

Navigating Survival in Shifting Landscapes: Women's Lived Experiences with Food, Land, and Water Systems in Climate-induced Internal Displacement in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper explores women's lived experiences navigating food, land, and water systems in the context of climate-induced displacement in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. Based on qualitative data generated through participatory methods, the paper signposts the effects of entrenched gender inequalities, shaped by patriarchal norms, in amplifying women's vulnerabilities in climate shocks. However, despite the systemic inequalities, displaced women demonstrate resilience and agency through adaptive strategies to sustain their families through challenging times. Based on qualitative data generated through participatory methods, the paper explores women's experiences in displacement. Using an intersectional approach, findings highlight their vulnerabilities, which include structural inequities, lack of access to land leading to disrupted livelihoods and challenges with access to water resources. They further underscore women's agency and resilience, challenging dominant narratives that portray displaced women as passive victims.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Food Systems, Displacement, Resilience

Introduction

Climate change is one of the key drivers of internal displacement, particularly in the Global South, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, including women (Okesanya et al., 2024). Although significant scholarship has been devoted to studying these effects, limited attention has been paid to exploring women's intersectional experiences in climate-induced displacement settings across food, land, and water systems (FLWS). Extreme weather events amplify vulnerabilities, especially for women, due to entrenched gender, economic, and socio-cultural inequalities shaped by patriarchal norms over generations (Nyabola & Wachira, 2024). Drawing on qualitative participatory methods with displaced women in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe, this paper examines the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of women in the face of climate-induced internal displacement. It examines how women navigate insecurities and resource scarcities across FLWS while striving to uphold their traditionally assigned roles of caregiving, food provision, and domestic responsibility.

In recent years, Zimbabwe has experienced recurrent and intensifying extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and cyclones, which have disrupted livelihoods, displaced communities, and strained already fragile socio-ecological systems (Maviza et al., 2025). Several studies have been conducted to understand some of the dynamics related to climate extremes, specifically cyclones, in Zimbabwe. These include lessons learnt from tropical cyclones (Mavhura, 2020); media preparedness on covering disasters in rural areas in the aftermath of cyclones (Maunganidze & Mawere, 2017); historical and comparative analysis on the severity of tropical cyclones and mapping environmental impacts in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts (Hungwe et al., 2024); participation and inclusion of higher education institutions in disaster management (Macheka, 2024); the roles of social work in disasters (Mhlanga et al., 2019); effects of cyclones on food and nutrition indicators in Zimbabwe (Dembedza et al., 2023) and mobility, immobility and relocation dynamics post-cyclone (Ncube & Murray, 2025).

Scholarly evidence has shown that climate impacts women more negatively than men in five key areas: food and nutrition security, agricultural production, health, water and energy, as well as climate-related disasters, migration, and conflict (Owiti, 2022; Okesanya et al., 2024). Some studies have attributed women's vulnerabilities to gender and social norms, which position them as subordinate to their male counterparts (Huyer, Simelton, Chanana, Mulema & Marty, 2021). For instance, Rao et al. (2017) advocate moving beyond the man/woman binary when assessing climate impacts and unpacking the power relations that influence inclusion and exclusion in decision-making, and in the process, challenging the cultural norms that position people differentially in the social hierarchy. In patriarchal societies, roles in food production, water collection, and land cultivation, often the responsibility of women, are central to community survival, yet women often lack formal rights to the resources they manage. When climate-induced displacement occurs, gendered roles and responsibilities are not suspended; instead, they become more burdensome (Adeola et al., 2023; Chikuruwo, 2024). Displacement disrupts access to land and water, fractures food systems, and exacerbates existing inequalities, leaving women to navigate survival in increasingly precarious conditions (Synnestvedt et al., 2025).

In line with cultural expectations and roles, women in Zimbabwe are expected to serve as primary caregivers and stewards of natural resources for agriculture and household purposes (Sithole et al., 2021). This makes them more susceptible to the adverse effects of climate-related shocks and hazards, such as disasters, leading to resource scarcity and displacement. These pressures, in turn, heighten vulnerabilities, threaten livelihoods, and increase their exposure

to gender-based violence (Nyathi et al., 2025). Despite these systemic challenges, women demonstrate agency and innovation to drive climate adaptation and resilience strategies (Meyiwa et al., 2014). In examining women's experiences, the paper critically engages with dominant climate change and displacement research, which often portrays women as vulnerable and passive victims in need of humanitarian assistance. The findings highlight that women are agentic beings whose contributions to climate adaptation challenge prevailing gender stereotypes. By acknowledging their agency in building resilience and sustainable resource systems, the paper advocates gender-transformative approaches that reshape cultural stereotypes.

