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Feminist collective action for agroecological transformation in Zimbabwe

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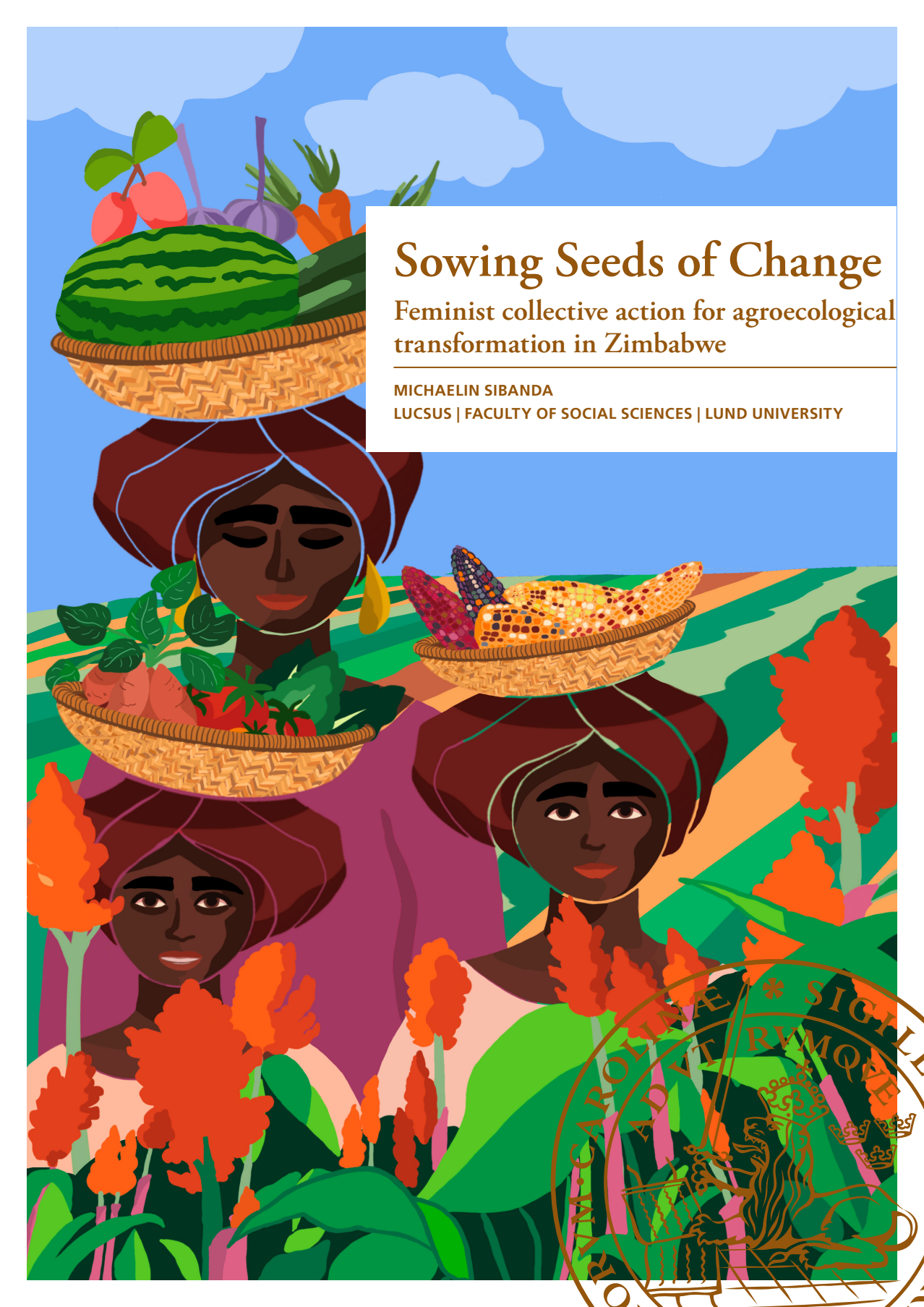
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LUCSUS | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY



Sowing Seeds of Change

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Michaelin Sibanda



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:

This thesis examines how women in agricultural communities in Zimbabwe leverage collective action to advance agroecological transformation while challenging systemic gender inequities. It responds to the persistent marginalization of women in Zimbabwean agriculture by investigating how collective action reclaims agency and reshapes agroecological systems. Despite constituting at least 70 % of the agricultural workforce in Zimbabwe, women face marginalization through unequal land access, exclusion from strategic decision-making, and devaluation of their indigenous knowledge. Grounded in Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Collective Action Theory (CAT), the study builds on qualitative document analysis and recurring fieldwork (2022–2025) in Zimbabwe's semi-arid regions, using interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

Findings reveal that women's collectives within farmer organizations, community seed banks, and seed fairs, serve as crucial platforms for resisting gender-based exclusion and fostering innovation. These collective actions enable women farmers to reassert control over local seed systems, enhance agrobiodiversity, improve climate adaptation strategies, and reinforce their agency and community resilience. Such grassroots initiatives reconfigure power dynamics by redistributing resources, promoting equitable knowledge exchange, and redefining women's roles and leadership in agriculture. Nevertheless, the research reveals inherent contradictions when transformative actions occasionally reproduce inequities while dismantling others.

The study makes three key contributions: empirically I demonstrate how women's collective action links agroecology with gender equity, theoretically I advance FPE by centering Southern African women's experiences, and as regards policy, I offer recommendations to integrate ecological resilience with gender justice. By foregrounding Zimbabwean women's leadership, I argue that agroecology – rooted in collective organizing – is a powerful strategy for achieving systemic change towards ecological balance and gender justice. These generated insights hold global relevance by demonstrating effective, context-specific models of collective action that can inform broader strategies to support marginalized groups worldwide. Findings also provide valuable guidance for scholars analyzing gender dynamics in agriculture, policymakers aiming to develop inclusive agricultural policies, and social movements striving to build resilient, equitable, and sustainable food systems in widespread smallholder farming.

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Feminist collective action for agroecological
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MADE IN SWEDEN 

“Even two grains of beans can tell a story”

- ZIMSOF seed custodian, interviewed in December 2022



Photo: Several seed varieties

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Abbreviations

AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
AGRITEX	Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services
CAT	Collective Action Theory
CIAT	International Center for Tropical Agriculture
CSA	Climate-Smart Agriculture
ESAFF	Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
FTLRP	Fast Track Land Reform Program
GAD	Gender and Development
LVC	La Via Campesina
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PELUM	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management
RQ	Research Question
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFO	Small Farmer Organizations
UN	United Nations
UNDROP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
WAD	Women and Development
WID	Women in Development
ZAPPA	Zimbabwe Agroecology Practitioners and Promoters Alliance
ZFU	Zimbabwe Farmers' Union
ZIMSOFF	Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum
ZSSP	Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Program

Abstract

This thesis examines how women in agricultural communities in Zimbabwe leverage collective action to advance agroecological transformation while challenging systemic gender inequities. It responds to the persistent marginalization of women in Zimbabwean agriculture by investigating how collective action reclaims agency and reshapes agroecological systems. Despite constituting at least 70% of the agricultural workforce in Zimbabwe, women face marginalization through unequal land access, exclusion from strategic decision-making, and devaluation of their indigenous knowledge. Grounded in Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Collective Action Theory (CAT), the study builds on qualitative document analysis and recurring fieldwork (2022–2025) in Zimbabwe’s semi-arid regions, using interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

Findings reveal that women’s collectives within farmer organizations, community seed banks, and seed fairs, serve as crucial platforms for resisting gender-based exclusion and fostering innovation. These collective actions enable women farmers to reassert control over local seed systems, enhance agrobiodiversity, improve climate adaptation strategies, and reinforce their agency and community resilience. Such grassroots initiatives reconfigure power dynamics by redistributing resources, promoting equitable knowledge exchange, and redefining women’s roles and leadership in agriculture. Nevertheless, the research reveals inherent contradictions when transformative actions occasionally reproduce inequities while dismantling others.

The study makes three key contributions: empirically I demonstrate how women’s collective action links agroecology with gender equity, theoretically I advance FPE by centering Southern African women’s experiences, and as regards policy, I offer recommendations to integrate ecological resilience with gender justice. By foregrounding Zimbabwean women’s leadership, I argue that agroecology – rooted in collective organizing – is a powerful strategy for achieving systemic change towards sustainable food systems and gender justice. These generated insights hold global relevance by demonstrating effective, context-specific models of collective action that can inform broader strategies to support marginalized groups worldwide. Findings also provide valuable guidance for scholars analyzing gender dynamics in agriculture, policymakers aiming to develop inclusive agricultural policies, and social movements striving to build resilient, equitable, and sustainable food systems in widespread smallholder farming.

Sammanfattning

Avhandlingen undersöker hur kvinnor i Zimbabwes jordbrukssektor tillämpar kollektivt handlande för att främja agroekologisk omvandling och utmana könsrelaterade ojämlikheter. Trots att kvinnor utgör minst 70% av arbetskraften i Zimbabwes jordbrukssektor, marginaliseras de genom ojämlik tillgång till mark, utestängning från strategiska beslut och devalvering av beprövad erfarenhet. Studien bygger på kvalitativ dokumentanalys och återkommande fältarbete (2022–2025) med intervjuer, fokusgrupper och deltagande observation och tillämpar feministisk politisk ekologi (FPE) och kollektiv handlingsteori (CAT) i materialanalysen.

Resultaten visar att kvinnokollektiv inom jordbruksorganisationer, lokala fröbanker och frömässor utgör viktiga plattformar för att både främja innovation och motverka könsbaserad utestängning. Dessa kollektiva åtgärder möjliggör för kvinnliga jordbrukare att återta kontrollen över lokala frösystem, öka jordbrukets biologiska mångfald, förbättra strategier för klimatanpassning, och stärka både egen agens och samhällets motståndskraft. Som gräsrotsinitiativ bidrager dessa handlingar till att omforma maktförhållanden genom att omfördela resurser, främja rättvist kunskapsutbyte och omdefiniera kvinnors position och ledarskap inom jordbruket. Forskningen visar dock på kritiska inneboende motsättningar såsom att djupgående omvandling undanröjer vissa former av ojämlikhet samtidigt som den riskerar att skapa eller återskapa andra former av ojämlikhet.

Studien ger tre viktiga bidrag: empiriskt visar författaren hur kvinnors kollektiva åtgärder i denna studie integrerar agroekologi med jämställdhet, hur FPE kan vidareutvecklas genom studiet av kvinnors erfarenheter i det afrikanska jordbrukssamhället, och att ekologisk motståndskraft bör kopplas till jämställdhet som policyrekommendation. Genom att lyfta fram zimbabwiska kvinnors ledarskap argumenterar författaren för att agroekologi – med rötter i kollektiv organisering – är en kraftfull strategi för att uppnå systemförändringar för hållbara livsmedelssystem och jämställdhet. Dessa insikter har global relevans genom att de påvisar effektiva, kontextspecifika modeller för kollektiva åtgärder som kan ligga till grund för bredare strategier för att stödja marginaliserade grupper över hela världen. Resultaten ger också värdefull vägledning för tre olika typer av aktörer: forskare som analyserar könsdynamiken inom jordbruket, beslutsfattare som strävar efter att utveckla inkluderande jordbrukspolitik, och sociala rörelser som strävar efter att bygga upp motståndskraftiga, rättvisa och hållbara livsmedelssystem inom småskaligt jordbruk.

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Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'

Mary Anne Radmacher

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Finally, I dedicate this work to the resilient women seed custodians of Zimbabwe, whose quiet yet powerful acts of care and resistance continue to inspire me and give this research its deepest meaning.

List of papers

Paper I

Sibanda, M. (2025) Feminist Agroecology: Towards Gender-Equal and Sustainable Food Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Agricultural & Rural Studies*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.59978/ar03010001>

Paper II

Sibanda, M. (202X) Guardians of Heritage: Women's Position in Traditional Seed Systems and Agroecology in Zimbabwe. *Agriculture & Food Security*. Accepted, subject to corrections

Paper III

Sibanda, M., & Jila, Y. (202X) Leadership from Below: Institutional Navigation and Transformative Feminist Strategies in Zimbabwean Agroecology. (*Manuscript*)

Author's contribution to papers

Paper I

I wrote the paper as a single author

Paper II

I wrote the paper as a single author

Paper III

I (M.S.) conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted the fieldwork, performed the analysis, and wrote the original draft. Y.J. developed the theoretical framework. Both authors contributed to subsequent writing, reviewing, and editing. M.S. drafted the majority of the empirical sections, and Y.J. contributed substantially to the theoretical framing and discussion.



Figure 1. A seed fair at the national level hosted by ZIMSOFF organization

Prologue: The seeds we carry

In a sun-drenched field in Bubi District, Zimbabwe, laughter and determination mingle as a group of women kneels on woven mats, their hands cradling seeds like precious heirlooms – each one embodying resilience, identity, and survival.

Each season, they gather for a ritual that transcends agriculture: a seed fair where generations of knowledge are exchanged alongside drought-resistant millet, nutrient-rich cowpeas, and vibrant native vegetables. Among them is an elder whose calloused fingers move deftly as she sorts pearl millet seeds, her voice steady with conviction: “[t]hese seeds are our children. They carry the wisdom of our ancestors and the promise of our future.”

This act: quiet, generative, and radical in its ordinariness, captures the spirit of this thesis. It is in these hands, these gatherings, and these shared seeds that we find the living roots of feminist agroecology and collective resistance.

What follows is an inquiry into the structures that constrain such practices; and the pathways women forge in reclaiming land, knowledge, and food futures. This everyday act, often overlooked in agricultural policy and academic analysis, provides a window into the gendered politics of food, land, and survival – questions at the heart of this thesis. With every shared seed, these women are sowing futures of justice.

1 Introduction

As highlighted in the prologue, the personal and collective experiences of women farmers are central to understanding the complexities of agroecological practices in Zimbabwe. Although women make up over 70% of Zimbabwe's agricultural workforce, their vital contributions to food production, biodiversity conservation, and environmental stewardship remain largely invisible due to systemic exclusion from land, governance, and policymaking (FAO, 2011; Moyo, 2011a; Tayal, 2019). As the country faces intersecting crises of climate change, economic instability, and land degradation, these exclusions have become more pronounced, exacerbating food insecurity and deepening gender inequities (IPCC, 2022). Across Zimbabwe's agroecological landscapes, women are collectively organizing in seed-saving networks, farming cooperatives, and agroecology movements that challenge dominant systems of knowledge and resource control. Agroecology, as used in this thesis, is understood not only as a set of ecologically sound farming practices, but also as a political and social project grounded in local knowledge, collective governance, and resistance to extractive agricultural models (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; La Via Campesina, 2015). It encompasses both a scientific approach to sustainability and a grassroots movement for food sovereignty and justice.

Recent scholarship has shown that struggles over seeds are central to these broader movements. Seed activism, as analyzed by Peschard and Randeria (2020), highlights how farmers globally mobilize against the commodification and enclosure of seed systems. Comparable work in Southern Mexico conceptualizes seed sovereignty as a process of decommodification rooted in peasant life-worlds (Hernández Rodríguez, 2022). By situating Zimbabwean women's seed struggles within these debates, this thesis extends the conversation by demonstrating how feminist collective action grounds seed sovereignty in cultural memory, everyday care, and political resistance.

My approach foregrounds agroecology as it is practiced and transformed by women, whose leadership, care labor, and seed work challenge dominant power structures and generate feminist forms of agrarian transformation. While some studies have framed such initiatives as forms of resilience or subsistence (e.g., Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Mutopo, 2014), this thesis builds on and extends that work by showing how women's agroecological practices actively contest dominant systems of knowledge and resource control. Drawing on Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Collective Action Theory (CAT), I argue that women assert feminist claims to land,

biodiversity, and governance through collective action, transforming agroecology into a site of political struggle and institutional innovation. These grassroots efforts offer powerful alternatives to industrial agriculture by drawing on situated knowledge, cultural traditions, and ecologically sound farming systems. This conceptual framing informs the thesis' four research questions, which guide the analysis of how women negotiate, resist, and reshape institutional constraints through agroecological action.

In recent years, the Zimbabwean government has renewed its commitment to agricultural modernization through strategic policy frameworks such as the National Agriculture Policy Framework (2018–2030) and the Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy (2020–2030) (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Tinarwo et al., 2024). These documents articulate ambitious visions for transforming agriculture into a more productive and market-oriented sector. Be as it may, like earlier technocratic interventions, they often sideline the structural legacies of land dispossession and the ongoing marginalisation of women and smallholder farmers. These gaps, both in policy and in practice, underscore the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to agrarian transformation, a need this thesis critically engages with in the chapters that follow.

While research on gender and agroecology has expanded significantly in recent years (Bezner Kerr et al., 2021; Wezel et al., 2018), critical gaps persist in understanding: (1) how women's collective action redistributes power in patriarchal agrarian systems; (2) how indigenous knowledge¹ (especially women's) integrates with climate adaptation in agroecology; and (3) how policy fails to recognize women's grassroots innovations. As I argue elsewhere in Paper 1 (Sibanda, 2025), mainstream agroecological and sustainability literature continues to overlook intersectional gender relations, often treating women as beneficiaries rather than agents of systemic change. These gaps, elaborated in Chapter 2, underscore the urgency of this study. They are not merely conceptual – they have tangible implications for equity and justice on the ground.

In this thesis, I use the term gender equity to emphasize the need for context-specific redress of structural injustices. While equality suggests identical treatment, equity recognizes that fair outcomes require different strategies for differently positioned groups, particularly in systems shaped by historical and institutional exclusions. If the shift to agroecology is not accompanied by deliberate efforts to challenge patriarchal power relations, there is a risk that gender inequities will be reproduced within supposedly transformative models (Barr et al., 2024). Recognizing this danger strengthens the urgency of this study: documenting and discussing women's

¹ In this study, *indigenous knowledge* is used to highlight context-specific, place-based understandings rooted in Zimbabwean cosmologies and lived experience.

agency is not enough – it must also interrogate and challenge the structures that constrain it.

This research bridges these gaps by analyzing the leadership strategies of the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF)², an agroecology-based farmer organization prominently led by women. While ZIMSOFF centers women's leadership, men also participate in its networks, with some men increasingly supporting or adopting agroecological practices inspired by women's initiatives. The findings allow for both empirical and analytical contributions in that they pave the way for actionable models for policy and practice while also speaking back to theory. By highlighting women's leadership strategies in agroecology, I contribute empirical insights from underrepresented geographies.

By developing conceptual tools that account for women's collective, embodied, and situated strategies to transform socio-ecological systems, I advance Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). These insights are vital for scaling agroecology beyond Zimbabwe into wider regions confronting agricultural modernization agendas and input-intensive farming models, alongside climate crises. By centering the voices of Zimbabwean women farmers, the study challenges top-down agricultural interventions and advocates for policies that recognize, resource, and amplify women's leadership in forging just and resilient food systems. In a world where industrial agriculture exacerbates gendered climate vulnerabilities (FAO, 2023), this research demonstrates agroecology's potential as a feminist project.

Through a detailed examination of women's collective action in agroecology, this thesis argues that such action is crucial for achieving gender equity and ecological resilience. By centering Southern African women's experiences, it shows empirically how these synergies inform FPE, while offering policy recommendations that integrate ecological resilience with gender justice. In doing so, the study provides vital insights for scholars, policymakers, and social movements striving for sustainable and equitable food systems.

1.1 Research aim and questions

Guided by the above intersections, this research aims to understand not only *how* women in agroecology-based farmer organizations in Zimbabwe are transforming agricultural systems through collective action, but also *why* such transformations emerge under specific human-environmental conditions. By examining the intersections of gender dynamics, traditional knowledge systems, and

² Zimbabwe Organic Smallholder Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF) is a national farmer-led network that promotes agroecology and sustainable agriculture among smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe. It is affiliated with regional and global movements such as La Via Campesina.

organizational strategies, I seek to illuminate the mechanisms through which women assert agency in agriculture despite structural constraints, and the causal conditions that shape their possibilities for change. My investigation highlights women's innovative strategies to overcome patriarchal barriers, particularly through seed preservation, knowledge exchange, and community leadership, showing how these practices both respond to constraints and generate transformative alternatives.

The study is guided by four key research questions that target the gaps in the existing gender and agroecology literature on Zimbabwe and globally by focusing on how women's collective action can bring about transformative outcomes:

1. Why and under what structural and socio-cultural conditions do gender inequities persist in Zimbabwean agriculture?
2. How do women engaged in agroecology-based farming organizations navigate and challenge patriarchal power structures within agriculture and across scales?
3. What leadership strategies and organizational mechanisms enable and challenge women's collective action and resource-sharing in agroecology-based movements?
4. How do women's traditional seed-saving practices and knowledge systems contribute to seed sovereignty in Zimbabwe?

Together, these questions illuminate the interplay of structural barriers, resistance strategies, and collective power in agroecological transformation. By addressing them, this thesis not only documents women's agency but also contributes to broader conversations on sustainability, feminist praxis, and equitable food system transitions. It also reveals how agroecology as both scientific practice and political project, becomes a transformative force when reclaimed by Zimbabwean women. I will argue that their collective action *turns seed-saving into a form of radical resistance and positions farmer networks as agents of systemic transformation*, thereby sowing futures rooted in both ecological balance and gender justice.

The study will show how Zimbabwean women use agroecology both as a set of techniques and a means of resistance to reclaim agency. Where industrial agriculture imposes monoculture and corporate control, their practice embodies what La Via Campesina (2013) terms 'the politics of seeds': a daily assertion of sovereignty through seed-saving cooperatives, and traditional knowledge exchange.

1.2 Approach

This study adopts a critical realist perspective to examine the complex interplay between gender, ecology, and collective action within Zimbabwe's agroecology-

based farmer organizations. Critical realism, as articulated by Bhaskar (2016), posits that reality exists independently of our perceptions, but our knowledge of it is always partial and shaped by social, historical, and conceptual conditions. It distinguishes between the *real* (underlying structures and mechanisms), the *actual* (events that occur), and the *empirical* (experiences and observations), providing a stratified ontology well-suited to analysing multi-layered social phenomena such as gendered exclusions and institutional barriers.

I employed this framework to ground interpretive methods in a structural analysis, ensuring my methodological approach was both reflexive and focused on causal mechanisms; particularly how patriarchal tenure systems, policy frameworks, and organizational norms constrain or enable women's collective action. Critical realism not only directed my work towards the biophysical conditions of agriculture but also helped me shape my research questions and deepen my analysis: I sought to explain not just *what* happens in women's agroecological organizing, but *why* and under *what* human-environmental conditions. This explanatory ambition is carried through into the research questions, particularly RQ1, which explicitly asks why inequities persist and under what conditions they are reproduced or challenged.

My research design is transdisciplinary, integrating insights from sustainability science, gender studies, and agricultural development research. This integration was vital to capture how women's collective action in agroecology intersects with environmental sustainability and social equity. As Lang et al. (2012) suggest, such approaches foster "mutual learning processes between science and society" by bridging disciplines and centering diverse knowledge systems; a principle I embedded in my study.

The study is a product of sustainability science and was developed within the broader *FOMPO*³ (Mobilizing Farmer Organisations for Sustainable Agriculture) project, which explores how farmer organizations across sub-Saharan Africa contribute to inclusive agricultural transformation.⁴ In Zimbabwe, I conducted the research in close collaboration with the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF), a national farmer organization known for its leadership in agroecology and gender justice. This partnership enabled sustained engagement with grassroots initiatives and decision-making spaces, aligning with the study's

³ The [FOMPO \(Mobilizing Farmer Organisations for Sustainable Agriculture\)](https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/mobilizing-farmer-organisations-for-sustainable-agriculture-in-su) project is a multi-country research collaboration (2020 – 2024) funded by the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (Formas). It aims to examine how farmer organizations contribute to inclusive and sustainable agricultural transitions in sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, see: <https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/mobilizing-farmer-organisations-for-sustainable-agriculture-in-su>

⁴ Boda, C. S., Akorsu, A. D., Armah, F. A., Atwiine, A., Byaruhanga, R., Chambati, W., ... & Sibanda, M. (2024). Visions of sustainable development and the future of smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa (and beyond). *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 8, 1357574. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2024.1357574>

feminist and participatory orientation. While the broader project shaped the comparative framework, the Zimbabwe context was grounded in localized fieldwork and community-led knowledge production.

My methodological orientation is therefore interpretive and participatory, centering women farmers as active knowledge co-producers and change agents rather than passive research subjects. This approach aligns with sustainability science's commitment to co-create knowledge with stakeholders instead of merely extracting data from communities (Jerneck et al., 2011). This participatory orientation reflects what Miller et al. (2014) identify as sustainability science's normative commitment to supporting transformative change toward more just and sustainable futures. It also aligns with the critical realist aim of triangulating lived experience with deeper structural dynamics and explanations. Accordingly, by employing qualitative methods, I capture the nuanced ways in which women farmers navigate power dynamics, build networks, and challenge gender inequities in agriculture.

In examining how women's farmer organizations serve as sites of practical innovation and political resistance, the research contributes to discussions on gender-equitable pathways to sustainable agriculture while yielding insights that are directly relevant to the communities involved. This participatory orientation also resonates with calls to decolonize research, which emphasize resisting extractive academic practices, challenging the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies, and foregrounding indigenous and women's knowledges as authoritative (Chilisa, 2019). By situating knowledge production in dialogue with participants and local priorities, I sought to ensure that the research was not only about but also for and with the communities involved.

While critical realism provides the ontological scaffolding for analyzing structures and mechanisms, I also draw on feminist epistemologies, particularly Haraway's (2013) concept of *situated knowledges*, to inform reflexivity. This perspective emphasizes that knowledge is partial and embodied, produced from particular positions. This combined approach, drawing on critical realism's depth ontology and feminist commitments to reflexivity and voice, enhances both the analytical robustness and ethical grounding of this research. It allows the study to remain attentive to structural causality while also valuing the contingent, situated nature of women's knowledge and agency in agroecological transformation.

Theory and rationale

This study is primarily grounded in Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), with complementary support from Collective Action Theory (CAT), as I elaborate in Section 1.3. I employ FPE as my overarching analytical framework because it offers a relational and intersectional lens; one that foregrounds gendered power relations, situated knowledges, and the political dimensions of everyday environmental

practice. This approach allows me to critically examine how women's experiences and strategies are embedded within, and often resist, broader structures of inequity. I draw on CAT to supplement this analysis, as it provides me with tools to understand how women initiate and sustain cooperative efforts, navigate collective decision-making, and mobilize resources toward shared goals like seed sovereignty. While FPE helps me unpack the structural and discursive dimensions of environmental justice, CAT equips me to analyze the internal dynamics and practical effectiveness of grassroots organizing. Together, these frameworks enable me to develop a multidimensional understanding of how social justice and ecological sustainability are co-produced through women's collective action.

