

# Revisiting and Rethinking the Agency of Women in Sustainable Rural Development in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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## **Abstract**

Debates about how gender differences and the patriarchy have relegated some women in many developing societies to domestic unpaid roles (mothers, homemakers and nurturers) are not new. Such socio-culturally defined roles restrict women's effective participation in wider socio-economic developmental activities. However, thinking in terms of development, the 'tide' seems to now be turning. Women now, at least in theory, play a central role in human development plans and programmes portrayed by their benefactors (governmental and non-governmental agencies) as gender-sensitive, inclusive and sustainable. This paper focuses on the authenticity of claims of women inclusivity, full participation, and sustainability made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) regarding community development programmes funded and supported by them (NGOs) in the Raymond Mhlaba and Ngqushwa Local Municipalities in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. A three-year, multi-method study of NGO-funded sustainable rural development projects in selected communities in the region found that women played pivotal roles in the design, implementation and sustenance of the selected projects, thus making important contributions to food security in the households of project members. The deep level of female involvement in the projects brings out robust testimony to the sponsors' claims of inclusivity. However, the study found that the supported projects epitomised what is termed a 'transformation paradox', as they were regarded by certain segments of the study communities as 'women's jobs'; that is, they were projects in which men did not, for cultural reasons, ordinarily participate. Besides, the sustainability question remained debateable, as some of the women participants were still economically dependent on welfare grants provided by the state despite their full involvement in the projects.

**Keywords:** Full participation, inclusive, rural development, gender sensitivity, sustainability

## **Introduction**

The predominance of patriarchal ideologies and practices in some African rural communities has historically relegated women to the domestic roles of being mothers, homemakers, and nurturers. Often, these patriarchally defined gender roles have restricted rural women's freedoms, choices, and rights (Cornwall 2003). They have also affected rural women's participation in matters that affect their own personal development as well as local political and socio-economic development issues. However, in recent times, recognition of women's agency in rural development has gained traction. Evidence now shows an increasing acceptance that women are active agents beyond the household, as they are contributing to local economic development, governance, politics, health, environmental and educational wellbeing for their communities (Bayeh 2016).

While the idea of participation is not new in development discourse and practice, there has been a renewed and sustained focus on the active participation of women in different facets of human development (Cornwall 2000). Many African governments, including that of South Africa, have placed gender equity and women's active participation in all decision-making structures in politics, the economy, health, education, agriculture, environment, sports, and culture as a human developmental priority. The extent to which different African countries have been successful in practically achieving this ideal varies due to many country-specific political and socio-economic considerations. For example, countries like Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, and Burundi (World Economic Forum 2020) have made significant strides in increasing the active participation of women and their representation in competitive politics, government, and the economy and overall have improved their gender gap index. Other countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo and Mali (World Economic Forum 2020) have struggled to address this gender gap, given their political, economic and religious contexts.

At a local level, especially in rural African contexts, women's active participation in human development programmes and projects remains a subject of enquiry and debate. Ample evidence has shown that many women

in some African countries remain at the periphery of development intervention conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation, due to various reasons. Even though their governments are aware of poor female participation, they have not done much to address this anomaly besides the usual tokenism and political rhetoric. To address this human development gap some NGOs have designed programmes and projects that place women's agency at the epicentre of driving rural development. These NGOs are at the forefront of gender equity advocacy, specifically with regard to the advancement of women's equal active participation in rural development. Their advocacy and developmental practice are rooted in participatory development approaches, which are about the direct involvement of local people (regardless of gender) from programme/project baseline needs to assessment, conceptualisation, resource mobilisation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Chambers & Conway 1991; Scoones 2015) for the benefit and development of local people. Their argument, which is emphasised here, is that developmental initiatives are more effective when all stakeholders, especially local citizens, and marginalised groups within communities are actively involved in the planning, execution and monitoring of development programmes (Oxfam 2014). Within this context, this study contributes to this field by examining the specific character of rural women's involvement in NGO-supported socio-economic development programmes in the Raymond Mhlaba and Ngqushwa Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. It questions women's participation through an assessment of their specific roles, decision-making power, and local political matrices in these development programmes. Beyond understanding the participatory level of rural women in these development programmes, the paper also explores enduring factors that militate against their active participation and the local community's embedded strategies they have devised to counter these obstacles.

