

Rural Women's Livelihoods, Literacies and Learning Strategies in Zambia: A Capabilities Approach

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Abstract

The thesis seeks to explore rural women's livelihoods and how they connect literacies and learning practices to contribute to gender justice and sustainable livelihoods. In Zambia, policy discourses on women's literacy and learning reflect those of formal schooling system (deficit approach), which fail to account adequately for what people do with literacy in their everyday lives. Understanding literacy and learning as everyday social practices, shaping how individuals and communities make and sustain their livelihoods, is critical to human development as well as issues of gender justice and societal wellbeing.

The research is an ethnographic study shaped by a conceptual framework that situates literacy and development at the intersection of the social theories of literacy and the Capabilities Approach. It unravels women's literacies and learning through their lived experiences. The study was conducted with 15 women participants over 9 months in an anonymised village in Eastern Province of Zambia. It also involved interviews with policymakers from government departments and practitioners from NGOs/companies. The study explored women's literacy practices and meanings, social relations and power, and how learning influences their aspirations for livelihood security and gender justice.

Findings indicate that women pursue literacy practices and knowledges that are relevant to their livelihood activities in the social context in which they are situated and valued. These varying situational encounters include, for example, those at home, church, or in marketplaces. Women's conceptualisation of literacy is shaped by what is defined by the school system (an autonomous model), while rich encounters they experience with texts in their everyday livelihoods go unrecognised. Conversely, being identified as literate does not affect women's aspirations. Instead, accessibility to wider resources: material, social and cultural, influences women's participation and aspirations to pursue a life they consider valuable. Women pursue literacy and learning mainly in the interest of collective wellbeing that reflects ubuntu rather than for self-achievement. Finally, literacies and knowledges that are valued in women's livelihoods are embedded as social practices. Through situated literacy and learning practices, women develop wider capabilities that contribute to gender justice and wellbeing.

The study contributes new insights into literacy and learning and invites policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to consider the limitations of relying on a single theoretical narrative. It highlights the significance of prior learnt knowledges and informal skills in women's sustainable livelihoods. However, many adult literacy policies and programmes ignore this aspect in favour of a predominantly deficit approach. The study challenges us to understand that adult literacy as a policy may differ from literacy in practice.

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Table Of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgement.....	ii
List Of Figures.....	ix
List Of Tables	x
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.0. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Journey into The Research Topic	3
1.1.1. Encountering Women in a Literacy Class	5
1.1.2. Literacy Policy Shaping My Research	7
1.2. Exploring the Gap Between Women’s Literacy and Development.....	9
1.3. Developing a New Research Framework: Literacy and Development	11
1.4. Conclusion and Thesis Outline.....	12
Thesis Structure	13
Chapter Two: Context and Background	15
2.0. Introduction	15
2.1. Livelihoods and Human Development Policies in Zambia: An Overview	15
2.1.1. Women’s Livelihoods and Wellbeing: Policy Discourses in Zambia.....	17
2.2. Gender and Development.....	19
2.2.1. Gender and The Post-Colonial Legacy	20
2.2.3. Towards Gender-Inclusive Laws and Policy Reforms: Resource Access, Acquisition and Control.....	22
2.2.4. Gender-Inclusiveness and Equality: A Historical Context	24
2.3. Development of Adult Education and Literacy	27
2.3.1. A Synopsis of the Historical Background	27
2.3.2. Adult Literacy Policy Discourses and Development	30
2.3.3. The State Of Adult Literacy and Education (ALE) in Zambia	32
2.4. Situating the Research Site and Background Context.....	35
2.4.1. Historical Background and Context Of Chipangali District in the Eastern Province	36
2.4.2. Ethnic Diversity and Livelihood Practices in Chipangali District.....	37

2.4.3. The Political Structure and Formation of Chabwera Village.....	40
2.4.4. Demographics and Socio-economic Status	41
2.4.5. Cultural Practices and Social Integration.....	41
2.4.6. Livelihood Activities and Practices	42
2.5. Conclusion	44
Chapter Three Conceptual Framework	46
3.0. Introduction	46
3.1. Rural Women and the Livelihood Discourse	47
3.2. The Literacy Discourse.....	48
3.3. Social Theory of Literacy.....	49
3.3.1. Literacy as a Social Practice	51
3.3.2. Literacy Events	53
3.3.3. Gender and Literacy	55
3.4. Non-Formal/Informal Learning and Literacy	59
3.4.1. Learning Through Participation	62
3.5. Literacy and Human Development Debate.....	63
3.5.1. New Literacy Studies and the Capabilities Approach: Exploring the Tension	65
3.5.2. Literacy Through the Lens of Capabilities Approach	69
3.6. Social Theory of Literacy and Capabilities Approach: My Conceptual Framework.....	70
3.7. Literacies and Women's Agency, Power and Empowerment	72
3.8. Livelihoods and Capabilities: An African Context.....	74
3.9. Conceptualising Gender Relations	77
3.9.1. Gender Relations and Equality Dynamics	78
3.10. Women and Gender Justice	79
3.10.1. A Critical Reflection on Gender Justice and Women's Livelihoods Empowerment in Zambia	81
3.11. Conclusion	82
Chapter Four – Methodology	84
4.0. Introduction	84
4.1. Research Orientation: Framing the Methodological Approach	84

4.2. Ethnography as a Methodological Framework	86
4.2.1. Justification For a Case Study	87
4.2.2. Negotiating Access	88
4.2.3. Accessing My Research Site (Chabwera Village)	90
4.2.4. Mapping Out The Site	91
4.2.5. First Community Meeting, First Implied Consent	94
4.3. Participant Recruitment	96
4.3.1. Recruitment Techniques	98
4.4. Research Methods	99
4.4.1. Interviews and The Practice of Notetaking	100
4.4.2. Informal Conversations as Opportunistic Data	101
4.4.3. Participant Observation	102
4.4.4. Documentary Sources	104
4.5. Data Recording and Analysis	106
4.5.1. Data Collection and Analysis as Back and Forth	107
4.6. Navigating the Fieldwork	108
4.6.1. Positionality and Reflexivity	108
4.6.2. Overcoming Self-Biases: Making the Familiar Unfamiliar	111
4.6.3. Entering the Women’s Social Spaces	113
4.6.4. Participant Observer as Useful Resource	114
4.7. Being a Stranger: Navigating the Insiderness/Outsiderness	116
4.7.1. My Outsiderness as My strength in the Gendered Social Space	118
4.7.2. My Fluid Insiderness in the Women’s Social Space	119
4.8. Ethical Dilemmas and Pragmatic Approach	120
4.9. Reflecting on My Research and Professional Context	121
4.10. Conclusion	122
Chapter Five- Literacy and Livelihoods: Meanings, Literacy Practices, Networking and Mediation	124
5.0. Introduction	124
5.1. Exploring Literacy Meanings and Perceptions	124
5.1.1. Literacy and Power	129
5.2. Livelihoods and Literacy as Situated Practice	130

5.2.1. Textual Meaning as Situated	133
5.2.2. Literacies as Reading Signs, Images and Print Labels	134
5.2.3. Literacies as Decoding Text Messages in the Phone	138
5.3. Literacies and Gender Relations in Social Groups	140
5.3.1. The Chabwera Village Bank Group	141
5.3.2. The Azimai ba Mending Group	147
5.3.3. Institutional Literacy: Literacy Mediation.....	150
(i). Outsider Literacy Mediators	154
(ii). Insider Literacy Mediators	155
5.3.4. Intertextuality and Multi-Modal Communication	157
5.4. Conclusion	161
Chapter Six – Women as Adult Learners and The Role of Informal and Non-formal Settings in Shaping Social Practices.	163
6.0. Introduction	163
6.1. Indigenous Learning and Community Livelihoods	164
6.1.1. Indigenous Knowledge as Situated Practice	166
6.1.2. Food Systems and Gender Relations	167
6.1.3. Learning as Participating in Family Activity	171
6.2. Learning as a Practice of Experiencing: “The mealie-meal gives me greater satisfaction”	173
6.2.1. Learning Through Apprenticeship in a Community of Practice	175
6.2.2. Learning as a Capability: The Art of Negotiation.....	179
6.2.3. Learning as Everyday Literacy Practices in Different Social Domains..	181
6.2.4. Learning as a Self-directional Activity	185
6.3. Women’s Learning and Capability Development.....	188
6.3.1. Processes Shape Participation and Learning	192
6.3.2. Collective Learning and the Ubuntu Capability.....	193
6.3.3. Epistemic Capability	195
6.3.4. The Narrative Capability	196
6.5. Conclusion	197
Chapter Seven - Gender Justice and Women’s Empowerment	200
7.0. Introduction	200

7.1. Households as Site of Disempowering Relationships	201
7.1.1. Women’s Power and Agency as Negotiated.....	205
7.1.2. Agency as Active or Passive Resistance to Patriarchy	207
7.2. Renegotiating Gender Justice Through ‘ <i>Ubuntu</i> ’.....	209
7.2.1. Institutional Bureaucracy and Gender Justice	213
7.2.2. Situating Women’s Groups and the Bargain with Patriarchy	218
7.2.3. Women’s Voice as Socially Situated and Contextual	220
7.3. Conclusion	223
Chapter Eight – Discussion: Literacy and Learning, Women’s Lives, Livelihoods and Gender Relations.....	225
8.0. Introduction	225
8.1. Women’s Agency: Literacy Practices as a Livelihood Choice	225
8.1.1. Agency and Embeddedness: Informal Learning and Indigenous Knowledges	228
8.2. Wellbeing and Empowerment: What’s in it for women?.....	229
8.2.1. Gender Relations, Literacy and Empowerment	229
8.2.2. Social Status Power and Participation in Literacy and Learning Practices	233
8.3. Social Relations and Power: Literacy Practices	234
8.4. Challenging the Patriarchy: “I speak the voice of the majority”	238
8.5. Capability for <i>Ubuntu</i> : “We did not have a cooperative and we had to form one”	240
8.6. Women’s Livelihood, Wellbeing and Empowerment: Challenging the Status Quo.....	242
8.7. Conclusion	244
Chapter Nine Conclusion and Implications	246
9.0. Introduction	246
(i). Revisiting my research questions.....	249
9.1. Challenging the Deficit Approach to Literacy and Development	251
9.2. Implications of The Study for Policy and Practice in Zambia	254
(i) Adult Literacy and Learning	254
(ii) Practitioners and Rural Women’s Empowerment Programmes	257
9.3. Implications of Ethnographic Study Approach to Research in Zambia	259

9.4. Contribution of The Study	260
(i). Capability Framework	261
(ii). New Literacy Studies Approach.....	263
9.5. Limitations and Recommendations	264
Reference.....	266
Appendices	289
Appendix 1: Adult literacy curriculum	289
Appendix 2 : Story of turtle and fish	290
Appendix 3 Interview schedule for policy makers/practitioners.....	291

List Of Figures

Figure 1: Key stakeholders of adult literacy providers in Zambia	32
Figure 2 : ALE Materials from the two-line ministries (Education and Community Development).....	33
Figure 3: Farmers' Training Manual, a local NGO in the Country.....	34
Figure 4 Eastern Province showing its districts (in green	38
Figure 5: Agroecological Study Site.	39
Figure 6 :Aerial View of Chabwera Village	41
Figure 7: Modified Development Model.....	71
Figure 8: The temporal shop called 'Kanthemba' and makeshift stand for food products	92
Figure 9: Church building	93
Figure 10: Sketch-map – Chabwera Village.....	94
Figure 11: Under-five Childcare Plan	105
Figure 12: Maize heaps on the field	112
Figure 13: Marketing placards in the community.....	125
Figure 14: Credit Book	132
Figure 15: Kanthemba shop and assorted groceries	136
Figure 16: Village Bank Group monthly contributions	142
Figure 17: Group Register for Savings Group (VBG)	143
Figure 18: Round circle meeting and clients book	148
Figure 19: KAINGO Contract Form	153
Figure 20: KAINGO's Vision and Mission Statement	159
Figure 21: Text trajectory and meaning in transcontext	160
Figure 22: A chiselled tree trunk	166
Figure 23: Local foods and seed preservation.	169
Figure 24 : Storybook.....	184
Figure 25: TV channel programme on HIV/AIDs.....	186
Figure 26: Captured notes from one of the participants.....	190
Figure 27: Group activity of women tailoring	192
Figure 28: Diagram showing opportunities and constraints (conversional factors) for women participation in livelihood activities.....	198
Figure 29: List and structure of the TWC membership	211
Figure 30: Certificate on the left and constitutional by-laws on the right.....	215

List Of Tables

Table 1: Mapped out rural-based activities in Eastern Province – Zambia	26
Table 2: Source: Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) 2020, Annual Report.....	31
Table 3: Group characteristics of the Chabwera Village.....	44
Table 4: Modified Table Capabilities List (1995, p. 83-4).....	68

ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	Alternative Distance Learning
CA	Capabilities Approach
CCG	Christian Community Group
CoP	Community of Practice
VCHW	Voluntary Community Health Workers
EFA	Education For All
FISP	Farmer Input Support Programme
GAD	Gender And Development
HCT	Human Capital Theory
WID	Women In Development
MOC	Ministry Of Commerce
MOE	Ministry Of Education
MOG	Ministry Of Gender
MoFNP	Ministry of Finance and National Planning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLS	New Literacy Studies
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SHG	Self-Help Group
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNDP	United Nations Development Plan
WB	World Bank
ZNDP	Zambia National Development Plan
QOL	Quality Of Life
ZSA	Zambia Statistics Agency
IFAD	The International Fund for Agricultural Development
MoESVTEE	Ministry of Education Science Vocational Training and Early Education

USE OF TERMS, NAMES, QUOTATIONS AND EMPHASIS

1. Terms

(i). When talking about my research site,

- Community refers to Chabwera Village
- Community members refer to all individuals living in my research site

2. Names

For reasons of anonymity, all names of people and places directly involved in the study are pseudonyms.

3. Quotations and Emphasis

In this thesis, I show quotations in the following ways:

- Italics: For extracts from my field notes
- ‘Single quotation marks’: For quotation within another quotation, making it as a spotlight or contested words
- “Double quotation marks”: For short direct quotes from literature
- Indenting: For long direct quotations from literature as well as from my field notes
- Three dots ... indicate that some words are omitted

4. Other Conventions

Borrowed and vernacular words, except proper nouns are italicised
Aptos font is used for all text with 1.5 spacing.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0. Introduction

As part of a team on a women's literacy funded programme in rural Zambia, I was impressed with how our team implemented the project. In the year 2019, our charity organisation secured funding for a pilot project on women's literacy. We conducted it under the banner of *'Empowering women through reading and writing'*. From an organisation point of view, the project outline and indicators were in tandem with each other and meeting our funder's expectations. On the contrast, a deeper interrogation of these indicators drawn from my policy expertise in educational policy, I felt there was a disconnect between the project goals and participants expectations. I wondered if the kind of literacy we were implementing was making any real significant impact on women's improved livelihoods. The Zambian Government's approach towards improving livelihood of the wider population has been largely in relation to women's access to health services (reproductive health), education (increase literacy rates) and employment (socio-economic growth), which are identified as impeding factors to women's wellbeing (Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017). In this thesis, I give a broader definition of livelihood expounded in both Chapter Two and Three which contrasts with the government's economic-orientated welfare livelihood.

Literacy programmes in Zambia run yearly, supplementing government's efforts within its defined livelihood framework. Despite all these efforts, the status quo for rural people, mainly women, has remained unchanged. For example, rural poverty remained significantly high at 76.6 per cent in rural areas (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022b). During my project engagement with the local community, people took part in these programmes with different expectations. In my observation drawn from my personal encounter with the local people, only a fraction tried to embed the practices in real life context.

Hence, my doctoral research was partly motivated from this personal experience, to explore women's livelihoods, in relation to literacy and learning practices. I wanted to understand what goes on with rural women; how they construct their livelihoods; and

how this is linked to their development and ‘wellbeing’¹. In my thesis, I have focused on relational wellbeing (White, 2010) which I discuss in Chapter Three. Particularly, I explore local understanding of wellbeing and what women in this community considered as valuable for their livelihoods. In the wider context of women’s livelihoods, I have chosen to look at literacy and learning through a social practice approach —analysing their practices through the lens of Capabilities Approach discussed in Chapter Three. In so doing, I do not just look at literacy and learning as skills acquired, but how they are embedded as social practices and influenced by livelihood activities.

My second desire was to conduct an ethnographic study into rural women’s livelihoods, given the personal observations I made during my role as a development worker. My interest was to look at the forms of injustice that women in this local community encountered. Hence, my key research question introduced in Chapter Three and Four is: *“How do rural women’s livelihood activities influence literacy and learning in contributing to their capabilities, gender justice and wellbeing?”* To explore this question, I recruited women participants in one village site in Zambia (see Chapter Four). I made the conceptual and methodological decision in what I wanted to observe as women engaged in their everyday livelihoods; how concepts such as wellbeing, gender justice, *ubuntu* and empowerment manifested within interactions of their learning and literacy practices.

Most literacy programmes which I discuss in Chapter Two reflect government’s mainstream adult literacy policies that depict ‘illiterate’ adults as lacking formal technical skills and less capable contributors to society (MoESVTEE, 2015). The bulk of research and literature on adult literacy in Zambia continues to look at numerical parity to ascertain the effectiveness of these programmes and policies. By contrast, my study attempts to problematise literacy and learning differently. I try to explore the meanings, social relations, identities and power embedded in these livelihood practices through lived experiences of women. These are pertinent issues that are often not discussed or barely captured when evaluating these programmes, yet worth interrogating to

¹quality of life that people would want for themselves (Robeyns, 2017, p. 126). I am aware of the term’s constructed meaning in different contexts. See my discussion in Chapter Three and Eight.

understand what else I could learn from these social practices. For instance, how these practices contribute to women's wellbeing.

Throughout my discussion, I lean towards women's empowerment², which remains a central issue in my thesis. The concept of empowerment has not achieved consensus among scholars subscribing to either the conservative model or radical perspective of what would be an 'empowered' woman (Longwe, 1998). The latter questions whether this is possible in a deeply unequal society entrenched in patriarchy like Zambia. Longwe (1998) cited how most of the women's empowerment programmes such as literacy or schooling in their existing framework perpetuated the unequal gender norm by privileging the 'naturalness' of male-domination. For my reference, I have adopted Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment which comprises resources, agency and achievement, discussed extensively in Chapter Three and Eight. This conceptualisation allows me to interrogate local women's understanding of empowerment in relation to their livelihoods. I have framed my discussion of different concepts and themes from the two theoretical approaches and link them to Sustainable Development Goals 4 (quality education) and 5 (gender equality) which I find relevant to what my thesis directly seeks to address in relation to women's wellbeing.

In exploring women's livelihoods, the study relies on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, drawing key concepts for a critical analysis and nuanced discussion.

1.1. Journey into The Research Topic

Upon completion of my master's programme in Young People, Social Inclusion and Change in the UK, in 2016, which broadly covered courses around education policies and inclusion, I returned home and started volunteering with a local organisation while teaching at the same time. I have always been passionate about providing quality

² the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability (Kabear, 1999, p. 437). Women participants in this community live in a patriarchal society and often must navigate complex power dynamics. The ability for women to voice concerns and to exercise choice in ways that challenge patriarchal power in this study was looked at in the context of their social relations (see discussion in Chapters Three, Five and Seven).

education and equitable access to the most vulnerable communities, particularly in rural Zambia. Having spent a significant chunk of my childhood in rural areas where my father taught as a teacher, I saw myself as a success story of what quality education could do. During my childhood years, I learnt with fellow children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who walked more than 6 kilometres every day to attend school. Girls in particular dropped out of school along the way and only a few of my Grade 1 peers completed high school. Despite recent gains at Grade 1 enrollment by annual increase of 1.5 per cent against the population growth of 2.8 annually, a significant proportion of the population still remains outside of school system, a development that worries policy makers (Ministry Of Education, 2022).

With my UK postgraduate qualification, I developed a more critical awareness of the many education programmes and policies that were being implemented in public schools. For example, I was privileged during my teaching years to participate in the teaching of adult learners who re-enrolled under Alternative Distance Learning (ADL) at my former school between 2011 and 2018. This programme was launched under the Directorate Of Distance Education in the Ministry of Education complemented by open-learning programmes. Through the ADL programme, I witnessed adult learners enrolling in lower secondary (Grade 8 and 9) or upper secondary (Grade 10) provided one had either a Grade 7 or Grade 9 certificate to get enrolled. The Ministry of Education provided this route for adult learners' progression to primary and secondary education using these modes for those who attended school or were early primary school dropouts (Ministry Of Education, 2022). Some learners went on to complete Grade 12 and pursued different career pathways such as teaching and nursing while others pursued opportunities in the informal sector (farming, entrepreneurship, etc.).

The over enrollment in ADL classes signified high demand for adult literacy and education, yet it was underfunded and had limited capacity to enroll many learners. I recall working as a co-author on a paper entitled *"An Assessment of Participation Levels in Adult Education in Chipata District"*, which was presented during the Annual International Conference organised by the Education Research Association of Zambia (ERAZ) in 2023. In that research study, we noticed the gender disparities in the enrolment levels of adult learners, in favour of female students. While this was a positive indicator of women

getting back to school, it was a poignant reminder that the majority of school dropouts were female. Seemingly, the high 'illiteracy' levels among women was still a pervasive problem in the country. At the time of fieldwork, the problem was more acute in rural areas, where ADL programmes were not provided. Many of my female relatives and friends in rural areas were early primary school dropouts and could neither read nor write. Experiencing this as an insider in the long chain of policy actors at the implementation level as a teacher, the desire to pursue doctoral research was even more compelling.

1.1.1. Encountering Women in a Literacy Class

During the launch of the Seventh National Development Plan, Zambia described 'Human Development' as "the expanding human freedoms to live long, actively participate in shaping equitable and sustainable development" (Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017, p. 90). I have discussed this concept in more detail in my next two chapters. This definition influenced many adult literacy programmes in the country to fit into the policy framework. My teaching experience and personal involvement in an adult literacy project enriched my awareness of the centrality of adult literacy in human development. When I got the opportunity to work with a local charity organisation in 2017, we later embarked on a project focusing on literacy and women's empowerment in rural areas of Eastern Province.

I became fully engaged with the organisation's activities, performing the role of project coordinator. Our project was called the '*Tiphunzitsane Project*,' a literacy programme for women and we targeted those above the age of 15. The project involved training women in reading, writing and arithmetic skills. It was open to all women interested in rekindling their skills. It targeted those who dropped out or never attended school before. I coordinated the programme's team, which comprised staff from our organisation and local teachers at one community school designated as a training centre. My role involved working closely with our volunteer teachers and the participants to meet our goals. I would meet them on the first and last working day of the week to monitor progress. Our organisation provided teaching materials on literacy and numeracy. We trained our field staff on what to teach women and how to record performance indicators. I would always find time to interact with participants and observe some class sessions during my field

visit. Outside of classroom interactions and sometimes before the commencement of class sessions, I often took some lighter moments with participants through informal chats to learn more about their personal experiences and aspirations. It was quite interesting to hear the many shared stories about how some made personal choices to join the reading class based on leadership roles they held at church or local cooperatives. These included taking readings or minutes during meetings. I was surprised that some even asked if the training would enable them to progress to higher grades so that they could sit for national exams, with the prospect of getting recognition certificates.

Most of these things were not captured in our performance indicators. These indicators only quantified enrolment, attendance in classes and performance in the reading and writing test at the end of the pilot project, qualifying those with such acquired skills as literate. This adult literacy teaching approach by key providers reinforced a deficit-model³, and in turn, was internalised by adult participants. The group was characterised by wider aspirations although their levels of literacy varied significantly. For those who came to the learning space with existing reading and writing skills, the ongoing literacy class did not match their expectations. They were only there as part of the group, helping others with reading and showcasing their literacy skills. The various responses and expectations reminded me of what women do with literacy —the disconnect that exist between what we tried to achieve as an organisation and the individual expectations of participants on the other hand. This disconnect sometimes creates tensions between local communities and providers.

Hence, my insider roles as a teacher under the ADL programme at our school, and as NGO project coordinator, played a significant role towards shaping my proposed thesis. I developed a balanced understanding of literacy policy in theory as well as in practice, the complexities of policy and planning, and of the conflict of interests between different stakeholders. As a project coordinator, I also found myself questioning the suitability of

³ Literacy skills acquisition - 'learn first and practice' (Rogers, 2005, p. 236). This is a deeply grounded approach within the local education system which government has identified as a panacea to people's improved quality of life. (see my discussion of this conceptualisation in Chapter Two and Three).

approaches to the interventions we were trying to implement, but that did not meet other participants' expectations, eventually leading some to drop out.

Our understanding of development was about fitting into the developmental framework of government which was pushed towards addressing key Sustainable Development Goals (1) poverty eradication and (2) hunger as its top priority (Ministry Of Commerce and Trade Industry, 2006; Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017). In our case, the programmes that we implemented endeavoured to fight illiteracy and improve women's wellbeing through the same key SDGs, but also included those on good health and wellbeing (3) and gender inequality (5). Hence, our project design was a blueprint of what was envisioned in Zambia's National Development Plan (Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022). The success of the project was largely evaluated by statistical data, ignoring the important life stories of participants. This personal encounter marked the turning point and a trigger towards a pursuit of research study around women's literacy and learning (SDG4) that captures a deeper understanding of women's experiences and aspirations beyond mere human capital approach (instrumental benefits) or rights-based models of empowerment. It explores broader social relations in the context of gender equality (SDG5).

My encounter with the Capabilities Approach meant that my understanding of adult literacy and learning in development context considered a broader notion of human capabilities. Hence, in Chapter Three, I look at the discourses around the human development and capability framework as promulgated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011).

1.1.2. Literacy Policy Shaping My Research

My doctoral studies allowed me to have broader access to literature on literacy and other development theories. These scholarly engagements eventually refined my research ideas. For example, over the years, the deficit approach to literacy has dominated how the government in Zambia frames the policy curriculum on adult literacy and learning programmes (Ministry Of General Education, 2013; MoESVTEE, 2015). Sichula (2020) has

criticised how government's campaign for financing of youth and adult learning for the acquisition of functional literacy, an approach that inherently reinforces the same deficit model has not been successful, and why there is need to recognise other forms of literacies which I have discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.2. The current deficit model focuses on skills acquisition to adult learners to effectively contribute to socio-economic development of the country. Commentators on adult literacy on the other hand argue that focus should be about creating platforms for asking different questions that allow marginalised voices in policy discourses to express their viewpoints (see Robinson-Pant, 2004). The Zambian government's goal through functional literacy is to eliminate school illiteracy by 2030 (Ministry Of Commerce and Trade Industry, 2006; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022a).

There is generally a dearth of literature evidence around adult literacy and learning in Zambia in relation to women's livelihoods and wellbeing. Hence, adopting literacy as a social practice for this thesis study is an interesting undertaking in the Zambian context. I look at the wider context of how literacy is embedded within women's livelihoods (Street, 1984; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007). In theorising literacy as a social practice, I capture other key concepts of literacy as encapsulated in different literacy models.

Beyond the theoretical assumptions about literacy are some critical questions that I raise in Chapter Four through the lens of the Capabilities Approach—to look at literacy and learning not only from its instrumental gains, but also to other non-extrinsic values; how these contribute to our understanding of capabilities and gender justice⁴ in women's everyday social practices. In Chapter Three under Section 3.9, I explore Fraser's conceptualisation of justice in more detail by looking at the three dimensions of justice: 'recognition', 'redistribution' and 'participation'.

Literacy and learning are always entangled in the notion of development, with the capability's conceptualisation of development and wellbeing equally expanding my understanding of development. The approach depicts development as a dynamic process where individually valued freedoms are central in assessing what constitutes a

⁴ "parity of participation" (Fraser, 2008, p. 16). I have highlighted in the next chapter, the skewed focus by government and other aid agencies on achieving redistributive justice based on accessibility to opportunities, and why I also explore justice through social relations discussed in Chapter Three.

good life, that is, people's functionings and capabilities, discussed in Chapter Three (see Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Conversely, rather than assuming that people are illiterate and need to be taught literacy skills, understanding literacy as a social practice is to ask the question "*What do people currently do with literacy in their everyday lives?*" This notion is what is advanced by scholars promoting the view of literacy as a social practice (see Street, 2001b; Rogers and Street, 2012). Within this view, adult women are active participants in development and the kinds of capabilities they develop are associated with specific literacies and forms of learning strategies. I have discussed capabilities as understood in its conceptual language in Chapter Three —what rural women are 'able to do and to be', as they embed literacies and learning practices in their everyday livelihoods.

The ethnographic study approach, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Four, responds to my research questions around women's livelihoods and wellbeing. Grounded in this research design, I recast the focus of the study on literacy beyond numerical parity, to critically examine other dimensions of livelihoods in the context of social relations. Overall, my research intends to expand the debate around rural women's livelihoods and empowerment and give new insights into the concept of literacy, learning and *ubuntu* in development discourses.

1.2. Exploring the Gap Between Women's Literacy and Development

My personal encounters with women who shared aspirations that were outside the project's scope, was an eye-opener to me. Most importantly, I came to see how polarised the concept of development can become with different understandings and appreciation of the word to different people and communities. What wellbeing for example meant to the local community. To some of our participants, learning to read was ultimately pursued for leadership roles in their communities, while as providers, our goal was simply focused on the assumption that the acquisition of this skill would lead to individual wellbeing and effective participation in national development. These definitions are usually implicated in power relations among different actors, and whose interpretation override others.

Current data on literacy trend shows that literacy programmes rarely reach the scale required to have a visible impact at the population level (UNESCO, 2024). In the last two decades, the illiteracy rates have been consistently high around 18 per cent globally for adult population with more than 60 per cent women (UNESCO, 2005, 2007b). Despite gains through policies and programmes implemented by countries as observed (UNESCO, 2022), this has been reversed by rapid population increase at the same time. The global statistics about illiteracy depict literacy as a binary (illiterate vs literate) or deficit-model, and framed as a ‘quantitative increase’ (UNESCO, 2005, p. 200). However, this is changing with the emergence of the New Literacy Studies approach which I discuss in Chapter Three. The more popularised autonomous model, a depiction of a deficit-approach claims that many participants relapse into illiteracy due to a lack of practice (UNESCO, 2020b). On the contrast, I have wondered how women perceived as illiterate manage to navigate around literacy-mediated tasks, even before being introduced to the training programmes. To respond to some of these questions, my adoption of the New Literacy Studies approach in Chapter Three is a shift from the long-standing view of literacy as a code-based autonomous model or rather skills-based approach (Street, 1984, 1995) to an ideological one. The two different models are widely discussed in Chapter Three.

By pursuing the ideological model, I depart from the autonomous model to measuring literacy and development, to a more documentary approach of analysing how women are “taking hold” of literacies in their lives (see Kulick and Stroud, 1993). In the next chapter, I will be explaining how the autonomous model has influenced Zambia’s current policy direction on adult literacy and learning. Dominant local studies and policy discourses in Zambia lean towards the autonomous model. For example, in a recent comparison study on women's empowerment involving the Norwegian and Chinese-supported agricultural intervention programmes (Nyanga *et al.*, 2020), quantitative methods of analysis are used to explore inequalities in the context of women’s empowerment. The study highlights the gender disparities in the frame of school text-based literacy between men and women, on a scale of the school grading system (1,2,3..) and the ability to read and write, shaping participation in different roles. Conversely, the same study acknowledges that regardless of their literate status, women went on to sign contract farming forms by

themselves in the Chinese Agricultural Support project intervention largely because they were typically already experienced in cotton production, working on their male relatives' cotton fields. The study further states that the company was more comfortable working with women based on this learned farming skill, experience and compliance with the contractual obligations of the loan (Ibid., p. 6). In other words, it was the women's rich experiences in crop management and agricultural literacies that enabled them to navigate some literate-mediated tasks in farming activities.

This project initiative highlights the debate of women's literacy and learning outside of the school system which has influenced my framing of the key research question I raise in my Methodology Chapter.

1.3. Developing a New Research Framework: Literacy and Development

My conceptual framework is an interface between women's literacy as social practice and development as conceptualised in the capability lenses and the African *ubuntu*. The framework leans on two key approaches to unravel women's social practices, but I have co-opted the African *ubuntu* philosophy to reflect local conceptions and experiences of women's livelihoods and wellbeing which I discuss in Section 3.7. in Chapter Three. My interest in these two key theoretical approaches is to have a more nuanced interrogation of literacy and development in a broader context. I look at literacy and development through different dimensions of women's empowerment. For example, I capture social relations and gender justice, participation, power and agency in discussing women's literacy and learning and their development of capabilities.

Women in the global South were often constructed as part of a homogenous, powerless group that is passive and victims of development (Mohanty, 1991). The idea of development largely depicted the Western narrative as evidenced by global inequality and cultural dominance (Mosse, 2004), but the notions are being challenged with more Global South literature (Longwe, 2000; Gebre *et al.*, 2009; Openjuru *et al.*, 2016; Nyanga *et al.*, 2020; Cummings *et al.*, 2023). Using ethnography as my research methodology, I interrogate these assumptions. Within my empirical data, I discuss women's use of

agency in their social practices as active participants and taking a leading role in the development agenda.

My interest in this study includes exploring the parallels of development so as to understand what perhaps works for rural communities in Zambia. The conceptual framework developed explores new insights into how women's livelihoods connect with literacy and learning practices to inform policy and programmes. The methodological approach is inspired by this framework, and allows me to get into the case study site discussed in Chapter Four.

1.4. Conclusion and Thesis Outline

In this chapter, I have given an account of the journey that led me to and shaped my doctoral research. The empirical heart of the research is an ethnographic study of rural women's livelihoods and how these influence their social practices through literacy and learning. The study has also been shaped by my multiple identities as a student, teacher, researcher and development worker, generating different experiences that I have drawn on to craft this exploration of women's literacy and learning: I have surveyed the field from different mountain tops. These different perspectives have also generated the critical questions the thesis poses. I question the underlying policy assumptions around adult literacy and learning that frame non-literate women as passive recipients in development and consolidate the deficit-approach (see Street, 2001, Rogers, 2004, 2014).

My key research question introduced in the first Chapter is to signal the direction of my research and foregrounds the conceptual and methodological frameworks I adopt to interrogate social practices of literacy and learning in women's livelihoods within the African rural context. I have signalled the importance of New Literacy Studies in this research for exploring contemporary understanding of these social practices. The capabilities lens (Nussbaum, 2000a; Sen, 2001) is used to interrogate literacies in different social domains within the rural settings; how these could contribute to my understanding of capabilities through social practices that influence rural women's

livelihoods and wellbeing. To highlight the shortfalls in adult literacy policy in Zambia, I seek to demonstrate the need for more qualitative research of adult literacy that moves away from evaluative to exploring social practices of participants. I have sought to develop a conceptual framework that promotes a dialogue on how women's literacy and development can be understood in a more nuanced way, building on existing literature.

Thesis Structure

Chapter Two provides a historical overview of Zambia in relation to women's livelihoods and wellbeing. Here, my discussion illuminates the complexities of livelihoods that rural women have to navigate. Particularly, I look at empowerment in relation to access to livelihood resources that include human, produced, social, cultural and natural. The social and cultural resources are not widely discussed within institutional policies and laws that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. I explore human resources in relation to the adult literacy and the policy environment for women's empowerment in Zambia. The chapter highlights debate around adult literacy, gender and women in development that have dominated discussions between policymakers and researchers. I explore the history of adult literacy, but also link this to gender relations in the context of existing gender equality driven policies and constraints women experience—the historical context of the country via a rural community as my specific study site.

In Chapter Three, I highlight wider conceptual debates around literacy, learning and development. I introduce key theories and concepts that have inspired the development of my conceptual framework. I provide critical accounts of a few selected concepts (social literacy practice, learning, Capabilities Approach, gender justice and *ubuntu*, drawn from different theories relevant to the study. In this chapter, I raise key issues around my framework to understanding women's livelihoods and development, pointing out the limitations of different concepts and theories and the tensions of bringing them together. These first three chapters aim to delineate the extensive contextual and conceptual landscape that has shaped the contours of this research.

Chapter Four is centred on ethnography as my methodological framework, which I used to conduct my research. In this chapter, I introduce key research questions that helped

me to collect the data and pick out themes for analysis. The chapter is as much about how I conduct my research as it is about working the conceptual framework within the confines of the methodology. My research is not only defined by the kinds of questions I ask but also how I seek answers. This justified my methodological approach. I also share my personal reflections on my positionality and experience of doing ethnography among people that I share a lot in common.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven draw largely from the data collected and analysed. Chapter Five looks at women's conceptualisation of literacy and what counts as literacy in their livelihoods. I explore meanings, literacy practices, identities, picking out key themes and what these mean in the context of capabilities and wellbeing. I explore literacy practices through various social domains (Barton, 2007) and demonstrate how women take hold of their literacies.

Chapter Six considers learning as social practice and explores different forms of knowledge acquisition and transfer. This includes the intergenerational indigenous knowledges and informal learning. At the centre of this chapter is looking at how access to livelihood assets shape learning and contribute to women's capabilities and empowerment.

Chapter Seven pulls out key themes discussed in Chapter Five and Six, such as social relations and gender; highlighting how this impact women's wellbeing and empowerment. It focuses on the patriarchy which manifests in different institutional structures at household, community, market and State. My data chapters reflect on my fieldwork observations, and I engage with limited literature and concepts that allow me to interact more fully with my empirical data for analysis.

Chapter Eight is where I pull out cross-cutting themes from the data chapters for a nuanced discussion and my key takeaways for policy consideration. Chapter Nine is the conclusion chapter where I highlight key issues discussed in all other chapters. I also share the implications of the overall study findings to policy and practice, contribution to the research community and recommendations for action.

Chapter Two: Context and Background

2.0. Introduction

This chapter gives a historical context of literacy and learning in relation to gender and women's empowerment in Zambia. I will be looking at the general policies around improving livelihoods, but also relating it to adult literacy and learning in the historical context of how these have been implemented to improve women's agency and participation in developmental activities. I will be making regular references to key concepts such as livelihoods, literacy, wellbeing and empowerment throughout my discussion, as key issues intertwined in the broader policies shaping the country's development agenda. The key issues and missing gaps identified in this chapter ultimately shape the structure of my follow-up chapters.

2.1. Livelihoods and Human Development Policies in Zambia: An

Overview

In this section, I explore government's policies towards people's wellbeing in relation to their livelihoods. This is to give a contextual understanding of how policies have shaped human development discourse and the status quo of rural women's livelihoods. In Zambia, the current Eighth National Development Plan is anchored on "socio-economic transformation for improved livelihoods" (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022a, p. 3). It thrives on the notion that an improved economy will lead to improved livelihoods. However, livelihoods particularly for rural women are more diversified and encompass many things which go beyond the universal metrics applied for ascertaining people's improved living standards than what government has relied on. For example, these may include social and gender relations wellbeing, as I demonstrate throughout my empirical Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

A livelihood is simply a means of gaining a living (Chambers and Conway, 1992, p. 6), but tends to be related to the sustainability of livelihoods. Chambers and Conway (*ibid.*) argue that to achieve sustainable livelihoods, people must utilise capabilities, assets

and activities required for a means of living (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1998). According to Chambers and Conway (1992), rural livelihoods comprise several activities that help people construct and contrive a living.

In my thesis, I adopt livelihood as conceptualised (Bebbington, 1999) which is broader and discussed extensively in Chapter Three, to understand rural women's aspirations. Human Development (HD) has largely reflected the conceptual works of Sen's (1985) definition of wellbeing, agency and freedom and adopted as a universal definition. However, this has created a debate among scholars and policymakers as to the effectiveness (or usefulness) of relying on a universal definition for human development.

In Zambia, government has adopted the UNDP definition of Human Development that focuses on a long and healthy life, with access to knowledge and a decent standard of living (see United Nations Development Programme, 2020, p.6). Successive governments have thus adopted this UNDP definition of Human Development indicators such as healthy life and education. For example, the country's leading policy document has defined Human Development as "...the expansion of human freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives and to actively participate in shaping equitable and sustainable development" (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, p. 90). Consequently, this conceptualisation of Human Development has led to increased investment in human capital to enhance people's capacities in self-employment and wage employment that would contribute to the socio-economic growth of the country (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022a). This position is also in line with Vision Zambia 2030, initially launched in 2006 and since operationalised into the country's national development plan framework, beginning with the Fifth National Development Plan to the current Eighth National Development Plan (see Ministry Of Commerce and Trade Industry, 2006; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022a).

The Vision Zambia 2030 policy framework was adopted to build a middle-income industrial nation that provides opportunities for improving the wellbeing of all people by 2030 (Ministry Of Commerce and Trade Industry, 2006). In the process, this main policy framework has constantly been revised to align itself with some of the main global

agenda goals, such as the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and 2030 SDGs as observed (see Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2011, 2017, 2022a). Therefore, the UNDP conceptualisation of Human Development has had a broader influence in the other sectors such as education where policies around adult literacy are framed to equip adults with skills to contribute to socio-economic development of the country and achieve the 2030 SDGs.

2.1.1. Women's Livelihoods and Wellbeing: Policy Discourses in Zambia

According to the Human Development Index (HDI) ⁵ constructed around people's freedoms to live the lives they aspire to lead, Zambia has made steady progress in the last three decades, moving from 0.421 in 1990 to 0.584 by 2019, but more needs to be done (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The HDI score depicts improvement when moving closer to one and worsens when drifting further away or closer to zero. The country still grapples with inequality in many gender-related categories. The recent Gender Development Index (GDI) ⁶ shows Zambia falls within the medium human development category with a score of 0.958 (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). The closer the ratio is to 1, the smaller the gap between women and men. In this case, the GDI for Zambia is not bad, earning its medium categorisation. I will be looking at some reform policies adopted that could have contributed to achieving these metrics later in this chapter. However, the gender inequality distribution was at 31.3 per cent mostly linked to the Gender Inequality Index (GII) ⁷ and Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) ⁸ at 47.9 per cent, exposing persistent gender inequality gaps across different domains of life (see United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

Conversely, Zambia's poverty level is categorised more as absolute ⁹ than relative poverty and is widespread in rural areas (Weeks *et al.*, 2007): the country's poverty rate stands at an estimated 54.4 per cent, (JRC Technical Report, 2017; Ministry Of Finance and

⁵ A metric for quality of life based on income, education and health

⁶ Measure disparities by gender

⁷ measure of gender inequality using three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market.

⁸ multiple deprivations that people in developing countries face in their health, education and standard of living (United Nations Development Programme, 2020a)

⁹ Based on fixed expenditure or consumption level to meet standard of living as opposed to individual/group wealth relative to that of others in the group (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022, p. 2)

National Planning, 2017; Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022a). The country still grapples with rural poverty and hunger: Zambia was recently classified as one of the most food insecure, at 102 out of 113 countries, according to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), with a GFSI score of 33.3 (JRC Technical Report, 2017).

While rural poverty was estimated at 78.8 per cent compared to 60 per cent in urban areas, by 2022, it was reported that 77 out of every 100 male headed rural households and 83 out of every 100 female-headed rural households were living in poverty (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022b). Additionally, there are claims that male-headed households earned more than double the gross income compared to female-headed households (FHH), hence emphasising that 10 per cent more resources were needed to eliminate poverty for female-headed households (Indaba Agricultural Research Policy Institute, 2015, 2019). Besides female-headed households, other vulnerable groups include child-headed households, persons with disabilities, the chronically ill and older adults at 65 years and above (Indaba Agricultural Research Policy Institute, 2015; Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022a).

Poverty is exacerbated by high unemployment levels. For example, there has been a spiral of unemployment in the country that worsened from 7.8 per cent in 2012 and almost doubling to 12.5 per cent by 2021 (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022b). Employment is mostly in the informal sector, largely self-employment, with rural areas having a comparatively higher percentage, at 86.1 compared to 66.6 per cent in urban areas by the turn of 2021 (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022b). Agriculture has consistently remained the second largest contributor of GDP after mining even during the post-COVID-19 (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022b). Currently, the agricultural sector absorbs about 67 per cent of the labour force and remains the main source of income for rural communities, while approximately 80 per cent of the food producers are women (Ministry Of Agriculture, 2011; Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, 2016). Agriculture as an informal sector is also the most underpaid in the country, with women having less control of the produce. The data shows that in male-headed households, men dominate decision making on management of fields countrywide at 87.9 per cent against 12.1 per cent. It is only in female-headed households that women had an upper hand, but this could also

be down to farming being an unattractive venture for men (see Indaba Agricultural Research Policy Institute, 2019). The implication of this is that farming becomes the only limited option for many women in rural areas to secure a livelihood and support their families, but also a power contest on who controls the cash flow from the sale of farm produce. This is demonstrated in Chapter Seven. The FHHs differential access to productive resources often limits their access to livelihood strategies that are more lucrative or impede their capacity to overcome the difficult circumstances which they find themselves (Dolan, 2005).

It is argued that women and men are affected differently by economic changes and development, hence the need for an active policy that seeks to narrow the gender gap (Momsen, 2009). Women's involvement in agriculture as an informal sector gives insight into the women's agenda as a central focus by government in the recent past. For instance, the formulation of policies and programmes that are more gendered, which I will soon be looking at, are driven by the anticipated wider benefits of an empowered woman to the nation.

Gender equality focuses on the attainment of knowledge and a decent standard of living for all, as envisioned in the National Development Plan (Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017a; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022b). As signalled in Chapter One, I also draw inspiration from the gender and development commentators where gender issues have become more visible within a wide range of policy-making institutions (see Moser, 1993; Razavi, 1997; Longwe, 1998; Momsen, 2009). However, before unpacking the complexities of gender relations in Zambia, I start with the broader context of gender discourses.

2.2. Gender and Development

Razavi (1997) observed that global North and South governments had taken steps to include gender considerations in their national development and strategic economic policies, although the marginalisation of gender has been a longstanding challenge for policy change advocates. Momsen (2009, p. 21) argued that "different places and societies embrace different practices, hence the need to acknowledge this heterogeneity

within a certain global homogeneity of gender roles, being aware of the different voices and giving them agency”. The poverty that women experience, for example, is mediated through unequal gender relations and “local patriarchies” that shape allocative behaviour and constrain women’s access to their own labour power (see Kabeer, 1994, 2003).

The many emerging challenges in Zambia, besides poverty and hunger as earlier mentioned, have added new dimensions to gender as a central issue of discussion. I gave an example in Chapter One of the organisation I worked for and how we tried to capture women’s literacy as a crucial gender aspect. The project was taking place amidst ongoing policy debates among local researchers that criticised some policies on adult literacy programmes aimed at empowering women (see Longwe, 1997, 1998, 2000; Sichula and Genis, 2019; Sichula, 2020). In this empowerment project, we strategically opted to work with women with the view of improving their wellbeing. Given the multiplicity of interpretations influenced by place and cultural variations, Human Development and the meaning of empowerment remain a contested subject in different countries and regions. The debate becomes even more protracted when it incorporates the concept of Quality Of Life (QOL), regarded as complex and multifaceted (Haas, 1999). As I develop my discussion on women in development, I unpack their struggles as they navigate different spaces of livelihood practices through literacy and learning.

2.2.1. Gender and The Post-Colonial Legacy

Gender relations in Zambia could be better understood from the historical context that includes its post-colonial legacy. Evans (2015) argues that gender relations in Zambia reflect broader historical patterns emanating from imported Christian ideologies and colonial-capitalist concerns, especially in urban settings. For a long time, the division of labour in the local context was streamlined according to gender, with women involved in food production and domestic chores such as cooking, mudding floors, and collecting firewood. In contrast, men were involved in tree-cutting, hunting, and building huts and granaries (Richards, 1939). The last decades of the nineteenth century, not only resulted in a geographical division of labour in which African men were recruited into wage labour on farms and in mines, it confined African women in rural areas to working the fields and

taking care of children and the old (Hansen, 1990; Mamdani, 1992). Hence, the viability of village life depended overwhelmingly on women's work, which also subsidised migrant workers' substandard wages without costing the administration (Cliffe, 1978).

Gender, social class and race played a huge role in shaping experiences of women in Zambia during both the colonial and post-colonial model. For example, gender biases continue to reflect the aftermath of historical patterns across much of Zambia, where women and men regard the home as women's place and childcare and household tasks as their most important endeavours. Research evidence from a project that promoted participatory methods for women through the evaluation of an agricultural extension programme on the contrast, revealed male bias among the project leaders and difficulties dealing with gender issues (see Frischmuth 1998). In another study, some teachers and NGO gender facilitators showed scepticism of the gender content and were unwilling to endorse it (Evans, 2015). These revelations were in consonant with the study where local officials often dismissed women's contributions in public meetings (Parpart, 2003). While the topic of 'gender' was said to have become 'omnipresent' in the Zambian government and NGO discourses (Simpson, 2007, p. 185), this did not appear to have been sufficient for attitudinal change.

Over the past twenty-five years, this colonial model of male breadwinner and female housewife has weakened considerably. Other studies on women empowerment in Zambia have also reported positive trends towards women's inclusion in development. A study on women participation in development (Evans, 2015) revealed that women have also been making incursions into hitherto male-dominated occupations. For example, findings showed that 60 per cent of urban women and men both 'very strongly agreed' that women needed to have equal rights and receive the same treatment as men.

In rural Zambia, Frischmuth (1998) found that some sensitised women became more vocal in public meetings and were increasingly supported by men, while other women remained resistant to the egalitarian messages presented. This individual variation is also supported in Wendoh and Wallace's (2005) study, drawing on research from Zambia, Uganda, Gambia and Rwanda —"although discourses of equality are typically perceived as 'foreign' and 'deeply threatening', educated urban women responded positively to

concepts from the Beijing Conference... Those more able to embrace the ideas tended to be those with more economic options" (p.74).

Overall, successive governments in the past have relied much on the gender policy reforms to narrow the gender inequality gaps, but also on income and consumption as indicators of poverty eradication and women empowerment (Weeks *et al.*, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2017).

I will be demonstrating how the government has recently taken further steps to finance projects to empower women. In the next section, I present an account of developments that have shaped gender policies in Zambia.

2.2.3. Towards Gender-Inclusive Laws and Policy Reforms: Resource Access, Acquisition and Control

In this section, I explore how developments that paved way for women inclusion into national development, the law reforms and gender-oriented policies became key aspects that the government adopted to transform women's livelihoods in Zambia. It is worthwhile emphasising that with the attainment of independence came the sanctioning of the 1964 Constitution that contained an extensive Bill of Rights under which every person, regardless of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, was entitled to fundamental rights and freedoms (Government of Republic of Zambia, 1964). However, it is observed that while the same Constitution outlawed any provisions of a law that was seemingly discriminatory in its enforcement, this did not apply to customary law (Ndulo and Kent, 1996; Ministry Of Gender, 2021). This arguably created a base for much of the discrimination that women in Zambia have suffered over the years. For example, the land tenure system has continued to discriminate against women's land ownership (Ndulo and Kent, 1996; Ministry Of Gender, 2021).

Zambia's dual land tenure system consists of leasehold and customary tenure systems. The land held under leasehold tenure is governed by national legal statutes while land held under customary tenure depends on the customs, practices and norms of the chieftaincy in which the land is situated; claims on land-based resources are therefore made primarily using kinship linkages (Biru, 1998). Since time immemorial, many Bantu

chiefs have been the supreme rulers of customary land within their territories (Richards, 1939). The implications of this two-land tenure system for access, management and control of land resources are as follows. On customary land, the land is largely under traditional authorities, but men and women can access it by purchase or inheritance/allocation. Citizens and non-citizens of the country can access customary land under the Lands Act of 1996 (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 1996). Beyond navigating the customary land tenure system, women and men face different challenges in accessing land. This is because transfers through inheritance are governed by customary tenure systems, which differ based on each ethnic group/chiefdom or cultural practice.

Since precolonial history, local and kinship groups have been mainly determined by matrilineal descent or patrilineal ties (Richards, 1939; Ndulo and Kent, 1996). In the matrilineal-matrilocal system, land is passed on from uncle to nephew, or to state that land is inherited through the women. Hence, the male children inherit land from their uncles. However, a man can leave his village to stay at his wife's village and live as a '*mkomwene*'¹⁰ (son-in-law), working for his wife's family for several years as agreed by the wife's family. In the patrilineal-patrilocal system, land is passed from father to son. Daughters have secondary rights over family property, the assumption being that daughters will marry and access land through their husbands and that newly married couples reside in the husband's village (Richards, 1939; Kishindo, 2010). Therefore, a girl child can access the property as long as she chooses to remain with their family but cannot inherit land or property with her husband.

Whether a couple settles in the husband's village (virilocal), the wife's village (uxorilocal) or in a neutral village (neolocal), influences the basic pattern of inheritance in both matrilineal and patrilineal cultures. For men in matrilineal/matrilocal households, the most basic form of land tenure security is provided by stable marital relations and living as *mkomwene* in his spouse's village with secondary rights to property. Therefore, kinship ideology defines who has rights to customary land (Kishindo, 2010). Regardless of these

¹⁰ A man from another village who is married in another village. A marriage practice common among tribes in Eastern Province of Zambia.

traditional practices, male children who are sons/nephews have a primary right to family property in the context of kinship through patrilineal or matrilineal ties unlike their female counterparts such as daughters/nieces. Unfortunately, this is a pervasive problem for many women in Zambia and wider sub-Saharan Africa, who face severe discrimination in land and property ownership as perpetuated by social structures including patriarchy and paternalism. This reinforces their disempowered position within the household and community (Reddy and Moletsane, 2015). This results in poor women having few resources to invest in besides their labour in crop production, over which they have little control.

2.2.4. Gender-Inclusiveness and Equality: A Historical Context

Since independence, Zambia has steadily experienced some progress towards advancing women's empowerment through some gender-driven policies, but constraints around implementation remain. Progressive policies and law reforms have been introduced, as well as a commitment to some international charters where it is an affiliate to institutions and organisations such as the African Union, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), United Nations, Human Rights Commission, International Labour Organisation. For example, Zambia was part of the 1985 Third World Conference in Nairobi which saw the formation of a Forward-Looking Strategies (FLS) framework endorsed by 157 member states. This conference had a clear proposal, and actions set for the 2000 agenda, yet by the end of the 20th Century, few countries had integrated gender into their national development policy (Moser, 1993). Indeed, the lack of compliance by member countries has continued into the 21st Century.

Longwe (2000) noted that many providers in Zambia and African countries generally alluded to women's lack of education and literacy as an excuse for their exclusion from empowerment programmes. Longwe criticised this narrative for a lack of correlation with no research evidence backing these claims. It was not until 2000 that the Zambian government formulated a national gender policy framework to enact and ultimately enforce a law that would facilitate land allocation by the year 2010 (Government of Republic of Zambia, 2000). The government has, in the recent past, also ratified several

other international agreements including the Africa Union's (AU) Soleman Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) which was integrated into its Seventh National Development Plan (SNDP) 2017-2021, and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ministry Of Gender, 2021). Longwe (1997) noted how gender policies tended to diminish in influence within international development agencies because of the loose connection between policy formulation and implementation by the very institutions.

There have been numerous attempts in the past to equalise opportunities for women in Zambia. However, the Ministry Of Gender has continued to grapple with financial, institutional and technical challenges to effectively implement its gender policy outlined in the Seventh National Development Plan 2017-2021 (Ministry Of Gender, 2021). A notable challenge is where women face challenges accessing land under customary tenure, widely practiced in rural areas despite these legal and structural gains. Women can only access land or rent property if they reside with their parents, husbands or sons (Spichinger and Kabala, 2014). Calls to address this area of gender inequality were further reinforced by the government through its affirmative action to increase the land reservation for women to 50 per cent from 30 per cent of all land on offer, in line with the Revised 2016 SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. This was done in cognisance of the impediments being experienced under customary land tenure (see Government of Republic of Zambia, 2000, 2015, 2023; Ministry Of Gender, 2021). The National Gender Policy has also been reinforced to eradicate inequalities in women's access and control over land (Government of Republic of Zambia, 2000, 2015, 2023; Spichinger and Kabala, 2014).

Overall, the Government has demonstrated a commitment to gender equality through enacting these progressive laws, and the legislation of Gender Equity and Equality Act No. 22 of 2015 (see Government of Republic of Zambia, 2015).

2.2.5. Policy into Practice: The Role of Government and Stakeholders

Women’s empowerment in Zambia has been framed as their ability to control and benefit from resources, assets and income, as well as to have control over their own time (Ministry of Gender, 2021). For instance, the inception of the Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment and Livelihood (GEWEL) project, where 74,998 women in 51 districts were implemented. This is in addition to other projects such as the Livelihood and Empowerment Support Scheme and Social Protection Programmes, all targeting the empowerment of thousands of women (see Ibid.). All successive governments have also upheld the farming subsidy programme. By the 2020 and 2021 farming seasons, over 1.2 million peasant farmers are claimed to have benefited from the Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP) (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021). The private sector has also run programmes centred around rural livelihoods and empowerment, mostly targeting women. The table below shows a random sample of programmes that were being implemented in the rural areas of the province in 2022.

Rural-Based Empowerment Projects and Programmes

Department	Programme	Target Audience
Ministry Of Agric (Govt)	Farmer Input Support Prog. (FISH)	Co-operatives – Smallholder Farmers
Ministry Of Community Devpt. & Social Services	Support Women’s Livelihoods (SWL)	Women
COMACO (NGO) – Local	Wildlife Conservation & Organic Farming	Smallholder Farmers
SIFAZ (NGO) – Local	Sustainable Smallholder Farming	Co-operatives - Smallholder Farmers
Ministry Of Community Devpt. & Social Services	Adult Literacy – Functional Literacy	Men and Women
GIZ (NGO) -International	Scaling Up Nutrition	Women (Breastfeeding Mothers).
CTO (NGO) – Local	Women’s Literacy	Women

Table 1: Mapped out rural-based activities in Eastern Province – Zambia

The table above summarises the main activities that the government, in collaboration with the private sector, runs in the Eastern Province of Zambia. The goal is to involve women in livelihood empowerment programmes as much as possible. The government facilitates these programmes through organised groups such as co-operatives or clubs.

Communities are expected to form these groups where members join, which is part of the condition for access to these programmes (see Ministry Of Agriculture, 2021).

In the organisation I worked for, we trained 100 women in the reading class by the end of the project for 12 months on a locally designed model. We chose to focus on women because we believed that women needed more empowerment, and it was also within the government's policy guiding framework in prioritising women's empowerment over men. Our assumptions of running an adult literacy for women was fuelled by an optimistic belief that women's literacy would facilitate their active participation in national development and programme activities as envisioned (Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017). Regional reports also indicated that illiteracy was not only a problem affecting Zambia, but the wider sub-Saharan African countries, with an average illiteracy level of over 60 per cent of the adult population above the age of 15 who can neither read nor write (see UNESCO, 2020b, 2020a). Hence, we were steadfast in accomplishing this mission as stakeholders, which we identified as a form of women's empowerment that would equip them with the necessary skills to improve their wellbeing.