These theoretical frameworks are not applied in abstraction but come alive in the everyday practices of Zimbabwean women farmers, whose acts of cultivation, seed saving, and organizing embody the very intersection of ecological resilience and gendered resistance. By centering biodiversity not merely as an ecological principle but as cultural survival (Altieri & Toledo, 2011), they transform fields into sites of liberation. This reimagining: where drought-resistant millet becomes a protest against climate fatalism (Bezner Kerr, 2020), and seed fairs challenge patriarchal expertise (Shiva, 2016), reveals agroecology's radical potential when wielded by those most marginalized by industrial food systems.

These practices also point to a broader understanding of agroecology as a social movement, one that includes not only formal mobilizations but also the *everyday acts of care, cultivation, and quiet defiance* (Scott, 1990) that sustain communities and subvert dominant power structures from within. As Fadaee (2022) reminds us, social movements in the Global South often take shape through dispersed and relational forms of resistance; a perspective that aligns with my ambition in Paper 3 to decolonize social movement and leadership studies by centering women's situated strategies in Zimbabwean agroecology. In this light, Zimbabwean women's agroecological practices embody a grounded, relational politics (Voss & Zingwena, 2024) deeply local, yet resonant with global calls for food sovereignty (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007) and feminist environmental justice (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015).

In sum, women farmers as the protagonists of the study do not only preserve agricultural heritage through agroecology but also forge new pathways toward gender equity and sustainability. With a focus on their agency and collective action, the study advances understanding of how marginalized groups can drive systemic change. It highlights women's pivotal contributions to reimagine food systems that are more just and resilient and provides guidance for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to support such transformative efforts.

Reflexivity and positionality

Informed by critical realism's recognition that while reality exists independently, our knowledge of it is shaped by social and historical contexts, I adopt a reflexive stance throughout this research. My personal and professional background as a Zimbabwean researcher born into a smallholder farming family informs both the design and interpretation of this study. My upbringing in rural Zimbabwe not only exposed me to traditional agricultural practices and seasonal rhythms, but also deeply shaped my sensitivity to gendered knowledge systems and community-based agroecological wisdom. Growing up in a smallholder farming household, I observed how women's expertise in seed saving, soil care, and pest control was transmitted through daily practice, storytelling, and ritual. These lived experiences informed my relational and reflexive research approach, fostering trust in the field and enabling deeper insight into the often-overlooked forms of women's agency and knowledge. This positionality became a methodological asset, bridging insider familiarity with critical analytical distance.

At the same time, my gender and research focus sometimes shaped how male participants engaged with the study. In some cases, men were curious or skeptical about my emphasis on women's roles in farming and seed systems, questioning whether this knowledge was truly distinct or deserving of special focus. Others were more supportive, often referencing the 'hard work' of their wives or mothers, while distancing themselves from domestic or seed-related labor. These interactions revealed how gendered hierarchies of knowledge persist in both formal and informal spaces. While I was often welcomed as a researcher, my presence also prompted men to assert authority over certain topics, or to perform supportiveness in public while withdrawing from discussion in more intimate settings. Recognizing and navigating these dynamics was crucial, not only methodologically, but ethically as it informed how I interpreted power, silence, and positionality in both women's and men's narratives.

Professionally, my work with farmer-support organizations has provided insights into the policy frameworks, development interventions, and institutional barriers that shape smallholder farming systems. While this research foregrounds women's experiences, I do not treat 'women' as a homogeneous group. Instead, I use the term with critical awareness, recognizing it as a collective category shaped by intersecting dimensions such as class, age, marital status, and geography. This intersectional approach is central to my feminist analytical lens.

Prior to the start of this doctoral research, I engaged with ZIMSOFF through earlier collaborative research and advocacy work in the field of sustainable agriculture. This pre-existing relationship fostered trust and provided a solid foundation for building co-produced knowledge. During the FOMPO planning stages, I worked closely with ZIMSOFF representatives to design fieldwork processes that respected local priorities, and to ensure mutual benefit from the research. This collaboration

enabled access not only to farmer-led initiatives and leadership structures, but also to deeper insights into how grassroots agroecology movements mobilize, negotiate, and transform power. These experiences have sensitized me to the central but often undervalued role that women play in maintaining food security, preserving agricultural biodiversity, and transmitting ecological knowledge across generations.

Drawing on Haraway's (2013) notion of 'situated knowledges,' I recognize that all knowledge claims are partial and embedded within specific social and historical contexts. While Haraway's feminist epistemology arises from a different intellectual tradition, it resonates with critical realism's emphasis on epistemic fallibility and the socially mediated nature of knowledge production. Taken together, these perspectives reinforce the importance of reflexivity in acknowledging how my identity, assumptions, and experiences shape the research process, interpretations, and the co-production of knowledge with participants.

As England (1994) and Sultana (2007) caution, shared cultural or national identity does not guarantee full understanding or eliminate power differentials. I acknowledge the tensions of working in the 'space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), where proximity and analytical distance must be carefully negotiated. To maintain transparency and foster sound ethics, I engaged in dialogical reflexivity during fieldwork; soliciting feedback, maintaining a reflective journal, and deliberately seeking out views that challenged my interpretations (Pillow, 2003). For instance, after a focus group in Matabeleland South, a younger woman critiqued my framing of seed-saving as solely a cultural practice, pointing out its economic significance in sustaining single mothers like herself, a perspective that prompted me to revisit my assumptions and reframe my analysis to better reflect these intersecting realities. My goal is to produce credible, situated, and ethically grounded knowledge that speaks both to academic inquiry and to the lived experiences of the women farmers whose work and leadership shape this research.

My positionality, rooted in lived experience as a smallholder farmer, shaped by academic training in development research and sustainability science, and informed by active engagement in agroecology and gender justice advocacy, supports a critical realist engagement with theory. It enables me to interpret situated empirical accounts in relation to the deeper structural mechanisms that shape them, while grounding my methodological strategy in a commitment to both epistemic reflexivity and transformative praxis.

Fieldwork activities

I adopt a qualitative interpretive approach, utilizing empirical data collected during four and a half months of intermittent fieldwork in Zimbabwe between 2022 and 2025. The study draws on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, workshops, and participant observations, supplemented by analysis of policy

documents and secondary sources. The core data explores how Zimbabwean women navigate gendered constraints and engage in collective agroecological practices, with key findings presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. These methods were purposefully selected because they foreground participants' lived experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of power, identity, and everyday resistance. Given the relational and often tacit nature of women's agricultural knowledge and leadership, structured surveys or quantitative instruments would have missed the contextual depth and emotional resonance captured through dialogue.

Primary documentary sources consist of government policy papers, public statements, and institutional reports on agricultural development and gender initiatives in Zimbabwe, offering crucial insights into formal governance structures and policy discourses that influence women farmers. Secondary materials, including academic literature, civil society reports, and historical analyses provide additional contextual and analytical depth, further enriching the interpretation of primary data. A total of 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted across stakeholder groups listed in Table 1, including farmers, extension officers, traditional leaders, seed custodians, NGO staff, and ZIMSOFF leaders, alongside 17 focus group discussions (FDGs) and 3 participatory workshops were conducted within the period of four and a half months in 2022-2025. The farmer interviews engaged organized women farmers of diverse ages, marital statuses, and regions – from young single mothers in Plumtree to elderly seed custodians in Nkayi, capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives on leadership, land access, seed practices, and community organizing.

The focus groups were semi-structured, guided by open-ended thematic prompts, fostering storytelling, debate, and collective reflection on seed systems, leadership, and everyday challenges. These discussions proved particularly valuable in revealing group dynamics, sparking lively exchanges on topics such as labor-sharing norms and seed exchange rituals. They also highlighted how caregiving responsibilities and family structures shape women's ability to engage in collective action; insights that would have been difficult to glean from interviews alone.

The participatory workshops, co-organized with ZIMSOFF, were designed as dialogical spaces. Combining scenario-based discussions (e.g., exploring situations such as droughts, input shortages, or new seed regulations) with collaborative analysis (collective reflection on seed practices, organizational dynamics, and adaptive strategies), these workshops refined the research focus while co-producing practical recommendations. Beyond generating empirical data, these sessions served as political spaces where women's collective strategies; from mentorship models to consensus-based governance, were articulated, validated, and amplified on their own terms. As both researcher and activist, I witnessed how these engagements shifted the study from abstract empowerment themes to actionable, community-driven solutions, many of which are synthesized in the policy recommendations presented in Chapter 6.3.

While the appended papers contain detailed methodological discussions, Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the fieldwork methods and data collection techniques that I employed in this research.

Table 1. Overview of Fieldwork Activities 2022-2025

This table outlines the fieldwork activities that form the core empirical basis for Papers 2 and 3. The 2024-2025 phase focused on validating findings with ZIMSOFF leaders and farmer groups, as well as conducting follow-up interviews to address emerging analytical questions.

Research phase	Time	Stakeholder engagement	Research methods and techniques
July - August 2022	2 weeks	Key informants from the ZIMSOFF organization; agricultural extension officers; community leaders	Preliminary semi-structured interviews; site visits to agroecology demonstration farms; historical and policy document collection
November 2022 - January 2023	8 weeks	Farmers (women and men) in agroecology groups; local government officials; traditional leaders	In-depth semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; participant observation of farming practices; seasonal agricultural activities observation; oral histories of seed preservation and agricultural practices
December 2023 - January 2024	4 weeks	Community seed custodians; members of women's farming collectives; NGO representatives	Observation of seed fairs and knowledge exchange events; follow-up interviews; documentation of collective decision-making processes
November 2024 - January 2025	4 weeks	ZIMSOFF women leaders; previously interviewed women farmers; representatives from regional farmer networks	Participatory workshops; validation workshops; follow-up interviews; document analysis; impact assessment of collective action initiatives; feedback sessions with research participants

Conducting fieldwork across multiple agricultural seasons and ecological zones was a deliberate methodological strategy to capture the dynamic, context-specific nature of women's agroecological practices in Zimbabwe. Seasonal variation plays a critical role in shaping agricultural activities, resource availability, and collective action patterns, particularly in semi-arid regions where rainfall is erratic and closely tied to farming calendars. By engaging with communities during different stages of the agricultural cycle such as planting, harvesting, and seed-saving events, I was able to observe and document shifts in labor distribution, decision-making processes, and knowledge-sharing practices over time.

Additionally, conducting research across various agroecological zones, particularly Natural Regions IV and V, allowed for a comparative understanding of how environmental conditions intersect with gender dynamics and collective strategies. These spatial and temporal variations provided a richer, more nuanced picture of how women adapt agroecological principles to local realities, demonstrating that their practices and organizational efforts are not static but continually shaped by ecological rhythms, climatic pressures, and socio-political contexts.

As the thesis draws on multiple case sites across distinct regions and agroecological zones, Table 2 below offers a concise reference guide to the fieldwork locations, participants, and activities that took place throughout the study. This overview supports the empirical chapters that follow.

Table 2. Overview of Field Sites, Agroecological Zones, and Research Activities.

This table summarizes the main field sites included in the study, indicating their geographic location and agroecological classification, key participants involved, and activities hosted by the farmers. It serves as a reference point for understanding the spatial and methodological scope of the research.

Agroecological Region	District	Activities	Stakeholder engagement
IV. Matabeleland North Province	Bubi: Mhlotshana Nkayi: Sibantubanye	- Seed fairs - Field days - Oral histories - Workshops	ZIMSOFF Farmers ZIMSOFF women leaders Community/traditional leaders Local government officials Community seed custodians NGO representatives
V. Matabeleland South Province	Matobo: Tshelanyemba Plumtree: Plumtree		

While the table summarizes field sites and activities at a glance, the images that follow bring these research moments to life, offering a glimpse into the everyday practices and environments encountered during fieldwork. These include women's seed-saving activities, agroecological farming practices, and collective organizational meetings.



Figure 2. Fieldwork snapshots.

Photos from top left to bottom right: Participation in the seed fair in Bubi (2022); traditional maize storage in Matobo (2023); draft power farming in Bubi (2024); agroecological intercropping in Nkayi (2023); traditional seed preservation technique in Tshelanyemba (2022); workshop with ZIMSOFF women leaders in Shashe (2025); Mhlotshana SFO women's meeting in Bubi (2022). **Sources: Bottom left** (Hendrick N); **The rest** (Author's own).

1.3 Analytical frameworks

While critical realism provides the overarching philosophical orientation of this study, offering a lens to examine both structural constraints and the enabling conditions for women's agency, the analytical framework draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Collective Action Theory (CAT). These frameworks illuminate different but intersecting dimensions of the research problem; gendered exclusions, ecological knowledge, and collective governance, and are further enriched by sustainability science's focus on the co-production of social and ecological systems. Each paper in this thesis engages these frameworks in depth. Here, I provide a synthesis that clarifies how they shaped the research design, interpretation, and conceptual contributions of the thesis.

By integrating FPE with CAT, this thesis explicitly addresses how power dynamics, intersectionality, and embodied practices shape collective institutions. My application of FPE enriches CAT by foregrounding women's everyday acts of resistance, care, and emotional labor as integral to the effectiveness of collective institutions. Additionally, by advancing the concept of the feminist commons, I illustrate how feminist principles reshape traditional institutional frameworks, challenging corporate enclosure and patriarchal control

Advancing Feminist Political Ecology (FPE)

FPE is the primary lens for examining gendered power relations in environmental management and rural livelihoods (Elmhirst, 2011; Rocheleau et al., 1996). This thesis engages with foundational FPE concepts; particularly gendered resource access, intersectionality, situated knowledge, women's agency and power, while making a distinct theoretical intervention by centering spatialized intersectionality and feminist institutional design. I draw especially on relational and practice-oriented strands of FPE (e.g., Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011, 2020; Elmhirst, 2011), which emphasize how gender, knowledge, and power are co-produced through everyday interactions with land, institutions, and ecological systems. These scholars move beyond essentialist framings of 'women and the environment' to highlight the institutional, spatial, and political dynamics shaping women's environmental agency. Their work informs my focus on how Zimbabwean women engage in agroecological transformation through collective organizing, care labor, and the stewardship of seed and land. These contributions reorient FPE toward the uneven geographies of exclusion and the everyday governance innovations women build from below.

First, I develop the Spatially Aware Intersectional Framework to theorize how geographical marginality (e.g., remoteness, drought-prone regions, infrastructural

neglect) intersects with gender, age, and marital status to shape exclusion in specific, context-dependent ways. While FPE literature has emphasized intersectionality, it has often under-theorized spatial inequity, despite its geographical foundations (Sultana, 2021). My empirical findings show how these spatial dynamics structure women's capacity to access resources, participate in governance, and engage in collective action.

Second, I foreground acts of everyday resistance, care, and collective leadership as central to women's transformative agency. Practices such as seed-saving, reciprocal labor-sharing, and collective negotiation with local authorities are not only pragmatic but politically significant. These acts embed care, reciprocity, and feminist ethics into agroecological practice, directly challenging patriarchal control and extractive agricultural paradigms (Elmhirst, 2015; Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). In doing so, the thesis contributes to a growing FPE literature that links environmental transformation with affect, subjectivity, and relational ethics, recognizing emotions as political forces that shape environmental struggles (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020).

Third, I contribute to emerging debates on the feminist commons by analyzing women's seed networks and collective organizations as institutional innovations (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Clement et al., 2019). These initiatives go beyond symbolic resistance, enacting governance structures rooted in participation, rulemaking, intergenerational mentorship, and biodiversity stewardship. In contrast to commons literature that often centers on knowledge sharing or cultural symbolism, I show how women construct and sustain rule-based, power-aware systems of governance that resist enclosure and corporate capture.

Key concepts from FPE also guide my methodological choices. For example, the concept of situated knowledge (Haraway, 2013; Sundberg, 2004) informed the use of participatory methods that center women farmers as knowledge producers. Intersectionality shaped the analysis of how class, age, and marital status affected women's engagement in collective action (Nightingale, 2011). To this I added spatial location, here called 'geographies'. Finally, agency conceived not just as individual autonomy but as collective resistance, guided the interpretation of women's strategic responses to exclusion (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Ecofeminist perspectives, closely related to FPE and foundational to Papers 1 and 2; complement feminist political ecology by illuminating the cultural and spiritual significance of women's seed preservation practices (Shiva, 2016). This further enriches the analysis by showing how agroecological labor is not only material but symbolically and politically charged.

Theorizing Collective Action and Institutional practices

CAT complements FPE by providing tools to understand how women groups mobilize resources, share responsibilities, and achieve common goals. Drawing on Olson (1971) and Ostrom's (1990) principles, including clearly defined boundaries, collective-choice arrangements, leadership rotation, conflict resolution, and shared norms, I analyze how women's groups manage seed banks, labor cooperatives, and savings initiatives. These mechanisms are critical to the resilience and longevity of agroecological institutions built by women. In this research, I have used CAT primarily in Paper 3 to explore women's organizational strategies and leadership within agroecological collectives.

This lens is particularly useful in understanding how women's groups manage internal dynamics, develop participatory leadership structures, and scale their organizational impact under resource-scarce and patriarchal conditions (Agarwal, 2000; Cornwall, 2003; Njuki et al., 2023). By operationalizing CAT through qualitative methods such as participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, I trace how women build group cohesion, navigate institutional gaps, and foster resilience through shared governance practices (Mudege et al., 2015).

Relational Institutions: Bridging FPE and Collective Action

As indicated earlier, my integration of FPE and CAT involves a Relational Institutional Approach, recognizing both the structural power relations highlighted by FPE (Elmhirst, 2011; Rocheleau et al., 1996), and the organizational governance mechanisms emphasized by CAT (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001). Rather than treating these frameworks as parallel or competing, I operationalize their integration by examining how women's situated knowledge and collective agency (FPE) dynamically interact with institutional rules and leadership structures (CAT) in Zimbabwean agroecology movements. This layered strategy connects micro-practices of resistance to macro-structures of governance, providing a nuanced understanding of agroecological transformation.

Aligned with my critical realist approach, FPE and CAT together provide complementary lenses that address different levels of social reality. FPE helps me identify and analyze the deeper structural mechanisms and gendered power relations; the 'real' dimension, that shape and constrain women's collective practices. It also explicitly recognizes intersectional inequities and relational ethics as underlying structures influencing empirical observations. CAT, meanwhile, illuminates the organizational practices, institutional arrangements, and leadership strategies; the 'actual' dimension, that women deploy within these constraints. By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, I can move beyond merely documenting empirical phenomena (women's observed practices) to explaining the

causal mechanisms and structural conditions that make collective action both necessary and transformative.

Together, FPE and CAT enable an integrated analysis of how Zimbabwean women navigate exclusion, build alternative institutions, and advance gender-just agroecological transformation. This dual-framework approach provides theoretical scaffolding for the empirical chapters that follow and anchors the study's core contributions to gender, sustainability, and institutional change.

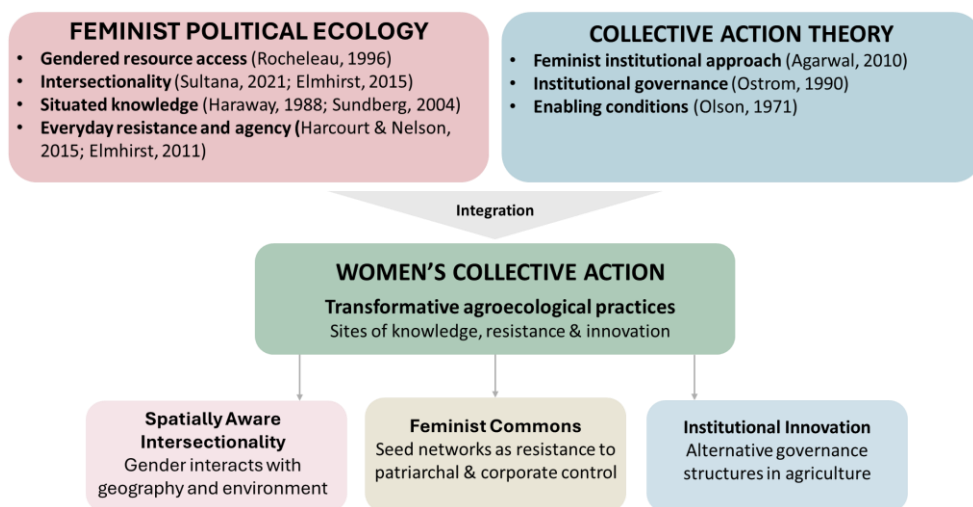


Figure 3. Integrated Theoretical Framework

This framework combines FPE and CAT through a Relational Institutional Approach to explore how Zimbabwean women navigate and transform patriarchal agrarian structures. This synthesis informs three core conceptual contributions of the thesis: Spatially Aware Intersectionality, Feminist Commons, and Institutional Innovation.

1.4 Geographic, agroecological and policy context

To start from the ground: Zimbabwe's agricultural landscape is shaped by five agroecological zones, differentiated by rainfall distribution, soil characteristics, evaporation rates, and drought conditions. These zones reflect significant climatic variability, with rainfall declining sharply from the wetter north-eastern highlands to the arid southern and western regions. This study focuses on Natural Regions IV and V, which are the driest and most agriculturally marginal zones, receiving less than 650 mm of rainfall annually (Manatsa et al., 2020). These regions are also characterized by notably high evaporation rates and are highly vulnerable to drought and climate variability. Such conditions severely limit agricultural productivity and intensify the vulnerability of rain-fed agriculture, with profound implications for

gendered access to resources and adaptive capacities (Makuvaro et al., 2018). Fieldwork in these arid zones highlights how women’s traditional ecological knowledge and collective practices offer context-specific strategies for resilience and transformation. (See Figure 4 for a map of agroecological regions).

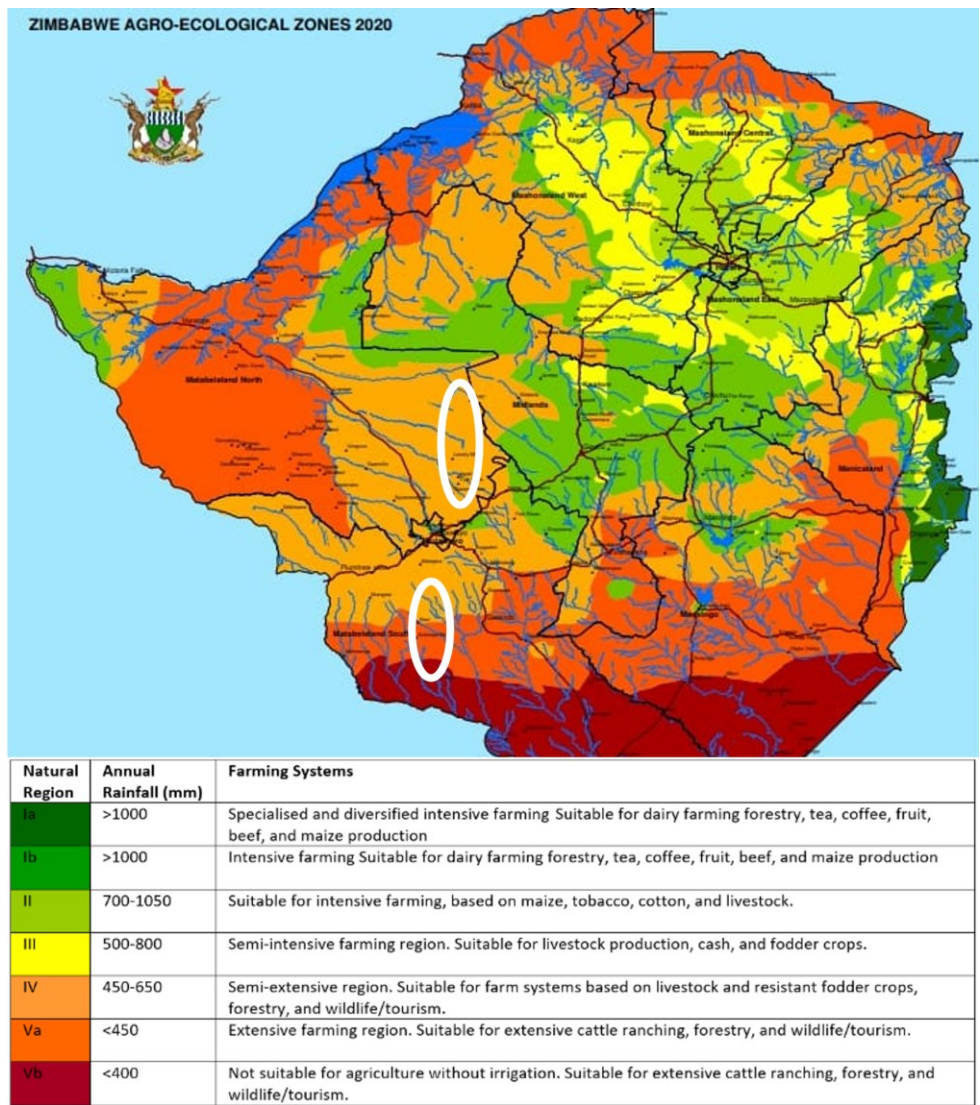


Figure 4. Map of Zimbabwe’s agroecological regions (Natural Regions I–V)
Regions IV and V cover the most arid areas with the lowest rainfall. **Source:** Whole Earth Education (2020)

These challenging environments amplify gender inequities in agriculture, as women farmers confront unique vulnerabilities stemming from limited access to climate information, agricultural support services, and adaptation technologies (Mutekwa, 2009). Women in the drier regions often experience climate impacts differently than men due to their restricted access to the resources needed for adaptation. Research by Mango et al. (2017) demonstrates that women-headed households in semi-arid zones face heightened vulnerability to climate shocks, primarily because they have constrained access to labor, draft animal power, and financial capital for implementing adaptation strategies.

Climate change is intensifying these challenges: shifting rainfall patterns, more frequent droughts, and evolving pest dynamics disproportionately affect women farmers, whose operations depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture (Frischen et al., 2020; Ndlovu et al., 2020). Despite these constraints, women possess valuable traditional ecological knowledge that enhances resilience to environmental stresses – including expertise in seed selection, soil management, and indigenous pest control methods (see Figure 5), that align closely with agroecological principles (Makate et al., 2019). This knowledge forms a crucial foundation for sustainable farming practices, with women serving as repositories of traditional methods that reduce dependence on external inputs while enhancing adaptation to local conditions.



Figure 5. Indigenous pest control and Soil management techniques

An illustration of traditional ecological practices that are part of agroecological adaptation strategies. The left image highlights the use of organic pest deterrents such as wood ash and smoke for seed treatment. The right image depicts soil fertility enhancement through the application of fertile topsoil sourced from anthills or compost pits, a method known to improve moisture retention and nutrient availability in dryland farming. These practices, passed down through generations, not only reduce reliance on synthetic inputs but also reflect women's critical role in conserving agrobiodiversity and sustaining climate-resilient farming systems. **Source:** Author's own.