## **Objectives of the Study**

This study seeks to investigate the full participation and inclusivity of women in projects supported by NGOs in rural community development programmes. It further explores the factors that militate against the participation of women and strategies used to counter these obstacles. Emphasis is placed on rural women because the struggles and impacts of

development on rural women differ from those experienced by women in urban areas. Substantial evidence suggests that rural women have consistently been neglected in the processes of development and there is also further evidence that developmental policies and projects are formulated without the involvement of rural women in most African countries.

Excluding women in processes of rural development is a counter-productive activity as they are the most affected by social issues as they carry the brunt of lack of services in the rural areas. Women are the ones who constitute the majority of the poor and who make up the largest population in rural areas. They need to be included in matters of development such as sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods, which aim to help poor people achieve lasting livelihood improvements (sustainable livelihoods), measured by using poverty indicators that they themselves define. In order to achieve sustainable rural development, rural women are necessary for transformation and, thus, should be active participants in local development, not just for their own benefit but also that of their communities. However, the main question is, are they truly and actively involved?

## **Revisiting the Participation of Women in Development Planning and Practice**

The ideal and practice of participation is not new in developmental discourse. At a conceptual level it holds the promise of inclusion, the creation of spaces for the less vocal and less powerful to exercise their voices as well as expand their choices (Cornwall 2000). Over the years, its emphasis has shifted from beneficiary participation to wider issues such as rights and the need to address equity issues (Cornwall 2000). The importance and impact of participation ideals and practice are demonstrated by how it is central to the policies and interventions of multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, African Development Bank, Development Bank of Southern Africa, and other NGOs, down to community-based organisations. In these development institutions, full community participation and the active involvement of all stakeholders are intrinsic to their programming and seen as a progressive ideal and practice for bettering all, including women (Cornwall 2000). The common narrative in these institutions is that for development interventions to be effective they have to be inclusive, locally relevant, and speak to the livelihoods, capabilities and

vision of rural change agents, which include women and youth. Oxfam (2014) emphasises this point, which sees inclusive development as a ‘pro-poor’ approach that equally values and incorporates the contributions of all stakeholders, including the marginalised groups, in addressing issues of human development. This implies that everyone in any community should be an active participant in local development. The ideal situation is that, through the use of participatory approaches that promote inclusiveness, there should be an increase in effectiveness, efficiency, self-reliance and sustainability of development programmes (CEDPA 2015). Furthermore, widespread thinking is that inclusive participation and gender equity discourse and practice will produce positive results, especially the encouragement of the active involvement of marginalised groups, such as women, in human development programmes (Akerkar 2001).

However, the reality, in some African rural communities is far removed from this idealisation. For example, Bock (2014) notes that few rural development plans specifically address gender issues, and those that do only include some separate feminine projects for women. He adds that little is done to address the systemic features of gender inequality in development planning to realise inclusive development that addresses the needs of all social groups, including women. Further, despite vociferous debates about the full participation of all stakeholders, in reality, many rural women’s voices, especially in Africa, remain marginalised in developmental planning and practice, as only the voices of the vocal few are heard (Cornwall 2003). Most rural women’s voices fall on deaf ears, and thus their interests are marginalised, despite pretences of participatory processes (Akerkar 2001; Cornwall 2003; Silny *et al.* 2015) in rural development interventions. Although rural women are already highly active as producers and entrepreneurs, they are more concentrated in subsistence-level agriculture and marginal activities in the shadow economy (African Development Bank 2015). This marginalisation brings into question the inclusivity claims of participatory approaches. After so many years of pro-poor inclusive developmental programming, it is surprising why so many women in rural Africa are still subjects and victims of gender discrimination and alienation. It is precisely because of these failures that participatory approaches are criticised, rightfully so, for being co-opted and providing lip service to the interests of the most marginalised sections, such as women, that they claim to represent (Cornwall 2003).