2.3. Development of Adult Education and Literacy

2.3.1. A Synopsis of the Historical Background

The policy environment on gender equality has also influenced adult literacy policies and programmes. In Zambia, adult literacy is mainly provided in the form of non-formal literacy classes. Since independence, government identified formal and non-formal training as gateways to human resource development.

The early education policy replicated that of the colonial system and early missionary traditions across all levels, focusing on elementary skills (Mwanakatwe, 1971). Under colonial rule, western ideas and technology replaced indigenous education centred on life-skills survival (Luchembe, 2012). Indigenous forms of education took place outside of school, at home in more organised settings or groups, usually under the guidance of acceptable instructors (Indabawa *et al.*, 2000). Hence, the arrival of white missionaries

and the colonial government led to the infiltration of Western ideas and technology into indigenous forms of education. This brought in a paradigm shift from indigenous education for life-skills survival to one that focused on converting Africans to Christianity (Mulenga, 2000b).

Additionally, the British established village schools focused on providing elementary instructions in the 3Rs (writing, reading and arithmetic/numeracy), which had little bearing on people's livelihoods (Snelson, 1990). International agencies – principally UNESCO and the World Bank – gradually replaced these colonial influences. The process began during the 1960 Addis Ababa Conference, which greatly influenced education policy formulation in Zambia (Ministry of Education, 2007). UNESCO advocated a Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy and Education For All (EFA) while the former was also framed as a human right by the international community (Kelly, 1999).

UNESCO's definition of literacy, however, has changed over time, adapting to the global agenda such as the 1990 declaration of Education For All (EFA), 2015 MDGs and 2030 SDGs. For instance, in its early definition, literacy was defined as "reading and writing in simple statements" (UNESCO, 1978, 2015). Numeracy was added to reading and writing for the group's effective functioning and community development (Lind and Johnston, 1990; UNESCO, 2015). In the year 2000, when UNESCO and other agencies organised a second EFA conference in Dakar, countries agreed among other things to take a new look at a number of key issues in literacy work, from definitions and measurement, the relationship between child and adult literacy, and new conceptualisations of literacy based on cultural variation (Wagner, 2000). In the post 2015 and Agenda 2030, the world analysed the literacy concept in relation to what worked and what did not for both MDGs and EFA. This definition implies that literacy underpins educational attainment, the absence of which equates with illiteracy.

With the current global framework around 2030 SDGs, literacy conceptualisation has also evolved to ensure that learners have the requisite knowledge and skills for sustainable development, while developing multiple competencies in other areas of life such as human rights, gender equality, civic participation (DVV International, 2016; UNESCO, 2024). However, the complexity of developing indicators for such

competencies has compelled UNESCO to revert to the traditional literacy monitoring mechanism that depicts the binary distinction of literate vs non-literate which I discuss in detail in the next chapter. Associated with this assumption for example is that illiterate individuals experience problems getting employment, poverty and display anti-social behaviour (Papen, 2006).

In Zambia, when basic literacy was evaluated in 1969, a person was considered literate if he or she had attained the equivalent of Grade 3. Another section of policy commentators criticised this approach because it was lower than Grade 5, a standard measure for the country (Luchembe, 2018). It is worth mentioning that the skill-based notion of literacy has since permeated policy formulation of teaching and learning approaches in Zambia's education system (see Ministry of Education, 1992, 2003, 2008). Literacy was perceived as a basic tool acquired through the school system to achieve the United Nation's EFA and MDGs by 2015 (Ministry Of Education, 2013). The emphasis is premised on the conviction of the literacy providers, particularly the Government of Zambia, that the acquisition of literacy skills will empower youth and adults to participate fully in national development (MoESVTEE, 2015). The skills-based notion makes the acquisition of reading and writing skills less visible and foregrounds the acquisition of knowledge and skills as the main aim of the literacy and learning programme.

Prior to this, there was still a need for more consensus on what counts as literacy. This led Zambian policy experts and government officials to agree on a definition of a literate person as " ... one with the ability to write, read and interpret symbols for use and application for effective functioning of the self, family, community and environment in which one resides," (Chali, 1998:9). The more recent definition by the Zambia National Curriculum Framework reinforces this popular view as it emphasises "ability to read and write" on one hand and "effective communication" on the other (Ministry Of Education, 2013, p. 1). Generally, the government has used school attendance and the grading system to determine an individual's level of literacy acquisition (Luchembe, 2012).

2.3.2. Adult Literacy Policy Discourses and Development

Arising from the skills-based conceptualisation of literacy, Zambia's post-colonial governments devised a practical alternative of using adult literacy and education (ALE) to teach citizens labour-based skills needed for productivity (Kelly, 1999; Mulenga, 2000b). Consequently, the period following independence experienced a surge in ALE programmes, with the post-colonial (UNIP) government launching a functional literacy programme called the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) in 1965, the Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme in 1975, and the National Literacy Campaign in 1990 (Mulenga, 2000b; Sichula, 2020).

Programmes designed to promote functional literacy have been used extensively since post-independence (see Kelly, 1999; Indabawa *et al.*, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2008b). Reflecting on women's participation in development in Zambia, launching the National Literacy Campaign in 1990 became the turning point for engaging more women in literacy, with different players coming on board (Luchembe, 2018). Many NGOs and churches were involved in providing literacy education to adults in the form of evening classes (Mulenga, 2000a). It was argued that women-only NGOs or oriented NGOs tended to offer more innovative approaches to improving the participation of girls and women in education and training, not offered by government institutions (Stromquist, 1994; Nicola, 1995).

However, recent studies show that adult education programmes in Zambia increasingly engage people in numerous literacy activities outside formal school systems (Mumba, 2020). Many of these organisations run adult literacy programmes in flexible, community-based settings, allowing adults to learn at their own pace and apply literacy skills directly to their daily lives although depicting a deficit approach. For instance, studies on adult literacy programmes conducted in Southern Province and other provinces of Zambia depict this type of literacy (Mkandawire and Tambulukani, 2017; Sichula and Genis, 2019; Kambikambi, Chelliah and Sudarsanam, 2025). Sometimes, such programmes have been challenged in the past for perpetuating the same disparities and biases for women that prevail in formal education (Leach, 1996). Longwe (1998) observed how local

schooling systems in patriarchal society merely promoted women’s subordination rather than real empowerment.

Developing trends in adult literacy provision in Zambia have since shifted the focus more towards pedagogical practices and purposes of teaching literacy as reflected in the main national development plan (Sichula and Genis, 2019; Sichula, 2020; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022b). This contrasts the more nuanced situated literacies or literacy as a social practice (Street, 2004; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007) which I discuss in the next chapter.

Mulenga (2000a) has branded adult literacy and education falling under the Ministry of Community Development as a ‘Cinderella’ department, functioning at the margins of public and ministry’s concerns; operating with minimal funds, and just within the perimeter fence of the ministry, but almost as far out of the mainstream of its activities.

Enrolment in Functional Literacy programme by Province, 2020.

Functional literacy programme, 2020				
Province	Number of Learners			Number of Literacy classes
	Total	Male	Female	
Total	23,280	18,047	5,233	1,487
Central	762	583	179	64
Copperbelt	2,264	1,853	411	117
Eastern	608	470	138	92
Luapula	3,804	3,013	791	195
Lusaka	1,447	1,189	258	128
Muchinga	3,406	2,726	680	183
Northern	4,126	3,178	948	255
North-Western	1,159	923	236	59
Southern	2,416	1,841	575	147
Western	3,288	2,271	1,017	247

Table 2: Source: Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) 2020, Annual Report

The table above gives highlights of how widely functional literacy programmes were administered to local communities; teaching them reading, writing and simple arithmetic skills courtesy of the Ministry of Community Development as the main provider. Overall, there are more males enrolled in the programmes compared to females, which gives insights into the power relations and decision making in households. Equally, it signifies a reminder that this form of literacy continues to dominate policy and implementation in

the country. Eastern Province where this study was carried out had the lowest number of those enrolled.

2.3.3. The State Of Adult Literacy and Education (ALE) in Zambia

Those accessing the ALE have used it as a springboard to get into formal education beyond upper primary (Ministry Of General Education, 2013). See Appendix 1 for reference. Adult literacy rates slightly increased from 66.0 per cent to 67.2 per cent between 1990 and 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2008b). The number had risen to 87.5 per cent of adult women above the age of 15 as being considered literate during the last survey conducted (World Bank, 2020). This figure is contested, however, as it only captures those people with functional literacy skills, having attained a certain level of education or the standard definition used by government departments (see Ministry of Education, 2008b; UNESCO, 2008, 2015).

The recent past has witnessed several literacy programmes run by the government departments, NGOs and public institutions such as the University Of Zambia through the extension studies which focus on imparting life-skills.

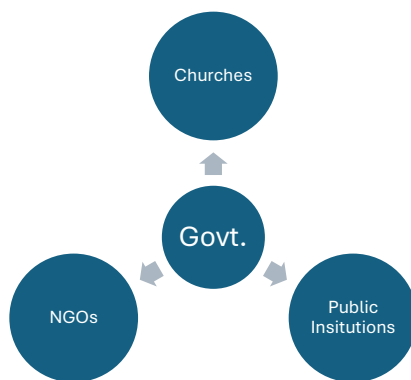


Figure 1: Key stakeholders of adult literacy providers in Zambia

The figure above shows key players involved in the offering of adult literacy to local communities. For instance, the University of Zambia through the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies has branches in all the 10 provinces. More of these programmes relate to national development concerns. Through its line ministries, the government has devised an adult literacy programme using the national curriculum, and

generating teaching materials for programme facilitators in English and local languages. NGOs must align their literacy programmes with what is in the mainstream, although education school inspectors rarely monitor them. For example, the women's reading and writing class we ran as an organisation adopted the standard curriculum to train the participants in literacy and numeracy (see Ministry Of General Education, 2013). We worked with volunteer teachers to implement this pilot project and did it autonomously without pressure from school inspectors. Most materials were privately funded, but aligned with the school curriculum, even though the classes were non-conventional and took place in the afternoon when the women finished on-farm activities.

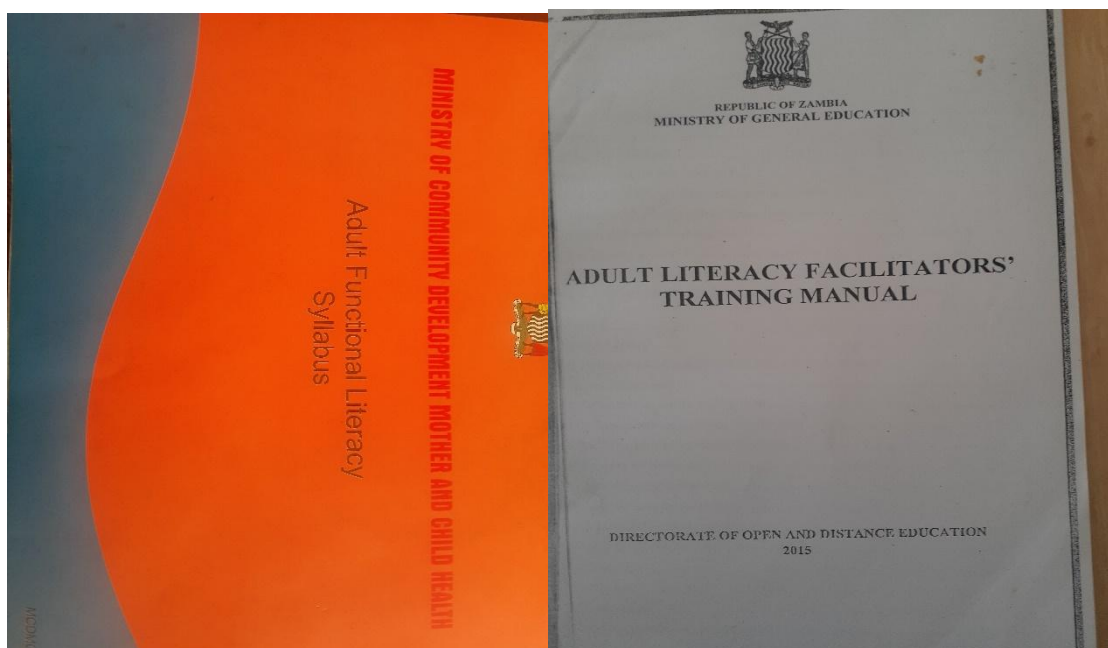


Figure 2 : ALE materials from the two-line ministries (Education and Community Development).

Figure 2 above shows the syllabus for the adult literacy class that has been generated by one of the government ministries and translated into the main regional local languages. The Ministry Of Education, through the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) and line ministries such as the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, work hand-in-hand to develop these materials, which are then translated and distributed to training facilitators. Most of these materials have been developed to offer functional adult literacy programmes. Additionally, the syllabus is quite diverse to cover other life skills such as entrepreneurship, civic education, and gardening, among other

programmes. The facilitators sometimes include extension officers from the Ministry Of Agriculture and NGO/church volunteers who then train peasant farmers or villagers in different livelihood activities. The government has been crucial in guiding adult literacy programmes while working with other external actors.

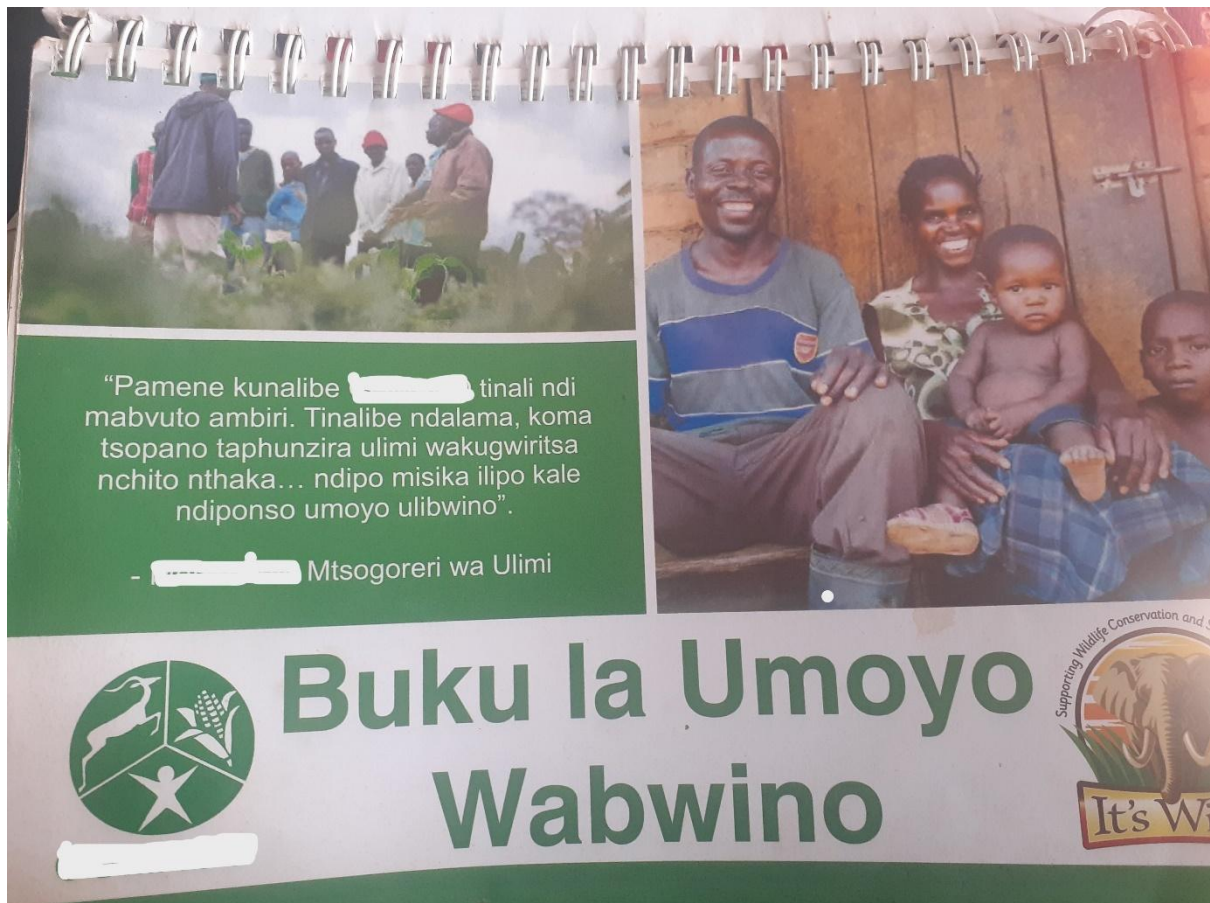


Figure 3: Farmers' Training Manual - A local NGO

This training manual is for a local NGO operating its activities in Eastern Province of Zambia. The main title is '*Buku la Umoyo Wabwino*', translated as '*A Book for Good Life*', in the Chewa language. It teaches farmers in conservation farming as well as food processing and value addition. It is a demonstration of the government's liberalised policy on adult literacy teaching. At the top left is an excerpt of an interview quote from one of the volunteer farmers expressing appreciation for the conservation farming methods taught to them and how this has helped farmers in seeking food production and good markets for their produce:

“Pamene kunalibetinali ndi mabvuto ambiri. Tinalibe ndalama, koma tsopano taphunzira ulimi wakugwiritsa nchito nthaka...ndipo misika ilipo kale ndiponso umoyo ulibwino” —Mtsogoleri wa Ulimi.

The connection between illiteracy and underdevelopment is embraced by the government. It recognises the importance of adult literacy in human development and has made a commitment to increase literacy skills (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017, 2022b). It pledges to increase adult literacy for the population aged 15-49 years to 85 and 90 percent by 2026 from 66.4, and 81.8 percent in 2020, for women and men, respectively (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022b). Here, government, also relies on some empirical evidence for this resolution. For example, the evidence from the National Education Assessment Report of 2015 reveals that some areas of the country with low literacy levels (absence of schooling and inability to read and write) also showed low returns in income and participation in education (Ministry Of Education, 2015). This is perhaps why past governments have considered literacy a policy concern, despite failing to meet the 2015 MDG literacy target of 80 per cent and the Education for All goals (see UNESCO, 2015, 2016; Sichula, 2020).

This section has provided an overview of adult literacy education and how it has been incorporated into the government's mainstream policy frameworks since independence. It illustrates how far ALE has been underpinned by a skill-based approach in its design and implementation, to impart basic functional literacy skills.

2.4. Situating the Research Site and Background Context

Having shared salient policy reforms in the research context on livelihoods, gender and human development in Zambia, I now come to the final phase of introducing my study site. I name the community as Chabwera Village, which is a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. As earlier stated, the village is in Chipangali District in the Eastern Province of Zambia.

2.4.1. Historical Background and Context Of Chipangali District in the Eastern Province

The Eastern Province has several comparative advantages, including extensive arable land, forests, and abundant wildlife. It is a strategic location through the Nacala Corridor Project, integrating the Zambia-Malawi-Mozambique Growth Triangle. It has boosted cross-border trade among the people in the recent past using road and railway transport (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017). The Eastern Province of Zambia has been popular for projects and research undertakings for many years. It has the third largest population of 2,454,788 among the ten provinces of Zambia with a population density of 35.9 persons per square kilometre (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022a).

The livelihood crisis in Chipata District, known pre-independence as Fort Jameson, finally led the colonial government to initiate several resettlement schemes, of which Chipangali was designated. Eastern Province is largely a mono-economy, depending on farm produce from peasant farmers (World Bank Group, 2015). Thus, Chipangali was part of Chipata District until it was upgraded to a district in 2018. As a resettlement area, the district was meant to accommodate African farmers and focused on unalienated land, popularly known as Native Trust Land, for the future use and benefit of Africans (Amberntsson, 2020). It is reported that people were relocated to this area primarily by force by the colonial government, as the area was tsetse fly-infested at the time, but the place has transformed over the years (Ibid.).

The population of Chipangali has moderately increased from 122,916 in 2010 to 169,357 in 2022, with a female representation of 49.86 per cent compared to 50.14 per cent of their male counterparts (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022a). Chipangali District and the entire province have always contributed immensely to the national food basket, albeit being among the least developed areas in the province and country. It has limited development in all key sectors: education, health, and infrastructure. Chipangali has one of the highest numbers of poor people in the province, most of whom are involved in agricultural livelihoods (World Bank Group, 2015). The district is 30 km west of Chipata City as the headquarters. The government and the private sector have also supported several farming schemes in the district.

2.4.2. Ethnic Diversity and Livelihood Practices in Chipangali District

The province has also seen the intra-regional migration of locals moving away from the insecure border alongside Mozambique, which has experienced a prolonged internal conflict and displacement its independence, with a preference for more secure interior areas of the country (Black, 1994). The Eastern Province has six ethnic groups, including the Chewas, Ngonis, Tumbukas, Nsengas, Kundas, and Sengas, spread across the 14 districts, even though Chewas and Ngonis dominate the main ethnic groups in the Chipangali District. The languages of these groups largely overlap, with the Chewa group reflecting early Iron Age developments within the Eastern *Bantu* region that extends over central Malawi and Eastern Mozambique. The Tumbuka group is in the extreme north between Lake Malawi and Tanganyika (Roberts, 1976). All these ethnic groups are part of the *Bantu*-speaking people stretching from South to Central and East Africa. The Chewa tribe practices matrilineal inheritance, while the Ngoni use patrilineal. However, these traditional and cultural practices based on inheritance and ownership are rapidly changing, with increased legal reforms and awareness about safeguarding the interests of children, women and the most vulnerable in society. New reforms and community sensitisations from government and co-operating partners are empowering both daughters and sons to inherit land directly from their parents, whereas inheritance was formerly reserved exclusively for nephews in matrilineal groups (Nyanga *et al.*, 2020). This is not to downplay that these practices have completely vanished as they are still deeply and culturally embedded in some sections of society, especially in rural communities.

Needless to mention are the considerable cultural integration through intermarriages and intra-migration since post-independence. These practices were influenced by the political banner of 'One Zambia, One Nation' slogan by the founding fathers and mothers. This culminated in what I term as 'cultural dilution' that permeated rural regions like Chipangali District.

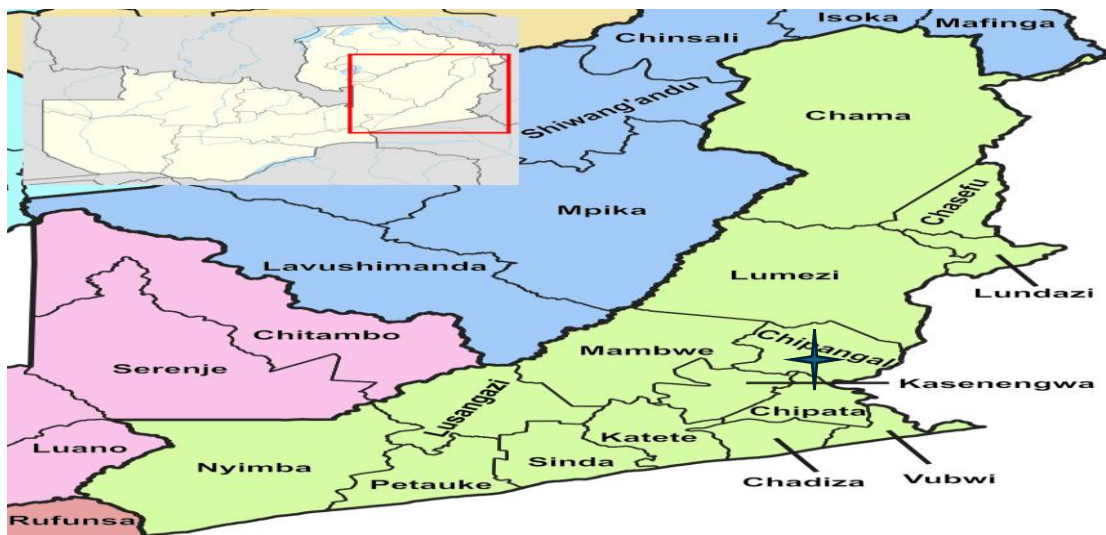


Figure 4 Eastern Province showing its districts coloured (in green)

Coordinates: [13°00'S 32°15'E](#) Source: Wikimedia Commons (Online)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Province,_Zambia#/media/File:Zambia_districts_in_Eastern_Province_2022.png

Figure 4 shows the location of Chipangali marked with a cross. As stated earlier, Chipangali District is widely dominated by smallholder farming. Smallholder farming households are those that derive their livelihoods mainly, but not exclusively from agriculture, predominantly utilising family labour in farm production, are characterised by partial engagement in input and output markets, and are both producers and consumers of agricultural goods and services (Ellis, 1993; Umar, 2014). It is argued that smallholder farming households are not homogenous, but have notable differences in landholding, asset portfolios, income-generating potential, livelihood strategies and well-being outcomes (Siegel and Alwang, 2005). Hence, this dominance of farming livelihoods also gives insight into how the weather and climate in the province plays a role.

The agroecology of the Eastern Province is primarily characterised by seasonal rainfall that ranges between 800 and 1,000 mm per year. Usually, the crop-growing period of different crop varieties starts in October, but is increasingly influenced by the rainfall pattern, which has become increasingly unpredictable due to climate change. Theoretically, crop growing can continue up to March, with crops maturing between 100 and 140 days.

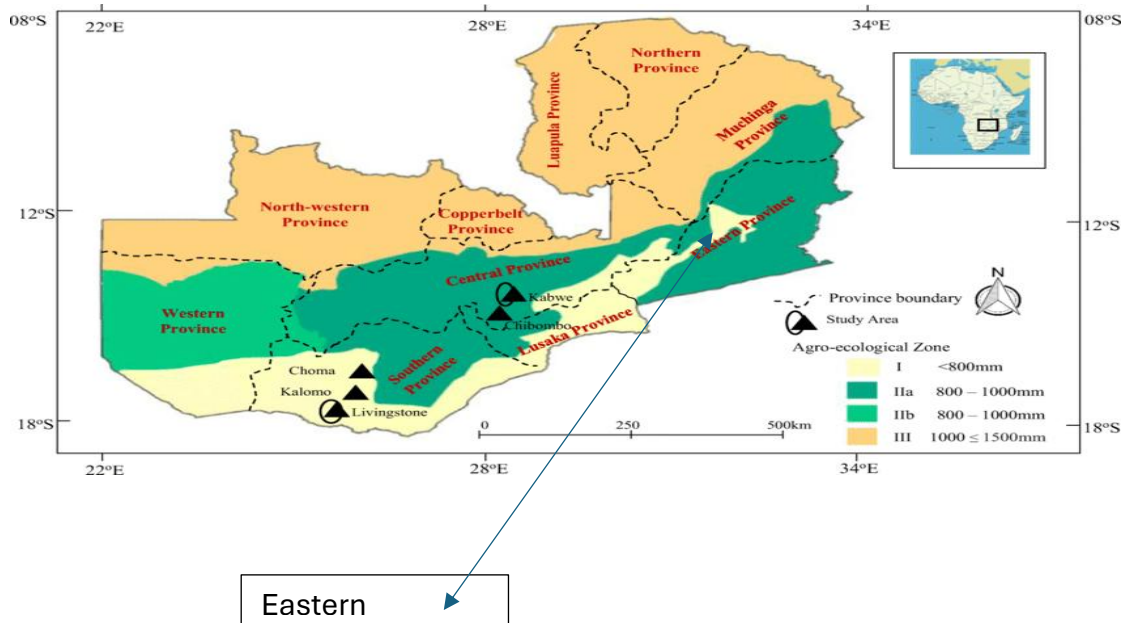


Figure 5: Agroecological study site.

Source: Zambia Meteorological Department

Figure 5 shows the agroecology of the province and study site. Agricultural production by smallholder farming households is predominantly rain-fed. It caters for the following crops: maize corn, cotton, sunflower, tobacco, groundnuts, soya beans, sweet potato, rice, sorghum, cowpeas, millet, cassava, and cucurbits. Generally, maize and groundnuts are the widely grown crops in the country, with maize as the leading crop followed by groundnuts. Many female-headed households who dominate the farming sector, tend to produce more groundnuts than male-headed households (Indaba Agricultural Research Policy Institute, 2015, 2019; Mphande, Umar and Kunda-Wamuwi, 2022). Hence, groundnuts are considered a women's crop as they are commonly used in cooking and highly valued for that purpose (Ibid.).

However, in Chabwera Village, there was a sudden shift in priority crops where maize was still leading, followed by soya beans based on the market value and livelihood survival as I discuss in Chapter Four. Most of these smallholder farmers in the district use simple technologies (hand hoes and oxen) and cultivation practices with minimal purchased farm inputs such as hybrid seed or chemical fertiliser. The farming practices are also complemented by livestock rearing and seasonally irrigated vegetable production. The livestock include cattle, goats, pigs, and poultry farming, mainly free-range chickens,

ducks and guinea fowl. These farming practices are widely practiced and embraced in the community and wider district.

2.4.3. The Political Structure and Formation of Chabwera Village

Like many other villages in the chiefdom, Chabwera Village is an amalgamation of small clans that are mostly part of the same tribal groupings and have a rich history and cultural heritage. The merging of these clans led to small groups and finally forming one huge village popularly known as '*village groupings*' with a village council controlled by men; an overall village group representative (induna) appointed by the Chief of the chiefdom area. As a point of reference, the “first post-colonial government promoted the village grouping concept”, as explained by the village group representative. The villages merged to form one big community for easy provision of social services to the people by government at the time. The common language spoken is Chewa, but the village has experienced some intra-migration within the district since its formation in 1947, according to the village chief. The prolonged existence of these village groupings has led to some intermarriages and intrafamilial marriages within and between different clans over the years. As a village for the Chewas, locals pay allegiance to the local chief who is in charge of the administration, rulership, and administration of the vast area of Chewa land.

The village also has a mix of other ethnic identities at household level such as Tumbukas, Ngonis, and Nsengas who sought permanent residence either through family ties, marriage or negotiating for permanent settlement with the local leadership. Some community members identify themselves as indigenous residents and early founders of the village, and they categorise other members as newcomers. Subjects can switch allegiance to another village headman of a section without relocating. A few foreign nationals, mostly men from Malawi, have settled in this community based on migration and marriage arrangements in the context of matrilineal households. They live as *mkomwene*, but are also nicknamed as *phalombe* (foreigners) by the locals. Most households in the village were male-headed; the few female-headed households (probably less than ten) were because of a woman becoming a widow or a divorcee at the time of fieldwork.



Figure 6 :Aerial view of Chabwera Village

2.4.4. Demographics and Socio-economic Status

There are between 100 and 150 households in the community, with a population of approximately 500. The demographic in the community is largely dominated by children between the ages of 0 to 12, adolescents, and youths in that order of a pyramidal structure based on age group. The poverty levels in the community would be categorised as extreme since most of the community live on less than a dollar per day, with highly poor food nutrition status, poor accommodation and pervasive unemployment. Their houses are a mix of grass-thatched homes and iron-sheet roofs, which speaks to a marked difference in household priorities, income and social status. The village is not connected to the national power grid, and few households use solar lamps or solar panels for their lighting, while firewood and charcoal are the main energy sources.

2.4.5. Cultural Practices and Social Integration

The village embodies a matrilineal tradition and some cultural practices such as '*Gule wakulu*' or '*Nyau*' a secret society comprising young and elderly men. The women are mostly involved in the singing for the dancers during public performances, but are prohibited from accessing the ritual site called '*Dambwe*'. However, women also have the '*chinamwali*' cultural practice, which is a rite of passage for girls that occurs at puberty

and at the point when they are considered ready for marriage. The girls are secluded from the community for a short period and taught various rituals, with practical education imparted by elderly women called '*alangizi*'. According to Roberts (1976) the *chinamwali* tradition was commonly practiced across tribes in the eastern Region of Zambia and still exists today. The '*Nyau*' secret society, on the other hand, is a cultural tradition associated specifically to the identity of Chewas. It is meant to revere ancestral spirits represented by special masks and practiced only by men who have undergone an initiation ceremony.

Whereas the Chewas and Nsengas have a common matrilineal system of tradition, households that identify themselves along with their original ethnic identity, such as Ngonis or Tumbukas, choose to practice a patrilineal system while living in the same village, especially regarding marriage negotiations and payment of *lobola* (dowry).

Many young couples marry from clans within the same community. Kinship and family ties are deeply rooted and form community identities, alliances, and political power connections. In the extended family tree, shared with me during fieldwork, every village member appeared to be related to each other. I will explore this in detail in my empirical chapters.

2.4.6. Livelihood Activities and Practices

As can be observed from the aerial picture, the village is surrounded by vast open fields for farming practices. Like any other village in the chiefdom, the land is under customary tenure which determines who has access and control, and on whose account. Every household has a field, and family labour is extensively used in farm production. These households are both producers and consumers of agricultural goods and services. The cultivated land is usually between one and three hectares per household. Few households use domesticated animals such as cattle for labour. They have goats, pigs and sheep for sale or consumption.

The Chabwera Village also has different groups that members can join based on whether they meet the group descriptions and requirements. Formal and informal groups naturally emerge from these broadly defined relationships, where members are related

to each other, live in proximity or belong to the same congregation/religion. These ties remain strong even when one leaves the village through marriage or relocation to more fertile pastures. Many of these groups are categorised as self-help groups (SHGs)¹¹. I will explore these groups to look at participant involvement in more detail in my empirical chapters. Usually, these groups do some income-earning activities through hired labour services, but can also seek financial or material support from aid agencies, government and individual donors. Overall, groups can be categorised as either autonomous or semi-autonomous, as determined by interference from external actors. More formal groups will have a written constitution; group register and clear mandate of office bearers with outlined dates of formal meetings. Some groups are informal and mainly of an entertainment nature, such as sports or cultural groups.

No	Group Name	Category	Membership	Activities	Constitution	Gender	Goal(s)
1	Women Mending	Autonomous	Free	Unstructured	Informal (unwritten)	Female	Self-help Group
2	Village Banking	Autonomous	Subscription fee	Structured	Semi-formal (written and written).	Mix	Self-help Group
3	Chi-sweeter Women	Autonomous	Free	Unstructured	Informal	Female	Self-help Group, networking
4	Titani Women's Club	Semi-autonomous	Subscription fee	Semi-structured	Formal	female	Self-help Group
5	Kadyakale Co-operative	Semi-autonomous	Subscription fee	Semi-structured	Formal	Mix	Self-help Group
6	Kaingo Micro-credit Group	Semi-autonomous	Subscription fee	Semi-structured	Semi-Formal	Mix	Self-help Group
7	Women Netball team	Autonomous	Free	Informal	Informal	Female	Self-help Group/entertainment

¹¹ Self-help groups - defined as "mutual assistance groups in which individuals undertake collective action to improve their own lives"(Gugerty, Biscaye and Leigh Anderson, 2019, p. 129).

8	Gule wa Mkulu Cultural Group	Autonomous	Free	Informal	Informal	Male	Entertainment
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Table 3: Group characteristics of the Chabwera Village

Several groups are formed as either mixed-gender or women-only, and members join with a variety of reasons besides those highlighted in the goals column.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have situated my study on rural women's livelihoods in the context of Zambia's political, socio-cultural and economic history that spans across the 20th and 21st centuries, respectively in its developmental trajectory. I started by exploring the policy discourses around human development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. This allowed me to give a context of the country's human development history and agenda that have shaped livelihood activities in rural areas since post-independence. I discussed Zambia's commitment to Human Development in the context of gender policies seeking to empower women's livelihoods. I looked at adult literacy education and development policies implemented from independence, perceived as a quick fix to the highly unskilled labour force confronting the country at the time. This prompted me to explore adult literacy in the context of its inclusion in the development agenda —how it has been framed within the mainstream policy in response to global agendas over the years. I went on to discuss its conceptualisation, as well as how the government has adopted the skills-based notion of literacy, popularly known as the deficit approach, with the view that this would lead to increased productivity and quality of life. This notion has also underpinned how literacy has influenced research, and programme designs of many external actors in facilitating the generation of materials that focus on promoting functional literacy skills in Zambia.

I concluded my discussion with a case study of my research site, Chabwera Village, giving a detailed account of the village based on its political formation, livelihoods, social and cultural background. A key issue emerging from the chapter is women's empowerment

and whether access to livelihood resources has been a silver bullet to their wellbeing and participation in development from the many policy reforms. I have sought to extend the discussion about women's empowerment with reference to the various initiatives that the government and its co-operating partners have been implementing. There is a consensus from a wider section of gender commentators that the current policies and law reforms remain work-in-progress, amidst the grim facts on the ground with regard to enduring social structural barriers.

The other main argumentative thread is around literacy. Adult literacy has attracted interest across different actors such as researchers and practitioners, but fundamental and ideological issues remain unresolved. For example, the World Education Forum in Senegal assigned countries to meet a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, but many countries including Zambia, failed to meet their target (see UNESCO, 2017). I have referred to the plethora of curricula reforms implemented since independence and how they are underpinned by autonomous assumptions. I have also discussed how informal literacy and learning is eclipsed by these dominant approaches yet important for rural women livelihoods as I will be demonstrating in my empirical chapters ahead. The fundamental question is whether government should narrowly look at women's empowerment through literacy access only, as often expressed in numerical data such as enrolment rates, attendance, skills acquisition or go beyond these boundaries, and what empowerment means to the local community.

Fundamentally, at issue is rural women's livelihoods and development as a discourse. Through describing my research context, I have situated the study in relation to the themes of livelihoods and empowerment, literacy as well as gender justice and development. The next chapter addresses these themes from the point of view of the concepts and theories that have informed the research.

Chapter Three Conceptual Framework

3.0. Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning the methodological design for the study and the methods used in data generation and analysis. The conceptual framework draws on two key approaches earlier introduced in Chapter One: literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) and the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2000a), and how they interact within the context of African *'ubuntu'*. I will be diving deep into these approaches in my discussion.

My conceptual starting point is a shift away from the dominant literacy discourses that tend to enable a deficit approach discussed in Chapter Two. Similarly, the Capabilities Approach (CA) challenges the instrumental benefits of literacy as depicted in the Human Capital Theory (Nussbaum, 2000a). In the wider discourse of Capabilities Approach, I also explore literacy and learning through the African notion of *'ubuntu'* as architectonic capability, and what wellbeing and empowerment is locally understood in the context of women's livelihoods.

As signalled in Chapter One, wellbeing can be analysed through a pyramidal structure that includes material, relational, and subjective wellbeing (White, 2010). The material comprises assets, welfare, and standards of living crucial to people's livelihoods. Conversely, the second type, which is relational wellbeing, is divided into two spheres: social (social relations and access to public goods) and human (capabilities, attitudes to life, and personal relationships) (Ibid.). The third one, subjective, has two aspects: people's perceptions of their (material, social, and human) positions, and cultural values, ideologies, and beliefs (Ibid.). Hence, my overarching research question, *"How do rural women's livelihood activities influence literacy and learning in contributing to their capabilities, gender justice and wellbeing?"* —is aimed at problematising these key concepts as often discussed in the mainstream policies, and how these reflect and get embedded in rural women's livelihood practices.

My discussion is framed around women's social relations and gender justice, as they participate in livelihood activities. I am cognisant of the tension that arises from adopting

the two conceptual frameworks, because their conceptualisation of literacy differs ideologically. However, through this approach, I hope to deepen an understanding of women's livelihoods and how literacy and learning might contribute to their wellbeing and development. I will discuss the benefits, limitations, criticisms and tensions surrounding the two approaches and use of other concepts to draw out the various dimensions that have shaped my conceptual framework.

3.1. Rural Women and the Livelihood Discourse

I stated in Chapter One, how as an organisation, we constructed literacy as a given aimed at improving rural women's livelihoods. I gave a definition of livelihood in Section 2.1. Chapter Two. People engage in a range of livelihood activities which include remote/distant as well as locations near to resident households (Ellis and Freeman, 2005). My conceptualisation of livelihoods in this study links to the wider access to 'resources' that people identify as important for a secured livelihood —ones that go beyond dependency on natural resources to a range of assets (wider resources), income resources and labour markets (Bebbington, 1999). In so doing, I use Bebbington's (1999, p. 2022) definition of livelihoods as derived from accessing five types of "capital" assets¹²: produced (physical assets - investment goods), human (skills, education, health), natural (land, water, etc), social and cultural capital (network and associations) all important in composing a livelihood. While not all map neatly onto the construction of livelihoods, they are fundamental to understanding the options available to individuals/households. I draw particularly on social and cultural capital to understand how women navigate their day to day activities. Ellis and Freeman (2005) argue that different family members will access one or several of these assets. Furthermore, Bebbington (1999) has argued that sometimes people sacrifice one or another of these assets to build up another asset base deemed more appropriate for their overall livelihood strategy. These resources are not merely means through which people make a living, but also give meaning to a person's world, the capability to be and to act, within evolving social, institutional, political, economic and environmental contexts (Bebbington, 1999).

¹² Refers to assets as thus resources that have been accessed (Bebbington, 1999, p. 2039)

Using the livelihood concept, I interrogate the broader assets that people use to compose a livelihood in their community, and how these are implicated in relations of power and identity. For instance, social and cultural capital assets are bound up with the social relations and networks that individuals build both at household and community level as I will be showcasing in my empirical chapters. Exploring these relationships sheds light on the processes of access and participation for women in different livelihood activities. In the following sections, therefore, I discuss in depth the key concepts that I introduced in Chapter One to explain how women engage in making choices about their livelihoods.

3.2. The Literacy Discourse

In this section, I explore some of the key debates that have dominated literacy discussions in the recent past. Different ideologies have shaped the definitions of literacy over time, which has had and continues to have implications for policy and practice. For example, during my discussion about Zambia's literacy policy framework in Chapter Two, I argued how school-based literacy has been the primary focus. This approach illustrates a functional literacy model which, according to Gray (1969, p. 20) "assumes that the training given should be such that the trainees will be able to meet independently the reading and writing demands made upon them." This account depicts learners as passive recipients of literacy and has been challenged for its inability to capture various literacy-related activities, including informal learning that individuals and communities engage with in their everyday livelihoods (Papen, 2005). Levine (1994) criticised the model as more reflective of an economic terminology that emphasises the 'supply side' —the minimal level of reading and writing skills required for individuals to fulfill their roles as workers and citizens, while ignoring the factors that generate that demand. Other scholars have gone for an expanded definition to this model to include the full range of functions that literacy can perform in a modern industrialised society. This encompasses broad domains such as leisure/social purposes, vocational purposes and academic purposes in which text is used (Hammond and Freebody, 1994).

Increasing evidence from ethnographic studies on literacy reveals the importance of exploring its complex role in processes of social change to better account for the role of literate (and illiterate) identities and practices in shaping social relations, capacities and

aspirations. This need has opened many other ways of conceptualising and understanding literacy, such as the social theory of literacy.

In Chapter One, I signalled how implementing functional literacy was proving problematic for my team. I found myself trying to better understand literacy as a policy on the one hand, and how literacy contributed to women's well-being on the other. Meanwhile, a burgeoning literature has been highlighting the disconnect between literacy as a policy and literacy in practice (see Kulick and Stroud, 1993; Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Robinson-Pant, 2001; Kell, 2009, 2013). This motivated me to look into women's literacy practices beyond the classroom. Given my interest in exploring how rural women interact with text in different social domains of their livelihoods, the social theory of literacy provided a far more sophisticated analytic lens.

3.3. Social Theory of Literacy

The emergence of New Literacy Studies (NLS) has added a new dimension to understanding literacy. According to Papen (2005), scholars first developed the social theory of literacy in the 1980s. This emerged from the body of anthropological literature now known as the 'New Literacy Studies', which critiqued the traditional conceptualisation of literacy as a dichotomy, separating the literates and illiterates through an autonomous model (Street, 1984; Gee, 2012).

The autonomous model was coined by Brian Street to describe those holding a traditional view of literacy, also known as the 'Great Divide', distinguishing between the traditional and modern way of life or the oral societies (non-literate) versus literate societies (text-driven) (Goody, 1968, 1986; Street, 1993). Brian Street, an early proponent of New Literacy Studies, challenged this notion, branded as a 'text-based' form of literacy, with universal standardisation for individuals and society. Street criticised this assumption, arguing that engaging with literacy is always a social act (Street, 1995, 2008). He advocated for the ideological model based on the specific social practices of reading and writing which —“stresses the significance of the socialisation process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for participants and is therefore concerned with

the general social institutions through which this process takes place, and not just the explicit 'educational' ones" (Street, 1984, p. 2). Therefore, the NLS stressed the plurality of literacy in terms of the different socially and culturally defined practices connected to the print (different 'literacies') (Gee, 2012). Each set of practices around literacy, whether with computers, visual media, or traditional print is a complex of these domains with varying context and social meanings where emphasis is rather more on the practices than on the medium (Street, 1999).

The ideological model argues that the meaning of literacy should be understood from the social institutions in which it is embedded (Street, 1984, 1995, 1999). In other words, literacies happen every day and are already embedded in particular forms of activity; thus, reading and writing should be studied in the context of social practices of which these are part and operate in particular social spaces (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009). Literacy in this sense is always contested, both in its meanings and practices, as people take hold of these new communicative practices (Street, 2008). Like literacy, numeracy too cannot be separated from the context in which it is sited (Openjuru *et al.*, 2016).

While the autonomous model seemingly dominates practice and programmes, Street alongside other academics, researchers and practitioners worldwide, have come to a conclusion that the model is not an appropriate intellectual tool either for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world or in designing the practical programmes (Street, 1984, 1993). By adopting an ideological model, literacy is seen as immersed in power relations, and how people take hold of it is contingent on the social and cultural practices and not just pedagogical and cognitive factors (Street, 2008).

Arising from this scholarship and incorporating an extended plurality of literacy practices to practice, the NLS therefore has also led to an emergence of practices involving technologies. This includes other literacies within the NLS scholarship such as multimodality/multiliteracies, to reflect broader competencies in an ever increasing variety of practices such as computer, digital, media or visual literacies (see Pahl and Rowsell, 2005; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Conversely, multimodal literacy implies looking at the "semiotic means through which literacy is communicated and where texts are not just a product of language written down, but also get their meanings through other modes of semiosis" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: Kress, 1997) in Baynham and Prinsloo

(2009, p. 13). This includes use of a range of signs, colour, layout, print font, etc, in this context (Street and Lefstein, 2007). The two further argue that the inclusion of computer, media or visual literacies does involve some aspects of literacy practices, but may not wholly be defined by them. This is complicated by the technological and mode determinism in which overlaps and interactions of such modes are drawn out according to context and practice (Ibid.).

Suffice to mention that, the NLS has helped clarify the distinctions between literacy practices in and outside of school (see Basu, Maddox and Robinson-Pant, 2008). On the other hand, Zambia's current revised standard curriculum on adult literacy has maintained its position vis a vis skills acquisition and sometimes caters for those learners who want to transition into formal education, emphasising the need to eradicate school illiteracy by 2030 (see Ministry Of General Education, 2013; Sichula, 2020).

3.3.1. Literacy as a Social Practice

Increasing discourses around literacy and learning recognise the contribution of a social theory of literacy. Given my departure from the typical framing of 'literacy' as a learning outcome, my conceptualisation of literacy avoids studying literacy-in-itself. Instead, it helps to explore 'literacies' in the context of livelihoods. Literacies, as defined, "are socially recognised ways of generating, communicating and negotiating the meaningful content through a medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in discourses (or as members of discourses)" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, p. 64). Barton (2007) argued that people have different literacies which they make use of, and which are associated with different social domains. I find the concept of participation in this definition important to the role of literacy in practice.

The concept of 'practice' in relation to literacy was first used by Scribner and Cole in their 'Psychology of Literacy', which focused on what they termed a practice account of literacy (Scribner and Cole, 1981). In so doing, they drew on the literacy practices of the Vai People in Liberia, based on their unique Vai scripts and language as a literacy practice which differed from school-based practices. They identified three components that

aligned with the meaning of 'practice': technology, knowledge and skills. These were applied in different spheres of life such as education, religion, farming and law. All practices involve interrelated tasks that share common tools, knowledge and skills (see, *Ibid.*, p. 236). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) criticised the focus on the technology and skills dimensions of literacy practices. Instead, the social domain in literacy has largely been embraced as the ideal approach to understanding processes of literacy practices. Street for example, framed practices as "particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2001b, p. 11). The concept of 'practice' here is robust and attempts to cater for events and patterns around literacy and link them in the broader social and cultural context (*Ibid.*).

With regards to practice, Barton (2007) contends that much literacy is learned through relationships of unequal power, such as with parents, teachers and students. Hence, different institutions influence different aspects of literacy practices. Further, these practices become generally accepted cultural ways of using literacy, drawing on what have been termed as 'literacy events' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 2007). According to Barton and Hamilton (2000), socially powerful institutions such as education tend to support dominant literacy practices which therefore are more visible while rendering others less visible. This hierarchy of visibility has implications for identity and power relations among actors.

Wenger (1998), in an expanded definition, proposed that the concept of social practice connotes "the doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is the doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do" (p. 47). Therefore, social practice includes both the explicit and the tacit and uses language, tools, documents, images, symbols and well-defined roles, among other things, that various practices make explicit for various purposes (*Ibid.*). Language forms or texts have situated meanings in the different contexts of use (Gee, 1999). Hence, determining what the word means in any given context is important. Many social interactions involve literacy practices shaped by literacy texts (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007). Street (1993) posits that it is important to recognise the diverse cultural practices associated with reading and writing in various contexts. Ironically, many people labelled 'illiterate and non-literate' within the

autonomous model, find themselves making significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts (Street and Lefstein, 2007).

Hence, Street (1993) categorised literacies into either dominant literacies emerging from dominant social institutions or vernacular literacies which emerge from our everyday life. At the local community level, everyday literacies would be associated with social institutions such as family, church, or the marketplace. These institutions are examples of social domains and present particular configurations of literacy practices (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 2007).

Generally, the scholarship on social practices of literacy from these early proponents emphasise on seeing literacy not just as a neutral skill, but as a socially situated practice. Here, I take the perspective of social literacy practice that incorporates texts, images and symbols to interrogate the power relations around participation and meaning-making in different social domains and contexts. The social and sociocultural approaches and adult learning theories allows me to question what counts as literacy as opposed to the earlier assumptions based on the functional model.

3.3.2. Literacy Events

In exploring literacy as a socially situated practice, I am also drawn to discussing literacy events in the broader context of literacy practices (Street, 2001), and as a concept that is instrumental to the social theory of literacy.

Heath defines a 'literacy event' as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (Heath, 1982, p. 50). Literacy events can also be described as "constituents of literacy practices" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 15). Street (2001b) acknowledges Heath's definition and the importance in using the concept by researchers which allows them to draw out characteristics of a particular literacy event such as where things are happening and are overt. However, Street argues that using the concept of literacy event on its own is problematic as it becomes descriptive and does not explain how meanings are

constructed; the ambiguity on how participants interact with text based on the assumptions around literacy event that make it work (Ibid.). Baynham and Prinsloo (2009, p. 11) posit that the conceptualisation of the literacy event also poses some problems in that, "the notion of event implies some distinct structured set of activities, which can easily be readily distinguishable, having a schematic structure". The authors question this type of characterisation that projects the view that a literacy event is something that can be isolated from its context and be studied elsewhere (ibid.). Street (1993) has therefore depicted literacy events as not just empirical occasions to which literacy is integral within literacy practices, but also as 'folk models' of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them. Street contends that exploring these models and their meanings call for an ethnographic account. That one cannot predict ahead what gives meaning to a literacy event and the set of literacy events linked to literacy practices (Street, 2001).

I adopt the concept of literacy events to describe occasions where writing becomes part of the interaction among different actors, and what would count as literacy to participants. Here, literacy events are part of the broader literacy practices, but which exist in the space of social interactions. Hence, each social institution shapes power relations among actors as they interact with text (see Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Literacy events can take place in different forms and in different social spaces/domains, with specific established norms and practices that influence participants' interactions (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005; Barton, 2007).

According to Pahl and Rowsell (2005), context, identity, and practice are akin to any reading and writing event and that through context, fluid identities are constantly constructed, and meaning-making is attached to the form of literacy. Literacy practices, as discussed, are said to change as new ones get acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making, as well as through formal education and training (Barton and Hamilton, 2000).

Consequently, context is important to understand the power dynamics being enacted during processes of interaction. Barton (2007) highlights the importance of identifying actors involved in making sense of the text or mediating a literacy event. The notion of events, as cited in the literature, explains the situated nature of literacy. Additionally, the

event can occur in any given place and situation and tends to have a mixture of written and spoken language (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007). Even when this happens, it is argued that in every given context, the “uses and meanings of literacy are always embedded in relations of power” (Street, 1999. P. 37).

I am aware that drawing the parameters of a single literacy event can prove problematic if I consider Baynham and Prinsloo's (2009) argument. The two argue that literacy events are deeply immersed in a text-saturated world, and therefore the textuality of the world cannot be grouped into neatly differentiable event structures. Hence, the ‘eventness’ becomes problematic if treated as discrete whereas a literacy activity can extend over time and space in different locations. I argue that this does not negate the fact that it is a person or group of people at the centre of navigating the literacy-mediated space, and this is the focus of my study.

In looking at literacy practices in a range of different ‘situated’ settings (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 2007), I use the literacy event as a concept for understanding literacy practices in broader cultural and social relations of Street’s (2001) conceptualisation. This will involve looking at literacy practices, as opposed to focusing on how it is acquired as often emphasised (see UNESCO, 2005, p. 35), while acknowledging that learning is deeply embedded in literacy practices.

3.3.3. Gender and Literacy

There is a belief that women’s literacy is the key to development, and this has informed governments and international development aid agencies on policy formulation and programme designs worldwide. Robinson-Pant (2007) argued that in countries of the South where female literacy rates were often much lower than male, policy makers and planners tended to promote adult women’s literacy based on this notion. In Zambia, government has made significant progress towards the promotion of gender equality as discussed in Chapter Two. The provision of adult literacy has been seen to close the gender gap in terms of accessibility and retention in adult literacy where statistically there are more literate adult males than females (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3). The

UIS (2013) noted that 64 per cent of the 774 million illiterate adults were women. While research into female literacy focused much on the development perspective, Westen (1994) argued that little was done in exploring power relations based on gender and on a woman's situation with regard to her rights, her place within the family, her self-esteem.

Over the years, researchers have focused on finding statistical evidence indicating positive connections between female literacy rates, health indicators such as decreased child mortality and fertility rates and economic participation (Robinson-Pant, 2008). Several studies have backed up these statistical correlations and remain popularised by many policy makers and practitioners. For instance, the study of Pakistani women showed that those with good literacy skills earned 95 per cent more than women with weak literacy skills (UNESCO, 2012, p. 196). In sub-Saharan Africa which accounts for 70 per cent of the world's HIV infections, 91 per cent of literate women knew that HIV was not transmitted by sharing food, compared with 72 per cent of those who were not literate (UNESCO, 2013, p. 8). The UIL (2013) study findings also showed support evidence of correlations between literate women and the accompanying wide range benefits linked to healthcare and positive influence on their children. These correlations and the assumptions that illiterate women were lacking led to curriculum reforms and literacy classes as entry points (Robinson-Pant, 2008). The assumptions labelled literate women as developing unique behavioural characteristics that made them different from illiterate peers thus perpetuating the 'blind' illiterate woman widely found in many policy documents (Robinson-Pant, 2004). While these statistical correlations were a justification for women's education, Robinson-Pant argued that many studies failed to disaggregate between those adult women who learnt to read and write in school, as compared to those who had learnt as adults (Robinson-Pant, 2008).

The emergence of the New Literacy Studies has marked a departure from the notion of 'literacy' as a technical fix to a concern with researching what literacy means in the lives of the women participants (Robinson-Pant, 2008). This is giving an opportunity to explore literacy practices outside of school rather than simply focusing on the effect of education on women. Duckworth (2014) noted how 'domestic literacy' which has been traditionally carried out by women seldom enters the public domain and often remains invisible and unrecognised. Instead, institutional literacies are often perceived as the basis of

educational progress and deemed more important than 'vernacular literacies'. This also borders on the concept of hierarchies of literacies (cf. Street, 1993; Barton, 2007). The 'illiterate' women already have knowledge of their condition, but these forms of knowledge held and expressed by them are blocked, invalidated and forbidden through institutional practices that legitimise the desire of particular 'literacy' for women (Chopra, 2004). On the other hand, literacy's ideological role of supporting women's subordinate position dominates many societies due to structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power within society.

The early works in women's literacy were influenced by research attempting to measure the impact of women's literacy on development, while tackling the structural and cultural barriers to participation, rather than to look at the quality and relevance of literacy programmes to women's lives more broadly (Robinson-Pant, 2004). There were calls for women's empowerment especially after the first women's conference in 1975 that led to the formation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. The Women In Development (WID) approach emerged since then, inspired by work on Third World Development and the plight of women as early as 1970s to mid-1980s. The first phase during this same period centered on equity approach, allowing women to acquire literacy skills in order to catch up with men and become equal partners in development, then followed the anti-poverty approach, and finally the predominant third approach called 'efficiency' policy in 1980s. This was inspired to tackle women's development, stressing the economic benefits of educating women and girls (see Moser, 1993). The Gender and Development (GAD) approach then merged on the scene in response to the limitations of WID, so that women's plight was not only viewed in isolation, but in the context of gender relations (Ibid.). Hence, policy makers were interested in looking at how literacy programmes could help tackle gender oppression within the home and wider community.

The 1980s period also coincides with the emergence of Freire's critical literacy which emphasised presentness and activeness in the struggle in reclaiming one's voice, history and future (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Women used this approach as a reflection on their traditional gendered roles and championed a campaign to collectively challenge gender inequalities. The work of feminists or at least those inspired by their works in the 1980s

and '90s, stressed women's multiple identities according to ethnic, class, caste, economic and age differences. For example, Crenshaw (1991) argued that our identities were intersectional, but in ways that played out differently in terms of power, equity, visibility, and vulnerability. This means that our prominent identity can be a source of privilege and power or vulnerable to violence and disposability depending on how people characterise and use our intersectionality. Stromquist (1990) perceived gender as an institutionalised expression of power in society which encapsulated factors that constantly disadvantaged women. The distinction between women's condition (practical interests) and position (strategic interests) engendered the impetus for research on gender and literacy. The former is linked to women's basic needs like employment and family, while the latter is linked to women's empowerment as they seek to redress their condition within and outside the family, to combat discrimination, oppression and violence against women, and promote their political participation (Molyneux, 1985, p. 232-33).