Food, land and water systems in displacement

Food, land, and water systems are the primary connectors between people and the planet, and are vital for food, health, economic, and environmental security. However, due to stressors such as climate change, these systems are breaking down globally and failing to meet the needs of a growing population, marked by notable inequality and inequitable access (Läderach et al., 2021). This is due to the increasing frequency of external stressors and shocks, which can negatively impact various stages of the system (IFPRI, 2022). Due to their interconnectivity, if one part of these systems becomes stressed at a given point, it risks having a domino effect on other parts, creating cascading challenges for dependent livelihoods. These challenges are gendered, disproportionately affecting women and girls more than their male counterparts.

In climate-induced displacement, FLWS often face prolonged and compounded pressures that inhibit their resilience to climate stressors and shocks (Synnestvedt et al., 2025; Queiroz et al., 2021). A combination of various structural and contextual factors, including access and viability of natural resources, adequacy of food production, as well as infrastructure for food distribution and linkages to markets, affects the resilience of FLWS (Béné, 2017). Moreover, limited infrastructure, disrupted social networks, and weak economic conditions generally shape the means available to displaced populations to adapt to and respond to extreme weather events. Notably, in communities hosting displaced populations, FLWS can be strained, particularly due to the lack of adequate institutional mechanisms for natural resource management that can help address the overexploitation of scarce resources. In addition, unsustainable practices commonly adopted by both displaced and host populations, such as charcoal production and reliance on fossil fuels for cooking, contribute to environmental degradation, putting additional pressure on already strained FLWS. As such, displaced populations experience high levels of food and economic insecurity, often due to their limited means to produce, access, and sell food (Synnestvedt et al., 2025; IDMC, 2023; Vos et al., 2020). While displaced populations face these challenges, the impacts are not experienced uniformly, as they are often shaped by gender and other intersecting social factors, as presented in the ensuing.

Gender and intersectionality

Climate change drives internal displacement, albeit disproportionately, often affecting women and girls more. This is particularly more pronounced in patriarchal communities where men dominate, leading to structural inequalities. As such, the impacts of climate change and the subsequent experiences of displacement are not gender neutral; they exacerbate existing social inequalities and vulnerabilities. In this paper, we employ an intersectional lens to analyse multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage (such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) to understand how

interdependent these categories are in shaping women's experiences of displacement. We take the position that different social categories denote different hierarchies of power that structure social and material life (Cole, 2009). Intersectionality is a framework that has been widely used to unpack how various social categories of identity interconnect and create overlapping systems of privilege and disadvantage (Bowleg, 2012). The theory originated from Kimberle Crenshaw, who argued that gender intersects with other overlapping identities, notably ethnicity and race, among others, to produce multiple levels of social injustice and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989). Emerging from critical race theory, intersectionality developed as a framework to better understand social relations by examining intersecting forms of discrimination, originally used to unpack how women of colour in the USA were discriminated against in employment due to gender and race segregation. Therefore, it is necessary to note that multiple identities do not exist in isolation but are interconnected and shape complex social inequalities (Hill-Collins, 2015). From this standpoint, an intersectional approach is crucial for comprehending the various dimensions of disadvantage that women face in displacement contexts. For instance, in this paper, it will be crucial to show how displaced women navigated vulnerability in the context of their sociocultural positioning in Tsholotsho. This is a patriarchal society where women are primary caregivers responsible for reproductive work in their families. Given that communities in Tsholotsho are agro-based, this role places them as frontliners in natural resources management and exploitation for household food and water security. From an intersectional perspective, women's overlapping identities shape how they experience displacement, influenced by the sociocultural norms in place.