In parallel with these ecological pressures, Zimbabwe's agricultural sector is being reshaped by a state-led push for 'modernization.' Policy frameworks such as the *National Agriculture Policy Framework (2018–2030)* and the *Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy (2020–2030)* envision a transition toward market-oriented, input-intensive farming (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Tinarwo et al., 2024). Promoted by government, donors, and agribusinesses, this model emphasizes hybrid seeds, standardized input packages, and contract farming as the basis for food security and economic growth (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019; Tirivangasi et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, for many smallholders, particularly women in communal and resettlement areas, these interventions bring new vulnerabilities. Input-intensive packages often assume access to land titles, cash, and irrigation; conditions many rural women do not meet (Mutopo, 2014; Manzeke-Kangara et al., 2024). Standardization sidelines farmer-saved seed systems, undermining agrobiodiversity and devaluing women's ecological knowledge (Bezner Kerr, 2013; Kloppenburg, 2010). This tension around seed systems, between formal commercial channels and informal farmer-managed networks, runs through Zimbabwe's agricultural development pathways and forms a central thread in this thesis, returning in detail in Chapters 2 and 5.

Within this broader agroecological and policy context, agriculture remains the backbone of Zimbabwe's economy and rural livelihood. The agricultural sector contributes approximately 12% of national GDP and provides the primary livelihood for most rural residents (LSE, 2021; Solomon et al., 2024). Smallholder farmers dominate this landscape, representing nearly 98% of all farm households and controlling roughly 79% of the country's agricultural land (ZimStat, 2019). These smallholder farms, typically cultivating only 0.5 to 2.5 hectares, operate under various tenure arrangements; including communal lands⁵, resettlement areas, and small-scale commercial farms, with growing evidence of informal land rental and sharecropping arrangements. In some cases, especially within A2 resettlement schemes⁶, these involve unequal landlord-tenant dynamics where access to land is mediated by political or economic power rather than secure tenure (Chambati & Moyo, 2013; Scoones et al., 2010).

⁵ Communal Lands in Zimbabwe refer to areas held under customary tenure, historically designated as Tribal Trust Lands during the colonial era. These lands are not individually owned but are administered by traditional authorities such as chiefs and village heads, with ultimate custodianship resting with the state (Chiweshe et al., 2015).

⁶ The A1 and A2 resettlement schemes refer to Zimbabwe's land redistribution programs initiated in the early 2000s. The A1 scheme typically involves small-scale family farming plots aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting subsistence farming, while the A2 scheme includes larger-scale commercial farms intended to enhance agricultural productivity and economic growth.

Colonial land policies entrenched male land ownership and marginalized women in agricultural decision-making (Moyo, 2011a). This historical and socio-political legacy of ingrained gender disparities in the agrarian structure is still evident today. Post-independence land reforms, such as the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP)⁷, only partially addressed this imbalance: women ended up receiving roughly 18% of redistributed land in A1 (smallholder) resettlement schemes and 12% in A2 (larger commercial) schemes⁸, falling short of the 20% policy target (Utete, 2003; Zikhali, 2010).

However, beyond these aggregate figures, the distribution of tenure security remains highly uneven. As illustrated in Figure 6, drawing on data from the 2017 Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Survey, a significant proportion of smallholders, particularly those in communal lands, still lack formal land documentation. While some resettlement sectors, such as A1 and Old Resettlement Areas, exhibit higher documentation rates through offer letters and settlement permits, persistent undocumented landholding underscores enduring structural insecurity. This absence of formal recognition not only weakens tenure security but also restricts access to credit, state support, and the ability to invest in sustainable long-term land management (Zikhali, 2010; Chambati & Moyo, 2013).

⁷ Launched in 2000, the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) was designed to redistribute white-owned commercial farmland to Black Zimbabweans. While it addressed colonial land imbalances, implementation raised concerns over elite capture and limited gender inclusivity (Ossome, 2021)

⁸ The A1 and A2 resettlement schemes refer to Zimbabwe's land redistribution programs initiated in the early 2000s. The A1 scheme typically involves small-scale family farming plots aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting subsistence farming, while the A2 scheme includes larger-scale commercial farms intended to enhance agricultural productivity and economic growth.

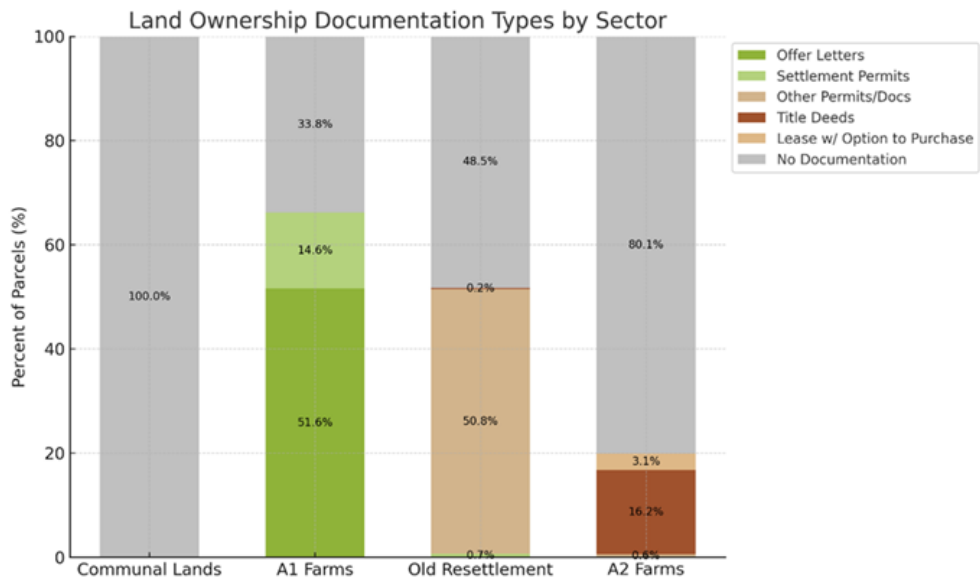


Figure 6. Land Ownership Documentation

This figure compares land tenure documentation across Zimbabwe's smallholder farming sectors. Communal Lands rely entirely on customary tenure (no formal documentation), while A1 Farms and Old Resettlement Areas show partial formalization, roughly half of parcels have government-issued offer letters or permits. A2 Farms (Small Scale Commercial Farms), despite their designation, exhibit high tenure informality (80% undocumented), reflecting persistent gaps in post-reform land tenure security. **Source:** Reproduced by author using data from the Zimbabwe Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Survey Report (2017).

Traditional smallholder farming systems in Zimbabwe now face mounting threats that disproportionately impact women. Market liberalization and corporate consolidation in the seed sector endanger the local seed varieties and sharing networks that women have safeguarded for generations (Tirivangasi et al., 2023). Some observers argue that agroecological methods lack the scalability to address national food security, or that gender inequities in agriculture are too deeply entrenched to be overcome. However, the experiences of Zimbabwean women farmers suggest otherwise (Mutopo, 2014), as I will show. Through collective action, women are preserving seed sovereignty, building knowledge networks, and creating alternative farming models; demonstrating that transformative change is possible when women lead (Agarwal, 2018; Bezner Kerr, 2020).

These grassroots alternatives unfold against Zimbabwe's ongoing push for agricultural 'modernization.' Policy frameworks such as the *National Agriculture Policy Framework (2018–2030)* and the *Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy (2020–2030)* envision a market-oriented sector built on hybrid seeds, fertilizer use, and contract farming (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Tinarwo et al., 2024). While framed around food security and growth, these

strategies sideline agroecological knowledge and often reproduce gendered exclusions. This contrast underscores the significance of the women's strategies discussed in the following chapters, which represent systemic alternatives rooted in biodiversity, reciprocity, and resilience. Situating these practices against the backdrop of state-led modernization also highlights why questions of seed politics and agricultural pathways are central to this thesis; in later chapters (particularly Chapters 2 and 5), I return to these dynamics, showing how they structure smallholders' vulnerabilities while simultaneously creating the conditions for women's collective agroecological resistance.

1.5 Thesis structure

I developed this thesis through three interconnected papers that together examine the theoretical, empirical, and political dimensions of women's collective action in agroecology. Each paper addresses a different aspect of the research problem, spanning theoretical critique, empirical analysis, and institutional dynamics, while collectively contributing to the overarching argument. Together, they illustrate how gendered power relations are both reproduced and challenged in agroecological systems, and how women's situated practices and leadership catalyze broader processes of change. The paper-based chapters are framed by a set of Kappa chapters that introduce the research context, outline the analytical framework, explain the methodological approach, and synthesizes the key findings. The framing chapters provide conceptual grounding, methodological transparency, and reflective synthesis across the three papers.

Paper contributions

The three papers in this thesis, though distinct in their analytical entry points, are united by their grounding in Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and shared focus on women's collective action as a strategy for structural transformation in smallholder agroecology. While each paper stands alone, they cumulatively deepen the thesis's conceptual and empirical scope, addressing different dimensions of how gendered power relations are challenged and reconfigured in agrarian systems.

Together, they explore how women enact change through everyday practices, situated knowledge, and strategic collective action, offering a layered understanding of agroecological transformation. Table 3 outlines each paper's core focus, methodological approach, and contribution, providing a foundation for the synthesis that follows. While each paper stands alone, they are united by a shared use of and commitment to FPE and an overarching concern with how women transform

agrarian systems through everyday practices, situated knowledge, and strategic collective action. I designed these three papers to be cumulatively generative, each one deepening the conceptual and empirical scope of the thesis while addressing different entry points into the broader question of how gendered power relations are challenged and reconfigured within smallholder agroecological contexts.

Table 3. Paper Overview

The table summarises the three papers in terms of methodology, theoretical framework, and core contribution. While all are grounded in Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), each paper brings a distinct focus: Paper 1 develops a feminist critique of agroecology; Paper 2 applies ecofeminism to seed systems as commons; and Paper 3 combines FPE with Collective Action Theory (CAT) to examine women's leadership. Together, they offer a layered and relational analysis of women's agency and systemic transformation in agroecology.

Paper	Methodology	Theoretical Framework	Main Contribution
1	Narrative literature review	Feminist Political Ecology (FPE)	Establishes the conceptual foundation by integrating FPE with agroecology; identifies critical gaps in sustainability discourse around gender, equity, and local knowledge; advocates for a feminist agroecological lens in food systems transformation.
2	Interviews, FGDs, and observations	FPE and Ecofeminism	Provides an in-depth empirical account of seed-saving as a political and ecological strategy; conceptualizes traditional seed systems as a feminist commons; links everyday practice to resistance, care, and food sovereignty.
3	ZIMSOFF case with interviews and participatory workshops	FPE and Collective Action Theory (CAT)	Analyses women's grassroots leadership and institutional innovation in ZIMSOFF; highlights relational and transformative leadership practices that challenge both patriarchal norms and internal organizational contradictions.

Paper 1. *Feminist Agroecology: Towards Gender-Equal and Sustainable Food Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa* – lays the conceptual foundation for the thesis through a narrative literature review. It brings together FPE and agroecology to highlight the persistent gender-blindness in sustainability research and policy, especially within Sub-Saharan African food systems. In the paper, I identify key gaps in how agroecological approaches have addressed (or failed to address) questions of gender justice, intersectionality, and power. I argue for a more explicit integration of feminist principles, such as equitable resource governance, attention to women's ecological knowledge, and intersectional justice, into agroecology. This paper orients the thesis toward the need for transformative, justice-oriented sustainability science that goes beyond technical fixes to address the structural and relational dimensions of inequity in agriculture.

Paper 2. *Guardians of Heritage: Women's Position in Traditional Seed Systems and Agroecology in Zimbabwe* – moves from the conceptual to the empirical by focusing on the lived experiences of women seed savers in rural Zimbabwe. Based on interviews, FGDs, and observations, I explore how seed-saving is not only a practice of ecological stewardship but also a political act rooted in ancestral knowledge, gendered roles, and spiritual values. Women are shown to act as custodians of biodiversity, resisting the encroachment of commercial seed systems and asserting autonomy through practices grounded in community and memory. Drawing on FPE and ecofeminist theory, I conceptualize seed systems as a feminist commons; spaces where care, resilience, and resistance intersect. The paper reveals how women's traditional ecological knowledge operates as a form of agency and adaptation in the face of climate change and structural marginalization, thereby linking micro-level practices to broader debates about food sovereignty, epistemic justice, and agroecological transformation.

Paper 3. *Leadership from Below: Institutional Navigation and Transformative Feminist Strategies in Zimbabwean Agroecology* – shifts the focus to the internal dynamics of grassroots organizations. Through interviews and workshops with women leaders in the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF), I examine how women confront both external patriarchal institutions and internal organizational contradictions. While formal gender quotas and leadership positions exist, the findings highlight the persistence of symbolic inclusion and tokenism. In response, women leaders develop mentorship networks, cultivate political consciousness, and exercise relational power to enact change from within. The paper contributes to a feminist rethinking of leadership; not as a top-down or individualistic trait, but as a collective and transformative practice grounded in lived experience, solidarity, and critique. It also situates this form of leadership within broader transnational networks such as La Via Campesina, showing how local strategies intersect with global feminist and agroecological movements.

Together, the three papers offer a layered analysis that moves from conceptual critique to grounded empirical investigation, and from everyday seed practices to institutional change. They align with and expand the overarching thesis by illustrating how women's collective action operates at multiple scales: reclaiming knowledge systems, transforming institutions, and challenging the structural conditions of exclusion. The papers reinforce the central argument that agroecology, when led by and with women, holds radical potential for ecological balance and gender justice; but only if its political, institutional, and epistemological dimensions are fully confronted.

Thesis outline

The thesis consists of five core chapters, with Chapters 2 – 5 each corresponding to one paper and addressing specific research questions. As shown in Table 4, the chapters progress thematically from broad theoretical and contextual analysis to a focused empirical examination. Together, they construct a cohesive argument about women’s collective action and agroecological practices in Zimbabwe, weaving multiple perspectives into a unified narrative.

Table 4. Thesis progression

The thesis progresses from identifying structural gender inequities in smallholder agriculture (Chapter 2), to exploring how women respond through agency and resistance (Chapter 3). It then deepens the analysis by examining the organizational strategies that sustain collective action (Chapter 4), culminating in a focus on seed sovereignty as both a material and symbolic site of feminist agroecological transformation (Chapter 5). This progression illustrates a shift from diagnosing exclusion to documenting how women co-create alternatives through collective praxis. Each chapter addresses key research questions on gender dynamics in Zimbabwean agriculture.

Key Chapter	Research questions
Chapter 2: Gendered discourses in African smallholder agriculture	RQ1: Structural factors sustaining gender inequities
Chapter 3: Gendered constraints and women’s agency	RQ2: Women’s strategies for navigating power relations
Chapter 4: Women’s collective action	RQ3: Organizational and leadership mechanisms in women’s collectives
Chapter 5: Seeds of resistance	RQ4: Seed sovereignty’s role in agroecology and gender justice

Chapter 2 – Gendered discourses in African smallholder agriculture: Here, I investigate the structural, socio-cultural, and policy factors that perpetuate gender inequities in Zimbabwean smallholder agriculture, addressing RQ1. I situate my Zimbabwean context within broader sub-Saharan African debates on gender and agriculture, employing FPE to analyze how historical land regimes, cultural norms, and institutional biases continue to marginalize women. Through my review of relevant literature and insights from Paper 1, I establish the contextual and theoretical foundations for my analysis. This chapter not only explains why gender disparities persist but also sets the stage for my examination of women’s agency in later chapters.

Chapter 3 – Gendered constraints and women’s agency: In this chapter, I analyze how women in agroecology-based farming organizations navigate and challenge patriarchal power structures in agriculture, directly addressing RQ2. Drawing on empirical evidence, including findings from Paper 1, I demonstrate how women exercise agency and resistance within a historically male-dominated

agricultural system. Through their use of traditional knowledge, social networks, and agroecological practices, I show how they contest gender norms and negotiate greater control over resources. My analysis positions these women not as passive victims of inequity, but as proactive agents reshaping local food systems and driving social change through agroecological initiatives.

Chapter 4 – Women’s collective action: Here, I explore how women in agroecology-based organizations establish, sustain, and lead effective collectives, addressing RQ3. I examine the leadership strategies, group dynamics, and organizational mechanisms that enable women’s collective action and resource-sharing in agroecological movements. Drawing on FPE, CAT and my empirical data (particularly from Paper 3), I highlight how women’s groups develop participatory decision-making processes, build solidarity, and navigate challenges such as resource constraints and external pressures. My findings demonstrate how women’s leadership and collaborative organizational models disrupt traditional hierarchical structures, fostering more inclusive and equitable forms of community governance and agricultural innovation.

Chapter 5 – Seeds of resistance: In this chapter, I focus on women’s pivotal role in preserving traditional seed systems and knowledge as a form of resistance to agricultural industrialization and corporate seed dominance. I address RQ4 by investigating how women’s seed-saving practices and indigenous knowledge contribute to seed sovereignty, food security, and climate resilience in Zimbabwe. Drawing on evidence from Paper 2 and my own field data, I analyze the cultural, ecological, and socio-political dimensions of seed sovereignty. My findings illustrate how women, as custodians of biodiversity, not only safeguard heirloom crop varieties and adaptive knowledge but also actively challenge the norms of commercial agriculture and intellectual property regimes that threaten local seed autonomy. Ultimately, I argue that women’s traditional ecological knowledge is indispensable for sustaining agrobiodiversity and strengthening community resilience against climate change and market pressures.

The visual below summarizes the narrative arc of my thesis on Zimbabwean women in agroecology. The diagram traces the progression of my analysis; beginning with the structural barriers women farmers confront, moving through their resistant strategies and assertions of agency, and culminating in their collective organizational approaches and seed sovereignty practices. These practices reflect both the practical and political dimensions of agroecological transformation. Through this framework, I show how women’s collective action generates pathways from constraint to empowerment, with each stage dynamically building upon and responding to the last.

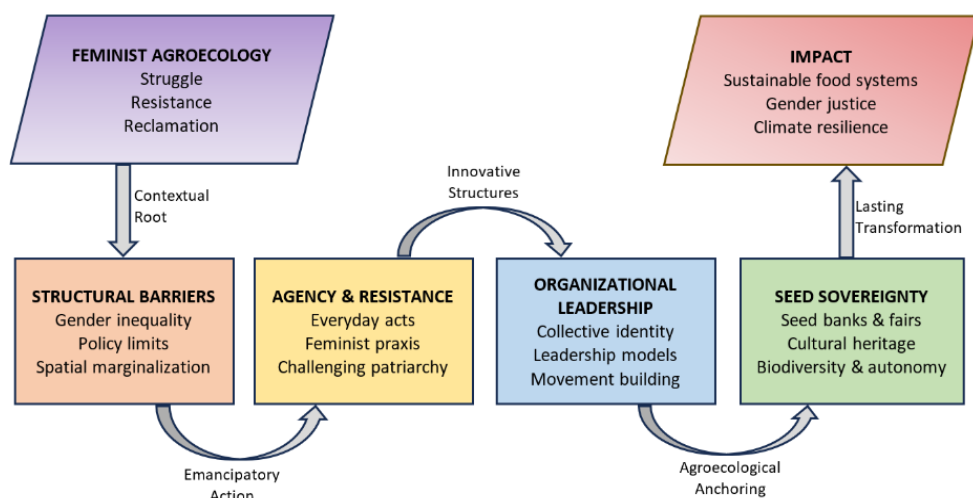


Figure 7. Women's journey in agroecology.

A conceptual model of Zimbabwean women's shifting roles; from marginalized laborers to empowered leaders in seed sovereignty, community organizing, and policy advocacy. Key phases include historical exclusion from land and extension services, collective mobilization, reclaiming indigenous knowledge, leadership in seed movements, and engagement in food governance. This trajectory embodies resistance and agency, illustrating how feminist agroecology redefines agrarian power structures.

Source: Author's own.

In the concluding discussion of my thesis (Chapter 6), I synthesize the findings and examine their broader implications. I reflect on how insights from Zimbabwe contribute to academic debates on gender and agroecology, evaluate my theoretical frameworks against the empirical results, and outline actionable recommendations for policy and practice. Finally, I identify key areas for future research, returning to my original research questions to underscore the transformative potential of women's collective action in reshaping agricultural systems.

2 Gendered discourses in smallholder agriculture

This chapter serves as a conceptual bridge between the thesis introduction and the empirical chapters that follow. Its central aim is to critically interrogate the persistent gap between the proliferation of gender-sensitive rhetoric in agricultural development and the enduring structural inequalities experienced by women in practice. By mapping the evolution of gender paradigms, from Women in Development (WID) to Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), the chapter demonstrates how mainstream approaches often fail to engage with power, place, and institutional exclusion. Drawing on FPE and Collective Action Theory (CAT), I argue for a more relational and intersectional lens that can better explain and address the mechanisms sustaining gender inequity in smallholder farming systems. In doing so, the chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for addressing RQ1 on how structural and socio-cultural factors sustain gender disparities. It is organized into four sections: gender paradigms in development, intersectionality and spatial marginalization, and the politics of seed sovereignty and structural transformation.

2.1 Agricultural gender paradigms

Over the past five decades, gender analysis in development has evolved significantly, moving from a narrow focus on integrating women into existing structures toward more critical frameworks that interrogate the underlying systems of power and inequality. Early Women in Development (WID) approaches, popularized in the 1970s through the work of scholars like Boserup (1970), highlighted women's exclusion from formal development programs and advocated for their inclusion as a means to improve productivity. These approaches were rooted in liberal feminist thinking and sought to 'add women' to existing models of agricultural development by stressing their contribution to production but without necessarily questioning the patriarchal and capitalist logics underpinning them.

By the late 1980s and 1990s, Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks emerged as a response to WID's limitations. Drawing on Marxist and socialist feminist perspectives, GAD shifted attention toward structural power relations, emphasizing

the importance of transforming gender roles, challenging patriarchy, and recognizing women's reproductive and care work as central to development processes (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1993). However, despite these conceptual advances, the implementation of GAD has often been superficial, with gender-sensitive reforms reduced to technocratic fixes or box-ticking exercises. As Cornwall (2003) argues, gender mainstreaming frequently becomes a depoliticized project that fails to challenge deeper structural inequities.

This gap between theory and practice is especially evident in the agricultural sector, where women continue to be positioned as instrumental actors in service of productivity goals. The persistent framing of women as a means to economic growth rather than as rights-holders or political agents, undermines the emancipatory potential of gender-focused development (Chant, 2014). Programs may include women in training or resource allocation, but often fail to account for the unpaid labor, land insecurity, or socio-cultural norms that constrain women's agricultural decision-making (Mohanty, 2003). Table 5 below summarizes this evolution from WID to GAD and toward post-GAD paradigms such as FPE. It highlights the core logic, limitations, and relevance of each paradigm, with examples drawn from Zimbabwean agricultural programming.

These shifting paradigms have had direct implications for how gender is approached in Zimbabwe's agricultural development landscape. For example, many NGO and state-led programs continue to rely on WID-style approaches that treat women as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents of change. This persistence highlights the disconnection between stated commitments to gender equity and the realities of program design and delivery. For example, flagship interventions such as Pfumvudza/Intwasa and Conservation Agriculture (government-led, input-intensive programs)⁹, though often framed as gender-sensitive, rely on standardized input packages and top-down extension services that fail to engage with women's lived experiences (Mutopo, 2014). The table below offers a conceptual synthesis of these gender paradigms, highlighting their assumptions, limitations, and implications for agroecology in Zimbabwe.

⁹ Pfumvudza/Intwasa is a state-led 'climate-proofed' agriculture program launched under Zimbabwe's Presidential Climate-Proofed Agriculture initiative (2020), implemented by the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Climate and Rural Resettlement through AGRITEX, with standardized input packages of hybrid seed and fertilizers. Conservation Agriculture was introduced earlier through FAO- and donor-supported projects in partnership with the Government of Zimbabwe, emphasizing minimum tillage, mulching, and crop rotation. Both are promoted as flagship interventions, though they often rely on top-down extension models and input-intensive packages that marginalize women's situated agroecological knowledge.

Table 5. Evolution of gender paradigms in development and their relevance to agroecology

This table traces how different gender paradigms have shaped agricultural policy and practice in Zimbabwe over time. The examples in the first two rows reflect dominant or historical approaches. The final row includes emerging grassroots initiatives that, while not yet institutionalized, reflect the values and practices advocated for in this thesis.

Paradigm	Core Logic	Critique	Relevance to Thesis	Examples from Zimbabwe
WID	Integrate women into development for efficiency and economic growth	Ignores structural inequities	Legacy of inclusion without power change persists in Zimbabwean agri-programs	AGRITEX's focus on home gardens and nutrition for women; seed aid programs that ignored women's seed knowledge.
GAD	Transform gender roles and social relations	Limited uptake in practice	Informs call for structural change, but often diluted	Gender focal points in ministries; policy-level gender mainstreaming with limited grassroots engagement; isolated training initiatives under NGOs.
Post-GAD / FPE	Emphasize intersectionality, power, ecology, and agency	Often marginalized in policy	Framework through which I analyse women's collective agroecological action	Emerging grassroots alternatives such as ZIMSOFF's seed sovereignty work; women-led seed banks and farmer field schools; feminist land advocacy and traditional knowledge sharing.

These policy framings often assume a level playing field, overlooking the structural barriers women face in accessing land, credit, and extension support. Interviews conducted during fieldwork revealed that even when women were formally included in project activities, their knowledge was dismissed, their labor was undervalued, and their participation was restricted by patriarchal norms embedded in both formal and informal institutions. For example, one woman appointed as a national treasurer within ZIMSOFF lamented the symbolic nature of her role; “I am a national treasurer, but I have never set foot in a bank,” highlighting how leadership positions were often granted without the power or institutional access to carry out meaningful responsibilities. This reflects how inclusion in name does not always translate into substantive participation, an issue also evident in the gender-sensitive initiatives discussed above. Others described how traditional authorities continued to require male mediation for land-related matters:

Government says we have rights, but the chief says my husband must speak for me (FGD, 2022).

Even within women-led farmer organizations such as ZIMSOFF, gender norms persisted; “[t]hese positions that we are elected for are just for show,” noted one participant during a leadership workshop, pointing to the lack of institutional support, training, or access to decision-making spaces. Another woman reflected critically on internalized patriarchal values, noting that women brought each other down. Such insights illustrate that inclusion on paper does not automatically translate to substantive participation or empowerment in practice.

These examples illustrate what Cornwall and Rivas (2015) term the ‘illusion of inclusion’; programs that appear equitable on paper but entrench existing power hierarchies in practice. Agricultural extension services, for instance, continue to privilege male farmers and commercial crops, while largely ignoring women’s knowledge of food crops and agroecological practices (Chiweshe et al., 2015). This reflects what Harcourt and Nelson (2015) describe as a disconnect between policy rhetoric and ‘the politics of everyday life’ where gendered labor, decision-making, and knowledge are embedded.

