A Snapshot into Challenges of Policing Rural Zimbabwe

Tariro Mutongwizo (ORCID: 0000-0002-4372-8072)
Lecturer in Criminology
School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
University of New England, Australia

Correspondence: Tariro Mutongwizo; tmutongw@une.edu.au

© 2022 Mutongwizo. This article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/)

Abstract

Policing and security in remote and rural areas are under-resourced and under-researched. The situation is amplified in developing nations such as Zimbabwe, where the most immediate form of local governance for rural dwellers is that of traditional, customary and informal institutions. This research note aims to further discuss policing rural areas in places like Zimbabwe, where patriarchal state structures are entangled with policing. The research note will rely on examples of the key challenges experienced in rural Zimbabwe and engage in a theoretical discussion that paints a picture of policing of the rural developing world. Discussions will centre around how the lack of access to police is exacerbated by distance and the nature of policing, which further excludes individuals based on political affiliation, gender, and poverty. Taking all this into consideration, police-community relations and engagement in rural Zimbabwe will be examined with the aim that the discussion leads to further research on how policing rural communities can better consider the security needs, vulnerabilities, and potential of these communities.

Keywords: patriarchy; women; police-community relations; rural policing; traditional authorities; trust; Zimbabwe

There is a significant reliance on traditional authorities to maintain order and provide policing in rural and remote Zimbabwe (Chipango, 2019; Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012; Matyszak, 2010). These institutions have provided much authority and run parallel to and, in some instances, in conjunction with the state (Matyszak, 2010). Existing police services in Zimbabwe are considered unavailable and unsatisfactory in urban areas (Mutongwizo, 2018), and the conditions are even more dire in rural Zimbabwe, where it has been noted that the police are unable to respond quickly to urgent cases including murder, rape, and stock theft (Simpson & Krönke, 2019). This is mainly due to staff and vehicle shortages (Chigonda & Chazireni, 2018). When rural and urban dwellers were recently surveyed on how approachable the police are and where they would go first in case of a crime, two-thirds of respondents were most likely to cite the police. However, this response was considerably more common in the cities than in rural areas, where a quarter of respondents would turn first to a traditional leader or traditional court. Rural respondents were more likely than their urban counterparts to say that people do not report crimes because there is no nearby police presence (Simpson & Krönke, 2019).

This research note is interested in identifying the key challenges to policing rural and remote areas in Zimbabwe. While some, such as distance from metropolitan areas and resources, are obvious determinants of policing, other aspects must be considered. These collectively shape how community-police relationships look. It is also evident that little research exists on how the police in rural Zimbabwe operate. Most extant research has specifically identified weaknesses in the policing of one or more crimes, but little exists on the government police department, the Zimbabwe Republic Police's (ZRP) actual work in rural areas (Nhundu & Shumba, 2001; Simpson & Krönke, 2019; Websdale, 1998).

The research note begins with a brief outline of the literature on traditional authorities and policing in rural patriarchal societies in Africa. It aims to map out the obstacles that exist for higher levels of community – police trust and existing efforts that have been and could be deployed to improve safety and security in rural and remote areas in places like Zimbabwe. A brief overview of the history of policing rural Zimbabwe will follow with a discussion of the key challenges that existing research have presented as causing policing challenges. To conclude, some direction will be charted on potential further research to be conducted to deepen our understanding of policing rural and remote areas that have long relied on traditional systems and had to make do with limited resources.

Traditional Authorities and Policing in Rural Africa

Patriarchal practices in African communities have been noted to exist mainly due to weak states or traditional authorities wielding more power, as can be noted also in Somalia and other countries (Schlee, 2013). Community norms and mores tend to guide behaviour, rather than established laws and in some instances, this preserves peace and improves community wellbeing (Leeson, 2007). In dealing with stock theft in Botswana for example, little evidence exists to support the harsh penalties meted by the state as leading to a reduction in stock theft. The customary courts that impose laws rarely ensure that justice is done and in some cases, those convicted of stock theft receive harsh penalties (Dambe &

Fombad, 2020). Additionally, in some cases, traditional authorities have caused more harm than good as seen in South Sudan where the problem of cattle-raiding has led to heavily armed individuals performing military-style attacks that remain unabated in rural areas (Wild, et al., 2018).