Over the years, these debates on the gender limitations of participatory approaches have crystallised into specific schools of thought, namely women in development (WID), women and development (WAD) and gender and development (GAD) etc. Boserup's (1970) WID approach explored the existential conditions of women in the process of economic and social growth in the global South. In the context of the ongoing struggle for women's rights, Boserup argues that the specialised division of labour associated with development programmes undermines and neglects the value of the work and status of women. As a result, women are deprived of an equal share of the power, social benefits and economic gains derived from their work. To address this mistake, Boserup argues that efficient development can only be achieved through the integration of women into existing developmental processes. Strategies for achieving this efficient development includes developing and implementing so-called women's projects, increasing the income of women and their remunerated productivity levels (Collins 2013). This means that WID assumes that increasing local women's involvement in the market economy and project activities would not only enhance their active participation in development, but also boost their socio-economic status.

WID, particularly Boserup's (1970) seminal work, ignited a rethink of development programming by global North development and humanitarian agencies. For example, in 1973, the US Congress passed a Bill that required that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recognise the rights, choices and aspirations of women through ensuring their active participation in development programmes. Therefore, to an extent, the WID approach partly motivated the increasing integration of women in the workforce, increased their level of remunerated productivity, and generally improved some women's lives (Collins 2013). It can also be argued that the approach affected making women more visible in development planning and practices.

However, WID's emphasis on integrating women into existing development processes and its unrelenting pursuance of the liberal project of inserting women into conventional developmental activities was one of its main weaknesses. The integration and insertion of women were superficial as it failed to address the root causes of gender discrimination and marginalisation that prevented women's full participation in the development of their societies. Further, its proposal to incorporate women in development

activities failed to recognise that women are already involved in reproductive, productive and communal activities. At the forefront of this criticism were advocates for the Women and Development (WAD) paradigm. They argued that women were already over-involved in local development, especially poor women (Akerkar 2001). In addition, women's labour was already a part of the economy, although not necessarily recognised as such or remunerated (Akerkar 2001). In other words, women were active in developmental processes, but on unequal terms with their male counterparts. Hence increasing their involvement in development projects and the market, as suggested by WID, meant increasing their labour burden (Akerkar 2001). Further, it would be futile to intensify their involvement without a corresponding increasing access to resources or decision-making power.

Further, the WAD approach shifted focus to the patriarchy and capitalism as the foundations upon which the genesis of gender discrimination and the marginalisation of women should be understood. One of its main arguments was that women have been a part of the development process from the beginning. Its point of departure is that women have been integrated into their societies and that the work they do inside and outside the household is central to the maintenance of those societies. However, that integration only served to sustain the existing international structures of inequality. In summary, the WAD perspective assumed that the position of women would improve if structures became more equitable (Rathgeber 1991).

The weaknesses of WID and WAD resulted in the emergence of a new school of thought, Gender and Development (GAD), which explored the social relations and interactions between men and women and how socio-political contexts constructed masculinity and femininity (Thibault & Geadah 2004). GAD focuses on the patriarchy and its resultant female subordination effects, further arguing that mainstream development practices encourage gendered inequalities due to its patriarchal foundations. Based on this premise, it changed the focus of women's participation in development programmes from increased efficiency to greater equity and empowerment for women (Thibault & Geadah 2004). It engaged with the diversity of men and women's experiences of power and powerlessness by bringing a gender perspective to bear on policies and the experiences that maintain or exacerbate the marginalisation of women (Cornwall 2000:5). At the epicentre of GAD was that gender, the social roles and responsibilities of men and women, differentiation continues to subordinate women and gives

them secondary or inferior roles to men. Owing to gender roles, development affects men and women differently and both have different impacts on development programmes (Thibault & Geadah 2004). They also benefit and suffer unequally because, although they are interdependent, men can constrain or expand women's options. This is although both men and women create and maintain society, and hence should be jointly involved in identifying problems and solutions if the interests of their community as a whole are to be achieved (Thibault & Geadah 2004).