To overcome these limitations, I draw on FPE and CAT as complementary frameworks. FPE foregrounds the relational, situated, and power-laden nature of environmental knowledge and gendered labor, offering tools to understand how structural inequities are reproduced through everyday practices (Elmhirst, 2011; Rocheleau et al., 1996). It also attends to emotional, embodied, and symbolic dimensions of agricultural labor; domains often ignored in conventional policy discourse. CAT, meanwhile, provides insight into how collective institutions navigate resource governance, build leadership, and foster resilience under constrained conditions (Agarwal, 2000; Ostrom, 1990) as illustrated by women’s seed groups or farming cooperatives in this study,

By integrating FPE and CAT, I shift the analysis from inclusion to transformation. I conceptualize gender not as a variable to be mainstreamed, but as a field of struggle shaped by history, identity, space, and institutional culture. This approach aligns with the view that meaningful transformation requires confronting structural power and building new forms of collective governance that, as seen in this study, center women's agency and knowledge. This is consistent not only with FPE's commitment to relational, situated, and power-aware analysis, but also with a critical realist ontology that recognizes how deep structural mechanisms such as patriarchy, shape observable events. By combining these perspectives, the study foregrounds both the material and discursive conditions under which transformation can occur, and how women, through collective praxis, act as agents of change within and against those structures. In the sections that follow, I apply this lens to examine how intersectionality in terms of spatial inequity, and seed sovereignty shape, and are shaped by women's agroecological action in Zimbabwe.

2.2 Intersectionality and geographical marginalization

While gender is a critical axis of exclusion in agriculture, it does not operate in isolation. Women's experiences in farming systems are shaped by multiple, intersecting dimensions of identity and structure, such as class, age, race, marital status, (Crenshaw, 1991; Thompson-Hall et al., 2016) and, crucially, geography. Intersectionality, as a framework, highlights how these interlocking systems of oppression create differentiated vulnerabilities and capabilities, particularly within rural livelihoods and agricultural governance (Leder, 2022). Leder & Sachs (2019) critique the limitations of additive, sex-disaggregated indicators and argue for a more relational, lived-experience-based approach that recognizes how intersecting identities, such as gender, age, marital status, and geographic location shape agricultural experiences and outcomes.

Political ecology has long treated space as relational and contested (Massey, 2005; Neumann, 2005), and FPE has contributed place-attentive analyses that map how gender, class, and other axes of difference are produced through landscapes and access regimes (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011; Elmhirst, 2011). Scholarship on territorialization and frontiers shows how state-market projects actively make margins (Escobar, 2008; Hall et al., 2011). Thus, FPE does engage with geography; the issue is how particular forms of spatial inequity are theorized and connected to intersectional identities in specific agrarian contexts.

This perspective is especially urgent in Zimbabwe, where agroecological zones vary widely in rainfall, infrastructure, and access to agricultural support services (Makuvaro et al., 2018; Manatsa et al., 2020). For instance, women farming in Regions IV and V, the driest and most infrastructurally neglected areas, face

compounded disadvantages compared to their counterparts in more fertile and accessible areas. These former ones are characterized by limited access to markets, irrigation, extension services, and formalized land tenure (Frischen et al., 2020; Mutopo, 2014). At the same time, marital status can intersect with geography to further exacerbate exclusion: widows and single mothers in remote areas are especially marginalized, often lacking both male intermediaries and kin-based social capital that can ease access to land and inputs.

Hence, I developed a Spatially Aware Intersectional Framework to better analyze how gendered exclusion is mediated by place, identity, and institutional reach. Drawing on critiques that feminist geography has often under-theorized spatial inequity despite its disciplinary focus (Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sultana, 2021), this framework integrates spatial, social, and institutional dimensions of power.

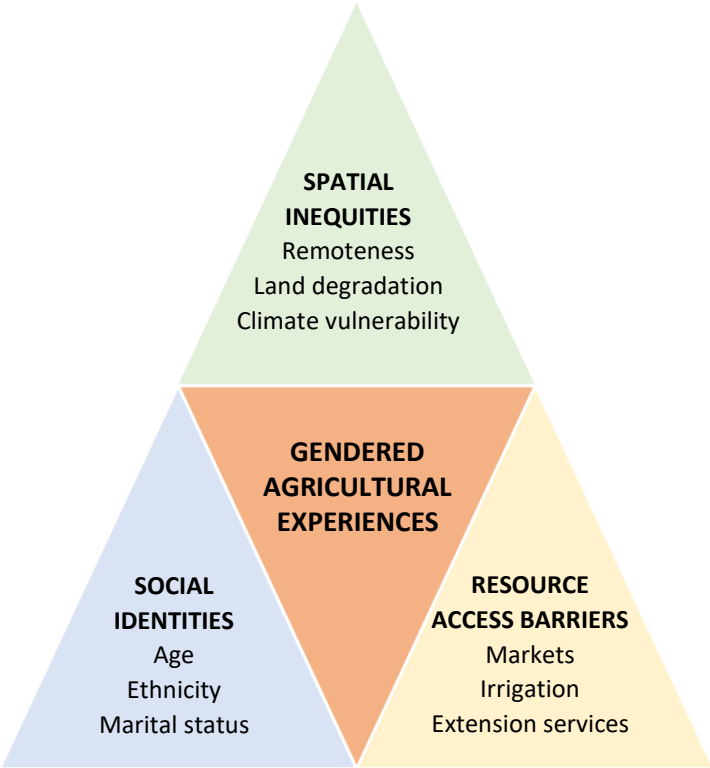


Figure 8. Components of a Spatially Aware Intersectional Framework
This figure visualizes how spatial inequities, social identity, and institutional access intersect to shape differentiated agricultural experiences. It is based on field data and extends intersectionality theory with an explicitly geographical lens to show how structural power is lived and negotiated in semi-arid smallholder farming systems. **Source:** Author, adapted from Sultana (2021), Mollett & Faria (2013), and fieldwork (2022–2025).

Evidence from Zimbabwe's land reform programs illustrates how these intersecting dynamics play out. Although the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) included gender quotas, patriarchal gatekeeping and informal decision-making processes meant that women, especially those without male relatives, were often allocated marginal lands, far from roads and irrigation schemes (Matondi, 2012; Moyo, 2011; Zikhali, 2010). Tenure insecurity was further entrenched by documentation practices that prioritized men's names on offer letters or permits (Chigbu et al., 2019; Chiweshe & Bhatasara, 2022). These structural exclusions limit women's ability to access credit, participate in policy consultations, or experiment with long-term agroecological practices. Climate change adds another layer of vulnerability. Female-headed households in drought-prone regions reported the highest crop failure rates during the 2015–2016 El Niño drought, largely due to restricted access to drought-tolerant seeds, irrigation, and weather information (Brown et al., 2012; ZimVAC, 2017). Despite these challenges, women in these regions also exhibited remarkable resilience, drawing on intergenerational ecological knowledge to implement context-specific soil and pest management practices (Makate et al., 2019), as shown in Figure 5.

Building on this literature, my contribution is to specify three mechanisms through which spatial inequity and intersectional difference co-produce one another in Zimbabwe's smallholder agroecologies: (1) cross-level barriers – how district- and national-level seed and land rules mediate village-level options (see also Marston, 2017); (2) peripheralization through infrastructure – transport, markets, and extension that privilege better-resourced corridors while rendering remote zones administratively distant (Bebbington, 1999); and (3) ecological classifications with social effects – labels like 'arid,' 'fragile,' or 'communal' that justify input-intensive interventions or enclosures, reshaping who accesses which seeds, soils, and waters (Leach et al., 1999).

This framing enables me to read center/periphery, fertile/marginal, and upstream/downstream not as static descriptors but as relational effects of policy, markets, and ecology that intersect with gendered livelihoods. By integrating intersectionality with spatial analysis, I show how women's experiences reveal both systemic vulnerability and strategic adaptation. Women's ability to organize, share knowledge, and innovate agroecologically is shaped simultaneously by their social positioning and their geographical environment. This understanding is critical for crafting equitable agricultural policies and supporting grassroots farmer movements. In the next section, I extend this analysis by examining seed sovereignty; a site where gendered power, cultural knowledge, and ecological resilience dynamically intersect.

2.3 Gender and seed sovereignty

Land access is foundational to agricultural production, yet it is not sufficient to ensure food sovereignty or women's empowerment. Seeds – what is planted, how it is selected and saved, and who controls its reproduction – are equally fundamental. From a FPE perspective, seeds are not just biological agricultural inputs; they are political and cultural resources embedded in gendered power relations and knowledge systems (Kloppenborg, 2010; Shiva, 1993). Seed sovereignty refers to the right of farmers, particularly smallholders and Indigenous communities, to select, save, use, exchange, and cultivate diverse seed varieties without interference from state or corporate actors (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; La Via Campesina, 2013). For many women, especially in contexts like Zimbabwe, seed sovereignty is intimately tied to survival, autonomy, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Howard, 2003). In this thesis, I engage seed sovereignty both as an analytical lens to examine power, gender, and knowledge in agrarian systems, and as a farmer-driven concept mobilized by farmer organizations like ZIMSOFF in their advocacy and everyday practices.

Seed systems in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in the Global South, operate along two interconnected but unequal tracks: the formal and the informal. Formal systems are structured around state regulation, certification procedures, and commercial seed companies, privileging hybrid and standardized varieties. Informal systems, by contrast, are farmer-managed and embedded in local social relations: farmers save, select, exchange, and adapt seed across generations, ensuring both biodiversity and cultural continuity (Sperling & McGuire, 2010). My empirical findings confirm that these informal systems supply the majority of seed used by smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe, particularly for traditional grains and legumes such as millet, sorghum, cowpeas, and groundnuts. Nonetheless, they are frequently delegitimized or even criminalized under seed laws that outlaw uncertified exchanges and prioritize commercial seed markets (Wattm, 2016; La Via Campesina & GRAIN, 2015). This duality is crucial to understanding women's experiences: their everyday seed practices are simultaneously marginalized by formal regulations and revitalized through grassroots networks.

However, this sovereignty is increasingly undermined by the spread of commercial seed systems, particularly hybrid and other 'improved' varieties promoted through state and donor programs. Hybrid seeds are developed by crossing distinct parent lines to produce uniform, high-yielding plants. Unlike farmer-saved seeds, their desirable traits do not reproduce in subsequent generations, obliging farmers to purchase new seed each season (McGuire & Sperling, 2016). This creates dependency on external suppliers and undermines traditional systems of saving, exchanging, and collectively managing seeds.

From an agroecological perspective, hybrids and other ‘improved’ seeds, including certified open-pollinated varieties and, increasingly, genetically modified crops, pose challenges by narrowing biodiversity, eroding local knowledge systems, and reinforcing commodification of life forms (Altieri & Nicholls, 2017; Bezner Kerr, 2013; Kloppenburg, 2010; Shiva, 1993; Wynberg, 2024). While such seeds may increase yields under controlled conditions, they often marginalize the diverse, low-input, and culturally rooted varieties stewarded by women. In this thesis, I therefore use the term ‘commercial seed systems’ to encompass hybrids, certified improved varieties, and the institutional frameworks that consolidate control over seed production and distribution.

Historically, women in Zimbabwe have been plant-breeders and thus custodians of seed diversity, responsible for selecting, saving, and sharing seed varieties adapted to local agroecological conditions and cultural preferences (Mutopo, 2014). These practices are deeply relational and often tied to networks of reciprocity and care. Nonetheless, they have been systematically marginalized by colonial and post-colonial agricultural regimes that promote commercial seed systems and monoculture farming (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019). The erosion of farmer-saved seed systems, often in the name of productivity or modernization, has disproportionately affected women, whose knowledge and agency in seed management remain undervalued and under threat (De Schutter, 2009; Mkodzongi, 2018).

The Zimbabwean government and donor-led initiatives have historically prioritized commercial seed systems, framing certified improved varieties, most prominently hybrid¹⁰ maize, as central to national food security (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019). This is especially evident in programs like Intwasa/Pfumvudza, the government’s flagship ‘climate-proofed’ agriculture scheme launched in 2020 under the Presidential Climate-Proofed Agriculture initiative. Rolled out through Agricultural Technical and Extension Services (AGRITEX) extension officers, the program provides standardized input packages of hybrid maize seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides to smallholder households, targeting food security through input-intensive methods. While the initiative is promoted as climate-resilient and gender-sensitive, it operates through a logic of standardization that marginalizes farmer-saved seed, agrobiodiversity, and women’s traditional ecological knowledge (Manzeke-Kangara et al., 2024; Tirivangasi et al., 2023).

Both my fieldwork and existing studies show that Intwasa/Pfumvudza assumes access to land, cash inputs, and irrigation; conditions many rural women, especially

¹⁰ In this thesis, I use the term “commercial seed systems” to encompass hybrid seeds, certified improved open-pollinated varieties (OPVs), and, where relevant, genetically modified (GM) seeds. Hybrid maize is the most prominent and widely distributed example in Zimbabwe, but it is part of a broader package of certified seed technologies promoted through state and donor programs.

in communal and resettlement areas, do not meet (see also Manzeke-Kangara et al., 2024). Women often lack tenure security, face difficulties with co-financing, and are penalized for non-compliance with rigid guidelines. The program's top-down extension services tend to sideline women's collectives and dismiss traditional knowledge as unscientific. As a result, rather than supporting women's agroecological efforts, such programs displace them, reinforcing dependence on external inputs and undermining local autonomy. This disconnect highlights a central argument of this thesis that: without a feminist and agroecological reorientation, state-led food security initiatives risk deepening the very inequities they aim to address.

In contrast, agroecological movements in Zimbabwe, such as those led by the ZIMSOFF, have reclaimed seed sovereignty as a site of resistance and regeneration. Women in these movements organize seed exchanges, maintain community seed banks, and document traditional seed varieties and their uses. These practices not only preserve agrobiodiversity but also restore cultural authority to women as knowledge-holders and decision-makers (Zaremba et al., 2021). For example, evidence from my fieldwork revealed that in Matabeleland North, seed fairs organized by ZIMSOFF not only celebrate women's seed stewardship but also serve as political spaces where alternative agricultural values; resilience, taste, nutrition, and cultural identity, are foregrounded by yield alone. As one woman from Nkayi put it, *"Even two grains of beans can tell a story"*, underscoring how these gatherings valorize seeds not just as inputs but as carriers of history, identity, and sovereignty. Another participant reflected:

Seed fairs are more than technical exchanges, they are cultural events where women exhibit seed varieties, share cultivation stories, and celebrate agricultural heritage (Seed fair, 2022).

Similar struggles over seed sovereignty are unfolding across Africa and beyond. In Kenya and South Africa, farmer organizations and NGOs have resisted restrictive seed laws that criminalize informal exchanges (Wynberg, 2024). In Latin America, seed fairs and farmer-managed banks are similarly framed as acts of decommodification and cultural survival (Hernández Rodríguez, 2022), while in India, Navdanya has long highlighted women's seed custodianship as both ecological and political resistance (Shiva, 2016). These cases resonate with ZIMSOFF's practices, underscoring how women's seed networks embody a global feminist commons while remaining rooted in locally specific struggles.

This highlights the fairs' role in affirming women's knowledge and challenging dominant narratives of productivity. While practices such as seed fairs affirm the cultural and political significance of farmer-managed seed systems, newer institutional forms have also emerged that straddle the line between informal traditions and formalized organization. Seed custodians, for example, draw on long-

standing practices of women's stewardship over seed diversity, but their formal appointment within farmer organizations like ZIMSOFF represents an institutional innovation designed to strengthen local governance of biodiversity (Mutopo, 2014; Wynberg, 2024).

Similarly, community seed banks, though rooted in household and kinship-based traditions of saving and sharing seed, are more recent organizational outcomes, often supported by farmer movements and NGOs since the 2000s, to safeguard landraces against market and climatic pressures (Vernooy et al., 2017; McGuire & Sperling, 2016). Both custodianship and seed banks therefore illustrate the hybrid character of contemporary seed systems; anchored in indigenous practices yet strategically adapted to resist enclosure, ensure intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and build resilience in the face of formal seed sector dominance.

From a feminist commons perspective, these collective practices represent more than cultural tradition; they enact alternative governance systems rooted in participation, rulemaking, and care (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Clement et al., 2019). By preserving and exchanging farmer-saved seed outside commercial markets, women's seed custodianship directly resists the commodification of life forms, while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of their ecological knowledge. Seed custodianship is thus both relational and political, underscoring how women's everyday agricultural practices carry implications for ecological resilience and power relations in agrarian systems.

In this study I argue that seed sovereignty is not a technical domain but a feminist site of struggle. Who defines quality seed, who controls its distribution, and whose knowledge counts in that process, are all deeply gendered questions. As such, seed systems offer a potent lens for examining not only exclusion but also how women reassert agency and shape agrarian futures from below. The next section builds on this analysis by exploring the limitations of gender-sensitive reforms more broadly, showing how even well-intentioned programs can fall short when they ignore women's lived realities, institutional constraints, and collective strategies for transformation.

2.4 Toward structural transformation

The preceding sections have examined how gendered power operates in agriculture through policy frameworks, spatial inequities, and contested seed systems. Even as many development institutions adopt gender-sensitive reforms, their ability to deliver substantive change remains deeply limited. In this final section of Chapter 2, I critique such reformist approaches and signal the need for more grounded, transformative responses; setting the stage for the empirical analysis that follows.

Over the past two decades, Zimbabwean agricultural policy has increasingly integrated gender equity objectives through national frameworks such as the Zimbabwe Gender Policy (2017) and gender focal points in agricultural ministries (World Bank, 2023). On paper, these instruments aim to redress exclusion by improving women's access to land, training, and resources. However, such reforms are often embedded in technocratic paradigms that treat gender as a variable to be mainstreamed, rather than a structural relation of power to be transformed. As a result, many gender-sensitive initiatives suffer from limited implementation, tokenistic participation, and a disconnect between national intentions and local institutional dynamics (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Women may be included in extension programs or input schemes, but their knowledge, leadership, and ecological practices remain marginalized, especially in contexts where customary norms and male-dominated bureaucracies intersect to constrain access and authority (Chiweshe et al., 2015; Mutopo, 2014).

These limitations are further compounded by a reliance on individualized models of empowerment that emphasize training, credit, or market access, without acknowledging the collective, relational, and institutional dimensions of women's agricultural labor (Agarwal, 1994; Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Crucially, such approaches often ignore or devalue the very practices like seed saving, reciprocal labor, and communal care, that sustain agroecological resilience and are led by women. In Zimbabwe, farmers' collective action is often acknowledged in official agricultural discourse, but largely as an implementation mechanism for state and donor-led input schemes such as Pfumvudza/Intwasa, rather than as autonomous grassroots institutions. This framing depoliticizes collective action, reducing farmer groups to delivery channels while overlooking their role in sustaining agroecological resilience and advancing women's knowledge and leadership. As discussed in Section 2.3, these interventions frequently undermine women's autonomy and reinforce dependence on external systems. Before turning to the empirical chapters, it is useful to briefly consider agricultural extension as a concrete example of how institutional frameworks privilege men and marginalize women's knowledge.

Agricultural extension as a gendered institution

Agricultural extension services provide a concrete example of how institutional logics privilege men and constrain women's agency. In Zimbabwe and much of sub-Saharan Africa, these services have historically been shaped by productivist, market-oriented approaches that equate 'the farmer' with the male household head (FAO, 2011). Designed around landholders and commercial value chains, extension continues to privilege men as the default recipients of training, inputs, and recognition (Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010).

Mechanisms of privilege: Programs often register beneficiaries through land documents and cooperatives controlled by men, excluding women who farm on customary or secondary plots (Ragasa et al., 2013). Content prioritizes cash crops such as maize or tobacco, while women's domains – small grains, legumes, and vegetables, are overlooked (FAO, 2011). Sessions are scheduled around men's calendars, with travel requirements that clash with women's care responsibilities, and male-dominated staffing can further discourage their participation (Farnworth & Colverson, 2015). Monitoring indicators emphasize yields and input adoption, rendering invisible outcomes valued by women such as seed security, dietary diversity, and reduced labour burdens (Howard, 2003; Kloppenburg, 2010).

Implications for women's agency: These biases limit women's access to resources, weaken their decision-making power, and devalue their knowledge. Exclusion from trainings reduces access to climate advisories, tools, and credit, while the framing of men as household decision-makers reinforces women's marginality. Agroecological practices where women often lead seed selection, storage, and intercropping, are frequently dismissed as 'traditional,' reproducing epistemic injustice (Howard, 2003).

Partial reforms and agroecological implications: Gender mainstreaming has introduced quotas for women in farmer field schools and new digital advisory platforms, but these often "add women in" without shifting the deeper logics that privilege male farmers (Ragasa et al., 2013). Positive examples, such as female farmer-trainers or women-only seed programs, show what is possible but remain exceptions (Farnworth & Colverson, 2015). Because agroecology depends on biodiversity stewardship and collective governance, domains where women play central roles, the male bias of extension represents a structural barrier to transformation. Addressing these biases is critical if extension is to support, rather than undermine, agroecological futures.

These persistent shortcomings reflect not failure of intention, but failure of framework. Gender-sensitive reforms that operate within existing institutional logic are unlikely to deliver structural change. As the example of agricultural extension shows, institutional practices that privilege men as default farmers continue to marginalize women's knowledge and contributions, even when policy rhetoric stresses inclusion. What is needed are approaches that reconfigure how power, knowledge, and ecological care are distributed and recognized in agricultural systems. This critique leads directly to the analytical pivot of the thesis. If gender-sensitive policy has reached its limits, then we must ask: how do women organize beyond these limits? What forms of agency and leadership emerge in contexts where policy falls short, but where women, drawing on situated knowledge and mutual support, continue to innovate and resist? The next chapter explores precisely this: how women in Zimbabwe's agroecological movements navigate exclusion not only by coping, but by creating.

3 Gendered constraints and women's agency

The question of who controls land, and the political and institutional power that accompanies it, remains central to Zimbabwe's post-colonial agrarian landscape. As shown in Chapter 2, women face persistent exclusion from land ownership, agricultural extension, and decision-making structures due to overlapping formal and customary systems that privilege male authority. Even so, these structural inequities do not go uncontested. This chapter builds on that foundation to examine how women farmers respond to exclusion not only by navigating constraints, but by asserting agency through collective strategies rooted in agroecological practice. Drawing on fieldwork in Zimbabwe's Regions IV and V, I explore how women mobilize informal networks, reinterpret customary norms, and build new institutions of care, governance, and resistance. Rather than viewing women as passive victims of patriarchal systems, the chapter highlights their capacity to negotiate, organize, and transform agricultural and institutional spaces from the ground up.

3.1 Institutional exclusion in agriculture

Zimbabwe's agricultural governance operates through overlapping formal and customary systems, creating a layered institutional terrain that women must navigate (Mutopo, 2014). While national policy frameworks such as the *National Agriculture Policy Framework* (2018–2030) and the *Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy*, promote inclusive and sustainable development, implementation remains gender-blind in practice (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Tinarwo et al., 2024). These policies rarely translate into tangible gains for women due to patriarchal norms embedded within both state and traditional institutions (Munemo et al., 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Formal institutions, including AGRITEX and the Ministry of Agriculture, have made attempts at gender mainstreaming, but extension services remain male-dominated in personnel and practice. Only 23% of extension officers are women, and outreach tends to prioritize cash crops grown by men over food crops managed by women (Chipenda, 2025). During interviews, women farmers reported being

overlooked or bypassed entirely by state support channels, particularly in remote areas where resource scarcity and staff bias intersect. This exclusion is particularly clear in the case of seed custodians, women selected by farmer groups, traditional leaders, or organizations like ZIMSOFF to steward traditional seed varieties and facilitate local seed governance. Their role includes managing community seed banks, organizing seed exchanges, preserving agrobiodiversity, and mentoring others in seed stewardship. Although seed custodians are essential actors in sustaining agroecological systems, many receive little institutional support, training, or recognition. This reflects how formal roles often lack the structural support necessary for meaningful participation, reinforcing patterns of marginalization (as discussed in Paper 3). These exclusions are institutional, not incidental, revealing how knowledge systems and decision-making authority are gendered.

Customary authorities play a parallel role, particularly in communal areas where chiefs and headmen retain control over land allocation and agricultural dispute resolution. Despite constitutional provisions for gender equity, customary law often positions men as household heads and primary landholders (Hellum & Derman, 2004; Moyo, 2011). In fieldwork across Matabeleland, many women described having to appeal to male relatives to secure land access or assert cultivation rights. This dynamic illustrates what Ribot and Peluso (2003) term ‘webs of power,’¹¹ where access to resources is not determined solely by formal rights, but is continuously shaped through social relations, institutional authority, and identity-based negotiations. One woman summarized the situation:

Government says we have rights, but the chief says my husband must speak for me (FGD, 2022).

Moreover, a traditional leader explained:

Land allocation must follow our traditions, which recognize the man as the head of the household and primary decision-maker (Interview, 2023).

This perspective exemplifies how traditional governance often reinforces gender hierarchies in agricultural systems.

This dual structure produces contradictions. While statutory law guarantees equal land rights, customary norms restrict women’s control, especially for widows and female-headed households. These institutional barriers are compounded in practice. For example, male outmigration has led to de facto feminization of agriculture, but extension officers continue to seek male decision-makers, overlooking the women now managing farms (Chiweshe et al., 2015). In Bubi District, women formed the

¹¹ Ribot and Peluso (2003) conceptualize access as the ability to benefit from resources, emphasizing that it is mediated through overlapping ‘webs of power’ such as social identity, institutions, and relationships, rather than being determined by formal rights alone.

Sibantubanye Small Farmer Organization (SFO)¹² after state services ceased due to the absence of men. Their ‘absent husband protocol’ formalizes women’s authority in decision-making; by presenting harvest records and consensus documents to extension agents, they gradually shift institutional recognition in their favor.

While women’s responses to exclusion may appear incremental or adaptive on the surface, many of these practices reflect deeper shifts in power, identity, and institutional norms. In this thesis, I define transformative strategies as those that do more than enable survival, they alter the conditions that sustain inequity. Drawing on FPE, I consider practices transformative when they redistribute authority (e.g., through collective decision-making), reclaim or validate marginalized knowledge (e.g., seed stewardship), or create new institutional arrangements (e.g., women-led cooperatives). These strategies move beyond individual coping to reshape the structures, relations, and values underpinning agriculture. As Table 6 illustrates, women have begun to respond through creative strategies: negotiating land through kin networks, forming women-only cooperatives, and leveraging collective productivity to build legitimacy.