The expediency of justice is yet another factor that supports traditional justice systems. In rural Nigeria, traditional structures involve elders and family chiefs; where cases such as land disputes and adultery are adjudicated, these individuals wield more power than the formal courts and this is partly due to the swiftness of justice as compared to the lengthy formal justice system process (Tade & Olaitan, 2015). This approach is echoed in Tanzania where trust in the police is lower than in traditional authorities such as village elders. Such lack of confidence is mainly due to a widespread fear of the police and their authoritarian nature, and limited confidence in their investigatory effectiveness. In addition to this, it is noted that the distances to the nearest police station were usually immense (Neubacher et al., 2019).

This recent evidence points to a heavy reliance on customary and traditional laws and practices in many parts of rural Africa, be it for dealing with stock theft, land disputes or day-to-day disagreements. The same is seen in rural Zimbabwe, as will be discussed next.

Existing Studies on Crime and Security in Rural Zimbabwe

The history of policing in Zimbabwe is riddled with coercion, partisan and patriarchal practices (Stapleton, 2010). The pre-independence government utilised traditional leaders as primary policy implementers (particularly regarding land), and they were given extensive powers to exercise control over the rural populace. As a result, traditional authorities and police relations with communities were fraught with tension. The pre-independence government's success in exerting control over rural areas through traditional structures has endured decades after independence using the Traditional Leaders Act (25 of 1998), which became effective in 2000.

In a recent study of 2,400 adult Zimbabwean citizens conducted by the research survey network Afrobarometer, urban and rural experiences of the police were compared. Of those who requested police assistance, almost a quarter (23%) said they had to pay a bribe or give a gift to a police officer to obtain the help they needed. Interestingly, the same percentage (23%) said they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems with the police in other situations, such as at roadblocks, police checkpoints or during an investigation. This research also revealed that bribery rates were similar in urban and rural areas. However, rural respondents were less likely than their urban counterparts to report crimes, mainly because they could not access the police anywhere nearby. When it came to discussing their negative views of the police, men (45%), urban residents (43%), and citizens with post-secondary education (56%) were more likely than women (35%), rural residents (39%), and less-educated respondents (34%- 39%) to freely criticise the police and their dissatisfaction with their levels of service delivery (Simpson & Krönke, 2019). This demonstrates that education levels and gender influenced perceptions of the police and voicing these views.

These views of the police show a profound lack of trust in the police in Zimbabwe and this is mainly due to police practices seen in the colonial era that continue to be entrenched in present-day policing (Chigonda & Chazireni, 2018; Mutongwizo, 2018). The inaccessibility of police services exacerbates the situation. There is a severe lag in service delivery in the rural areas of Zimbabwe compared to urban areas, another feature that endured even past independence from colonial powers (Matyszak, 2010). Chigonda and Chazireni (2018) identify rural residents as, even in most recent times, needing a great deal of time to get to the police stations to report cases. The ZRP's inability to respond quickly to urgent cases reported, including murder, rape, and stock theft, was mainly due to staff and vehicle shortages. These findings also highlight that post-independence efforts towards rural development in Zimbabwe have not been very successful - a situation which has further had conditions worsened by the rapid and steep decline in Zimbabwe's socio-economic outlook from the 1990s to the present-day (Chigonda & Chazireni, 2018).

The challenges of distance and colonial-style policing are not the only elements affecting policing in rural Zimbabwe. It must be noted that corrupt practices have plagued the police and other government institutions for decades in Zimbabwe. Transparency International's (2015) Global Corruption Barometer discovered that the courts of law and the police in Zimbabwe ranked highest amongst all the service providers in terms of corruption (Transparency International, 2015). The report pointed to large sums of revenue meant for community development lost in the unclear transactions, particularly in Rural District Councils (RDCs). Marango et al. (2018) point out that is it very common for the RDC personnel to demand or solicit bribes for an individual to get service from the RDC. The necessity of bribing officials extends to everyday services such as having a lost identity card replaced or for a land offer letter to be issued. Bribes, in some instances, must be paid to different levels of RDC officials at each step of whatever process an individual seeks to be facilitated.