GAD not only describes and critiques the subjugation of women, but goes further to advance an argument about what they can do or what needs to be done to break this bondage. It thus challenges the status quo of power and imagines a situation where decision-making and the benefits of development are equitably distributed and there is gender neutrality (Collins 2013). The social, economic and political relations (rooted in patriarchy) between men and women should be transformed, made equitable, and make women-decision makers in development planning and practices. Such a biased focus on women is justified, according to GAD, because they have historically, for centuries, been disadvantaged. In essence, GAD tries finding solutions to women's challenges in development planning and practices and imagines a more equitable society.

Notwithstanding their weaknesses, all three paradigms (WID, WAD, and GAD) place women's rights, choices, aspirations, and agency at the epicentre of their problematisation of conventional development planning and practices. They are concerned with enabling women to gain a voice in the development process (Cornwall 2000). Further, they submit that the submersion of women in 'the community' covers the distinctiveness of women's experiences and claims to inclusivity quaver when questions about who specifically participates, makes decisions and benefits from participatory interventions, are asked (Cornwall 2000). They also echo each other in critiquing the role of development practitioners in practices, as they share the view that several community development interventions have historically been implemented, with little or no engagement with intended beneficiaries, particularly poor women. This externally sponsored development also involves the application of external development models and concepts, especially from the global North, as a basis for informing and assessing women's participation in development processes. This approach is not only an ill-informed approach to local development implementation but



an antithesis to genuine participatory development which transforms conventional development into a process of engagement with and by the local people rather than using expert knowledge to dictate interventions.

The participatory development debate and practice have evolved to include gender-sensitivity (awareness). This gender-aware participatory development paradigm explicitly questions the naturalised assumptions that associate women with weakness and the poor with ignorance (Cornwall 2000). It engages power and differences with the goal of confronting and transforming inequalities in development actions. Despite its theoretical orientation differences with participatory rural appraisal (PRA), they both emphasise the particularity of local lived experiences and personal experience (Cornwall 2000) as variables that guide and inform any local development intervention. This gender-sensitive participatory development approach focuses on enabling local people to articulate and solve their own issues in their own ways (Cornwall 2000). This point is emphasised by Bock (2014), who argues that gender-mainstreaming needs to address the disadvantaged position of women, support female employment, and take women's needs into consideration to enhance rural development sustainability.

Despite all the above approaches, theories and claims of inclusiveness that come with the advocacy of participation in development, the language and practice of participation are obscure in the world of women, their needs, and their contributions to development, making equitable participatory development an elusive goal (Guijt & Shah 2008:1). Further, rather than creating requisite spaces for effective participation in development, gender mainstreaming has in some cases meant a little more than funding separate small projects for women (Bock 2014). This article engages with these contradictions in rural areas of the Eastern Cape. It specifically focuses on local rural development projects and explores what, when, how, where, and whether women are active stakeholders in local development projects. Further, their negotiation of participation spaces and articulation of power and the difference in these development interventions are examined.

## **Women and Rural Development in South Africa**

Like most African countries, South Africa still faces challenges in terms of female empowerment, with particular reference to the development of women in rural areas. Rural women are faced with more challenges compared

to their urban counterparts, in terms of a lack of socio-economic development and infrastructure, lack of opportunities for employment and a lack of income generation. Moreover, rural women are faced with limited access to education, skills training and access to resources. Overall, these challenges have a huge impact on their quality of life; hence, the need to empower them to be able to change these circumstances and improve their lives. It is for this reason that the issue of women empowerment has been central in government policies, regulatory reform, and programmatic intervention. These policies, reforms and programmes are an effort to make sure that rural women are part and parcel of the country's development and are in a position that enables them to improve the socio-political and socio-economic conditions of their communities. Although so much has been said and done about empowering rural women, there is still a long way to go before equality, full inclusion, and gender mainstreaming are achieved.

However, South Africa has progressed in a number of areas to improve the position and socio-economic status of women in general. This progress includes political representation, education, health, and local leadership positions in communities. In this study, progress has been observed in women breaking barriers of patriarchal practises that have been holding them back from holding leadership positions.