Not all strategies listed may be equally transformative in every context. Some began as coping mechanisms but evolved into collective responses that challenged exclusionary norms. Their transformative potential lies in how they reconfigure power relations, institutional arrangements, or knowledge systems, rather than simply enabling survival. These strategies often emerge in response to institutional gaps, but they also shape how institutions themselves evolve. For example, collective action has prompted shifts even within customary systems long seen as resistant to change. The relationship between formal and traditional institutions is evolving, with some progressive traditional leaders working to reform gender-discriminatory practices while maintaining cultural continuity. In parts of Matabeleland South, chiefs have created women’s advisory councils to influence land and farming decisions (Tom & Banda, 2023). This demonstrates that customary structures are not static and can be sites of negotiation and reform when women organize collectively.

¹² Small Farmer Organizations (SFOs) are locally based farmer collectives that bring together smallholder households within a defined area. In the context of ZIMSOFF, SFOs form the foundational units of membership and governance, providing platforms for seed exchange, collective decision-making, and grassroots leadership. They are nested into regional clusters, which in turn link to the national structure.

Table 6. Gendered constraints and transformative strategies in Zimbabwean agroecology.

This matrix illustrates how women farmers respond to structural and cultural barriers through grassroots strategies rooted in collective action, indigenous knowledge, and agroecological practice. **Source:** Author's own findings

Gendered Constraints	Women's Transformative Strategies
Unequal access to land	Negotiating informal land access via kin networks; Collective lobbying for land recognition in communal areas
Exclusion from agricultural policy and extension services	Creating women-led knowledge hubs ; Partnering with NGOs for farmer-to-farmer learning
Devaluation of indigenous knowledge	Revitalizing seed fairs and community storytelling; Agroecological experimentation (e.g. intercropping)
Labor burden and time poverty	Cooperative labor sharing; Community childcare during peak farming periods
Cultural norms restricting leadership roles	Women-only leadership committees; Mentorship from elder seed custodians
Market bias toward high-input commercial crops	Maintaining local seed banks; Selective market engagement for traditional crops

In sum, women are not merely reacting to exclusion; they are reshaping the meaning of land access and decision-making. Through informal tenure arrangements, cooperative lobbying, and parallel support systems, they carve out space in a terrain shaped by institutional inertia and patriarchal norms. Table 6 synthesizes these responses, showing how they address constraints in land, extension services, labor, and market access, and do so in strategic ways.

3.2 Organising for change

Facing institutional exclusion, women in Zimbabwe have responded with both resilience and strategic collective action. Drawing on CAT, I examine how women form cooperative structures to share labor, pool resources, and negotiate access to inputs, while FPE illuminates how these practices challenge gendered power relations and dominant agricultural paradigms (Agarwal, 2000; Elmhirst, 2011). Women's organizing often begins at the community level, grounded in informal institutions such as church groups, burial societies, and rotating savings clubs. These grassroots forms of mutual aid provide the foundation for agroecological practices and gendered agency. For example, seed exchange and labor-sharing networks serve

as both practical tools for farming and sites of collective negotiation over knowledge and authority (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019).

A major driver of change has been the feminization of agriculture, particularly in areas affected by male migration. This shift creates contradictions: women increasingly manage farms yet remain marginal in extension, input, and credit systems designed for male heads of households (Tirivangasi et al., 2023). These dynamics align with wider debates on the feminization of agriculture (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2008; Razavi, 2009). While women increasingly shoulder agricultural labor and decision-making due to male outmigration, they do so under structural constraints that limit access to land, credit, and institutional recognition. My findings contribute to this debate by showing how feminization is not merely a burden but also an entry point for women’s collective agency, though one that remains circumscribed by patriarchal structures.

As illustrated in Figure 9, women now comprise a growing share of agricultural decision-makers, though this shift is not matched by institutional recognition or support.

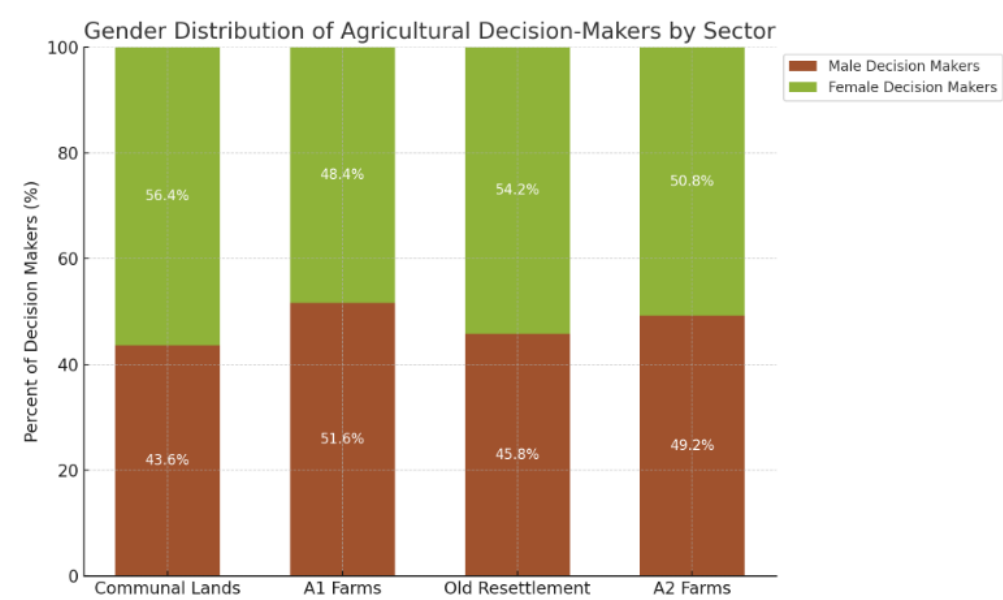


Figure 9. Gender distribution of agricultural decision-makers by sector
The trends suggest that while women are taking on more agricultural leadership, partly due to male outmigration, they still face barriers to full decision-making power. Patriarchal norms in land governance continue to shape these disparities. **Source:** Reproduced by author using data from the Zimbabwe Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Survey Report (2017).

Figure 9 presents the gender distribution of individuals identified as primary agricultural decision-makers across Zimbabwe's smallholder sectors. Nevertheless, the data aggregates 'decision-making' without distinguishing between different types of decisions (e.g., land use, seed selection, irrigation, marketing, or harvest management), the timing of such decisions, or whether they are made individually or jointly. This aggregation risks obscuring the often invisible and distributed nature of women's contributions, which are frequently embedded in everyday tasks and shaped through negotiation within households and community networks. Moreover, it can reinforce assumptions about who holds power, sidelining the many forms of informal, shared, or context-specific decisions in which women are central actors.

In response, women's groups have created alternative governance models. For example, my findings indicate that some women's groups in Zimbabwe have developed labor-sharing systems that compensate for male out-migration while creating decision-making forums where women exercise greater agricultural autonomy. These organizational innovations demonstrate how women collectively respond to changing household structures when formal agricultural institutions fail to adapt, directly connecting social transformation to women's strategic agency. My fieldwork in Bubi District provides compelling evidence of how women's collectives strategically respond to these demographic shifts. The Sibantubanye SFO in Bubi District established a rotating labor system that addresses male out-migration challenges while creating new decision-making spaces. As one of the group leaders explained:

When our husbands left for Bulawayo and South Africa, extension officers stopped visiting us, saying they needed to speak with the men. We formed our group to share labor during peak seasons, but it became much more; a place where we make agricultural decisions without seeking permission from absent men (Interview, 2023).

This testimony illustrates the dual dynamics of exclusion and innovation. Similar strategies have been documented across Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Andersson and Gabrielsson (2012) found that women in rural Kenya and Uganda pooled labor and resources to confront agricultural precarity, underscoring how solidarity-based organizing becomes a response to poverty and institutional neglect. The resonance between their findings and mine suggests that these forms of collective agency are not isolated to Zimbabwe but constitute a wider feminist agroecological repertoire across SSA.

Extension services, bound by patriarchal assumptions, withdrew support once men were absent, effectively erasing women from formal channels of agricultural knowledge. Nevertheless, women responded by transforming a pragmatic labor-sharing arrangement into an autonomous decision-making forum. In doing so, they disrupted male-dominated agricultural governance and asserted themselves as legitimate knowledge holders. The fact that their careful records of yields and input

use later helped legitimize their practices with skeptical extension officers underscores how grassroots initiatives can generate bottom-up institutional innovations. This directly links to my broader argument that women's collectives not only compensate for state neglect but also reconfigure the terms of engagement, challenging gendered exclusions embedded in agricultural systems.

Similarly, in Matabeleland South, the Tshelanyemba SFO developed cooperative marketing strategies to overcome price discrimination against women. By pooling transport and negotiating collectively, they increased bargaining power and improved returns. These strategies are grounded in shared norms of solidarity and care, core tenets of FPE. Market liberalization has undermined state support systems such as subsidized input schemes, extension services, affordable credit, and guaranteed crop markets, leaving women farmers especially exposed to exploitative intermediaries and resource scarcity (Mutopo, 2014; Scoones et al., 2010; Yeros, 2013). This has created new exclusions and prompted institutional adaptation. Women's cooperatives have stepped into the gap, forming parallel economies that bypass exploitative middlemen, as one farmer noted:

Before we organized, middlemen would offer different prices to different women, always the lowest to single mothers who needed immediate cash. Now we negotiate as one voice using our price information. Even the Grain Marketing Board representatives treat us with more respect when we come as Tshelanyemba (Interview, 2023).

This account highlights how women's collective organizing transforms exploitative market relations into spaces of negotiation and recognition. Their strategy exemplifies how grassroots organizing counters structural inequities in agricultural trade, aligning with Gibson-Graham's (2006) notion of diverse economies. The broader implication is that feminist agroecology involves not only sustainable farming but also the creation of alternative economic spaces rooted in reciprocity, dignity, and fairness.

Beyond markets, knowledge systems have also become contested terrain. Agricultural institutions continue to privilege scientific knowledge over traditional practices, yet women's collectives are reclaiming their roles as experts (Bezner Kerr, 2014). In the case of ZIMSOF, I observed that farmer groups have established farmer-to-farmer learning networks that facilitate knowledge exchange while building solidarity among women farmers facing similar challenges. Through practices like seed fairs, demonstration plots, and participatory research, ZIMSOF creates autonomous knowledge spaces that enhance women's agricultural agency while building resistance to dominant knowledge hierarchies. These dynamics are vividly illustrated in Figure 10, which captures how National Seed and Food Festivals serve as critical 'autonomous knowledge spaces'; platforms where women's visibility, leadership, and agricultural expertise are publicly celebrated and collectively reinforced.



Figure 10. National seed and food festivals

As platforms for women's visibility and knowledge exchange. These images showcase national-level seed and food fairs in Zimbabwe, where women farmers from diverse regions display their indigenous seed varieties and agricultural innovations. The fairs represent the scaling up of grassroots initiatives into broader movements that celebrate women's roles as custodians of agrobiodiversity and traditional ecological knowledge. **Source:** ZIMSOFF

These grassroots efforts often scale up into policy engagement. As noted in Chapter 1, women's groups affiliated with ZIMSOFF have influenced seed legislation and climate adaptation planning, asserting that their agroecological strategies are not 'backward' but effective responses to environmental and economic pressures (Solomon et al., 2024). Their advocacy is supported by concrete evidence from collective practices like those summarized in Table 6.

In sum, women's collective organizing is both reactive and transformative. It enables them to navigate institutional barriers while actively reshaping them, redefining what counts as knowledge, who gets to decide, and how agricultural systems can be governed more equitably. These efforts represent not only survival strategies but blueprints for systemic change rooted in feminist agroecology.

3.3 Strategic agency

While earlier sections emphasized women's adaptive responses to exclusion, this section shifts focus to more strategic, forward-looking initiatives that actively reshape agricultural systems. Women's collectives are not just resisting marginalization, they are prefiguring alternative futures rooted in agroecological values, feminist ethics, and institutional innovations. These initiatives operate across multiple fronts: climate-smart agriculture, digital technology adaptation, and food sovereignty advocacy. Rather than passively absorbing these trends, women reinterpret and reconfigure them through collective praxis.

Climate-smart agriculture (CSA), promoted in Zimbabwe by the government, FAO, and donor agencies, is often rolled out through technocratics that emphasize standardized input packages (typically hybrid maize seed, synthetic fertilizers, and pesticides), fixed planting basins, and prescriptive planting calendars (Newell & Taylor, 2018). In practice, these models marginalize local agroecological knowledge by treating farmer-saved seed and indigenous soil or water management practices as ‘unscientific,’ and they ignore women’s constraints by assuming access to land, cash, and labor that many do not have. Despite that, my research indicates that women’s groups that are part of ZIMSOFF are repositioning themselves as essential knowledge holders within CSA frameworks. By demonstrating the effectiveness of drought-resistant traditional seeds and water-conserving practices, they challenge the assumption that only modern inputs can deliver climate resilience. During workshops with ZIMSOFF leaders, they highlighted their seed stewardship and soil management techniques as low-cost, climate-adaptive alternatives. Rather than being framed as beneficiaries, these women presented themselves as co-designers of climate strategies.

Moreover, these women’s groups are also engaging digital tools on their own terms. Despite the gendered digital divide (Tsan et al., 2019), collectives have created shared mobile platforms and communal information hubs that democratize access to weather forecasts, price data, and agricultural training. Focus groups revealed that in Plumtree District, younger members of women’s cooperatives manage WhatsApp groups to circulate market prices and input availability; an example of intergenerational strategy sharing that integrates digital skills with traditional organizing. These initiatives reflect FPE’s emphasis on relational agency and CAT’s focus on institutional adaptation. Digital tools are not deployed individually but embedded within collective structures that redistribute knowledge and authority within these groups.

In addition, women’s groups are increasingly aligning with transnational food sovereignty movements, especially through ZIMSOFF’s affiliation with La Via Campesina (LVC)¹³. These connections offer not only ideological solidarity but also practical resources and political leverage. For instance, women’s involvement in drafting Zimbabwe’s agroecology policy and seed regulations was informed by lessons from global peasant organizing. During interviews, women expressed pride in representing their communities at national consultations, not as ‘beneficiaries’ but as leaders. Their contributions were grounded in lived experience: seed-saving rituals, climate risk mitigation, and cooperative land use. This embodied expertise anchors global discourses in local realities.

¹³ La Via Campesina (LVC) is an international grassroots movement that brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, Indigenous peoples, migrants, and agricultural workers from around the world. It advocates for sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and the rights of rural communities.

Throughout these social and economic transformations, policy frameworks have remained crucial institutional arenas where gender inequities are either reinforced or challenged. Current agricultural policies often inadequately support both agroecological practices and women's collective initiatives, creating an institutional misalignment between policy rhetoric and implementation realities (Chimhowu et al., 2010; Tom & Banda, 2023). As noted in Chapter 2, programs like Intwasa/Pfumvudza often marginalize traditional seed systems and prescribe rigid farming packages inaccessible to many women (Manzeke-Kangara et al., 2024). This goes to show that policy disconnects remain a recurrent frustration. As one workshop participant explained:

The policy talks about 'modern agriculture' but defines it as expensive seeds and chemicals we cannot afford. Our agroecological methods produce more food with fewer inputs, but extension officers still call our practices 'backward' because that is what their training tells them (Workshop, 2025).

This underscores the epistemic bias in agricultural policy and extension, where input-intensive models are valorized while women's agroecological practices are dismissed. Such delegitimization compels women's collectives to construct parallel institutions that embody alternative values of care, sustainability, and justice.

The disconnect between policy frameworks and women's agricultural realities represents an institutional cognitive dissonance, where formal structures fail to recognize the efficacy of women's collective approaches. Therefore, rather than await reform, women's collectives have developed parallel institutional structures, local seed banks, rotating labor schemes, and informal input distribution. These alternatives not only address material needs but also embody new governance principles rooted in solidarity and accountability. As discussed in Table 6, these strategies often arise from direct critique of mainstream models and draw legitimacy from their success in sustaining livelihoods under extreme constraints.

Basically, Zimbabwean women farmers are not simply navigating structural exclusions; they are transforming them. Many of their strategies go beyond short-term survival or individual adaptation. For example, when women form labor-sharing groups or community seed banks, they are not only responding to immediate constraints like time poverty or input scarcity, but they are also creating new forms of collective governance and knowledge circulation that challenge patriarchal and extractive models of agriculture. Similar dynamics have been observed in other African contexts. Andersson and Gabrielsson (2012), for instance, show how women in rural Kenya and Uganda organized collective action not only as a coping mechanism in conditions of poverty but as a means of building new institutions of resilience and food security. Placing the Zimbabwean case in dialogue with such findings highlights how women's collective action, across diverse contexts, often

evolves from necessity into transformative practices that reshape governance and resource access.

Moreover, lobbying traditional leaders or negotiating informal land access through women's cooperatives reflects a shift in how power is claimed and exercised at the community level. These strategies are transformative because they redistribute decision-making power, institutionalize women's ecological knowledge, and build collective capacity for long-term systemic change. In this way, even practices that may begin as coping mechanisms acquire political weight and structural impact when enacted collectively and sustained over time.

3.4 Redefining empowerment

Women's agroecological organizing in Zimbabwe is not only a response to exclusion, but also a project of transformative collective agency that reimagines the power structures shaping agriculture. Drawing on FPE and CAT, I explore how women build new forms of governance, redefine empowerment, and challenge dominant agrarian paradigms through sustained, collective action. As documented in earlier sections, women's strategies, from seed banking to cooperative labor, do more than meet immediate needs. They redistribute decision-making power, assert alternative knowledge systems, and reshape institutional relationships. These initiatives align with Fraser's (2009) distinction between affirmative and transformative change; rather than seeking inclusion in existing structures, women collectively rework the foundations of those structures.

Rethinking empowerment

In this study, I define empowerment relationally as the capacity to influence decisions, access resources, and gain recognition as legitimate actors (Kabeer, 1999), in this context in agriculture. Women in this study described empowerment not in abstract terms, but as lived experiences of transformation: gaining the confidence to speak in meetings, being consulted on planting decisions, or mentoring younger members. Local expressions such as *ukuzimela* (Ndebele language) and *kusimudzira* (Shona language) reflect this shift, meaning 'upliftment' or 'to stand independently,' gaining voice within the community. These expressions capture the emotional and social dimensions of agency beyond formal power, emphasizing dignity, self-worth, and being seen. As one Sibantubanye member reflected:

Before, I waited to be told what to do. Now other women come to me for advice. I feel I am someone who leads (FGD, 2023).

This testimony shows empowerment as relational and experiential rather than abstract, rooted in peer recognition and everyday leadership. It exemplifies how collective agroecological organizing redefines empowerment as dignity, visibility, and voice, advancing feminist notions of agency beyond access to resources.

For women in Tshelanyemba, empowerment meant accessing drought-tolerant seed from community banks without needing permission from male relatives. These situated expressions reveal that empowerment is not a universal process but relational, place-bound, and shaped by institutional and ecological realities. While some women experienced it as increased voice in household decisions, others emphasized autonomy in farming decisions or collective visibility in public spaces like seed fairs. This diversity underscores that feminist empowerment must be understood through *localized idioms and everyday practices*, not just external indicators.

This reflects empowerment as a process of mutual recognition and transformation, not just access to external inputs. Throughout this thesis, I treat empowerment not as a static outcome but as a process, evolving through women's collective action, peer mentorship, seed stewardship, and everyday resistance. Rather than measuring empowerment solely through institutional access, I emphasize lived experiences of transformation: how women articulate, negotiate, and claim space in agroecological and socio-political systems that have historically marginalized them.

While many women report enhanced agency, these gains are differentiated by age, marital status, geography, and education. Focus groups revealed that widows in remote areas often gain autonomy but face labor constraints. Younger women may have ambition but face social skepticism. These patterns confirm that empowerment is never uniform; it is shaped by intersectional dynamics, as previously theorized in the spatially aware framework in Figure 8 (Chapter 2) and supported by data in Figure 9 on gendered decision-making. This highlights the need for policy and development interventions to move beyond generic notions of 'women' and instead support diverse pathways to agency, tailored to specific positionalities and structural constraints.

Thus, women's collective strategies in Zimbabwe reflect a layered form of transformation; one that works within, around, and against dominant systems. Empowerment here is neither purely individual nor merely instrumental; it is built through collective practices, place-based knowledge, and a redefinition of power that centers everyday acts of care, resistance, and leadership. These dynamics set the stage for the final section of this chapter, which examines the tensions and contradictions embedded within these same collective processes.

3.5 Navigating internal tensions

While women's agroecological groups in Zimbabwe offer powerful alternatives to patriarchal systems, they also reflect internal contradictions and exclusions. Transformation is never total, collective spaces can simultaneously empower and marginalize. Despite an ethos of inclusion, women's agroecology groups often reproduce class, educational, and generational hierarchies. Field research in Matabeleland South revealed significant participation disparities based on socioeconomic status, with leadership positions frequently occupied by women with relatively greater access to resources. As one community member in Matobo District explained during our focus group discussion:

Those who speak at meetings and represent us to officials usually have some education, maybe a small pension, or a husband working in South Africa. They understand the system better, but sometimes they don't fully understand our daily struggles (FGD, 2023).

These patterns align with Agarwal's (2001) concept of participatory exclusion where nominal inclusion masks internal inequities. In Mhlotshana SFO, focus groups revealed that female heads of households with young children participated far less than married women with adult children, reflecting how care burdens limit engagement. Educational divides also matter; groups using formal documentation practices (e.g., meeting minutes, proposal writing) unintentionally exclude illiterate members, reinforcing internal knowledge hierarchies.

Furthermore, tensions also emerge between older and younger women. During my interaction with the Tshelanyemba SFO, I documented recurring intergenerational conflicts over appropriate agroecological methods. Elder seed custodians emphasized traditional seed selection criteria based on cultural and culinary properties, while younger members advocated incorporating climate-resilience metrics drawn from scientific assessments, revealing different priorities and framings of agroecological value. These frictions reflect broader debates in agroecology between tradition and innovation, and the politics of who gets to define 'valid knowledge' (Chambers & Jiggins, 1987).

Additionally, some organizing reinforces gendered labor roles. Collective farming efforts often build on women's responsibility for household food security, effectively collectivizing, but not transforming, traditional care roles. At a leadership workshop, a participant reflected on the politics of mobilizing women's knowledge:

When we emphasize women's special knowledge of seeds and their responsibility for family nutrition, it helps us gain recognition and support. But sometimes I worry we're just confirming what men already believe, that these are 'women's crops' and

‘women’s concerns,’ not important enough for men to be involved with (Workshop, 2025)

This insight captures the ambivalence of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988). On the one hand, framing women as custodians of seed and nutrition has instrumental value in securing recognition and resources. On the other, it risks reinforcing the very stereotypes that marginalize women by keeping them confined to the ‘soft’ side of agriculture. This dual edge reflects the complexities of feminist organizing, where empowerment strategies must balance short-term gains with long-term risks of reproducing gendered divisions.

Funding often comes with bureaucratic demands and external agendas, which can shift organizational focus away from grassroots needs. This can result in instrumentalizing women’s participation, valuing it primarily for its utility in achieving development outcomes, rather than supporting intrinsic goals of empowerment, voice, and self-determination. This mirrors critiques of NGO-ization (Byaruhanga, 2024), where movement energy is redirected toward institutional maintenance. Another participant lamented how donor discourse reshaped organizational practices:

When we started, our meetings focused on practical knowledge sharing, the best seed varieties for our changing climate, and how to manage pests naturally. Now we spend so much time creating reports with the exact words donors want to see: ‘climate resilience,’ ‘women’s empowerment indicators,’ ‘sustainable livelihoods framework.’ Sometimes I wonder if we’re still speaking our own language or someone else’s (FGD, 2025).

This reflection reveals the alienation that occurs when external frameworks dominate, sidelining local epistemologies. It demonstrates the risk of co-option, where epistemic justice is compromised by donor logics. Linking this back to my argument, women’s movements resist not only material exclusion but also epistemic domination, insisting on the legitimacy of their categories of value and ways of knowing.

Importantly, many collectives are aware of these tensions and take steps to address them. Some implement quotas for young or remote women; others develop mentorship systems to bridge generational gaps. For example, the Bubi Seed Custodians Network pairs elder women with younger members, combining traditional knowledge with leadership training (see Section 3.2 and Table 6). The strategic responses that women’s organizations have developed to address internal contradictions offer valuable insights for agricultural development approaches more broadly (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Their efforts to create more inclusive governance structures, bridge intergenerational knowledge divides, and strategically engage with market systems while maintaining non-market values are significant.

In sum, Zimbabwean women's strategies of pooling labor, preserving seeds, and organizing collectively mirror findings from other Sub-Saharan African contexts, where solidarity has likewise emerged as a response to poverty and institutional neglect (Andersson & Gabrielsson, 2012). These parallels position my study within wider debates on the feminization of agriculture (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2008; Razavi, 2009), showing that while women's increased responsibility in agriculture often reinforces structural burdens, it also creates entry points for collective agency and leadership. Situating the Zimbabwean case in this broader frame underscores how women's collective action both reflects regional patterns and contributes new insights into the constraints and transformative potential of feminized agroecological systems.

Taken together, these strategic practices reveal not only women's adaptive capacities, but also their role as protagonists in shaping more just and sustainable agrarian systems. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which shifts from broader agency and strategy to a focused analysis of how women enact leadership, governance, and institutional resilience within agroecological organizations, exploring how plural values are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes challenged.

4 Women's collective action

In this chapter, I shift focus from informal grassroots strategies (as discussed in Chapter 3) to the institutional and organizational dimensions of women's collective action in agroecology. While the previous chapter examined how women navigate and resist exclusion through everyday practices and informal networks, this chapter explores how they formalize these efforts through organized structures like Small Farmer Organizations (SFOs) and national platforms such as ZIMSOFF. Drawing on FPE and CAT, I analyze how Zimbabwean women build inclusive governance systems, develop grassroots leadership pipelines, and sustain organizational networks in the face of systemic marginalization. While the literature often portrays women's organizing as a practical response to resource scarcity, I argue that these formal collectives are also sites of political agency and institutional innovation, where women reconfigure power and reshape agrarian governance.

What remains underexplored, especially in post-land reform contexts, is how marginalized women reshape organizational structures from below. Through my study of ZIMSOFF, a national agroecology movement where women lead governance, advocacy, and knowledge-sharing, I address this gap. My analysis draws on interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations, and workshops to trace how leadership emerges and how collective decision-making adapts under constrained conditions. These collectives, I argue, are not just responses to scarcity but dynamic platforms for renegotiating power in Zimbabwe's agrarian landscape.