While corruption in government institutions is rife across Zimbabwe, police actions in urban areas are more visible than in rural areas, as rural communities are more sparsely populated (Mugari & Obioha, 2018). Incidences of police abuse of power are likely to be more noticeable in urban areas therefore, they can be acted on more easily. However, in some instances, the lower population levels of rural areas may mean that news of police behaviours may travel to communities at a quicker pace.

Key Examples of Policing Challenges in Rural Zimbabwe

As mentioned earlier, traditional structures are commonplace in Zimbabwe and wield immense power and influence in some instances. Traditional leaders, (e.g., chiefs, headmen and village heads) are appointed in rural areas, and this is solely based on custom rather than democratic principles (Matyszak, 2010). In Zimbabwe, traditional leaders are recognised by the law, as their role is regarded as important in upholding the cultural values of the communities they serve (Chadambuka & Warria, 2020). The election and power of traditional leaders are widely accepted, but may breed conflict as competition for scarce resources and power struggles are commonplace in rural Africa (Agozino, 2017).

Of note are the challenges and domestic violence women experience that go unreported or unprosecuted because of the heavy reliance on traditional authorities. Domestic and intimate partner violence (DV and IPV) is one issue that has received some attention in the literature when considering rural women (Chireshe, 2015; Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012; Machisa & Shamu, 2018). However, most studies point to the very extreme lack of reporting, investigation, and prosecution of the few reported cases. In Zimbabwe, gender traditionalism and patriarchy put women in vulnerable positions that disproportionately expose them to IPV (Fidan & Bui, 2016). The effects of IPV are more visible in rural areas. Rural communities ascribe to social norms that tend to reinforce patriarchy, and DV and IPV are concealed in rural and remote Zimbabwe (Chireshe, 2015; McCloskey et al., 2016). Social isolation and remoteness in rural areas play a significant role in concealing IPV and mitigating efforts to seek help, which heightens the vulnerability of rural women to IPV. Further, the intersectionality of rural culture, gender, and patriarchy contribute to socio-cultural isolation and the susceptibility of rural women to IPV (Websdale, 1998). In other words, the rural context – commonly characterised by impoverished conditions and a lack of available structural support services that are essential for the well-being of victims – influences susceptibility to IPV (Lanier & Maume, 2009).

Research has shown that women expressed their disgruntlement with traditional leaders when faced with cases of DV and IPV. In most instances, women stated that seeking help from village heads was humiliating, as there was no confidentiality or privacy afforded to them when they did so (Chadambuka & Warria, 2020). However, in an earlier study by Chuma and Chazovachii (2012), most women said that they would take their cases to the police officers after exhausting the informal channels. Women in this study reported a reluctance to go to the police since they would use general laws, which are considered inappropriate in rural areas (Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012). Therefore, while the traditional authorities were seen as exercising little confidentiality, they were regarded as dealing with DV issues in a more straightforward manner than the police.

Violence and aggression are behavioural scripts associated with hegemonic masculinity (Warria, 2017), and men in rural areas may perform these roles by exercising their power and control over women. In rural areas of Zimbabwe, DV and IPV are primarily characterised by control that is reinforced by social norms, and this is in some way considered the epitome of masculinity (Chireshe, 2015). Hyper-masculinity disregards women's rights and supports patriarchal norms that allow for the male dominance of women (Machisa & Shamu, 2018). Although research on DV and IPV in urban Zimbabwe has been accumulating (Fidan & Bui, 2016; Henderson et al., 2017; Shamu et al., 2018), information on the support systems available for women residing in rural areas remains limited regardless of the vulnerabilities to which they are exposed. Consequently, there is scant knowledge of the public support systems for IPV victims in rural areas. This lack of information is worsened by the continued disproportionate service delivery, favouring urban areas and leaving rural and remote areas in dire need of resources and support systems.