By 1990, Lalaga Bown's research on women's literacy programmes was the first attempt to pin together research on women's literacy (different from girls' literacy in school) (see Bown, 1990). This development shaped the future course of research afterwards that have looked at the broader term of gender rather than simply women's literacy and development. For example, a recent study on the women of Mexican descent in the USA provided valuable insights into the realities and lived experiences of Latinx women and their construction of multimodal texts for expression of gender and racial identities (Guzzetti, 2022).

As a shift from focusing on gender and literacy through numerical parity, my study explores gender justice and the kind of social relations in influencing women's marginalisation in various domains of livelihoods. Duckworth (2014) has posited that what counts as literacy and what does not, have a bearing on the distribution of knowledge and power, with others benefiting and others excluded. Currently, adult literacy in many countries of the global South has been seen as domain for women, not men (Robinson-Pant, 2007). In Zambia, this scenario often relegates adult literacy in the grey area of being poorly resourced, lower status and unpopular.

3.4. Non-Formal/Informal Learning and Literacy

To better understand the learning experiences of participants, there is a need to have a framework that captures learning processes rather than (but as well as) the outcomes. I pay particular attention to issues of power relations and identity around the learning processes of participants. I draw my analysis from how a community of practice frames learning and participation.

A theory of practice does take learning, thinking and knowledge to be historically/culturally specific, socially constituted, and politically tempered, as these structure the social world as well as being structured by it (Lave, 1988). Lave and Wenger (1991) have drawn a contrast between a theory of learning in relation to practice as subsumed within processes of learning and on the other, where learning is not merely situated in practice, but is an integral aspect of generative social practice in a lived world. This has been referred to as situated learning: exploring the relationships between learning and the social situation in which it occurs. In a broader context, this involves exploring the relational character of knowledge and learning, exploring the learning trajectories of participants; how they develop identities, negotiate meanings, and the nature of learning activity for the people involved (ibid.). As regards to learning, Flannery and Hayes (2000) claim that fundamental assumptions which support theories of learning and teaching are usually unquestioned, yet theories showcase significant biases around values and cultural norms which do not always chime with the experiences of women and men alike. With reference to broader discourse practices and the importance of a gender dimension, Murphy (1999) in her study, acknowledged how gendered learning influences participants' engagement in tasks and the sense that they make out of them.

The notion of situated learning and gendered learning is relevant because of my interest in capturing learning outside of formal school system. Particularly, my focus was on the informal learning¹³ taking place in the community—learning that does not occur within a formally organised learning programme or event. According to Colardyn and Bjørnåvold

¹³ defined as "an activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presences of externally imposed curricular criteria" (Livingstone, 2001, p. 5)

(2004) cited in Straka (2004, p. 8), formal, non-formal and informal learning are differentiated based on the intention to learn (centrality of the learner in the learning process), and the structure in which learning takes place (the context in which learning takes place). While formal learning is more structured and involves certification, the last two do not. Non-formal learning (Straka, 2004) tends to be embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, although with a learning element, and is intentional from the learner's perspective. According to Barton and Hamilton (2000), informal learning takes place in particular social contexts in which part of this learning is the internalisation of social processes.

Traxler (2009) has identified mobile learning as having those unique attributes that position it within informal learning rather than formal. The rapid spread of mobile phones and the internet in many areas of the world is drawing interests among researchers to explore the impact of new technologies on gender relations, literacy practices and livelihoods in rural areas. Hence, through situated learning, mobile learning is said to be uniquely suited to support context-specific and immediate learning, as mobile technologies situate learners and also connect learners. Koole (2009) observes how wireless, networked mobile devices are shaping culturally sensitive learning experiences. Marguerite Koole argues that through what is called interaction-learning intersection (LS), learners as individuals are situated within unique cultures and environments while such settings impact a learner's ability to understand, negotiate meaning, integrate, interpret, and use new ideas as needed in formal instruction or informal learning (Ibid.).

Research into young people's livelihood and learning in two communities in Egypt showed young women were restricted from owning mobile phones until after marriage due to parents' concern that they might engage in promiscuity relationships (IFAD-UNESCO, 2016). On the other hand, non-literate young people in Ethiopia learned to use mobile phones through informal support from their literate peers (ibid.). Exploring varying social spaces is particularly important for my study of learning practices across different dimensions of livelihoods. Rogers and Street (2012) argue that through daily life

experiences of literacy activities, even those referred to as non-literates, acquire literacy through informal learning (including ‘indigenous knowledge’¹⁴).

The informal learning definition also fits into the social learning theory as promulgated by Wenger (1998), emphasising learning as social participation. Wenger argues that social participation is not just about engaging in local events with certain people, but includes processes of being active participants in the practices of social communities; constructing identities in relation to these communities (Ibid). Adult education scholars such as Street and Rogers (Rogers and Street, 2012; Rogers, 2014) argue that most of our learning is informal and results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. I find the concept of participation particularly useful in understanding how women interact and learn in these spaces. At the core is exploring how women negotiate power and identity within the learning processes. Hence, paying attention to women’s participation would help untangle these critical issues and see how these shape women’s aspirations and well-being.

As noted, learning in practice goes beyond mental processes: it includes developing practices and ability to negotiate meaning and build our identity (Wenger, 1998). People are in constant pursuit of enterprises of all kinds for a secured livelihood. This involves interaction and collective learning through participation in multiple social practices, thereby building practices that become the property of the community created over time through a shared enterprise that ultimately leads into communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Consequently, negotiation of meaning is at the centre of human learning, as opposed to merely the acquisition of information and skills. This is something I draw from the theory of community of practice to explore learning as situated. Problematising the concept of participation would help me understand the processes of power and identity in learning and literacy practices.

¹⁴ a collection of traditional knowledge, belief and practices which are common to a whole community (p.24).

3.4.1. Learning Through Participation

Participation is a central theme to understanding women's engagement in learning and new knowledge practices. However, the common use of the term 'participation' conceals divergent views about its aims and practice. Guijt and Shah (1998) have argued that the term has been used in a normative sense, where anything participatory is associated with 'good' and 'empowering', describing very rudimentary levels of consultation such as one between agency staff and community members. For my nuanced discussion, I adopt the expanded concept of participation as expounded (Wenger, 1998, p. 55-6), to refer to "the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in the social communities and active involvement in the social enterprises...a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging".

Women's participation in a social enterprise can signal gender justice, but there several complexities to this. Lave and Wenger (1991) described learning as legitimate peripheral participation in which those seeking to become part of the community of practice, locate themselves in the field of participation to gain the requisite skills and knowledge. These border on social structures involving complex relations of power where the degree of peripherality in an activity can mean a source of power or powerlessness to a participant. Thus, participation according to Lave and Wenger is that it is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world (Ibid.). Cornwall (2002) explains how participation can be seen as bringing new spaces to life, carving out new spaces, and creating new social forms with their own momentum and impetus. Notably, Lefebvre (1991) argues that these spaces can be ways in which opportunities for engagement are conceived or perceived, but also that they could be actual sites that are entered and animated by citizens. Nevertheless, there is a need to examine how spaces for participation are occupied, negotiated, subverted or mediated and to consider the various dynamics that shape these spaces with regards to people's patterns of interaction in different social domains.

Following Lefebvre's argument, it is therefore important to situate instances of 'participation' in the particular sites where practices occur. In this study, the social and cultural context of learning or literacy practices taking place alongside a multiplicity of

other spaces that influence each other. A substantial literature on participation, as Cornwall (2002) observed, generally focuses on how participation is supposed to work and less on "what actually happens" in practice. However, considering the unequal power relations in situated learning, this can have implications on how policies or programmes are implemented. It is important to examine how participation shapes the relations of power and identity among different actors within the community.

My standpoint in adopting the concept of participation is to provide a critical analysis of women's engagement in these different livelihood activities, as they interact with each other and with different social actors.

3.5. Literacy and Human Development Debate

Literacy has always been entangled with notions of development, which are more complex than generally perceived. The development literature has consistently described illiteracy as a pervasive characteristic of poverty, while conversely, literacy is credited for its role in poverty reduction, low mortality and wellbeing of women (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2006). This conceptualisation of literacy from the capability scholarship seemingly draws on the autonomous model in relation to human development. The perceived importance of literacy in human development is also displayed from how adult literacy rates are centrally situated in the Human Development Index and in wider measures (Sen, 2000; UNESCO, 2005; Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa, 2018). These varying notions have sometimes led to conflicting expectations between the providers and participants (Basu, Maddox and Robinson-Pant, 2008; Robinson-Pant, 2008).

The ethnographic approach to literacy in development has argued that literacy is not just a set of uniform skills to be imparted to those considered illiterate —the 'autonomous model', but rather, that there are multiple literacies in communities, and these literacy practices are socially embedded (Heath, 1982; Street, 1995; Barton, 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007). Papen (2005) argues that literacy as a social practice challenges us to inquire first about what people do with literacy in their everyday life, and

more generally, the role of literacy in their life. The ethnographic approach is credited for giving such insights into understanding literacy in development. However, ethnographers have also been criticised for remaining ambivalent about the role of literacy capabilities and practices in progressive forms of social change and production of agency (Basu, Maddox and Robinson-Pant, 2008; Maddox, 2009).

One of the key challenges facing literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy is how such studies can inform policy and practice, especially where statistical information looks more appealing and is easier to present to policymakers. For example, it is argued that “literacy practices are so contextual and so variable that it would never be possible, a priori, to invent a measurement that would account for their diversity” (Bartlett, 2008, p. 742). Mjaya (2017) highlights the complexities of applying the social and situated view of literacy to fit into the assessment processes of governments, the perspective that I support. This is because the approach has created a conundrum for many researchers in terms of how social and situated views of literacy can fit into these assessment processes whereas Hamilton (2012, p. 41-42) notes, “[numbers] are useful to politicians and civil servants who are pushed to justify their expenditures on policies: how much more or less and to what effect.” The social practice approach still struggles with how to make policymakers appreciate the diverse ways in which people interact with literacy, and for what purpose in a way that can inform future policy. Robinson-Pant (2008) recognises the tension of problematising literacy as a social practice with different questions of informing policy, without risking the efforts of other actors conducting literacy advocacy campaigns. While ethnographically informed studies of literacy provide a rich account of literacy as social practice, Robinson-Pant (2001) argues that anthropologists generally are reluctant to attribute their causal analysis beyond the particular to larger-scale.

On the other hand, the macro-level analysis often displayed by economists, Maddox (2008) notes, overlooks data on literacy and development. Maddox (2008) argues that this can be rectified and addressed through implementing an approach that appreciates the diverse ways in which people perceive and use literacy. He has proposed the assessment of literacy outcomes based on capabilities, a position also supported by St. Clair (St Clair, 2010, p.35-38).

To further deepen my understanding of literacy and development, I adopt the Capabilities Approach which provides a richer version of human development than Human Capital Theory, a deficit approach that narrowly focuses on production and acquisition of skills. Few studies have attempted the use of approaches that are not entirely compatible with each other (for these exceptions, see Walker, 2009; Boyadjieva, and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Walker *et al.*, 2022). In the case of my research, combining literacy as social practice and the capability framework despite their incompatibilities, contribute to a holistic understanding of human development through adult literacy, learning, gender justice and wellbeing.

3.5.1. New Literacy Studies and the Capabilities Approach: Exploring the Tension

In recent years, the Capability Approach has influenced the policy discourses around human development, challenging Human Capital Theory, a radical economist model of human development. The Capability Approach as a conceptual framework became influential during the 1990s and is designed to assess human development. It expanded the evaluative space for understanding wellbeing not as a static set of criteria that dictate what renders a life worth living, but as a dynamic process where individually valued freedoms are central in assessing what constitutes a good life (Sen, 1999). The approach focuses on two core elements: capabilities or the real freedoms that are available for individuals—and functionings or achieved freedoms that have been operationalised by the individual (Ibid.). “Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles” (Ibid., p. 75).

Lifestyles here also relate to livelihood activities, as discussed earlier. People’s functionings represent the achievements of a person: that is, what the person manages to do or to be (Sen, 1999, 2001, 1985). Hence, functionings are perceived as outcomes, such as learning to read and write, while capabilities are the potential to achieve these functionings (Walker, 2007). The Capability Approach has not been without its critics. Robeyns (2017) notes that researchers and policymakers might not be interested in

applying the Capability Approach unless they see it as a smart idea to help them construct a particular capability theory, application or analysis of the problem. The case in point is this study where I need to establish how multiple literacies (Street, 1995) as a social practice can contribute to the pursuit of freedoms. The breakthrough of NLS research evidence has moved away perceptions from seeing literacy primarily as an individual skill towards a view of literacy as social practice. In contrast, Robinson (2003) points out that while NLS has led to valuable insights into how people use literacy and literacies, and what it does for them, it has also led to a neglect of the unavoidable individual aspect of literacy, namely that it is acquired individually. The Capability framework tends to sit more comfortably within the autonomous model, and this creates the tension between these two approaches. Nonetheless, there is some common ground as Sen uses the concepts of capability and agency as key elements in the pursuit of freedom in which the latter is central to the social transformation of women's wellbeing (Sen, 2000).

Alongside the Capability framework is Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), which I adopt as a point of reference throughout my discussion. While Sen and Nussbaum share common views on many fronts regarding capabilities and functionings, they disagree with each other on vital issues in framing the Capability Approach. Sen's CA is more democratised, in that it sets the tone for identifying capabilities that befit a quality of life, consistently demanding public participation and dialogue in the whole process (see Sen, 1984, 2001; Clark, 2005). At the same time, Sen's CA is criticised for emphasising the measurability of functionings. However, this is different with respect to perceptions of literacy. For example, Sen sees literacy as one of the elements of empowerment which raises the agency of women, but beyond that is the promotion of women's political participation and social wellbeing (Sen, 2000).

While the instrumental benefits are widely acknowledged within the CA framework, such as people's improved income or productivity, these are merely one capability which interacts with others (for example literacy), to achieve the end of greater freedoms. Robinson (2003) argues that literacies find their place as both socially structured and individual practices: their use, along with that of other capabilities of different kinds, may

offer opportunities, within a particular social context, for the individual to overcome “unfreedoms”.

Other than looking at literacy as a set of skills for social advancement, Street (1995) emphasises viewing literacy as set of socially embedded practices that vary across communities, where their wider implications and benefits may be highly contextual. Sen recognises that people value things differently in different places, contexts and cultures (Sen, 2000, 2003). Notwithstanding, the use of literacy as one of those capabilities will vary. This view connects well with the concept of multiple literacies as discussed earlier.

There is a growing consensus among academics and practitioners that literacy promotion must first and foremost understand and respect the context of use. This development strengthens cases for dialogue between different approaches or cross-disciplines. In relation to the capability framework, it has been observed that some literacy functionings are relatively easy to measure, even on a cardinal scale, while others are more complex and difficult to capture in official statistics (Gaertner, 1993). To this end, Nussbaum came up with a universal list of central capabilities which does not strictly subscribe to econometric standards (see Nussbaum, 2000a, p. 78-80). Nussbaum argued that every well-meaning government must achieve these capabilities also shared in table 4 below for its citizens (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000b; Walker, 2007).

Although Nussbaum's approach to capabilities was initially challenged for its generalisation and potential for disempowering local communities as opposed to Sen's approach, the two share much more in common. Nussbaum's approach is credited for providing a contrasting rationale for literacy development, as she argues that there are concepts of the good life that crosscut all cultures, globally and a basis for human development and social justice (Nussbaum, 1999, 2000a, 2009, 2011). Her capability theory, rather than being the version of another approach, demonstrates pluralism within the Capability Approach (Robeyns, 2017). Below is a modified table of Nussbaum's list of universal capabilities:

List Of Nussbaum's Central Capabilities

Capability Type	Sub-Categories	Total Capabilities List
Combined Capabilities	Material Capabilities	1. Life 2. Bodily Health 3. Bodily Integrity
	Individual Capabilities	4. Sense, Imagination and Thought 5. Emotions 6. Practical Reasoning
	Relational Capabilities	Affiliation Other Species Play Control over environment

Table 4: Modified Table Capabilities List (1995, p. 83-4)

This list in the last column of the table is a product of combined capabilities which, according to Nussbaum, are appropriate to be developed, and each capability must be complimented by the supportive external environment for the exercise of a functioning (Nussbaum, 2000a). Nussbaum argues that humans are innately equipped with basic capabilities such as speech and language, which are responsible for developing more advanced capabilities (internal capabilities), such as the ability to read and write, enhanced through interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environment. Nussbaum claims that we cannot satisfy the need for one of the capabilities by giving people a larger amount of another. Alternatively, all capabilities are of central importance and are distinct in quality and need to be met for one to live a life that is fully human (Ibid.).

As combined capabilities displayed above, Nussbaum's list is categorised into individual, relational, and material capabilities. The first three; life, bodily health and bodily integrity, appeal to 'material capabilities' where every human has the right to fully access basic services such as healthcare, food and security. The next set comprising sense,

imagination and thought, emotions and practitioner reasoning, relates to 'individual capabilities' and border on people's ability to exercise agency. For instance, adequate education, including literacy, can cultivate our own use of imagination and the senses. It is said that one of the most effective ways of promoting women's control over their environment, and their effective right to political participation, is to promote women's literacy (see Nussbaum, 2000, p. 81). I find this argument problematic, and I discuss this in Chapter Eight.

Both Sen and Nussbaum recognise that education and literacy are a basic capability that affects the development and expansion of other capabilities, and this has widened the scope for discussion. The third category is closely linked to 'relational capabilities', associated with belongingness and social networks such as social groups/families. This particular category has greatly influenced my analysis of women's livelihoods and empowerment as I will showcase in my empirical data.

3.5.2. Literacy Through the Lens of Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach generally presents illiteracy as a significant and avoidable form of capability deprivation (Sen, 2000; Saito, 2003). Evidence based on correlation has established that literacy is related to fundamental issues of human development, which include the attainment of tangible outcomes such as the quality of life or living conditions - the doings and beings (Sen, 2000; Clark, 2005; Nussbaum, 2006). Hence, women's literacy is perceived for its both instrumental and intrinsic benefits, as earlier mentioned (see Nussbaum, 2000a; Sen, 2001). While the CA recognises the non-measurable capabilities such as agency which is associated with being literate, it does not go in-depth to interrogate the processes around this which shape literacy practices in ways that enhance or inhibit women's literacy capabilities. For example, agency here implies that it is a product of functional literacy, but little is known about the complexities of exercising it to attain desired freedoms.

Both Sen and Nussbaum identify agency as a vital element in women's attainment of wellbeing (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000a). However, the notion of agency and

empowerment has a contextual meaning in different cultures and societies, and how it is expressed and valued. Since it is context-driven, there is a need to pay attention to other factors such as economies and sociocultural historical developments of particular societies (Gaertner, 1993). Conversely, it is argued that the current assumption is that the Capability Approach projects literacy capabilities as future-oriented, relating to people's potential uses of literacy; how this might enhance their wider freedoms and agency (Maddox, 2008). Regarding policy implications, there is a concern that the dual rationale of literacy (benefits and inherent value/good) does not offer a clear explanation of whether literacy promotion should be conditional upon instrumental benefits or unconditionally supported as an intrinsically valuable good (see *Ibid.*).

Fitting literacy into the broader CA framework has encouraged me to ask questions such as: *“How does literacy as social practice contribute to enhancing wider capabilities in women’s livelihoods?”* Taking a wider lens of analysis would involve looking at the significance of literacy practices to women's livelihoods, rather than just focusing on skills (see Barton and Hamilton, 2000, p. 13). This is how the social theory of literacy has inspired my thesis.

3.6. Social Theory of Literacy and Capabilities Approach: My Conceptual Framework

While NLS has challenged the dominant models of literacy through the application of the socially situated model, the CA has equally challenged the radical economic driven model to Human Development that solely focuses on workforce productivity and skills acquisition (e.g. literacy) via institutional training, and have opted for an expanded definition of Human Development (Nussbaum, 2000b, 2000a; Sen, 2000). The radical economic model also ignores important components in Human Development such as gender. Jackson (2002) proposed that gender related research can also move beyond gender gaps, as often portrayed in education and health, to questions of autonomy, leadership and voice. This also emanated from the limitations of the economic driven model and its failure to theorise gender equality beyond class. The CA has enabled

researchers to look at gender roles, relations, and resistance, whereas these differentiations are largely ignored within the economic model (Kanbur, 2002).

Using the NLS would have sufficed to provide access to in-depth account of women's literacies, but I was also interested in how these are shaped by social relations. What the Capabilities Approach offers is a lens through which to explore how literacies and outcomes of situated learning might contribute to valued capabilities in the various social contexts of women's livelihoods. Below is the conceptual framework that underpins this study of literacy and learning as a function of women's livelihoods:

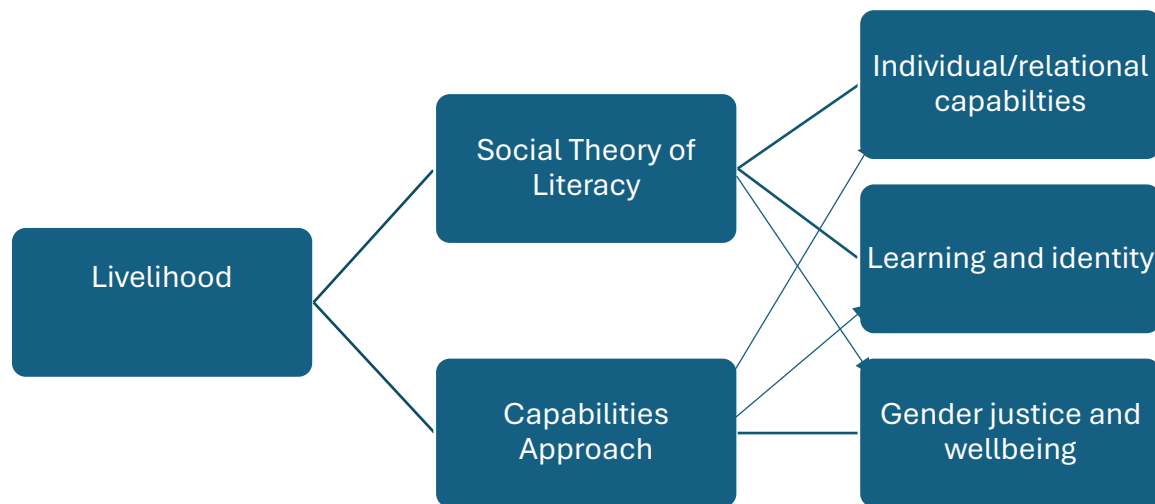


Figure 7: Modified Development Model

This framework is drawn from the problematisation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks as highlighted. Central to this framework is accessibility to livelihood assets; how this shape literacy and learning practices and in turn contribute to wider capabilities and gender justice. For example, there is an assumption that capabilities lead to secured livelihoods while their absence perpetuates social injustice (Nussbaum, 2000b, 2011). In looking at women's literacy and learning, there are core issues to explore and expand on as illustrated by the complex issues raised in each approach. Street (1993) through the NLS, emphasised the importance of inquiring from the locals about multiple literacies

and how they apply it in their daily lives. Adult literacy policies tend to be prescriptive, promoting the acquisition of functional literacy skills. While acknowledging this as wide issue and though contributing to human development, this approach has often led to a mismatch between the local expectations of adult learners, and how development is generally conceptualised. The case in point I discussed in Chapter One of our women's literacy project.

The framework positions women's social practices and learning as central to the discussion, along with capabilities and gender justice. In the next sections, I explore some of these concepts and theories in a more elaborate pattern to give context and raise issues for interrogation. Understanding processes around relational capabilities, gives me a wider view of what goes on in communities (social practices) and how women secure their livelihood aspirations. From Nussbaum's list, I have settled for the individual and relational categories of capabilities as my starting point.

3.7. Literacies and Women's Agency, Power and Empowerment

At the centre of women engaging in literacy practices is how women exercise agency to pursue their livelihood activities. The concept of agency, as earlier demonstrated, has a strong connection with participation. Agency is described as a form of women's empowerment and can manifest in different forms across different social and cultural contexts (Sen, 1999). In simplistic terms, agency entails individuals being able to reflect on the options available before them and make personal choices, even though these same choices might not be very satisfying (Sen, 1999, 2001). Another close definition is where agency is described as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them... It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Suffice to mention that even exercising agency happens in the context of social relations and power.

The discussion of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984, 1995; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007) recognises agency as expressed by individuals in different social and

cultural contexts, with implications for power relations. Agency as a form of empowerment goes hand-in-hand with choice (see Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 2001). For example, Kabeer (1999, p. 437) describes 'choice' as depicting one's ability to exercise agency and points at three important elements to successfully achieve this:

- Resources – also identified as preconditions that include material, human (skills, literacy, education) and social resources (social relationships) which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice.
- Agency – expressed through bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, etc.
- Achievements – particular ways of being and doing, realised by different individuals.

Hence, choice is a crucial aspect of livelihood aspirations and has been a key argument that Nussbaum uses to discuss people's freedoms to choose the life they consider most valuable. Admittedly, 'choice' is also entangled in the relations of power and identity, even as women engage in literacy practices.

I find the concepts of power and identity deeply connected to choice crucial in the processes of participation and capability development. I note the different views on power even as I explore the social relations and practices around women's livelihoods. Some literature portrays power as a commodity which not everyone can have, although Wenger (1998, p. 191) characterises it as "primarily the ability to act in line with the enterprises we pursue." I use Lukes's (2005) description of power as manifesting in "two distinct variants... 'power to' and 'power over,' where the latter is a subspecies of the former" (ibid., p. 69). 'Power to' "indicates a 'capacity', a 'facility', an 'ability'" (ibid., p. 34). I am aware that there is always a tendency to conflate the two terms, 'power to' versus 'power over'. The 'power over' is both "relational and asymmetrical", and "to have this form of power is to have power over another or others" (ibid., p. 73).

Seemingly, Nussbaum advocates for both forms of power. For example, in Section 3.4.1., I discussed 'power over' with regards to 'control over resources'. In the context of women

gaining 'power over' resources and the ability to exercise the right of political participation (power to). Nussbaum argues that in pursuing relational capabilities (affiliations), women are especially likely to be the losers when the good of a group is promoted as such, without asking about hierarchies of power and opportunity internal to the group (Nussbaum, 2000).

My interest in the study is to explore both the 'power to' and 'power over'. This can be linked to women's ability to make independent choices as individuals or collectively, as a form of empowerment for women (see Nussbaum, 2000a). Exploring the 'power over' also links to the social justices and opportunities within communities. Therefore, 'power over' and 'power to' both amount to forms of empowerment. In this thesis, exploring women's literacy practices gives me an opportunity to interrogate the power dynamics within livelihoods and relational capabilities especially in the African context. It should be noted that the notion of pursuing capabilities is framed differently in the African context, with more emphasis on collective capability which I look at in the next section.

3.8. Livelihoods and Capabilities: An African Context

As an extension to the discussion of capabilities, I look at how individual and relational capabilities in the capability framework (Nussbaum, 2000b, 2009), resonate with the African *ubuntu* philosophy. For instance, an individual's capability to "affiliate" (Nussbaum's term in the central list) is reframed as a communal process, dependent on group solidarity rather than solitary choice. However, the CA's individualistic leanings can overlook relational dynamics important in non-Western contexts. The operationalisation through '*ubuntu*' addresses these nuances through what this concept envisages.

Primarily associated with the 'Nguni' people of Southern Africa, *ubuntu* permeates a wider section of the sub-Saharan region among the Bantu-speaking people. Hence, the notion of *ubuntu* capability embraces social justice and wellbeing as it is premised on promoting human values and dignity. Within the *ubuntu* philosophy, each person exists because others do, and interactions between people are drawn on mutual respect, tolerance, interdependence and cooperation to the extent that others' lives and wellbeing

are inextricably linked to the individual's life and wellbeing (Hoffmann and Metz, 2017; Migheli, 2017). The *ubuntu* philosophy borders on 'social relations and networks' and 'values for the public good' (Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas, 2023). While the Capability Approach as popularised in the Western world is concerned with pursuing individual capabilities to achieve human flourishing (functionings e.g. individual rights) based on fairness and social justice (Sen, 2000), the African conceptualisation of capabilities focuses on pursuing positive relationships with others in communal terms, or relations of fellowship, such that these relationships have fundamental value on people's capacities (Metz and Gaie, 2010; Hoffmann and Metz, 2017). The concept of *ubuntu* is embodied in the meaning of humanness and finds expression in communal contexts rather than in contexts where individualism is most valued (Molefe, 2016; Rapatsa, 2016). At its core, *ubuntu* infuses the CA with a relational ontology, shifting from isolated agency to interconnected flourishing. With *ubuntu*, morality is relational in the sense that the only way to develop one's humanness is to relate with others in a constructive way for everyone's wellbeing.

As discussed in Section 3.5.1., Sen (1999) has explained how wellbeing is a dynamic process for assessing individual valued freedoms for a life worth living, and highlights conversion factors¹⁵ (circumstances) that can limit or enable individuals to exercise their freedom. The thesis also captures how *ubuntu* as a capability matters to rural women and work alongside other capabilities within the newly developed framework. This framework provides an opportunity to look at the valued outcomes in relation to women's gender justice and wellbeing; focusing on their social interaction as they participate in learning and literacy activities. This does not preclude a focus on individual capabilities and how these relate to communal interests and wellbeing.

Biney (2014) describes the concept of *ubuntu* as equally embodied in African humanism, encompassing various political ideologies espoused by Pan-Africanist leaders on the continent that have influenced its political and economic discourses. In Zambia, African Humanism was spearheaded by the first Republican President Kenneth Kaunda between 1964 and 1991, anchored on reconstructing a moral, social order that was compatible

¹⁵ persons different abilities to convert resources into functionings (Robeyns, 2017).

with African values and way of life —one which centred on the communal and extended family (Sekwat, 2000). The significant tenets of humanism were about creating an egalitarian society by promoting political, economic, social and inclusiveness, which valued social relations and kinships (Sekwat, 2000; Biney, 2014). While the goal for capability development might be personal fulfilment, the *ubuntu* framework argues that this should not come at the expense of taking undue advantage of others. The emphasis in the *ubuntu* is on the reciprocity of action between the ‘self’ and the ‘group’ and ‘vice-versa’. *Ubuntu* as a capability clearly resonates with Nussbaum’s individual and relational capabilities, but I am aware of the visibly tensions in the use of these two framings. Particularly that ubuntu's communitarianism approach may undermine the CA's emphasis on individual scrutiny and autonomy, risking cultural imposition or diluted universality in liberal democracies. Despite this, the integration of *ubuntu* in this framework is part of promoting epistemic justice which far outweighs limitations when operationalised inclusively. In the context of interdependence, the *ubuntu* philosophy not only fosters relationships among humans, but also broadens its ethical reach to include non-human animals and the spiritual world, promoting a holistic view of community livelihoods (Mutanga and Haihambo, 2024).

My study situates itself deep in the African context and finds the *ubuntu* philosophy very relevant in looking at women's literacy practices and learning strategies. I was able to observe it through this contextual inquiry of women's literacy practices and learning which I share in the next chapter. Additionally, exploring capabilities that could contribute to Nussbaum’s capability list. In so doing, I bring a fresh perspective to it, recognising how *ubuntu* shape the power dynamics of the patriarchal system in the community, including participation and negotiation, within the identities of women’s groups and other social domains. These key issues speak to social justice within communities. I discuss forms of justice later in this chapter and pinpoint ones emerging from women’s social practices.

3.9. Conceptualising Gender Relations

I have identified the gender dimension as crucial to understanding rural women's livelihoods. Cornwall (2002) argues that existing institutions and relations of power can be replicated within newly created arena, through how spaces are managed—for example, where women sit at the back, or the association that people may have with a particular place. In relation to this study, the association with particular events/activities can also mean that relations of power are difficult to disrupt. Here, I take a gendered approach-based ideology, which Simbolon (1998, p. 15) defines as "the way a group perceives the proper social roles of men and women in certain sociocultural contexts based on the sexual-biological differences of being male and female". This definition also acknowledges that gender is conceptualised differently in different cultures. By implication, power relations and hierarchies evolve around the socially constructed roles assigned to the two genders.

Underpinned by this understanding, in my study, I looked at whether existing processes or institutions in the community seemed to enhance participation or reproduce the same inequalities that perpetuate unequal power relations.

Inequalities are to a significant extent perpetuated by how gender is conceptualised in societies. There is a tendency to conflate biological sexual differences and gender differences, creating the belief that all observed differences in roles, capacities and aptitudes between men and women within a given context, are attributable to their biology and therefore cannot be changed (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 2000; Momsen, 2009). Kabeer and Subrahmanian (2000) add that such societies exhibit significant overlaps of these issues as displayed in the lives of men and women, while others maintain the rigid status quo that strictly maintains this distinct gender divide between men and women. Momsen (2009) contends that since different places and societies have different practices that have implications for gender relations, there is a need to exercise awareness of this heterogeneity within a certain global homogeneity of gender roles. Through examining women's literacy practices, I focused on capturing these gendering practices embedded in the social institutions and livelihood activities I encountered in the field.

3.9.1. Gender Relations and Equality Dynamics

In pursuing gender relations, I try to discuss equality broadly. Firstly, “gender relations are always power relations” (Harding, 1996, p. 437 in Flannery and Hayes, 2000, p. 6). As Fricker (2007) argues, gender is one arena of identity power, and, like social power more generally, identity power can be exercised actively or passively. Gender carries different meanings in the context of equality such as equal access to opportunities regardless of gender (value-neutral meaning). Secondly, the social relations of gender (social processes and relations between men and women) and thirdly, the attributes of the person while acknowledging that these are changeable and entail freedom and agency (Walker, 2007a, p. 89-90).

Although I focused mostly on gender relations in different social spaces, I remained alert to all three forms of equality and the ways in which they interlink. For example, in the third type of equality, “women and girls from different families or places, 'do gender' differently at different moments in their lives, driven by different factors such as demands of social structures (e.g. family) or because of negotiations and contestations that a woman is able to make” (Walker, 2007, p. 90). Walker gives an example of how women attending literacy projects in Nepal ‘did gender’ differently in settings organised by international development assistance, and in settings that linked to community or personal priorities (Walker, 2009). Of course, the three different meanings of gender equality signal different approaches to thinking about equality and justice. As Cin (2017) has argued, without gender justice, the world should forget about equality, as any attempt or strategy towards development is likely to fail. Momsen (2009) discusses the unfair gendered division of labour in some areas of Africa; how women take up more significant roles and responsibilities within their livelihoods, especially in rural areas.

The gender disparities in literacy rates shown in the Human Development Reports (HDR) are also a pervasive reminder of women's marginalisation across the livelihood spectrum (Nussbaum, 2006). In this regard, Kabeer and Subrahmanian (2000) bring in a more nuanced insight into gender inequality issues and allude to the gender relations in family

and kinship in households and extended family networks. They identify these as primary sites, but gender inequality also gets reproduced across a wide range of institutions and policy-making agencies. Hence, the question worthwhile interrogating is how women are repositioning themselves within the social and structural inequalities in Zambia.

3.10. Women and Gender Justice

The issue of gender justice, as reflected in the framework, is an important ingredient to understanding women's livelihood experiences. I gave insights into women's livelihoods in Zambia in Chapter Two. Jacquette (1990) looks at gender justice from three competing criterion: equality, merit and need as popularised by feminist advocates in the development context. For example, Mama (1995) argues that black women faced a wide range of multiple struggles and the dominant order, which was both racially oppressive in gendered ways and sexually oppressive in racialised ways. Yet as black women, they took steps to liberate their hearts and minds from the constraining legacies of their oppressed position.

In interrogating gender relations in the Zambian context, I draw on some feminist arguments to reflect on perceived social injustices and gender relations debates, knowing that the two are deeply intertwined. Nancy Fraser refers to justice as 'parity of participation' and draws on a social justice system based on three dimensions: 'recognition', 'redistribution' and 'participation' (Fraser, 2008). Fraser elaborates that "justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life" (ibid., p. 11).

Here, I relate to all three dimensions as overarching themes, which, in my view, relate closely to understanding gender equality. For instance, recognitional justice recognises women as a historically marginalised group in the African context and how they situate themselves in different social settings. This is often associated with institutionalised hierarchies that are embedded within cultures. In my case, I sought to explore how processes/politics of different groups and families shape women's participation. To this end, I was interested in social relations at household level and in groups, and differences in the quality of interactions of participants when in women-only or gender-mix groups.

Distributive justice relates to equal access to resources such as land, control over income. As discussed earlier, participation as the third dimension of justice, is also linked to equality of capabilities for leveraging power relations among actors in different social spaces; how women actively participate in decision making or have their voices acknowledged in debates or meetings.

Like many capability scholars, Nussbaum's theory of social justice, centred on the list of ten human capabilities, also draws from Fraser's characterisation of justice. This can be seen in her emphasis on the importance of women's participation through control over resources (Nussbaum, 2000a) which relates to distributive justice, or the relational capabilities related to recognition. *Ubuntu* also emphasises mutual respect and cooperation among participants, enhancing a sense of recognition and belonging which resonates with recognition and participatory justices. It is said that "overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2008, p. 16). In terms of institutionalised obstacles, I looked at the various social domains I identified in the field, as avenues for literacy and learning practices, and how these might influence women's participation.

While Nussbaum's central capabilities raise global awareness of social justice, her emphasis on individual agency seems akin to attaining capabilities and functionings. Nussbaum (2000) highlights high levels of women's illiteracy in many countries compared to their male counterparts, as a form of injustice. She also acknowledges the complexities of relying on concepts that originate in one culture to describe and assess realities in another whilst maintaining that her central list of capabilities provides a good guide (Nussbaum, 2009).

It is in the public domain, though, that black women in Africa face broader historical patterns of marked injustices that go beyond formal access to literacy or education. A study on epistemological access to Higher Education (HE) in South Africa (Morrow, 2009) showed how the conceptualisation of HE 'access' was limiting in capturing the broader inequalities that marginalised groups faced accessing quality education, calling for an expanded meaning than initially conceptualised. This underscores the danger of

assessing equality or social justice based on equity access (numbers) and ignoring other underlying factors outside the statistical framework.

I mentioned in Chapter Two, the various gender policy initiatives that the government and other stakeholders have advanced. In the following section, I discuss the literature on empowerment to understand whether these policy initiatives are addressing women's gender justice and empowerment or perpetuating some form of injustice.

3.10.1. A Critical Reflection on Gender Justice and Women's Livelihoods

Empowerment in Zambia

Discourses around gender justice have generally centred on women's livelihood empowerment. Within feminist scholarship, concerns have been raised in relation to what are claimed as forms of empowerment dominating public policy discourses. Firstly, studies on gender have shown contrasting findings on how the term 'empowerment' has been misconstrued. For example, a study on women's participation in the informal sector (see Leach, 1996), revealed that most Non-Formal Education (NFE) programmes designed to empower women continued to reflect the same disparities and biases common in the mainstream formal education. The basic literacy training for women reinforced the gender roles of women as housewives and mothers, rather than on literacy and numeracy for employment.

In Africa, the term empowerment exhibits many indicators that can mean different things in different research undertakings (Fiedrick and Jellema, 2003). Empowerment in other fields might also mean achieving 'power over' resources, or in another dimension, refer to the consciousness and perceptions of individuals or the 'power to' express and act on one's desires (Ibid, 2003). In relation to policies and legal frameworks, Rao (2017) argues that state policies and equitable laws that seek to empower women by ensuring access to productive assets like land and credit, largely depend on identifying the specific structures and relations that can enable or constrain this process. Furthermore, interventions of this nature have generally yielded poor results in sub-Saharan Africa and

South Asia (Ibid.). As with Cin's (2017) expanding capabilities of others, there is some resonance of empowerment with '*ubuntu*' which is about communal benefits.

In the case of Zambia, previous studies on women's empowerment have shown similar persistent anomalies within gender inequality discourses (see Chapter Two). Longwe (1998) noted the increased misinterpretation of the term 'empowerment' and argued that the formal education systems purportedly promoting women's empowerment, did not advance women's interest in practice. On the contrary, in a patriarchal system, formal education was simply perpetuating male dominance and women's subordination. In the context of gender, the empowerment question further reignited her 'policy evaporation' debate (Longwe, 1997) — the tendency for the policy to evaporate bit by bit based on the wrong approach adopted or losing steam between the formulation stage and implementation. Longwe argued that women's empowerment could only be adequately demonstrated through women's access to resources by dismantling, once and for all, the very rigid structures that impeded women's progress towards secured livelihoods (Longwe, 1998). Longwe (1998) therefore questioned the viability of gendered-oriented empowerment programmes in significantly impacting women's livelihoods.

Overall, these arguments highlight some of the critical issues and nuances at present that emerge from my study regarding women's livelihoods. Since my focus is a village community, I adopt the term 'community' to refer to "people who share a common locality" (Kepe, 1999, p. 419, citing Selznick, 1996). This is usually the same concept that the government and aid agencies adopt in Zambia when mobilising people through various programmes within their localities. While I adopt this definition of a community, I am aware that apart from the elements cited above, the community could have different interpretations and could mean other factors such as "concerted activity and shared belief" (Selznick, 1992, p. 359). I use this concept to draw the parameters of the women's livelihood activities as they are situated in one locality.

3.11. Conclusion

As stated in my introduction, my overarching research was framed to help me develop a conceptual framework that would allow me to discuss women's literacy and learning in

relation to livelihoods and human development. Hence, I picked literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984), which led me to a detailed discussion about the various literacy assumptions and models of literacy, while showcasing their shortfalls. I then critiqued the Capability Approach, the most widespread framework for development, as being over-economistic in defining human development and well-being, by illustrating some of its limitations in relation to literacy. I gave my rationale for my conceptual framework, which I developed to promote dialogue between the two theoretical and conceptual frameworks so as to adequately understand women's literacy in the context of livelihoods and African *ubuntu*. Key concepts such as participation, social justice, agency and power helped bring out some of the complexities of literacy and learning in relation to human development.

Throughout my discussion, I drew concepts from the two approaches by exploring some contestations emerging from these theoretical lenses. The key argument in my discussion is that understanding literacy and development goes beyond normative terms or binaries and needs to be interrogated from different angles, rather than a one-size-fit-all approach. Since my thesis is on women's livelihoods through literacy and learning, I took an interest in extending my discussion to key themes around gender relations and social justice in Zambia, drawing from the *ubuntu* concept, and how capabilities and empowerment as conceptualised in the Western world tend to vary in the African context .

Chapter Four – Methodology

4.0. Introduction

In this chapter, I explain my methodological framework I used to collect and analyse the data on women's lived experiences around literacies and learning. In relation to literacy, the goal was to look at how literacy is used rather than how it is learned (see McCaffery and Street, 2017). Hence, my decision to settle for an ethnographic study. In conducting an ethnographic investigation, I was able to understand the context in which the social practices of people's daily activities, specifically those that involve literacy and learning, are embedded. Papen (2005a) argues that literacy practices are always embedded in the social and cultural context. Using this methodological framework, I was able to explore the livelihood experiences of rural women through the social practice lens.

I will also share some of the challenges and dilemmas of doing ethnographic study in my own country and community, where I shared many commonalities; how the data collection process provided some methodological dilemmas, and how I navigated the research field. Particularly, I will explain the roles I played during data collection in relation to accessing the site, reflecting on my positionality and how such roles may have impacted my study.

4.1. Research Orientation: Framing the Methodological Approach

My background experience as a development worker in an adult literacy project, as discussed in Chapter One, led to this methodological design. Guided by the overarching research question and drawing on the key concepts of literacy and learning discussed in Chapter Three, my overarching research question was: *“How do rural women's livelihood activities influence literacy and learning in contributing to their capabilities, gender justice and wellbeing?”* My aim to situate women's lived experiences in the development framework generated four sub research questions, to specifically look at how literacy, learning and gender justice are enmeshed in notions of development and wellbeing:

- i. What are rural women's livelihood activities and how do these shape their literacy practices?
- ii. How does non-formal and informal learning enhance rural women's capabilities?
- iii. What are women's perceptions of justice, and how does literacy and learning contribute to gender justice and wellbeing?
- iv. What are the implications of literacy and learning as social practices for understanding capabilities and human development?

These questions required a narrative approach (increased voice of participants) (Sluka and Robben, 2007), as well as a context-driven research design, grounded and ontologically situated in a constructivist worldview where reality is perceived as socially constructed and has varying meanings to different people (Mertens, 2020).

The first research question is an attempt to understand participants' everyday literacy practices by exploring their literacy uses, ideologies, discourses and meanings, constructed within their social world that shape their aspirations and identity. The second research question builds on the first and looks at how through literacy practices, women encounter processes of learning as situated and part of social practices. The aspect of capabilities developed through learning in different social domains, becomes the key focus in this follow-up question. The third question is crucial in exploring local systems and understanding how these shape perceptions of justice, as women engage in livelihood activities. This is addressed by exploring social relations in the community, looking at: women's experiences in the wider context of living in a community that is immersed in its own systems; the daily encounters of women navigating gender justice and pursuing individual and collective aspirations. The final question is discussed as a reflection of the key concepts mentioned and themes that emerge in their implication to policy and practice.

Given these questions, the constructivist paradigm where "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33) seemed the most pertinent and useful to this inquiry. It is also a perspective that fits with my own stance, since it recognises the significance of interactions in meaning-making and how these are continually revised. For instance, when women construct meanings

of wellbeing or agency in their local context. Epistemologically, I adopted an interpretivist viewpoint to explore subjective views on meanings and experiences of literacies and wellbeing. The assumption here is that data, interpretations, and outcomes occur in a context in which participants conduct their lives. This is equally true of those conducting the research: these are not just participants' imagination, but an outcome of their sources and interpretations made explicit in the narrative (see Mertens, 2020,p.19). According to interpretivism, "...people of different cultural backgrounds under different circumstances and at different times make different meanings and so create and experience different social realities" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p. 140). Hence, the meaning of knowledge is captured from a prism of cultural lenses to determine what could be considered legitimate knowledge (Mertens, 2019).

Ontologically, my study is a narrative project, seeking to gather stories from participants, including practitioners and policymakers —hear their accounts of literacies and learning in the wider context of livelihoods. These viewpoints frame my research participants as 'active knowers' in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning. The ethnographic approach is hence suited for this investigation as it enables a deep dive into the participants' social world.

4.2. Ethnography as a Methodological Framework

There is no consensus about the definition of the term ethnography. Generally, it is defined as "...a research approach in which the researcher attempts to understand the beliefs, values and cultures of a group or community in their own terms" (Gebre *et al.*, 2010, p. 393). Ethnography allows one to engage with participants in their daily lives and social practices. Firstly, I chose ethnography because I wanted to explore how the reframing of literacy as social practice and learning in outside spaces not designated for learning might be contributing to women's capabilities and wellbeing. Secondly, it is about how ethnography can illuminate and/or move forward to the existing dialogue around literacy and development. Lastly, ethnographic studies have not been widely used by the research community in Zambia, even less so in the area that this study sought to investigate. While face-to-face interaction with participants is associated with

qualitative studies, it is the in-depth approach, observing behaviours, beliefs and motivations of people that is associated with ethnography.

Another important aspect is the notion of being there in the field, in the environment, observing and absorbing the information rather than relying on the descriptions of others (Becker and Geer, 2004). The ethnographic approach is often associated with the idea of the case study. In using a case study method, I followed the conceptualisation that a "case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake, 1995, p. 443). In other words, I studied my chosen case ethnographically. In the next section, I explain how I selected one rural community I introduced in Chapter Two as my case study and the local women I chose as participants.

4.2.1. Justification For a Case Study

As I stated in Chapter Two, I recruited women from Chabwera Village in the Eastern Province of Zambia. I chose to situate women at the centre of community livelihoods and explore the different dimensions of relations such as social, gender and economic, as I highlighted in Chapter Three, and how this might influence gender (in)equality and wellbeing. According to Mitchell (1984, p. 237), "case studies are detailed presentation of ethnographic data relating to some sequence of events from which the analyst seeks to make some theoretical inference". A case study gives a detailed account of a series of events or actions of actors. For example, following the notion that cases are 'bounded systems' (Stake, 1995; Punch, 2009), I had to decide what to include or study in my cases which comprised social groups and women as individual case studies. Firstly, I considered the presentation of case material that connected with my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Gluckman (1961, p. 7-8) in (Ellen, 1984, p. 237) explains that "Each case is selected for its appropriateness at a particular point in the argument; and cases coming close together in the argument might be derived from the actions or words of quite different groups or individuals".

There were things that I was interested in exploring based on my research questions. In choosing the case study, I did not opt for a 'representative' or 'typical' case; instead, I

followed Mitchell's (1984, p. 240) notion of “telling cases”. Mitchell distinguishes how a ‘telling case’ is more suitable for ethnography over a ‘typical case’: the former places emphasis on the circumstances surrounding a case and brings to the fore the previously obscure theoretical relationships whereas the latter is more about analytical exposition (ibid.). This also implies that procedures for mobilising the configuration of data for different events differ. For example, my telling case included collecting and analysing data around literacy events and learning occurring in the community, the social relations, and how these were situated in the broader context of socio-cultural practices and the wider society. This enabled for valid connections between events and phenomena that could have previously been ignored, to be established theoretically (Mitchell, 1984) .

Using this framing of the case study, I also engaged with voices in the broader context: policymakers, practitioners, community members and families, to situate these telling cases through women’s narratives. Mitchell (1984) has argued that undertaking a case study approach is not about studying other cases, but simply understanding the case at hand. A case study, being a bounded context, must be identified at an early stage of the research, and this can refer to an individual, family, community, and so on (Punch, 2009). In this case study, it was women and how they interacted within the social relations of their livelihoods. Data was collected through multiple data sources of evidence, to create a case study database and maintain the chain of evidence (see Yin, 2018). This strategy helped me to provide evidence that would help build my discussion about women’s literacies and learning experiences.

4.2.2. Negotiating Access

I just arrived in Zambia for my fieldwork and started to figure out about visiting my potential study sites, but before that, to put things in place. I first engaged in a scoping exercise to identify a suitable site. Firstly, I considered a community that has experienced either literacy or agricultural programmes or one with such ongoing activities. Secondly, a community that had a range of social institutions and communal areas within the vicinity that reflected the kind of livelihoods on a daily basis such as presence of religious buildings (churches/mosques), cultural/burial sites, school, clinic, marketplace and

farming fields. I identified these as vital spaces to observe my participants' interaction with literacy and learning experiences. Thirdly, a research site which I could easily access at any time of the year without any physical or cultural barriers. A community where I was mostly familiar with the language so that I did not have to start learning it first. Finally, I looked for a community that was typically far from town and less influenced by urban culture while sharing this homogeneity description based on the uniformity of language and culture.

I then had to prepare materials for my fieldwork, including translating my participant forms into the local language for the community. Having identified one site, I proceeded to meet with local authorities to gain permission to access the site. I visited the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) in the district where the site is located and explained about my study. I was told that since my study would be conducted mostly in the village and not schools, it would not need the involvement of the DEBS office. Instead, I only needed to seek permission from the chief of the area, who had the ultimate jurisdiction over villages in the chiefdom. The DEBS office promised to be available to provide any information or interviews on matters in line with their services, if anything, as the study progressed.

I decided to pay a courtesy visit to the chief of the area where my chosen village site was located. I shared good relations at a personal level with the chief, because we had previously implemented projects in his chiefdom. To some extent, my personal relationship with him influenced my decision to choose this area because I surmised correctly —that I would face fewer hurdles in accessibility: there are generally rigid protocols associated with meeting traditional leaders in the province. Thus, having a pre-existing relationship was a significant benefit. On 5th March 2022, I took with me a letter with all the details of my research project and contact information to meet the chief, who gladly permitted me to proceed with my study.

4.2.3. Accessing My Research Site (Chabwera Village)

In this section, I share an extract from my diary on what transpired on my first visit to my study site and how I navigated some of the early dilemmas and challenges that I encountered. I knew the site just like other options I had on my table, because of my previous visits to the many areas in the district.

I set out on my first research trip on 26th March 2022, three years after my last visit, under a project we launched as an organisation for the community. My expectations of the place were nothing more than what I envisioned on my last trip: the same physical appearance, as the period of my absence was relatively short. However, the visit reminded me of the story of a 'fish and turtle' and 'the return walk to dry land' (see Rogers and Street, 2012, p. 18), also see Appendix 2; which helped me to think through the new expectations and how I was going to navigate my new identity. In this story, Brian Street emphasises the need to abandon one's position and adopt another, something I did. I embraced my new identity as a researcher as opposed to what I always positioned myself as a development worker. It was not easy to abandon previous identities in a community where some people already knew me. Their own expectations and perceptions of me and might not have made the same shift that I was attempting to make.

On this day, I arrived in the village around 13:30, after some 45 minutes of drive to the area. It was still the harvesting period, and the village looked deserted. I was immediately recognised by one gentleman I name as 'Uncle Rex,' because he always called me 'malume' (uncle) each time I visited the area. He came over to welcome me, ushering me to a chair in the corridor of his house as he greeted me.

"Mwalandilidwa malume!" (You're welcome uncle) as he stretched out for a handshake.

I am not surprised by his hospitality. He considers me a distant relative and calls my grandmother his aunty, since she is his mother's sister. We have a brief chat about life in general, and I explain to him the purpose of my visit. He volunteers to take me to the gatekeeper, who is the representative of the chief and group headman of the village. When we arrive at his residence, I notice the gatekeeper's excitement about my visit. He too, keeps introducing me to every member of his family who comes to greet me as a 'mdzukululu' (grandchild of the family) of 'amai Tikambenji' (grandmother's name) for easy description of my identity. This

reinforces my relatedness with his family. The grandmother left this village some time back and lives at her farm. I quickly think about how this is going to be a challenge to change my identity and how we relate with each other going forward. [Fieldnotes reflections: 22/03/2022]

The gatekeeper was the only gentleman seated on a chair, while the women sat on the floor on reed mats. At least I was familiar with some common cultural practices in rural areas and was not surprised by this, especially as he was also the chief. He called out to one lady, whom I later learnt was his junior wife, to serve us 'thobwa' (a traditionally homemade drink). The woman squatted on her knees while serving us thobwa. Uncle Rex then briefly explained to him about my visit, from which point I took over and explained in more detail. I then gave him my introductory letter and mentioned to him that I had also paid a courtesy visit to His Royal Highness of the Chiefdom, and that he should feel free to confirm this with him directly in case of doubts. Uncle Rex was asked to read the letter on his behalf as we all listened attentively. In the end, he gladly accepted my request to conduct my research in the village, stating that this was a positive move, as such activities would lead to future developments. I realised at this point that I needed to deal with a lot of expectations about my presence in the village that I would not be in a position to fulfil.

4.2.4. Mapping Out The Site

Before leaving, I asked Uncle Rex to take me around the village because I wanted to confirm certain things that I had in mind that would be important for my fieldwork. Together, we took a transect walk around the village. I learnt that this place that I have always perceived to be one big village was, in fact, an amalgamation of three sub-villages, each having its name, leader and boundaries. I never paid attention to these subdivisions and details during my previous visits. The boundaries were not clearly marked on paper, but rather, the locals knew them using landmarks such as a building or local trees. Nothing was ordinary on the site; even collapsed or abandoned buildings were added to the markers and descriptions of the whole village setup. Some of the artefacts or physical

features were deliberately untampered yet played a significant role in their location. The village was not connected to the national power grid. At this point, I quickly figured out where I could find accommodation with access to power for my laptop that would ensure my health and safety. There were only two boreholes for an entire village with over 100 households, and the safety of the drinking water was not guaranteed for someone like me trying to adapt to the local livelihood.

I was aware of the school in the community, but there was no market. The only place to buy groceries was from a few small makeshift shops with simple groceries. Other sites displayed their merchandise, such as tomatoes, relish for sale, on their makeshift stands. Everyone looked at me with curiosity as we walked around with Uncle Rex. I noticed gestures and discussions, seemingly wondering what I was doing in the village.



Figure 8: The temporal shop called 'Kanthemba' and makeshift stand for food products

When I asked how the villagers did their shopping in bigger quantities, I was told that they needed to travel to a nearby sub-centre. Midway through the village, there was a church where people congregated for worship. Across the road, opposite the church, a group of

women sat on the ground under the shade of a tree, watching and listening to their children playing and singing in the church building.



Figure 9: Church building

"It is not common for women to sit like that during this time," said Uncle Rex and the two gentlemen who accompanied me on the village tour agreed with him.

The other church, a makeshift structure, was located at the end of the village, giving me insights into the various religious practices in the community. When I asked whether all members in the village belonged to the Christian religion, the two gentlemen answered that *there were few Muslim members even though their Mosque was outside the village, about 3 km along the main tarred road.* We then moved to the other end of the village entrance, where there was an abattoir. I was told it was the only one in the entire area and the trading centre's main supply of meat carcasses. At the end of the village, there was an open-air drinking place run by a local trader; the only customers were men.

Below is the detailed sketch map of the village I was able to draw and spot the most important areas of activities.

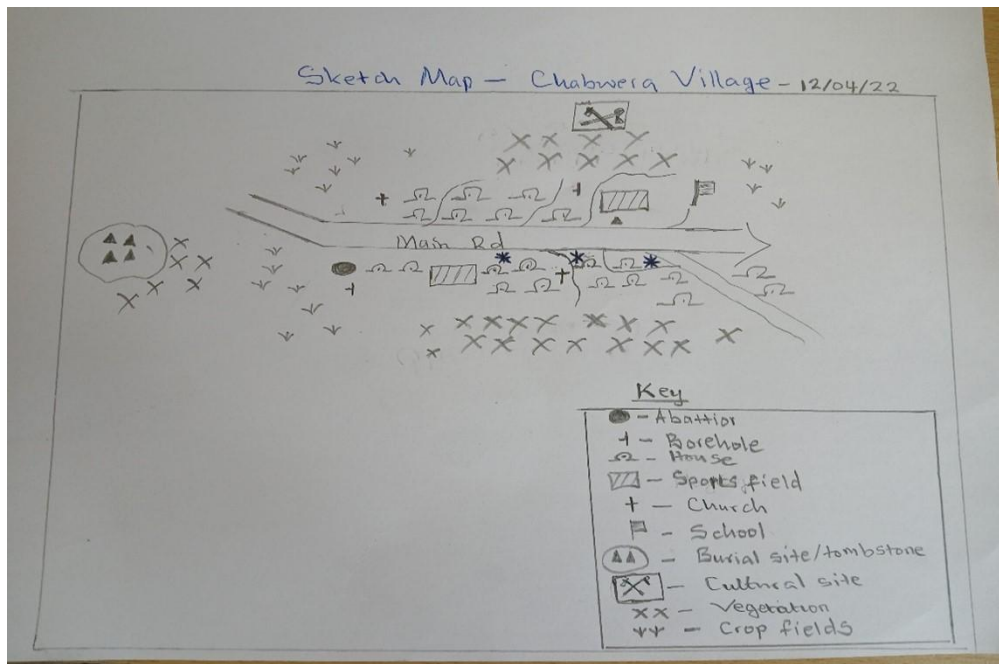


Figure 10: Sketch-map – Chabwera Village

The first tour of the village site gave me some level of satisfaction and appreciation of what I was going to be observing. I realised that staying right in the village, especially at night without power, would be quite challenging even if I wanted to. I needed to frequently charge my gadgets, but already the country was experiencing prolonged hours of loadshedding, accessing health and sanitation services in the area was not guaranteed. Additionally, living as neighbours amid people related to me would constantly provide ethical dilemmas and unnecessary misunderstandings. Hence, I decided to rent a house at nearby sub-centre (mini-town) which was about 3.5 km. I would be cycling to the village, which would only take about 10 to 15 minutes. I shared these concerns with my supervisory team, and my decision on how I wanted to proceed with my fieldwork. This also meant that I would have ample time to do fieldwork during the daytime and catch up on my field notes later in the evening.