4.1 ZIMSOFF's architecture and evolution

The Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF) exemplifies a grassroots organization that blends formal governance with feminist principles to support agroecological transformation. From its origins during Zimbabwe's land reform period, ZIMSOFF has pursued an alternative institutional model; one that centers women's leadership and ecological knowledge while navigating the constraints of resource scarcity and patriarchal governance. Formally established in 2007, ZIMSOFF grew out of the Eastern and Southern Africa Farmers Forum (ESAFF-Zimbabwe), with early support from NGOs such as Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM). Even so, the organization

increasingly asserted autonomy through structures that prioritized participatory decision-making, local leadership, and agroecological values. Founding members, many of them women seed custodians and community organizers, embedded gender equity into the organization’s DNA, not as an add-on but as a foundational commitment (Interview, ZIMSOFF founding member, 2023).

ZIMSOFF operates through a multi-tiered structure: individual farmers join local groups, which form Small Farmer Organizations (SFOs). These are nested into four regional clusters: Central, Eastern, Northern, and Western, reflecting agroecological diversity across Zimbabwe (see Figure 2 for agroecological zones). Each level includes parallel leadership structures and is linked to a national secretariat and coordination body. Formal mechanisms such as quadrennial elections, term limits, and leadership quotas support democratic participation and gender balance.

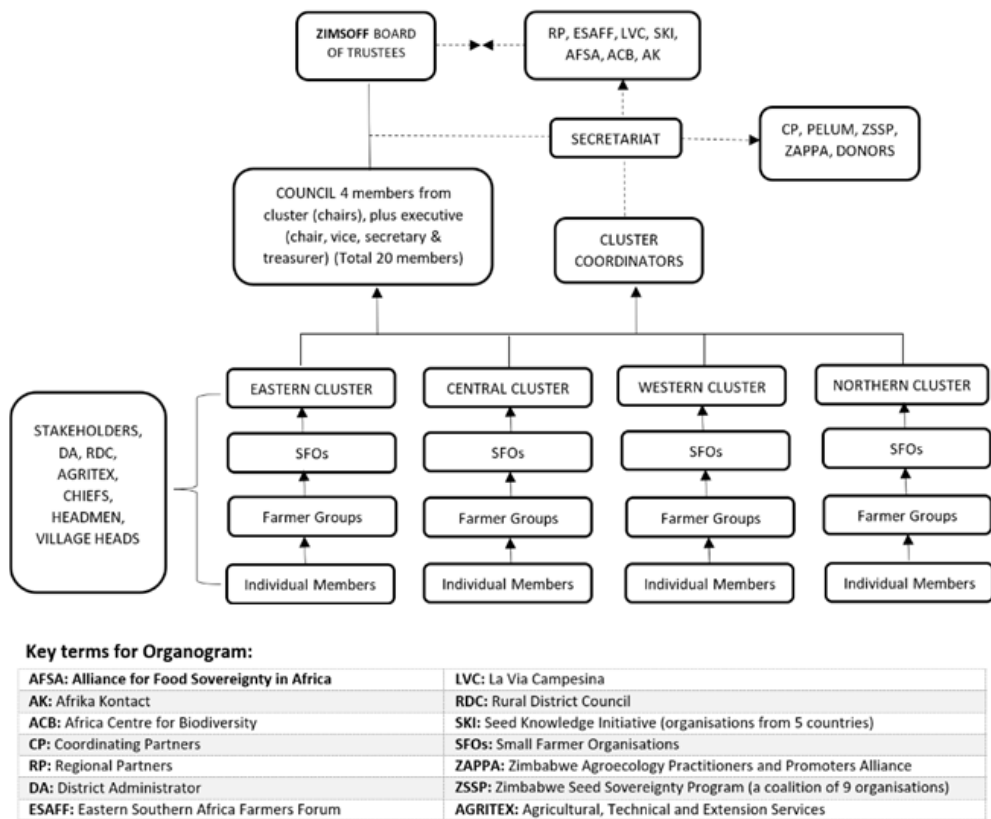


Figure 11. Organizational structure and key relationships of ZIMSOFF
 Illustrates both hierarchical links and external partnerships. **Source:** Reproduced by author using data from ZIMSOFF

ZIMSOFF reports a national membership of approximately 19,000 smallholder farmers, of whom about 13,000 are women, organized into four regional clusters (ZIMSOFF, 2024; Agroecology Fund, 2021). While this represents only around 1–2 % of Zimbabwe’s 1.1 million communal and 200,000 resettled smallholder households (Scoones, 2017), the organization’s strength lies in its local penetration. In districts such as Bubi and Nkayi, ZIMSOFF-affiliated Small Farmer Organizations reach several hundred women each, with membership in some wards encompassing more than a quarter of active women farmers (FGDs, 2023–24). Compared to larger bodies such as the Zimbabwe Farmers Union (ZFU), which is the dominant mass union which claims over a million farming households, with women constituting 60% of its membership (ZFU, n.d.), ZIMSOFF is a mid-sized but influential player, distinguished by its dense local organizing, its explicit focus on agroecology and women’s leadership, and its regional and global linkages through networks such as La Via Campesina, PELUM and Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) (ZIMSOFF, 2024).

ZIMSOFF’s numerical reach and its positioning within Zimbabwe’s rural sector highlight both its significance and its limitations as a farmer movement. Even so, sheer membership numbers tell only part of the story. While women comprise approximately 70% of the membership and hold many local leadership positions (especially in SFOs like Bubi’s Mhlotshana), representation diminishes at higher levels of decision-making (FGD, 2022). This ‘glass ceiling’ effect reflects persistent gendered norms, and the organization’s internal evaluations acknowledge this disjuncture (SAFCEI, 2023).

Moreover, ZIMSOFF’s evolution has involved trade-offs between grassroots responsiveness and institutional formalization. Professionalization, including the hiring of a full-time secretariat and the expansion of donor partnerships, especially during its tenure hosting La Via Campesina’s International Secretariat (2013–2021), enhanced its advocacy capacity but also risked distancing leadership from rank-and-file members. Also, this donor funding sometimes directed organizational priorities toward donor interests rather than grassroots concerns. As one SFO leader observed:

Sometimes the projects that are funded are not the ones we most need. We have to adapt our priorities to fit the available funding (Interview, 2022).

This candid reflection underscores the structural tension between grassroots needs and donor agendas. While external support is indispensable for sustaining organizational capacity, it can also impose priorities that diverge from members’ lived realities. This illustrates how autonomy is negotiated within women’s collectives: they rely on donor resources but must constantly guard against the erosion of member-driven agendas. The implication here is that empowerment is always partial when framed within externally determined priorities.

Despite these tensions, ZIMSOFF has developed reflexive strategies to protect organizational autonomy. It maintains a policy of declining funding that conflicts with its principles, rotates leadership to maintain grassroots accountability, and invests in communication systems to connect remote groups despite infrastructural challenges. As a cluster coordinator noted:

We know we need strong institutions, but they must serve our members, not the other way around (FDG, 2022).

This statement reframes institutionalization not as a bureaucratic end but as a feminist tool for accountability. It reveals a political consciousness about protecting grassroots priorities, highlighting how women in these organizations redefine institutional logics. Rather than replicating hierarchical structures, they insist that institutions exist to amplify members' voices. This supports my argument that collective action is not merely a response to state absence but a reconfiguration of power around feminist democratic principles.

Figure 11 outlines ZIMSOFF's governance model and external partnerships. Table 6 (introduced in Chapter 3) complements this by mapping the constraints and strategies ZIMSOFF groups adopt in navigating exclusionary institutional landscapes. ZIMSOFF's architecture thus illustrates a hybrid governance model: formal enough to engage with national and international actors, but flexible enough to adapt to the everyday realities of Zimbabwean smallholders. It represents an evolving experiment in feminist institutional design; one that seeks to democratize agricultural governance by embedding equity, care, and local knowledge into the organizational form itself (Batliwala, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2006).

4.2 Feminist leadership and development

While women are numerically central in Zimbabwe's farming workforce (FAO, 2019), their leadership space is often carved out through movement organizations rather than legacy unions; ZIMSOFF's women-majority membership contrasts with ZFU's broader but more heterogeneous base (Agroecology Fund, 2021; ZFU, n.d.). Within ZIMSOFF, women's leadership develops through grassroots practices such as seed custodianship, labor-sharing groups, and local organizing, combined with experiential authority, peer mentorship, and formal training. Taken together, these pathways illustrate what Batliwala (2011) calls 'feminist leadership': an approach that seeks to redistribute power, not merely increase women's presence in leadership roles.

Three primary leadership pathways were evident across the study:

1. **Organic leadership**, where women gain recognition through their success in agroecological farming and community trust.
2. **Mentored leadership**, fostered through intergenerational relationships and guidance from seasoned members.
3. **Capacitated leadership**, developed through structured training and governance workshops led by ZIMSOFF and partner NGOs.

Focus groups show that most women followed hybrid trajectories across these pathways. Crucially, effective leaders were those who could translate between local legitimacy (e.g. ‘dirty hands’ from farming) and institutional engagement (e.g. policy advocacy and documentation).

Also, despite ZIMSOFF’s formal commitment to gender equity, leadership opportunities remain shaped by intersectional barriers. Age, marital status, education, and geography all influence women’s visibility and participation in decision-making. For instance, young women leaders often face skepticism from elders; widows gain autonomy but may lack social capital; and women from remote districts are often excluded from meetings due to travel constraints. These findings align with Crenshaw’s (1991) insight that multiple axes of inequality shape how inclusion (or exclusion) is experienced.

To address such disparities, ZIMSOFF employs hybrid governance mechanisms that combine formal democratic procedures (e.g., quadrennial elections, term limits) with informal, culturally embedded practices such as consensus-building and elder mediation. These practices exemplify *institutional bricolage* (Cleaver, 2012), blending community norms with formal organizational principles to support inclusive decision-making.

Importantly, within these groups, decision-making occurs at multiple levels:

- **Household level**, where women often influence decisions through informal negotiations, indirect influence, or joint decision-making. For example, several participants described how they could influence what was planted or when harvesting should occur, even if formal land rights remained with male household heads. In contexts of male out-migration, many women assumed full decision-making responsibility over agricultural activities, though they still faced barriers when interacting with state extension officers or claiming land-based entitlements.
- **Group level**, where women engage more visibly in formal decision-making processes. Within Small Farmer Organizations (SFOs) and ZIMSOFF structures, women occupy elected leadership positions (e.g., chairperson, treasurer), contribute to strategic planning, and collectively determine rules for seed bank governance, labor sharing, and resource distribution.

- **Community/network level**, where collective presence (rather than individual status) carries negotiating power, as seen in successful petitions for land or extension services. Decision-making involves interactions with traditional leaders, extension agents, and other external stakeholders.

These layered decision-making dynamics reflect both practical agency (e.g. managing daily agricultural tasks) and strategic agency (e.g. influencing resource governance and organizational rules). By making space for women in governance bodies, resource allocation, and advocacy platforms, collective organizing enables a shift from informal influence within households to formal leadership in cooperative structures. Documenting and interpreting these decision-making practices revealed how relational and situational power operates within collective action. The emphasis on collective governance is endorsed in women's reflections on decision-making:

Even if you are not the chairperson, your voice counts. We agree together, especially when it comes to how seeds are shared, or which crop we focus on that season (Interview, 2024).

By insisting that leadership is not concentrated in formal positions but distributed across all members, women describe an institutional practice grounded in inclusion. This aligns with CAT's emphasis on distributed leadership, where authority emerges through relations rather than hierarchy. Linking this back to my argument, it demonstrates that women's collectives embody feminist institutional practices that disrupt patriarchal norms and reimagine governance as cooperative rather than exclusionary.

Sustaining leadership also depends on effective conflict management and intergenerational succession. ZIMSOFF utilizes both formal grievance procedures and informal elder-led mediation to address internal tensions. Structured mentorship pairs younger leaders with seasoned members, while documentation of seed practices and leadership roles helps preserve collective memory. For instance, field observations and focus groups reveal that the Bubi Seed Custodians Network's intergenerational model combines seed expertise with conflict resolution strategies, illustrating the embeddedness of governance in agricultural knowledge.

Furthermore, tensions persist, especially between traditional and scientific knowledge claims. As noted in the previous chapter, in Tshelanyemba SFO, generational conflicts emerged over seed selection criteria whereby, elders prioritized culinary and cultural traits, valuing taste, storability, and ritual use, while younger members emphasized drought resilience and market potential, reflecting their immediate economic and climatic concerns. These frictions demonstrate the complexity of co-producing knowledge and sustaining leadership across shifting contexts (Chambers & Jiggins, 1987).

Overall, leadership in ZIMSOFF is not a static position but a distributed practice, continually negotiated through mentorship, participation, and everyday interactions. The organization's emphasis on experiential learning, mutual accountability, and shared governance offers a valuable model for feminist institutional practice in constrained environments (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Trevilla Espinal et al., 2021).

4.3 Network building

Women's agroecology groups in Zimbabwe operate within layered networks that span from local mutual aid systems to global food sovereignty alliances. These networks serve both practical and political functions; providing essential resources, enabling learning, and building collective power across scales (Agarwal, 2010; Desmarais, 2007). Results show that at the local level, women have adapted traditional cooperation models like *amalima* (rotating labor groups) and *ukutshayelana* (savings clubs) to meet contemporary challenges. These arrangements address women's time poverty and financial exclusion by enabling collective labor mobilization and shared investment in seeds, inputs, and school fees. For example, the Juru SFO operates a weekly savings pool with low-interest loans, directly countering barriers in formal credit markets. Seed exchange networks exemplify feminist commons in action. From an interview with one of the Bubi Seed Custodians Network, I established that women maintain local seed varieties through catalogued storage systems while preserving custodianship and cultural knowledge. These practices resist enclosure and commodification, aligning with Altieri and Toledo's (2011) vision of agroecology as cultural resistance.

ZIMSOFF's regional cluster structure facilitates horizontal knowledge exchange across agroecological zones (see Figure 2). Field days and exchange visits as shown in Figure 12, allow women to exchange knowledge and learn from each other. These exchanges deepen solidarity while enabling adaptive innovation under climate pressure. Still, participation can be uneven. As one leader noted during a workshop:

There have been workshops and other activities on climate change, seeds and agroecology, but those who are part of the collectives do not get the opportunity to attend (Workshop, 2025).

This reflects how logistical, financial, or social constraints, such as caregiving duties or exclusion from decision-making can limit who is able to participate and benefit.



Figure 12. Field day activities

Women farmers share agroecological practices at a cross-cluster field day in Plumtree District (2023).

Source: Author's own

The value of these exchanges is especially evident in climate adaptation strategies. Women farmers from Matabeleland South, facing severe drought conditions, have adopted water-harvesting techniques observed during visits to Manicaland, adapting these approaches to their specific agroecological context as shown in Figure 13. Conversely, women from higher rainfall areas have incorporated drought-resistant crop varieties and planting schedules from more arid regions as climate uncertainty increases. These exchanges represent the capacity to integrate knowledge from diverse sources to prepare for uncertain climatic futures. Even so, geographical inequity persists; women from remote areas still face barriers to participation due to travel costs and poor infrastructure.



Figure 13. Water harvesting techniques

Adopted by women farmers in Matabeleland North and South, based on knowledge exchange with farmers from Manicaland. These innovations demonstrate how women's collective networks facilitate the sharing of climate adaptation strategies across Zimbabwe's diverse agroecological zones. **Source:** Author's own

At the local and district levels, ZIMSOFF closely interacts with government AGRITEX officers. These regularly participate in evaluating and judging farmer field days and seed fairs organized by ZIMSOFF, thereby providing formal recognition and legitimacy to the farmers' agroecological practices. At the national level, ZIMSOFF participates in policy-focused alliances such as the Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Program (ZSSP) and the Zimbabwe Agroecology Practitioners and Promoters Alliance (ZAPPA). These coalitions have opened pathways to formal policymaking. While the National Agroecology Policy has not yet been legally adopted, agroecological principles have been integrated into frameworks like the National Agriculture Policy Framework (2018–2030). More significantly, the government has launched a 2022–2032 Plant Genetic Resources for Food and

Agriculture (PGRFA) Strategy¹⁴ and is currently drafting a PGRFA Management Bill. If passed, this legislation would provide a legal basis for the recognition and protection of traditional seed systems and farmer varieties. ZIMSOFF's advocacy is central to driving these reforms forward.

Internationally, ZIMSOFF's affiliation with La Via Campesina (LVC), has expanded global engagement, enabling Zimbabwean women to participate in transnational exchanges and advocacy. Hosting LVC's secretariat from 2013–2021 positioned women leaders in global governance spaces and fostered mutual learning across the Global South. These exchanges, such as visits to Cuba and Brazil, facilitated the adaptation of agroecological techniques and participatory methods to Zimbabwean conditions. Moreover, language and travel constraints often limit who benefits from these engagements. ZIMSOFF mitigates this through rotating delegates and feedback sessions to disseminate knowledge locally.

Navigating external relations also involves strategic tension. Government agencies range from supportive to obstructive, depending on political context and the perceived challenge to industrial agriculture. NGOs provide vital support but may impose donor-driven priorities. ZIMSOFF employs clear engagement principles: it refuses funding that undermines core values, diversifies its funding base, and maintains dual accountability; outward to donors and inward to members (ZIMSOFF interview, 2023). Participatory monitoring ensures that external partnerships serve, rather than distort, grassroots goals. These strategies reflect what Gibson-Graham (2006) terms *strategic counter-hegemony*: the tactical use of dominant institutions to build alternatives without losing political autonomy. ZIMSOFF's engagement with policy processes, donor systems, and global networks illustrates how women's organizations navigate and reshape power structures, positioning themselves as both knowledge producers and political actors.

In sum, network-building is not merely about scale, it is a political infrastructure. Through multilevel cooperation, resource-sharing, and advocacy, women's collectives extend their influence, deepen solidarity, and create the conditions for agroecological and gender justice beyond the field. The collective action patterns I document; pooling labor/resources, rotating work groups, and seed-centered organizing, mirror findings in Kenya and Uganda (Andersson & Gabrielsson, 2012), Tanzania (Oxfam, 2013), and Malawi (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019). These parallels situate ZIMSOFF within a wider SSA repertoire of feminist agroecological organizing, strengthening the external validity of the Zimbabwean case.

¹⁴ The National Strategy and Action Plan on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (2022–2032) provides Zimbabwe's 10-year roadmap for conserving and governing plant genetic resources. Developed with FAO support, it aims to establish a legal and institutional framework for the recognition of farmer varieties and traditional seed systems, complementing existing seed laws and feeding into the drafting of a forthcoming PGRFA Management Bill.

4.4 Balancing transformation and constraints

In my research, I observe that women's agroecology groups in Zimbabwe, particularly those within ZIMSOFF, embody both the promise and the contradictions of grassroots transformation. In this section, I synthesize how their collective action fosters alternative governance, knowledge systems, and economic practices, while also confronting persistent structural and internal challenges.

Transformative dimensions of collective organizing: ZIMSOFF and its affiliates exemplify institutional innovation, creating organizational forms that depart from conventional, top-down agricultural governance. Their participatory structures, marked by gender quotas, rotational leadership, and consensus-building, challenge hierarchical norms and model more inclusive feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2011). The study indicates that they also democratize knowledge. Through seed banks, peer-led training, and documentation of traditional practices, these groups validate experiential and indigenous knowledges often sidelined by formal extension systems. This counters epistemic injustice and affirms women's roles as agricultural innovators, as supported by Bezner Kerr et al. (2019) and Harcourt & Nelson (2015).

FGD and Interviews indicate that, economically, women's groups build 'diverse economies' through reciprocal labor-sharing, community savings schemes, and cooperative marketing to disrupt market logic and revalue reproductive labor. These practices reduce dependence on external inputs and reinforce resilience in precarious ecological and financial conditions. Politically, these organizations engage in scale-shifting advocacy, influencing policy through evidence, alliance-building, and global solidarity. Their contributions to agroecology policy drafts and seed legislation demonstrate how localized knowledge and organizing can shape institutional change.

Persistent challenges and internal contradictions: Intersectional exclusions persist within ZIMSOFF. Despite structural gender parity, age, literacy, marital status, and geography continue to shape who leads and who benefits. Younger women, widows, and those from remote areas often remain underrepresented or silenced (FDG, 2023). This study shows that resource dependency introduces further tensions. As ZIMSOFF professionalized and scaled up its operations, especially during and after its tenure with LVC, some members voiced concern that donor priorities diluted grassroots needs. This 'NGO-ization' of movements, as Byaruhanga (2024) notes, risks shifting focus from long-term transformation to project deliverables.

Spatial inequity also limits reach. Despite ZIMSOFF's well-designed cluster system, infrastructural and communication challenges mean that some regions, especially remote communal areas (i.e. former Tribal Trust Lands under customary

tenure)¹⁵, are less integrated into the organization's networks. This underscores the importance of explicitly geographically responsive strategies in organizational planning. At the ideological level, policy engagement often occurs in technocratic spaces that marginalize feminist and agroecological frameworks. Results show that while ZIMSOFF has made gains in seed sovereignty and climate adaptation, influence over core domains like land tenure and agricultural finance remains limited. This selective influence reflects a strategic selectivity of state institutions, which are more permeable to feminist intervention in certain policy domains than others as shown by Razavi (2009).

Strategic adaptation and political labor: Despite these constraints, women's organizations demonstrate remarkable strategic reflexivity. The study reveals that many groups within ZIMSOFF have implemented internal reforms, e.g. quotas for marginalized members, dual documentation systems, and intergenerational mentorship, to confront internal inequities and power hierarchies. This reflects a politics of pragmatism, whereby transformation is always partial, negotiated, and situated (Fraser, 2009). These women's work should thus be understood not merely as resilience, but as ongoing political labor, constructing alternatives while navigating embedded systems of exclusion and extraction. As Kabeer (2011) emphasizes, collective action becomes transformative when it opens space for new subjectivities, power relations, and institutions to emerge – thus strategic change.

Theoretically, this chapter demonstrates the value of bridging FPE and CAT. While FPE elucidates the structural and symbolic terrain of exclusion, CAT highlights the design features and governance mechanisms through which transformation is pursued and sustained. Practically, the analysis points to key lessons for agricultural development and feminist movement-building: support existing grassroots institutions rather than imposing new ones; address both practical needs and strategic interests; and recognize that equity must be continuously enacted, not merely declared.

Building on these insights, I now turn to a domain where these principles; collective agency, knowledge sovereignty, and feminist transformation are most vividly enacted: seed systems. Here, the organizational dynamics and leadership practices I explored in Chapter 4 converge in material and symbolic struggles over biodiversity, authority, and the right to define agricultural futures. In Chapter 5, I show how women's seed-saving networks function not only as sites of ecological resilience but also as spaces of resistance; where care, culture, and politics are cultivated in tandem.

¹⁵ In Zimbabwe, 'communal areas' are state-owned lands allocated to households under customary tenure and administered by traditional leaders. They are typically densely populated, resource-constrained, and remain the main livelihood base for the majority of smallholder farmers, especially women.

5 Seeds of resistance

Building on my analysis in the previous chapter of women's collective organization, I now turn to seeds; a domain where ecological transformation and gender politics converge most tangibly. In Zimbabwe, seed-saving is more than a farming technique; it is a political, cultural, and ecological act rooted in care, memory, and resistance. I use seed sovereignty as a lens to examine how women challenge exclusionary agricultural systems and reclaim agency over biodiversity and food production, a concept that is also mobilized by farmer organizations like ZIMSOFF, even if women at the grassroots often express it through everyday idioms such as 'our seed' or 'freedom to plant what we want.' I argue that women's seed practices, far from being residual or nostalgic, are foundational to agroecological futures. By focusing on their seed networks, I show how women transform marginal practices into collective strategies of resilience and power.

5.1 Contesting seed politics

Women's seed-saving efforts through fairs, community banks, and informal exchanges emerge within a deeply contested terrain shaped by colonial legacies, neoliberal reforms, and institutional neglect. Seed sovereignty in Zimbabwe is not simply about agricultural autonomy; it is a political response to the enclosure of the commons (see Seeds Act and Plant Breeders' Rights Act)¹⁶ through restrictive seed laws, intellectual property regimes, and input distribution programs that displace farmer-saved seed, marginalize traditional knowledge, and consolidate seed control by state and corporate actors (Kloppenborg, 2010; La Via Campesina, 2013).

Historically, Zimbabwe's seed sector developed along two unequal tracks: formal systems promoting certified commercial seed, most prominently hybrid maize (see footnote 10 in Chapter 2.3 for terminology) but also including improved open-

¹⁶ In Zimbabwe, the enclosure of the seed commons occurs primarily through formal seed laws and regulatory frameworks. The Seeds Act [Chapter 19:13] restricts the marketing of uncertified farmer-saved seed, while the Plant Breeders' Rights Act [Chapter 18:16] establishes intellectual property protections for commercial varieties but does not extend recognition to farmer varieties. Together with input distribution programs such as Pfumvudza/Intwasa, these frameworks reinforce corporate and state control over seed while delegitimizing traditional custodianship practices.

pollinated varieties, and informal farmer-managed systems, largely maintained by women, focused on indigenous grains and legumes. Colonial and post-independence policies privileged the former, reinforcing narratives that dismissed traditional crops as subsistence or backward (Tavuyanago et al., 2010). Even after land redistribution under the FTLRP, agricultural research and regulation continued to favor certified commercial seed within Green Revolution logics, sidelining farmer-saved varieties and the women who steward them (McGuire & Sperling, 2016; Mutopo, 2014).

This Zimbabwean experience resonates with broader scholarship on seed activism, which highlights how farmers across the world contest the commodification of seeds and reclaim collective rights against corporate and state enclosures (Peschard & Randeria, 2020). Comparable dynamics are evident in subsistence peasant communities in Southern Mexico, where seed sovereignty has been conceptualized as a process of decommodification (Hernández Rodríguez, 2022). Situating Zimbabwe within these wider debates underscores that women's seed-saving practices are not only local strategies of survival, but also part of a transnational politics of autonomy, care, and cultural continuity.

This marginalization is institutional as well as epistemic. Formal seed laws emphasize intellectual property rights and commercial seed certification, leaving little space for communal seed systems or local landraces. Women's expertise, rooted in generations of informal experimentation and cultural knowledge, has rarely been acknowledged in official agricultural discourse (Wattne, 2016; Kloppenburg, 2010). The exclusion is not incidental; it reflects how agrarian authority has long been constructed through the erasure of gendered and indigenous knowledge systems.

In response, women farmers have mobilized seed sovereignty as both a practical and political project. Field results show that within organizations like ZIMSOFF, seed-saving is not simply about food security but also about reclaiming control over knowledge, biodiversity, and the future of farming. These practices challenge dominant agricultural models that treat seeds as standardized inputs, instead asserting them as living repositories of resilience, identity, and relational care (McGuire & Sperling, 2016; Shiva, 2016).