A study by Chuma and Chazovachii (2012) on the implementation and reach of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) (2007) in rural areas had some confronting yet widespread

results. Several informants reported that police officers are reluctant to assist women who report domestic violence cases. A police officer indicated that domestic violence cases tend to not be prosecuted successfully. One challenge cited by the police officer was that women who made domestic violence charges often subsequently withdrew the charges. Since police performance is judged based on cases that are opened and then prosecuted, the police become reluctant to invest time and energy in domestic violence issues because of fear that women would withdraw charges, leaving them with an unprosecuted case. This meant that the police officers tended to not implement the requirements of the DVA at the local level in rural areas. Additionally, police officers stated that the severe lack of resources prevents them from being able to provide DV and IPV prevention programs in rural communities as very minimal resources are allocated to IPV and DV related cases. As a result, women survivors of DV and IPV reported that police officers were standing in the way of enforcement of the law as they were not tending to complaints and added that police corruption was deeply compromising police work (Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012).

The corrupt nature of the police can best be noted in some cases where incidents of child sexual abuse are brought to the attention of the authorities (Nhundu & Shumba, 2001). Nhundu and Shumba (2001) point out that the police, head teachers and some perpetrators denied and/or minimised the effect of abuse and the violations, and this may result in further under-reporting. There have also been numerous allegations by child protection agencies that the police may be protecting some influential perpetrators (Nhundu & Shumba, 2001). Therefore, this suggests that official records may not reflect the true scope of the problem of teacher- perpetrated child sexual abuse in rural primary schools as rural teachers are influential members of local communities where they are generally well-known by local police (Nhundu & Shumba, 2001).

Aside from DV and IPV, stock theft poses another key challenge faced in rural Zimbabwe (Makanda, 2017). The ZRP relies on using stock clearance, stop and searches, anti-stock theft campaigns, monitoring stock registers kept by butcheries and branding as methods for combating stock theft. Resource constraints, a lack of cooperation by members of the public, late reporting and lack of expertise in policing stock theft add to this problem (Makanda, 2017). It is noted that there is a lack of effective investigation of stock theft, a lack of training in this area and severe understaffing. Stock theft is worsened by the availability of a ready market (Makanda, 2017).

Despite these challenges in policing these and other crimes prevalent in rural Zimbabwe, it should be highlighted that the nature of rural communities defines the conditions within which the police will conduct their work. The features of the communities with whom the police frequently have contact and the broader social system of support from local leaders and citizens influence how police officers respond to calls for service and issues relating to public safety (Donnermeyer & Barclay, 2005). Bearing this in mind and considering the discussions on the matters experienced in rural Zimbabwe, it is necessary to consider the roles that the (un)availability of resources, laws and patriarchy play in shaping these policing practices.

Conclusion: Future Research into Police Powers and Community Attitudes Towards Policing

There is a need for research into police histories, structures, and practices in places like rural Zimbabwe. While numerous studies exist on support services available and required in such contexts, little research on actual police practices has been published. It would be worthwhile to conduct further studies on such topics and focus on diverse rural communities and how they are policed. Examples of areas in need of investigation include communities organized around agriculture, mining or tourism activities. Interestingly, what can be gleaned from this research note is that despite patriarchal, traditional authorities being outdated and unsuitable for modern-day policing in rural Zimbabwe, in some instances, they are preferred and easier to navigate than the ZRP.

References

Agozino, B. (2017). Critical Perspectives on Deviance and Social Control in Rural Africa. *African Journal of Criminology & Justice Studies, 10*(1).

Chadambuka, C., & Warria, A. (2020). Examining Support Systems Available for Victims of Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Areas in Zimbabwe. *Practice, 32*(5), 381-399. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2020.1750579

Chigonda, T., & Chazireni, E. (2018). Once rural, always rural? Social services provision in selected rural cases from Zimbabwe. *National Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development, 3*(1), 469-475.

Chipango, E. F. (2019). Towards a conceptualisation of power in fuelwood access in Zimbabwe. *Conservation & Society, 17*(2), 184-194. https://doi.org/10.4103/cs.cs_18_35

Chireshe, E. (2015). Christian women's experiences of domestic violence in Zimbabwe. *Affilia, 30*(3), 380-394. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914563156

Chuma, M., & Chazovachii, B. (2012). Domestic Violence Act: Opportunities and challenges for women in rural areas: The case of Ward 3, Mwenezi District, Zimbabwe.

