

# Harvesting Opportunities: Contribution of Watermelon Farming and Selling to Women's Economic Empowerment in Rural Communities. A Case Study of Ward 18, Mwenezi District, Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigated the role of watermelon farming and selling in promoting women's economic empowerment within rural communities particularly Ward 18, Mwenezi district. Watermelon farming, recognised for its economic viability and nutritional benefits, serves as a platform for women to attain financial independence and improve their livelihoods. The researchers employed an interpretivist-qualitative approaches to capture the diverse experiences of women in the watermelon farming and selling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 women entrepreneurs, selected through purposive sampling to reflect varied community backgrounds and direct observations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data collected from interviews with women participants. The findings revealed that watermelon farming and selling substantially enhances women's household incomes, enabling investments in education, healthcare, and overall living conditions. Interviewed women also reported diversifying their income and financial independence through the sale of watermelon by-products, which contributes to their economic resilience. This research highlights the potential of watermelon farming and selling as a catalyst for women's empowerment, advocating for targeted interventions to address existing challenges. However, despite these advancements, significant barriers remains, including limited access to financial resources, inadequate training, and markets accessibility challenges. The study emphasises the need for improved support mechanisms, such as provision of agricultural extension services, improving access to market opportunities and access to microfinance. Therefore, this article recommended the need to advocate for policies that support women in agriculture, addressing systemic barriers such as land ownership rights, access and control of resources, and social norms that limit women's participation in economic activities and gender equality in rural areas.

**Keywords:** Economic empowerment, Watermelon farming and selling, Rural communities

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Worldwide, women in rural areas play an essential role in quest to alleviate poverty and foster sustainable development through a numerous of agro-livelihood strategies [15]; [21]. The most common definition of livelihoods encompasses the capabilities, assets and activities used in order to gain a living. Climate resilient agricultural projects is a key mechanism adopted by women globally as part and parcel of their economic empowerment [15]. In many communities, agriculture serves as the primary source of livelihood [4]. According to [4] the proportion of women working for these organisations is significantly higher than that of women in the workforce overall, indicating that more and more women are participating in climate-smart agriculture activities. In Africa, women comprise 75% of the total agricultural labour force because many men have migrated for employment to towns and they often face socio-economic challenges that limit their access to income-generating activities [3]. In sub-Saharan Africa, rural women rely on agriculture as their main source of food and other diverse livelihoods as their source of income [21].

Due to gender dynamics women's lack of access to resources and more limited agency relative to men, and other social constraints, often limit their ability to adopt agricultural technologies [29]. The findings agree with literature by [32] claimed that despite the fact that Zimbabwean rural women constitute the backbone of the farming industry and contribute significantly to agriculture, men still own the vast majority of the country's

land, manage the activities of women, and decide agricultural decisions which are backed by social structures that are patriarchal. In most developing countries, women earn less than men, they are prevented from owning land, face numerous obstacles to holding positions of authority and face many threats of violence, their works and opinions are undervalued just because they are women [26]. Women play a crucial role in agriculture but often face systemic barriers that limit their economic potential [28]. It is known in many countries of the world that women are the last people to be considered for any employment because they are considered the weaker sex [14]. In this vein, [7] lately emphasised the advantages of women participating in agricultural operations and came to the conclusion that female entrepreneurship via agro-cooperatives can help achieve regional and national development goals. According to [27] in Bangladesh women have ventured into watermelon projects and they have benefited from, a high-value crop, has gained popularity due to its market demand and nutritional benefits. Furthermore, [12] state that agriculture may be a pleasant environment for women and a catalyst for equality. These organisations can serve as a launching pad for economic growth and gender empowerment if they can facilitate women's entry into the business world.

Livelihoods are termed as the activities and the resources done to gain a living [15]. Engaging in watermelon farming and selling can provide women with not only a source of income but also a means to enhance their social status and decision-making power within their households and communities. Growing and selling watermelons is another agro-initiative that will enable women to realize their full potential and promote socioeconomic development in local communities [30]. Other benefits of watermelon projects include improvements in nutritious food, increased source of income [31]. Therefore, the watermelon projects assumes not only the responsibility of bringing economic benefits to women, but also of improving their quality of life and that of the larger community in which it is located. This means that increasing rural women's agricultural productivity and value chain engagement will empower them economically. However, [23] discussed that despite the growing popularity of women agricultural cooperatives and their superior resistance to economic downturns, studies drawing on this business model remain scarce. This supports [27] that agricultural disturbances brought on by climate change have a detrimental effect on rural livelihoods and increase food insecurity. These increase susceptibilities and establish circumstances that may increase the likelihood of gender-based violence (GBV). In Mwenezi, climate change induced droughts, in combination with heat stress and increased water demand for key crops, will further reduce agricultural yields [21]. The rural community has limited capacity to manage climate change-induced shocks that will adversely affect agricultural production. The district is also characterized by erratic rains which is below normal, a series of droughts almost on yearly basis. These series of droughts have brought more women into horticultural production which includes watermelon production [21]. The study area was chosen because it is highly vulnerable to climate, economic, social and external shocks because it is not diversified as a result of limited investments in agriculture. Rural livelihoods present various challenges, such as limited access to resources and education, which hinder the empowerment of rural women [2]. Lack of suitable technologies, unequal access to productive resources and services, insufficient or unreachable infrastructure, restricted credit, health care, and education availability, global food and economic crises, and climate change are only a few of the many and varied limitations. [9]