4.2.5. First Community Meeting, First Implied Consent

My first meeting with the community proved to be extremely important for establishing rapport and gaining the endorsement of the community. It shaped my future relations with the community and how I navigated around issues of consent in the wider space of

the community, which was always not straightforward from an ethnographic standpoint. Below is an extract from my diary on another important day in the early stages of fieldwork, and what I observed:

As per the appointment with the gatekeeper, I travelled on the date of 8th of April to meet the whole village community. I found the gatekeeper waiting for me at an open drinking place with a mounted makeshift shelter made of grass and wood with other gentlemen. They all addressed me as '*atsogoleri mwalandilidwa*' (Our leader you're welcome!). Their reception said a lot about how they regarded me as a societal leader.

The gatekeeper immediately instructed the gentlemen to usher me to the meeting venue. One gentleman, seemingly an *induna*, went round the village, calling everyone to gather at the gatekeeper's palace. I was uncomfortable with meeting at the palace because of his positionality in the community and authority associated with such places. Fortunately, it started showering before many people arrived, and the venue was immediately changed to the local church building. This was an ideal place for people to feel more comfortable. The turnout was good, and I made a few observations as we entered the church building. For example, people sat in columns with women and children sitting in one section, mostly at the back and the men on their own, occupying the front rows. The women were asked to come closer to the front rows but were hesitant to do so. The divide between men and women in terms of seating patterns was quite visible.

Uncle Rex, who was asked to moderate the meeting, took over the programme and asked a volunteer to offer a prayer before the start. One gentleman stood up and offered the prayer. Later, the moderator carried out a roll call for each sub-village with their leaders. He then invited me to introduce myself and the purpose of my visit. I mentioned that though I was a visitor, I was not new to the village. I thought reminding them about my previous visit to the village would be a good way of creating rapport with the community. I then went into the details of my visit, including how I was going to select participants, as everyone listened attentively. I explained my desire to spend a lot of time with women in their day-to-day activities. There were smiles and some laughs, and I picked up on how bizarre it sounded to them for a man like me to spend most of the time with them; I had already seen that men and women generally did not socialise, even in the church building. Later, the three village headmen were allowed to give their vote of thanks. They all urged

their members to embrace me and be as helpful as possible. They seemed to have expectations, viewing the programme as a great opportunity offering future prospects for development. I heard one woman shouting:

“Azibambo mwamvela ka? Sitifuna nsanje!” (You men have heard for yourselves, right? So, we don’t want you to feel jealous!). Everyone laughed!

She was seemingly teasing men who might feel uncomfortable seeing me with their spouses in the long run.

I gave the audience a chance to ask questions or seek clarification, but there were none. The moderator this time insisted that a woman offer a closing prayer. Unfortunately, none of them were willing to volunteer, prompting one of the village headmen to step in and offer the prayer. This made me wonder why, despite being the majority of the audience, the women were reluctant to speak.

4.3. Participant Recruitment

The first day of the meeting was the commencement of rapport-building and being welcomed into the community. My immediate task was to begin by explaining my visit to the community and clarifying some false expectations people might have about my stay. During those early weeks, as I walked about, I also became aware of the range of activities that I could potentially observe. Sometimes it was challenging to grasp the number of activities happening in the community.

The early months were also the time for repositioning myself as a researcher, transitioning from my previous role as a development worker to the community. There was so much excitement around my presence and people really trying to understand what I would be doing. Sometimes, I asked different categories of people, the men, young boys and girls, couples, what they had heard about me, just to get an understanding of the conversations that were going on. I paid attention to the gender and public social relations between men and women, the existing tensions between families or sub-villages, just so that I did not inadvertently fuel conflict further by seeming to side with one group over another. This was also an opportunity to reflect on my power and

positionality in relation to the wider community. I had to understand the workings of the systems within the community, from the ecosystem to the family, and understand the phenomena in the context of relations between people and social groups and the environment.

Robinson-Pant (2016) has pointed out that as researchers, we all have a starting point within the wider context of culture, whether the more essentialised 'large' culture, or the 'small' culture, as we engage with participants. Coming to this community, having been exposed to both Western culture and urban culture, I needed to find a common ground in terms of negotiating the social space. I also needed to understand what people might assume I knew because of sharing the same culture and language, —what could be our differences in contextualising things, as someone coming from the world outside of their community. Sluka (2007) argues that this familiarisation exercise is important in developing meaningful relations with the research participants.

The whole process of participant recruitment lasted three months from the commencement of fieldwork. I was able to build on the rapport I had built with the community. I had two types of consent forms, one for the participants and the other for the practitioners/policymakers. The translated form in the local language was read on the participants' behalf if they opted to do so. They were given the option of signing their signatures or being audio-recorded. The consent form clearly stated the objectives of the study and the withdrawal option at any point in the research without needing permission or giving any reason for their decision.

Initially, my recruitment exercise faced a challenge in dealing with the minimum age eligibility for women participants. The consent form indicated 16 years and above, but my field experience revealed that numerical age was not always the standard measure of adulthood within the local community. I pondered about how I would deal with this dilemma if faced with it, since the government laws considered 16 years and above as a consensual age, although the current Marriage (Amendment) Act of 23 defines a child as anyone below the age of 18 years. The Article 266 of the Zambian Constitution defines a child as "a person who has attained, or is below, the age of eighteen years" and an adult as "a person who has attained, or is above, the age of nineteen years," (Government of Republic of Zambia, 2016). Traditionally, biological markers such as reaching puberty are

a sign of adulthood in this community. The dual system in the country between customary law and statutory law has often operated in antagonism with each other in terms of marriage practices and property rights, as discussed in Chapter Two. Customarily, teenage/adolescent marriage can be considered valid as long as certain requirements have been met in respect of certain ethnic traditions and cultural practices. However, I decided that I would still follow what was indicated in the ethics form if I encountered this dilemma, while respecting the views of the local community.

I took basic steps in terms of my dress code; in that I wanted to blend in with the community. However, I noticed that this had little impact on people's perceptions of me, built over time. It did not matter how I appeared to them because they knew the person I was. This was observed in how I was often called many titles, including by my surname. Notwithstanding, dressing in ordinary clothes made my participants more comfortable when I visited them or accompanied them to different places, including in the fields. Similarly, I always insisted on taking ordinary seats in the audience when attending meetings. The local leaders seated at the high tables were often not always comfortable with this choice as they perceived me as a special guest in the community. With the passage of time, and repeated explanations about my role, did everyone come to understand the reasons behind my preferences.

4.3.1. Recruitment Techniques

One of the techniques I used to identify potential participants was snowballing, which involves starting with key informants who are viewed as knowledgeable about the programme or community (Mertens, 2019). In relation to my study, I applied snowballing through the gatekeeper who was my first key informant when I arrived in the community. During our informal chats, he immediately hinted to some of the women in the community who were quite active in many training programmes. Usually, local leaders would know most activities that their subjects were involved in. I did not automatically select such individuals, but it allowed me to do my initial scoping exercise at the community level while I paid visits to some of the names mentioned for a chat. I was

aware of the influence of local leaders on their subjects. Robben (2007) explains that informants tend to reveal unique aspects about themselves because of their social position, opinions and beliefs for their association with the given community or society. I did not disclose to my potential recruitees my conversations with key informants as this would have made them feel compelled to agree to participate. Instead, when talking to them, I used general statements such as, “*people in the community were talking about events A and B, and I was wondering if you were part of such events.*” They would then confirm and even identify other colleagues with whom they participated, which also became a clue for me.

The other technique was purposive sampling, which normally took place during group events I attended. I identified certain women who were often involved in these different events and looked at those who were not actively involved. The sample size, was based on the 'rule of the thumb' (Mertens, 2019), determined by the number of events I needed to observe in the community; the amount of time to spend with my participants and the duration of my stay. Initially, I recruited 15 potential participants, hoping to narrow this down over time. The frequency of contact diminished as other participants moved out of the village for a long stay away, got married, or divorced. Hence, my number went to below 10 participants with whom I could have frequent interactions during field days on an average of four days a week.

4.4. Research Methods

In this section, I discuss in detail the research methods I used to collect data during my fieldwork and reflect on my personal encounters and experiences. I share my experiences using interviews and participant observation as my leading research methods. I also highlight the ethical challenges I encountered in implementing these methods.

4.4.1. Interviews and The Practice of Notetaking

The central data collection method I used was conducting interviews, though some of these were more like conversations than structured ones. Often, an interview drew on specific observations that I had made and the desire to hear what participants had to say. This also worked in reverse, in that an interview could lead me to observe a particular activity or event, in what was an iterative process of data collection, initial analysis and follow-ups.

Most of my conversations would start as unstructured interviews depending on the social space I found myself in, and the people around me. The data I picked up from these informal conversations can be seen as largely opportunistic, allowing me to follow-up on issues that emerged. For example, I would note down observations following a group event such as a church service or group meeting that I had attended and decide to have conversations with my participant afterwards. These informal conversations would sometimes occur at the participant's home as she performed her household chores. The question could be around how they made sense of a loan application form from a particular lending institution; if they understood the contents, their own interpretation and reaction to the form, and how they managed to navigate the application process. I listened attentively and tried to recall as much as possible. I did not write anything at the time. Rather, when my participant went in the house or during my lunch break, I would quickly scribble down some scratch notes for reference later and then proceed with our normal conversation. Informal interviews were particularly useful as they emerged from natural conversations so that participants were more likely to feel free to express personal frustrations about the systems or programmes, or their dissatisfaction with certain requirements.

The semi-structured interviews were one-on-one and mostly took between 30 to 45 minutes. These included different groups: policymakers, practitioners, and participants. Most of the institutions I set up for a follow-up interview were selected after being connected with local programmes that my participants attended. These institutional follow-ups were mostly done in the final stages of my fieldwork. When I visited their offices based on appointment, I would use an interview guide drawn from the issues

emerging from the field observations and initial data analysis. This ensured that the content focused on the crucial issues of the study (see Burns, 2000). I would ask to look at their policy documents/project reports and pamphlets, seeking permission to photograph posters that would be displayed on the walls or noticeboards about the institution's vision and mission and programme activities being implemented; I explained that this would be for my personal reference only.

Throughout my fieldwork but particularly in terms of my conversations, I kept extensive fieldnotes, using three types of notes: headnotes, scratch notes, and fieldnotes. In the evenings, I expanded on these as I read through, retrieving missing information and impressions (see Sanjek, 1990, p. 95). These writing techniques complemented the long hours in the field, absorbing a lot of much information that I could not always write down in one go.

4.4.2. Informal Conversations as Opportunistic Data

My early fieldwork experiences started slowly and involved hanging around the community and simply being in the environment. In that process, I began to juxtapose my insider and outsider positionality to piece together the different things I might focus on. This was another way of gathering data about the community. For instance, I came to learn about a prominent group of women by spending time in the social spaces of men. While this group of men were constructing a maize granary, I would be there playing drafts and listening to stories.

On a different day, a group of women carrying hoes were passing through the community when one gentleman shouted '*azimai ba mending abo*' (*There goes the Women's Mending Group*). I asked the gentleman what the group was all about and if he knew their group leader. He gave me a brief explanation and also gave me the details of a few of the women leaders who I was then able to approach. On this day, I learnt about a new group in the community that became an important one for research purposes, as it involved digital literacy (see Zimba, 2024). Attending this group was hugely significant in terms of

understanding women's agency and their pursuit of both communal and individual aspirations.

In these social spaces, my interlocutors/participants and I co-shaped these conversations. When the conversation seemed to be petering out, I would throw in a topic on a different subject, such as decision-making in the family on a budget or family planning, to get women's perspectives and listen to what each one contributed. For many participants, I believe, the reluctance to disclose was due to shyness rather than a resistance to sharing certain things or unfamiliarity with the questions I asked. In these cases, I would ask follow-up questions to seek clarification or rephrase, and these would sometimes elicit further disclosure. Our frequent interactions meant that I became aware of certain phrases used when women were around men and vice-versa, or euphemisms when children were around and so they could not speak openly.

4.4.3. Participant Observation

Participant observation is central to ethnography, providing "... a situation in which the meanings of words can be learnt with great precision through study of their use in context, exploration through continuous interviewing of their implications and nuances, and use of them oneself under the scrutiny of capable speakers of the language..." (Becker and Geer, 2004, p. 247).

In the community, I tried to be part of every event that took place: I attended group meetings at the church, the palace and joined local self-help groups (SHGs). Quite often, I would be offered a stool to sit on. As earlier mentioned, I often resisted because of the social meaning this carried. I wanted them to treat me as one of them and avoid being perceived as someone of higher social status. Over time, they understood, but sometimes it was more judicious to accept the seat graciously.

At the individual level, I observed personal activities that participants were involved in, such as trading activities, picking out some texts on posters stuck in their homes, and asking questions about them. I looked at how text was written, in what language, and if

they were able to explain it or if it meant anything to them in practice. I checked through personal record books and asked about their use. I often accompanied my participants in different social settings, such as at their homes or in public places like boreholes. Listening to their ongoing conversations allowed me to determine what topics dominated those social spaces. I tried not to interfere in their conversations, but paid attention to their reaction when I approached their spaces for my own reflection. Sometimes, they spoke with gestures, winking at each other. I developed personal strategies of engaging with them when I noticed a sudden quietness. I would give a greeting joke or chip into their conversation, as though I knew its background which would make them break into laughter. Sometimes, I used local phrases I learnt to break the silence such as, '*azimai tiyeni tishebeko*' (ladies let's do some gossip) as though reinforcing the same stereotype, that I too, loved gossiping which was a common perception of the community about women in groups. I often used this phrase which would make them break into laughter, but in a greater way, it made them feel comfortable and carry on with their conversation to show that I was interested in being part of their conversations and never meant any threat of disclosure to anyone.

Participant observation helps check the descriptions against facts, noting discrepancies, such as distortions, which are less likely to be discovered by interviewing alone (Becker and Geer, 2004). The technique is effective where only the interview is used as a source of information about the situation and events that the researcher has not seen. However, in a community like this, one can also get vital information through informal conversations, which I made great use of. For example, I would often visit my participants and check out the observations I made. This allowed me to see the things that were not reported in the one-on-one interview or group chats for further clarity.

Punch argues that in every society, people use complex meaning systems to organise their behaviour, understand themselves and others, and make sense of the world in which they live (Punch, 2009). Sometimes, the participant observer becomes both aware of the problems of inference (shifting perspectives of participants over time) and more equipped to deal with them, because of operating in a social context rich in cues and information (see Becker and Geer, 2004, p. 249). This anomaly can be tricky, but I addressed it by conducting more follow-up interviews with a set of new questions, as well

as conducting observations on different occasions and in different social spaces rather than just one isolated semi-structured interview. In this regard, I found informal interactions as a complement to participant observation extremely beneficial, especially spending more time with members rather than a one-off event and observing them in different social contexts and situations.

The activities to observe became much more focused midway through the fieldwork. I was careful not to influence the schedule of programmes and events to fit into my workplan. Rather, I remained alert to the movement between distance and proximity in my engagement with participants, reflecting on my own roles and identities in different encounters with them (See Burgess, 1984). This meant being alert to the shift in my position as an outsider and insider during my interactions, and how these would impact my role. I will explain my researcher positionality in more detail later.

4.4.4. Documentary Sources

The third method and type of data was the analysis of documents collected from a range of sources. Documentary products provide ethnographers with a 'rich vein for analysis' (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). I chose sources that would enable me to document the activities of key institutions such as the Ministry of Community Development, the Ministry of Education, and that of Agriculture, and NGOs, which were quite often mentioned by members of the community. I would look at their policy documents and the programmes that were being implemented. I looked at the role of these institutions and the actors involved in the generation of materials such as policy documents, strategic plans, handbook reports, brochures, project design documents, sponsors, and application forms. I would then analyse how information trickled down to the community — the medium of communication and power relations involved, and control on what programmes needed to achieve; how women's groups responded at the community level. I compared this information with how it shaped particular group interactions and participation, as well as individual participant reactions. I looked at group documents and compared those from the mainstream institutions. I analysed texts based on the

context in which they were written, when and how they were distributed to target groups, and how people at the community level made sense of them (See Appendix 3).



Figure 11: Under-five childcare plan

The poster above was in one of my participant's homes and was shared with all breastfeeding mothers in the community as a manual for child nutrition. I looked at the language and how it was written, the font size, images and what these tried to communicate; how aware participants were of the information on the poster. I would analyse the text based on the type of institution that it was generated by, and the context. I would ask how the participant interpreted the different images and text on the poster. For example, what it meant to care for a child versus the expectations of the organisation that produced the text and other players involved in the project.

Regarding on-site training, I looked at participants' personal notes taken from training programmes, which I often photographed and kept securely. As with my own observations and the interview questions/topics, the kinds of documents I collected changed over time as I narrowed my research focus. I always collected blank documents/forms, if possible, but where there were none, I collected ones with personal data, which I anonymised.

4.5. Data Recording and Analysis

Data recording and analysis are essential elements of the research process as the building blocks of doing research and report writing (Burgess, 1984). Data analysis was an ongoing process in my study, involving transcribing and translating recordings and manually searching for emerging themes at every stage of fieldwork.

When I tried to transcribe my data using the Microsoft Teams software, I noticed that some of my words were either misspelled or wrongly phrased due to my accent. The programming of this software is perhaps more effective and accurate with a specific accent and does not account for diverse accents. In view of this, I did not want to risk losing vital details for my data. Neither could I engage someone with the perfect accent. For me, doing it manually also helped me to understand things in context, which is also important in analysing ethnographic data. Therefore, everything was manually done, including transcribing all interview recordings.

My data were collected in the local language of the community. Because of my ability to code switch from Chichewa to English and vice-versa, as I transcribed the interview data, I also translated the data into English. I became aware that this is a transferable skill that I have used in other roles. For example, as a teacher and in the context of English as the medium of communication in schools, I often used the local language to explain things to my pupils when they were struggling to grasp a particular concept. As a participant in small Christian Community Groups (CCG), where the Bible was being read in English, I often translated it simultaneously into the local language.

In terms of transcribing data, I kept keywords and phrases, such as proverbs, in the original language. If I asked someone where they were coming from and they responded '*ndachoka ku munda*', the response would simply be translated as "*coming from the field*" because it does not carry any contextual meaning. By contrast, a phrase like '*ayenda njila zamthengo*' (walking the bush's tracks) carries different meanings depending on the context. It can mean a '*promiscuous*' person or could also mean a crooked person. I was conscious of my responsibility for conveying these different connotations. This is why I always tried to reread my transcriptions to the interviewee to see if it matched their

intended meaning. Atkinson (2004) argues that there is no such thing as a 'natural' mechanism for the representation of speech, and that ethnographers styles of representing their data inevitably impact on the reader.

The final coding of data was done through an open coding process¹⁶. An important undertaking in data coding is deciding what counts as a theme by looking at its prevalence, both in terms of space within each data item and prevalence across the entire dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, women's voicelessness as an emerging theme was expressed in different ways, such as not having a say in the sale of goods, feeling helpless or being taken advantage of, and having limited choice.

4.5.1. Data Collection and Analysis as Back and Forth

My data collection and recording were programmed into different categories that included a table for key themes in that month, and weekly activities, broken down into days. I laid out what I needed to observe on a particular day, such as a field visit or group meeting. My daily schedule was not cast in stone, however, but was flexible, as determined by the activity on a given day and time. I backed up my field activities with my field diary, where I kept appointments for special events, days, and time. I arranged specifically who to meet on a given day, either a planned activity or just an ordinary visit or spending more time with a participant. I tried to make my stay natural so that it was never based on appointments, but on mutual relations and being part of the community and their families. I informed my participants that sometimes I would make impromptu visits, and it was all fine if they did not have any programme lined up as I simply wanted to fit into their normal routines. I found this was important in breaking the status barrier between us and treating me as one of the wider community members, making them more relaxed and authentic.

¹⁶ Open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorising of phenomena through close examination...data is broken down into discrete parts and compared for similarities and differences. (Strauss and Corbin, 2004, p. 303)

I took notes of my observations, aligning them to the emerging themes. The field notes and audio recordings from semi-structured interviews were then transcribed in the evenings. This allowed me to identify and analyse the emerging themes as I listened to the audio recordings and transcribed the data. The scratch notes or head notes were also rewritten and expanded for meanings. The missing gaps or emerging themes allowed me to go back for follow-up interviews coupled with observations. Hence, analysis was a continuous process through the preliminary interpretations of field notes in an iterative process and continued after my fieldwork. What really helped me in my data analysis was revisiting the data each time I came back from the field with more data and continued with transcribing existing data. Braun and Clarke (2006) call this strategy data immersion, which usually involves 'repeated readings' of the data. Moreover, this reading is active in that one is alert to meanings, patterns and so on. Then one goes back to the field with a new set of questions or points of clarification.

Three months into my fieldwork, certain themes began to emerge in relation to the key areas of the research, such as livelihood diversification¹⁷. While everyone in the community was involved in some form of land cultivation, many engaged in other forms of livelihood. For example, I noticed that Sophia, one of my participants, also ran a grocery shop, although this was not her main livelihood activity, since it seemed to open at the end of the day. Spending time with her allowed me to explore various activities she was involved in around securing livelihoods and family wellbeing.

4.6. Navigating the Fieldwork

4.6.1. Positionality and Reflexivity

Fieldwork is an intersubjective construction that relies heavily on the encounter between the ethnographer and the research participant (Rabinow, 2007). Rabinow further adds that culture is a heterogeneous web of meanings spun by people themselves, thus

¹⁷ Livelihood diversification – a process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle for survival and in order to improve their standards of living (Ellis, 1998, p. 4)

requiring interpretation and translation (Ibid.). Nevertheless, this construction cannot be said to always occur between equals.

In my encounters with participants, I reflected on the power relations between myself as a researcher and the participants, and how this might shape the research. I was aware of the influence my own biases and interpretations of the phenomena under observation might have, as well as what I chose to write about my participants and the extent to which my accounts made space for their voices.

As I have discussed in this chapter, building rapport in the community was a priority for me, and this often materialised into bonds of friendship based on trust and respect. I observed how these bonds strengthened with time and familiarity. Midway through my fieldwork, my participant group became smaller — the gain was that I was able to have more nuanced interactions. During this time, reflexivity was crucial to understanding the perspective of the participants' world, particularly with regards to specific issues, such as what it meant to be literate. In exercising reflexivity, I adopted the technique of distance and proximity (see Street, 2001; Robinson-Pant, 2016), which is not about physical distance, but rather, describes the process of stepping in and out; a detachment about oneself that Robinson-Pant refers to as an etic-emic-etic process (Robinson-Pant, 2016). This technique helped me see my participants' worldview from different angles, through the back and forth of participant observation, in-between the 'inside' and 'outside' events. It was not until I became more closely involved with the women, acting as an insider and an outsider, that I understood why gossip often dominated their social space.

During my close interaction with one of my participants, I observed that the women, while in their social space, spoke negatively about men in the community, especially those passing by. For their part, the men tended to criticise women for being gossipers. Yet I became aware that gossiping was important for women: it offered the opportunity to explore social interactions and share updates about the happenings in the community. Talking negatively about a man was, in fact, something satisfying to them: a way of hitting back at patriarchy for the forms of mistreatment they were subjected to, and in a way, cementing relations at a personal level with their peers.

While this gave women confidence and a sense of belongingness, it created discomfort and even fear among the men. Couples were acutely aware of how they could become the focus of gossip, and this undermined women in the sense that a married woman might conceal the abuse they suffered at the hands of their husbands, for fear of public ridicule in the community. Domestic violence in marriages was also normalised by the use of local terms such as ‘*chikwati nikupilia*’ (marriage is about perseverance), whereby a woman showed her resilience by embracing pain. A woman is encouraged to protect the integrity of her marriage rather than her personal safety, thereby perpetuating male oppression of women in conjugal relations. Below is an extract from a conversation I had with a group of women on conflict resolution:

"Mmmmh! But with the type of village we live in, it is hard to hide anything. When you pick-up a fight with your husband, people even stop cooking to come and watch what is happening [Laughs]. The fight starts in the house and spills over outside in the open. It is drama here! [Laughs]." Participant

Fieldnotes: 21/09/22

In the context of this local community, a married woman will do her best to resolve conflict in her home to save her marriage. So, she would tolerate a certain level of abuse, which can sometimes be extreme, as long as it is not in the public domain. I have used some exact words in the extract, such as 'drama,' because of their contextual meaning.

Violence is generally internalised among women in their marital homes rather than challenged publicly, because harmonising social relations in the family is more valuable than directly challenging the power structures. This realisation led me to further reflect on my own positionality as someone coming from the same culture, but holding a different perspective. I reflected on how religious beliefs, education, and exposure to Western culture might be shaping my perspectives about women's livelihoods within patriarchy.

4.6.2. Overcoming Self-Biases: Making the Familiar Unfamiliar

Familiarity with culture, local people, and language can sometimes present a challenge in giving an ethnographic account. Conversely, Becker and Geer (2004) argue that although we might speak the same language or share many practices, we cannot assume we understand things in the same way, despite ostensibly 'belonging' to the same culture. My familiarity with the place and people was an advantage in terms of being able to blend in with the community and try to interpret things on my own, things I might have taken for granted, and rectify the errors although I was aware it could also pose a challenge in another context.

I was recruiting in a place that was not really new to me: I had familiarity with the culture and the people, some of whom I knew at a personal level. Atkinson (1984) notes that ethnographers often face the problem of 'familiarity' and 'strangeness', where the familiar is rendered strange and the strange rendered familiar. I certainly faced this challenge of familiarity and did my best to become aware of my biases, especially in the beginning when I had little to write about in my fieldnotes except for the assumptions I had about rural livelihoods.

I indicated in Chapter One that my rural upbringing and my familiarity with the locality through my professional life, meant I felt a high degree of familiarity. Hence, I sought strategies that would help to make the familiar unfamiliar, rather than taking for granted what looked ordinary and self-evident in the community. Avoiding settling for obvious explanations and meanings, I explored the perspectives of different groups based on gender, age or social status.

The thick description technique was helpful in this endeavour. This approach meant observing the 'thick' detailed descriptions of phenomena/social life. Becker (1986) adds that thick descriptions might include other aspects of reality that use other senses such as sounds or smells in the physical surrounding which are usually ignored. Such thick descriptions all add to the ethnographic account. To do this, I identified myself as an urban dweller, adapting to a new life in the village with a curiosity and open mind. In this regard, the analogy of the turtle and fish (Rogers and Street, 2012) resonated with my role

as a researcher. I had my morning routine of visiting the field, but my positionality shifted in different social settings, as the familiar became unfamiliar. This approach helped me see things differently and to recognise what needed to be interrogated. It also challenged some of my personal biases emanating from my pre-exposure to the culture and surroundings.

For instance, I was familiar with some farming practices because I had been involved in crop harvesting before, doing it alongside my parents and grandmother; going together to the field to harvest. On one occasion, I was invited by one of my participants to accompany her to their maize field. When we arrived at the field, the task was quite familiar: removing the maize cobs from heaped stalks. However, she mentioned something that caught my attention, which I share here from my fieldnotes:

...I planted both local and hybrid maize. The strategy I use is to cut the maize stalks while they are still fresh and then heap them to allow the maize cobs to dry up slowly. Once that is done, it is then that I pluck off the maize from the stalks in readiness for the granary. Mum taught us this method while I was young, and everyone does this along the valleys. That is how we protect our grain, and it never gets attacked by pests. My parents and siblings live in the valley, and this is the method they use for grain preservation and storage. So, I do not need to buy pesticides.

Fieldnotes: 27/05/22



Figure 12: Maize heaps on the field

This knowledge exchange had a deep impact on me. What had been so obvious to me in terms of the harvesting process was very different to what I learnt on this day. I noticed that harvesting involved managing the stages carefully for the long-term storage of the grain, as opposed to what I was accustomed to while practicing peasant farming alongside my parents. From this experience, I learnt to always seek clarification, even when things appeared to be straightforward. The exchange was also a moment of co-construction of knowledge, as we both shared our knowledges of different farming practices. It also led to the kind of thick description referred to by Geertz (1973) in that interpretations and conversations with my participant contributed to a more richly textured, multi-layered and multi-voiced ethnographic account.

4.6.3. Entering the Women's Social Spaces

I discussed the genderedness of activities and social life in the community in Chapter Two. Hence, an important task in the early weeks of my fieldwork was to negotiate my presence in these highly gendered social spaces and safeguarded while circumventing the fluidity of my identity. I have also alluded to the complexities of being a researcher known by the participants in a different capacity, which brings with it certain expectations.

Kelly (2016) suggests that being objectified in a given identity puts constraints on what you can and cannot do. Although my researcher identity allowed me to have access to spaces considered out of bounds for a man, I could not simply walk into these spaces any time I wanted. Over the course of at least two months, I took every opportunity to explain to individuals I met in the community, why I was there and respond to their questions. It became accepted that I would spend time in the company of women, but this was an outcome of ongoing negotiations. However, my concern was that my presence would cause unease and that women would feel inhibited in terms of how they interacted, and what they could say or not.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 217) have argued that "researchers investigate those who are less powerful than themselves, and for this reason are able to establish a research bargain that advantages them and disadvantages those they study." The argument illustrates the issue of positionality and power between the researcher and participants. I was cognisant of these power relations and built relations based on trust and reciprocity, so as to redress and/or flatten the power inequalities between myself as a male researcher and the women participants. One way of doing this was to maximise opportunities for them to make decisions. For example, I gave my participants the power to decide what things they would want to invite me to participate in. I sometimes asked them to take pictures of me taking part in a common event, which seemed to be welcomed with excitement.

Women's spaces included the borehole, and sometimes later in the afternoon, the netball pitch. At some point, I had volunteered to be a netball coach for a local team of young women, married and unmarried, having coached a school team before as a sports teacher. This gave me privileged access to their space and bond with everyone. I became someone they got used to talking to, although younger women and girls tended to be more shy and awkward around me.

As I gained their trust, invitations became more frequent. On one occasion, I was invited to observe a money-sharing activity in a group my participant affiliated with, and every woman in the room seemed excited to see me there. I had succeeded in being accepted into women only spaces. Not only that, but from simply being an observer, I became more participant than observer, as I was asked to help the group navigate the arithmetic task (see Zimba, 2024). Their response and acceptance of me seemed to me a reward for the long process of negotiating my identity and positionality that started from my first meeting with the community.

4.6.4. Participant Observer as Useful Resource

On a few occasions, representatives of formal groups such as newly formed cooperatives would approach me for guidance to help interpret questions and comment on the

responses they had given when completing the complex application forms. This would enable them to participate in a government-funded programme. This kind of request could feel awkward because it bordered on power relations and my views would likely not be challenged based on their perception of me. I did engage in such activities, although it was in the context of the mutuality in the community; making them take the lead in discussion and form-filling and only contributing my views or supporting those of others as a participant where they looked stuck. The forms were written in English and those members identified to have literacy skills would be tasked with filling them in on behalf of the group. I assumed that officials at the district office would have provided assistance, but it seemed not and most of the group representatives struggled with the technical terms in the documents. I would ask the secretaries to tell me how they understood the questions and based on their responses; I would clarify the meanings of the questions. I found myself translating the questions into the local language so that they could judge whether their responses corresponded with the questions being asked. This meant that I did not have to give my opinion on the right or wrong responses.

While my participants embraced my role as a researcher over time, other sections of the community, like children, young women and men engaged in various team sports, saw me as a resource person. They sometimes approached me to get them balls or sponsor them in a local tournament. This quite often presented an ethical dilemma between helping or not helping, and how that would affect our relationship. I needed to constantly clarify my role in the community, and I only helped in the context of our mutual relations.

On one occasion, one of my participants fell sick and had tried to ignore the symptoms, resorting to local remedies because she said she did not have money to go the clinic or buy drugs at the local pharmacy. Her condition deteriorated so that she started vomiting right in front of me when I visited her home. I immediately gave her husband the money to go to the hospital, where she ended up being admitted. She did not ask me for money, but I felt I had to assist as a duty of care having been presented with her critical condition; clearly explaining to her that I was not buying her favour as my participant.

Others saw me as a prized asset in their community, especially the young people, calling me '*aZimba banthu*' (our Mr. Zimba). The trust and closeness that evolved also meant that others looked at me as a counsellor and shared their personal frustrations. I would invite

them to explore their options rather than telling them what they needed to do. These were some of the complexities I found myself navigating daily.

4.7. Being a Stranger: Navigating the Insiderness/Outsiderness

In this section, I reflect on my fluid identity of insider/outsider in my interactions in different social spaces. The insider-and-outsiderness has implications on how one conducts research on communities as a researcher tries to navigate the binary (Hellowell, 2006). From an ontological perspective, the insider is associated with an 'emic' account of culture, with the outsider providing an 'etic' one. An emic description or insider view of reality focuses on the cultural distinctions and behaviours within studied communities that are both meaningful and relational for and from the perspective of their members, and is not necessarily about being a current member of the community (Ibid). On the other hand, an etic account attempts to operate from the assumption that it will provide descriptions of cross-cultural differences from the perspective of a supposed 'detached' outsider looking in (Kusow, 2003). Therein arises the issue of positionality boundaries for a researcher.

My positionality of insiderness in this study granted me access to the community and to participants who gave their intra-community 'seal of approval' right from the first day of our meeting. What amplified my perceived insider positionality was my association with some of the families as I have explained earlier in this chapter. The way I was welcomed by Uncle Rex and the gatekeeper on my first day, was effectively an endorsement of our relatedness and therefore, insiderness. This was cemented by the ways in which I was addressed such as *mdzukululu* by the gatekeeper. There was a sense in which my insiderness gave me access to certain details about ongoing events in the community which I probably would not have had so soon and so easily, had I been viewed as an outsider. I am acutely aware of how this personal relationship shaped my subsequent interaction with the community.

Being identified as an insider is an advantage in that it reinforces the ethnic ‘authenticity’ (Alakija, 2016). For me it was about being identified as one of their own family members. While insider status may give heightened access, it can also lead to bias through the process of ‘over-rapport’ or ‘going native’ (Hammersley, 2004). Over-rapport was more pronounced during my early days, especially with those families to whom I was related. I was aware that this in itself was a disadvantage in terms of developing the fieldwork: I needed to manage this perception to ensure that I had participants from across the village. I needed to overcome the perception and suspicion from certain families about who I would want to recruit as my participant. To monitor the effects of over-rapport, I reflected on my insider/outsiderness whenever my participants or members of the community shared information with me or invited me to their social events. I also noticed, however, that my insiderness was not a given. It was often called into question depending on various situations, and was neither straightforward nor fixed identity.

Brun-Cottan (2016, p. 166) has argued that “labelling an ethnographer, an insider or an outsider may well depend on the ethnographer’s relationship to the person who is doing the labelling”. For me, there were different layers of insiderness that I had to negotiate in each social space and location. For instance, being in one location of the sub-village at a particular time in this village grouping setup I discussed in Chapter Two would situate me as an insider or outsider, a constant hyphenated identity that I found myself having to negotiate in this fluid space. I became aware that certain members of the community were also navigating identity issues when called *mkomwene* or *phalombe* titles (see Section 2.4.3.) which had contextual meanings. This revealed to me that hyphenated identities in different social spaces, situations and events were common among the locals too.

Quite often, situational characteristics such as my gender, age, perceived class, educational identity, and urban accent, involuntarily shifted the pendulum of my insiderness back and forth across the positionality spectrum. I regularly reflected on the impact and implications of my positionality with particular emphasis on my insider-outsiderness throughout the research process.

4.7.1. My Outsiderness as My strength in the Gendered Social Space

With regards to the insider-outsider debates, I was mindful that while my participants and I, came from the same tribe and might practice the same culture, share gender identity, etc, we were also different in many ways. This insight helped me to think of my research site as both a "place of cultural sameness" and a "place of difference".

My changing identities as both an insider and outsider were not premeditated. Rather, they were driven by a situationally driven affective response within the fieldwork environment, a result of trying to manage the perceived peculiarities of my presence and my trustworthiness. For example, I knew that I was an outsider in the space of women, but my sense was that was the reason that most women were comfortable sharing their experiences with fewer suspicions because I was an outsider, in other words, not a permanent of the local community. The advantage of outsidership as an ethnographer is that it confers more freedom from particularistic expectations and group loyalties, which encourages novel questions and the challenging of accepted or 'normative' explanations (Chhabra, 2020). It was in this sense that I was able to make observations and draw inferences through my naive questioning of women. I was free from the expectation that I should know some of the local practices like any other man in the community.

In one encounter, one of my participants laughed when I told her that I did not know the difference between two local concepts, '*chise*' and '*njise*'. According to her, every adult person like me should know the meaning, and she went on to explain:

"... 'chise' is when a woman involves herself in promiscuity while pregnant and dangerous for the unborn baby while 'njise' results from a woman getting pregnant while breastfeeding, the act that causes the living baby to start having poor growth and suffering. So, both a man and woman can suffer 'chise' where one will experience unstoppable migraine and leg pain. The elders do treat that ailment at the earliest possible sign..."

Fieldnotes: 27/07/22

I suspect that this participant would not have been able to share such a candid response with a man of my age from the community or indeed laugh at my ignorance. The continuous on-and-off-the-field allowed me to exercise reflexivity and unpack myself on

who I am, who I have been, who do others think I am, and what ought to be figured at key intervals of my research transition.

4.7.2. My Fluid Insiderness in the Women's Social Space

Pike (1990, p. 34) has argued that people learn to act as insiders and that “just as outsiders can learn to act like an insider, so the insider can learn to analyse like an outsider”. This learning to act was a challenge for me, not least because of obvious differences in gender and status, and involved a process of building trust with my participants. I explained my strategies for getting into these gendered social spaces in Section 4.6.3. My concerns that the women would be too aware of my presence to talk comfortably. As I became more accepted, conversations became noticeably less guarded and more relaxed, and they did not appear to censor what they said. It was at this point that I felt a sense of being an insider. In the extract below, I reflect on one such moment:

I visit one of my participants who is joined by two other ladies under a tree. Her hair is being plaited, and I decide to spend some time with them and listen to their stories. Suddenly, a couple is seen walking by the road. The three women start passing some nasty comments about the couple, and their voices go low as though not wanting to be heard by the passersby.

“That lady can dish out insults when provoked”, all staring at the couple, “ I don’t know how that man manages to stand her. [Laugh!]. Anyway, I am not surprised because he’s such a coward. He’s not a real man! A man that is afraid of the darkness and never wants to walk alone in the night”.

All the three women laugh loudly again, before holding back after looking at me. I simply reciprocated the smile.

Fieldnotes: 12/08/22

This illustrates how over time, my presence was accepted to the extent that they even gossiped about a couple without minding that I was there. To them, I had become an insider in that social space at that particular time. My status could change in a moment, however, depending on whether I was acting as an insider (Pike, 1990) or if the social

space was suddenly invaded by a male intruder, reinforcing the objectification of maleness and therefore outsiders, in the female space (see Kelly, 2016).

4.8. Ethical Dilemmas and Pragmatic Approach

I am facing a dilemma on the consent issue as I enter the female space and joins the conversation. Was the initial/implied group consent enough? Or do I have to always inform the people I interact with that I am recording our conversations each time I talk to them?

[Fieldnotes reflections: 03/06/22]

This study followed the ethical guidelines, in line with the University of East Anglia (UEA) and the British Educational Research Association (British Educational Research Association, 2024). Informed consent was a primary concern in the recruitment of participants, ensuring that they were taken through the recruitment process. However, there were other ethical dilemmas that were encountered along the way. This is why, as earlier mentioned, the role of implied consent played a huge role when interacting with people in the communal space. The community was aware of my presence, and it was not practical to stop every person I met and spoke to in the community to start taking them through the consent forms, particularly as people were not accustomed to this kind of formality. What was important was my integrity, being transparent with them with regards to the purpose of my research. Earning their trust and verbal reassurances that their information or anything they shared, or I captured, would be anonymised and kept secure, was important. Reflections on my positionality, discussed in earlier sections, were also part of ensuring the ethical integrity of the research.

In general, I used a pragmatic approach in the collection of data because sometimes my participants mingled with others in the same social spaces, including those who were not on my list. In practice, it was not achievable to keep getting consent from everyone participating in an activity in such a shared public space such as market or church.

Sticking strictly to consent guidelines in these situated social spaces would have negatively impacted on the natural interactions among members and consequently the quality of data. This is something I did not have control over on how my participants chose who to interact with, and from what social space. In any case, people in a village live a communal life and most of the time, my participants would be in the company of others, either being visited or visiting somewhere, so it was not practical to inform others who interacted with them. Sometimes I also needed to include the voices of people I spoke to during my routine tours because these would give more context. Hence, always bringing consent forms to these social spaces would have disrupted the natural interactions and flow of uncensored information, defeating the very purpose of ethnography.

The practice of consent was by and large, context driven, depending on the formality of the activity. For example, I did formally introduce myself when there was a formal activity which my participants were taking part in, and made everyone aware of my presence. Sometimes, the community leaders would do the introductions. The few times I attended the court sessions; the gatekeeper always announced my presence and my purpose in being there. Hence, my research was underpinned by the commitment to the essence of informed consent, within an ethics of reciprocity.

4.9. Reflecting on My Research and Professional Context

As a researcher, I found ethnographic study an enriching experience; while I had visited the community before, this was the longest period of time I had spent with them. There was so much I learned, especially with regards to the topic that I felt I knew something about, namely, rural livelihoods. The strategy of using thick description (Geertz, 1973) really helped me to see rural women's livelihoods from a different perspective. Participant observation allowed me to generate insights into how women interacted with literacy, and used informal learning to navigate the complexities of rural livelihoods and social relationships. The continued interactions with women made me question some of the assumptions and beliefs I held about transforming women's livelihoods and wellbeing. In terms of my practice as a teacher, lecturer, practitioner and now academic

researcher, these roles have helped me rethink and reconsider assumptions about literacy and development. As I will argue in more depth in the concluding chapter, any work on policies and programmes requires a broader approach to better engagement with adult learners.

The doctoral process was also a lonely venture and was not devoid of hurdles. To have reached this far, I had to overcome many obstacles. Having started my PhD during the Covid-19 lockdown, I spent half of my first year at home when I contracted the virus. I also lost loved ones, such as my grandmother, along the way. I had to put up with the great emotions of loss and pain experienced as a family in many ways that I cannot comprehend. Time management proved a crucial factor, and amid these eventualities, everything was emotionally draining.

I am aware that the stories and experiences I have gathered for this thesis, including my analysis and writing up, are the priceless outcomes of this community that I blended so well with, creating a strong attachment. In fact, at the end of fieldwork, I held a farewell meeting with the entire community again, where I asked how they perceived me. Various responses came out, especially my surname. One of my participants said, I was '*Azimba bakafukufuku*' (Mr. Zimba, the researcher). When I mentioned that my stay with them had come to an end, there were so many gloomy faces, and I was asked when I would return again to the community. It would have been inappropriate to leave without a token of appreciation, beyond the actions of reciprocity that I discussed in Section 4.6.4. Hence, I bought every woman in the community a '*chitenje*' fabric.

4.10. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shared my fieldwork experiences, using ethnography as my methodological framework. I have argued that ethnography was the right fit given the ontological and epistemological assumptions of my research in exploring rural women's literacy practices and learning strategies. I have demonstrated how I implemented this methodological approach in navigating the research space. In my case, this was a study conducted in a familiar community, and I had to adopt different strategies while in the

field to gain their trust and confidence. Reflexivity and thick descriptions were central to the fieldwork, underpinned by ethical guidelines to navigate the very different contexts in which I gathered data.

I reflected on the challenges of relationship-building with people of similar cultures and the risks of being emotionally over-involved in the researcher-participant relationship. I also had to overcome my personal biases. Indeed, reflecting on personal biases and how this impacted my data analysis, and the rigour of the study was an ongoing exercise. I developed strategies for navigating various ethical dilemmas and working on my insider/outsider positionality that constantly changed at different intervals and social spaces. The next chapter will explore how this methodological framework fed into my research findings.

Chapter Five- Literacy and Livelihoods: Meanings, Literacy Practices, Networking and Mediation

5.0. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore women's livelihoods through the concept of situated literacies (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007), and look at how these are framed as social practices within a community. Additionally, how women navigate power relations and pursue livelihood aspirations. In addressing the role of rural women in development, I pay attention to their use of agency and participation in livelihood activities. As discussed in Chapter Three, I draw on the concept of agency (see Kabeer, 1999) and participation (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). The question of how women's livelihood activities influenced their literacy practices is central to my discussion. The discourse will centre on the analysis of text and how it is used in the construction of identities, knowledge and meaning-making in different contested spaces, including the digital space.

In the first section, I explore the literacy perceptions of the local community to gain insights into how these impact power relations and identity. Then, I follow-up on women's livelihoods and how these might shape literacy practices both at an individual and group level. I interrogate these literacy practices through the gender lens to explore the power relations and the kinds of capabilities that emerge. This chapter concludes that what counts as literacy in this community is manifested in how women's livelihoods influence the use of different forms of literacies, build interpersonal relationships and strengthen social relations as network of support. The structure of social relations influences how women exercise agency and participation in different contested spaces.

5.1. Exploring Literacy Meanings and Perceptions

My observation of women's literacy practices mostly happened in informal spaces and ordinary sites such as at home, community group meetings, crop fields and religious

events, although I did not visit a Mosque. One of my participants told me that men and women did not sit in the same space when in the Mosque, and would be separated by a wall and be invisible to each other. That meant that I would not be able to observe the interactions among women even if I had attended a prayer event.

In a community where most women regarded themselves as illiterate during my recruitment exercise, I wanted to understand how this perception was being reinforced by everyone. Generally, there were few examples of the printed word within the community space and at certain times of the year, none at all. The few prints I saw were placards stuck on poles or trees as adverts for crop marketing. The only location with lots of prints was the school, which was on the outskirts of the village though very much a part of the larger community as earlier shown in Figures 6 and 10, respectively. Evidence of literacy practices in the public domain was sparse, mostly determined by seasonal events.

Below are some of the placards that were captured during my early weeks of fieldwork, which give insights into the dominant livelihoods in the community.



Figure 13: Marketing placards in the community

I noticed that it was common practice for some households to display placards as shown above, on trees or poles next to their homes. This was in the post-harvest period. The two placards here give full details of the crops being bought, the weight and price tag with the key written text in bold capital letters ‘*TIGULA*’ which means ‘*We are buying*’.

Those living in this community interacted with this text and seemingly knew the information the posters carried. These were read as signposts by virtue of being displayed in public at that time of the year, while others read through the text to look at the details and search for meaning in that context. In fact, some of my participants told me that when you see a poster like that in the village at that time of the year, it meant that the marketing season had started, and you could sell your crops at a named site or household. It was common to bump into locals, especially women, taking their commodities, usually in small quantities for quick money, to get some necessities of their home use. The two local buyers I asked told me that they were trading agents for big companies and were expected to meet certain targets. The presence of these local markets plus other big competitors such as the government, gave the local community wider options in terms of where to trade.

Given this background and insights into activities that were happening, I now could start to explore local perceptions of literacy through one of my participants.

We are just few here on the part of women who can read and write. Actually three, ‘amake Jaki’ (mother to Jack), myself and Khumbi. So, women would come to my husband and plead with him to allow me to remain in their group to help them with paperwork because the forms are usually too complicated to understand. So, I’m always given the position of secretary. Zeledi

Fieldnotes: 16/06/22

The excerpt above is from one of my social encounters with Zeledi. I met her carrying some books for the Titani Women’s Club that she was representing. She attended school up to Grade 10 which was above the normal standard used to define a literate person using a grading system as I discussed in Section 2.3.1. in Chapter Two. At the time of fieldwork, Zeledi had lived in Chabwera Village since 2012. She got married to a prominent local businessman. Zeledi has three children, but lives with the last two as the first-born daughter is not her husband’s biological child and lives with Zeledi’s mother

in another village. She is called '*amai nini*'¹⁸ in family circles, usually an inferior status in what is a polygamous marriage. As a '*mai nini*', Zeledi has to negotiate her power position based on this status. In practice, this depends on how she navigates the different layers of power structures in the family and community. Whereas in public, her relationship with the senior wife, Enala, seemed quite collaborative, but closer inspection showed that they were disguised competitors. The differing social positioning and power within their marriage meant as a '*mai gulu*', Enala lived in a bigger family house with her four children. Enala was entrusted with bigger family responsibilities by their husband. Her solar-powered house was the biggest in the village and was adjacent to Zeledi's, a small one-bedroomed house that I initially thought was a servant's quarter.

Between the two, Zeledi was known in the community as the '*wachangu*' (smart one), since Enala could not read or write. Later I learnt that Zeledi could speak a few words in English, but did not want to use her English vocabulary in the community because she feared that people would label her as boastful. Quite often, I observed her helping Enala, with writing and reading tasks. The two went together to many social gatherings and on the surface looked to be on good terms although Zeledi told me that she had initially faced hostility and an unwelcoming attitude from Enala when she just got married.

Identity has been cited as one way of displaying dense interconnections between the intimate and the public venues of social practice (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Thus, I decided to engage Zeledi more in trying to understand exactly what her claims of being 'literate' meant in relation to her social status in the community. There were a few instances where I noticed that 'literate' and 'educated' identities were mostly used in abstract form by those who chose to identify themselves with either one or both. For example, when someone responded that they never went to school, or dropped out early, what they actually meant was that they could neither read nor write or they had very poor reading skills. Others holding this perception referred to themselves as '*tilije metso*' (blind). Bearing this in mind, I rarely asked participants to read the information sheet, but instead, read it out loud on their behalf.

¹⁸ 'Mai nini' is local title to refer to junior wife and senior wife as '*mai gulu*' for women married to one man

My one-on-one chat with Zeledi gave me some insights into local perceptions of literacy, when I asked her to explain certain local terms that women used when describing themselves.

“I think when they say azimai osteguka metso (women with open eyes) they mean those women who are able to read and write because they’ve been to school.”

I then asked about those that had been to school, but were not able to read and write.

“Oh yeah. It is possible that someone could have gone to school, but unable to read and write. Hence those are referred to as ‘mbuli’ (ignorant/not smart). It means they could have gone up in the school grading system, but can’t do anything. They can’t write.” Zeledi

Fieldnote: 27/06/22

The ‘literate’ identity category would consist of primary school dropouts who were able to read and write, also known as ‘kuweranga’ in the local language.

Here, the local community shows awareness of the concept of being literate and refers to people as either ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’. One’s literate status was only put in the spotlight when it came to the specific application of school text-based related tasks. Being associated with the dominant literacy (school-based literacy) led to the development of self-identity like in Zeledi’s case and others she mentioned. A literate identity gives women a sense of self-worth in the public domain. Those identified as literate also enjoy certain privileges associated with the dominant literacy while those that are not literate are systematically marginalised.

The literate or illiterate identity is a shared concept imposed on the local community by the school system, predicated on school text-based literacy involving reading and writing (see Barton, 2007, p. 21). Literacy is understood as a special skill acquired through one undergoing the school grading system, but participants are less aware of the numerous texts that they encounter in their everyday livelihoods such as ones shown in figure 13.

5.1.1. Literacy and Power

I was motivated further to inquire what it meant to Zeledi to be identified as a literate woman. In terms of social relations of power, a literate identity positioned her above other women in the community. I wondered how she and others attained this validation as 'literate' women, and others 'illiterate'. Zeledi spoke about reading and writing and whether this was linked to school text-based literacy or any other languages. It was clear that this identity was also situated in the social relations of power. More importantly, this identity also reflected differences in their livelihood aspirations and how they interacted with text.

Firstly, Zeledi's self-appraisal statement implied that women in this community recognised each other's unique abilities and that this influenced interactions in their social spaces. The 'we' versus 'them' aspect of claiming a literate identity had implications for interrelationships. Many of the literacies that women were involved in were unrecognised as these were overshadowed by the dominant literacy practiced in public spaces. Zeledi's point of reference was the dominant literacy, where specific tasks needed to be accomplished and could only be accomplished, by those who were literate. Many local literacy abstract terms such as *mbuli* or *tilije metso* which I have mentioned were used as a substitute for illiterateness. These terms were assigned in the context of lacking the Western dominant literacies practiced in school.

I struggled to get a clear understanding of the distinction being made between being 'literate' and being 'educated' in the context of the on-going interactions. It seemed to me that the locals used these terms interchangeably, depending on the context. In one scenario, an individual juggled in-between these concepts to project themselves as either 'literate' or 'educated'. For example, individuals who could read in English were perceived to practice a superior form of literacy and could be considered higher up in the scale of 'educatedness'. By implication, these individuals would have gone up to secondary school in-between Grades 8 and 12, with a school certificate or good basic articulation skills in English. Whereas if they failed to speak or write properly in English, they would be considered as '*anabwelako chabe*' (did not learn anything) and looked

down upon as no different from primary school dropouts. All this can be deduced from the cultural hegemony of colonial education legacies.

My findings also showed that literacies connected with reading and writing in English were valued more highly than local languages and advantaged such individuals with social mobility at local level. Similarly, those who could do it seamlessly in local languages while pointing to the hierarchies of literacies and their valued attachments (cf. Street, 1993; Barton, 2007). In this community, individuals who were able to read in both English and Nyanja were locally perceived as higher status in the context of literate identity, with prospects for social mobility into positions of power.

In the case of Zeledi, she enjoys social mobility through being designated the secretary of her women's club. This illustrates how the role of literacy within social relations is related to power and position. All women in this community were generally involved in diverse activities that called for use of literacy practices though unaware of it, and which helped sustain their lives. As Gebre *et al.* (2009) point out, adults engage with literacy in their everyday livelihoods, situating themselves in different social domains. This is evidenced from the presence of text in public social spaces in figure 13.

In the next section, I explore women's encounter with literacies through their lived experiences and what literacy looks like for them. I focus on Zeledi and two other women with contrasting literate identities, to see if these differences affect their agency, participation and aspirations.

5.2. Livelihoods and Literacy as Situated Practice

As stated in the introduction, literacy in policy documents is depicted as consisting of functional literacy skills that are attained through a minimum level of education. Statistics have been produced regarding literate adults above the age of 15 and how this impacts on their potential participation in national development (see Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017; World Bank, 2017b). In this section, I explore women's encounter with text and experiences of literacy in different social domains, and how they navigate and overcome complex literacy tasks.

Women in this community developed different survival strategies as they pursued personal goals. This pursuit led to encountering and navigating literacy-mediated tasks in different social spaces and through the diverse livelihood activities they engaged in.

I start with Zeledi who was running a money lending business which she claimed she had learnt from Enala. She later decided to buy a book which enabled her to do record-keeping for her clients. This was the business trade she was known for in the community. Through her pursuit of survival and improved well-being, Zeledi was constantly involved in literacy practices due to the nature of her business. She had to adopt different strategies to navigate power hierarchies and acquire new identities and achieve personal aspirations. The excerpt below explains what her business involves:

It is the first day of August, 2022, and I have just arrived in the village for my usual fieldwork observations. I see Zeledi in her home corridor talking to one of the casual workers from their family abattoir business. At the same time, she is holding a book and updating her records as the man leaves. It is the first time I have found her doing this even though I was aware of her money-lending business. In our lengthy conversation, she explains to me that her business demands that she constantly reminds her clients when payments are due and the amount of interest they have accrued. I then request to have a look at her records which she takes me through, showing me how she is able to keep records of her clients in terms of the names and amounts owed to her. She explains that her contracts are mostly verbal agreements, but her record book works as proof of that agreement, if a client defaults and refuses to pay what is due to her. She tells me that she explains this orally to her clients before giving out the money. This implies that clients know exactly what percentage of interest they were expected to pay back at the end of the month.

[Fieldnotes reflections: 01/08/2022]

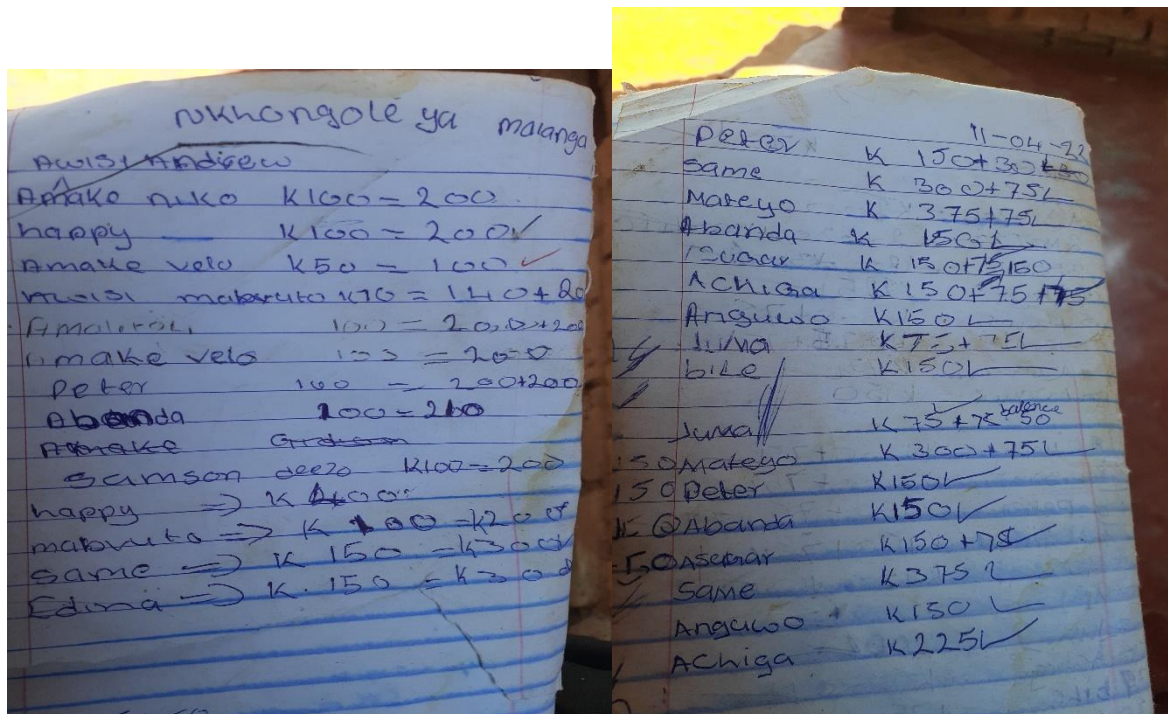


Figure 14: Credit Book

The credit book above has two categories of clients based on their payment schedule and percentage of interest. Those to pay ‘nkhongole ya malanga’¹⁹. The credit book records borrowers being charged different interest rates which she said ranged between 25% and 100%. Those who got the money at the start of the farming season are recorded as ‘nkhongole ya malanga’, expected to pay back double the amount they borrowed, which is 100% interest rate for the period between April and August (post-harvest). For example, someone who borrows K100 during the rainy season (November to March), would have to pay back K200 in the ‘malanga’ season. The second category on the right of the page is for the monthly borrowers and the rules are different. The borrower is expected to pay back the money at an agreed interest which is usually 25%. If someone borrows K300, they are expected to add K75 when paying back.