5.2 Mobilizing collective resilience

Across Zimbabwe, women have built vibrant seed networks that preserve agrobiodiversity, enhance food security, and assert local autonomy. These networks, comprising seed fairs, community banks, informal exchanges, and seed-saver clubs, reflect both practical farming strategies and deeply political acts of resistance. Across multiple field sites, women describe seeds not merely as inputs, but as life, security, and independence. In contexts where they often lack land rights or formal

recognition, seed stewardship offers women a powerful form of agency. In Bubi, Nkayi, and Tshelanyemba, women repeatedly referred to seeds as '*our future*' and emphasized their role in sustaining both crops and communities.

Seeds are described by women not as commodities but as carriers of meaning and survival. As one woman in Nkayi expressed during a seed fair, "*[e]ven two grains of beans can tell a story*" (Interview, Nkayi, 2022). Her statement illustrates how seeds embody cultural memory and intergenerational continuity. Rather than being inert inputs, they become storytellers, linking ecological adaptation to ancestral heritage. This reflection highlights how women's seed custodianship actively resists the erasure of indigenous knowledge while reinforcing their authority within agrarian systems.

Similarly, an elder woman in Bubi described seeds as "*our children... [they] carry the wisdom of our ancestors and the promise of our future*" (Interview, Bubi, 2022). This metaphor situates seeds within kinship and care frameworks rather than production logics. By framing seeds as 'children,' the speaker emphasized their relational and living quality, resonating with ecofeminist insights that highlight care and reciprocity as political forces. Such expressions show how women's seed practices reconfigure power by asserting cosmologies that contest corporate seed logics, positioning seed sovereignty as both ecological and feminist praxis.

Seed fairs, observed in Bubi and Matobo districts, have become central to this work. These gatherings are more than technical exchanges, they are cultural events where women exhibit seed varieties, share cultivation stories, and celebrate agricultural heritage as shown in Figure 14. Rituals, traditional songs, intergenerational storytelling, and competitive seed displays reaffirm community identity and embed seed knowledge in collective memory. My fieldnotes from the 2022 Bubi seed fair document how women used these spaces to validate traditional practices and strengthen solidarity across communities, as one woman explained during a seed fair in 2022, "[w]hen we bring our seeds together, we also bring our stories and our strength; it reminds us that we are not alone."



Figure 14. Seed fair

(Top left to bottom right) Women celebrating through song and dance; attendees exploring seed displays; a variety of showcased seed types; traditional food display. (Bubi, 2022). **Source:** Author's own

Community seed banks further institutionalize these efforts and provide crucial material support during crises. Managed predominantly by women, and often collectively; these banks store drought-tolerant and locally adapted seeds, ensuring access to planting material when harvests fail. They rely on both traditional and modern storage methods (Figure 15) and operate on principles of reciprocity and mutual aid. In one district, women described how seed banks acted as ‘insurance’; when rains failed, they could draw from communal reserves to replant. These collective reserves buffer against climatic variability, ensuring continuity of farming practices. This collective safety net, also observed in Matabeleland North and South, buffers against both ecological and market shocks, proving especially valuable during climate crises like droughts. These initiatives reflect their hybrid character: rooted in long-standing household and kin-based seed saving yet deliberately institutionalized through custodianship and community banks to strengthen governance and resilience (Vernooy et al., 2017; Wynberg, 2024).



Figure 15. Comparison of modern and traditional seed storage methods.

Top: Illustration of the modern seed bank, highlighting its seed preservation techniques. **Source:** Hendrick, 2024; Bottom: Depiction of the traditional seed bank, showcasing its indigenous seed storage practices. **Source:** Author's own

Quantitative data reinforces these dynamics. National surveys, along with my fieldwork, show that smallholder households, particularly women, rely heavily on farmer-saved, community-distributed, and socially exchanged seeds, especially for traditional crops like millet, cowpeas, and groundnuts (see Figure 16). Focus groups confirmed that social networks (relatives, neighbors, and fellow church members) serve as the most trusted and accessible seed sources, while formal seed systems remain out of reach or irrelevant to their farming needs. These patterns highlight the marginal role of formal seed markets in supporting agroecological diversity, and the centrality of women's informal systems in sustaining food production.

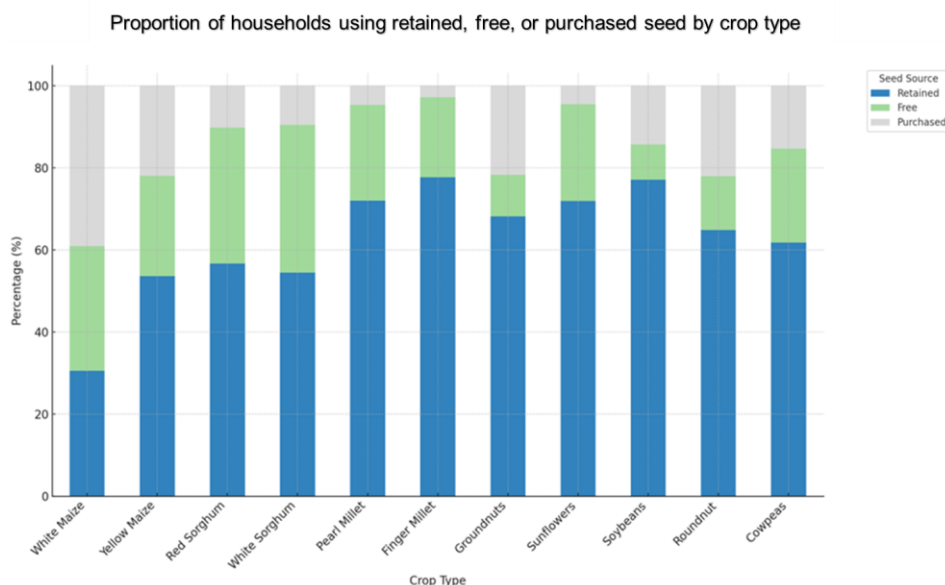


Figure 16. Seed sourcing strategies by crop type among smallholder households in Zimbabwe.

The chart illustrates the proportion of households using retained (carry-over), free (e.g., government or community-distributed), or purchased seed across various crops. Data highlights the continued reliance on farmer-saved seed for traditional small grains (e.g., finger millet, pearl millet) and legumes (e.g., groundnuts, cowpeas), while purchased seed is more common for hybrid staples like white maize.

Source: Reproduced by author using data from the Zimbabwe Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Survey (2017).

Moreover, understanding how smallholder farmers access free seed is essential for assessing Zimbabwe's seed systems. The data highlights not only the widespread reliance on free seed but also the varied actors enabling its distribution. Figure 17 breaks down these sources by crop, revealing how institutional programs and informal networks shape seed access. Notably, social networks, particularly family members and fellow farmers, play a dominant role in supplying traditional grains and legumes, crops that are often marginalized in formal seed systems but vital for agroecological resilience.

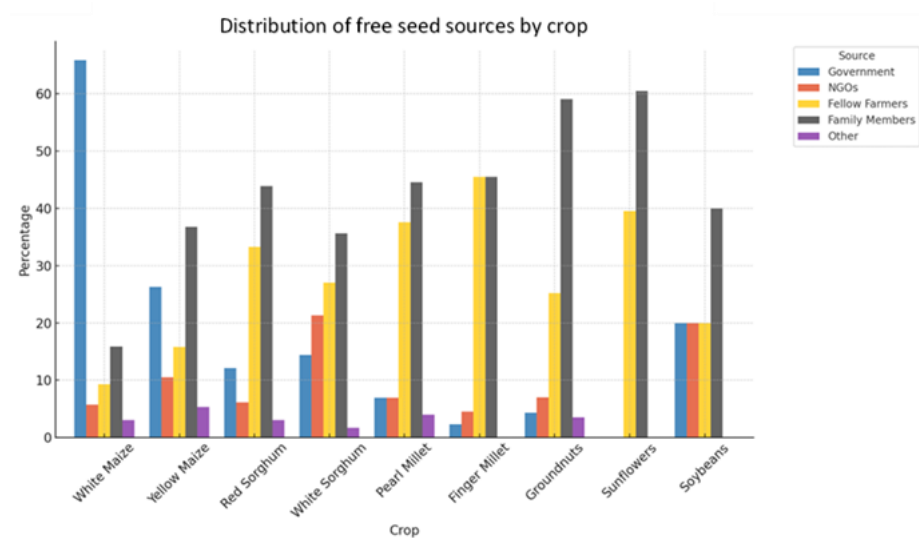


Figure 17. Distribution of free seed sources by crop type among smallholder farmers.

The data illustrate the relative contributions of government programs, NGOs, fellow farmers, family members, and other sources to free seed access. Informal networks (family and fellow farmers) dominate the supply for traditional grains like pearl millet and groundnuts, while government support is more prominent for hybrid crops such as white maize. **Source:** Reproduced by author using data from the Zimbabwe Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Survey (2017).

One of the most consistent themes across my research communities was the normative emphasis on reciprocity and trust within informal seed systems. These networks are sustained through everyday acts of trust and cooperation. Focus group discussions revealed that seeds are exchanged at weddings, funerals, church meetings, and marketplaces. In many cases, older women maintain small, experimental plots to test new varieties and share findings with peers. One woman explained how she isolates each new seed *‘to learn its capacity,’* a form of grassroots Research and Development often ignored by formal research institutions. Such experimentation is collaborative: knowledge circulates freely, enabling decentralized innovation that responds to local conditions. These efforts also engage the next generation. In interviews and workshops, women expressed concern that younger generations viewed traditional seeds as outdated. In response, women increasingly involve youth in seed fairs, school gardens, and storytelling, aiming to preserve not just genetic diversity but also cultural continuity. Nevertheless, challenges remain: the growing appeal of commercial seeds, declining interest among youth, and time burdens on women all pose sustainability concerns (Shukla et al., 2019).

Still, tensions and contradictions persist. As discussed in focus groups, while seed-saving is framed as empowering, it often reinforces traditional gender roles, assigning women the labor of preservation, documentation, and experimentation

without redistributing decision-making power within households. Many women noted that men still control land use, cash crop choices, or even approval over what is planted, limiting how far seed sovereignty translates into structural change. Others described balancing cultural pride in indigenous seeds with economic pressure to grow high-yield hybrids for market. The valorization of women's seed work thus coexists with persistent gendered labor divisions, where responsibility falls on women even as formal authority remains with men. Most adopt a pragmatic approach: combining traditional staples with select commercial varieties, experimenting carefully rather than rejecting either system outright.

This tension was evident during the 2022 Bubi seed fair, where a representative from a commercial agribusiness pitched a groundnut contract farming scheme. Despite promises of income, the women were wary of monocropping and the potential loss of seed control. As one participant put it, “[t]hey wanted us to plant only their seed and follow their conditions; what happens to our own varieties then?” Her rhetorical question captures the risks of monocropping and the erosion of autonomy under contract farming. Although the scheme was framed as an opportunity, none of the women signed up. By refusing to participate, the women enacted what Luna (2020) calls a form of constrained but deliberate choice, navigating limited options while choosing to protect their sovereignty. Their collective silence at the event became a political statement: seed-saving was not just a technical practice but an act of resistance. This refusal, however, does not imply outright rejection of external inputs.

As Luna (2020) shows in her study of cotton farmers in Burkina Faso, smallholders' choices are rarely reducible to a binary of adoption or rejection. Farmers may embrace input-intensive practices, even when aware of their risks, because these can be the only viable pathways within restrictive institutional and economic conditions. Zimbabwean women's responses similarly reveal a spectrum of pragmatic choices that complicate simplified narratives of technology adoption in African agriculture. Comparable dynamics emerge in ESAFF networks in Uganda and Tanzania, where women mobilize collectively to negotiate seed access while quietly defying state and donor pressures (Njuki et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, women's seed networks have developed adaptive, resilient strategies rooted in collective labor and care. In Plumtree and Matobo, for example, groups coordinate responsibilities, sharing seed multiplication tasks, rotating leadership, and preserving rare varieties through collective surplus distribution. Many practice 'seed insurance,' balancing traditional staples with small plots of commercial crops to navigate ecological, cultural, and economic trade-offs. Others document seed traits digitally or advocate for public procurement of traditional crops (e.g., for school feeding programs), merging livelihood needs with preservation. These efforts reflect a nuanced pragmatism, ensuring legibility without surrendering control.

These dynamics do not simply represent tensions; they point to emerging dilemmas and possible trajectories in Zimbabwe's seed systems. One trajectory reflects the deepening of agroecological sovereignty, rooted in collective action and traditional seed stewardship. The other signals potential fragmentation, where younger farmers gravitate toward commercial seed systems, driven by economic necessity, donor influence, or a shift in cultural values. These divergent paths raise critical questions: Will seed commons be sustained across generations? Can collective seed governance adapt to these pressures without losing its feminist and ecological ethos? Framing these not only as tensions but also as divergent trajectories helps us anticipate how gendered knowledge systems might evolve or erode in response to structural dynamics and change.

Crucially, these networks are neither isolated nor merely functional; they are feminist commons. Connected through organizations like ZIMSOFF or the Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Programme (ZSSP), women access training, advocacy platforms, and policy dialogues. In Shashe, a ZIMSOFF leader facilitated a collaborative drafting of a position paper on farmer seed rights, illustrating how grassroots efforts scale into political engagement. Through collective rules, care-based governance, and distributed leadership, these networks enact alternative systems of resource management and agency.

Rooted in local ecologies and relational ethics, women's seed networks are dynamic systems of knowledge-sharing, conservation, and resistance. They align with global food sovereignty movements while remaining grounded in cultural traditions. Governed by reciprocity and memory rather than commodification, they do more than preserve seed, they cultivate futures. The dynamics I described above, encompassing seed fairs, community seed banks, informal exchange systems, and policy advocacy form part of a broader, iterative process of feminist agroecological transformation. Figure 18 synthesizes these interrelated elements, illustrating how women's seed networks move from grassroots organization to institutional and ecological impact.

While these findings underscore the transformative potential of women's seed networks, it is important to acknowledge potential counterarguments. Critics may contend that centering women as custodians of seed and care risks reproducing gendered divisions of labor rather than dismantling them (Agarwal 2001). Others might argue that such initiatives, rooted in localized and small-scale networks, lack the scope to alter entrenched patriarchal or state structures. A further concern is that dependence on donor partnerships risks diluting grassroots priorities (Byaruhanga 2024). My analysis shows that women are not merely reproducing constraints; they strategically mobilize cultural roles to gain recognition, scale local practices into policy spaces, and adapt external agendas to their own feminist agroecological visions. Transformation here is partial and negotiated, but nonetheless substantive.

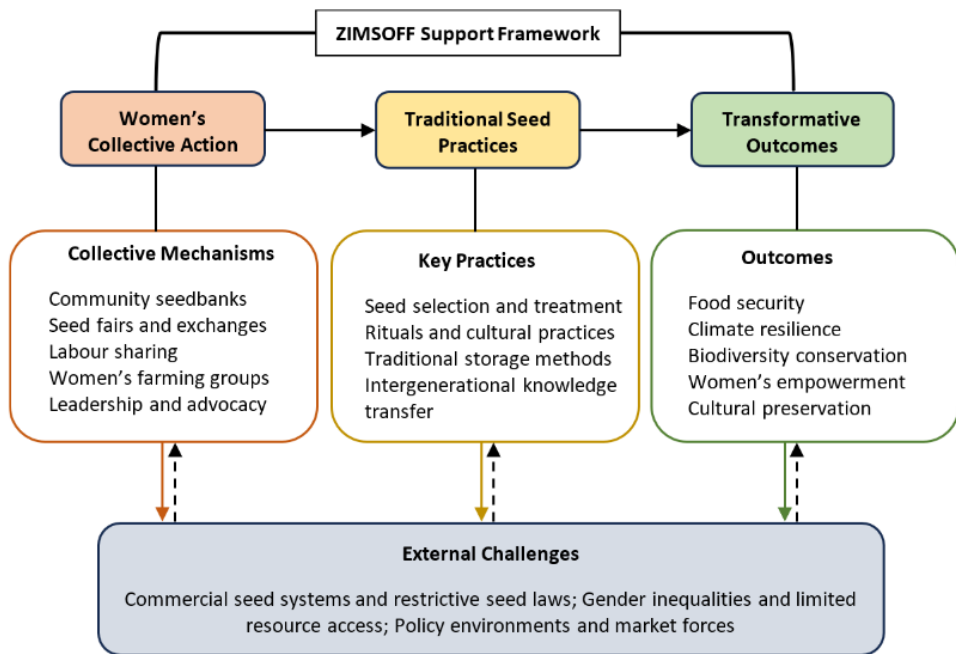


Figure 18. Process flow of women's seed sovereignty and collective action in Zimbabwe
This diagram illustrates how organizational strategies (left) and traditional seed practices (center) produce transformative outcomes (right), such as enhanced food sovereignty, ecological knowledge, and women's leadership. It synthesizes empirical insights from fieldwork across Matabeleland North and South, capturing the core dynamics discussed in this section. Source: Author's own design.

This process flow highlights how women's seed work is not isolated or incidental, it is embedded in collective structures that link care, knowledge, and resistance. In the next section, I examine how these grassroots efforts intersect with, and often challenge, national agricultural and seed policy frameworks.

5.3 Informing policy pathways

The collective seed practices described in the previous section not only support local food security and biodiversity, but they also expose the disconnect between grassroots innovation and national agricultural policy. The evidence from this study demonstrates that Zimbabwean women's seed sovereignty efforts are vital to national food security, climate resilience, and biodiversity conservation. These informal, community-based systems are not only effective, they are indispensable. Still, policy frameworks have largely failed to recognize or support them. This neglect persists despite formal strategies such as the *National Agriculture Policy*

Framework (2018–2030), the *Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy (2020–2030)*, and climate adaptation plans like the *National Climate Policy (2017)*, all of which emphasize standardized input packages and hybrid seed adoption while overlooking women’s informal, community-based seed systems.

Field data from the research communities highlight that women’s seed practices, particularly with drought-tolerant small grains and legumes, were crucial for household food security during recent droughts. Participants consistently reported that local landraces outperformed commercial hybrids under stress. In interviews, women explained that even in low-rainfall years, they could harvest something from traditional crops, whereas hybrid maize often failed. These observations align with agronomic studies (e.g., Altieri & Nicholls, 2017; McGuire & Sperling, 2016), confirming that genetic diversity enhances yield stability and ecosystem resilience.

Nutritional benefits are also significant. Women also emphasized that as primary caregivers they bear the responsibility for feeding children and nursing them when ill. Their intimate knowledge of which grains and vegetables best sustain children’s health positions them as strategic actors in linking nutrition to household well-being, a role that extends their ecological knowledge into domains of health care and social reproduction often overlooked in policy. Indigenous grains like finger millet and legumes preserved and distributed through women’s seed networks, are rich in protein, minerals, and dietary fiber (Mubaiwa et al., 2018; Samtiya et al., 2022). Several interviewees reported cultivating traditional vegetables and legumes specifically to ensure household nutrition during food scarcity. These practices position women’s seed systems as critical components of national nutrition and food sovereignty, not just subsistence strategies.

Despite their contributions, women-led seed initiatives receive little formal recognition. Community seed banks, seed fairs, and farmer-saved seed systems remain outside Zimbabwe’s formal agricultural frameworks. Participants expressed frustration that their traditional seed practices were dismissed as ‘unscientific’ or ‘non-compliant’ by extension officers, even when these practices ensured food security. Climate adaptation plans, such as Zimbabwe’s National Climate Policy (2017), promote climate-smart agriculture (CSA) but operationalize it through standardized input packages that overlook farmer-led seed systems. As noted in workshops with ZIMSOFF leaders, CSA programs often exclude women seed custodians, despite their frontline role in adaptation.

This sidelining is not unique to Zimbabwe. Across sub-Saharan Africa, national adaptation plans framed under CSA often promoted through African Union policy platforms and donor-driven modernization agendas, replicate this neglect by privileging external, commercial seed systems while undermining women’s custodial roles over traditional seed diversity (Segal & Speranza, 2024). Seed policy reforms, such as the adoption of proprietary regulations, have marginalized

women's seed-saving practices and biodiversity, with success measured not in terms of empowerment or food security but simply by 'women reached.'

To bridge these gaps, three interlinked policy pathways emerge from this study:

1. **Legal recognition of farmer seed systems:** Current seed laws favor commercial systems, leaving farmer-managed varieties in a legal grey zone. As one participant from Matabeleland South stated:

We save seed because we must, but we do it without protection. Tomorrow, they could say it is illegal (Interview, 2023).

This testimony captures the insecurity created by restrictive seed laws, which criminalize farmer-saved systems and render women's knowledge precarious. The quote highlights the tension between state regulation and grassroots practices, revealing how women's autonomy remains unprotected by law. Zimbabwe could adopt provisions from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP, Article 19), affirming rights to save, exchange, and sell farm-saved seed. A simplified national register for local varieties, with community-level documentation, would legitimize informal systems.

2. **Institutional integration of traditional knowledge:** Public agricultural extension often dismisses women's experiential knowledge. A farmer noted:

They come with books and fertilizers, but don't ask what we already know (Workshop, 2023).

This statement highlights how extension services privilege external expertise while sidelining women's lived knowledge. It reinforces my argument that farmer-led seed systems are marginalized not for lack of efficacy but because institutions fail to recognize them. The remark points to epistemic injustice while calling for recognition of women's experiential authority in agroecological governance. Therefore, integrating traditional knowledge, through female farmer facilitators, community seed stewards, and participatory plant breeding could bridge this gap. Initiatives like school garden programs and seed fairs could also foster intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Beyond extension, there is also a need to embed traditional ecological knowledge in academic curricula and research agendas, both nationally and internationally. If students and researchers are trained to engage with the wealth of farmer knowledge, its value is more likely to be recognized, documented, and legitimized. Such integration could empower custodians of that knowledge, strengthen intergenerational transmission, and contribute to the decolonization of agricultural research.

3. **Resource and market support for seed custodianship:** Women's seed work is labor-intensive and undervalued. Small grants, decentralized seed banks, and community-managed procurement (e.g., sourcing traditional grains for school feeding programs) could strengthen these efforts. Participants in Matobo and Bubi suggested forming cooperatives to bulk seed production, stating:

If we could sell our own seed at our own price, we wouldn't need outsiders (Interview, 2024).

This statement underscores how seed sovereignty is tied not only to cultural identity but also to economic autonomy. It highlights women's aspirations to control local markets, challenging the dependency created by external actors and emphasizing that seed-saving can be a pathway to both livelihood security and self-determination. Thus, existing networks like ZIMSOFF could coordinate such initiatives with minimal regulatory barriers.

The findings underscore that Zimbabwe's food and climate strategies must recognize and resource women's collective seed work. Women are not passive aid recipients, they are already shaping adaptation, nutrition, and biodiversity from below. A gender-just agroecology policy must treat these networks as vital institutions deserving legal protection, financial support, and political inclusion.

International models offer useful parallels. In Nepal, for example, community seed banks evolved into farmer seed cooperatives that produce and sell certified seed of local varieties, successfully entering the national seed market (Vernooy et al., 2022). These cases show that farmer-led systems can align with formal institutions without sacrificing autonomy. Beyond policy reforms, epistemic authority must shift, recognizing women as experts, not just beneficiaries. Protecting oral and digital seed knowledge from appropriation and ensuring youth engagement are critical for intergenerational sustainability. These policy directions require structural shifts in how knowledge, authority, and ecological care are valued in Zimbabwe's agricultural system. Ultimately, the future of food sovereignty depends not only on technical reforms but on reimagining whose practices and perspectives count.

The next chapter, I bring together these empirical and conceptual insights to reflect on the broader implications of women's collective action in agroecology. I synthesize the study's key contributions to theory, policy, and practice, and maps potential pathways toward more just and regenerative agricultural systems.

6 Sowing futures: Concluding reflections

In this concluding chapter, I synthesize the core insights of my research, reflecting on how Zimbabwean women, whether in groups or as individuals, are reshaping gendered power relations and building more just, sustainable food systems through collective agroecological practices. Their actions, from seed saving to organizational leadership, are not merely isolated acts of resilience; they are deliberate strategies of transformation, rooted in everyday struggle, care, and solidarity. I bring together my empirical and theoretical contributions to assess their implications for Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Collective Action Theory (CAT), outline actionable policy and practice recommendations, and propose urgent directions for future research. In doing so, I argue that feminist agroecology does more than offer an alternative to dominant agricultural models; it reimagines how knowledge, power, and sustainability are co-produced from the ground up.

6.1 A synthesis of key findings

This study demonstrates that Zimbabwean women in agroecology-based farmer organizations are not simply adapting to adversity; they are actively reshaping agrarian systems through collective strategies that are political, ecologically sound, and relational. Across diverse agroecological zones and organizational contexts, women's efforts converge around three transformative practices: reclaiming control over seeds and knowledge, restructuring leadership and governance, and building solidarity networks from the local to the transnational. Together, these practices constitute a feminist agroecological praxis – a form of everyday resistance that challenges patriarchal structures while advancing ecological sustainability (Bezner Kerr et al., 2021; Harcourt & Nelson, 2015).

While the findings discussed above are structured thematically, they directly address the four research questions that guided this study. Briefly, RQ1 is addressed primarily in Chapter 2 through a critical analysis of structural and discursive exclusions. RQ2 is explored in Chapters 3 and 4, which examine women's agency, organizing strategies, and negotiation of power. RQ3 is the focus of Chapter 4,

which analyzes leadership pathways and governance mechanisms within ZIMSOFF and related organizations. Finally, RQ4 is taken up in Chapter 5, which examines women's seed-saving practices and their contribution to feminist agroecological transformation. A fuller synthesis of these findings is provided throughout this chapter.

Gendered barriers and spatialized inequity

As outlined in Chapter 2, Zimbabwean women face persistent constraints in accessing land, agricultural support services, and decision-making authority, despite decades of reform. These barriers are entrenched through overlapping customary and statutory institutions, both of which tend to privilege male authority (Mutopo, 2014). Land tenure insecurity persists, particularly in communal areas where customary law dominates and land documents are often issued in men's names (Moyo, 2011a). These exclusions are not uniform; they intersect with geography, marital status, age, and class. Widows, single mothers, and female heads of household in drought-prone regions such as Matabeleland South or agroecological Regions IV and V face compounded disadvantages due to their isolation from markets, irrigation infrastructure, and male-mediated kin networks. Marginalization from extension programs and the devaluation of women's ecological knowledge further exacerbate these disparities.

This insight led me to develop the Spatially Aware Intersectional Framework (Figure 8), which integrates social identity, spatial marginality, and institutional reach to explain patterns of exclusion. My framework advances feminist political ecology by theorizing how spatialized patriarchy intensifies women's ecological vulnerability while shaping the boundaries of collective action.