Women in Zimbabwe, like those in other developing nations, are the backbone of any nation due to their maternal responsibilities; they are the source of nearly everything, including having children and raising them [17]; [19]. This was founded on the idea that women are not only responsible for these tasks but also serve as educators for the next generation and provide health, nutrition, and welfare care for the family, to name a few. Therefore, empowering a woman is empowering the entire creation. Despite that watermelon projects can provide economic opportunities for women, increase their assets and income controlled by women as part of their economic empowerment, [21] found that women in Mwenezi often lack access to agricultural land, lack of labour, greater time burden and social norms that prohibit women's use of particular economic activities and women have been constrained in fully participating in the economic fraternity especially those in the rural areas [11]. Researchers [30]; [31] have hitherto tended to neglect the role of watermelon farming projects because they do not have a clear place in a capitalist system where the private sector is assumed to be the dominant player in promoting economic development [7]. Thus, more focus should be placed on understanding the conditions that give women in water melon projects the chance to be empowered. Given the important role women play in the agriculture sector, this study sought to assess how engaging in watermelon farming and

selling can women empower economically, promoting gender equality and sustainable development in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite their key contribution to economic empowerment through agriculture, rural women have inadequate access to resilient agriculture practices and value chain participation, which makes them highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change., [21] revealed that women in Mwenezi district are often left behind from capacity building and education activities, so they remain ill equipped to ensure their safety during cyclone induced disasters. The problem is that such women are the hardest-hit demographic during droughts and fall into a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability. Despite the potential of watermelon farming to empower women economically, many face significant challenges that inhibit their success [21]. These include market access obstacles, negative climate change consequences, insufficient expertise in agricultural operations, and restricted access to financial resources [29]. Limited household income contribution and a lack of livelihood options are among the problems. These elements lower women's position and decision-making authority in the home, and their ignorance and incompetence make them more susceptible to abuse and GBV. Notwithstanding the promise of other agricultural-based businesses, women in rural areas frequently face economic inequality and often bear the brunt of coping with food insecurity, by skipping meals altogether or eating less-nutritious or less food [6]. These obstacles prevent them from taking full use of the potential that watermelon growing offers. Thus, the study sought to find out how watermelon businesses affect women entrepreneurs and what makes them successful.

### Research Objectives

1. To assess the economic benefits of watermelon farming for women in Ward 18, Mwenezi district.
2. To identify the challenges women face in engaging with watermelon farming Ward 18, Mwenezi district.
3. To explore the support mechanisms needed to promote women's entrepreneurship in watermelon farming in Ward 18, Mwenezi district.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that agricultural activities significantly contribute to women's economic empowerment, with findings highlighting the positive effects of crop diversification [27]. Watermelon, due to its nutritional value and high market demand, has emerged as a viable crop for women farmers [28]. Similarly, studies have shown that women face unique barriers, including limited access to credit, education, and social networks [26]. Supportive measures, such as provision of agricultural inputs, training and cooperative marketing, can help mitigate these challenges and improve women's entrepreneurial skills [6]. Studies such as [11]; [17]; [19] centred on evaluating how development programs that aim to reach, benefit, and empower women have affected women's empowerment in various contexts with differing degrees of success. Recent examples include a study by [10] that demonstrated that participation in self-help groups in India increases women's empowerment scores and gender parity. This is mainly because women actively [21] participate in groups, make better credit judgments, and have greater influence over their income.

In other studies by [17]; [19] it was noted that market gardening, pottery, traditional beer brewing, sewing and crocheting as well as buying and selling of small commodities have provided for extra income needed during off-seasons and extra occupations in a season. According to [4] the primary source of household income in rural areas is small-scale farming. In light of growing climate risk, raising small-scale farmers' agricultural output is essential to promoting overall economic growth, lowering poverty, and enhancing food security. [15] Highlighted how rural women have embraced a variety of livelihood choices to augment their agricultural revenue in an effort to attain economic emancipation.