Zeledi explained that she would use her discretion sometimes when deciding how much a client would have to pay back, depending on their negotiations or relationship with the potential borrower. I struggled to make sense of the calculations based on her explanation, and what was recorded in the book, but I got a sense of how she was playing around with the figures. The payment schedules were either monthly or seasonal, with

¹⁹ debt to be paid during post-harvest.

different conditions. The borrower's interest rate increased with the amount borrowed if one defaulted. For example, the client was expected to pay back interest to prevent their debt from increasing, and if they did not pay one month credit, the money borrowed plus the interest would be calculated as a lump sum borrowed for that month, to be paid back at a new interest rate. Therefore, someone borrowing K300 to pay back with an interest of K75 would choose to pay back only the K75 to maintain his or her K300 debt, but failure to pay meant that the K375 to be settled for that month became a new loan borrowed with a new, usually higher interest rate.

5.2.1. Textual Meaning as Situated

Zeledi's lending business showcases the relevance of context in which text has situated meaning. Here, text played a key role in facilitating Zeledi's money-lending business and strengthened her legitimacy, status and power in relation to negotiating with her clients. She generated the text that had a functionality purpose for a business transaction within the given social context requiring both parties to agree to terms and conditions. The record book and the encoded meanings in the text, differed at different times and in the social context, within the informal space. A closer look at the records revealed some complex arithmetic, texts and symbols that I could not always make sense of without Zeledi's explanations. The names with attached figures and ticks at the end meant that someone had paid the given amount, not necessarily settling the debt. The left page for those to pay in *Malanga* season did not show the actual date, but there was a shared understanding that this was linked to the payment season (post-harvest) rather than the actual date. In one social context, the text acts as proof of payment agreement; in another, it could also be used as evidence at a court palace or police station if the client defaulted and was taken to court or police. Hence the situational functionalities of the text had symbolic meanings and depended on context and purpose, for example, as a permanent record of clients or legal document.

Zeledi clearly used her power to dictate functionality: the textual meaning was constantly changing and needed further reinterpretation, for example if the initial debt was not

settled at an agreed time. The understanding of these arithmetic practices was also contextual, rather than simply governed by standard arithmetic rules. This also means that these literacy and numeracy practices were being enacted within relations of power, in which the text was used for negotiation and meaning-making.

The social domains in which these literacy practices occur are also spaces of identity construction and contestations of power. Zeledi had successfully constructed her identity as a moneylender. However, she had to constantly fend off the resistance from her husband who did not approve of his two wives engaged in such businesses or group affiliations. Zeledi said her strategy was resilience and building alliances with others both within the family network and other women in the community. The social relations with the women she represented ultimately cemented her positionality as a business guru in the community.

What I learnt is how her access to livelihood resources such as her local network with Enala and income capital, influenced the kinds of literacies that emerged while negotiating her way through the structures of power. The life of doing business was not just a matter of pursuing a life that Zeledi considered valuable (freedoms), but was also about exercising agency and power, gender justice and identity. It was about how social positioning impacts women's capabilities to pursue a life of choice, and how they must constantly negotiate their way via different layers of power, in different social settings and context.

5.2.2. Literacies as Reading Signs, Images and Print Labels

I now turn to Sophia who is in her early 60s, and a well-known figure as a community lead farmer for a small-scale farmers' group. She is also the owner of a grocery shop, one of only two I found in the community at the time of my fieldwork which she runs successfully. Her literate status contrasts with that of Zeledi as she was an early primary school dropout. Sophia identifies herself as illiterate, although she had recently tried to revive her reading skills through a literacy programme. She claimed that her skills were very rudimentary and that she struggled both to read simple sentences in the local language

and with writing tasks. She once lived in the city, but returned to the village in the 1980s after losing her first husband. Like Zeledi, she too was a junior wife in her second marriage, with Khumbi as the senior. Khumbi is one of the few literate women Zeledi referred to who was a Grade 7 school dropout. Sophia is a mother of five surviving children out of eight and is also a grandmother. At the time of my fieldwork, she was staying with her sons, Mabvuto the older one and Form 1 or Grade 8 dropout. Her last-born teenage boy, Boyd, is dumb and deaf. She also looked after two of her grandchildren who were both orphans, and one was on antiretroviral therapy treatment. Her small *kanthemba* shop sells a range of groceries such as salt, soap, snacks and other processed food products which she orders from town. She ran this business with her son, Boyd, whom she mentored. Sophia taught him sign language and developed simple algorithms so that he could easily communicate and transact with customers using fingers and gestures. Boyd had learnt these transaction skills under Sophia's tutorship and as a result, could attend to customers independently. On one of my visits, I observed the following transaction activity:

I see two kids buying some biscuits and being attended to by Boyd. The kids communicate using fingers pointing at what they want to buy as Boyd responds using gestures and signs. He raises all five fingers to mean K5 local currency, or three fingers to mean K3 as price for the items. Sophia tells me she taught him all these basic signs and the different notes of the local currency. Boyd gets the money, gives the kids their product and adds a change for the money given.

"He is such a talented son, and I believe he would have been smarter if he was allowed to enroll at the special mission school, but we were denied entry on grounds that it was already full. He gives me hope that he can stand by himself and really doing well in his small business." Sophia.

Fieldnotes: 05/06/22



Figure 15: Kanthemba shop and assorted groceries

Sophia explains to me that she only asks for help from her older son when restocking her shop. He helps her to write down the list of items, in quantities that she presents to shop owners when ordering goods. When she goes to the city, she is already oriented to the right shops and could then present the list of items on the counter to the shop owners who would then read through and calculate for her the amount she needed to pay. When she returns, she and Boyd attend to local customers as usual.

Sophia knows exactly how much profit she is making out of her orders and at what point she needs to go back and restock their shop. Nonetheless, her admiration for schooled literacy for her son, Boyd, seemed to be its association with the acquisition of the formal literacy skills which she assumed would improve her son's cognitive abilities, to be smarter than he was at the time. Not negating the importance of acquiring functional literacy skills, Sophia seemed to be unaware that she was already using both functional literacy and numeracy very successfully with specific functionalities that were relevant to the day-to-running of her business and their social and cultural context. She and her son engaged in complex numeracy and literacy practices on a daily basis, as part of the transactions that they performed for their customers. This involved high level mental calculations, reading different banknotes and coins, either by looking at the figures or features of the currency, making a shopping list, budgeting and so on.

I noticed that the basic algorithms and simple codes she had generated for her son as a communicative practice during transactions, were eventually adopted by the community, as demonstrated by the children who came to buy items at the shop and being attended to by him. In fact, the son used these communicative practices in different social domains, for example, when he went to the nearby trading centre to put in orders.

Sophia on the other hand only requested help from the older son with the writing task because the marketplace needed use of different types of literacies that were practiced by shop owners in the city. Most of the products were labelled in English with some in local names so it was important to use the correct spelling and names of these products when going to other shops. Mostly, these business transactions occurred in informal spaces in which it was the functionality of the text that mattered. In these spaces, either dominant or vernacular/market literacies were used that were relevant to the social practices characterised in the marketplace and shopping centres. I asked Sophia if she could be given a receipt for these transactions when doing her shopping. She responded that it was not necessary and could not ask for it. If the items were defective, she would simply return them and ask for replacement or refund. The shop owners always oblige. I noticed that local transactions in the community were rarely done with receipts, and it was something no one is accustomed to.

I was surprised that the shop also stocked some basic drugs for fever and malaria, common ailments in the community. Sophia said that these are sold secretly to her by some local pharmacies and other drug suppliers in town, as it would be a crime if she was caught by the medical authorities. I asked her how she distinguished one drug brand from another when selling to customers. She told me she looked at their labels, the colour of the box or the main print and learnt to recognise them over time. These labels of products such as '*Cafemol*' or '*Panadol*' shown in figure 15 on the display bear some dominant literacies, sometimes with symbols on the packages to describe the prescription. Sophia could also rely on the information shared by the customer. She would ask for some background information from her customers about their condition to get an idea of what could be the best prescription. Others would tell her what drug they were looking for, based on their symptoms or the prescription recommended to them, but unavailable at the local clinic in the area. Sophia stated that she was fairly confident

in the knowledge and experience that she had developed over time, regarding the appropriate medicine and dosage, according to symptoms.

Here, Sophia navigates different multi-modal spaces in grappling with a specific literacy task, involving the dominant literacy but in a range of social domains and for particular functionalities. Her son, Mabvuto, as someone who is 'literate' has become part of her social and cultural capital, and she turns to him for help with writing tasks. However, what is interesting is how she has learnt to navigate complex dominant literacies such as printed labels on items she sells in the shop, including medicines. Her main strategy is to look at the headings or printed labels on the packages, rather than reading the whole text. In terms of medicine, meaning making is collaborative with her customers making sense of the right prescription. These negotiations are based on social power relations at that particular point which are always fluid. For example, Sophia acts as a knowledge broker for customers who do not know what product or prescription they need, and enlists the help and expertise of the pharmacist. This serves to illustrate that textual meaning in multi-modality is shaped by power relations.

Similarly, the simple algorithms she taught her son show how numeracy practices and meaning-making are equally situated within the social and cultural context. The numeracy practices in this community depict numerical figures and signs as having a contextual meaning as used within the local communicative practices. This is seen when Boyd raises two or three fingers when serving her customers at the shop.

5.2.3. Literacies as Decoding Text Messages in the Phone

Building from the previous section, I explore literacy as women practicing and decoding meaning through digital text, drawn from my personal encounter with Belita. I compare Belita's story with that of Sophia's; each exercising agency in pursuing personal aspirations.

Like Sophia, Belita considers that she is entirely uneducated, since she dropped out in her first term of Grade 1 to nurse her sick mother. Diagnosed with a terminal illness that claimed her life, Belita was left in charge of her youngest baby sibling at a tender age. She

was 24 years old at the time of fieldwork, married and had just given birth to her third baby by caesarean. Her two older children were from her first marriage and were staying with her grandmother in another village.

Belita owned a phone and explained that having it was clearly fashionable since almost all her peers owned one, and that she felt under pressure to not get left behind. As a result, she told me, she had worked hard on the field to raise enough money from selling her farm produce, to purchase a phone. Acquiring a phone gave her a sense of identity and self-worth as she told me it allowed her to strengthen ties with her family circle and network of friends.

One afternoon, I was passing by the village when Belita called out my name, stating that she wanted to show me something. She was in company of her neighbour with whom they always shared quality time together. I was curious when she handed me her phone, asking me to read a text message sent to her by an anonymous person. She was not sure what it really meant. She mentioned that her neighbour expressed suspicion about the message which read as follows:

“Muitanidwa ku crusade pa Sondo” (You are invited for a Sunday crusade).

I asked them how they interpreted the message as it was as clearly as it sounded (a straightforward invitation). The friend quickly mentioned that she thought the message was strange, especially because it was from a strange number that they did not recognise. When I probed further why they thought the message was suspicious, the friend mentioned that there were a lot of fake churches and satanists around and the fact that it has been sent without the sender identifying themselves, meant that there was something amiss about it. I went on to ask Belita if she would be able to do without a phone. Her response was even more fascinating:

“Honestly, I’m so addicted to a phone that I can’t do without it. Impossible! [Laughs!] I know people make fun of me that I can’t read, including my husband, but it wasn’t my fault that I didn’t go to school. It’s not my fault that I’m ignorant, but God knows anyway. “

Fieldnotes: 29/10/22

There is clearly stigma because of her lack of schooled literacy, especially compared to other young women of her age who had been to school. However, this stigma has not deterred her from actively engaging in digital literacies and applying its functionalities in different social domains. Belita explained how she had learnt to use some basic apps on the phone such as opening text, dialling, checking top-up credit and only asked her neighbour to decode some messages. She explains that she is able to recognise some numbers on the phone by looking at the last two digits or browsing through the phone book. Key contacts in the village that she calls regularly were displayed in special letters, so she could check them easily.

These anecdotes also illustrate how digital texts carry different meanings in different social contexts. While the text is clear in terms of the words, for Belita and her friend, the identity of the sender was crucial to understanding the meaning: in other words, the sender adds context to the message. The two of them conclude that the text is suspicious, drawing on their contextual knowledge. They are aware that there are a number of cults who try to draw people in. They took time to analyse the message beyond the literal meaning, aware that it was likely to come from an untrustworthy source. Their interpretation also depicts their local belief system as women who congregate at a local church in the community, but also dragging in their literate identities in this activity. This also illustrates how this is a shared activity: Belita's neighbour read texts for her, but on this occasion, the two wanted my interpretation as well. Agency, voice and power are involved in decoding the meaning of the text.

Mobile phones, as a category of digital literacies are shaping women's social spaces and how women interact with each other in this community. Women like Belita are taking hold of digital literacies and as a result, taking control of their lives and gaining a sense of self-worth, a form of pursuing gender justice. More importantly, through digital literacies, I would argue that women are constructing new identities and new gender relations.

5.3. Literacies and Gender Relations in Social Groups

The NLS has generally emphasised that reading and writing are to be studied in the context of social (cultural, historical, political and economic) practices in which

they are part and which operate in particular social spaces (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009, p. 2).

Here, I draw on this citation to analyse how text within given social domains influence social relations and women's participation. Westen (1994) observed that women's participation in literacy programmes was seldom the focus of close analysis. This observation inspired me to analyse women's engagement with literacy in social groups from a gender perspective. As a community where different activities took place in sites across the physical space, various social domains also shaped how women engaged with literacies, especially in group activities.

In Chapter Two, I gave examples of the different social groups in the community, their unique identities and characteristics. I was particularly interested in how these characteristics might influence social relations, identity and women's interactions with text. What emerged from the data is how particular social spaces could be sites where gendered practices and inequalities were legitimised and reinforced.

5.3.1. The Chabwera Village Bank Group

The Village Bank Group (VBG) was a site I identified early on as relevant to my reflection of women's agency and participation. Although members only met once a month, the group had an influential role in community life. Anyone could join for free. The group had its own ground rules which operated as its constitution and members were inducted through those rules. For example, the group agreed to meet every 16th day of the month at one place. Penalties could be applied for late-comers or absentees without reasons. I always made sure to arrive early on this day so that I could observe interactions among members as well as those who attended and ongoing activities. In the few meetings I attended, I noted compliance with the rules, but also certain consistent patterns of gender relations. For example, at the start of the meeting, the men sat on chairs/stools while the women sat down on the ground, as was common in other group activities and meetings. Zeledi and Enala were members of the VBG. I share my reflections on one of the group meetings I attended below:

The group leader Uncle Rex calls the meeting to order and conducts a group register. The few men take the front seats while the rest sit on the ground. Some members seem to ignore their leader's request and whisper to each other and sometimes laugh. The chairperson calls out names one at a time from the register. Whenever a member is called, she/he comes forward to give their earnings. The men help in the counting of the money, which is displayed openly on the table, and verifying the figures for each member while women observe the proceedings and noting in confirmation about who has paid for that month, and how much. People like Zeledi join in the calculations on phones and shout out the figures whenever the chairperson calls for help from the audience. The rest of the women seem to follow the proceedings quietly. Members bring their savings with interest, while those that fail only pay interest. The group leader reminds them to double-check the figures and reminds them to have personal record books, although I don't see anyone with any notebook or notepad. Once the verification is done, members then request the amount of money they would like to borrow and reinvest. Few group members seem to be vigilant and display vocal personalities. Everyone at least seems to know the balance remaining and whether their shares are growing or diminishing. For the sake of transparency, the group leader announces each amount received from every member, and what amount an individual will need to pay back with interest in the following month. Clarifications are made whenever there are disagreements, explaining the rationale behind the figures. Those who fail to repay the whole lump sum request to pay back only the interest.

Fieldnotes 16/05/22



Figure 16: Village Bank Group monthly contributions

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, I tried to observe other events leading to the meeting. The time set was usually 2 pm, but few members observed that. Most of the latecomers were women who could give the excuse that they had to complete household chores first, before rushing to the meeting. Hence, they never paid the K5 penalty. I

observed that the rules were not strictly enforced by the group leadership, but it was also an insight into the power relations at play within the group. I requested to look at the register and noticed that women far outnumbered their male counterparts with 61 females and 30 males, 91 in total. The turnout seemed to be rarely if ever 100%, and mostly was less than half the group. The larger number of women highlights that women in this community took part in different livelihood activities inspired by this group.

I asked whether men were appointed to count the money, but the chairperson explained that they only volunteer to do so. The chairperson seemed to have multiple roles, including keeping documents for the group, calling the register onsite and updating the records. The lack of personal records at an individual level did not surprise me because people generally in the community were not accustomed to this practice. Transactions were mostly done orally rather than in writing. Individuals chose when to put things in writing and only if it felt necessary and mostly the necessity would be externally driven, as I will demonstrate later.



Figure 17: Group Register for Savings Group (VBG)

The group leader explained to me how the recruitment of membership was done and how he played a crucial role in enticing new recruits. As a founder member, he explained that

he suggested starting the group because he and other four colleagues used to save with another group in a neighbouring village, but the long distance was a big disadvantage.

The chairperson took me through some of the rules which also includes the K20 minimum as monthly savings for members, although one can borrow more than one saves. This includes a 20 % fixed interest rate for paying back the loan. These rules form the practices of the group; members need to acquaint themselves with and understand this language. Overall, while there was a good turnout of women in this social space, engagement with literacy was mostly mediated. For example, throughout the meeting, the chairperson was the one multitasking in the main activities, helped by the men who always volunteered; the women generally sat and watched.

In terms of how men and women interacted in the communal space, men had more influential roles than women. This dictates who does what and perpetuates gender stereotypes. Roles were generally gendered in the sense that men led the dominant activities associated with literacy and numeracy, while women were spectators, though a few actively followed by double-checking on their phones. Uncle Rex was in a position of power and used his literate identity to shore up his authority. The register as a generic document can be seen as a powerful part of dominant literacy. It reinforces Uncle Rex's position of being in-charge. His familiarity with the reading and writing task gives him power over most of the members, mostly women who identify themselves as illiterate, and rely on his mediation role. The book that Uncle Rex took charge of, is not just used for calling the register, but it also performs other record-keeping functionalities for the group. Women's participation in this gender-mixed group is mostly expressed through commitment to the membership's ground rules.

I saw this from the conduct of Zeledi and Enala in ensuring that they were not regular absentees. On-site, women were more engaged in the talking and offering checks on the activities than the men seated at the high table, were engaged in. While this could be seen as encouraging dialogue and accountability, the seating pattern was a clear indication of a gender divide based on unequal power relations. Whenever the chairperson opened the floor for questions and answers, it was primarily the men who responded to the questions, yet they were equally ordinary members who should have been asking questions, too.

Over the course of several monthly meetings, I observed a change. It seemed to me that women were challenging their gendered roles as housewives, claiming new identities in pursuing opportunities for their family wellbeing. For example, Zeledi and Enala liked to sit next to each other during meetings and always spoke or murmured when expressing dissatisfaction with the proceedings. I could sense that for their vocal personalities seemed to give confidence to other women and that they were speaking on behalf of the 'silent majority'.

In one meeting held before the final one in November to close the year cycle, the chairperson invited the group to make suggestions on what to do with those members who had defaulted. Enala, in her sharp voice, demanded that all those who had defaulted needed to be given police callouts, and be forced to return the money that they owed to the group. All other women shouted out in support of her demand. Zeledi stated that it was becoming a trend, with some unscrupulous individuals getting away with it and that group leaders needed to act on this quickly.

Our group leader was registering everyone who turned up to join, and now people have stopped showing up. We didn't even save this month because we need to recover the money people are holding onto. This group has been like a one man show, and it is bloated to over 90 members, which shouldn't have been the case. Now we have a problem. Enala

Fieldnotes: 22/10/22

From conversations after the meeting, I gathered that Zeledi and Enala were among a few women who had several shares in the savings group, since members were allowed to own more than one share. Others also saved shares on behalf of their children, but I could not confirm for every member of the group. Those with greater shares influenced the direction of the group in terms of critical decisions. Thus, not all members in the group had equal power: the more shares one had, the louder one's voice.

Here, Enala and Zeledi were aware of the significance of the seating as a signifier of gender relations and power. Women exercise a degree of freedom, but with great awareness of differences based on gender, patriarchy, age and literate identities. Kinship ties also shape the power dynamics: as members are from the same community and many are related to each other. For example, Uncle Rex was the elder brother of Enala

and Zeledi's husband, and called Sophia their mother-in-law in the wider context of family relations. In contributing to group discussions, there were many interpersonal relationships to take care of. All these factors contributed to how women expressed themselves in spaces like this.

I would argue that the VBG was not simply about savings: women were equally negotiating and reclaiming positions of power. The group forum was a legitimate and formal way of demonstrating to the community that women's earning potential was significant, and through that, their ambition and self-reliance. For me as a participant observer, it was interesting to see that what looked like simple and ordinary group was a space in which tensions around power and women challenging the hierarchy were being enacted in a strategic way. On the one hand, the implicit inequalities in the seating pattern, and the gendered roles at the meeting, reinforced gender stereotypes whereby men are naturally in charge and women have a more subordinate role. On the other, these social practices can be seen as postures of negotiation and engagement, therefore more fluid than they might appear.

Women's mere presence, including those who appeared disengaged or passive, created a sense of checks and balances for those sitting at the high table. The group leaders clearly felt the need to show transparency and accountability before the members, as seen when the money was being added up in full view of everyone. This SHG was also a prominent site for information exchange and provided opportunities to women to build alliances with other women, thereby drawing on their social networks for specific purposes.

The naming of the group after the village gave it a collective identity that members could feel ownership of. A remarkable number of small businesses were set up through the small credits members were able to secure, businesses that allowed them to make savings that contributed to the family wellbeing. Thus, while cultural practices in the community confined women to household chores and farm labour, these practices were being challenged by the new SHGs such as this group. Indeed, any mixed formal grouping, it seemed to me, was being seized upon by the women as an opportunity to get away from the gendered routines assigned to them. Beyond the pursuit of instrumental, whether financial, well-being, social relations, or a sense of belonging to this collective identity,

women can be seen as using these spaces to fight for gender justice from the inside. In the next section, I look at gender and literacy practices in women-only groups.

5.3.2. The Azimai ba Mending Group

I now turn to the '*Azimai ba Mending Group*' (Women's Mending Group) that I introduced in Chapter Four. It provides a contrast to the mixed gender group as represented by the VBG. The idea of the 'mending group' was hatched out of women trying to step into the role of helping their spouses in their homes by complementing on important items necessary for the house, mostly in the kitchen. It was a fundraising group for any woman interested to join rather than strictly for the married-only women as I observed and based on its rationale. The name of the group 'women's mending' as I learnt had a contextual meaning—to mend up what was missing in a woman's home such as cooking pots which could be purchased later. The mending group had adopted a similar executive committee structure to other groups, comprising a chairperson, secretary and treasurer. Additionally, they had fused in a job master position which Belita and her colleague were assigned. This meant the two were in charge of determining the price negotiations for their hired services on behalf of the group. This was an important position due to the services that the group offered at a cost.

The group comprised women between the ages of 15 and 40, with shared commonalities in terms of social status and literate identities. Most of them were early school dropouts and were either marginalised or discriminated against by the community, based on their 'illiterate' identity. Their literacy was mostly domestic (see Duckworth, 2014), and in the confines of their own spaces. My key participant in this group was Belita, who was also a member of the Village Bank Group. I accompanied her to a meeting of the mending group, as I recount in my fieldnotes:

On this day, I join Belita who is a member of the WMG and it's their final day for money-sharing activity. We enter the living room, and all nine members sit down on the floor forming a circle. I'm given a stool, and everyone looks excited to see me around. The treasurer puts all the money at the centre in small batches of different notes starting with the biggest, which is K100 to smaller coins. I ask the secretary if I could look at the record book she is holding. One page has names of

the people they worked for and includes details like the size of the portion and the amount that was charged for that work. The document lacks other necessary details such as date work done, or section for signatories, but it is enough for their records and communication within their context. The atmosphere is filled with lots of noise as everyone is involved in the heated debate about the figures being calculated. It takes the group leader to get everyone to be quiet. They all laugh, but after a brief pause, the chatter breaks out again and this frenzy goes on and on. They constantly refer to the book to double-check and see how much was charged from one job. Sometimes, they remind each other based on the records about who was present and who was not. Those members who missed work on a given day excuse themselves from taking part in the earnings for that day. Other members are involved in doing some calculations on their phones. Belita and the other colleague as job masters, chip in to give more details on who still owes them money, which the secretary counterchecks with her records. I find myself once in while being invited to confirm the figures being calculated. Everyone is so active, and the group frequently breaks into loud laughter.

Fieldnotes: 24/06/22

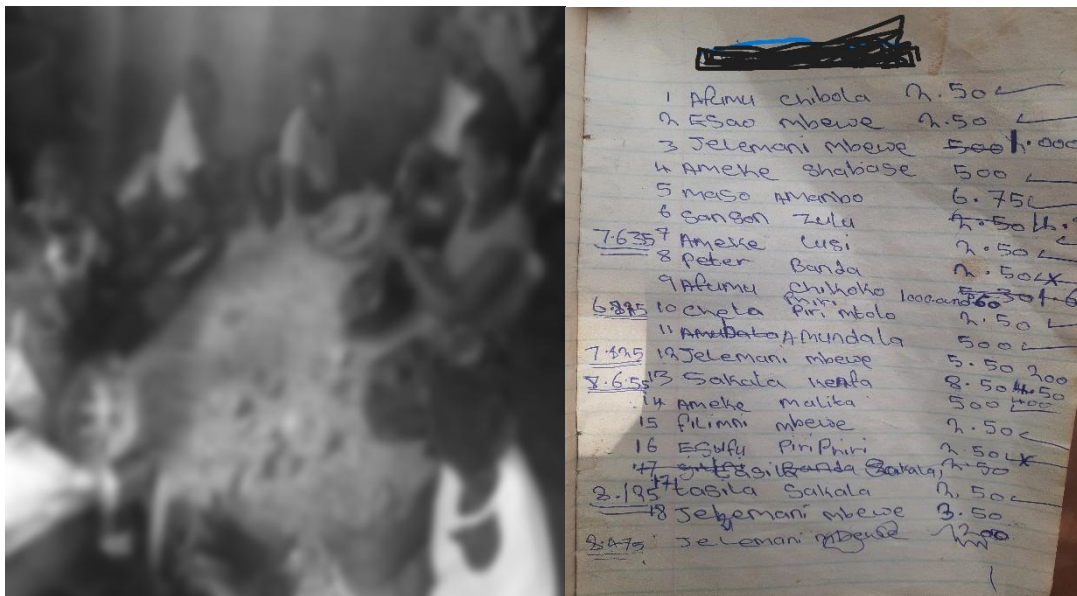


Figure 18: Round circle meeting and clients book

I requested to look at the records book shown above because some figures had caught my attention. The secretary told me that these figures represented the number of acres they had worked for the people. The figures were written against each name. When I asked how they were calculating these acres, I was told that 2.50 meant two and a half acres of land worked on. On the other hand, a block figure like 500 represented the amount owed to them by a client. The tick meant that the person had finally cleared the debt, but this was preceded by an (X) if they initially did not clear. Certain symbols were

adopted from school text-based literacy such as a tick (✓) or (X) to communicate meaning in their context on what it represented, against the names with those marks such as paid or not paid.

I asked Belita how the job mistresses carried out their roles. I learnt that their role included bargaining, taking measurements and charging amounts for every piece of work. They used simple formulae for working out measurements such as counting steps to determine the size of the field as an acre or lima. Belita told me that an acre was measured by 70 steps by 70, and a lima, 50 steps by 50. In other words, steps were used as a unit of measurements for acre or lima and these were context specific, playing that particular functionality in the local farming practices. Steps could also be used for spacing. For example, one step depending on its width would stand for a metre or centimetre measurement when planting seeds. Every peasant farmer in the community understood these simple measurements and used them for their agricultural practice: what a given number of steps equated to. Interestingly, Belita explained that these rules were equally accepted by agricultural extension officers when demarcating field sizes.

The circle formation seating pattern in figure 18 meant that members were at par, and everyone had equal participation in the activity. This contrasted with the seating arrangements in the village banking group with a mixed gender. The frequent laughter seemed to be intrinsic to this formation, giving the gathering a very informal flavour and capturing how women behaved in their women only social space. Participation in the literacy practices embedded within the activity seemed to be free of the reticence and self-restraint I observed in the gender mixed groups. Here, women called each other by their first names while laughing and joking. They also seemed to be unbothered by their 'illiterate' identities despite their activities frequently engaged with complex institutional literacy practices (agricultural extension guidelines) that depict dominant literacy/numeracy. The local community integrated and readapted these agricultural practices into their livelihood context; performing particular functionalities such as counting steps as a substitute for a measuring tape used as a universal standard tool.

This activity shows the women blending different forms of literacies and numeracies to fit the activity. In so doing, they have agency. Here, their interactions with text did not appear to be in the service of power relations among themselves. Instead, it was in the

service of collective action against external threats. When I asked Belita and the chairperson what they could do if people defaulted and chose not to pay. I was told that such people were taken to the local court palace for justice and the records could be used as proof of unpaid work. As in the Village Bank Group, literacy text in this social context was being used for specific functionalities, namely, record keeping for paid-up services and as a legal document in case of non-payment.

By contrast, the group can be seen as representing a collective identity and solidarity among the women. Through participation, women can be seen as active and challenging their gendered roles and therefore, their relative powerlessness. Through organisation and leadership required by the formalities of setting up a group, the women are taking control of their personal lives and freedoms, in contrast to the passivity portrayed in literacy-mediated activities in male dominated spaces. The women-only group showcases how women's behaviours and attitudes and engagement with literacy changes in a women-only space. As with the Bank Group, the initiative generated so much more than instrumental purposes. In this case, however, women can be seen strengthening their collective identity and resilience through solidarity and networking.

5.3.3. Institutional Literacy: Literacy Mediation

So, I do help a lot. Helping mother to read through the list of items, sometimes filling the forms for her, explaining to her sections of the form where to put her NRC or phone number. I do that and even sign for her or ask her to use her thumb." Mabvuto

Fieldnotes: 12/10/22

In section 5.1.1., I explored the power dynamics that arise from a situation where institutional literacy influences women considered literate with social status power. Following the launch of the literacy campaign in 1990, later leading to gender reforms such as the Gender Equity and Equality Act No. 22 of 2015 discussed in Chapter Two, a proliferation of literacy programmes emerged from both government and the private sector. These sought to empower women's participation in development.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the notion of participation is problematic and contested, particularly in dominant literacies when a monologic approach to communication takes centre stage, thereby also shaping power relations. The resulting power imbalance leads to the adoption of strategies such as literacy mediation by either providers or participants themselves to engage in an activity. The term ‘mediation’ has several meanings, but here I adopt what Barton (2007, p. 85) has described as “another person making sense of describing, interpreting an event or experience on behalf of someone.” In communities like Chabwera where daily lives do not depend on literacy, literacy mediation was often applied to help participants when engaged in literacy-mediated tasks. This has significant implications with regards to agency and social power, in a contested social space.

In this section, I examine how Sophia and her colleagues navigated complex institutional literacies through mediation by tapping into their social and cultural capital. I begin with an excerpt from my fieldnotes.

On this day, Sophia called me to share her recent encounter with a new company claiming to offer financial support to villagers:

“So, there is this company called KAINGO, that our colleague shared which is a micro-lending institution and gives out small loans to villagers. Pretty much the same conditions as the ones in village banking except that when you sign the agreement forms before getting their loan, you’re given six months to pay back the loan with interest.”

Sophia proceeds to give me more details about the loan and explains why she decided to join.

“I’m planning to borrow a K500 for a start. I don’t want to put myself under too much pressure. You see, this loan doesn’t want that you borrow for consumption...”

Fieldnotes: 24/09/22.

Sophia explained to me that on the first day of the meeting with KAINGOA officials, she and others in the community did not finish the meeting and ran away because they did not understand the conditions. It took one of their friends, who remained to the end, to convince them that the conditions were not as bad as everyone thought. This anecdote illustrates the role of literacy mediation; how information relies not only on local networks,

but personal networks. Sophia went on to explain to me about the process involved in forming a group that would ultimately be affiliated with the company. She explained that there were certain requirements that she found were a bit risky such as collective collateral. In other words, if one individual defaulted, the whole group had to bail that person out. However, Sophia mentioned that she was eligible to apply for the loan since she was running her grocery shop and was willing to give it a try. We agreed that I was going to attend the final meeting with her, which was scheduled in a couple of days as communicated by the company officials.

On the meeting day, I arrived at the venue at 2 pm in the company of two men from Chabwera Village who were also curious to hear about the loan before making a decision. There were many groups from other villages. Sophia and the other three women were already at the venue. The assumption was that everyone who wanted to get a loan had to bring the necessary documents such as a national registration card (NRC) or voter's card. While waiting for the KAINGO officers, I chatted to various members of the audience while making my personal observations shared below:

We all get into a church building, and women sit in their own section on the floor. There is a high table in front where the two officers sit accompanied by the focal point leaders of the area. The meeting proceeds with an apology for the late coming, since it was scheduled at 2 pm, and now it is quarter to 4 pm. One officer quickly gets down to business, as he distributes the forms and begins to explain the different products packaged in the form, in the local language. One of the local group leaders in front helps him to explain certain words with clarity in the local language when the official fails to translate adequately. I observe that the officer is not so fluent in the local language. Everyone is listening attentively, but there is a lot of whispering going on in the building. The officer double-checks with people's attention through some random question-and-answer session on what he has just explained. Those with answers, mostly men, raise their hands and respond.

Women are encouraged to participate, but they look shy and only one has done so, after being pointed at and persuaded to respond. Everyone with the form is then asked to tick the options on the form, with guidance from the officer as he takes them through section by section. Those who are unable to read or write like Sophia are being helped by other members.

The officer then gives instructions for people to go outside, and he calls them back in one by one. He calls out names according to groups and makes them join a queue outside to capture some photo IDs. He has an electronic device with which he asks everyone to sign their names on the touch screen, but for those that can't,

he holds their hand and aids them in writing their names on the touch screen. He explains to the audience that the signing was the first stage to compile information in the database. The next stage will be for them to conduct field inspections to check with each current business to assess their eligibility. Everyone is told to keep their hard copies and present them to his team when they visit them.

Fieldnotes: 10/10/22

IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONDITIONS TO CONSIDER

Late payment penalties

1. Late fees: NON YES

2. I will continue calculating interest on outstanding loan balance: NON YES

Terms and conditions

1. Cash deposit/mandatory savings: NON YES

2. Collateral: You are committing the following as collateral: NON YES

3. Variable interest rates applies: NON YES

REPAYMENT SCHEDULE

Payment Number	Payment Date	Principle (A)	Interest and other fees and charges (B)	Payment Amount (P+A)	Remaining balance	CD Signature
0	29-09-2022	0	164	164	0	
1	11-11-2022	227	77	304	1,137	
2	12-12-2022	227	46	273	810	
3	11-01-2023	227	46	273	583	
4	13-02-2023	227	30	257	456	
5	13-03-2023	227	25	252	229	
6	11-04-2023	225	17	242	0	
Total		1,364	404	1,768		

NOTE: This information is provided only as a guide and does not replace the loan agreement. This loan is not insured for...

Lending officer (AKIZ Branch Manager)
Name: [Redacted] Signature: [Redacted]

Borrower:
Name: [Redacted] Signature: [Redacted] Date: 9/29/2022

Guarantor (if applicable):
Name: [Redacted] Signature: [Redacted]

I acknowledge receipt of this statement prior to signing the loan agreement.
I would like to submit the general public that we do not work with any group for our operations.
We will request for any document in order to have access to our loans.
The request for group should be request to the credit officer prior to proceed.
The request for group will show bank ID for identification.

For mobile money loan repayments kindly use these numbers: [Redacted]

Figure 19: KAINGO contract form

This is the standard form written in English and generated by the same credit institution. It is situated within the mainstream or dominant literacy of the institution and used to engage with clients. There is a bureaucratic procedure that clients need to undertake to be able to access this loan, with guidelines and conditions set by the company which include payment of an application fee of 12% of the loan applied for. Other columns on the form include a schedule of payment in terms of the number of months, the amount borrowed and the monthly breakdown, plus interest fees until the loan is settled. The form would have to be presented to the officer at the end of every month, the officer explained. The officer would then tick to ensure that the group had complied with the conditions. If one member defaulted, the whole group needed to settle the credit. These conditions were read out orally, and the audience was given a chance to ask questions,

but few sought clarifications. The form has a sign section consisting of a declaration whereby clients understand the terms and conditions. As instructed by the officers, everyone kept a copy. I asked Sophia and a few others around, if they understood the contents in the form, and there were gestures of doubt.

(i). Outsider Literacy Mediators

In this literacy event, the clients are simply passive recipients. The officers on the other hand are the recognised experts in terms of interpreting and filling out the form. Standing at the front, facing the audience, they hold power both as literacy mediators and gatekeepers. Two categories of mediation roles can be identified in this scenario. The two officers reading out and translating the form are outsider literacy mediators, represent the institution and are gatekeepers to the resources and ultimately, the loans. As insider literacy mediators, the members themselves offer refinements and clarifications to colleagues, and in this role, can be seen as exercising power for meaning-making. The officers code-switched from the language of their institution with its posture and authority to the local language. In fact, having introduced themselves to the audience, they were mostly addressed as '*ba KAINGO*' by the members (to mean KAINGO officers) rather than their individual names. The process followed a formal code and a formal mode of communication, legitimising the power and authority of the two officers. In such a context, Sophia and the rest of the group meant their participation depended on their subject position in this group interaction rather than whether or not they possessed schooled literacy. Their social status power was weakened, confining most of them to being listeners or passive recipients as the KAINGO officers took charge of the meeting.

Reading and writing can crisscross at different points, depending on the social practices operating in a given social space (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009). The officers here represent an institution that has its own communicative practices. The text being disseminated is institutionally imbued, reflecting its cultural practices and values. The officers are there to ensure that the content is understood as intended, through translating and explaining the content and its implications to the audience. The officers as outsiders have elite status and are perceived to advance the interests of the institution. There were clarifications sought from the audience around the terms and conditions which were of interest to the attendees. However, I noticed that officers did not spend

much time under other sections of the form such as 'Late Payment Penalties' and instead, concentrated on the 'Payment Schedule Plans'. The facial expressions and extensive whispering suggested uncertainty and a certain lack of trust perhaps. When one officer asked if there were any questions, I noticed, in the abrupt silence that followed, that people gestured to one another as if to question the extent to which they had any choice in the proceedings, as if to say their understanding of the document was so woefully minimal, they could not even formulate a question.

These officers were mediating the text on behalf of their institutions, but at another level, they were also wielding social power within the discursive context rather than inviting people to engage in literacy practices. In other words, the officers remained in control of the textual meaning, which mirrored their social status and that of the institution they represented.

(ii). Insider Literacy Mediators

The second category of mediators were those within the group (insiders or significant others) who were able to read and interpret further for those who could not. Insider literacy mediators thrive on the mutual relations that are built over a period of time. Their mediation role mostly happens in the context of social relations rather than a formally assigned role (Malan, 2013). In this community, mediators included lay preachers, volunteers, high school leavers such as Mabvuto who had attended higher levels of formal education. Members of this category of mediators situate themselves as part of the literate group, and naturally render the mediation role as a free service for the people they assist as part of *ubuntu*. This role comes as a result of long-term investment in social relations within different settings and mostly in informal settings. Their identities are grounded in the local realities of community life. For instance, from those onsite, I could see informal non-verbal cues such as facial expressions that were being exchanged during the meeting. This showed that some members treated this information and interpretation of the text by the outsider literacy mediators with scepticism.

In this context, the actions of the literacy mediators had significant implications, since there were decisions to be made about whether or not to apply for the loan. Here, Sophia

and other women signed on the electronic device with the help of the officer holding each one's hand and writing their names. This was the case for those that were not able to write while others preferred use of thumb print. I found this practice problematic: on the one hand, guiding their hand could be empowering, but it also could be seen as disempowering and a loss of agency, especially where proximity and distance between men and women, has a significant influence on the relations of power and control in this community.

My observation of member reactions was that the form was not adequately explained, and that people grappled to comprehend the form. Yet as a signed document, the form signified a binding contract, with serious legal consequences. People like Sophia had to rely on the interpretation of literate members of Nyanja and in a sense, had no choice, but to trust that everything was fine. Sophia explained to me that she took the form to her elder son, Mabvuto. He acknowledged that the document was too technical to really understand the hidden meanings. To him, his mother had taken a gamble and that is why they had tried to go for a small amount of KAINGO loan. Most people in the community had shunned the loan, based on the bad reputation of micro-credit institutions, largely based on previous experience or insider literacy mediators. These warned locals that the loans were often a debt trap although appearing attractive on paper. Quite often, those considered illiterate rely on the approval of the insider literacy mediators to make a decision, as Sophia did in her first encounter with the lending institution.

Sophia takes the document to Mabvuto in his role as a local literacy mediator as indicated in the introductory section. As such, Mabvuto has social power and social capital, beyond being a local resource to his family. He displays an insider understanding of the local discourses. He draws on this understanding to shape and reshape the intentions and style of written document, and can influence participation based on his recommendation. An insider literacy mediatory will usually simplify information and will provide it in informal interactions. This does not diminish, however, the strong influence they have, based on their social positioning as 'literate'. In most cases, the agency of literacy mediators whether insider or outsider varies based on the degree of social power attributed to them in every context, the social bond and trust they share with the participants.

Overall, the presence of these literacy mediators as part of the community's social networks sheds light on how those considered illiterate navigate complex institutional and livelihoods related texts, showcasing the hidden power relations that surround such practices. Notwithstanding, Sophia and others considered 'illiterate' can exert an active role in meetings and contribute to meaning making, through seeking clarifications and getting to a clear interpretation. In a more formal process, outsider literacy mediators seemingly take up the writing and reading task for others as a legitimate form of negotiation within the dominant discourses. The power relations in this situation are more starkly uneven.

5.3.4. Intertextuality and Multi-Modal Communication

A multimodal approach assumes that language, whether as speech or writing, is one means among many available for representation and for making meaning (Kress, 2012p. 37).

There is an increased trend for institutions to adopt a multi-modal communication strategy in engaging individuals and groups by age or gender, through on-site participation. In the literacy event just discussed, the KAINGO officers adopted this strategy to engage with members. There was use of a digital device as an additional resource in the construction of knowledge and meaning-making. Here it was not just a tool for collecting signatures, it also symbolised participants transitioning into a new mode of interaction with text within the digital literacy space. What was problematic was the use of intertextuality in meaning-making throughout the presentation by the two officers. The event was characterised by code-switching between English, the language used in the form, and the local language, which was done with the assistance of a local translator. The English text used is particular: it draws on certain institutional assumptions and legal ones. There was plenty of scope, therefore, for textual or contextual meaning to be lost or compromised. For example, closer attention to the official application form shows that it is a legal document with binding terms and conditions. It incorporates certain legal terms: under the risk section where it says, "*Your interest rates will be charged based on*

changes in the Bank of Zambia policy rate. This change can affect the duration of your loan". This text was quite technical and needed to be understood both from an economic and a legal perspective as it was seemingly crafted in that style and context. However, no one in the audience seemed interested in seeking clarification on this section. The two officers, either intentionally or under the pretext of running out of time, did not spend time explaining the text in this section and its contextual meanings or legal. Instead, the officers exercised their social power to spend more time on the payment schedule column which seemingly was more appealing to the audience.

Another notable development was the mode-switch within the same social space where an electronic device was used to gather signatures. As discussed in the previous section, the officer held the hand of each potential client and helped them to write their names with a stylus on the screen. This signature confirmed the client's eligibility to participate in the programme. However, to me it was hugely symbolic of the power dynamic between the lender and the recipients. The digital devices were institutional resources that the two officers used to legitimise their social power, but also to exploit the members using their mediation role for dominant literacy tasks in these informal spaces.

In their presentation, a monologic approach was used throughout in that members were just told what to do. Only those with highly developed literacy skills were able to engage with the activity and took on the role of literacy mediators, helping to navigate the complex literacy task of applying for a loan. At the same time, the activity reinforced the illiterate identities of those that could not, thereby creating a space defined by social class based on literacy identities and social power.

After this meeting, I paid a visit to the KAINGO Offices in order to gain an understanding of textual meanings as explained by field officers; the text as generated and then disseminated by the institution, through various organisational structures in a top-down approach. I was immediately struck by a big poster right above the entrance inside the office and even bigger one above (see Figure 20, p. 159 below). Both the mission and vision statements were in different font sizes and colour to strategically convey the message in this print mode. The key message linking both vision and mission statements is around livelihood opportunity and well-being for the local community, hence carrying the meaning of one's social position in life, particularly those in low-income status. Using

clear text that was catchy to the eyes of readers, the messages were underpinned by assumptions around empowerment. Behind these messages is the institutional hegemony over how economic well-being should be defined and achieved. The officers who engage with local communities on the ground, as representatives of the institution, speak for and to the power and hegemony of these assumptions. For example, the institution adopts a prescriptive role to problem-solving for the community.

Here, the management structure and information flow can be seen as a pyramid, a top-down flow from the centre (Head Office) to the recipients (rural villages). The chief executive officer (CEO) of the company is stationed in the capital city while middle management occupies various provincial branches headed by managers and down to field officers. Arguably, the focal point persons represent another layer in the information pyramid, providing a preview of the information that would be provided on the day of the meeting. This can tip power relations, a top-down creditor-client relationship, as both parties look at the same text differently through media and multi-modal communication.

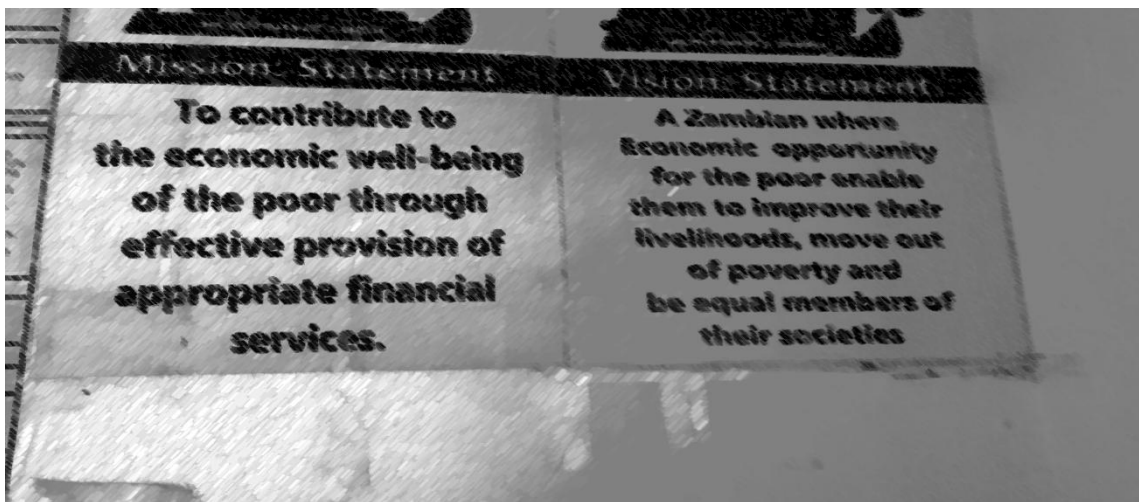


Figure 20: KAINGO's Vision and Mission Statement

At the head office, clients are invited into designated spaces in the building and interact one-on-one with an assigned officer. During my visit, the officer took me through the recruitment processes such as the minimum group size of 30 members, followed by a three-day training workshop. This account of the process was quite different to the one

carried out by officers on the recruitment training days. So, I asked him why the field officers seemed to be giving out different information about the process. These differences illustrate how officers have a degree of autonomy in terms of how they convey the information to their target audience. The officers conducted a one-day training workshop as opposed to three days. It also illustrates how meaning changes through the layers of translation and interpretation, filtered by differences in language interpretation, culture, geolocation, and the audience (see Figure 21, p. 160).

The interactions between officers, translators and insider literacy mediators shape how text is shared, and meaning is encoded in different social settings. Furthermore, established interpersonal relationships also shape these interactions. Field officers sent by KAINGO to disseminate information already had a strategic position in the community. Other media channels such as radio and phone calls were also used by them to reach out to communities and their focal point persons.

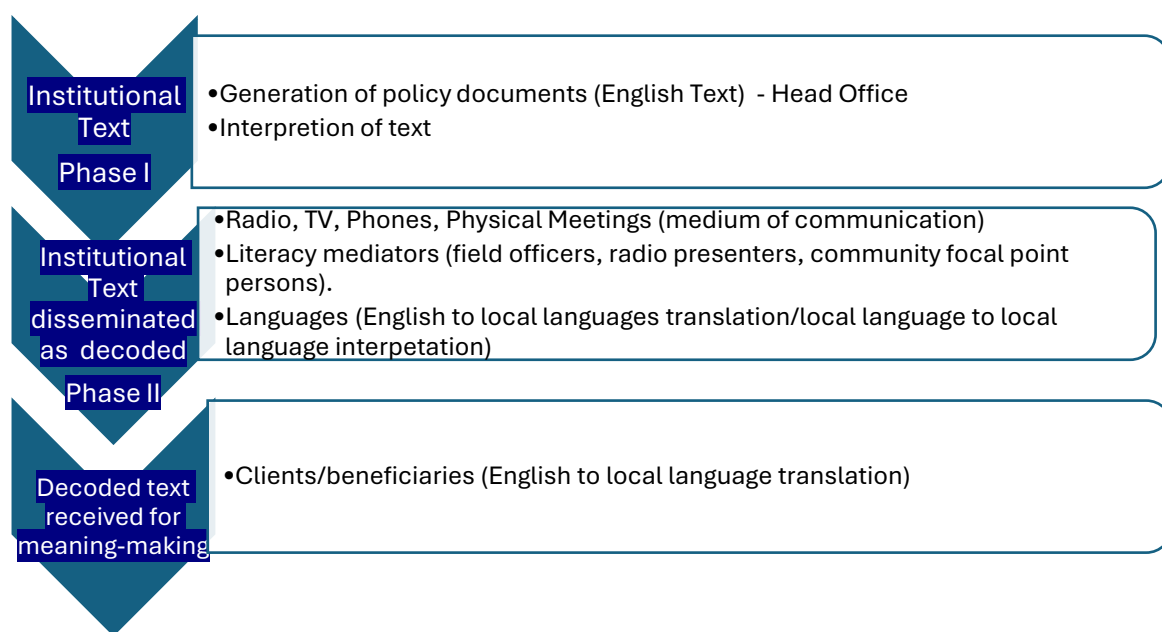


Figure 21: Text trajectory and meaning in transcontext

The table above shows the trajectory of a text as it is read and interpreted in a multimodal context, from top to bottom across different media. Kell (2009) talks about the ‘meaning-making trajectory’ of text where meaning changes across different contexts (transcontextual). At the centre of it lies the power a person involved in the translation of

a text can exercise, which varies in different situations and context. The multimodal space becomes a place of power and contestation as text is disseminated and decoded by the different actors involved. Each actor sees messaging from the position of the sender and the interrelationship taking place in that social context in relation to their own. The textual analysis takes into account the social context in which text occurs and what happens in practice when different actors are involved in meaning-making. It highlights the centrality of power relations in meaning-making, as the trajectory of text moves from top to bottom in bureaucratic literacy practices or institutional literacy, as this analysis of KAINGO's application form demonstrates.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored literacy through the experiences of the local community and their participation in textually-mediated events. I learnt how there can be multiple meanings and how local terms such as '*tilije metso*' or '*osteguka metso*' are used figuratively to describe a literate or illiterate person. These local terms were all used in the context of schooled literacy or Western dominant literacy women claimed they lacked. This was despite domestic literacies playing a bigger part of women's day-to-day life in different social domains such as at home, church or marketplace. The lack of recognition for these literacies reinforces the power of the dominant literacy and confer privilege on those who can claim a literate identity.

I used the concept of situated literacies (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007), to explore the different literacy practices women encountered in their livelihoods. I chose to focus on understanding what women do with literacy and recruit women with varying abilities in reading and writing. The findings show how each participant interacted with literacy in their social space, but it was mostly about functionalities of the text in relation to their livelihood activities. In fact, women considered illiterate had developed various strategies to interact with texts that they needed for their livelihoods, such as reading labels, colours, prints, enabling them to navigate complex literacy tasks. Street and Lefstein, (2007) have argued that many people, including those defined as 'literate' by

standard measures, develop strategies that might not be necessarily seen as reading, to decode text, for example by decoding signs, colours or print font.

I then mapped out women's interactions with text in different social groups and how these shape social relations and participation. Through personal observations, I have discussed the constraints and strengths for women's participation in literacy-mediated tasks in gender-mixed or women-only groups. I concluded that the latter are significant in providing opportunities for women to exercise agency and develop wider capabilities which ultimately contribute to their wellbeing. An external organisation, KAINGO, served to illustrate how women situate themselves in spaces where they encounter dominant literacy from the outside. I paid attention to women's participation when text plays a pivotal role in negotiation and meaning making, and what literacy mediation might mean for women's inclusion and participation. I highlighted the impact of social relations and power among actors involved in the discursive context.

Finally, I explored textual meaning in a multimodal context and described the trajectory of a text from the source to the grassroots, highlighting the power relations in meaning-making across the multimodal space. Women's livelihoods are not only connected to literacy practices, but these practices were also processes of learning outcomes in a broader sense. In the next Chapter, I explore how livelihood activities enhanced women's learning practices.

Chapter Six – Women as Adult Learners and The Role of Informal and Non-formal Settings in Shaping Social Practices.

6.0. Introduction

This chapter develops some of the arguments and themes that emerged from the previous chapter, with the focus on women as adult learners. Participation and agency were key themes associated with women's literacy practices and construction of meaning in a discursive context. The social spaces were equally sites of learning that shaped interactions and identities among women. I explore these social domains as described (Barton, 2007) to establish how women navigate both the informal and non-formal spaces. Particularly, how social relations are situated in *ubuntu* as a capability. I use selected telling cases for my discussion in which my participants were involved in learning activities individually or collectively. Through my fieldwork interactions, I took note of the many learning experiences women participated in, often taking place through relationships of power and identity. I therefore consider the roles of both social and cultural capital assets in situated learning. In particular, I look at how access to these forms of capital within the community might shape women's learning experiences and sustainable livelihoods (see Bebbington, 1999).

All education involves learning, but many forms of learning are not regarded as education (Kelly, 1999). In this chapter, I adopt the concept of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation to understand women's learning experiences in settings not specifically designed for education—how the transfer of knowledge happens in different learning contexts (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). Women's situated learning is analysed through the lens of the capabilities framework to understand what they are able to do and to be. I begin with indigenous learning which was largely embraced by the community and a highly gendered activity. Then I explore learning as an everyday practice through the experiences of individual participants, but also as a collective in group tasks. The conclusion emphasises the significance of individual differences such as family

structures, identity and access to capital assets, in shaping learning experiences and participation in different social domains.

6.1. Indigenous Learning and Community Livelihoods

At the centre of women's livelihoods are indigenous learning knowledges and practices. According to Western scholars, African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) are not specific to individual countries, nor does a homogenous body of knowledge belong to a specific tribe (Herbert, 1993; Semali, 1999). However, there is a clear distinction between Western knowledge and African knowledge, whereas Western medicine is as distinct from traditional medicine in the local context. In Zambia, indigenous knowledge is often used interchangeably with local/traditional knowledge, and this is a common ambiguity both in policy and in practice (see Morgan, 2005).

In this discussion, I use the modern interpretation of the term 'indigenous'²⁰. In particular, I adopt the definition of indigenous knowledge as discussed in Chapter Three (Rogers and Street, 2012). Based on this definition, I reference the indigenous learning practices in the community that play a critical role in women's learning, as co-producers of knowledge in their day-to-day livelihoods.

Firstly, the community is rooted in its cultural identity, both physically and metaphorically. This can be seen in the language spoken and in cultural practices (see Chapter Two). People's cultural identity is deeply rooted in communal land ownership and cooperation, evident in their practices of sharing resources and engaging in cooperative grazing. In fact, it is argued that the interconnectedness extended to land, highlights *ubuntu's* intrinsic link to natural resources as central to community and individual well-being (Mangena, 2015).

This community is endowed with many things, from plant species to animals with native names and the interaction with nature is both physical and spiritual. People know which

²⁰ "tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations" (Barume, 2010, p. 27)

tree is good for making hoe handles or poles for the house as well as for making medicine. Young ones learn these things from older generations as they grow, thus a form of intergenerational learning. This knowledge transfer flows along with what the community constructs as gender roles for males and females. Certain tree species carry deeper meanings and are popular among female and male genders, for different reasons.

When I asked one of my participants why the named local tree was widely spoken of in the community, she simply laughed before shyly telling me that it was being used as a love potion by women. It was believed that it made married men stay loyal to their wives or for those women in search of new potential husbands/boyfriends. The various medicinal benefits of the local tree were quite known to the community generally and popular to specific genders. Meanwhile, the men made jokes about it, saying that any man who looked ‘sheepish’ in the community was a victim of the same tree, and was under the control of the ‘petticoat government’²¹. It was interesting to learn about the politics of indigenous trees and that they had a role in the power dynamics between men and women, especially at the household level. Men also had special trees that they believed were good sex boosters, called ‘*mvubwe*’ and this knowledge was only shared among the men. When I looked at the tree, I observed that the locals had chiselled most of its bark. The interdependence between humans and nature is often seen as essential for sustaining ethical communities and preserving ecological balance (Mutanga, 2024). This is the kind of interaction that takes place between people and nature, and how livelihoods are sustained.