Some authors suggest that intersectionality is crucial for capturing the lived realities of marginalised populations (Tavenner, 2022; Christofferson, 2024). Other studies that have used an intersectional approach, for example, Morales (2022) on vaccine access, found that women were more marginalised and faced challenges when it came to accessing psychotherapy. Similarly, Milulewick et al (2023) suggested that intersectional theory must be extended to climate justice and advance social justice vis-à-vis marginalised groups. In bioarcheology, the approach has been used to explain and understand past lives and examine evidence of trauma after death (Mant et al, 2021). Psychologists have engaged with intersectionality to promote and deepen critical engagement with social justice and equity (Grzanka, 2020; Rosenthal, 2016). More recently, it has gained prominence in climate change scholarship (Sultana, 2021b; 2021c; Vickery, 2018). For example, Perkins (2019) found that indigenous women are disproportionately excluded from international climate policy-making, while Sultana (2021b) brings attention to the role of spatiality in climate justice, particularly in relation to the Global North-Global South divide. In addition, a study by Sultana (2010) highlighted that individual vulnerability to floods in Bangladesh is shaped by the intersection of multiple identities, including gender, caste, socioeconomic status, religion, and age. Other approaches to intersectionality have viewed it as a critical phenomenon situated within power relations or as an analytical strategy that offers a new lens for the critical analysis of social phenomena (Hill-Collins, 2015).

Despite its popularity and widespread use as an analytical framework across disciplines, intersectionality has been criticised for its fluid definitional mess (Hill-Collins, 2015). The definitional mess stems from the lack of a singular, universally accepted definition of intersectionality. This has led to varied interpretations and applications across academic, policy, and activist spaces. Nonetheless, this paper employs an intersectional approach, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of displacement in Tsholotsho during the 2017 flooding caused by Cyclone Dineo, particularly how this ensuing displacement exacerbated pre-existing socio-cultural inequalities.

Women, agency and resilience

Gendered power dynamics and intersectional vulnerabilities impact women's agency and shape their resilience and adaptive capacity. Gender and cultural norms influence how women are affected by and respond to displacement, both individually and collectively. Women's labour in rural areas is not actively accounted for in national indices as an economic contribution; yet, women spend most of their time engaged in both reproductive and productive labour (Maviza & Thebe, 2024; Meyiwa et al., 2014). Their roles are closely tied to climate-sensitive livelihoods, which tend to worsen women's vulnerabilities as they grapple with adapting to climate-induced challenges. This paper analyses displaced women's experiences in Tsholotsho at the intersection of multiple axes of disadvantage that shape their responses to displacement in relation to their culturally assigned roles. Although vulnerable, women still exercise their agency through various practices of resilience, adapting to their displacement (Synnestvedt et al., 2025). It is essential to examine how they respond to their changing circumstances due to displacement in a patriarchal context, thereby enabling us to understand women's agency and resilience in contexts of multiple risk factors (Ungar, 2011).

In this paper, women's agency is demonstrated in both their individual and collective acts of resilience. Given that resilience is culturally embedded, there is a need to understand how agency and resilience are shaped. The paper thus offers valuable insights into how women confront and deal with climate-induced displacement in the context of structural inequalities embedded in normative sociocultural belief systems. These insights can potentially shape policy responses and stimulate further research in climate change and displacement from a gendered perspective.

Methods

Study area

Tsholotsho district is located in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe. The district has 22 official wards. Data for this paper were generated from two wards (5 and 6) that were selected because of their experiences of displacement due to flooding from Cyclone Dineo in 2017. Generally, the wards have high levels of exposure to climate-related shocks and disaster risks. Ward 6 is prone to flooding due to its proximity to the Gwayi River. Ward 5, an adjacent rural ward, experiences erratic rainfall, resulting in water scarcity and disruptions to agricultural activities. Due to flooding during the 2016-2017 rainy season, communities in Ward 6 were displaced and relocated by the government and its partners to Ward 5.