## **Research Setting and Methodology**

A three-year, multi-method study was conducted in three purposively selected rural communities, namely Mxumbu, Dikidikane (in Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality), and Ndlambe (in Ngqushwa Local Municipality) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality is a largely rural municipality. Most of its population are indigent; 62% live in the villages and farms, while a minority, 38%, live in the urban areas (Raymond Mhlaba IDP 2020/21). Women, children and the elderly dominate its population, since many men have migrated for employment opportunities in mines, towns and cities. These population demographics mean that women and the youth are the ones working on the land. Agriculture is the main source of employment in this area (Raymond Mhlaba Municipality IDP 2020/21). Dikidikane and Mxumbu are two of the many villages under the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality. Some Dikidikane community members are running a poultry project, while those

in Mxumbu village are implementing a horticulture production project. Both projects were, at various stages, supported by an international NGO, World Vision, and South Africa's National Department of Social Development.

The third research community, Ndlambe, is located in the Ngqushwa Local Municipality. This municipal area is predominantly rural, with 56% of the population residing in the rural hinterland and only 44% residing in the urban areas (Ngqushwa IDP 2020/21). The rate of unemployment in the municipality is currently sitting at 31% (Ngqushwa IDP 2020/21). Agriculture is one of the main sources of livelihood and is a main means of generating income. To enhance agricultural productivity, the municipality technically supports agricultural enterprises under its local economic development programme (Ngqushwa IDP 2020/21). Many Ndlambe community members are involved in a household food plots programme and a large-scale pomegranate fruit plantation, both of which rely on a local NGO, Ruliv, for technical support.

In these three communities, community members, who were active in the aforementioned projects and programmes, were purposively identified as the study population. In addition, simple random sampling was used to select some community members who were not project/programme members to explore the impact of the projects/programmes in the broader community. A household survey was done among those community members who were not project/programme members. Among the project/programme members, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, focus-group discussions, and a mini survey were used as data collection techniques. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with expert staff from the two NGOs (World Vision and Ruliv) involved in local community development and empowerment.

## **Women in Local Agro-Programmes: Participation, Benefits and Challenges**

Patriarchal ideologies have reigned in these rural communities for a long time. Traditional, political and local leadership positions were mainly occupied by males, with women excluded from such crucial positions just because they were assumed incapable of leading. It was viewed as 'wrong' to have women in any leadership positions when men were present. Women were only leaders in their own 'projects', which excluded men. Although

some of the issues mainly affected women, such as sourcing water for their families in areas without taps and boreholes and collecting firewood in areas without electricity, they were not given the space to voice their concerns on how they should be assisted; yet they were still expected to provide these basic needs to their families. It has taken a long time for women's voices to be heard in these rural communities, let alone for women to be allowed to hold leadership positions and make decisions affecting their communities. However, advocacy on the equality and participation of women has finally reached these communities and some changes have begun to occur.

In all three communities, more women than men were actively involved in the local community development and empowerment programmes. The tomato production enterprise in Mxumbu village had 35 members. Out of these, 20% (n=7) were males while 80% (n=28) were females. The Dikidikane village poultry initiative had 40 members, comprising 13% (n=5) males and 87% (n=35) females. Out of the 180 active programme members of Ndlambe, 44% (n=80) were males and 56% (n=100) were females. These figures mean that out of 255 members of all three agricultural programmes, only 36% (n=92) were males and the remaining 64% (n=163) were females. These statistics tell a positive story about women's participation in local development programmes in these rural communities.

The extent to which active participation in these agricultural programmes directly benefits (materially and financially) women and their households is mixed, perhaps, and debateable. Indeed, many of them have initiated or joined the programmes to meet their basic needs and improve their livelihoods. True to this assertion, many in the vegetable and food plots were directly benefiting as they had access to daily basic food requirements. As two vegetable farmers further explained,

*Our tomato project is really helping us now, us as women had problems with what to cook for our families but since we started this project, we have various vegetables, and we have something to cook now. (Mxumbu project member)*

Another member also expressed the same feeling,

*Not only is it us as project members benefitting but the whole village and even the neighbouring villages rely on us for vegetables. We have*

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*given life to our communities; no-one ever goes to bed on an empty stomach now. (Mxumbu project member)*

Similarly, those into food plots harvested significant quantities of maize for their own household consumption.