Below is a tree trunk I captured because it was very popular in the community.

²¹ A man under the spell or control of a women in a home



Figure 22: A chiselled tree trunk

6.1.1. Indigenous Knowledge as Situated Practice

You see the barks of the tree are cut from the east and west? Yes, you then pound them, boil them and can make porridge from the fermented seed crops whether maize or millet. The patient gets fine without needing to go to the hospital. Sophia

Field notes 22/09/22

I had a chat with Sophia about the healing benefits of the same tree, located just outside the village along the road to the fields. I asked her why the tree had been chiselled so extensively. Sophia explained that the bark of the tree was prescribed to treat epilepsy. The particular tree species had also been used as a place of worship before the arrival of Christian missionaries and was still seen as having sacred properties. It was not until this conversation that I realised that one needed to be grounded in the local culture and indigenous learning practices to understand certain indigenous knowledges, and how they were perpetuated by being embedded in practice. This tree had multiple uses to different categories of people of the same community for different purposes. Its functionalities also reflected different livelihood practices of the people in the community. Those wanting to cure certain ailments like epilepsy, learnt about the tree bark's properties and how to prepare it. Young girls and women wanting to be loved by their partners, embraced this knowledge with the belief that it was 'lucky charm' for

relationship building. This knowledge circulated among members of the community as they met and interacted in different social spaces.

I was fascinated by the rituals that surrounded the tree: for example, the strict rules of following the direction from either east or west as one chiselled the bark and made medicinal preparations. The rules of practice were linked to the movement of the distal object, the Moon, and this coupled with the right direction, made the preparation more effective and spiritual. Some forms of knowledge were gendered, while others were neutral, depending on its meaning and purpose to each group. The knowledge and practices surrounding the tree is an example of the gendered learning in the community and its specific value and uses to women and their male counterparts. Most of this knowledge was informally learnt through women's interactions in a range of informal settings.

6.1.2. Food Systems and Gender Relations

Most women in the community viewed themselves as uneducated or even illiterate, and this framing was reinforced by aid agencies and government officials. I mentioned in Chapter Two, that programmes primarily targeted women and were designed to help them become more productive as well as to improve their wellbeing. Not surprisingly then, when I asked them to share their learning experiences, most of them spoke about formal or organised trainings they had participated in, which involved an agency such as NGO or government officials. They rarely, if ever, spoke about what they learned informally in the community with their peers. This perception of learning as linked to training and organised learning, is noticeably Western-centric in its dominant model of instructor and learner.

Here, I share my encounter with local food systems and how these shaped social relations and power dynamics in the community. Generally, women were heavily involved in farm labour activities, although when it came to selling a substantial proportion of crops, it was usually the men that made decisions and took control of finances for the family. Where food was meant for home consumption, women had a bigger influence and

would use different criteria for selection. At the household level, the fight for dominance in market-oriented crops created tensions between couples. Many other local food varieties uniquely contributed to the power and politics at the household and community level.

On the day I visited Sophia, she was polishing her kitchen floor. Outside of her grass-thatched kitchen was a reed mat where she was sun-drying her vegetables. While this was common practice in every house I visited in that month, something caught my attention when I looked at the kitchen roof: some unshelled crops had been stuck between the poles and the smoked grass roof. I asked Sophia why.

“Oh, I see! These seeds are being preserved for the next farming season and are deliberately stuck up there so that the rising smoke from the firewood prevents the crops from being attacked by aphids. I have a variety; the ones you’re seeing are cowpeas of two types; the ‘kachawangu’ (early mature) and the local breed which is the late mature. The other one is millet seeds [pointing]. The bigger cowpeas are the local breed that I like, but there is also the early mature, which comes with these agro-companies.”

Fieldnotes: 09/05/22.



Picture A (Dried okra and pumpkin leaves)



Picture B: Local seed variety (Dried cow peas plus millet)

Figure 23: Local foods and seed preservation.

Sophia's knowledge of these food preservation methods comes from years of experience as a peasant farmer. She went on to share with me her extensive knowledge, comparing the different seeds and their distinctive qualities over other hybrid seeds, and their relative performance. She explained that these traditional methods of seed storage saved on the cost of buying treatment chemicals. During harvesting, Sophia like many other women spent at least half and sometimes the whole day labouring in the fields, carrying loads of crop on their heads and backs. This would be followed by shelling and deciding which ones would be put into the grain store, and which ones were to be packed in sac bags for immediate or long-term use. I once participated in loading the grain into the maize granary, ensuring that some were separated from the food grain for immediate use. Responsible for food security, every woman has intimate knowledge of food varieties that can be grown and will grow crops such as beans and groundnuts to supplement food security. The coming of the dry season leads to food preservation activities where vegetables are harvested from the field and sundried. They are then safely stored as dried relish in sac bags in readiness for the approaching dry season. Women in this community are aware of the challenges of not having enough relish, which becomes scarce and expensive as the dry season gets underway.

Sophia explained that certain indigenous seed varieties were on the verge of extinction so members of the community, mainly older women like her, were involved in the

preservation of these seeds. She also kept some seeds varieties not really to grow on a large scale, but as safeguards if one did not manage to buy the hybrid seed for a new farming season. Sophia's efforts to protect specific indigenous seed varieties contributed to food security, livelihoods and therefore, the family well-being as well as the sense of responsibility for preserving and passing on this indigenous knowledge. Sophia also explained to me that there were few women in the village with her seed types, and that she would share her seeds freely with those interested.

Control over seeds in households tended to be contested among couples. Men tend to control the crop that is in highest demand on the market. In this house, Sophia was an exception. Despite living with her grown-up sons, she made decisions about what crop they would sell and what crop they would keep for their own consumption. By contrast, the kitchen was a women's space. This is not only where food decisions for the family were made but the activities around preserving food too. Men stayed away from kitchen activities. It was inappropriate for a man to check the food that was being prepared in the kitchen. Women were supposed to know the kind of meals for breakfast, lunch and supper, and secure enough relish for the approaching dry season. While these spaces reinforced stereotypes of women's roles, they were also spaces controlled and dominated by women, all be it in the form of their own particular power hierarchies. For example, Sophia lived next door to her daughter-in-law, and while the daughter-in-law was allowed to use the kitchen, there were certain kitchen practices she was only allowed to observe. On the other hand, she would not generally let her mother-in-law (Sophia) cook for the whole family while she was around, nor would she use anything in the kitchen without Sophia's permission as this would show that she was not properly schooled by '*alangizi*' (traditional women counsellors). This extended to her conduct such as kneeling when serving food to her mother-in-law.

In relation to gender relations, controlling food was a way of having a voice. For example, women used food varieties as a way of bargaining with their spouses for favours or against anything unpleasant. Sophia told me that the repeated cooking of one type of relish without adding other ingredients such as cooking oil, would send a signal that there was no money in the house for food and that the man needed to do something about it. This technique avoided direct verbal confrontation, and a wise husband needed to know that

things were not fine in the house. Sometimes, an unpopular relish was a way of sanctioning a husband for his inappropriate behaviour. On the positive side, a sudden change of variety of relish could be an expression of affection or appeasement before strategically making personal requests, such as money to help her parents. Sophia explained how she always cooked some nice food like '*chikanda*', a complex traditional food recipe for her husband whenever she had a request to make. Additionally, she explained that every adult woman was supposed to know different types of local relish in the community such as pumpkin leaves, *kalembula* (sweet potato leaves), *gwada* (cassava leaves), *wondwe*, *thelele*, *katate*, *tinding'oma*, *okra* and how to prepare them. For women, practicing these knowledges was a symbol of fulfilling a gender role, but also power and control at household level.

6.1.3. Learning as Participating in Family Activity

Indigenous knowledge about food is also a form of intergenerational learning; passed on to the younger generation mainly through informal interactions in a variety of social contexts. During the same month, I accompanied Sophia and her granddaughters to the field to look for *katate* which are small wild plants pulled out by their roots and used for their leaves. The search for these plants or firewood in the field was mostly done as a social activity either as a family or with neighbours. On this occasion, I was given tips on the main distinguishing features of the *katate* plants we were looking for, and which plants looked very similar but were poisonous. I noticed that the young girls did not have any problem distinguishing these plants and laughed at me when I picked the wrong ones. Sophia disclosed that the best *katate* grew in the dry season when the soil was dry. The young girls joked and asked funny questions regarding the same plants as everyone laughed. She jokingly cautioned them against picking the wrong plants like I did, but ruled out claiming that the young girls were now 'experts' as they have been doing that over the years under her guidance.

The field trip was followed by a process of plucking off the softer leaves mostly on the tips of the plant and leaving out the harder ones with brown patches. If this was not properly

done, she would reprimand the young girls, accusing them of negligence. She admonished them, saying that they knew how this was done at their age, but that without constant supervision, lacked a sufficiently serious attitude to the task. I noticed the levels of monitoring in such activities varied depending on how experienced the girls were, and their character generally. In the field, Sophia paid less attention to the type of plants the girls were uprooting, but was more alert at the stage of plucking out the leaves to ensure that the softer leaves were plucked and then the rest was followed by cleaning and cooking. The preparation of relish for eating on a given day differed from relish intended for sun-drying. The pumpkin leaves simply needed steaming for a few minutes on the fire before being spread out on the mat (see Figure 23). The leaves did not need cutting, and this activity needed to be timed with the sunny weather. If this was mistimed, the relish would still be wet and go bad overnight, rendering it unsafe for consumption.

Clearly young girls learnt these skills through observing and participating in everyday kitchen practices, alongside the elders or experienced women. In some cases, they were the main participants in an activity but still needed some monitoring. When I asked one of the young girls if she remembered how she had learnt, she could barely recall, but said she had been observing and participating alongside her grandmother over the years. She was 12 years old at the time of fieldwork. The girls in the community also shared cooking skills learnt from school. The young and inexperienced were allowed to make mistakes and were monitored closely until they were confident and ready to take charge of the activity on their own. The learning process was life-long, embedded within local livelihoods as part of day-to-day activities, thereby also cementing women's social bonds within the family and with neighbours.

Overall, women engaged in food practices with the desire to maintain their positionality and freedom in the broader social relations within their families and community although it was also about their survival.

6.2. Learning as a Practice of Experiencing: “The mealie-meal gives me greater satisfaction”

In this section, I discuss Sophia’s account to highlight the importance of a bottom-up approach to sustainable learning practices. I challenge the inherited practices that reflect the hegemony of dominant institutions. These systemic colonial ideologies are deeply embedded in the social fabric and continue to manifest through the top-down development and implementation of policies and programmes.

On this day, I arrived at Sophia’s house, and she was having her lunch. I noticed something peculiar about the *nshima* she was eating with her family members which looked orange. She invited me to join her as a way of showing courtesy, but I politely declined as I took a seat. Based on my observation, the *nshima* was not a common dish in that community, and so I asked her out of curiosity:

Ehh! They tell us it is good for eyes because it has vitamin A. For me the ‘nshima’ made from this mealie-meal gives you greater satisfaction that lasts for a long time. This is why I like it. I got the seed from my neighbour, just a gallon to try it and I’ve kept it since then. I managed to harvest two ox carts filled with this maize from my field. Sophia

Fieldnotes: 01/10/22

Sophia’s experience demonstrates learning by experience (see Rogers and Street, 2012). However, I explore what are described as learner’s interpretation of experience through critical discourse (Mezirow, 1996). Sophia gives her own view about the orange *nshima*. She looked very proud to be among the few that have this type of maize, but not because it was being promoted by the providers, mostly government and NGOs. Her neighbour who lives in another village told her that most people did not like his type of maize. Sophia kept this crop alongside other indigenous crops such as the traditional local maize and the GMO hybrid maize.

I was intrigued about why she adopted orange maize given that it was rejected by most community members. The orange maize was being promoted by government departments via community social workers as conceptual knowledge: the local

community was being urged to switch to orange maize as it was more nutritious, with greater health benefits. While she acknowledged this view, it is not the impression I got from my one-on-one conversation with her. There appeared to be contrasting views between what the experts were telling the community versus the community's feedback. It was a question of 'them' (seed promoters) and local perceptions (community) in this case, Sophia's own reasons for liking this particular seed crop. Her personal experience of the orange maize seemed to be more compelling than the key message being passed down by the dominant institutions. To Sophia, this was about the immediate impression of the taste of the *nshima* that was appealing, coupled with the longer lasting feeling of being full. This absence of hunger meant that she could get on with errands for far longer. This had financial benefits too: this type of mealie-meal was more economical compared to the common white mealie-meal because she explained that one did not need to consume as much to feel replete. Sophia here is exercising agency as observed from her choices: the new knowledge and personal experience gained through learning about the grain makes her adopt it for her farming practices.

Key messages, underpinned by the dominant narrative, are disseminated to the public through different media and channels of communication and language, teaching people about the health benefits of orange maize and this shapes how beneficiaries receive and process information. In this case, Sophia is not a passive recipient of this message and engages on a path of self-discovery learning. She critically engages with the information, coming to her own conclusion about why to grow the orange maize. It would seem that whether beneficiaries choose to embrace the new orange maize or not depends on how they relate to what they have been told, and whether the consumption of orange maize is perceived as having a transformational change in their lives.

From my viewpoint, the health benefits of the orange maize centred around conceptual knowledge by promoters were largely difficult to establish in the mind of the locals, especially as Sophia for example, did not suffer from nutritional health issues in relation to her eyesight, or whether her good health was a consequence of consuming orange maize. However, she was able to relate real time immediate gratifications: she liked the taste and remained satisfied for longer compared to other crop varieties. Any new ingredient that increases a sense of security or deepens satisfaction resonated well with

her. As head of the household, these unique qualities meant that the mealie-meal was good for the household budget and good for her family. Sophia's learning experience shows conceptual knowledge is accessed by the local community, but is always interrogated. It is what Sophia considered more valuable that shaped her decision to include orange maize in her agricultural practices: the learning as a practice of experiencing.

6.2.1. Learning Through Apprenticeship in a Community of Practice

We take issue with the narrow reading of apprenticeship as if it were always and everywhere organised in the same ways as in feudal Europe...we emphasise the diversity of historical forms, cultural traditions, and modes of production in which apprenticeship is found (Lave and Wenger, 1991,p. 62-62).

The previous chapter discussed how women's identities influenced their interactions. In their social spaces, there were those identified as having special skills such as reading and writing. I have discussed some of the women only spaces in this community, but here I discuss a group of women who help expectant mothers, locally known as '*anamwino (traditional midwives)*', an influential yet largely invisible and informal group to demonstrate how women situate themselves as individual participants in a community of practice (CoP). The group neither has a structure nor any formal membership registration. They meet informally in the community to perform birth rites during the time when an expectant mother is about to deliver. Home deliveries are becoming less popular, with most expectant mothers delivering in birth clinics. The influence of the *anamwino* is therefore on the wane. In one of my interviews with a local medical officer-in-charge at a nearby hospital, I learnt that these groups were being phased out and being replaced by Voluntary Community Health Workers who were being trained in modern health practices. When Sophia returned to the village, she joined the group. As a married woman who has successfully delivered a total of eight children, her is considered one of the most experienced and respected *anamwino* in the community. She explained that she is the

one who is called if an expectant mother develops sudden labour pains. As a mother and then grandmother, Sophia's personal encounters, navigating family challenges over the years, have motivated her to learn more about dealing with the most critical situations that arise in a family. She has now been a community *anamwino* for many decades.

In this section, I explore through an informal apprenticeship role, learning can occur even without the participant being aware that they are an apprentice or that they are learning, what I have chosen to refer to as accidental apprenticeship in a CoP. I show this through Sophia's experience.

...Sophia tells me that she had just come back from the hospital the previous day, where she was suddenly called to accompany Khumbi, who was taking their daughter-in-law. She had developed labour pains and successfully delivered just after reaching the hospital.

“So, I have performed several successful birth deliveries for expectant mothers, especially when they suddenly experience labour pains and are running out of time to go to the hospital.”

Sophia explains to me how she also performs frenectomy, a special surgery on young babies who had a condition locally known as ‘tulimba’ (a condition that inhibits speech development).

“...It is a skill I learnt by chance when I lived in the city because one of my sons had this tulimba and we invited this female traditional health specialist in these things. So, I observed how she was doing it as she explained it to me the tips. You need to be very accurate to go for the targeted vein and just cut it without causing irreversible injury or harm to the baby. I observed how she was doing it and asked her some questions. That is how I learnt it and started helping other women in my neighbourhood whose children had this problem. It's a special skill but now it is wearing out because I am growing old and shaking a lot when doing it, although people still come to me.”

Field notes: 02/06/2022.

Sophia came into the learning space as an adult participant, a breast-feeding mother and became fully involved in observing, shadowing and then learning specific procedures from the female health specialist. Traditional health practitioners are generally known for their indigenous knowledge practices and use traditional methods in their procedures. Known by different local names according to their specialist skills: traditional herbalists, witchdoctors or general traditional practitioners, they are seen as belonging to

communities of practice. Sophia describes how the health specialist had tools with which she performed the simple surgical operation, followed by administering some medicine on the wound once the operation was done. These specialists tend to offer their services at a cost, but their prices are not fixed; rather they can be negotiated with the clients.

In this scenario, Sophia's intention was simply to get a service, but she found herself learning this skill by chance through observation and then refining her skills through practice. She paid attention to the fine details and later began to practice this skill as a novice, gaining experience and performing many procedures on other babies in the community. In doing so, she quickly transitioned from this life-changing encounter as an apprentice towards a new identity as a specialist. A newcomer with a legitimate peripheral participation, she slowly deepened her knowledge and skills, gaining experience and building her reputation along the way before cementing her legitimate status in the community. This skill complemented her existing experience as a mother. She performed a dual role, performing the procedure on babies with frenectomy problems alongside the more general role of *anamwino*. Hence, she was not formally recruited to be trained as a specialist. Instead, it is through witnessing the activity that she became a participant. This was not formal training, but a social practice learnt in the context of community livelihoods.

The *anamwino* role on the other hand is embedded in the social practices of the community yet attracts the disapproval of health officials and other government officials. The role is informally passed on from one generation to another, an example of intergenerational learning. The role of the *anamwino* is particularly important, Sophia explained, both in the lead up to birth and when the new mother returns from giving birth in the hospital. Pre-natal arrangements for couples include avoiding engaging in extra-marital affairs that could endanger the life of the unborn baby and may lead to stillbirth. She emphasised the dangers of extra-marital sex while a woman was pregnant and explained that this could lead to couples experiencing delivery delays of the baby. Couples are also encouraged not to "sleep together" (have intercourse) in the two months before the due date. Sophia acknowledged that this was different from modern practice where couples are encouraged to have intercourse even in the last days of

pregnancy. If one of the couples admits to having intercourse outside the matrimonial home, rituals are performed immediately to ease the passage of the baby. In her view, young expectant mothers nowadays are too eager to “rush for a knife” (caesarian birth) and people were getting away with bad conduct. Similar guidance applies to post-delivery: couples who indulge in promiscuity, may lead to a mother experiencing ‘*chise*’ until the couple's confession and the performance of rituals. Another consequence of bad conduct is that the baby develops into a ‘*njise*’. I discussed these local concepts in Section 4.7.1.

The child has to suddenly stop breastfeeding immediately if the mother conceives again at an inappropriate time when the child is still crawling, not even two years. The couple has to look for enough food, and good nutrients, like porridge with ground nuts, or peanut butter to help boost the child's health or the child becomes a 'njise' which is dangerous. Sophia

Field notes: 13/04/2022.

In her new identity, Sophia used local terminologies to describe prenatal and post-natal complications, and how to deal with each one through performing some rituals. She spoke with much expertise about birth practices and what was expected of them soon to be parents. In this community of practice, therefore, Sophia assumes the role of a full rather than peripheral participant. She also passes on her knowledge to the next generation, inducting them into the practices and assigning tasks, as would happen in a formal apprenticeship. Although she is now doing far less, she continues to offer support to young mothers in the community, especially those having their first or second child who still come to her for guidance.

Sophia explained that one of the local medical officers at a nearby hospital had asked her to perform certain basic procedures on the baby such as swaddling or handling the baby when accompanying expectant mothers from the village as a birth companion. The medical personnel would often express surprise at the extent of her skills and laugh about it.

Sophia's account can be seen as an example of knowledge sharing, not just intergenerationally, but also between modern medical practices and indigenous ones. The knowledge shared and learnt among the *anamwino* is embedded in the community

as a social practice, with Sophia and other women situating themselves as mentors with the responsibility to pass on this skill to the young and novice mothers in the community. Young expectant couples did not attend pre-natal and post-natal preparations as formal lessons. Rather, they embraced these embedded social practices. As expectant couples, they conducted themselves in relation to everyone in the wider community. The pregnancy phase in this community is also traditionally a time for moral and spiritual cleansing between couples in the physical and spiritual realms, to avoid health risks to mother and baby.

In the community, these *anamwino* are recognised as uniquely knowledgeable and experienced. The traditional midwifery role is also about women being valued and needed in the community, supporting the continuation of life through successfully conducting these deliveries since time immemorial. In this sense, as an exclusively female domain, the community of practice can be seen as challenging the patriarchy, which includes the authority to hold men accountable as expectant fathers.

6.2.2. Learning as a Capability: The Art of Negotiation

Women's learning within the community went beyond the examples I have discussed so far. Agency and social positioning were equally central in how individuals situated themselves in these different learning contexts. The skills that women learnt, enacted and shared, shaped power relations and their identities, depending on the formality or informality of the transaction and the actors involved. In this section, I examine the patterns of interactions and how spaces for participation in a transaction shaped positionality, power and negotiating abilities.

It is in the morning, and I have just arrived at Sophia's place to spend some time with her. She is sweeping the yard when I arrive, and she is in the company of her son, Boyd, and her grandies. The son offers me a chair to sit on. As soon as we greet, we are interrupted by two business vendors selling their merchandise which are bananas. Sophia engages in intense business negotiations with the traders in a calm, but affirmative tone.

“Your bananas aren’t good to be honest. Just look at them. These two heaps are better, and the last one is terrible. I can’t make any profit out of these.” [Pointing at the heaps laid on the ground].

The trader tries to convince Sophia that the bananas are just fine, but she tells him she cannot and maybe he should try other houses. I see the desperation on the man’s face, and he finally yields to her demands on the pretext that she’s his reliable customer. After the man leaves, I tease Sophia that she’s a good bargainer, by managing to convince the man to offer a huge discount, half the price. She laughs and tells me she has been in this business and knows the language of traders. She explains that prices are not fixed with business vendors, but it was how one bargained.

Fieldnotes: 19/06/22

Sophia went on to explain how her life changed when she lost her first husband in the city and decided to return home. She had learnt quite a lot in the city in terms of doing business as she engaged in small transactions such as ordering vegetables and selling them in the compound that she lived in.

In the previous chapter, I alluded to how the community was the site of a range of small-scale businesses, as witnessed from local few posters and ‘*kanthembas*’ and makeshift structures for trading activities. This reflects how fluid social spaces are in the community and in households specifically, as several activities could be taking place sequentially and sometimes simultaneously. For example, the same space could be dominated by a cooking activity as seen from the food preservation methods in Section 6.1.2., while the grocery shop would be characterised by different activities. These multimodal spaces could suddenly metamorphose into trading sites. In all this, Sophia had to navigate a constantly shifting identity as trader, a cook, mother, farmer and so on.

In Sophia’s grocery shop, she was in control of any transaction event as the prices in the shop are printed and fixed and not open to bargaining. A trading activity in a shop has different parameters to the open marketplace and the relationship between vendor and buyer is shaped by these parameters. Everyone who comes to the shop knows that the price is pre-set. By contrast, when Sophia was bargaining with the vendor over bananas, I observed how her posture and whole demeanor changed. She took on the identity and language of the experienced trader, ultimately controlling the interaction. One needed to have trading experience to understand that firstly, the initial prices offered by trading

vendors could always be challenged or negotiated further. Hence the initial price figure was simply an invitation to do business, and it was all about the ensuing negotiation that ultimately settled the final price. Sophia projected a sense of social power and authority in that situation. She was well aware that the vendor desperately wanted to dispose of his merchandise, firstly because he was moving from one village to another, but also based on previous interactions. The vendor plays his part in the interaction, offering her a “discount” as regular customer. Presumably, the fact that the merchandise may go bad if unpurchased was a factor in the negotiations.

This interaction is played out in the context of past encounters between the two. This context sets the scene then for the power relations that shape the negotiation, in a give and take strategy, where the two participants act and react to the conversational turns. The vendor too no doubt would have assessed the social power he held in that trading space, very different to a marketplace where many customers may be lining up to buy the merchandise. In negotiating a fair deal with the trader, Sophia exercises her agency based on her years of experience of trade. These trading activities and experiences can be seen as part of social practices associated with seasonal changes rather than formal learning activities. Bargaining and conducting negotiations in the context of buying and selling merchandise are other skills that are learnt incidentally or sometimes informally in the context of livelihoods. Sophia’s account gives insights into how women in this community adopt varying bargaining strategies in different situations.

6.2.3. Learning as Everyday Literacy Practices in Different Social Domains

In the previous chapter, I explored women’s literacy practices in different social domains and what women could do with literacy. Learning as a theme constantly popped up as demonstrated in many examples of participants taking hold of literacies in the multimodal spaces described. Therefore, I argued that the entire community can be viewed as a learning site, a ‘literacy environment’²². In my introduction to this chapter, I

²² ‘the plurality of the text, text types and social practices’ as conceptualised (Rogers and Street, 2012, p. 148).

mentioned the role of family structure and access to capital, mainly social, in shaping women's learning experiences. The concept of learning as situated practice and embedded within people's livelihoods and interactions, provides a framework for analysing learning in these social spaces. As learners engaging in literacy practices that are embedded in their livelihood activities, women learn new things and construct their own identities within the circles of their families or community.

For instance, as group leaders at community level, Sophia and Khumbi participated in several agricultural training programmes throughout the year, categorised as pre-season or post-harvest activities. This meant that Sophia was in constant touch with extension officers and aid agencies that promoted new farming technologies. She told me that she and her team would be visited by extension officers in-person training or would attend programmes on the air through the radio and were introduced to various farming techniques. They would then do onsite field demonstrations on what they learnt on a small plot of land called the 'demo plot'. Some of the activities would be conducted in the presence of the extension officers who gave instructions to follow from planting to crop management, such as how to make composite manure, applying fertilizer or weed killer; how to record information at every stage of the harvesting, weighing the kilograms of the total yield and sending the data to the agricultural block centre. This activity would happen for the period matching the duration of the farming season. I was able to confirm this in my follow-up interviews with the block extension officer in the area and other aid agencies that conducted agricultural activities referred to as field/open classes.

I then observed how this knowledge activities were intertwined or shaped by and within the wider resources Sophia had access to, coupled with her existing knowledge and experience. For example, listening to the radio was part of Sophia's daily routine, along with the TV, which meant that Sophia had access to information on several events happening in the country. In the house there was an updated calendar which she explained was given to her by a shop owner in town when ordering groceries. This had become important for her daily activities, once she learnt how to use it. In other homes I visited, there were posters on their walls, like campaign posters, and calendars, that had outlived their usefulness and seemed to me to have simply a decorative function. This

shows how access to resources shape learning experiences to a greater extent as I demonstrate in the follow-up sections.

My visits to Sophia's house gave me further insights into how she spent her time learning informally through her social interactions with family members that shaped her identity:

"I want to show you what I bought from town" as she went inside the house and brought out a storybook. "You know what? Reading I do, but I only get a bit confused when writing. When I start writing, I easily forget the spelling [Laughs]! I start writing something else. Eeeh! But, but now I'm able to read! I even bought this storybook which I read for my grandchildren. It is a book written in the local language and it has a Lord's Prayer, our national anthem, and some stories."

"Interesting!" I respond as I look at the book.

"At least I can read it to my grandchildren when they come back from school. I just bought it in town. You know what? I was schooled in the old education system in Grade 1 which was equivalent to Sub A and Sub B [smiles]. So, I have faint memories of what we used to read."

"How do you do it?" I ask.

"I read this book to my granddaughters. They always argue with me sometimes, telling me that what I'm reading to them isn't correct, but their teacher at school [Laughs]! They like quarrelling with me [Laughs again]! So, these storybooks were in different local languages. I bought this for myself, but also for my grandchildren to be reading through together".

Fieldnote: 26/10/22

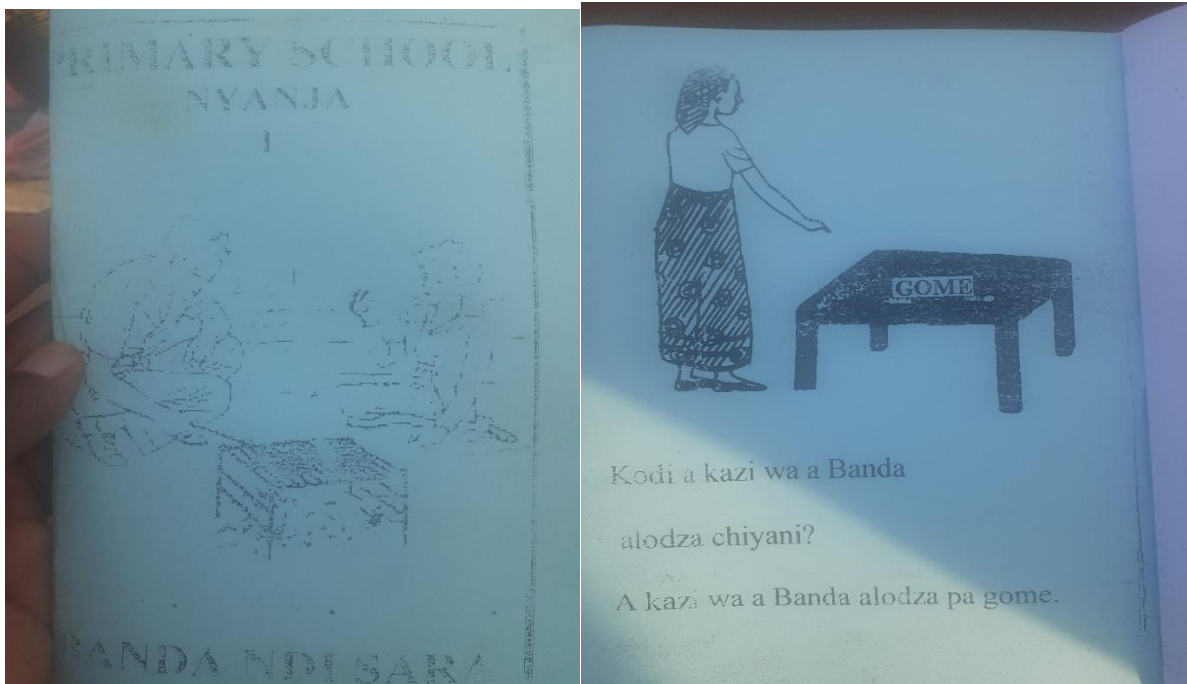


Figure 24 : Storybook

The storybook in the picture is in the local Chichewa language for primary school literacy, which mostly transitions learners from lower to higher grades. On the right page is one of the inside stories that reads as follows: *'Kodi akazi aBanda alodza chiani?' (What is Mr. Banda's wife pointing?). Followed by the response — 'She is pointing at the table'*

Firstly, the marital status is symbolic of respect and sense of dignity to every married woman in the village as seen from expression of words in the quoted text. These tend to be treated differently from their counterparts who are unmarried or widowed. Beyond that, it also represents submission to the head of the house who is a man, thus bearing their husband's name. This also shapes their social relations with different categories of people such as men or fellow women in the community. I will discuss women's identity and power dynamics in conjugal relationships in the next chapter. However, I found it interesting that Sophia claimed she was motivated to buy her book for the pleasure of reading it with her grandchildren, and not for herself to improve her literacy skills. Reading in her home seemed to be an embedded social practice rather than a learning task. It involved collectively doing it together with other family members, in this case, the grandchildren.

Her family network supported her learning aspirations. Her grandchildren had motivated her to spend time reading during her leisure time when they returned from school. She even bought a book and reconstructed her social space at home to facilitate particular social activities like reading time. Buying the storybook led her to reflect on how the patriarchal system and culture that prioritised the education of boys over girls meant that she had missed out on school. Sophia worried that her granddaughters would also be victims of the same gender inequalities in a community where schooling is at odds with young people, especially girls who find early marriages more attractive and a common cultural trend.

To challenge these perceptions, Sophia mentioned that as part of the activities at home, she held a reading and writing competition with her granddaughters, in the presence of her elder son, Mabvuto who acted as a judge or teacher. She could then challenge them to read in front of him, in what became a social activity, and the young girls would be surprised that what she was reading was more correct than what they were reading. She did not pursue this to be recognised as a literate person in the community, but this positively motivated her small girls to embrace a reading culture as home practice. Although she initially engaged in reading as simply a pleasurable activity to do with her grandchildren during leisure time, the regular practice of reading had improved her skills tremendously. The competition she set up and in which she participated, helped in social bonding with her family members. Interestingly, while everyone considered Sophia illiterate, informal interactions of this nature with family members projected a different version of herself, which transformed their perception of her. This section highlights how individual differences in access to resources, in personal aspirations and literacy practices shapes women's learning experiences as participants.

6.2.4. Learning as a Self-directional Activity

Straka (2004) states that while self-directional is intentional, it can take place in formal and informal contexts. Engagement can happen through accessing uni-directional sources such as a TV programme or be bi-directional, as in one-to-one interactions. In

the following example, Sophia engaged in what can be seen as a planned, self-directional learning activity through engaging with a TV programme on a topic that was of great relevance to her. She then follows it up with visits to the medical centre. With digital technology, social spaces including homes are now being transformed into sites of both planned and unplanned learning with participants situating themselves as learners.

On one occasion, Sophia invited me to go into the house to have some breakfast with her. She then switched on the TV and selected her favourite channel, while explaining to me her reasons for choosing the particular programme:

“I like this TV programme because it's very educational. There is another one that teaches us how to take care of an HIV/AIDS patient. You know that I've a girl who is now 12, and she is a virus carrier. Her mother died of HIV/AIDS while she was a baby. I took over and raised her, taking care of her, such as changing nappies, bathing and feeding her. People were saying all sorts of things like I was going to get infected too. I didn't have the gloves, and I had little information about the disease. I used to put on plastics whenever handling her, like changing nappies, which acted as my gloves. I could feed her and wash the clothes. There was so much stigma at the time, and I often took an HIV test to make sure I was fine. I could go to the hospital and ask the medical staff. They would advise me on how to take care of the child. The medical personnel would give me instructions on giving the prescriptions and how to take care of the baby. After I did that for three months, I realised that the child had regained her health. Everyone was surprised at how a small and fragile child had picked up. Now she is all grown up and looking healthy. I always go to the hospital to take medication for her and follow what they tell me. So, I love this programme; I learned a lot. There is another one about feeding a child with the required food nutrition.”

Fieldnotes: 19/06/22

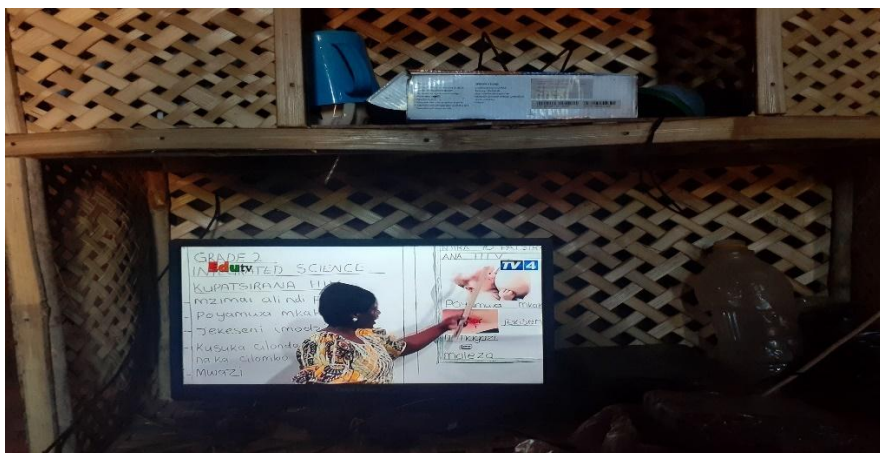


Figure 25: TV channel programme on HIV/AIDS

This was the only second house in the whole community where I saw an individual owning a TV. In this set up, Sophia was aware of the content of the topic and keenly listened to the presentation. She linked what was being said to her personal experience of taking care of her granddaughter (one of the girls she lives with). In this example, Sophia's interest in AIDS\HIV is bound up with her identity in the different social spaces of learning. She accesses material resources in the form of a TV programme very intentionally and seamlessly goes on to mention her network of support who are the medical staff at the nearby health centre where she goes to ask advice about the disease. In this example of self-directed learning,²³ circumstances and life experience have unleashed in Sophia the desire for knowledge. Because she could not afford to buy gloves, she can be seen adopting a 'trial and error' approach in her desire to help the sick girl. As a grandmother and learner, her objectives are clear and in control of the learning environment as she engages in different learning methods. In another scenario, the learning changes and her identity shifts to that of being a caregiver and listening to instructions from the expert (medical officer). The identity she brings to the interaction is on the surface, that of a caregiver. However, in coming to the learning space and engaging with the instructor who is a professional medical staff, she also brings her experience and knowledge as a mother. In these different social settings, Sophia can be seen as a participant in the co-production of knowledge. She has some level of autonomy to exercise control of her environment. For example, when in the house, holding a remote control and listening to her favourite TV programme, Sophia could make the decision to turn the TV off if she did not agree with the programme presenter. She has the freedom to choose the channel she prefers and, in her case, watch a health programme. At the hospital the setting changes and her participation involves listening to the medical officer, learning what she needs to know through this engagement. In all these spaces, Sophia influences the learning space as a participant. The only difference is that in the case of the TV programme, it is dependent on Sophia to process the meaning of the information: she can choose whether to apply it or not since the information flow is uni-directional. By contrast, when

²³ "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others" (Straka, 2004, p. 11)

she meets a medical officer, she can ask questions or challenge what is being said, depending on how much social power she feels she has in the social space.

The context in which learning takes place also changes depending on the different social spaces. For example, meetings with medical officers could consist of a formal appointment or an informal meeting in a given social space, be it at a hospital or if they just met on the street as friends. Sophia's encounters with medical staff tended to be bi-directional, with Sophia seeking advice in relation to her everyday practices and what things she could do differently going forward. However, Sophia could then choose how much of the new information to accept or integrate into her existing health practices in her daily routines of caring for her family members, rather than being formally assessed for her understanding. Again, through self-directed, situated learning, Sophia has far more control over resources, tools and the learning itself and what she does with the new knowledge.

6.3. Women's Learning and Capability Development

As discussed in Chapter Three, I view learning as a product of active participation (Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, I see groups as a potentially empowering resource offering social capital, with social relations, identities and patterns of interactions shaping the learning spaces and participation. The notion of learning tends to be motivated by many factors as already demonstrated. Beyond that, is its association with communal benefits — the sense of *ubuntu* as discussed in Chapter Three (see Metz and Gaie, 2010; Hoffmann and Metz, 2017). While there are assumptions that adults work more effectively in collaborative tasks (Rogers and Street, 2012), my focus is to explore the social relations and participation when women converge in one space. The previous chapter gave insights into women's identities, based on literateness, social or marital status. These are worth interrogating when women are involved in collective tasks in situated learning.

In this village, everything that was potentially of benefit to the community was usually announced by the village *induna*, including the nature of the event. I learnt about an upcoming event that Sophia and Khumbi invited me to attend which only targeted '*azimai*

ba mudzi' (women of the village), thereby defining the audience who would be in attendance. The gathering turned out to be informal, under the collective identity of the women of Chabwera Village. As I have mentioned, everyone knew everybody in the village, either as part of their extended family or as neighbour. These interpersonal relationships influenced how women behaved towards each other. For example, although Khumbi was a few years younger in age but also the first wife, she and Sophia shared a mutual respect. The social spaces became sites for learning as group leaders emerged among the women themselves, based on what participants brought to the site such as identities, skills relevant to the task.

In what was the third day of an NGO outreach programme, I attended a women's event based on my invitation. The women were being offered some training. I accompanied Sophia and her co-marriage partner, Khumbi, to the school grounds where training was taking place. We waited for the arrival of an NGO van. Women had once again come out in large numbers. There were lots of interactions and laughter among them. At the same time, seniority was clearly observed among the elderly, such as wives to local village headmen and young mothers. When the NGO team arrived, we were all invited to go into the classroom. Some women were accompanied by their children and carrying babies on their backs. The atmosphere was a bit noisy before the start of the programme. There were no clear ground rules to guide the training session. The team of facilitators comprised four females, two 'white women'²⁴ and two local women. One white woman explained in English what they wanted to showcase on that day, as one of the local NGO officers translated what she said into the local language.

The facilitator said hello to everyone and went straight into the programme of that day, introducing the task and content which was making food recipes, but also home-made therapies that women could use to treat different ailments in their community. The team unpacked some seed packs for different plants, while the team leader holding a manuscript, read out and explained the different recipes and seed packs, as the participants listened attentively. At that point, I noticed that Khumbi was whispering with the other women, while jotting down some notes as facilitators took them through the

²⁴ Whiteness was associated with foreign identity and shaped local perceptions and interactions with such people. Locally called 'azungu (plural) or mzungu (single)'.

training material. Once the demonstration was over, volunteers were invited to go to the front and taste the recipes. Khumbi and Sophia were among the volunteers. There were some laughter as other women whispered to each other on the sidelines while the training proceeded. After the training, I rushed over to Khumbi to look at what she had been writing. She was the only one I saw writing and I wanted to get her reflections on the training:

“The training went well. I was particularly curious to learn the different home remedies that one can use to treat ailments. I took a few scratch notes, but the instructors were too fast, and I got lost at some point. The two women next to me were helping me pick what I missed, but I failed to catch up because of the speed...I will apply the water and salt remedy we’ve learnt to my grandchildren because I’ve noticed they tend to experience blocked nose. Last night they were really sneezing.” Khumbi

Fieldnotes: 22/06/22

Later on, I asked if I could have a look at the notes she was taking during sessions. She was happy to oblige.

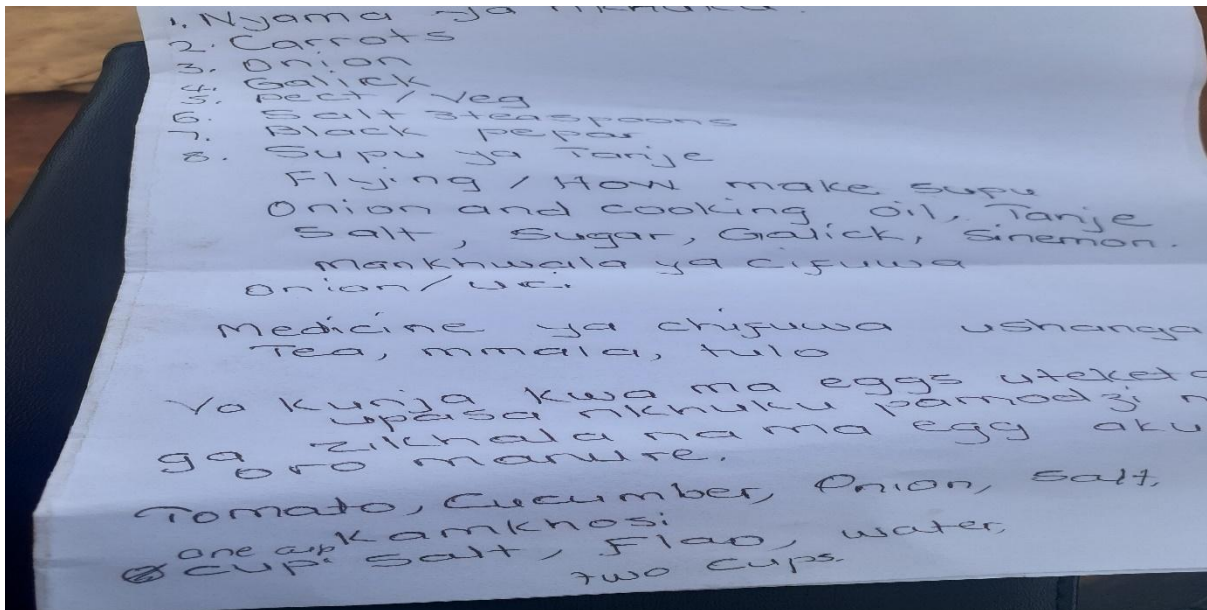


Figure 26: Captured notes from one of the participants

In Khumbi’s opinion, the training had been a valuable learning opportunity, and she felt motivated to apply what she had learned. While the training was intended to provide life-

skills, it reinforced gender stereotypes to some extent, legitimising the cultural and social practices of women in the community that are commonly associated with domestic chores. Additionally, the exclusion of male participants sent the message that these skills were not relevant to men's everyday practices and were outside their prescribed gender roles. Accordingly, the men had no interest in participating, viewing these skills as belonging to the women's domain. This perception was exacerbated by facilitators who were all female.

On the other hand, Khumbi's account demonstrates the complexities of women's learning in a community. First, it starts with the group characteristics, namely, age differences, different learning experiences and motivation. Each participant came to the social space with their own identity and were faced with the task of negotiating their presence. Effective participation involved navigating several aspects. The first one was the selection of learning site where the training took place as well as the composition of facilitators. In this example, a classroom can invoke memories of one's own experiences of schooling or lack of it. This can work as motivation or intimidation, especially since schools embrace dominant literacy practices mostly associated with Western education or elite institutions, and here being facilitated by white ladies. The interior walls were covered in posters used as teaching aids, which could have also been intimidating for those with illiterate identities who perhaps felt alienated by the classroom set-up.

As a 'literate' person, Khumbi's positive experience of the event must have been influenced by her familiarity with a social context that is dominated by school literacy. Her position as secretary for several groups in the community also gives her confidence. Thus, it is not surprising that her approach involved using a pen and paper to write notes. What was interesting was that the other women sat close to her, aiding her with the words she had missed out, in an example of collaborative learning. While the learning activity was offered onsite, it can be seen as integrated into women's social practices in the community.

6.3.1. Processes Shape Participation and Learning

It is the fourth and final day, and women, too, have been invited to showcase their skills, but the turnout is not as much as the previous day. Sophia tells me that they will be doing some sewing, although she has not learnt much because the women do not seem to be committed to this training. There are also complaints that the headteacher of the school does not give them ample time, despite the sewing machines being donated to them and only kept at school for safekeeping. She mentions that there are few women, about four, who have really been quick to learn, but she will be there to assist as part of the team. The headteacher in attendance tells me that few women were committed to come for practices in the afternoon as the rest did not seem interested. We are now in class. The women gather in groups and start cutting pieces of cloth, making different designs such as clothes for children. Some women, seemingly not interested in this part, are disengaged and busy talking to each other. Most breastfeeding mothers move in and out of class and spend more time outside than being part of what is happening, perhaps breastfeeding. This was different when there was a cooking session. It gives me the impression that there is a preference for different kinds of learning.

Fieldnotes: 23/06/22



Figure 27: Group activity of women tailoring

Again, this example illustrates how participation might be shaped by interaction. Associated with that, how participants are constructed, for example as 'beneficiaries,' 'clients,' or 'users,' shapes the ways in which and the extent to which they are able to contribute to the learning process or feel entitled to know or ask questions. Cornwall (2002) argues that these initial constructs help in framing the possibilities for engagement, circumscribing what can be said and what cannot. In this training, I observed that participants viewed themselves as beneficiaries based on the mutual

relationship that had been built with the NGO. This could also be seen in Khumbi's reaction to the workshop and her intention to use what she had learnt.

However, while the purpose of the gathering tends to shape the rules of engagement (Cornwall, 2002), for rural women in this community, learning in a communal space is always fluid and does not necessarily lead to the desired outcomes as originally designed. In this task, the women took the lead, determining the content of their activity while the NGO officials took the role of bystanders, watching rather than instructing. The learning and power relations naturally emerge not only between facilitators and women, but between the participants themselves. It is clear that those more experienced and skillful in tailoring are more involved with the main tasks, while those less experienced take a peripheral role. Like apprentices, they observe and assist with minor tasks when called upon by the volunteer task leaders. Others who had not mastered the skill were getting instructed by the more skilled among them. The female headteacher in attendance explained that it was only the same four women that were committed to coming for training that took the lead. At the end, the final products were displayed in the windows of the school for the visitors to see, depicting what they had accomplished in the community as a group.

The social interactions among participants themselves, and their perception of the event or activity taking place at a given time, can take a different dimension altogether and not meet expectations of the intended beneficiaries. I indicated that some participants were less engaged in these group activities for more personal chats on the sidelines.

6.3.2. Collective Learning and the Ubuntu Capability

While the outcomes may not have met the expectations of the NGO or the beneficiaries, there were unintended and broader outcomes to women's collective learning. For example, I picked up on a sense of individuals belonging to the collective identity in the context of being a member of the village community, rather than living or doing things in isolation. During interactions, there was teamwork based on mutual relations and respect as members of one community. The session was punctuated by clapping and

singing songs of unity. It did not matter that one needed to be more knowledgeable in any of the skills that were going on, but individual presence was valued in everyone and signified being part of the community. This could also be felt when there was a bereavement in the community or at a church event: presence was equated with solidarity. What struck me was that no one claimed individual glory for the clothes displayed in the windows. These were presented as a group product to the organisers. In this way, no one felt left out or less of a contributor to the event. Some of the attributes of *ubuntu* are showing mutual respect, tolerance, interdependence and cooperation among members (Metz and Gaie, 2010; Hoffmann and Metz, 2017). This spirit of togetherness could be sensed in the women's interactions among themselves throughout these trainings, regardless of participation levels.

In this event, the programme facilitators aimed to impart a certain body of knowledge to women in the community. They were in charge of setting up the parameters and indicators on what was expected to be achieved in the post-training. Objectives could be set, for example that participants should display certain acquired skills and apply them in real practice. Failure to do so would then signal the project's failure; participants might be dismissed as underachievers. For their part, however, members' agency in terms of their participation brought something else to the social space, sometimes subverting the intentions of the facilitators.

The different levels of participation can be seen by describing the roles that Sophia and Khumbi took in different activities. In the tailoring activity, those with most expertise led the task while others with less expertise were active in helping cut pieces of the fabric materials. Others watched and exchanged jokes or joined in the singing when it came to that stage or simply observed the activities. In the cooking task, by contrast, Khumbi and Sophia were active as volunteers, taking a lead in tasting the recipes, responding to the group and in Khumbi's case, writing notes. Others took peripheral roles or were on the face of it, simply bystanders. Yet they might be telling stories or jokes on the sidelines, instigating a song, thereby being an integral part of the occasion.

One of the women explained to me that she was not so interested in the tailoring but enjoyed the recipes, yet they all stayed on until the end of the workshop. This illustrates differing motivations for participation, a fundamental one, being solidarity with each

other as a group. The previous two sections demonstrate the constant shifting identities of participants as learners in one context and knowers in another, and how this positions them as passive recipients in one activity and active participants in co-production of knowledge and exchange in another.

6.3.3. Epistemic Capability

I now turn to the notion of epistemic capability in the context of the clothes making workshop. According to Walker (2019), epistemic capability is developed through a range of collective pedagogical encounters which involve sharing information and forms of social understanding, in which actors are both givers and receivers in making meaning. The development of epistemic capability was one of the notable outcomes of this example of collective learning. Epistemic capability is also often associated with epistemic contribution (the giving and sharing of knowledge), which is through informational materials or interpretive materials — making sense of a more or less shared social world (see Fricker, 2015). This is often ignored as a positive outcome by policymakers or practitioners in their evaluations.

The onsite interactions described in the previous section provides insight into what else might be happening when women engage in a collective activity. These informal interactions tend to enrich the learning experience of participants. Fricker speaks about the connectivity of purposes as people share information and interpretations. For example, women brought to this learning space their knowledge as mothers and caregivers, sharing their experiences with a group of facilitators representing the organisation, but also bringing their cultural experiences and identities to the space. Together, they also shared their knowledges based on experiences of motherhood; how each one navigated health practices in their homes. Openness is also shaped by how the facilitators make the environment more inclusive and hospitable so that participants are not just receivers, but givers of knowledge. The reciprocity activity performed by the participants during the entire exchange programme was good gesture for enabling the flourishing of this capability. There was knowledge sharing among participants, like

breast-feeding mothers chatting on the sidelines. Khumbi was jotting down tips regarding treating symptoms of flu in her grandchildren, while other women reminded her of what she might have missed. These interactions are examples of co-production of knowledge based on the group activities being performed and each one situating themselves not only as member of the group, but as having a specific role.

The women identified as fast learners took leading roles in operating the sewing machines, explaining the designs to fellow women, and making the right cuttings and measurements. Everyone recognised this ability in them and therefore looked happy with their leadership role. There were also some post-training interactions where women mingled with facilitators as they toured the village. Khumbi and Sophia were often seen explaining things to them, particularly the two white women, in the local context in response to questions asked. There was also an exchange of souvenirs which Khumbi showed me one she collected.

More importantly, in such spaces, women's voices are amplified and recognised. It is a social space where women do not have to compete to get their voice heard, as happens in male dominated spaces that are quite restrictive in terms of the participation of women. Overall, this workshop\training space was an opportunity for some women to showcase their capability of 'being', which is the self-recognition of the skill they possess, through the collaborative activities that were performed not as a show-off, but as a contribution to the group. Women seemed to work better in these collaborative activities and did not appear to need individual recognition.

6.3.4. The Narrative Capability

As a final dimension in this chapter, I turn to narrative capability. Phelps (2006) points to storytelling as manifesting a capability that is essential to the broader and richer sense of what it means to be human, and what it means to be just. It empowers individuals with self-recognition and enables them to be socially integrated into the group. As situated learning occurs within the context of social relations and interactions, some women were

actively engaged in chats on the sidelines. They could be seen whispering to one another but also would instigate a song or make jokes.

I have said previously that different types of participation seemed to be all underpinned by solidarity and a sense of belonging. In addition, alongside developing epistemic capability, women's participation in a learning event can also be seen as developing narrative capability. Women did not participate in silence, rather, informal conversations were free flowing in the context of social interactions and shared experiences. For example, while some members might have appeared disengaged in what was going on, they engaged in meaningful relationship building and interactions on the sidelines; sharing stories and lighter moments, including jokes. This looked like a great opportunity for some to get away from their household responsibilities and demands. Within this socio-cultural context, women in this community usually had little space for leisure, as they took on such a significant proportion of daily chores. Conversely, their male peers had more time for social interactions and could be seen in different drinking sites within the community. Hence, interactions in a female-only space promoted strong bonds and an opportunity to reinforce existing interpersonal relationships. In a wider sense, it enhanced existing power relations and gender justice through a collective identity as women of one community, embracing *ubuntu*.

Women as adult learners do transform public learning sites as social domains where different activities emerge as part of social practices. Individually, women have different aspirations and each one achieving their own sense of choice and worthiness. The chapter highlights the role of actors in shaping the learning space and allows participants make meaningful contribution to the social activity at hand.

6.5. Conclusion

The chapter set out to explore how women with varying capital assets situate themselves as learners in different social domains and develop capabilities individually and collectively to achieve sustainable livelihoods. In the diagram below, I give a summary of

role of the community environment in providing women’s freedom to pursue their aspirations.

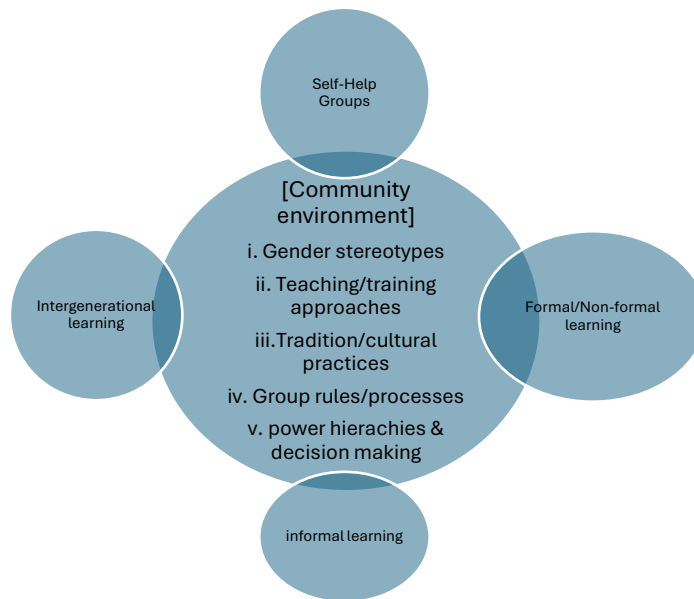


Figure 28: Diagram showing opportunities and constraints (conversional factors) for women participation in livelihood activities

I also identified women as diverse learners and discussed the role of social and cultural capital in shaping their learning experiences in different social domains. All these social spaces are interspaced in a woman's day-to-day livelihood activities, acquiring knowledge that can then be applied in different domains of life. Hence, to understand women’s learning, there is need to look at learning from a given situated context in relation to practices within the community environment such as social relations, activities, laws and how these can lead or inhibit the flourishing of capabilities.

I selected a number of “telling” cases of my participants, highlighting their positionality in the community and family structure, including proximity to wider resources. I showed how access to capital assets, particularly social and cultural capital, influence women’s learning experiences, and how all this happens and becomes embedded as social practices. This can be seen in examples of indigenous knowledge acquisition —how participant negotiate their positionality either as legitimate peripheral participants or full members of the community of practice, as part of contributing to sustainable livelihoods.

I then focused on participating in situated learning to explore the various processes and assumptions around learning in different social spaces. This was important to give insights into processes around recruitment, identity, participation and power relations in shaping the social spaces —how this generally influences women’s participation (see Cornwall, 2002). It was established that women come to the learning space with multiple identities, and that this shapes participation, whether at group level or individual level.

As has been demonstrated, women are collaborative learners and value this approach more than individual engagement. In this community, collective tasks also reflect *ubuntu* capability, a quest for communal wellbeing while not disregarding individual aspirations in their social practices. Recognising these nuances in women’s learning is an important starting point for policy actors and practitioners, as I will discuss in my final chapter. Women engage in literacy and learning as situated practices, but this happens in the relations of power as demonstrated. In the next chapter, I explore women’s social relations, another key theme and how this contributes to gender justice and wellbeing.