Population, data collection methods

The study involved twenty women from both IDP and host communities in Tsholotsho (Wards 5 and 6). Participants were selected against social identity markers, such as biological gender, age, socioeconomic background, and marital status. These markers were used to capture the intersectional dimensions of vulnerability, allowing for an analysis of how different identities shape individuals' experiences and exposure to climate-related risks and social instability. We employed participatory methods (focus group discussions (FGDs) and transect walks, historical timelines, seasonal calendars, among others) to understand women's lived experiences and responses to the risks and impacts of climate-induced displacement. Our methodological framework consisted of two phases. Firstly, we conducted transect walks

to familiarise ourselves with the local socio-ecological context and understand where natural and non-natural resources are located, how they are distributed and who has access to them. Then, we constructed historical timelines to trace women's experiences of various climatic and societal transformations. The second phase examined the impacts and risks associated with climate-induced disruptions to their livelihoods, using seasonal calendars and problem trees. Thereafter, we used the solution tree tool to assess women's coping capacities and response mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed through thematic analysis, defined as 'a systematic and replicable method for distilling extensive textual data into manageable categories or themes through clearly defined coding rules' (Stemler, 2001, p. 137). Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a structured approach to thematic analysis that helped identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. For this paper, direct quotes from the transcripts detailing the participants' experiences were thematically coded and analysed. Themes emerging from the data were systematically identified through recurring patterns. Data were grouped under distinct themes identified, and these became the key headings guiding data presentation.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, especially given the vulnerabilities and sensitivities of the participants. Researchers obtained informed consent from all participants. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to anonymise data and protect the participants' identities. The research design was guided by the principle of do no harm and sensitivity to cultural dynamics. Furthermore, clearance was obtained from local authority leadership to ensure compliance with research ethics. Finally, ethical clearance was obtained from the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT's institutional review board and granted under clearance number (2023-IRB72).

Presentation and Discussion of Results

This section presents findings of displaced women's lived experiences within FLWS systems in Tsholotsho. The results are presented under four major themes, broadly speaking, to highlight how gender and structural inequalities shape women's experiences and agency in FLWS.

Gender and structural inequalities

Flood-induced displacement in Tsholotsho was driven by Tropical Cyclone Dineo in 2017. Findings revealed that women faced disproportionate risks and burdens because of pre-existing gendered inequalities that were aggravated by the disaster. Due to the patriarchy, women were excluded from decision-making processes pertaining to their relocation. After relocation, they continued to be sidelined, as decisions were made through traditional leadership structures dominated by men. A 45-year-old MaSidambe narrated it this way:

When the floods hit, they didn't just wash away our homes; they also took away our voices. We had no say in our relocation; we just had to comply (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

To reinforce this, a 36-year-old single mother stated:

[...] we are not just victims of climate change – we are victims of a system that sees and refers to us as abesintwana [children]. They plan without us, and forget us when it matters most (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

The preceding narratives illustrate how women's experiences during crisis are shaped by pre-existing sociocultural gender norms, similar to findings in Ungar (2011). Furthermore, drawing on intersectionality, women's experiences encompass not only multiple intersectional identities but also autonomy, social context, power relations, and gendered inequalities (Hopkins, 2017). Furthermore, the women struggled to reconcile the acts of exclusion, which contrasted with the training their community received on gender equality. Hence, they felt that their participation in such programmes was a mere ceremonial gesture that had failed to change patriarchal attitudes and practices. It emerged that women who took a stand were labelled as defiant, not only by men but sometimes by other women too. This illustrates that women themselves are sometimes complicit in sustaining hegemonic gender discourses anchored in patriarchy, mirroring views by Knowles (2021), O'Connor, and Drury (1999). Based on intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989), we can infer how hegemonic conformity affects women based on their gender identity, which is mediated by other intersectional factors, such as culture and social context. This is further demonstrated in MaNkomo's narrative as follows:

[...] you may be in a committee as a woman, but you have no power, it is the men who will make decisions; you are just a ceremonial position holder [...] (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

MaSithole reiterated the same, noting that :

[...] it is even worse after we were displaced, our men do not even have a say because labo ngabantu bokuza njengathi [they are also foreign to the host communities like us] (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Similarly, MaSibanda narrated that:

[...] we hold the community together, yet we're never seen as leaders (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

In addition to their exclusion, the displaced women expressed that their vulnerabilities were further exacerbated during displacement, a finding that converges with Synnestved et al. (2025)'s research on Mozambique. In this context, they maintained their roles as primary caregivers, sustaining household stability with limited options. For example, the women indicated that they could not engage in productive livelihoods in the host communities because they lacked access to essential resources, such as land. Yet, they were still expected to fulfil their reproductive roles, ensuring that their families were fed, children continued to go to school, and they were in good health. MaSikhosana narrated:

It is difficult being a woman here; we have nothing to our name, we feel like outsiders, yet we are natives to Tsholotsho (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

The foregoing narrative has significant implications for the just transition for women in displacement contexts (see Orsatti and Dinale, 2024; Hovil, 2012). For instance, what transitions are needed to address the sociocultural and economic inequalities impacting marginalised genders in climate-affected communities?