*We are very grateful to Ruliv for these food plots because as it is, we grow our own maize and other crops and we stopped buying from the farms. At least our social grant money can be used for other items and not maize. (Ndlambe respondent)*

Echoing the same sentiments, one local leader of Ndlambe added,

*As a leader in the community I can see changes in people's livelihoods. Everyone is busy with their plots in the mornings, and they are reaping what they are sowing because their plots are producing enough maize for them. Some even have some surplus to sell. (Local leader Ndlambe Village)*

These testimonies, which mirror those of the majority (n=29 in Mxumbu; n=31, Dikidikana, n=100 in Ndlambe), confirm that women and their household members materially benefit in food for household consumption from the agricultural programmes. They can thus afford three relatively balanced meals per day, as noted by some of the participants, who mentioned that before these programmes, they barely had any food for their families. Although they remain subsistence farmers, the ability to feed themselves from their own farm production activities confirms their agency and is evidence of how they use local assets to improve their food access and livelihoods in general. Further, the vegetable programme is donating produce to indigent and elderly members of the community. Local schools are also occasional recipients of this benevolence. This humanitarian act to the needy by the programme members speaks to how social capital (Putman 1995) is embedded in this community. As Putman adds, 'interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric'. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks, and the relationships of trust and tolerance that can be involved can, it is argued, bring great benefits to people (Putman 1995).

However, besides satisfying domestic food consumption needs, all three agricultural production programmes were not profitable income-generating initiatives. While all programme members invested labour and time in the production activities with the hope of increasing surplus outputs, this effort was not, however, realised due to many reasons. First, the scale (sheer size) of the programmes was not large enough or designed for outputs more than required for subsistence. Secondly, farmers' capital investment in inputs (seed, fertiliser and pesticides) was inadequate to increase production to match their profit-making ambitions. Consequently, there were miniscule financial returns from all three programmes. For example, members of the poultry and vegetables programmes disclosed that their monetary income was R1 500 (approximately US\$100) per member per annum. Such a small annual profit is not a good return of investment by any measure. As a result, some of the women participating in the programmes were still economically dependent on social welfare grants provided by the state, despite their full involvement in the projects. However, seen from a poor household perspective, no matter how little these annual returns are, they contribute disposable income for basic consumption and utility needs.

As alluded to above, there was a predominance of women in the three programmes. Women dominated the leadership echelons in all three programmes. The chairpersons of all three were women; two of them had males as deputies, while the other had a female deputy. The composition of these leadership structures is an indication of the gender and power transformation that is occurring in these three rural communities. The leadership of rural development programmes is no longer exclusively for men, as women now occupy some of the decision-making positions. While this notion cannot be naively characterised as a complete overhaul in gender power relations in these rural communities, it does provide a glimpse of how male and female power dynamics are being altered.

However, beneath this veneer of changing gender power relations, a patriarchal narrative pervades some male community members' perceptions of the agro-based development programmes. Many male respondents viewed the agricultural programmes as feminine and 'designed for women', hence their limited participation in them. As one of them further explained,

*I am not a member of the local project because I consider growing vegetables and tomatoes a job for women. Men do not spend the day*

*in the garden but out in the veld looking after their livestock.*  
(Respondent 5, Mxumbu)

Another one added,

*My reason for not participating in the project in our community is simple, looking after chickens is for women and children who spend the days at home. As a man I cannot be seen feeding chickens every day and expect people to respect me.* (Respondent 13, Dikidikana)

With minor variations across the three communities, the above views depict the prevalent attitudes many men in the three rural communities have regarding these agro-programmes. This attitude partly explains their limited participation in them, although the agricultural produce and income derived also directly benefit the male household members. Further, while these programmes were not designed for women, it is evident that old patriarchal views about the role of women in them, and by extension, in domestic production activities, still persist. This idea suggests that while NGOs have been at the forefront of promoting inclusivity and women's active participation in local development, their efforts are undermined by some men, as shown by the negative attitudes of men discussed here.