Chapter Seven - Gender Justice and Women's Empowerment

7.0. Introduction

In the last two empirical chapters, I tried to highlight women's literacies and learning as social practices embedded in livelihood activities. The big question was how these practices enhance gender justice and wellbeing as women pursue their livelihood aspirations for a life they consider valuable. In this chapter, I use the concept of agency (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999) discussed in Chapter Three to explore local perceptions of empowerment. The conditions in which women demonstrated agency in different livelihood activities in the last two empirical chapters also unmasked existing injustices within the local systems anchored on the patriarchy. To better understand gender equality, I adopt Nancy Frazer's gender justice approach (participation, distributive and recognition) discussed in Chapter Three. This gives me an opportunity to explore local conceptions of justice—how women in this community situate themselves in the social relations and navigate unjust traditional practices. I pay attention to the intragroup differences of women in this community; how these dimensions of identities such as social status, class, race/tribe, positionality contribute to tensions or vulnerability of women. I situate relationships at the centre of my discussion rather than individuals in analysing gender justice. It is said that woman's status and position in asymmetrical relations of power tend to have an impact on their livelihood aspirations (Drydyk, 2013).

I start by exploring gender justice as perceived and experienced by women in conjugal relationships. I then delve into the complexities of women navigating the patriarchy; what happens to their identity and aspirations as they navigate the structural layers of patriarchy at household to community level. Most women in the Sub-Saharan Africa struggle with the kind of patriarchy which Kandiyoti (1988, p. 277) calls it 'the sub-Saharan African pattern'—in which the insecurities of polygamy are matched with areas of relative autonomy for women. As observed in the previous two chapters, women's livelihoods are deeply immersed in *ubuntu*. I explore how this capability is shaping the gender relations in the community as another dimension in my analysis. In this case how

collective agency plays a role in challenging the rigidities within the patriarchal system, but also in how women respond to injustices perpetuated by external players.

Acknowledging that all activities happen as social practices within a livelihood framework and through the relationships of power, I look at their implications on women's ability to exercise agency and wellbeing. I draw my conclusion based on these social relationships, and I posit that women adopt different strategies to challenge the patriarchy including building strategic alliances at household and community level. This makes a case that leveraging relationships is significant to the attainment of women's wellbeing and freedoms.

7.1. Households as Site of Disempowering Relationships

In this section, I pick on conjugal relationships in households as a common space where women experience forms of injustice. These relationships impact how they navigate their livelihoods and pursue their aspirations. I draw from Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargains',²⁵ to explore interpersonal relationships at household level.

The gender relations between men and women in this community were expressed formally in terms of absolute male control and dominance in key aspects of livelihoods. There were high cases of domestic violence and land property disputes which characterised local court sessions that I mostly witnessed. One local traditional leader explained to me that domestic violence was quite rampant amongst couples during post-harvest season. In this community, women had considerable choices to divorce and remarry fairly readily when marriage was unsatisfactory. Their ability to exercise agency in conjugal relationships also differed based on several factors including marriage arrangement —whether a woman was the only one in marriage or in a polygamous marriage. This extended to couples that were merely cohabiting although this concept is understood as one in which the man has never paid dowry to the woman's family. In other

²⁵ These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts... They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression, (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275)

instances, it is where a man relocated to stay with his wife in her village what is locally known as *chikomwene*. In this case, power dynamics mostly tipped in favour of a woman.

In one of my interactions, I asked Zeledi to explain how resources particularly the household income earnings from the sale of crops were being distributed to each one of them. We just returned to the village from a soya beans field where I had accompanied her and Enala in the harvesting activity. Her response was that of disappointment and frustration.

“The most disappointing part is that we really don’t know what he does with the rest of the money [in apparent reference to her husband]. He will sometimes tell you he did A, B,C and we just accept it. We can’t say anything.” Zeledi

Fieldnotes: 18/06/22

I indicated in Chapter Five that Zeledi was a junior wife and had just clocked 10 years in marriage with two children during the time of fieldwork. On the other hand, Enala had been married since 2003 and had five surviving children with the same husband. The positional identity for women in marriage was important in shaping social relations and power at both household and community level. Social position gives limitations and freedoms to exercise agency, and this can be on account of factors such as gender, social status, class (Holland *et al.*, 1998). In the case of Zeledi, being a junior wife meant that there were different layers of power hierarchies she needed to navigate at home. Firstly, from her husband, and then sometimes seeking consent from her senior partner based on seniority which was strictly followed as a cultural practice.

Ordinarily, the two women lived separately, but in proximity, and did most of the things together such as cooking meals, working on the field and other chores. The house for Enala was officially the main house where most of the chores would be performed. This also meant that there were certain things such as family transactions that Zeledi could not do autonomously without authorisation or consent from Enala, by virtue of her being a junior wife. Her positionality meant that there were certain privileges that she could not access, and so she needed to normalise her relations with Enala. Zeledi told me about

her rough induction into marriage, having had to endure aggression from Enala and sometimes from her husband, but remained patient and resilient. Zeledi explained that she could not openly complain about this mistreatment to her mother-in-law in fear that no one would believe her story or treat her as a 'cry-baby'. However, there were other safeguards that Zeledi like any other married woman in the community could explore. The children she bore gave her a sense of security and power in her marriage.

Children strengthened positionality and power bargain for women especially as they grew older. Sometimes, this worked to women's detriment as they compromised their wellbeing and lived in abusive marriages for the sake of supporting them. Zeledi's situation was that of fight or flight right from the beginning as she narrated. It was not until she had her first and second child with her husband that she cemented her social status and legitimacy in marriage. She also adopted a diplomatic approach with Enala as she negotiated her space within the family circles. For example, every morning, she would greet Enala and even when she did not get a response, she continued being nice and respectful towards her, until Enala realised she was not a threat to her social position in marriage.

On the other hand, Enala, told me how the news of her husband deciding to marry another woman devastated her to the point that she wondered if she was not a woman enough for him. She mentioned how her confidence crushed and contemplated walking out of marriage if not for the encouragement of her brothers-in-law not to do so, since she had already kids with her husband. These separate stories gave me insight into the tensions that occur in families even between women, but also with their spouses.

With regard to household income, Zeledi told me that the family resources were mostly put in one basket under the control and leadership of their husband. In the excerpt above, Zeledi bemoans the lack of participation and transparency from him as unfair practice inasmuch as he is a breadwinner and takes bigger responsibility of looking after the family. She explains how she and Enala worked hard together with the children throughout the farming season and producing a bumper harvest, only for the husband to take over control of sales and marketing.

Zeledi also shared few strategies that she had developed to negotiate the contested space within the family and community. For instance, were she built alliances with fellow women including Enala to pursue their aspirations. This prompted both to secretly engage in the money-lending business which I mentioned in Chapter Five. This was kept secret from their husband in fear of him cutting down on family support if he discovered, which he later did. Zeledi mentioned that it was through the same personal business that she often used for her saloon and hair, buying herself some body lotion as she claimed her husband never bothered to provide for such things. She complained of being sidelined in key decision making and felt that Enala was more fairly treated and entrusted with bigger responsibilities such as keeping money for the family generated from the business.

On few occasions, I accompanied the two ladies to their family business and observed what was going on. I asked the husband on the sidelines about how he was mentoring his wives into the family business since he often called them during weekends to assist with errands at the pub and lodge that they owned. I noticed that these duties were not randomly apportioned to his wives, but specifically assigned. For example, Enala oversaw operations at the lodge while Zeledi helped at the bar. Ordinarily these tasks depicted some level of trust and influence, something that caused tension between the two women although not publicly noticed. As housewives with their gendered descriptive roles, Zeledi and Enala were mostly involved in intensive farm labour-based activities besides parenting and household chores. Both told me they were responsible for the field preparations from the start of the farming season to crop harvesting.

From the excerpt above, Zeledi experiences feelings of disappointment, unappreciated, helplessness and voicelessness. This revelation means that the two have restricted exercise of agency (power to) —that is to execute an effective choice to achieve some valuable outcome. Conversely, their husband exercises agency exemplified in full control (power over), which effectively works to the detriment of the two women's ability to exercise agency in this unequal relationship of power (see Lukes, 2005). The implication for women in this kind of unequal relations is that they only develop skills and exercise agency in other activities such as field preparations, crop management and storage. Consequently, they lack the freedom to improve their market literacies in relation to crop

marketing as the process is usually taken over by their husband. The man understandably benefited from this cultural practice, clinging onto his titleship as head of the family, and always coming towards the end to take over the easy and most rewarding tasks of looking out for potential buyers. He studied the market trends, looked for vital information such as floor prices, exchange rate of currency and mostly made autonomous decisions on behalf of everyone in the family.

Like most men in the community, Zeledi's husband takes over these marketing responsibilities and engages more in price negotiations. On the other hand, the varying interests among family members pushes women to actively seek other avenues to raise some extra income for personal things they need. Zeledi and Enala chose to restrain themselves; avoiding a direct confrontation with their husband, but venturing into private small businesses on the sidelines beside the family business as I discuss in the next section.

7.1.1. Women's Power and Agency as Negotiated

Perhaps one crucial aspect to women's livelihoods in a community was the use of agency to navigate existing social and cultural institutions that inhibit their aspirations. What women are able to do and to be is often tied to gender norms that are entrenched in relationships and institutions that shape self-perceptions of what women are like, what they deserve, and what they ought to do and be (Koggel, 2013). Sen adds that women raised with traditional values may be afraid to break with the traditional practices and to shock others (Sen, 2000). In this community, women showed awareness of the patriarchy, but adopted strategies of navigating around these layers and sometimes used negotiation or resistance in very strategic ways that avoided direct confrontation. Here is Enala's narration on how she and Zeledi bargained with the patriarchy:

We usually have little say on what to receive when the farm labour was mostly done by other people doing piecework [laughs]. We just accept whatever we're given. So, we have to fully take part in the fieldwork every season to have a bigger say. Then, when a portion of money is given from the sales, everyone decides to do what they want. I'd go shopping with my colleague. The older children, since

they also do take part during farming, are also given their small shares to go and do whatever they want.

Fieldnotes: 10/07/2022

Firstly, both Enala and Zeledi are constrained by the hierarchy of authority in which power is highly centralised in one person. The ability for the two women to exercise their agency (power to) is bargained for and only in relation to how much of the freedom is authorised by their husband who exercises the 'power over'. This becomes an inhibitive relationship to the flourishing of women's agency. The two women are aware of these cultural norms and try to challenge the status quo to gain their freedom.

For example, when Enala says that they have to engage in extra farm-labour activities to have a sense of control and liberty, is part of the broader bargaining strategy. This perhaps meant that they were being monitored by their husband to ensure they committed themselves to fieldwork as evidence for post-harvest reward shares. Throughout my fieldwork, I never saw their husband getting involved in farm activities while the two worked tirelessly on the farm. What was even more complicated for them was that land ownership in the community was through the man. A married woman only accessed land through her husband as per custom. In their case, they had less decisions on what to grow and consequently take control. In this community, married women seldomly have the freedom to choose crops of their choice to grow and later on sell without their husbands' approval. Thus, one strategy for Zeledi and Enala was to double their labour efforts to win the favour from their husband and be able to get a bigger portion from the farm sales.

Seemingly, in this community, farming is the only major activity the villagers use to earn some money. For women, it is the only formally recognisable work because of its income contribution, while other domestic activities go unnoticed, such as household chores, childcare. These are treated as sex divisions of labour. Neither of these other duties count as unofficial are good enough for a bargain since they are assumed as ordinary women's gender roles. It is argued that domestic works are unremunerated and underestimated as female labour force participation are never accounted for as economically significant (Benería, 1992; Kabeer, 2024).

Additionally, there is an expression of limited options for women's agency as drawn from Enala's excerpt. The bargaining process could only be strengthened if the farm labour input was commensurate with the outcome (contribution to the produce) to the satisfaction of the man. Hence, gaining agency to engage in market freedoms was a hard-earned process of negotiations for women which had conditions attached, including the process of working on the farm. The two ladies though did not simply remain idle, but constantly exercised agency in many forms including resistance. Although the husband presided over family affairs for everyone, this did not negate the brewing tension and dissatisfaction among members of the family. On many occasions, Zeledi told me that she joined the local groups such as the women's club without his consent, despite his disapproval of her move and demanded that she withdrew. It was with the help of fellow women who constantly pleaded with him whenever he pressured her to leave. The local groups as network of support for women offered solidarity, but also a form of resistance to the patriarchy. Here, women fought for participatory and recognitional justice, to access resources such as land and do some farming practices, although this did not guarantee Zeledi and Enala a livelihood freedom they longed for.

7.1.2. Agency as Active or Passive Resistance to Patriarchy

Within the patriarchal bargains, Kandiyoti (1988) states that women can display active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression. I witnessed where resistance was also expressed in the form of deliberate withdrawal from participation. There were corresponding themes around limited freedoms and agency seemingly being curtailed even in spaces outside of women's homes such as religious institutions. As per cultural practice, a woman would normally go to congregate at her husband's church, but where disputes arose, women opted to boycott their spouse's church. Instead, one would go to either a neutral one or sometimes their church of origin in show of active resistance. This was common practice in this community where the man was not a regular church goer, and did not actively practice his faith yet expected his wife to do so and be an active congregant.

During my stay, I was surprised that Zeledi and Enala were not fond of going to church on Sundays as opposed to others. Particularly, the only oldest church in the community where majority congregated was being shunned by young women because of its doctrinal teachings. It conflicted with women's valued freedom to participate fully in the activities of the church. These included taking readings, which were restricted to men only. Many young women opted to withdraw and stay at home as I learnt from this interaction with Zeledi.

I was made to join his church, but I miss my church. His church discriminates women a lot...You can't take readings in church if you're a woman, their songs are different from my original church. I remember at some point I was recruited as a Sunday school teacher. I could go on trips with children where we used to teach them many things. I think this was the only part I enjoyed, but I was discouraged when my husband didn't like this idea. I remember a time when he tore all the papers that were lesson notes for children's Sunday class. I didn't like his reaction and told him I would stop going to his church and just stay at home. After all he was the one that introduced me to it. He never wanted me to take part in any activity, but just to be an ordinary member. So, myself and her [Enala] don't go there" Zeledi

Fieldnotes: 07/08/22

Interesting from Zeledi's narration, is a depiction of the existing conflicts and domestic violence that sometimes confront families as men seek to take control of their wives and their livelihood choices. This has broader implications on women's choices. However, the ladies' action is also about them standing up to the patriarchy manifesting through local traditional institutions in which women feel they are not only unrecognised and marginalised, but their freedoms to showcase their skills in church activities are curtailed. The resistance is about exercising agency and voice in the face of oppressive hierarchies. Both Zeledi and Enala passively engaged in resistance by simply absconding church service every Sunday when others did not. They both claimed to be baptised members of the church, but chose to be inactive for the same reasons.

On the flip side, are different forms of power being exhibited that I capture from this narration. There are varying forms of power exercised at family level where the husband has the 'power over', and at an institutional (church) level which holds the 'power with' — where choices made by a group might either restrict or expand the choices that its

members have (see Drydyk, 2013). These forms of power exert restrictive agency on women and impact the attainment of their well-being freedom. The latter form of power (power with) can be repressive or transformative in the sense that it restricts or expands choices made by its members (Ibid.). Institutional practices such as those within the church reflect its identity and image as a constrainer or disempowering institution that has a posture of patriarchy. This is because practices are prescribed for members and dictates their interaction with text. Where activities are highly gendered within the church, young women find this restrictive and curtails their agency to fully engage with text such as taking readings which is something they find valuable and gives them some level of satisfaction.

In the case of Zeledi, by virtue of being a wife, it is the cultural norm in this community that a woman has to join her husband's church or religion. The opposite is rarely the case unless in the '*chikomwene*' marriage arrangement as discussed in Chapter Two. The *chikomwene* is a rare practice which often puts a woman in a more superior position.

Zeledi's story is a reminiscence of her time when she volunteers as a Sunday school teacher and exercises her agency in way of contributing to the wellbeing of others (the children); enjoying a level of satisfaction in this role, but she has to constantly negotiate with the patriarchy (husband). When she also notices that her agency is visibly curtailed by the strict rules of the institution, she decides to stop attending church service although this decision is exacerbated by her controlling husband. As posited, in every relationship of unequal powers where there is restricted agency for one group or party, this becomes one of the ways women become disempowered.

7.2. Renegotiating Gender Justice Through '*Ubuntu*'

"our freedom often comes not directly in the form of our freedom to choose a functioning bundle, but in the form of the freedom to choose alternative actions which, together with other people's actions, determine our achievements in terms of functioning" (Pattanaik, 2006, p.195).

In this section, I explore how social relations via the *ubuntu* capability are reshaping women's positionality to collectively confront the patriarchy and change the status quo. Social relations in the capabilities framework (Nussbaum, 2011) are important for women's empowerment. Nussbaum has called on governments to treat every capability as unique and worth prioritising.

In the context of this local community, there is the perpetuation of injustice under the yoke of patriarchy. I explore strategies disempowered women adopt to collectively participate in the political life of the community and wellbeing. Women showed awareness about the unfair practices and stepped up to challenge various forms of injustice, repositioning their identity and roles.

An excerpt from my one-on-one interview with a chairperson of a women's cooperative club (Titani Women's Club) gave me insights into women leaning on the *ubuntu* capability to advance collective agency:

We never had the freedom to help ourselves as women. We noticed that this place was backward with no development while our colleagues were making progress. There was no co-operative or club here and we thought it was necessary that we do something, and the camp officer mentioned it too. So, we decided to form this club with this goal. TWC Chair lady

Interview excerpt: 12/09/2022

The chairlady here is the wife of a senior induna in the community, and her response crisscrossed with that of the club secretary, Zeledi, who I interviewed earlier. As illustrated (see Chapter Two), there were women only and gender mixed groups in the community. The Kadyale-kale Co-operative Group (KCG) was one prominent gender mixed group I often observed. The women-only groups meant that leadership positions were only contested amongst themselves. Sometimes, men were incorporated with a peripheral role like the Titani Women's Group (TWG). Such a group only created slots for men as trustees within their executive committee which were low-ranked positions. These were created on account that the men could assist women in activities they referred to as 'masculine activities' such as erecting tents or shelter during the agricultural show events, putting up a grass fence for a vegetable garden. I was told that

this was a women’s collective decision rather than a push from the men. This was also in the club’s constitution.

S/N	SURNAME	NAME	SEX	NRC NO
1			M	
2			F	
3			F	
4			F	
5			F	
6			F	
7			F	
8			F	
9			F	
10			F	
11			F	
12			F	
13			F	
14			F	
15			F	
16			F	
OFFAS			F	
17			M	
18			M	
19			M	
OLDWANS			M	
20			F	
21			M	
22			M	

TOTAL NUMBER
WOMEN'S ----- = 18
MEN'S ----- = 4
TOTAL ----- = 22

Figure 29: List and structure of the TWC membership

The figure 29 above displays a list of its members mostly women. At the bottom is a fraction of men incorporated as trustees. The inclusion of men based on the defined role they play into the group was a clear manifestation of the deeply ingrained sex division of labour, and reinforcing gendered stereotypes of masculine nature of tasks for men which are culturally embedded in the community. Even in a female-dominated group, gender stereotypical role and rigidities are being justified and normalised on the pretext of extending an olive branch to their male counterparts. On the positive not, it situates men into subordinate roles that subject them as peripheral participants, leveraging the gender relations. This is a stark contrast to gender-mixed groups such as the KCG where men dominated key positions while women deputised or put in subordinate roles as mere committee members or simply ordinary members.

The TWC here is seen as a women’s domain where gender identities are expressed, and their social positioning and power reconstructed and consolidated in what Fraser's

(2008) theorisation of justice describes it as, 'parity of participation'; women participants becoming peers in social life. More importantly, women's groups signify the leveraging of gender justice and power relations.

The *ubuntu* was a binding force among the different group members with each respective group working towards its joint enterprise. Women were aware about certain forms of injustice and that to be fully participants in the wellbeing of the community and redefine their recognition status, they needed the cooperation and involvement of fellow women. In the case of these local groups, communal wellbeing was the goal through a communally negotiated response to their situation. There was a collective sense of togetherness and solidarity where members expressed empathy, care, tolerance and respect for each other. At personal level, individual situations and responses did vary, so did their aspirations, but everything was interconnected within the wider network of everyday livelihoods.

Zeledi and the group chairlady both point at the lack of freedom in the context of women in general, not exercising their agency in decision making. As women of the community, they suffer misrecognition injustice that relegates them down the hierarchy in the patriarchal system. This also means having little voice in the stakes of the community even when ordinarily, they carry greater burden as mothers and guardians in various households to ensure family wellbeing. However, there is an awakening call amongst themselves to pursue participatory justice and to be able to participate in the wellbeing of the community.

The existing local systems were stifling women's freedoms since they could not participate fully and be recognised as peers in social life, alongside their male counterparts. This limitation meant that women's wellbeing, to live a full life considered valuable, was severely curtailed. More importantly, it was a women's collective concern about the wellbeing of their community which in their view was lagging behind and felt duty-bound to make a difference. The collective agency here is reinforced by the sense of *ubuntu*, to serve a greater cause which is seeking to uplift the communal wellbeing of everyone. This also reveals about women as more altruistic in nature.

In a community that is deeply entrenched in cultural norms and elevates patriarchal systems with men exercising the 'power over', enjoy the dominance and shape how women and men must interact with each other. Firstly, the Titani Women as a club existed in the space of other organised groups with different characteristics which shaped social group relations and interactions in different ways. The women's club was perceived as a women's identity, and so women needed to negotiate for the common space with other dominant groups in the community like the Kadya-kale Co-operative.

In the community, women were at liberty to choose which group they wanted to affiliate to, but there were other factors at play as I have highlighted in Chapter Two, and with the group's ground rules. Sometime women joined a women-only group for the love of exercising freedom and voice as observed from the TWC chairlady. Some groups worked in collaboration with others on specific issues, for example, the Kadya-kale Co-operative which was also a smallholder farmer co-operative like the TWC. This collaboration included sharing vital information in relation to farming inputs from government, but also a show of working in solidarity with each other rather than as competitors in the same community. Women faced challenges at individual level in terms of affiliating to some of these groups based on the requirements as others needed some joining fees or simply permission from their spouses. In this case, the personal experience of Zeledi with her controlling husband, and how she relied on the solidarity of other women.

I was more interested in knowing the processes that were involved in forming such groups. The group leader mentioned a female focal-point person (agricultural extension officer). This was another important authority figure representing an institution in which women built an alliance to challenge the existing local injustices, yet these institutions equally subjected women to the patriarchy systems as I showcase in the next section.

7.2.1. Institutional Bureaucracy and Gender Justice

In this section, I explore how bureaucratic processes around group formation aimed at helping local communities become the very undoings to women's empowerment. Co-operatives often are subjected to disempowering processes through formalised standard procedures imposed by the very institutions working as gatekeepers. The Titani Club

positioned itself as rural peasant farmer group (beneficiary) seeking to participate in the government's FISP programme. To be eligible for this initiative, farmer groups are expected to subscribe to the institutional practices, which are often bureaucratic.

It is said that "effective agency (and power) in development requires the strategic generation/manipulation of a network of actors within different discourses 'who become partly, though hardly ever completely, enrolled in the 'project' of some other person or persons" (Long 1992, p. 23 cited in Mosse, 2004, p. 8). The Titani group was working with government as the main actor of the FISP programme. As an actor, government has 'bureaucratic schemes' which involve recruiting supportive elements such as provincial and district agricultural officers, field extension officers all lined up at different stages of the development project. Development and its various discourses (that is policies and practices) have both institutional effects —maintaining relations of power and ideological effects and depoliticisation (Ferguson, 1994). My interested here is simply to explore how women exercise agency and power to challenge these bureaucratic schemes in the project development context.

I requested Zeledi to look at the group's documents she kept as a group secretary of Titani. I wanted to see processes involved in registering a group as a co-operative. She showed me the group register, and other documents that signified women's membership such as the group constitution and certificate of approval from the government. Zeledi kept these documents for her club, and she was able to show me some of them.

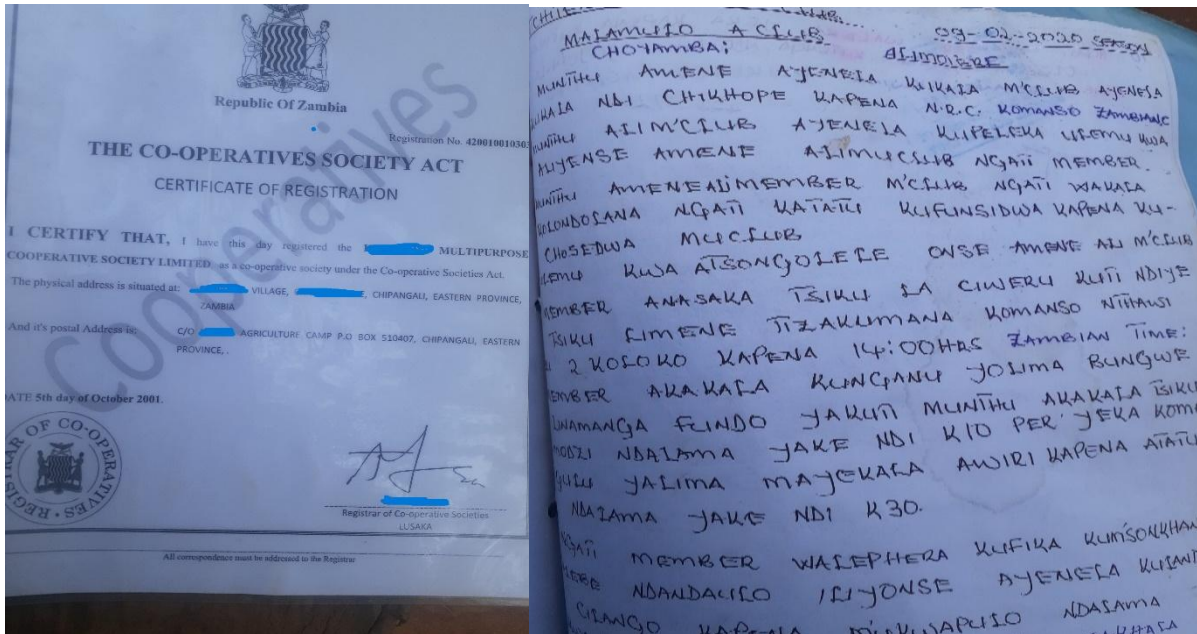


Figure 30: Certificate on the left and constitutional by-laws on the right

Shown above is a club certificate that was finally acquired, but reflects a bureaucratic process that members have to follow. Equally a demonstration of how some group's literacy activities are influenced by external players. On the right is the group constitution with the main heading 'malamulo a club' (Rules for the club). There is the standard procedure including payment of registration fees to the Registrar of Society that groups undertake. The chairlady acknowledged the household challenges women faced with little to access to income. She explained that members had to contribute in material form such as a gallon of maize. They managed to put together and sell the maize to fundraise for the registration fee of the club. There were rules set aside such as annual renewal of the group membership which also needed paying a fee for the club's renewal to the Ministry of Community Development. This meant opening a group's account with a named Bank in the district with all their details in the database. Those that did not manage to pay the membership fee were automatically removed from the register for that particular year. The certificate above granted women the freedom to apply for any government's empowerment funds including FISP. It also in itself legitimised their group status and unlocked the group's potential (what women were able to do and to be) in the context of the existing opportunities and constraints within the community. For example, the group's desire for self-empowerment.

However, government here can be depicted as a patriarchy, subjugating women's groups to play to its rules. The state or government department prescribed what standard procures must be followed by women's groups to be formally registered and recognised. The process of registration is very bureaucratic and demands an integration of those with reading and writing skills to navigate the dominant school text-based literacy which involves filling the complex standard application form. The form is in English and needs group members who are literate in English to understand it and effectively fill correct information. Potentially, this technical form disfranchises other women's groups from participating if they do not have members or local networks to help them navigate the complex process associated with reading and writing. For the Titani group, this perpetuated inequality of participation in literacy-mediated tasks based on literate identity among members.

What followed was the long registration process. The form plus other documents needed to be compiled and forwarded to the district office for screening and approval. The club's certificate acquired also reflected the dissemination of information from top to bottom (national level to community), and this is where women exercised their agency to challenge some of the rigidities of the application process. In asymmetrical relations of power, there are always moments of pushbacks by seemingly weaker groups in things they disagree with dominant groups.

What I observed in practice is that while the group had a template of the standard constitution collected from the government's department in-charge of registrations, group members collectively chose to tinker with some of the text in the standard constitution document with their own version. They only used the original version when applying for registration and renewal. For example, the original version written in English needed members to attach relevant documents as part of the registration process. However, during meetings, they used the modified version shown in figure 30 on the right. The modified constitution reflects women's own voice and how they wanted to proceed as a club. Some rules perceived inappropriate for their group were cropped out and only adopted the ones everyone was comfortable with. When it came to sharing the FISP, they ignored some guidelines from the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, the sharing of farming inputs amongst themselves which could have been apportioned to few group

members and leaving out some. Zeledi explained that if few members received few packs (FISP), this would be evenly shared among themselves in small quantities to make sure each one benefitted even though this was not allowed by the extension officers.

The women's group here is challenging certain practices within the institutional bureaucracy, but this is carefully done without the knowledge of extension officers for fear of anticipated consequences. The officers were probably aware of this practice, but farmers always protect each other and do not dare disclose they are not complying with their directives. The things they altered were hidden from local authorities, but which strengthened group relations and its survival. The strategy is about *ubuntu*, and overriding directives is to serve communal benefits; members sharing the little given to them because everyone has to benefit from the group achievements. In a relationship of power, government is an authority figure, a group of policymakers that make rules, displaying the 'power over' and their decisions have a direct bearing on the agency of groups like the Titani Women's Club. This can expand or shrink women's choices or ability to participate and determine their course of action.

To some extent, the dominant group (policy makers) can exercise the 'power over' in terms of suspending or deregistering perceived erring groups, and this keeps these groups in checks. On the other hand, the TWC has a restricted agency (power to) based on their awareness of the 'power within' — conditions for recognising choices that the group has and being ready to make them (see Drydyk, 2013). Most of the group's planned activities were tied to those of their potential sponsors. For instance, Zeledi and the group leader confirmed having received some farming inputs and livestock in the form of goats in the past. The FISP looked like a routine programme that the group was actively involved in, and influenced what members needed to do to be able to participate in every farming cycle.

As collective decision makers, sometimes the risk of dominance comes from more influential members, which I will be looking at in the later section. However, what is observed here is a coordinated attempt in which women express forms of resistance in the face of the perceived oppressive practices passed on by powerful institutions like government in a top-down approach. At community level, women navigate these rigidities with different strategies such as colluding with other similar groups within the

community or as a collective. This signifies women's resilience and agency to situate their voice in the negotiated space that is constantly contested.

7.2.2. Situating Women's Groups and the Bargain with Patriarchy

In the previous section *ubuntu* manifests itself in social relations among women's organised groups. The emerging collective agency allows women to constantly re-author their stories and aspirations. Through the group's enterprise, women reconstruct their identity and reposition themselves within the local hierarchies of power in a process of negotiation and participation. Women's groups in this community have drawn increasing awareness from patriarchy as contenders in the local politics of community.

While Sen's (1999) conceptualisation of agency makes good reference point to understand the role of agency to women, it is Kabeer's (1999, p. 438) definition of an expanded agency, based on wider choices that I draw on to try and interrogate dimensions of empowerment in which agency is deeply entangled. Here, women express agency in different forms across the livelihood spectrum, and this influence their ability to bargain and participate in many activities, while building social networks, although this does not mean they are fully empowered or achieved their aspirations. Kabeer (1999) emphasises on the notion of empowerment that is realised through the triad of exercising choice (resources, agency and achievement).

In this community, Zeledi's group ventured in different income and resource mobilisation activities. Wider social networks were part of these resources such as contacting extension officers and NGO practitioners. However, these activities did take place in a space of deeply entrenched cultural norms and values as I came to learn. Women's shared relations with the wider community differed based on their enterprise and how they were perceived by other players within the power structures as either a threat or supporter to the local systems. I observed this with my interaction with other members of the community. Wenger (1998) mentions that community membership has different dimensions, but in the context of the different social groups, one sees shared trends that happen in communities of practice and locally organised groups. In the case of a joint

enterprise, the group identity can translate into a perspective where members account for the social world differently in how they make their own interpretations, engage in certain actions and choices, but also how they value their experiences by virtue of participating in certain enterprises.

I was curious to learn how the men in the community generally perceived women's groups. My conversation with some revealed some deep underlying tensions of these groups in the community. In a one-on-one conversation with Uncle Rex, he shared his opinion which gave insights into men's increasing insecurity with women's groups and what they aspired to accomplish; citing power relations and domination as the main issue:

Women tend to have too much control over all the property raised through their so-called 'vi-sweeteners'(plural) or women's groups. She will claim ownership of everything and you as a man won't have a say, but you were there helping her in the preparations. She will simply say, all this property belongs to me because I was given by my chi-sweeter [Laughs]. It recently happened at the nearby village when this couple quarrelled, the lady picked up all the stuff that was bought by her chi-sweeter including the mattress leaving the husband with nothing. So as a man, you think you have property in the house, but when that time comes to start sharing, the woman will claim ownership of everything. However, some men do help, but others don't based on this [Laughs]. Uncle Rex

Interview excerpt:23/07/22.

This is a manifestation of the injustice women experience either individually at home or collectively within their community, through the systemic resistance of the patriarchy either expressly or impliedly. Men as spouses can show support while hiding the deep insecurity, and few challenge the increasing influence of these women's groups. Some men labelled these groups by blackmailing them as platforms for women to engage in promiscuity or insubordination in the house.

Zeledi and Enala is a case example of how both had to constantly repel the pressure from their husband who was against seeing them affiliate with women's groups. At the end of the day, this was all about the shifting power dynamics especially at household level where women expand their agency as they pursue personal aspirations, such as small business start-ups and achieving some level of control and self-determination. I witnessed where Zeledi and Enala opened personal mobile money accounts for safe-

keeping and privacy. The two disclosed that their husband was not supposed to know how much money they were making from their business. This gives insight into the differed gendered pursued self-interests on the part of women.

7.2.3. Women's Voice as Socially Situated and Contextual

“Women are already participating, but in neglected contexts; they have power as listeners in many participation roles, and as speakers in multiple registers and production formats through which they embed, unsettle and resignify language”(Jackson, 2012, p. 1000).

Throughout the discussion in this chapter, women are actively working towards self-emancipation and seeking ways of expressing their voice to authority. It is said that the notions of power generally, equates speech with power and silence with weakness (Jackson, 2012b). This phrase therefore raises the questions of how women as a voiceless and marginalised group speak under the patriarchy. Sometimes women's participation in public speech events has been used as metric of gender in(equality). However, Kabeer argues that 'voice' is not necessarily speech, and that silence can 'speak' — power can reside in women's silences (Kabeer, 2010, p. 18).

In this section, I explore how women in this community expressed their voices in public spaces that shaped power relations and their positionality in ways that were more effective for them. On this day, I attended the Kadyakale Cooperative upon invitation from Sophia where group leaders were updating their members.

We are seated under the trees, and the group leader reports on deliberations from the meeting he attended hosted by the camp agricultural extension officers. It related to the procedures for accessing the FSIP. The women sit in their section separated from men and are seen whispering to each other. Sophia raises her hand and asks leaders if they wrote the list of paid-up members. She requests them to write and read out the names of those who have paid; how much each one has paid. The leaders try to ignore her request, and decide to proceed with verbal briefings, but she intercepts the chairperson and insists that this should be done right away before proceeding any further. Sophia insists that names be written for future reference and that she is simply conveying a message as a mouthpiece for other women in attendance who cannot speak. The other women finally raise their

groaning voices in support. Eventually, the leaders yield to Sophia's request, and the chairperson instructs the secretary to go and collect a register. It is at this stage that the meeting proceeds normally.

Fieldnotes: 03/10/22

In a cultural hegemony, women tend to suffer exclusion from recognition and participatory justice, where their agency and voice is ignored within the hierarchy of power simply based on their identity status. Sometimes, this also lead to what Fricker (2015) frames as testimonial injustice, in which a speaker's credibility is reduced owing to prejudice in the hearer/s. Women in patriarchal society tend to suffer these forms of injustice, denying them the epistemic justice (Ibid.). These forms of epistemic injustice are seemingly being challenged by women in this community even when in male dominated space. The excerpt above demonstrates that women in this community use different strategies to make their voice recognised. Seemingly women create cartels before showing up at the meetings and they will have strategically held a position on a given subject based on the rumours or grapevine that has circulated ahead of time.

Prior to the meeting, Sophia had hinted to me about the meeting that group leaders had called for although at short notice and that it related to the FISP guidelines. She stated that there were a lot of rumours going on about which members would take part and those that would be excluded. I was not surprised to see Sophia positioning herself as mouthpiece for fellow women in attendance, since she was also a prominent figure in the community who commanded respect and was known for her braveness. Hence, her presence at the meeting was quite assuring to other women. I reflected on the many factors that could have led to her request being ignored at first attempt.

Firstly, it is normal that women experience certain stereotypes that put them at odds with authority, such as being known for making unrealistic demands that do not settle well with the leadership. This can also be at Sophia's personal level. For example, Sophia's past disposition and interpersonal relations with local leaders in public gatherings, perhaps as someone who is fond of challenging authority or merely being sarcastic. What is more interesting is how Sophia frames her request as a popular narrative, projecting it not as a personal opinion, but that of fellow women which mounts pressure on the group

leaders. This is reinforced by endorsement from other women in attendance with the groaning noise that come out in unison and as a collective view. It gives insights into how women reposition themselves in the public participation. This includes how they strategically sit in one section, and whisper to each other while using gestures and signs. They signal to the person whom they have entrusted to speak or raise a concern in the process of the deliberations.

It appeared that women had probably discussed this issue prior to the meeting and certain concerns were already listed to be presented during the meeting. What I found more fascinating was the group leader yielding to the women's demands. Jackson's (2012) argues that while there is a general notion in many scholarly writings that men speak more than women, it is also important to look at context. I would add that social context determines how women express their voice, and choose how to engage with the authority at different stages that might include silence, grumbling, inaction or speech. These shape the delicateness of power relations within the patriarchy. The social domains also dictates whether women would be free to speak and interact or not. In this social context, the meeting started calmly as everyone listened and men mostly contributing to the deliberations. It was at the point of raising a concern by Sophia that everything stalled. There was seemingly rising tension as women suddenly teamed up and chipped in with some disruptive shouts — raising their voices in making collective demands that pushed for transparency and making their leaders to account. The hegemonic masculinities which prescribe dignity and dominance for men simultaneously make men vulnerable to the refusals of women to show respect and acknowledge male authority (Jackson, 2012b). Perhaps, the team leader's yielding to Sophia's request also reflects this vulnerability. Additionally, this showcases the context of social relations where the public space can be an explicit and performative field of contestation, with victories and defeats, tactics and intentions as women actively participate with their vested interest.

The intonation arising from Sophia's voice as merely a 'mouthpiece' gives her a starting point to bargain with the leadership in a stronger position. She is never challenged to provide evidence for her claim. Instead, the leaders are able to read the different verbal and non-verbal cues in the audience. The rapidly changing atmosphere must be

diplomatically stopped through compliance to de-escalate the tension. Women do this together at the same time so that no one is singled out as being merely sarcastic. In situations where the male dominated space looks intimidating to women, various options are explored that consider the context. I explained that in Chapter Four about the silence that was befallen when the facilitator of my first community meeting requested for a woman volunteer to pray.

Drawn from this, it can be said that making assumptions on women's exclusion based on their non-participation in formal public speech fora is rather overestimated, and depends on whether meetings are the main site of decision making or not. Decisions as portrayed here are often made and consensus reached among members within the group, even in unconventional way. This could also happen even on site through on the sidelines—women chatting or whispering to each other, and even after the meeting in informal discussions that seemingly employ a more direct style in which women participate more. Therefore, listening more carefully to the many ways and places in which women communicate is important for a better grasp of power relations and empowerment assumptions. While agency and voice as advanced in the Western cultures might put voice as an individual right of expression, in the context of this community, it is more about context driven that appreciates the social relations, and women are constantly challenging these structures of power in multiple ways.

7.3. Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter was to understand gender justice through the context of social relations which are important to women's empowerment and wellbeing. I adopted the agency capability-oriented approach as conceptualised (Sen,1999), to better understand experiences of women in confronting the patriarchy, and pursuing aspirations and wellbeing. I explored gender justice through women's experiences in different households and how they bargain through the patriarchy. This tends to differ based on different family structures and positionality in the household and in the wider community. Both married women and single or unmarried experienced forms of violence

and marginalisation differently, but within the traditional boundaries of patriarchy. Women developed different strategies such as collectively and in solidarity working to confront these injustices. The case example of women participants in a polygamous marriage showed how they had to navigate different power structures to achieve personal aspirations. What was important was emphasising how the asymmetrical relations of power (Drydyk, 2013) shapes women's ability to exercise agency. This was demonstrated through interrelationships at household level, within local institutions such as churches, but also between women's group and dominant institutions of power. Worthwhile highlighting that while the capability framework through Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) have advocated for women's agency as crucial to attainment of their empowerment and wellbeing, thereby putting individuals at the centre of capabilities, my discussion in this chapter refocused the attention on the social relations that continue to disempower the women, and how in their state of disempowerment women try to navigate the power structures.

I explored the significance of *ubuntu* capability embedded in the context of rural livelihoods which promotes communal relations over individual ones, leading to collective agency for women to pursue a life they desire. I demonstrated how agency can take different forms of resistance and depicting women's self-interests in their wellbeing and aspirations, challenging the notion of Sen's co-operate conflict (Sen, 1995) which I will be discussing more in the next chapter. Contrary to the dichotomy of speech and voicelessness as a measure of gender equality, findings here have illustrated that women in this communal setting sometimes used multiple ways of voicing out using unconventional means of communicating. These turned out to be more effective in challenging dominant voices or powerful institutions.

Chapter Eight – Discussion: Literacy and Learning, Women’s Lives, Livelihoods and Gender Relations

8.0. Introduction

In this thesis, I was drawn to exploring rural women’s livelihoods through literacy and learning practices, and how these contributed to gender justice and wellbeing. I conceptually framed the study and ethnographically encountered — literacy and learning as social practices embedded in women’s everyday livelihoods, but which are entangled in relations of power. In this chapter, I pull out key findings from Chapter Five, Six and Seven by looking at the cross-cutting themes that emerged. I deepen my analysis through the concepts I mostly discussed in Chapter Three: multiple literacies, situated learning, capabilities, gender justice and empowerment. The key cross-cutting themes emerging from this project situating literacy and learning in women’s livelihood and gender relations, include women’s agency, empowerment, social relations, and collective capability (*ubuntu*). I am revisiting these themes to demonstrate how significant they are to understanding women’s livelihoods and wellbeing.

Towards the end, I give a summary finding of literacy and learning as social practices while highlighting contentious issues within the conceptual framework and in light of the policy discourses in Zambia. Being a study focusing on women, I take a gender lens and interrogate literacy and learning through gender justice and empowerment.

8.1. Women’s Agency: Literacy Practices as a Livelihood Choice

In this section, I explore the theme of women’s agency which I singled out as expressed through women’s embedded practices as they composed a livelihood of their choice. The data findings reported in the three empirical chapters show how women used agency to exploit their resources such as social and cultural capital in securing livelihoods. The

concept of embeddedness is seen from how women exercised agency and took hold of their literacies and new knowledges acquired in different social settings.

My analysis of embeddedness drew on Kulick and Stroud's (1993) research about how the inhabitants of a small village in Papua New Guinea 'transformed' literacy. In Chapter Five, I explored the local perceptions of literacy by asking randomly what my participants understood by the concept and compared it to literacies practiced in their daily livelihood activities. My study showed that women took hold of literacies that were identified as relevant to their livelihoods. In contrast, schooled literacy is what was widespread in programmes and policies influenced through a deficit-driven curriculum (see Appendix 2). The social domains in this community included church, home or public/community spaces where daily interactions took place and shaped by these local livelihood activities. For example, Zeledi whom I refer to across all chapters, showed how she used different types of literacies for different purposes. In Chapter Five, Zeledi was compelled to buy a credit book to keep track of her customers in her money-lending business. At group level, which I discuss in Chapter Seven, Zeledi took me through the written tasks she performed for the group as a secretary. The application form as one literacy-mediated activity needed some complex skills of reading and writing to fill-up the standard form written in English — a dominant literacy and cultural practice in government departments. On the other hand, the credit book ordinarily served its purpose for which it was bought for: as a records book, to keep track of her customers and make sure they complied with the agreed terms. What was clear is that reading and writing became integral to the social activities of different groups, not excluding individual daily social practices. Every document depicted a different text format and played different functionalities in different social domains.

Embeddedness was valued for strengthening social relations with peers and relatives whom I referred to as significant others, in Chapter Five and Six. For example, Belita as cited in Chapter Five, adopted digital literacies for her social practices and learnt to decode numbers and text messages on the phone by herself, but also with help from her peers. This made it easier for her to communicate with her loved ones. Engaging in digital literacies is especially captivating for youths from marginalised communities to explore their identities (Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2018), and participate within creative

communities (Ajayi, 2015). The ownership of a phone helped Belita explore her new identity as a digitally literate person in the face of her peers. The experience of owning personal phones also gave women ‘freedom’ for privacy, performing mobile money transactions, building new relationships and boosting their self-esteem. In one of my interactions with the Women’s Mending Group members at a money sharing activity discussed in Chapter Five, a participant narrated how she used her phone for other functionalities in her small business. These included checking the exchange rate, making calculations, performing mobile-money transactions (see Zimba, 2024).

The practice of reading and writing was shaped by group activities and cultural practices as the case was for individuals. Literacy practices are valued in relation to their specific social domains (cf. Barton, 2007, p. 38) explored in Chapter Three. The locals recognised dominant literacy, but the literacies they encountered and embedded as social practices were mostly domain driven. In my view, these literacies were not only relevant to what they do, they also empowered them to navigate their livelihood activities characterised by those social domains. For instance, the collective tasks in the Titani group, gave women the capabilities (to do and to be) such as when they participated in the FISP. Zeledi became a useful resource to the group, while enabling group members gain external capability²⁶ through this interrelationship. A person gains an external capability through her relationship with at least one other person.

Dominant literacy is often linked to social power and identity while relegating domestic literacies as unrecognised forms of literacies (Duckworth, 2014). In this study, these domestic literacies demonstrate their significant role to rural women’s livelihood activities taking place largely in informal settings. Literacy scholars have argued that people do not passively receive literacy, but that they may create literacies of their own, adapting them to their own needs and views (Kulick and Stroud, 1993; Street, 1993, 1995). The revelation in this study is part of the mounting evidence of what women in this community do with literacy.

²⁶ “freedom to achieve functionings that a person values by accessing the capabilities of other people through relationships” (Foster & Handy 2008).

8.1.1. Agency and Embeddedness: Informal Learning and Indigenous Knowledges

Further extension to the concept of embeddedness is also observed in Chapter Six where women embraced their indigenous knowledges for intergenerational learning and sustainable livelihoods. I also draw on the case of Sophia who embraced local food knowledge practices which she passed them onto the young generation. Participation and positionality were important in every situated learning. Sophia embraced indigenous knowledges not just as mere skills for survival, but this was a gendered knowledge she used to mentor young girls and women for adulthood and familyhood. Sophia perfected her skills with constant practice and experience, cementing her status with multiple identities mirroring her indigenous knowledge expertise in multiple areas as discussed in Chapter Six. For example, she became a traditional midwifery with a relevant role in the young expectant couples. She often conducted frenectomy procedures which she started as a novice. Later she transitioned as a practitioner, starting as a mere peripheral participant to a full participant in that community of practice for traditional health practitioners.

Embeddedness is also seen how Sophia, having gained her own learning experience of growing orange maize and identifying her own benefits of it, ensured that she kept orange maize for her agricultural practices. This signified the social positioning of learners in situated learning. The learning trajectories of participants enhancing transformational changes happened in the context of established social relations with peers, neighbours or members of the community/family.

Usually, knowledge acquired through informal or non-formal learning is entangled in the hierarchies of knowledge and valued differently. When asked to recall some of the trainings she participated in, Sophia mentioned ones she did as either formal or non-formal events through training workshops. Even when Sophia engaged in informal learning and acquired valuable skills, she never identified such experiences as learning, since these happened as everyday social practices which were uncertified. There were numerous occasions that Sophia explained about her learning experiences which went unrecognised and were explained to me as social practices she performed during leisure time. On the other hand, self-directed learning was much stronger when tasks were

associated with functional benefits. Once learnt, these became embedded in women's social practices. Case examples include when Sophia learnt to perform frenectomy on her child and when she learnt to treat her sick granddaughter by following a health education programme on TV. She went on to incorporate those learning outcomes in her everyday social practices for helping her family members and the community.

However, the cycle of assimilation through promotion of functional literacy skills has remained unchallenged and undisrupted as educators and educational policies continue to promote and praise skill-based literacy practices at the expense of other forms of literacies. While these are important policy directions, they limit the value of literacy to that of an instrumental functioning. Luke (2012) argues that this practice favours the literacies and literacy practices of the dominant culture at the expense of others, especially through assimilatory schooling practices. My study reveals that what is learnt informally through social relations tend to have a lasting impression on women as adult learners. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is social and mostly takes place from experiences of participation.

The various learning experiences as social practices in different situated context also point to the fact that everyday learning was shaped by hierarchies of knowledge mostly related to gendered roles and assumptions to different values attached to each. These, too, reflected the different situated learning contexts and characteristics of participants. This type of learning is unstructured as could be seen where young girls learnt from the elders through participation and observation in everyday activities that were gendered in nature like food processing.

8.2. Wellbeing and Empowerment: What's in it for women?

8.2.1. Gender Relations, Literacy and Empowerment

Established from the data findings is that everything around women's livelihoods, including literacy and learning, was being pursued with the goal of women's wellbeing as

much as it was for communal. The shared commonalities about women in this community was a sense of family and communal identity through group affiliations. At the centre of their livelihoods were constant struggles to sustain families, particularly their children. Women were willing to let go of personal wellbeing until family wellbeing was met. This resonates with the *ubuntu* framework and what it stands for. However, the communal goal does not necessarily contradict the capability framework with its core emphasis on individual choice, as a valuable life choice worth pursuing. In this community, at the very least, individual happiness also radiates that of the family, and vice versa.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, women's empowerment remains a challenge because of lapses in policies, but also how local interventions have so far been designed and implemented (Longwe, 1997, 2000; Nyanga *et al.*, 2020). I discussed how local systems of patriarchy impede women's empowerment, as do the gender policies discussed in Chapter Two, which I signalled as problematic. Gender policies and laws, for example, have promoted distributional justice through women's access to land. However, the National Gender Policy (see Chapter Two) focused on eradicating inequalities in land access and control for women without broadly looking at the nuances of gender relations. Traditionally, land access is largely in the hands of men, as was highlighted in the same chapter, while production tends to be done jointly.

Chapter Seven also looked at the concept of gender justice in relation to Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional justice system, where I unraveled some of the struggles that women face in terms of gender discrimination and violence, as well as the oppression of culture and tradition. I sought to identify which freedoms are necessary to provide women with lives that they value. The lingering question remains, '*To what extent do rural women exercise agency?*' — the extent women are capable of enacting their agency as described (Sen, 1999), which consists of having freedom to pursue and achieve their valued goals, be active participants of social change (taking hold of literacies) or helping others to expand their capabilities. There are some positive revelations around agency and the *ubuntu*, but at the same time, these often simply mirror the very systems of oppression that women must overcome.

As shown in this study, the patriarchal system continues to work to the detriment of women's empowerment and wellbeing. The gender mixed groups discussed in Chapter Five show a stark reality about women's inability to fully participate and pursue their aspirations. Conversely, women-only or women led groups have shown positive revelations around social relations enhancing collective agency and the *ubuntu* capability, to overcome collective challenges. This was observed in Belita's Mending Group as well as the Zeledi's Titani Group. Here, women felt more socially integrated and harnessing from existing social capital resources within their groups which expanded individual and group capabilities.

At household level, women continue to exercise agency even in the face of complex social relationships. This was seen from the experiences of Zeledi and Enala within the patriarchal setting. It was about one navigating the complex social relations with members of the family within the hierarchy of authority. Zeledi took me through some of the complexities she had to encounter and tried to challenge the status quo by exercising her agency. Agency was seen from the valued choices she made individually, such as managing proceeds of her business; making choices on what she preferred to spend on her money.

I have analysed social relations primarily in Chapter Seven in terms of the family structure; how women entered into conjugal relationships and their social positioning within the hierarchy of authority. Jackson (2012a) argues that expectations of conjugal contracts vary less by discipline, and more by the divides which separate perspectives, emphasising the determining power of social structures, and those giving greater weight to agency and structuration. Jackson adds that marriage structures are instrumental in mediating the capabilities and functionings of adult women (Ibid.). Here, women in the same polygamous family like Zeledi and Enala experienced different forms of social relations and injustice that impeded individual quests for self-direction and wellbeing. In this regard, Sen has argued that women's lower self-perceptions of the importance of personal welfare, combined with a great concern for family welfare, helps to sustain the traditional inequalities that characterise intra-house relations (see Sen, 1987, 1995).

By contrast, and in a departure from Sen's model of cooperative conflicts (Sen, 1987), women in this study showed awareness of the traditional inequalities and actively used

agency to bargain for their wellbeing and empowerment within their conjugal relationships. In my conversations with Zeledi and Enala, the two actively pursued personal interests by minimising direct conflict with the patriarchy. Instead, they engaged in patriarchal bargaining, building strategic alliances as well as engaging in either passive or active resistance.

Kandiyoti (Kandiyoti, 1988) claimed that patriarchal bargains exerted a powerful influence that shaped women's gendered subjectivity and determined the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. The bargains also influenced both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of the oppressor (Kandiyoti, 1988). In the case of Enala and Zeledi, their conjugal relations were characterised by compromise and contested interests against patriarchy. In relation to family income, they avoided direct confrontation and allowed their husband to take charge. Although this was a cultural norm in this community, the two did not sit idle. On the contrary, they exercised agency and pursued personal aspirations not only in setting up a small money lending business, but in choosing to participate in certain group activities. To some extent, this was done in defiance of their husband. Earnings from the business were hidden from their husband, allowing the two to spend it on things of personal choice. Their actions illustrate the complex relationships that women must navigate within the patriarchy in order to pursue individual aspirations. Within these patriarchal bargains, women also work towards cementing their social power. This reveals the complexity of the bargaining processes, immersed in the tensions and tactics based on the varying interests of members within one family, as described in Sen's model of cooperative conflict.

Thus, even in a well-entrenched patriarchal system, women in this community were actively working towards challenging the status quo. Collectively, they used *ubuntu* to redefine their social positioning in different social contexts.

8.2.2. Social Status Power and Participation in Literacy and Learning Practices

I go back to the concept of empowerment through participation to look at what went on in different social domains, and how participants were situated in a discursive context. Domains as described (Barton, 2007) mirror how people are positioned by roles and the demands placed upon. In this study, findings showed that literacy and learning often depicted social status power as situated, and those with this power tended to exert power over others. Chapter Five showed this connectivity where literate identity was used for social status power. A comparison of Zeledi's role when involved in women-only group and gender-mixed group demonstrated how gender relations shaped her participation and limiting her freedoms. She was more active in one group (women only group) where she wielded more power than the other where men dominated the space.

I discussed in Section 5.1 where Zeledi highly spoke of her self-worth as a literate person, and this perpetuated inequalities and disempowered other group members in relation to unequal participation in group activities. Social context depicted that engaging in a literacy-mediated activity was also more about who had social status power than participating in literacy practices. For example, Zeledi was active in the Titani Women's Club, but she was mostly a bystander in the Village Banking Group despite her prowess writing skills she always performed at least at community level. In Chapter Seven, Zeledi lamented how she and her co-partner, Enala were often excluded from participating in the budgeting and planning for the sale of their farm produce which was monopolised by her husband. This scenario diminished their ability to flourish in market literacies during post-harvest marketing season.

Social positioning is also seen to enhance participation in the learning activities within the given situated context. In Chapter Six, Sophia took different roles as both a participant and mentor in a social activity. In one situated learning activity, Sophia started as a peripheral participant, transitioning into a full participant where she eventually became part of a community of practice, performing frenectomy surgical procedures. To belong to this community of practice, Sophia underwent a process of joining and learning through participation and observation. In the process, gaining confidence with time and cementing her identity status as a recognised expert in the community. These indigenous

knowledges though, are often ignored, unrecognised and displaced in local communities where Western knowledge or practices dominates while perpetuating recognition injustice through institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge as discussed in Chapter Three (see Fraser, 2008). The hierarchy of knowledges also undermines the flourishing of epistemic capability (Fricker, 2015) of participants which is important as was explored in Chapter Six. Other support literature for example, Duckworth (2014) has argued that women who practiced domestic literacy do not get the recognition and remain invisible in the public domain. She adds that this discrimination equates to symbolic violence due to legitimation process and negative stereotypes of labels that characterise them as illiterate and impact on members and their experience in group activities.

Throughout the empirical data chapters, women's participation was limited by their limited social power with respect to social relations that characterised particular social contexts or nature of the group.

8.3. Social Relations and Power: Literacy Practices

This section builds on the previous one to elaborate the complexities of social relations and ultimately influencing participation. In the three empirical chapters, social relations were significant to how women engaged in social practices. Women's achieved social status such as social positioning in marriage or class, matters more in bargaining and cementing one's status power in this community. This contrasts the large-scale systems of power domination oppressing black women elsewhere constructed around racial, class and gender identities, discussed in Section 3.9. In this community, livelihood activities were pursued in the context of flourishing social relations. This is observed from the many groups that emerged out of women's resolve for collective wellbeing at community and household level.

The literacy-mediated activities discussed in Chapter Five reflected dynamics of social relations between literacy mediators and participants, shaping social status power and agency. Malan (2013) notes that the role of agency of literacy mediators is invested with varying degrees of social power. The study has shown how literacy mediation was

influenced by shared social relations with participants. I go back to the case of Sophia and her participation in the KAINGO Micro-credit loans discussed in Chapter Five — demonstrating how social power became the centre stage in literacy mediation between two categories of mediators. In this scenario, literacy mediation was more about discursive contexts that reflected power relations in the situated context rather than the question of who had literacy skills henceforth shaping women's decision making and participation. The differing social relationships shared between participants and literacy mediators labelled as either insiders or outsiders in specific social domains. Malan uses the concept of centripetal versus centrifugal power in how literacy mediators mediate the text. The former relates to dominant institutions of a given society and advancing the monologic meaning as they mirror the institutions they represent. The latter creates a dialogue with multiple voices as this requires one with an insider understanding of social life (Ibid.).