Similarly, Sinikiwe expressed that:

I am the mother. When the children are hungry, they come to me, and I must ensure they are fed. It is all on me, not the father (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Evidently, displaced women in Tsholotsho must navigate disrupted livelihoods, unpaid care work, and limited access to resources. Conformity to hegemonic femininity (see Schippers, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) means that women continue to fulfil their culturally assigned roles even when it is difficult to do so. Beliefs and norms shape the systemic disparities built into communal life, governing people's ways of life and coexistence in society. MaDlamini stated:::

I am dreaming of a Tsholotsho where women are not just survivors of displacement but also crafters of recovery. We don't want pity – we want power (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Women, livelihoods and food (in)security

Considering the structural inequalities presented above, our findings indicated that women's vulnerabilities in Tsholotsho were intensified by displacement. During our interactions, we found that displacement disrupted food systems and had an adverse impact on their livelihoods. Similar to findings in Chidakwa et al (2020), our results show that women's livelihoods were rooted in small-scale agriculture, small livestock rearing, and informal trade along the food systems. Key highlights illustrate that they did not merely lose their homes, but ruptured their everyday systems of survival, production, livelihoods and dignity.

Hence, Cyclone Dineo left them more vulnerable, as indicated below:

Displacement didn't just take my home, it took my livelihood too (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Before the floods, I sold vegetables at the market. Now, I sell nothing. The relocation site has no land to grow them (Female IDP FGD participant).

Elokitshini [in the location], there is no land. They gave us houses but not land. How are we supposed to rebuild our lives without land? (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Again, these narratives demonstrate the intersection of disaster with existing vulnerabilities, and crucially, how the effects can be profound for women who live on the margins of society, even before disaster strikes. Drawing from Crenshaw (1989)'s intersectional theory, the findings are key to understanding how gender roles and intersecting identities create a unique set of vulnerabilities for women. Given that women's livelihoods were directly linked to their access to land through men for agricultural production, participants narrated how they were displaced from fertile clay soils that had previously yielded good crops with adequate rainfall. However, after displacement, they were left in precarity because they no longer had access to produce food, which disrupted their livelihood strategies and compromised household food security (see also Mamba et al, 2025). Consequently, they had to depend on food aid. Although

the changing rainfall patterns had previously affected them, they could still make enough to sustain themselves and, during good years, produce surpluses for sale. Some of the women narrated:

How can we talk about food security when we can't even grow our food here? Women know how to feed families; we just need the means. (MaNdiweni, Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Esidakeni sethu [in our clay soils], we could produce enough to feed our families. Yes, we struggled with the erratic rains, but we never failed to harvest, especially with the drought-resistant varieties (MaNgwana, Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

[...] it really gets tough, I give the children my portion and pretend I'm not hungry. That's what mothers do (Sitholile, Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Notions of maternal sacrifices are prevalent in these narratives, as women had to sacrifice their nutritional needs for their children. This is not surprising given the social and moral expectations placed on women, essentially implying that they should prioritise children's well-being over their own needs. Summarily, motherhood expects women to self-sacrifice for the good of their families. To engage with this further, this may be classified as an act of agency and resilience, yet at the same time, it brings into question practices of agency and resilience, insofar as the very same acts, done out of desperate necessity, are harmful to women. This in itself suggests the need to address women's multiple axes of disadvantage that stem from their intersectional identities in patriarchal societies (see Steinfield & Holt, 2020). From the foregoing, it is evident that displacement in Tsholotsho not only resulted in a loss of homes, but it also disrupted age-long gendered food and livelihood systems long sustained by women. As food (in)security increased due to a lack of access to land, compounded by the adverse impacts of climate change, women were forced to navigate survival with shrinking resources and expanding responsibilities, as custodians of food systems before and after disasters.