The predominance of women in these agricultural programmes also raises points of debate about how NGO programming is changing rural Eastern Cape, creating what can be called the 'transformation paradox'. While NGOs and other civil society organisations have been advocating the inclusion of women in development programmes, the idea has now turned into a transformation paradox. The developmental interventions they fund and technically support have replaced one type of gender asymmetry in rural development, the exclusion of women, with another, the inadvertent exclusion of men, by focusing on community projects that are culturally deemed appropriate for women. This anomaly is precisely because, according to male respondents, local cultural considerations dictate that agricultural production programmes, such as poultry and vegetable farming, are not for self-respecting men. This situation suggests that the popular inclusive participatory approaches promoted by NGOs, governments and multilateral development agencies to development have created a transformation paradox in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, which inadvertently excludes some men's

participation. As a result, local agricultural interventions unintentionally seem like a systematic attempt to abolish the feminisation of rural poverty and entrench the feminisation of rural development interventions.

This feminisation of rural development interventions is antithesis to gender equality in the rural sphere under discussion. Therefore, there is a need to address this unintentional exclusion of men through gender mainstreaming in all rural development programmes in the Eastern Cape. Gender mainstreaming is important, because it provides equal opportunities to everyone and all gender issues are integrated in all levels of society, politics and programmes (OECD 2011). It is achieved when men, women, girls and boys have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society (Sida 2015). Within this context the consideration of cultural and social factors that deter some men from fully participating in rural development programmes should be a priority in Eastern Cape rural development programme designs. Such an approach will ensure the inclusivity of both men and women and lay a firm foundation for the effective utilisation of available human capital for local development.

## **Conclusion**

Women in the Eastern Cape are faced with the challenges that rural women globally face. These challenges include being dominated by men regarding decision-making and a lack of education, resources and skills. These challenges have a huge impact on the quality of their lives. However, women in the rural Eastern Cape have not chosen to sit back and be defined by these challenges, but, have derived means by which they can improve the socio-economic conditions of their communities. First, they have managed to initiate self-help projects despite their lack of education, resources, and skills. With little help from the local government and NGOs, they turned their challenges into success stories and were able to provide the much-needed food for their families. Secondly, these women did not succumb to patriarchal ideologies and gender-prescribed beliefs that their place is in the home. With the little knowledge they had, they sought assistance for their projects from government and NGOs and successfully implemented the projects, thereby improving their socio-economic conditions.

Small- to medium-scale agricultural development in communal



lands in the Eastern Cape contributes positively to local livelihoods. Through their own agency and human capital, coupled with technical and sporadic financial assistance from the provincial government and NGOs, locals are producing various vegetables, maize and poultry. The produce is not only satisfying domestic consumption needs of agricultural programme participants, but also the broader community through seasonal and occasional donations to local schools, the elderly, and indigent individuals. While there is no basis to claim that these programmes are the foundation of participant households' food security, there is enough evidence that shows their positive effect on households' food access. However, this ability to produce enough to eat has not translated for some in the market as there are no commodity surpluses. This inability to increase production beyond consumption needs means that programme participants' households remain subsistence farmers.

Women are central in this communal agricultural production. Contrary to the past where they predominantly provided rudimentary on-farm labour in many rural settings, they are now the main agents driving the farming activities in the communities under discussion. Their roles include leadership, with decision-making power of the agricultural programmes, coordinating input purchases, supply, utilisation and providing on-farm production and harvesting labour. In essence, this view suggests that women are the main catalysts in these agricultural programmes, and by extension, local development. While men are unsystematically excluded from leadership or active participation in these programmes, very few of them are involved, owing to social and cultural factors associated with vegetable and poultry production at a subsistence scale. Consequently, a transformation paradox has emerged in these communities in which men are inadvertently excluded from agricultural programmes with women on the ascendancy. This phenomenon, here called the feminisation of rural development interventions, is controversial because, while it addresses the historical patriarchal exclusion of women in rural development programmes, it unintentionally side-lines men. The phenomenon is an antithesis to gender mainstreaming, which has a clarion call for giving equal chances to everyone and the integration of gender equity at all levels of society and programmes.

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