Social groups as well as individuals tend to engage local literacy mediators to navigate the different literacy-mediated activities. The literacy mediation activities in groups showcased this, such as the Village Banking Group, The *Azimai Ba Mending Group*, KAINGO, but also the Titani Women's Club. Those holding leadership positions such as that of secretary or chairperson played the mediation role for the group. The literacy mediators were also situated in different multimodal space and with a shared relationship that was either student-focused or customer/client focused. In Chapter Six, I discussed Sophia who often watched a health programme on TV by lady presenter. This is an example of a student focused where programme designers have an imaginary audience, but are non-interactive with participants. Here, Sophia situated herself as a listener and followed the televised programme when she felt the need. When she visited a medical practitioner or visited by the agricultural extension officer, the social context changed and interactions were more clientele and contextual, each one positioning themselves in relation to the social relations, identity and power in that social space.

Further, when Sophia met the KAINOG officers, the interaction was between customer and sales agent, but one shrouded in mistrust. The recognition of the social power held in the setting where a business transaction was taking place made KAINGO officers use a monologic communication approach. This monologic voice can sometimes be

challenged by participants with the help of insider literacy mediators in the group. The KAINGO event in Chapter Five showed how text and meaning was challenged through a multimodal context.

Literacy as a multi-modal enterprise, tries to account for necessary interrelationships among language, written, and oral, sound, image, gesture, movement and even silence (Stein, 2007). This is because as Hull and Nelson (2009, p. 219) argues, “it is not so much on what is said, or shown, but on what lies-in-between the semiotic relationships — meanings that reside in text as product of the past and incarnations and uses; the content of one’s own expressive intentions”. I can deduce that Sophia made the decision in the context of the social relations she shared with her insider literacy mediators. I gave two scenarios of her encounter with the outsider literacy mediator (KAINGO officers) and the power relations at play. The officer holding hands of customers to aid them write their names, but the symbolic meaning of how that act can be disempowering to participants, depicting them as illiterate in the face of everyone. The insider (significant others) literacy mediators were based on the shared mutual relations. The positive relation between Sophia and her good neighbour eventually influenced Sophia into joining local group to get the loan. She and her friends went on to engage in literacy practices as influenced by external players which reflected bureaucratic institutions.

The form filling exercise during my observation of the KAINGO brought to light certain things that drew my attention. This related particularly to the trajectory of text from head office to the clients in the field through transcontext. In the transcontext, it is not only text that moves, but also what Kell (2006) calls the “trajectory of meanings”. Hence, the meaning-making processes become contested by different actors as text travels across contexts and in different form. I observed that the organisation seemed to involve what (Kell, 2011, p. 607) describes as the “small-scale traffic of texts” —the crossings and travels of literacy across different contexts. The small traffic of text also applied to the form-filling exercise for Zeledi’s Titani group in Chapter Seven, an exercise also depicting bureaucratic and institutional literacy. The text was generated and carried across contested meanings in different contexts which included symbolic meanings to some participant(s). In both events (KAINGO and Titani), my analysis of women’s experiences is that their participation became one way of them being subsumed into a particular

‘culture of practice’, some level of mutual engagement that mirrored the practices of the institutions (see Wenger, 1998). For example, at head office of the KAINGO, I learnt that part of co-opting clients into the institution included classifying them as ordinary, bronze, silver, gold up to platinum membership depending on how they faired with their loans. These were not mere labels, but had recognition status within institutional practices. These institutional practices dictated monthly payment schedules or rotas which shaped how Sophia and the rest worked towards the collective enterprise, with a set deadline to meet. The officer’s role was to ensure compliance while Sophia and others presented their forms on an agreed date to double-check and service their loan.

Over time, however, members began to ignore certain practices such as skipping the deadlines and sometimes attempting to renegotiate the payment plans and interests. I never saw Sophia giving too much attention to the document which she wrapped in plastic and secured somewhere in the house. Her expression of words was more of what they were told as routine activities, but questioned the practicality of certain terms over time. While the document carried an instrumental function as a binding contract with legal implications on the defaulters from the viewpoint of the company, Sophia and her friends viewed it as a symbolic representation of being admitted into the programme and downplayed the possible serious implications that it could have carried to whole group. She challenged that this would be unfair practice. For Sophia, the contents in the document seemed not to matter a lot, but rather her experience, information shared with peers in the context of their social interactions. In both events, there is this collective agency emanating from social relations besides the individual one.

The constitution of Titani Women’s Group is another example of participants exercising power and autonomy. Women ignored standard rules as prescribed from top to bottom. Instead, the document, setting out the ground rules, recontextualised, reinterpreted and reshaped existing texts into one that suited their purpose and consequently altered the original text and its functionality. The text served different intended purposes and therefore the original meanings changed in the new context of whether the meeting was formal or informal. Kell (2009) argues that it is in the process of recontextualisation, of shifting context to the next, that other entities such as power become thrown into space, signifying the role of the mode of communication in meaning-making. I have suggested

that a person can act and feel powerful in one context at a point in time using one mode of communication, but not in another. My research also demonstrates that the exercise of power can also be enacted the other way around: actors in new contexts — while being framed as subjected clients — also have power over bureaucratic texts within their given spaces of interaction and challenging the dominant institutions.

8.4. Challenging the Patriarchy: “I speak the voice of the majority”

As discussed in Chapter Seven, voice carries symbolic meaning in different social contexts and is associated with agency. Sophia referred to women’s participation in group activity in which they felt constrained by existing gender relations. Reader (2007) sees voice association with the notion of agency itself, as over-emphasised in Western ideas of personhood, equating speech with power. Nevertheless, asking ‘*Can the Subaltern Speak?*’ (Riach, 2017) — helped me to contextualise women in this community in terms of how they engaged with the patriarchy as a collective in more male dominated spaces and whether they tried to fight for gender justice. I paid particular attention in my data analysis therefore, to social relations, comparing mixed gender with women-only groups.

Throughout the empirical chapters, women are shown to be engaged in bargaining with the patriarchy in different social spaces, using different strategies. Examples include the money-sharing activity in the VBG (see Chapter Five), and the FISP meeting of the Kadyakale Cooperative (see Chapter Seven). In both settings, women positioned themselves strategically prior to these meetings and charted the way forward by either calling out the chairperson or through the use of non-verbal cues such as seating patterns, gestures or grunting noise that sent signals to the patriarchy in the context of what this meant within their social relations. These actions were very strategic, even straightforward aspects such as seating arrangements, where their proximity to one another in public gatherings, reinforced their collective voice and agency. These strategic alliances were often built prior to the meetings, and in some cases were premeditated. Women positioned themselves deliberately: adopting bargaining postures, assigning an informal

representative based on their unique abilities or social status to be the spokesperson. In doing so, they exerted collective agency in defiance against patriarchy.

At a community level, participation was in the form of disengagement and resistance to patriarchy. For example, where Zeledi and Enala as discussed in Chapter Seven, simply boycotted the Sunday church services because they felt it limited their freedoms to fully express their abilities such as taking readings based on their gender identity. In all the three chapters, women always took a specific posture of either to confront/challenge or negotiate in different group meetings and activities they felt curtailed their freedoms by those in authority. Here, it is another demonstration that uneven relationships of power can limit the scope of what a group can do, especially if the 'minority' group has greater ambitions (cf. Drydyk, 2013). When it came to challenging oppressive practices, women did it in much more diplomatic ways, while harmonising communal relations as a community.

At household level, the strategies differed. Some scholars have argued that women and men within households are not just seeking individual gains or material wealth in competition with each other. Rather, cooperation and reciprocity are central to their lives, associated with local understandings of well-being (White, 2010). While there were cooperate conflicts in Zeledi and Enala as one family, the two also pursued consensus: seeking to contribute to the wellbeing of their families through their involvement in income generating activities for the family and individual aspirations. At the core of their interactions are relational identities referred to as indexical of claims to social relationships with others (Holland *et al.*, 1998). This means that women's interactions were shaped by how they perceived and shared relationships with each other. Through titles such as '*mai gulu*' or '*mai nini*', the two showed self-positioning, reflected some of the qualities of their relationship with members of the family or acknowledged the kind of recognition one had in the community in comparison to other women.

8.5. Capability for *Ubuntu*: “We did not have a cooperative and we had to form one”

Common thread in all the empirical chapters is that women’s groups bring out the collective capability of women’s interactions. Working in groups signifies collective capability as well as collective identity, anchored on *ubuntu* and solidarity. The notion of *ubuntu* centered on human values such as love, dignity, kindness, interdependence, self-respect, respect for others, unity, cooperation, reciprocity and tolerance (Masitera, 2020; Ngubane and Makua, 2021), underpins what is valued within the context of social relations. Women were always motivated to work collaboratively in the interest of communal benefits, rather than self-aggrandisement or status power. I analysed women’s interactions from the point of their shared social relations and gender. There is a shift from early conceptualisation of wellbeing by Amartya Sen, which focused primarily on the agency of individuals in terms of their capabilities and functionings, their abilities to be or do (Sen, 1993). While Nussbaum has expressed the danger of marginalising individual wellbeing at the expense of pursuing relational capabilities, without interrogating power hierarchies, the *ubuntu* as demonstrated in Chapters Five to Seven, shows that it can work as a capability alongside those in the capabilities list. The findings in this thesis show that communal benefits were highly valued and appealed to women’s emotions in the context of how they related, thereby harnessing the greater good of the community. Indeed, anything that was introduced into the community had to be seen from the point of it being a common good²⁷. Throughout the data chapters, women collectively exercise agency to engage in group activities, the mending group, the Titani Cooperative as members of one family community.

The complexities of livelihoods also showed how women banked on livelihood resources within their sphere, and how this in turn influenced their participation. The social capital was a women’s collective resource and source of power, as well as their collective

²⁷ “A common good means that it unfolds in mutual social relationships, in and through which human beings enhance their well-being; it is therefore a kind of collective endeavour.” (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018, p. 348).

identity. Bebbington (1999) argues that sometimes people sacrifice one or another of these assets to build up another asset base deemed more appropriate for their overall livelihood strategy. In this thesis, there were different factors that shaped individual choices. Women also relied on local support networks as a power base built on mutual trust and a commitment to contribute to the wellbeing of the community. In the process of constructing individual and collective identities, the *ubuntu* capability is based on women's initiation of groups. Participation is seen as a common good, with every member at liberty joining through legitimate peripheral participation or as a full participant.

The data findings demonstrate that women as adult learners engage in social practices not for status related power, even when dominant literacies or formal learning associated with such literacies is offered, but rather to secure their livelihoods for their families and the community. The *ubuntu* capability further expanded other member's capabilities by virtue of affiliation to the groups, as they gained external capabilities as members of that group. The study shows that social and cultural capital are incredibly important to women's accessibility and participation in various livelihood activities. Zeledi gained external capability when she learnt about the money lending business from Enala, her co-partner in their marriage (see Chapter Five). At the same time, through the reading and writing tasks she did for the group, members were able to access FISP, and the latest information needed to prepare for their pre-farming season. The *ubuntu* capability to some extent strengthens claims that women learn better in collaborative tasks (IFAD-UNESCO, 2016).

In relation to the capability framework, there have been calls to look at human development beyond instrumental and economic benefits. The findings in this thesis address this by highlighting the value of social relations, and through *ubuntu*, where other capabilities such as epistemic and narrative capabilities, emerge. This also resonates with Edelsky's (2006) claims, that literacy and learning enhances gender and social affiliation seemingly more important than the literacy quest for success in terms of economic prosperity.

Duckworth (2014) in her study, noted how social capital as a resource was accumulated through new relationship building and offered many learners a support mechanism

throughout their trajectories and beyond. The on-site programme events discussed in Chapter Six showed that participants met both instrumental and non-extrinsic goals. Not all the women that attended the event engaged fully with the anticipated outcomes of the programme as designed by providers. A study on women's literacy in Nepal (Rogers, 2000, p. 236-37) revealed how women pursued non-literacy benefits rather than the literacy elements that were most valued by providers. In fact, it is worth noting that recent developments in wellbeing research have tended to shift the emphasis from psychological and individual measures (of happiness) to relational ones, thereby emphasising social and cultural situatedness in people's experiences and constructions of wellbeing (Rao, 2017). Certainly, the findings from this study suggest that women negotiate their participation in the learning space not as competitors, but as peers on a collective mission. At an individual level, the examples of individual learning that I have discussed in Chapter Six, demonstrate how access to capitals such as social and cultural assets, can be powerful resources that influence women's participation in learning.

8.6. Women's Livelihood, Wellbeing and Empowerment: Challenging the Status Quo

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, I was drawn to exploring literacy and learning as central to women's livelihoods, and therefore, to wellbeing and empowerment. I now return to my overarching research question that has shaped this ethnographic study of a community introduced in my Methodology Chapter.

Firstly, it is the role of 'capital assets' defined in Chapter Three that are key in shaping women's livelihood activities. The access to these resources influenced women's livelihood activities and could be seen as contributing to their wellbeing and empowerment. However, the extent to which access guarantees wellbeing and empowerment remains contested. The concept of wellbeing is deeply connected to social relations and in this community, manifests in different forms such as '*ubuntu*'. Sometimes women sacrificed their personal wellbeing to normalise relations within their family and kins.

Communal wellbeing cannot be achieved if one of its members is miserable. When the chairperson for the Titani Women's Cub (see Chapter Seven) lamented that the community was lagging behind, her comment invoked a collective understanding of how their community is seen, and this could significantly affect their collective and individual confidence. Thus, it was about exploring the scope for collective action, the range of experiences that people may have, initially within this community, but also more broadly. It has been said that collective wellbeing then becomes something that happens in relationship— between the collective and the individual; the local and the global; the people and the state. Relationship is at the centre of wellbeing analysis and politics, helping to inform how wellbeing can transform the terms on which marginalised groups engage with others and others engage with them (White, 2010).

When it comes to literacy and learning, the two are deeply intertwined, and occur in spaces where women can achieve real freedoms and justice, to guarantee genuine wellbeing and empowerment. Persistent patriarchal systems, as reflected in the social relations described in the three empirical chapters, can impede the well-intended interventions for attaining women's wellbeing and empowerment. Nussbaum's central list of capabilities was intended to be a solution: for people to live a life fully human, each item must be met for everyone at their point of need (see Nussbaum, 2000a). Nussbaum recognises the role of a supportive environment to meet these capabilities (see Chapter Three). However, it is the supportive environment that becomes complicated, as already demonstrated. While rural women do access 'capital assets' (such as land in the case of Sophia), women may have to submit to certain conditions (for example, not remarrying outside the village) which place constraints upon their ambitions, the freedom of choice and the life one considers valuable.

The intricacy of these relationships based on agency and power, have implications for empowerment. Guérin, Kumar and Agier, (2013) contend that not only is women's identity and diversity of positioning constitutive of pre-existing inequalities and hierarchies between women, but it also shapes dynamics of mobility, exclusion and marginalisation. This was sometimes observed when men and women were in the same social space. Here, status power or positionality meant that those with seemingly superior status

exercised power over other members of the same group or family structure, based on hierarchies of authority.

Additionally, social and cultural capital were instrumental in building wellbeing. Women strategically use their social capital to navigate the complex situations they encounter, associated with literacy and learning in different social domains. Gender inequality was also experienced in local definitions and assumptions around gendered roles. Women had far heavier workloads, juggling domestic and agricultural labour while trying to overcome male domination in private and public decision-making within their community and households. It could be argued that these were reasons for women to venture into other avenues where they could exert more freedom and control. These complexities lead to the difficulties with 'measuring' women's empowerment. However, Kabeer's (1999) triad approach to empowerment, comprising resources, agency and achievement, is a viable option. Kabeer's conceptualisation emphasises the interdependence of individual and structural change in processes of empowerment. Structures shape individual resources, agency and achievements, but also define the parameters within which different categories of actors are able to pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some and inhibiting that of others (Ibid.).

The patriarchy in this community has demonstrated how complex the relationships between women and men are, and also the relationships between women and women. The social relations within a family, kin and the entire community, shape women's interactions differently and this gives insight into the complex web of power relations, and the embeddedness of gender identities and roles.

8.7. Conclusion

What this thesis shows in relation to gender equality and empowerment, is that policies and literacy programmes will not be effective as long as focus is on accessibility while ignoring the existing structural barriers that impede women from pursuing a life worth living. Several crosscutting themes, discussed in all the three empirical chapters, are crucial to women in pursuing their aspirations, while wellbeing and empowerment still

remain a pipeline dream. Women consistently engaged in self-directed practices, displaying a degree of agency in most activities. Exercise of agency was always done in the context of social relations through family and friends, as well as a collective, exhibiting the *ubuntu* capability. Throughout the three chapters, is a witness of the role of ‘capital assets’ women individually engage with, which influences their literacy or learning practices as part of their everyday lives. However, the ability to engage with particular assets and opportunities are shaped by local and situated notions of legitimacy—social, legal and moral, and this is because accessibility may not guarantee a women’s wellbeing (Rao, 2017).

Chapter Five challenges the notion that being literate equates to empowerment, as this should also incorporate complex relationships between literacy and empowerment. For example, the capability framework through both Sen’s (1999) conceptualisation of literacy assumes that simply being literate equates to women’s empowerment, but while acknowledging the impact of social arrangement on attainment of individual freedoms. Sen’s accounts do not adequately capture how unequal power in these social relations impact women’s ability to exercise agency and pursue a life they desire. Nussbaum on the other hand, has proposed the provision of literacy as effective ways of promoting women’s control over their environment, but even with this assumption, it does not adequately take into account the complexities of power relations even as women pursue their individual capabilities through literacy. Her relational capabilities acknowledge the importance of women building social networks, but does not go into detail in exploring processes around these relationships in their situated contexts. In contrast, the *ubuntu* as discussed in Chapter Six and Seven shows how group activities shape women’s interactions and aspirations while enhancing their wellbeing.

Chapter Nine Conclusion and Implications

9.0. Introduction

This study did not seek “grand generalisations but real life lessons to be learned” (Openjuru *et al.*, 2016, p. 23). The findings I have shared in this study are based on my interactions with some community members in a small village that was selected as my study site in Zambia. The findings of these small case studies cannot be seen as representative of the wider country, or indeed, literacy practices in other parts. However, the findings provide great insights into understanding and approaching rural women’s livelihoods and the role of literacy and learning in achieving gender justice and empowerment.

As someone involved in women’s literacy projects in the past, my starting point in this thesis was to revisit rural women’s literacies and learning practices in the context of their livelihoods. The thesis introduced me to the wider literature on literacy and development. Particularly, the Capabilities Approach to development helped me understand how women construct their livelihoods around a range of assets (Bebbington, 1999). The study explored women’s literacy and learning as linked to sustainable livelihoods and development. This was achieved through the use of two different approaches that explored literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984), and development through a capabilities framework (Nussbaum, 2011), using an ethnographic study conducted in Zambia.

In this concluding chapter, I provide an overview of what I have captured in this thesis, and its contribution to literature on literacy, informal/non-formal learning and gender justice, in understanding women’s empowerment and wellbeing. Drawing on existing literacy research, data analysis and personal reflections, I share the key findings that emerged from the study of adult literacy as a policy, in contrast to literacy as used in practice. My conclusion is derived from the four key research questions that shaped my discussion, based on the conceptual framework that I developed. At the apex of the study was an exploration of livelihood activities, and how these might shape literacy and

learning practices to contribute to wellbeing and empowerment. The livelihood approach (Bebbington, 1999) was paramount in this study in situating women's positionality at the centre of development discourse. Hence, the overarching research question that guided my discussion throughout —“*How do rural women's livelihood activities influence literacy and learning in contributing to their capabilities, gender justice and wellbeing?*” In these concluding sections, I pull out the key findings and establish the implications for theory, policy and practice, and research in Zambia.

By embarking on an inquiry approach to find out ‘*What's going on with women's livelihoods in this community?*’ —the study has demonstrated the need to explore literacy practices beyond dominant understandings of literacy. It has been posited that women engage more in literacies which are seen as relevant and connected to their livelihood aspirations. The data also points to the need to appreciate the role of informal and intergenerational learning in the co-creation of knowledge —the role of *ubuntu* to achieving gender justice and wellbeing. It also shows social relationships in the community that play a crucial role in shaping women's ability to exercise agency and participate in the social activities that meet personal and communal goals. Notably, the data suggests that individual literate status does not impact women's aspirations for their valued goals; one does not need to be an educated participant, for example, to effectively take part in activities that influence social transformation at the household or community level, where the capability framework only recognises functional literacy. Instead, women in this community can be seen engaging in literacy practices as influenced by various social domains, exercising agency and choice to navigate the different literacy-mediated activities. Furthermore, participants, regardless of their literate identity, interact with texts every day in different social domains and make sense of texts that reflects the social and cultural practices (Gebre *et al.*, 2009).

I also analysed the textual meaning in terms of the context in which it is shared and how it trickles down to participants in a bureaucratic system to the community while also looking at participants' reactions. As indicated in Chapter Three, at the centre of both literacy and learning practices are power dynamics that are situated in different social and cultural contexts. The unequal power relations exhibited in different social domains and with different actors influenced how women took hold of literacy and learning. As

someone who, prior to my research study, was involved in local projects meant to empower communities, I have come to the conclusion that development is more about having a dialogue with local people, understanding what they consider a valuable life, and building consensus in designing policies and programmes that reflect genuine grassroots voices at different stages (see Mosse, 2004).

In Chapter One, I set the scene for the research. My starting point as I embarked upon understanding with rural women's livelihood activities was a reflection on the literacy programmes that 'we', in my role as NGO development worker, were providing to the local communities. I questioned whether these meant anything to women participants and their livelihood needs and aspirations. In Chapter Two, I provided an overview of the policy framework for gender justice, empowerment and adult literacy. My discussion then delved on adult literacy policies and programmes with some national and regional mappings in Zambia. I also provided a contextual background to the gender policies that have been enacted to enhance women's participation in development. The chapter provided a socio-economic and cultural account of the study area, highlighting the complexities of social relations and implications for women's empowerment and wellbeing. I established how complex women's livelihoods are, and why their empowerment needs more than access to resources such as training or adult literacy, or even land. My review of the literature in this chapter highlighted some of the limitations in addressing the issues around policies on women's literacy, empowerment and wellbeing.

Chapter Three set out the broader scholarship on literacy and livelihoods, providing the rationale for the conceptual framework underpinning the study. I brought together approaches around literacy and human development, key concepts and theories that helped to articulate women's livelihoods and wellbeing, to understand broader notions of literacy and learning in development context. Introducing the concept of *ubuntu* in the framework enriched my discussion of understanding women's wellbeing from the African context. Chapters Two and Three argued that adult literacy policy and programmes in Zambia continue to be framed through a deficit approach (Ministry Of General Education, 2013). For example, the government's goal of eliminating illiteracy by 2030 is underpinned by its vision 2030, but also aligned with the 2030 SDGs (Ministry of Finance and National

Planning, 2017, 2022). This dominant policy discourse connects strongly with an autonomous model of literacy (Goody, 1968), an approach that has been widely criticised by literacy scholars for what has been framed as hidden literacies that people possess (Nabi, Rogers and Street, 2009). Instead, I adopted the concept of “multiple literacies” (Street, 1995) which emphasises understanding literacy through its social and cultural practices, a departure from looking at literacy in numeric terms (autonomous model), that considers the literacies associated with specific livelihood practices in different social domains.

Chapter Four, my methodological chapter, describes the design of the study, research orientation, selection of research site, data collection and my engagement with women through ethnographic fieldwork. I explored women’s literacies and learning strategies and the kind of livelihoods they considered valuable in their day-to-day livelihoods.

The three empirical chapters, Five, Six and Seven, established that women’s literacy practices that relate to varying social domains and aspirations and learning as situated, are embedded in their everyday social practices. The chapters show that adult participants are already equipped with learning skills, and exhibit competences in different domains through their social practices even when they come to the new learning environment.

(i). Revisiting my research questions

During my fieldwork, some of my key research questions changed as result of the dominant livelihood activities I observed. Originally, I planned to look at literacy practices. Being in the community as a participant observer, I came to understand that women’s everyday livelihoods were not only about literacy practices: instead, they needed to be understood from a wider dimension of how women interacted with local resources in constructing sustainable livelihoods. I began to probe the kinds of livelihood activities of women, and how these connected with their literacy and learning practices. It was crucial to understand sustainable livelihoods through women’s access to wider resources and how these were valued (see Bebbington, 1999).

My first empirical Chapter Five explored local perceptions of literacy and what women took hold of as literacy practices embedded in their everyday lives. I was interested in how women navigated literacy-mediated tasks, regardless of their literate status. Hence, I endeavoured to answer three key research questions which include:

- i. *What are rural women's livelihood activities and how do these shape their literacy practices?*

The broader scholarship on literacy in Chapter Five highlighted the importance of understanding literacy and its meaning within the social and cultural context where it is applied. The chapter also highlighted that in constructing their identity and aspirations, agency and social relations were central to women's livelihoods. When I arrived in the community, I noticed that women were surrounded by a range of texts in social spaces or in their home. I posited that while these messages have an instrumental function, they also have symbolic meaning in terms of making use of text. I analysed the data by how women used the texts that they encountered from the situated context and the text's purpose (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007). Texts carried multiple functionalities: textual meanings involved negotiations and knowledge transfer in which women were often the knowers in relation to context and activity they were involved in.

The analysis in Chapter Six developed the themes of social relations, participation and agency introduced in Chapter Five in relation to situated learning, addressing the second question, "*How does non-formal and informal learning enhance rural women's capabilities?*" I explored local/indigenous knowledges and learning practices, and how these situated women as participants in spaces not designed for learning. The discussion around women's learning in non-formal and informal settings was built up from what I observed as not merely as social practices, but which were also entangled in the process of new knowledges and power. The findings in Chapter Six demonstrate the importance of informal and intergenerational indigenous learning and participation in these situated contexts, and how social relations, power and agency played a role in situated learning (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). It also shone a light on collective capability through *ubuntu* (Hoffmann and Metz, 2017; Migheli, 2017; Ngubane and Makua, 2021; Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas, 2023). I have argued that *ubuntu* as a set of values, is an important

dimension to women's agency and participation, thus situating social and cultural capitals as instrumental in shaping women's learning practices.

Chapter Seven draws on the understanding of literacy and learning in the context of livelihoods and gender justice, as articulated in Chapters Five and Six, addressing the third question: "*What are women's perceptions of justice, and how does literacy and learning contribute to gender justice and wellbeing?*" In particular, I analysed gender justice through Fraser's (2008) justice dimension, placing social relations at the core of empowerment. Kabeer's (2008) conceptualisation of empowerment was used as reference for understanding women's empowerment and understanding wellbeing through the lens of the capabilities framework as prescribed (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000b). The chapter explored gender justice through women's experiences of the patriarchy to determine what genuine empowerment might look like, in line with Nussbaum and Sen's notion of empowerment as guaranteeing women a life of their choice fully valued (Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 2000). This involved a closer look at the intricacies of social relations in a patriarchal society, but also relations with external actors and what strategies women adopted to navigate the complexities of achieving wellbeing.

9.1. Challenging the Deficit Approach to Literacy and Development

With regards to the central argument around literacy and development, my thesis echoes other studies that have interrogated the deficit approach to literacy, situating women's literacy in their broader livelihoods. There has been a shift towards exploring women's experiences through the lens of literacy practices rather than dominant assumptions about the impact of literacy skills acquisition (Robinson-Pant, 2004; Street, 2004). My first research question addressed in Chapter Five brought out several issues around women's literacy, such as local perceptions of literacy meanings, embedded practices, identity and power.

As earlier indicated, my background as a practitioner made me question whether there was a strong link between women gaining literacy skills and the social transformation

taking place in their lives within the developmental framework that aligned with the government's policy. As I interacted with the wider literature on literacy and development, I was able to establish that understanding literacy through a deficit approach narrowed the scope of unravelling what else women do with literacy. The capability framework has equally given a push back to the deficit-approach, although, as I have argued, their conceptualisation of literacy is still underpinned by the autonomous model. For example, capability scholars posit that a general lack of literacy skills among the majority of women in developing countries has implications for their ability to exercise agency. Their claims are based on statistical analysis that seems to show a significant correlation between women's literacy rates and other indicators of development such as reduced mortality and fertility rate (see Sen, 1999). This is in reference to standard literacy of school systems. Edelsky (2006) has stressed the political role of schooling and literacy, stating that literacy may be a tool for empowerment, but only if it does more than merely being used for evaluation. While acknowledging that literacy brings in both social and individual gain, Edelsky (2006) argues that factors such as gender and social affiliation are more important than literacy for success in terms of economic prosperity.

My approach to rural women's livelihoods went beyond dependence on material resources. Instead, I focused on the role of social and cultural capital in women developing wider capabilities. This facilitated a broader engagement with literacy as a capability; how it might work with other capabilities, by exploring relationships that occurred in women's social practices, and how they navigated the different literacy-mediated tasks.

A preview of the developmental agenda in Zambia indicates that rural women's literacy has been a central issue for decades, especially regarding how best to situate women in development. Nevertheless, to understand development, it was important to look at local conceptions of literacy and wellbeing, and how women, through literacy practices as an embedded practice (see Kulick and Stroud, 1993) positioned themselves as active participants in development. A social practices approach to literacy (Street, 1984) coupled with an ethnographic methodological approach, made visible local women's aspirations to pursue a life that they considered valuable (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Sen, 2000; Robeyns, 2017).

The findings present a strong case on the broader undertaking of development. For example, *ubuntu* as a capability highlights the notion of understanding developmental approaches from different perspectives, exploring what is considered as a valuable life in the context of how people live. In this community, communal relations were more valuable in as much as women embraced individualistic achievements. This revelation helps uncouple the link between women's literacy and what development as freedom might look like, from the perspective of this community.

Women's literacy has been perceived as a panacea to development, with the assumption that being literate will help women achieve valuable status in their community (UNESCO, 2005). The difficulty with this assumption, as discussed earlier, is that it frames participants as passive recipients, and frames the acquisition of school-based literacy skills as the only possible way for them to take part in development. This has also been a dominant narrative because as Papen (2005) argues, many literacy studies, based on the social theory of literacy, have failed to examine people's literacy discourses in a way that has been persuasive to policymakers. Therefore, this thesis looked at literacy more broadly by linking it with another dominant approach to development, namely, the capabilities framework. By listening to local perceptions and observing how literacies are embedded, I have highlighted possible areas of pedagogical intervention by educationalists and policymakers, as well as practitioners in their literacy programmes. Clearly, through the lens of dominant institutions, the funders and implementers of literacy programmes, the link between literacy and development has been idealised.

The empirical data presented in Chapter Five showed that although women understood literacy in multiple ways, expressed abstractly in local texts such as "*kuweranga*" (reading and writing), being 'blind' or one who has open sight (*otseguka metso*), all this was in relation to school text-based literacy as a reference point. Yet what the study shows clearly is how different literacies were valued specifically for different social domains within the community. This is in tandem with Barton's (2007) assertion that literacies should not be put on a scale of simple to complex, but rather, acknowledge that different literacies are valued for the purposes they serve. Hence the need to match literacy development interventions with local aspirations.

My central argument firstly is that women’s literacy practices need to be understood in order to see how these can contribute to our understanding of capabilities within the development framework. Women through their literacy practices developed capabilities individually as well as collectively in the form of agency, self-direction and self-esteem, and financial freedom. These capabilities are what help them to pursue a life that they aspire to. Secondly, women prioritise existing wider resources to construct their livelihoods. In this study, the power of support network was an extremely important resource that emanated from the community’s social and cultural capital (Bebbington, 1999).

9.2. Implications of The Study for Policy and Practice in Zambia

(i) Adult Literacy and Learning

Many contemporary literacy scholars look at literacy in terms of its social domain — that is, the broad areas of social activity in which literacy has a role (Papen, 2005b). I adopted the concept of “situated literacies” (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2007) as a departure from looking at literacy in numeric terms (autonomous model), allowing me to consider the kinds of literacies associated with a given type of livelihood practices in different social domains. According to Robinson-Pant (2016), this approach means taking a holistic perspective on how people engage with literacy practices in their everyday livelihoods. I also explored learning through the lens of participation, from peripheral to full participation in knowledge sharing and acquisition.

The findings of the study could provide models to improve existing formal and non-formal learning approaches in the Zambian education system to cater for literacies and learning that suits specific social domains which can be accessed in the comfort of people’s unfettered social spaces — a move away from the dominant cultural practices of the school systems. The model that recognises prior learnt knowledges and skills, as well as learner aspirations drawn from the informal and intergenerational indigenous learning experiences that exist in the community. This perspective acknowledges that there are different ways of learning and gaining new knowledge. The inclusion of *ubuntu* in the

framework provides insights into pedagogical practices and teaching approaches that could be more suitable for adult learners.

Hence, it is important to acknowledge what people learn in both informal and non-formal learning spaces, and what inspires them to participate. For instance, St Clair (2010) argues that the deficit approach to literacy is proving unreliable and ineffective since capabilities cannot always be measured. St Clair criticises the assumption of setting a measure on the level of literacy, and argues that people will learn what they need to learn, when they need to learn it, provided that there is open and responsive adult literacy support available to them. This is significant and worth noting for educators and providers in planning and dispensing literacy programmes. Conversely, Allan Rogers has noted that informal learning as situated, tends to be more influential than other forms of learning (Rogers, 2014).

Current adult literacy continues to recognise functional literacy as more important in the hierarchies of literacy knowledges and skills (see Ministry Of General Education, 2013; Ministry Of Finance and National Planning, 2017; 2022). When the government makes pronouncement on eradicating illiteracy by 2030 (Ibid.), this is often in relation to schooled literacy, which is formally recognised and assumed to meaningfully contribute to development and people's wellbeing. Similarly, policy makers often conflate the effects of schooling and literacy, using literacy rates in this case as a proxy for 'education'. Other forms of literacies occurring in various social and cultural domains do not receive the same recognition in policy discourses, nor does informal learning as a social practice. This implies that only people with functional literacy skills can make a meaningful contribution to national development.

Despite its contribution to development discourse, this perception is shared in the capability framework (see Sen1999); linking functional literacy to women's agency and wellbeing. The tendency to perceive participants as beneficiaries is based on the assumption that women like anyone else, need to develop reading and writing skills before they can become economically active or challenge social norms (see Rogers, 2000; Rogers and Street, 2012). This assumption is mostly associated with the autonomous model (Goody, 1968) of literacy which according to Street (1995) is western-centric, linked to European and North American educational history. This narrow notion

of 'literacy' is based on a model that associates literacy with its particular uses and therefore discriminates against people considered illiterate.

Rogers (2000) alludes to such dominant policy discourse as a 'schooled' literacy and a 'literacy first approach in programmes'. This approach ignores hidden literacies that people possess as earlier alluded (Nabi, Rogers and Street, 2009). Women are involved extensively in literacy practices that relate to varying social domains and aspirations. In other words, they do not come to the learning space as blank slates. Hence, there is need for the local national education system to create networks of interlinked learning spaces, proposing multiple possible trajectories for individual lifelong learning. These need to be based on a comprehensive system that recognises, validates and accredits competencies, regardless of the pathways through which they are acquired. By integrating them into mainstream policy, literacies and informal learning outside of school become more emancipatory to rural women's livelihood practices. The experiences of participants in situated literacies and learning include benefits around social cohesion, social inclusion and social capital that are hard to measure yet important human development dimensions closely linked to what CA advocates for.

Most importantly, the data findings challenge the dominant discourse whereby empowerment is equated with functional literacy skills. It is a discourse that overlooks the complex social relationships that tend to act to the detriment of women, regardless of their acquired functional literacy skills. Worth noting that through an NLS lens, functional literacy simply represents particular dominant cultural and social ways of using literacy. The plural conceptualisation of literacies allows women freedoms to pursue a life that they consider valuable (Robinson, 2003). In relation to gender equality policies (see Chapter Two), these tend to be underpinned by a discourse of 'deficits'. According to Rao (2017), such policies fail to acknowledge that women's agency, especially in relation to resources and their everyday struggles for survival, are often directed at building shared rather than independent lives. Rao advocates for policies that consider positive constructions of the resources, identities, skills, knowledges and relationships women build that this study endorses, based on the vital role that social relations play in women's empowerment and wellbeing.

(ii) Practitioners and Rural Women's Empowerment Programmes

Development has largely been framed by international agencies in the global North rendering assistance to countries mostly in the global South. These countries tend to capture what they intend to define and measure as indicators of development. However, this study provides further evidence for the idea that adults learn informally throughout their lives and engage in purposeful and planned learning episodes at different stages (see Rogers and Street, 2012).

While engaging with wider scholarship on literacy and development, I observed that literacy programmes designed to empower, underpinned by global North agendas, often frame participants as beneficiaries to be taught skills. If there is something that this thesis demonstrates is that empowerment is a complex concept that goes beyond resource provision or training programmes.

Gender is an important determinant of literacy forms and should be integrated into developing literacy practices (Wedin, 2006). Yet literacy practices as a form of empowerment is mediated by power dynamics that are deeply embedded in social relations. In this thesis, I explored these power dynamics in terms of women's experiences of relationships at household, community and market (State, institution) levels: how they are constrained by these structural powers in their social practices. This gave insights into what women's empowerment and wellbeing might look like in a local community.

There is a tendency for providers to fight inequality through distributional justice, as seen in efforts to provide equitable financial and material resources (discussed in Chapter Two). Little attention is given to inequality of social relations that manifest in different forms such as epistemic injustice. The asymmetrical relations of power (Drydyk, 2013) undermine the very essence of empowerment programmes, and the Capabilities Approach has been criticised for not comprehensively addressing this anomaly. My empirical data has shown that deeply ingrained social injustice is rooted in the patriarchal system in the community, but also in the interpersonal relations women experience daily with their male counterparts.

It is of crucial importance to recognise the types of power that are exercised by institutions towards its supposed women beneficiaries. Patriarchy is often ingrained in powerful institutions that exercise 'power over' its beneficiaries (see Lukes, 2005). For example, I described the unequal relations between the State and the women in the community in the context of the FISP initiative. From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1982), State, bureaucratic and institutional literacies are framed to have power over, thereby subjectifying its supposed beneficiaries. By contrast, in both the Titani and KAINGO groups, my research has shown how local people can also challenge this narrative by altering text and its meaning.

It is evident from Chapter Seven that women are no longer perceived as powerless, passive and victims of development. They are actually active and have multiple ways of getting their voice heard, shaping power relations in public spaces that become a performative field of contestation. It is incumbent on practitioners to pay attention to these power relations and identities when designing programmes. Cornwall (2002) contends that to make sense of participation in any given space, providers need to examine the power relations that permeate and produce these and other spaces. In this case, whether the space is suggested by the organisers, and who dictates the agenda, has to be considered. This also gives insight into the importance of working on initial constructs of participants as either beneficiaries, 'clients' or 'users', as this has a bearing on women's participation in an activity (Ibid.). Foucault has argued that in every discourse, the materials and symbolic dimensions that are brought in shape not only what is said and done, but in the given space, it can constitute 'what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge counts'. In other words, the architecture and organisation of the physical can serve as a means of domination or control (see Foucault, 1978, 1995).

The example of the training class with NGO facilitators discussed in Chapter Six, points to some of these important nuances. Quite often, text is associated with power, and whenever practitioners intend to use text as part of interaction, it is important that people learn to deal with issues of power in situations where the written word appears (Archer, 2003). The data has revealed that people's powerlessness is not just the lack of technical skills: for rural communities, it is deeply entrenched in social relations that impact other capabilities such as self-esteem and confidence. Archer (2003) also notes that dealing

with power relations is crucial because decoding the text (what might be seen as the technical part of learning) is only a small part of what needs to be addressed in any literacy programme concerned with increasing freedom. Empowering women should therefore involve promoting equal relations not reciprocally limited by any choices or demands (Drydyk, 2013).

9.3. Implications of Ethnographic Study Approach to Research in Zambia

Inquiry into ethnography's role in policy-making and practice is not new and has been critically explored in areas such as development and aid programmes (Mosse, 2004); literacy and development policies/programmes (Robinson-Pant, 2001; Papen, 2005b; Rogers and Street, 2012). There is a dearth of literature on livelihoods and development through ethnographic study approaches in Zambia. The value of my ethnographic account lies in part in offering "an element of critical reflection" (Mosse, 2004, p. 677) towards policies that are being implemented in the country. Street (2004) has argued that an ethnographic perspective involves making the invisible visible —paying greater attention to local meanings and uses [of literacy practices]. In the context of literacy and learning, it is about understanding people's uses of literacy, the role of informal learning for women's livelihoods and what 'outsiders' such as agencies and formal institutions plan as their developmental approaches.

Undertaking this ethnographic study was nothing more than an inquiry to find out what Street (2001, p.2) describes as ethnographers' role in understanding 'what is actually going on'. Only then was I able to identify what would count as an effective intervention that improves on the status quo, based on empirical data. Using this argument for example, I demonstrated that being 'literate' is not an adequate form of empowerment in the presence of unequal social relations. As such, I believe that "as a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people's actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 4). This approach allowed me to employ

various methods, influenced by the research questions that I developed and addressed throughout the fieldwork. Through this approach, I deepened my understanding of the community and how the locals engaged in literacy and learning; I was able to explore wellbeing and identities in the context of their livelihoods.

While my research was not directly involved in evaluating learning and literacy programmes/policies, adopting Street's ethnographic approach allowed me to come across literacy programme events such as women's interaction with NGO facilitators (see Chapters Five and Six). I was able to analyse the processes taking place and see things from the perspective of providers and participants. By attending to some onsite recruitment exercises conducted by programme providers, I witnessed how participants took part in different activities such as the application processes. This allowed me to explore the rich varieties of literacies being used in multi-modal spaces and domains, for different purposes. The study allowed me to identify the kind of literacies and learning practices that arise in communities where people interact in particular contexts. I was also able to identify particular areas that, if strengthened, would benefit the community. I explored factors that motivated adult learners and why they pursued certain literacies over others. I witnessed and documented different learning and coping strategies that participants adopted in pursuing their livelihoods.

9.4. Contribution of The Study

The conceptual framework was designed to explore the collaboration between literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) and the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2011) to understand rural livelihoods and wellbeing in much broader context that linked to African *Ubuntu*. The two theoretical approaches chosen for this study differ fundamentally and ideologically with regards to the concept of literacy. Yet from a theoretical perspective, the use of the two approaches has contributed to a more nuanced approach to literacy and development.

(i). Capability Framework

In debates about wellbeing and the freedom to achieve wellbeing, the capability approach has emerged as a new conceptual framework, encompassing public values in which either of these can play a role, such as development and social justice. As pioneers of this approach, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have shaped the discourse about human development. The Capability Approach redefines the freedom to achieve wellbeing as a matter of what people are able to do and to be, and the kind of life that they are effectively able to lead (see Chapter Three). Nussbaum developed her Capabilities Approach into a partial theory of social justice, based on human rights, central to which are ten capabilities that must be met at the very bare minimum to guarantee every person a life worth living (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000b).

Both Sen and Nussbaum have gone on to recognise literacy as crucial to the pursuit of a life fully human. Above all, the inclusion of *ubuntu* to the framework shows harmonisation of the framework in real practice. For example, while not disregarding the capabilities list, *ubuntu* has added new insights into the local understandings of women's wellbeing where both communal and individual wellbeing cannot be compromised, but rather enhanced through harmonised social relations in local communities, based on love, respect and dignity. Drawn from findings, it is clear that *ubuntu* plays an important role in women's livelihoods and can work alongside Nussbaum's central list discussed in Chapter Three.

On the other hand, literacy within the capability framework is depicted as the autonomous model, a standardised literacy that can be measured and credited as a set of skills for both instrumental and non-extrinsic benefits. My argument is that if literacy within the capability framework is treated as both a capability and a functioning, this can be theorised by seeking a common ground in unpacking the concept of literacy. The analysis of literacy practices in a number of contexts has informed the thinking and theories about literacy, leading to a growing consensus among academics and practitioners that literacy promotion must first and foremost understand and respect the context of use. In fact, Street (1995) claims that it is those who want to retain an autonomous view of literacy who are responsible for the dichotomy; those who subscribe to the ideological model do not deny the significance of technical aspects of reading and

writing, such as decoding sounds/shape correspondence and reading difficulties. From this perspective, the features of literacy are always embedded in particular social practices; the specialisation process through which reading and writing is acquired and the power relations between the groups engaged in differing literacy practices are central to understanding specific issues and problems. Literacy as a standardised technical skill, often delivered in rigid institutional frameworks and only in certain languages, has frequently led not towards freedom, but towards a passive acceptance of dominant structures and discourse (Robinson, 2003). This argument implicates the Capabilities Approach through its conceptualisation of literacy.

On a positive note, Sen's holistic approach to development distances itself from the dominant economic imperative. Instead, it has created the space to consider social practices such as literacy as means, and as ends, that is, as elements of the freedoms, which he contends, are the sole purpose of development. Robinson (2003) contends that literacy can be one of the capabilities that enable us to challenge and to change constraining social realities and move towards development as freedom, since it manifests as particular literacies and acquired in context-sensitive ways. Within the capability framework in which literacy is identified as one, a range of other capabilities are employed to achieve freedoms, depending on what those values are; on what individuals and communities 'have reason to value'. In the context of this framework, literacy is a capability that has been recognised alongside education, one that empowers women with agency to live a life that they have reasons to value, and which fits what human development should be all about (see Sen, 1999).

In the NLS approach, literacy has been pluralised to multiple literacies in recognition of other literacies (Street, 1995; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). Given this, Street (1995) encourages to ask the question: "*which literacy is appropriate for a given context?*" The question creates a space in which to see what kind of literacies meet people's aspirations as valuable choices to live a life fully human. My thesis has explored the role of the different literacies in different domains that rural women have adopted. If literacy as a capability and as advocated by capability scholars, plays a functional instrumental role in enabling women to exercise agency and pursue a life they consider valuable, other literacies too, outside of school that are practiced as capabilities by rural women, and

interacting with other capabilities such as agency, may serve the same purpose. The acknowledgment of literacies in the capability framework shows openness and flexibility exemplified by Sen's acknowledgement, that people value different things in different places, contexts and cultures.

(ii). New Literacy Studies Approach

Literacy as social practice emphasises embeddedness. Literacy scholars argue people do not passively receive literacy, but that they create literacies of their own, adapting them to their own needs and views (cf. Kulick and Stroud, 1993; Street, 1993, 1995). I cited a study in Chapter Eight of how the inhabitants of a small village in Papua New Guinea took hold 'of literacy' for social practices (Kulick and Stroud, 1993, p. 56). My thesis has argued that what counts as literacy is not necessarily school literacy, which is merely an imposed view. Rather, the literacies that matter are those that are embedded in the social practices that characterise women's everyday livelihoods. Thus, what is considered as embeddedness in which people take hold of literacies is, in reality, women exercising their agency. Here, agency led to women's wider capabilities such as self-esteem, widening networks, identity and a sense of belonging, in line with Martha Nussbaum's central list (relational and individual capabilities) as human freedoms.

Literacies find their place as both socially structured and individual practices — their use, along with that of other capabilities of different kinds, may offer opportunities, within a particular social context, for the individual to overcome 'unfreedoms'. Rather than assessing the impact of literacy per se, in this approach, it was about investigating how it works together with other capabilities and elements of agency. What are considered as functional literacies are simply other cultural and social ways that people use literacy (cf. Street, 1995). Literacies become part of those elements of freedoms that allow women to pursue a life they consider valuable. Embedded literacy practices are in fact valued freedoms in the context of lived experiences of women in this community. It is clear, however, that the range of capabilities employed to achieve freedoms, will depend on what those values are, on what individuals and communities 'have reason to value'. The

use of literacy and education, as one of those capabilities, will vary. The concept of capabilities therefore connects well with the notion of multiple literacies that is often used in the NLS (Street, 1995).

The thesis has identified a critical lack of research on informal learning and literacy as a social practice in relation to development in Zambia. Therefore, undertaking a study on women's literacy and learning to interrogate their role in development and wellbeing was very significant, given that very little studies have been undertaken in this quest. Beyond the Zambian context, the study provides new insights on the significance of everyday literacies and learning and how this strengthens women's livelihoods to participate in sustainable development.

9.5. Limitations and Recommendations

In Chapter One, I indicated how most studies on women's literacy in Zambia have been evaluative, attending primarily to the benefits of literacy from an autonomous model (see Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2022b; Nyanga *et al.*, 2020; Sichula, 2020). I emphasised the need for more qualitative inquiry that looks at not only how women acquire literacy and learning skills, but how these are taken hold of as embedded practices. This study, therefore, addresses this gap in studies that have so far been conducted in Zambia on adult literacy and livelihoods, but also adds to the existing literature, while informing policy on literacy and learning in the context of development. Through my interactions with the women in the community, I gathered so many stories. I learnt some valuable lessons about women's literacies and learning experiences. I learnt that women already possess rich knowledge outside these settings as equally observed (cf. Rogers, 2000; Rogers and Street, 2012).

The literature on literacy introduced me to the field of New Literacy Studies, where I came across the social theory of literacy. I was aware that as part of the practitioners and policymakers in Zambia, I had always considered illiterate people as deprived people underpinned by the dominant conception of literacy. Yet as Street has argued (2001b), from a culturally sensitive viewpoint, these people make significant use of literacy

practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. Based on this study, and in line with Rogers and Street (2012), I have revised my understanding of my role and the relationship between practitioners and the communities. As they engage with learners, it is incumbent upon policymakers and practitioners to engage in a dialogue to determine the starting point. Since the social theory of literacy does not comprehensively discuss the role of these practices in shaping women's livelihoods, which policymakers always look forward to, my research questions were framed to capture particular literacies and forms of learning as embedded practices. I have identified the kind of capabilities women develop as a result of engaging in these social practices, in relation to the capabilities list (Nussbaum, 2011). Building on the findings, I look forward to working with policy makers and educationalists to design a working model that recognises informal literacies and learning; prior learnt knowledges and skills, relevant to the local livelihoods and aspirations.

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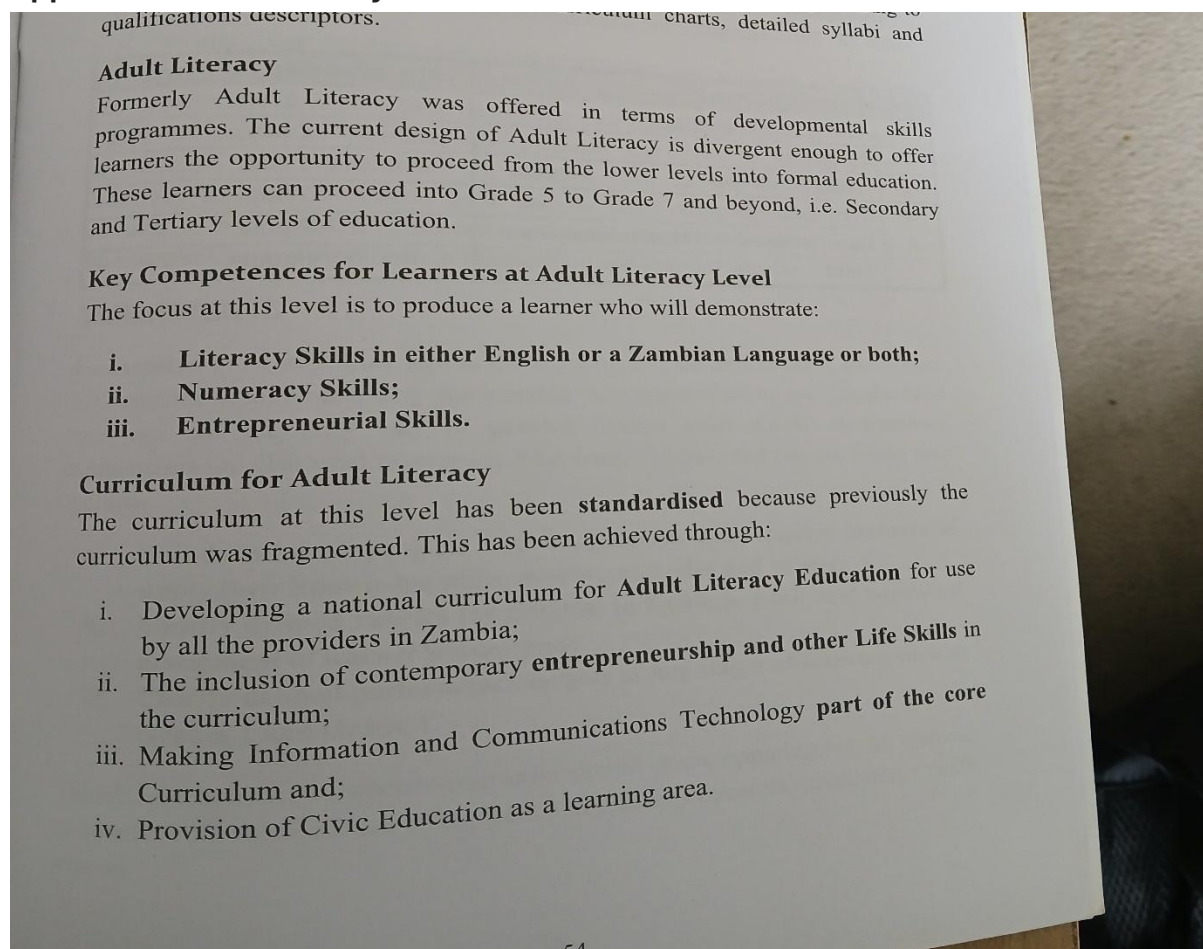
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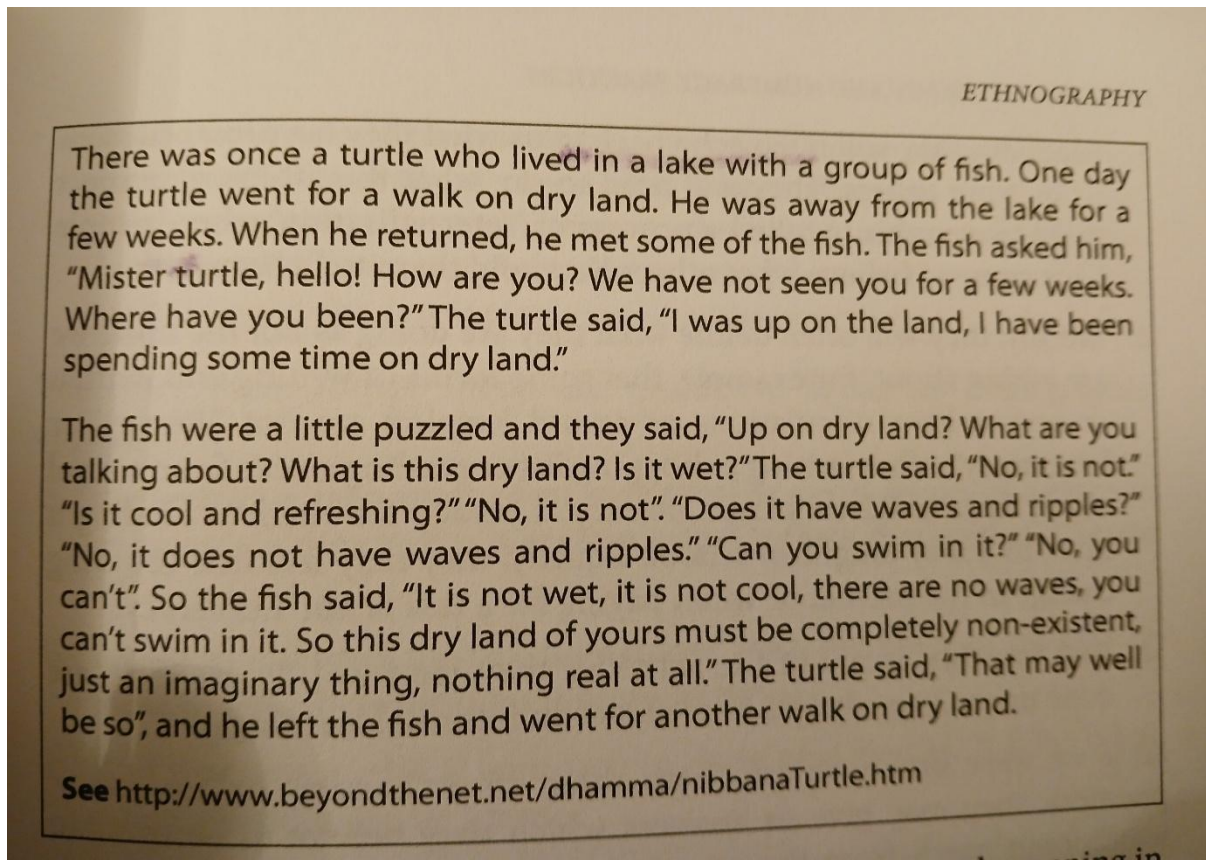
Appendices

Appendix 1: Adult literacy curriculum



Source: Zambia Education Curriculum Framework 2015, Page 54

Appendix 2 : Story of turtle and fish



Source: (see Rogers and Street, 2012, p. 18; Openjuru et al., 2016, p. 21)

Appendix 3 Interview schedule for policy makers/practitioners

Below is a template of questions for my participants. Not every question was asked since some would already be captured by participant's responses.

Question category	Questions and probes
Introductory – 5 minutes	This is my self-introduction. (Introduce self) Question: Now tell me about yourself. What position do you hold in this institution? How long have you worked here? What is the institution's mission and vision?
Transition – 15 minutes	Questions about your institution What do you do as organisation/department? What programmes do you offer to local communities? What are the key objectives? Who is the funder? Who is your target audience? How is selection done? How often do you interact with local communities? How do you engage participants? What language is used? What is the medium and mode of communication?
Key focus – 20 minutes	More follow-up questions Tell me more about your programme with communities in this location. Who else was/is involved in the programme/policy design? At what level were they involved?

How gendered are your programmes/policies?

How long was your programme implemented in this area?

How were the participation levels of the community?

What were challenges? Were they associated with participants or providers?

How is the generation of text materials and dissemination done?

Where are these activities performed? Are they Indoor or outdoor activities?

Who makes the decisions?

Summary and closing – 5 minutes

Questions based on general observations and responses.

Are you able to share some of your programme/policy materials with me?

Can I take pictures of some of your posters about your programmes and policies?

Can I come back or call again in future for any follow-up if necessary, regarding what we have discussed?

Any questions for me?

Thank you for your time and responses!