Women and access to land

In Tsholotsho, land is central to livelihoods. However, it is a patriarchal community where women do not directly own land but can access it through their male counterparts - fathers, husbands, uncles, brothers or other relatives (see Dzvimbo et al, 2018; Gaidzanwa, 2016). Yet, women contribute significantly to the labour of the land that they have only secondary access to. Land is closely tied to their livelihoods, as they utilise it for food production (Chidakwa et al., 2020; Sithole et al., 2021), in accordance with their gender-assigned roles. Displacement added to their pre-existing disadvantages, which excluded them from direct land ownership. From this perspective, we found that climate change is a compounding factor in the risks faced by women in Tsholotsho. This is exemplified in the narratives below:

I mean, yes, even before we were displaced, we did not have land in our own names; we accessed it through our fathers and husbands, but we could use it to produce food for the household (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Although women could not own land prior to displacement, it worsened their situations by disrupting their communal ways of organising land ownership and access. Both men and women were exposed to the impacts of Cyclone Dineo. However, comparatively, women were disproportionately affected due to their gender and other intersectional identities, subordinating them to patriarchy. For instance, their vulnerabilities intensified because even

men who had owned land before displacement, and had thereby granted women indirect access, lost their land once they were displaced. Participants narrated that:

[...] when the floods displaced us, it meant even those through whom we accessed land no longer have land in the host community (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

We were told the houses we were allocated in the host communities were for safety only. If we want land for farming, we should go back to where we came from (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Without protected access to land, their livelihoods, autonomy, and ability to recover were compromised. In this sense, displacement compounded women's existing vulnerabilities and further marginalised them.

Women and water resources

Access to water resources was identified as a significant challenge, attributed to the impacts of climate change over the years (Mathe et al., 2015). Given that the women in Tsholotsho were responsible for sourcing and managing the water used in their households, they bore the brunt. Findings further revealed that water scarcity has led to tensions between displaced and host communities (see Ndlovu et al., 2024). Some of the women put it this way:

There are a few functional boreholes in this area, and people from the host communities tell us they are theirs. We are forced to remain in the queues for extended hours while they get water first. They do not care even if it's an old or pregnant woman (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

The host community rations the amount of water we can get per household a day. There have been instances of serious fights at the water points; it can get bad (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

Sometimes we can be sent home without water because the host community will tell us that the time for fetching water for household use has passed, and it is now time for the livestock. Dams dry up fast, so they have to pump for the livestock at the boreholes (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

My sister, witchcraft, is real in this area. You may suffer severely or even die just over water. Sometimes we choose peace out of fear (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

The illustrations above demonstrate how challenges related to water resources can spark tensions and competition, exposing women to violence, which highlights how climate change compounds existing vulnerabilities (Goodman & Baudu, 2023; Knutsen & Pedderson, 2024). For example, when the participants express how they are excluded from accessing water in the host community, she refers to pregnant and elderly women. Whilst all women face the same tensions, the impacts on elderly or pregnant women are intense. This is where we identify a key strength in intersectionality, as it has allowed us to analyse the intersectional factors of displaced women, while also helping the study identify unique and elevated risks among the different subgroups (Versey, 2021). This analysis shows that not all women share similarities in either privilege or disadvantage. Therefore, water insecurity intensified women's daily burdens, further deepening structural inequalities in Tsholotsho. However,

this situation should not be attributed solely to climate change; rather, it reflects the complex interplay of socio-economic and cultural factors that shape how individuals are differently affected by crises, depending on their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Based on their narratives, climate change impacts disrupt peace and social cohesion in communities. In this case, the host community controlled displaced women's access to water by gatekeeping the limited water supply. This indicates how climate change impacts on water availability compound risks in communities. Moreover, the findings reflect how the intersections of climate change, gender and other social identities disproportionately affect women and girls, owing to existing social inequalities (Choudhary, 2024; Dutta, 2025). From this perspective, the study positions intersectionality as a useful approach to understand inequalities, not only from a gender binary of women and men but from a broader perspective that considers the interplay of multiple intersecting social identities (Birchall, 2021). Therefore, gender and cultural norms shape how women are affected by and respond to displacement, both individually and collectively.

