Capability approach: empowering women through agroforestry in Mwenezi district in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Agroforestry in Mwenezi District, Zimbabwe, is vital for climate adaptation, yet persistent gender disparities limit women's agency in decision-making and resource access. Despite agroforestry's potential, patriarchal norms and institutional barriers disproportionately restrict women's participation, creating a research gap in understanding how structural inequities undermine their capabilities. This study applies the Capability Approach to analyse how expanding women's freedoms in agroforestry can enhance climate resilience. It addresses: (1) How do socio-cultural norms constrain women's decision-making? (2) What interventions can strengthen their agency?

Using a mixed-methods design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 women smallholders (aged 25–60) and 10 key informants (extension officers, community leaders). Thematic analysis of qualitative data, supplemented by participatory mapping of household tree portfolios, identified systemic barriers. Findings revealed only 23 % of women controlled tree-planting decisions, with 78 % citing male-dominated land tenure systems as the primary constraint. Limited access to extension services (accessed by 15 % of women) and credit further marginalised their roles.

The Capability Approach framework highlighted that women's empowerment requires addressing both resource access (e.g., land rights) and institutional enablement (e.g., inclusive policies). The study proposes gender-responsive extension programmes integrating women's ecological knowledge and microcredit schemes for drought-resistant tree species. These interventions could increase women's income share from agroforestry by up to 40 %, fostering climate resilience. The implications stress the need for policy reforms to dismantle patriarchal norms and prioritise women's leadership in resource governance. Results are generalisable to semi-arid regions with similar gender dynamics, such as rural Zambia or Malawi, where agroforestry is critical for adaptation. By aligning with SDGs 5 (Gender Equity) and 13 (Climate Action), this study offers a pathway to transform agroforestry into a tool for equitable sustainability.

Keywords: Agroforestry, capability Approach, Climate adaptation, Gender equity, Zimbabwe

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