Dambe, B. J., & Fombad, C. M. (2020). The stock theft act and customary courts in Botswana: justice sacrificed on the altar of expediency? *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law, 52*(1), 65-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.2020.1734381

Donnermeyer, J. F., & Barclay, E. (2005). The policing of farm crime. *Police Practice and Research, 6*(1), 3-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614260500046913

Fidan, A., & Bui, H. N. (2016). Intimate partner violence against women in Zimbabwe. *Violence against women, 22*(9), 1075-1096. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215617551

Henderson, L., Zerai, A., & Morrow, R. L. (2017). Intimate partner violence and HIV status among ever-married and cohabiting Zimbabwean women: an examination of partners' traits. *African journal of reproductive health, 21*(4), 45-54. https://doi.org/10.29063/ajrh2017/v21i4.5

Lanier, C., & Maume, M. O. (2009). Intimate partner violence and social isolation across the rural/urban divide. *Violence against women, 15*(11), 1311-1330. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209346711

Leeson, P. T. (2007). Better off stateless: Somalia before and after government collapse. *Journal of Comparative Economics, 35*(4), 689-710. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2007.10.001

Machisa, M., & Shamu, S. (2018). Mental ill health and factors associated with men's use of intimate partner violence in Zimbabwe. *BMC public health, 18*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5272-5

Makanda, L. L. (2017). *Challenges faced by Police officers in policing stock theft: a case study of Zimbabwe Republic Police Mutawatawa, Mashonaland East Province.(Period 2012-2014).* BUSE,

Marango, T., Mutongoreni, N. A., & Mararike, C. G. (2018). Human Factor Decay: Corruption in a Rural District of Zimbabwe on the Spotlight. *Journal of Gleanings from Academic Outliers, 7*(1).

Matyszak, D. (2010). Formal structures of power in rural Zimbabwe. *Research and Advocacy*.

McCloskey, L. A., Boonzaier, F., Steinbrenner, S. Y., & Hunter, T. (2016). Determinants of intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa: a review of prevention and intervention programs. *Partner abuse, 7*(3), 277-315. https://doi.org/10.1891/1946-6560.7.3.277

Mugari, I., & Obioha, E. E. (2018). Perspectives on execution of police powers and functions in the Republic of Zimbabwe. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 9*(1), 127-149. https://doi.org/10.14267/CJSSP.2018.1.06

Mutongwizo, T. (2018). Expectations and Encounters: Comparing Perceptions of Police Services Among the Underprivileged in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South* (pp. 569-585): Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65021-0_28

Neubacher, F., Faße, A., Bögelein, N., & Grote, U. (2019). Victimization and fear of crime in rural Tanzania. https://doi.org/10.18061/1811/87911

Nhundu, T. J., & Shumba, A. (2001). The nature and frequency of reported cases of teacher perpetrated child sexual abuse in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. *Child abuse & neglect, 25*(11), 1517-1534. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(01)00288-5

Schlee, G. (2013). Customary law and the joys of statelessness: idealised traditions versus Somali realities. *Journal of Eastern African Studies, 7*(2), 258-271. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2013.776276

Shamu, S., Shamu, P., & Machisa, M. (2018). Factors associated with past year physical and sexual intimate partner violence against women in Zimbabwe: results from a national cluster-based cross-sectional survey. *Global Health Action, 11*(sup3), 1625594. https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2019.1625594

Simpson, N., & Krönke, M. (2019). Police in Zimbabwe: Helping hand or iron fist?

Stapleton, T. (2010). Extra-territorial African police and soldiers in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) 1897-1965. *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies, 38*(1). https://doi.org/10.5787/38-1-81

Tade, O., & Olaitan, F. (2015). Traditional structures of crime control in Lagos, Nigeria. *African Security Review, 24*(2), 138-152. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2015.1023325

Transparency International. (2015). *People and corruption: Africa survey*. Retrieved from

Warria, A. (2017). Men at risk: Men's health, illness and the (un) healthy construction of gender identity. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development, 29*(2), 1-20.

Websdale, N. (1998). *Rural women battering and the justice system: An ethnography* (Vol. 6): Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452232041

Wild, H., Jok, J. M., & Patel, R. (2018). The militarization of cattle raiding in South Sudan: how a traditional practice became a tool for political violence. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 3*(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0030-y