Women's agency and resilience in displacement

The foregoing narratives lay bare the precarity of women's livelihoods that are dependent on FLWS, more so for women whose socioeconomic and cultural positioning disadvantages them more than men. However, despite these challenges, the women did not succumb to victimhood; rather, they demonstrated resilience in facing their challenges. The following narratives capture women's daily practices of agency:

We started a small vegetable garden near the borehole. There are challenges, but we keep pushing. We get some income from selling, it is better than just waiting and complaining (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

We formed a small group to save money, a stokvel, and used the money to start small businesses. It's not much, but it's at least ours. (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

[...] we are not just victims of displacement; we are workers, farmers, traders, and caregivers. All we need are opportunities, and until our livelihoods are fully restored, we remain trapped in survival mode (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

At first, I used to complain that we had no land, but I later realised that I had to do something. Of course, our original fields are very far from here, but we decided we would rather walk the distance than complain. No land was coming to us. So, we had to go back to the land (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

[...] during the rainy season, we women stay with the children here in the host community so that they can attend school. So, as soon as they go to school, we walk to the fields, +/-6km one way. We just make sure to be back home on time to prepare food for the children when they come back from school, especially the primary school-going ones. (Female IDP FGD participant, Tsholotsho, 2024).

These findings confirm that displaced women were able to exercise their agency during the crisis. The study has thus made some progress in enhancing our understanding of intersectionality in the context of climate change. Notably, through this approach, we have unpacked how power structures and social categories are both reinforced and challenged in times of crisis (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013). They continued to rebuild their livelihoods through innovative ways. In so doing, these women continued to fulfil their socially assigned roles while challenging dominant narratives of women as passive victims. These results are consistent with other studies that have shown similar trends where women display

remarkable agentic capacities despite the complex constraints. For example, in Bangladesh, various studies have shown that women contribute significantly to climate adaptation and grassroots innovation (Huq et al, 2023; Khalil et al, 2019; Tanjeela & Rutherford, 2018). Taken together, these studies give insights into women's agency, despite their disadvantaged position.

Conclusions

This study has shown that gendered power dynamics and intersectional vulnerabilities impact women's agency and shape their resilience. Our findings indicate that displacement exacerbated deep-seated gendered structural inequalities reflected through patriarchy and access to land, food and water insecurity. Moreover, women's roles are linked to climate-sensitive resources, which worsen pre-existing vulnerabilities. These roles place women as frontline responders to climate change impacts, yet they are often treated as passive victims, with traditional male-dominated leadership structures sidelining their voices. Their responsibilities in crisis plunge them into extreme vulnerability as they are expected to maintain their reproductive and productive roles with limited to no access to resources pertinent to their livelihoods.

Furthermore, results show that, although women do not own land directly, they access it through male relatives (fathers, husbands, or brothers). Although the patriarchal system of land ownership disadvantaged women, displacement fractured communal land access systems, stripping women of the secondary access they previously relied on. This is because after displacement, neither women nor the men they accessed land through had rights to land, thereby worsening their vulnerabilities. Their livelihoods, rooted in small-scale agriculture, were adversely impacted, severing access to income and heightening food insecurity.

Despite these vulnerabilities, women continue to exercise their agency through various practices of resilience, adapting to their displacement. They evolve in response to their changing circumstances and activate their agency, which increases their adaptive capacities despite the persistent vulnerabilities. They leveraged the same traditional and cultural norms that confined them to caregiving and household roles to build resilience and manage resources effectively. For instance, the women initiated small-scale communal vegetable gardens, savings groups (stokvels), and informal businesses, creating alternative livelihood strategies to mitigate their challenges. Although commendable, these acts of resilience also highlight the burdens placed on women to adapt without adequate structural support. Therefore, without systemic change and secure access to resources, women's efforts remain survivalist, worsening their vulnerabilities in the name of resilience. Insights from this paper can inform policy responses and stimulate further research on the impacts of climate change and associated risks, such as displacement, resource scarcity, and social tensions.

While the study offers valuable insights into the intersectional experiences of displaced women, its findings are limited by a small sample size and a focus on a single location (Tsholotsho), making them non-generalizable. Future research should adopt a broader, more inclusive approach, for example, by exploring the experiences of men, aligning with scholars who advocate for expanding intersectionality frameworks to include male perspectives (Cristofferson & Emejulu, 2019; Wong et al., 2017; Bowleg, 2008).

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