Women's collective action and institutional innovation

Despite these constraints, I argue that women are not passive subjects of marginalization. In Chapters 3 and 4, I demonstrate how women's groups function not only as sites of resilience but also as hubs of institutional innovation. I show how women engage in transformative collective action, creating governance structures that redistribute decision-making power and legitimize their knowledge. In contexts where formal institutions fail to recognize women's labor or expertise, I highlight how grassroots collectives, particularly those affiliated with ZIMSOFF, emerge as alternative platforms for governance. These groups develop rotational labor-sharing systems, community seed banks, and participatory decision-making structures that foster accountability and redistribute authority (Table 6). Through rotating labor systems, consensus-based decision-making, and mentorship models, I illustrate how organizations like ZIMSOFF cultivate inclusive leadership rooted in trust and experiential authority, echoing Agarwal's (2000) insights.

This collective governance enables women to contest exclusion and claim space within both formal and informal institutions. Women's groups have successfully lobbied traditional leaders, negotiated access to land, and influenced extension services; evidencing grassroots institutional reform. Leadership is cultivated through hybrid pathways that combine experiential authority, mentorship, and formal training. Importantly, these models challenge dominant paradigms by emphasizing relational ethics, care, and mutual learning rather than individualistic or hierarchical norms. For example, the Bubi Seed Custodians Network pairs elder women with younger members to facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer and governance continuity.

Nonetheless, internal hierarchies persist. Leadership is often dominated by women with higher literacy or better access to remittances, sidelining younger women or those who are poorer, a form of participatory exclusion. Some collectives have addressed these inequities through targeted mentorship, quotas, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing, illustrating both the promise and limits of grassroots empowerment. These findings extend both FPE and CAT. FPE provides tools to interpret the structural and symbolic terrain of exclusion, while CAT elucidates how shared rules, collective norms, and distributed leadership sustain grassroots governance under resource constraints (Ostrom, 1990; Agarwal, 2000). Bridging the two, as articulated in the Relational Institutional Approach (Chapter 1.4), reveals how agroecological organizing is simultaneously relational, institutional, and political. These organizational forms demonstrate how practical governance mechanisms are embedded in everyday resistance and care work.

Feminist praxis through seed sovereignty

Chapter 5 positions seed sovereignty as a concentrated site of feminist resistance, cultural survival, and ecological innovation. Zimbabwean women act as seed custodians, preserving drought-tolerant landraces, organizing seed fairs, and maintaining community seed banks. These practices are not merely agricultural strategies: they are feminist commons that institutionalize care, reciprocity, and rule-based governance (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Clement et al., 2019). Through informal exchange networks and collective seed systems, women curate biodiverse collections that reflect cultural memory, agroecological adaptation, and epistemic sovereignty, reclaiming authority over knowledge devalued by industrial and colonial agricultural paradigms.

These acts are deeply relational, rooted in local cosmologies, yet explicitly political. As interviews and focus groups reveal, women frame seed-saving as resistance to corporate control, dependency on external inputs, and state neglect. Their networks bridge local and global movements, such as LVC and the ZSSP; scaling grassroots organizing into policy advocacy and solidarity. Women also navigate contradictions: while seed systems empower, they can reinforce gendered labor

burdens or intergenerational tensions over knowledge preservation. Moreover, collectives adopt reflexive governance, using mentorship and quotas to address inequities, demonstrating dynamic responses to internal and external pressures.

Critically, women's praxis asserts strategic autonomy (Vernooy et al., 2022). They selectively engage markets and policy forums, adopting hybrid varieties or donor partnerships when beneficial, while resisting enclosure and technocratic paradigms. In sum, this study shows how Zimbabwean women reconfigure power and knowledge from below, offering grounded models for gender-just sustainability transitions. Their work builds alternative institutions, reshaping agrarian futures through care, resistance, and solidarity, challenging patriarchal and industrial agriculture not from within, but through transformative alternatives, as a strategic choice.

Taken together, these findings underscore how women's collective action in Zimbabwe not only dismantles gendered barriers but also generates innovative institutions and practices rooted in seed sovereignty. Comparable dynamics have been documented elsewhere across the Global South. In Malawi and Tanzania, farmer-led agroecology has improved food security while simultaneously strengthening women's bargaining power (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019). In South Africa, community-based seed sovereignty initiatives supported by Biowatch position women as custodians of biodiversity and justice (Wynberg, 2024). These parallels highlight the wider significance of feminist agroecology, while Zimbabwe's case is distinctive in how ZIMSOFF embeds feminist leadership into institutional design, positioning women not only as custodians of agrobiodiversity but also as central architects of governance.

6.2 Feminist agroecology in practice

My research advances theoretical conversations at the intersection of feminist political ecology, collective action, and agroecology by showing how women's situated practices generate not only environmental resilience but also social transformation. While agroecology has often been defined as science, practice, and movement (Wezel et al., 2009), its gender dynamics remain underexamined, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on my empirical findings across Chapters 3–5, I argue that agroecology, when shaped by women's collective action, becomes a site of feminist praxis, where ecological sustainability, care work, and gender justice are co-produced. My work reveals that when women take collective control over seeds, land, and knowledge, agroecology transforms into a deeply political and emancipatory force. In my study of Zimbabwe, I demonstrate how these collective strategies not only foster ecological resilience but also challenge

structural inequities, positioning agroecology as a pathway for both gender justice and environmental regeneration.

Reframing agroecology through gendered lenses

While agroecology is often celebrated for its technical and environmental contributions, such as promoting biodiversity, improving soil health, and reducing input dependency (Altieri & Toledo, 2011); my study reveals that its transformative potential hinges on its social and political orientation. In Zimbabwe, I find that agroecology is not gender neutral. This is not unique to Zimbabwe: across much of sub-Saharan Africa and other regions where small-scale farming remains tied to male land ownership, agroecological initiatives are similarly shaped by gendered land tenure systems and patriarchal authority (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019; Razavi, 2009).

As I demonstrate in Chapters 3 and 4, women's seed-saving, reciprocal farming, labor-sharing, and community organizing directly confront patriarchal norms, hierarchical institutions, and extractive agricultural models. These practices are not merely reproductive or technical; they are political, relational, and symbolic (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015; Bezner Kerr et al., 2019). Through my research, I argue that women's agroecological labor embeds ethics of care and reciprocity into everyday routines, reconfiguring how sustainability is understood and enacted. Seed fairs, community seed banks, and informal exchange rituals, often dismissed as traditional or apolitical, emerge in my analysis as acts of resistance and reclamation, asserting claims to visibility, autonomy, and cultural continuity.

This work aligns with FPE in framing agroecology as a feminist practice, one that challenges epistemic hierarchies, where state and scientific institutions marginalize indigenous knowledge and gendered expertise (Chapter 5). By cultivating seed sovereignty or leading collective decisions, women's collectives contest not only material inequities but also the colonial and corporate logics dominating food systems.

My study makes a substantive contribution to FPE by addressing two critical gaps. First, I theorize intersectionality as spatial, not only social or scalar, demonstrating how remoteness and ecological marginality intensify gendered exclusion. Second, I center feminist institutional design in FPE analysis, revealing how women collectively reconfigure governance through rules, care, and intergenerational mentorship. These conceptual advances deepen the field's analytical power and reposition grassroots organizing as a site of both resistance and rulemaking. I argue that feminist agroecology is not a niche adaptation but a fundamental reorientation, rooted in everyday acts of care, reciprocity, and resistance to spatialized patriarchy.

Feminist commons on collective governance

My research contributes to feminist commons debates by demonstrating how women's agroecological institutions transcend symbolic resistance to create rule-based, power-aware governance systems rooted in care, solidarity, and equity. In Zimbabwe, I highlight how community seed systems and farming cooperatives embody feminist commons; institutions that not only manage shared resources but also foster intergenerational mentorship, storytelling, and cultural continuity. These systems both reflect and reconfigure Ostrom's design principles by centering feminist values often sidelined in mainstream commons literature (Agarwal, 2000; Ostrom, 1990). For example, ZIMSOFF's practices; rotating leadership, gender quotas, and consensus-based decision-making, reveal how institutional design can deliberately encode equity. Such cases expose hybrid governance, where formal structures (elections, term limits) intertwine with culturally embedded practices (elder mediation, collective storytelling). I align this with Cleaver's (2012) notion of institutional bricolage, which generates resilient, place-based systems of leadership and accountability.

My analysis advances CAT within FPE by stressing that who governs is as critical as how governance occurs, a critique often marginalized in institutional analysis. I redefine governance to include social reproduction, care, and shared identity as pillars of collective institutions, pushing back against commons frameworks narrowly focused on efficiency and rules.

Feminist agroecology in movement and practice

I engage with agroecology as both a scientific and political project (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Wezel et al., 2009), positioning it not just as a farming method but as a social movement with the potential to drive systemic change. In Zimbabwe, women's agroecological organizing operates across these domains: it is a social movement, advocating for food sovereignty and seed rights through alliances like La Via Campesina, and an everyday practice, enacted through seed exchanges, rotational farming, and community care, as presented in Chapters 4 and 5. This dual character reflects a relational politics of transformation (Voss & Zingwena, 2024), where feminist agroecology resists dichotomies between the technical and the political, the private and the public. Practices such as seed curation, reinterpretation of climate-smart agriculture, and consensus-based governance function as both survival strategies and interventions in hegemonic systems of knowledge and power. Drawing on Fadaee (2022) and Scott (1990), the Zimbabwean case illustrates how women's groups reclaim seed systems and influence policy spaces through dispersed, everyday resistance, quiet but persistent acts that challenge dominant paradigms.

Building on ecofeminist insights (Shiva, 2016), I argue that women's agroecological labor holds symbolic, cultural, and political significance, driving a double

transformation; ecological and political. My findings reveal that this process is not without contradictions. As I discussed in Chapter 5, some collective organizing inadvertently reinforces gendered care burdens or internal exclusions. For me, acknowledging these tensions is key to advancing a grounded feminist praxis that remains reflexive, inclusive, and transformative.

Feminist and reflexive methodology

Finally, my study contributes to feminist research methodologies by treating rural women not as subjects of inquiry but as co-creators of knowledge. Through dialogic interviews, participatory workshops, and iterative validation, I designed the research process to enact epistemic justice. While this aligns with sustainability science's commitment to transdisciplinarity and co-production (Jerneck et al., 2011; Lang et al., 2012), I extend it through a decolonising research praxis. This involves resisting epistemic hierarchies that privilege external expertise, validating the situated knowledges of Zimbabwean women farmers, and holding academic work accountable to the communities whose struggles and innovations it documents (Smith, 1999; Chilisa, 2019). My reflexive engagement with participants not only shaped my analysis but also exposed key tensions, between cultural pride and gendered labor burdens, or between youth innovation and elder authority. These complexities taught me that feminist praxis is neither romantic nor linear, but contested, situated, and perpetually negotiated.

This methodological orientation resonates with broader debates on decolonizing research. Scholars have highlighted the need to dismantle epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western frameworks while marginalizing local and indigenous knowledge (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Recent contributions also call for embedding reflexivity, accountability, and relational ethics into research praxis (Boer Cueva et al., 2024; Bendix et al., 2020). My approach builds on these insights but extends them by foregrounding Zimbabwean women's agroecological praxis as a site where feminist and decolonial methodologies converge.

6.3 Toward gender-just agroecology: Policy and practice

My research reveals a persistent gap between Zimbabwe's formal agricultural policies and the daily struggles of rural women farmers. Despite policy commitments to gender equity, such as those in the *Zimbabwe Gender Policy (2017)* and the *Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation Strategy (2018–2030)*, state-led programs remain locked into productivist, technocratic approaches that prioritize export-driven value chains, uniform input packages, and technological fixes. These frameworks systematically sideline the embodied knowledge, care work, and collective action that sustain agroecological systems,

especially for women in communal and resettlement areas (Mutopo, 2014; World Bank, 2023).

I argue that achieving gender-just agroecology demands more than symbolic inclusion; it requires dismantling structural barriers. As demonstrated in Chapters 3–5, rural women are not mere recipients of top-down interventions but are actively reshaping systems through seed sovereignty, grassroots governance, and climate adaptation. Their leadership, though often erased in mainstream narratives, is vital to building equitable and sustainable food futures.

Aligning policy with women’s agroecological realities

My analysis in Chapters 2 and 5 shows that initiatives like Pfumvudza/Intwasa, though framed as gender-sensitive, often reduce women’s participation to numerical targets, marginalizing their knowledge, priorities, and institutions. I argue that this disconnect does not stem from misaligned goals; many women’s collectives already advance national objectives on food security and climate adaptation, but from policymakers’ failure to recognize and support the institutional and epistemological frameworks women use. To bridge this gap, I contend that agricultural policy must shift from treating women’s organizations as passive beneficiaries to acknowledging them as co-governors and producers of agroecological knowledge and infrastructure.

Policy and practice priorities

The research identifies five critical domains where policy and practice must evolve to support feminist agroecology:

1. **Recognising and resourcing women’s knowledge systems:** As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, women farmers sustain diverse seed portfolios, innovate through agroecological experimentation, and preserve intergenerational ecological knowledge; nonetheless, their expertise is systematically marginalized by formal extension and research systems that privilege externally validated science. To rectify this, I propose three interventions: (1) integrating experienced seed custodians into extension services as peer educators, (2) institutionalizing participatory plant breeding and co-learning platforms, and (3) establishing simplified legal frameworks to protect and facilitate the exchange of farmer-saved seeds.
2. **Securing land tenure and addressing structural constraints:** This is fundamental to enabling long-term agroecological transformation. My research highlights how land tenure insecurity: particularly in communal and resettlement areas, disproportionately impacts widowed, unmarried, or geographically isolated women. To counter this, I propose three key interventions: enforcing joint titling, simplifying documentation processes, and engaging customary leaders in gender-sensitization initiatives to bridge statutory land rights with local practices. Additionally, I emphasize the need

to formally integrate women's collectives into local land governance and adjudication processes, ensuring they have equitable representation and decision-making power.

3. **Supporting collective organizing and feminist institutional design:** This is critical to scaling agroecology. In Chapters 3 and 4 I demonstrate how organizations like ZIMSOFF have pioneered participatory models, such as rotating leadership, to foster inclusive governance and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, I found that these groups often operate under precarious financial conditions and face pressure to conform to donor agendas. To protect their autonomy and amplify their impact, I propose that governments and donors must: (1) provide core funding directly to women-led organizations, (2) integrate collective action indicators (e.g., mentorship networks, solidarity economies, seed commons) into national monitoring systems, and (3) guarantee formal roles for grassroots collectives in agricultural, food security, and climate policy negotiations.
4. **Reorienting climate and market policy frameworks:** To recognise the value of traditional knowledge and women's informal economic practices. Drawing on my findings in Chapters 2 and 5, I show how current climate-smart agriculture programs often prioritize hybrid seeds and external inputs, undermining farmer-led adaptation strategies. Similarly, I demonstrate that mainstream market development approaches neglect the informal, non-monetized spaces where many women operate. To counter these gaps, I propose three interventions: (1) integrating traditional crops and seeds into school meal programs, local procurement, and national grain reserves; (2) expanding support for community seed banks, seed fairs, and farmer exchanges as critical climate resilience infrastructure; and (3) institutionalizing farmer participation through initiatives like the Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Programme and ZAPPA.
5. **Reframing metrics and accountability:** As explained in Chapters 4 and 5, I argue that it is important to reframe how success is measured. Rather than relying on superficial gender-disaggregated participation data, I propose assessing policy effectiveness through indicators that capture tangible shifts in women's power, agency, and institutional recognition. This means measuring not just how many women participate, but how they influence agricultural decision-making, transform institutional cultures, and drive structural change in land and seed governance.

Policy lessons from other African contexts reinforce these priorities. In Uganda and Kenya, women-led cooperatives have successfully shaped seed policy by demonstrating the resilience of farmer-managed systems (Njuki et al., 2023; Wynberg, 2024). Aligning Zimbabwe's frameworks with such regional experiences

could amplify grassroots innovations while avoiding the pitfalls of top-down, input-intensive models.

Practical considerations for development practitioners

For development practitioners seeking to support agroecological transitions, several principles emerge from this research. It is crucial to work with existing women's organisations rather than creating parallel structures, and to ensure support is long-term, flexible, and non-extractive. I argue that practitioners must prioritize participatory innovation, enabling women to adapt agroecology to their contexts through action research and co-learning. Also, my findings highlight the importance of strengthening women-led market access, particularly for crops that contribute to agrobiodiversity and are culturally rooted, to secure economic viability. Additionally, I advocate for programs that engage men through gender-transformative approaches, fostering shared responsibility in farming and care work while protecting women's leadership. Finally, I stress the value of horizontal learning; peer-to-peer exchanges, cluster models, and regional networks, to scale agroecological innovation. A compelling example is ZIMSOFF's cluster structure (Chapter 4.3), which demonstrates how such systems can build solidarity even in resource-constrained settings.

Aligning agroecology with gender justice

Agroecology's transformative capacity is fundamentally social. It is built not only through composting, seed diversification, or climate adaptation technologies, but through the radical redistribution of power in agrarian institutions, markets, and epistemologies. My research with Zimbabwean women farmers reveals that agroecology is not just a set of sustainable practices; it is a political strategy for reclaiming autonomy, dignity, and sovereignty.

To meaningfully scale agroecology, I contend it must be grounded in feminist ethics: interdependence, care, and participatory governance. Policies and development programs failing to center these principles risk reproducing the very inequities they aim to address. My findings affirm that recognizing agroecology as a feminist project is not only a question of justice, but also a strategic necessity for food security, climate resilience, and rural transformation in the 21st century.

6.4 Limitations

While this study offers rich, contextually grounded insights into women's collective action and agroecological transformation in Zimbabwe, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These constraints do not undermine the findings but

frame them as situated and partial, in line with the feminist and critical realist orientation of the research.

Geographic and organizational scope: I focused my research on selected districts in Matabeleland North and South, primarily within Zimbabwe's driest and most marginalized agroecological regions (IV and V). These areas offered critical insights due to their distinct land reform histories, communal tenure systems, and traditions of grassroots organizing. While this approach allowed me to examine how spatial inequity and gendered exclusion intersect, I recognize that my findings may not fully generalize to more resource-rich or politically distinct regions. My site selection was also influenced by the prominence of ZIMSOFF-affiliated farmer groups, which means my study may underrepresent dynamics in less organized or differently networked communities.

Methodological boundaries: I employ qualitative methodology to prioritize depth and nuance, particularly by analyzing and interpreting empirical material in close dialogue with theory. Even so, I recognize that this approach does not claim statistical representativeness. My sample, though rich in lived experience, remains relatively small and may not capture broader demographic trends. I also acknowledge that short-term shocks, such as droughts or market fluctuations, could have shaped participants' perspectives during the study period. Additionally, by focusing on organized women's groups, my research may inadvertently exclude isolated farmers or failed collectives, whose experiences could challenge or complicate prevailing narratives of empowerment.

Researcher positionality and power dynamics: As both a Zimbabwean woman with smallholder farming experience and a researcher embedded in academic and NGO networks, my positionality facilitated trust and access but also introduced potential biases. My pre-existing relationships with ZIMSOFF, for instance, enabled deeper engagement with participants, yet may have influenced their responses or constrained my critical distance. To address these asymmetries, I adopted reflexive practices like journaling, data triangulation, and validation workshops (Pillow, 2003; Sultana, 2007), recognizing that such measures could mitigate but never fully eliminate bias. As a researcher grounded in critical realist and feminist methodologies, I explicitly centered my analytical framework in these traditions, continually engaging with theory to interpret emerging findings; both within Zimbabwe's context and in relation to broader debates. This iterative process allowed me to interrogate my assumptions while situating local realities within wider structural critiques.

Language and translation challenges: While I conducted research in English, Ndebele, and Shona, often relying on real-time interpretation, certain cultural nuances, particularly around emotion, metaphor, and gendered concepts, were inevitably lost or simplified in English-language analysis. This constraint is not merely methodological but epistemological: it underscores the tension between

dominant academic frameworks and the embodied, feminist and agroecological knowledge produced by Zimbabwean women. As a result, while my findings capture systemic patterns, the lived textures of this knowledge may be partially obscured by translation.

Partial perspectives and external influences: While my study centers women's agency, it includes limited perspectives from men, policymakers, or customary leaders. A fuller relational understanding of agroecological change would require engaging these actors, who also shape the governance landscape. Moreover, broader political-economic and environmental forces, such as donor agendas, economic volatility, and climate shocks, deeply influenced the contexts in which women organized. These dynamics cannot be disentangled from the outcomes observed, and they caution against attributing change solely to collective action.

Temporal scope: Finally, the fieldwork captures a three-year window (2022–2025), offering valuable insights into transformations in motion. Still, this timeframe limits assessment of their durability. Whether the institutional innovations and empowerment gains observed will persist across generations or withstand political shifts remains uncertain. Addressing this gap will require longitudinal and comparative studies that track the endurance and transferability of feminist agroecological practices over time.

6.5 Future research

This study opens multiple avenues for advancing feminist agroecology research, particularly in contexts of structural inequity and ecological vulnerability. While grounded in Zimbabwe, the findings raise broader questions about how feminist agroecological practices emerge, scale, and endure across the Global South. Below are five priority areas for future inquiry, emphasizing intersectional, comparative, and participatory approaches that center women's agency while interrogating systemic constraints.

Longitudinal and comparative studies: My findings suggest that women's collective action generates meaningful shifts in power dynamics, knowledge systems, and institutional practices within agroecological contexts, though I question the durability and long-term sustainability of these transformations. To address this uncertainty, I argue for longitudinal research to track whether gains in leadership, agroecological resilience, and seed sovereignty endure amid climate shocks, political transitions, or generational shifts, particularly in sustaining youth engagement in seed networks.

I also advocate for comparative studies to interrogate how feminist agroecology unfolds across differing socio-ecological and institutional contexts. This work is

guided by the following key questions: *How do land tenure regimes (communal versus private markets) shape seed sovereignty or leadership structures? How do rural and peri-urban dynamics diverge in scaling agroecological practices? And what trans-local lessons emerge when examining parallels across regions?*

Political Economy of policy implementation: A persistent gap exists between progressive policy rhetoric, such as gender-responsive seed laws or agroecology frameworks, and on-the-ground realities. I argue that future research should critically analyze the institutional blockages, elite capture, and donor agendas that undermine policy implementation, as well as explore how the NGO-ization of grassroots movements may dilute their transformative potential through bureaucratic compliance. Further, I propose investigating how climate finance mechanisms and agribusiness influence distorts equitable agroecological transitions. Mixed-method policy implementation studies could offer particularly valuable insights into why reforms often fail to reach marginalized women, ultimately informing more effective advocacy strategies.

Deepening intersectional and relational analyses: While my study has highlighted disparities based on age, marital status, and geography, as well as class, given differences in household assets and income opportunities; I assert that future research must further disaggregate intra-group inequities by examining race, class, and ability more rigorously. Key questions driving this inquiry include: *Who remains excluded even within supposedly 'inclusive' collectives? How are internal hierarchies challenged or reinforced? And how do men engage with women's organizing as allies, resisters, or co-learners?* I suggest that relational analyses could productively uncover emerging forms of gender collaboration and their influence on household and community norms.

Markets, seed sovereignty, and alternative economies: In my analysis, women's cautious engagement with markets reveals several critical research opportunities. I identify three key areas for further investigation: (1) how alternative value chains, such as cooperatives can preserve agroecological values; (2) whether public procurement programs (e.g., school feeding initiatives) could incentivize indigenous crop production; and (3) the risks and potentials of farmer-led seed enterprises in scaling traditional knowledge without reproducing extractive economic models.

Decolonial and co-produced methodologies: Finally, I argue that future research must deepen its commitment to democratizing knowledge production through decolonial and co-produced methodologies. This means centering women farmers as co-producers of knowledge, not just research subjects, by adopting participatory action research, and rigorous safeguards for data sovereignty to resist extractive practices. I propose that bridging indigenous knowledge with intergenerational tools (e.g., digital storytelling, school gardens) and mixed-method designs (e.g., pairing yield data with participatory diagnostics) could transform both academic insights and policy advocacy.

For feminist agroecology to realize its radical potential, I contend it must forge tighter links between grassroots praxis and structural change. As a researcher, I see my role not only in documenting resistance but in amplifying and scaling it, through inclusive methods, critical policy engagement, and relational frameworks that honor the movement's political and cultural roots.

Epilogue: Sowing futures of justice and regeneration

This thesis began with the image of a woman, her hands weathered by toil, happily sorting seeds for a seed fair. That seemingly mundane act; repetitive, unremarked, unseen by policy or market, was revealed as something far more profound: a form of resistance, a ritual of care, a claim to agency. It was a reminder that transformation does not always erupt loudly; sometimes it is cultivated in silence, in the furrows of everyday activities. Across these chapters, I have traced how women in Zimbabwe, through acts as varied as forming seed banks, leading farmer cooperatives, engaging in climate adaptation, and reclaiming indigenous knowledge, are sowing the seeds of more equitable, ecologically attuned futures. These are not merely responses to marginalization; they are assertions of vision, of belonging, of sovereignty. In this thesis, I have shown that women's collective action in agriculture is not a supplementary development strategy, but a foundational force in reimagining food systems, land governance, and environmental stewardship.

As this thesis draws to a close, I return to the spirit with which it began; grounded in seeds, struggle, and the quiet determination of women who farm, resist, and reimagine. These seedings of change do not unfold easily. They take root in harsh soils, shaped by climate crisis, institutional neglect, and entrenched patriarchy. And within these constraints, Zimbabwean women are cultivating futures grounded in care, memory, and collective power. Their actions show that agroecology is not merely a set of practices, but a political commitment to regeneration of land, of community, and of possibility. The hands that save seeds today are not only preserving the past; they are planting the terms of our shared survival. In recognizing and supporting these hands, we commit to food systems that are not only sustainable, but just. And in telling these stories, we begin to honor the everyday revolutions already underway; quiet, persistent, and rooted in life.

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What if the future of sustainable agriculture rests in the hands of women farmers? In this thesis, I explore how Zimbabwean women farmers use collective action, through seed saving, farmer networks, and grassroots leadership, to challenge systemic exclusion and reimagine food systems. This research shows that when women lead, agroecology becomes more than sustainable farming: it is a feminist project of resilience, justice, and transformation. By centering the voices of Zimbabwean women, I offer insights for scholars, policymakers, and social movements seeking to build food systems that are not only sustainable, but also equitable and just. Ultimately, this thesis invites readers to rethink what just and sustainable food systems could look like if women's knowledge, labor, and leadership were fully recognized and resourced.

About Info:



Michaelin Sibanda: I am an interdisciplinary researcher in the field of sustainability science examining gender, agroecology, and rural transformation. My work centers the knowledge and experiences of rural women to challenge dominant agricultural paradigms and illuminate grassroots strategies for building resilience and for achieving food justice and gender equality. My disciplinary competence is in geography, environmental studies and sustainability.