[12] Opines that rural women's livelihoods in semiarid regions can contribute towards poverty reduction and women's economic empowerment as women become independent to generate their own income for sustaining their livelihoods. This corroborates with a study conducted by [15] showed that women faced challenges in their efforts to alleviate poverty and gain economic empowerment, including limited access to competitive markets, small-scale insurance for rural women's livelihoods, financial assistance, entrepreneurial education and training, the impacts of climate change, and inadequate utilisation of technology to boost rural women's livelihoods. Literature indicates that women are disproportionately vulnerable to economic inequality and they lag far behind their male counterparts under the prevailing economic and social circumstances [8]. Such significant disparities in employment and wage rates persist which; combined with considerable gaps in asset ownership, seriously limit women's economic opportunities. According to studies, women entrepreneurs encounter particular difficulties, such as restricted access to capital, training, and education [9]. Crop productivity is reported to be lower among women engaged in agriculture because of their low awareness of climate-resilient practices and lack of access to extension services ([26]. Furthermore, encouraging laws and neighbourhood initiatives can improve women's access to markets and entrepreneurial abilities, encouraging sustainable business practices [26]

[18] argue that rural women around the world face a number of challenges, such as the shifts brought about by globalization and technological development, laws and outside interventions, availability of resources and authority, women in leadership roles, and enhancing capacities like equality, health, and education.. According to [25] an intervention that gave men and women in Bangladesh trainings in gender-sensitisation, agriculture, and nutrition improved the outcomes for women's empowerment. [1] Revealed that the majority of women farmers employ simple tools for conventional rain-fed agriculture because investments in drip irrigation, greenhouses, and intensive orchards are limited by a lack of agricultural and financial services. [1] Which revealed that the lack of awareness on the causes and consequences of climate change is an obstacle to rural women as they are not aware of the dangers and adaptation mechanism on climate change.

Most of existing literature on women's empowerment focuses on how women's empowerment affects other development outcomes, such as improved nutrition and food security [11], a greater variety of production [17], or increased agricultural productivity. A study by [3] advocates for micro insuring of rural women's livelihoods, especially when they start their business which is tantamount to their sustainability. According to [2] found that women have significant advantages when they are able to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from adopting, utilizing, and profiting from irrigation technologies. This also corroborates with [28] who discussed that expanding women's access to small-scale irrigation for home garden production can decrease their time burden, increase their assets and income under their control, and give them economic opportunities. [26] reported that to achieve economic empowerment, women should be empowered to become competitive. In contrast, [16] agricultural activities may deprive women of their authority in comparison to males if it increases their effort, restricts their ability to influence production choices, or limits their ability to manage how the money from agriculture produce is used. According to [27] given that literate people are more inclined than illiterate ones to embrace new innovations and support more sustainable farming operations, farmers' educational attainment is important for adaptation training. [4] argues that skills training and education provide women with a basis for positive change and transformation in societies. Therefore, this article argues that women's economic empowerment through

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed an interpretivist-qualitative methodology, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as women's economic empowerment through watermelon farming and processing in rural communities [22]. The researchers utilised semi-structured interviews with 30 women engaged in watermelon projects. Non-participant observations, photographs and field notes were taken. This allowed the researchers to capture rich, nuanced narratives that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of women participants in watermelons farming and selling. The purposive sampling technique ensured that a variety of backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and farming practices were represented, enhancing the study's depth [5]. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews, allowing for the identification of key themes and insights that are critical for understanding the specific opportunities and challenges women



face in watermelon cooperatives [24]. This methodology allowed for a holistic understanding of how watermelon farming can serve as a catalyst for economic and social change in Ward 18 in Mwenezi district.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section focusses on the findings from interviews and observations conducted with women in watermelon farming and selling inward 18 in Mwenezi district.

### Economic Benefits of Watermelon Farming for Women

Various themes emerged as economic benefits of watermelon farming for women in rural areas particularly in ward 18 Mwenezi district. The themes included, increase in household income, women financial stability, diversification of income sources and women economic independence.

#### *Increase in Household Income*

Women reported that engaging in watermelon cultivation has led to a substantial increase in household income, enabling them to invest in essential needs such as education, healthcare, and improved living conditions. It was also highlighted that it's a source of income generation for female headed households. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...since I started growing watermelons, my income has doubled. I can now afford to send my children to school and buy them better clothes. It feels like I have control over my life."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

*"...we not only sell the fruit but also make juice from the leftover pulp. This has opened new markets for us and helped us earn more money than we ever thought possible."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

*"As a widow I have no one to support me with money to bring food and other basic needs for my kids, hence this watermelon business has been doing wonders for me every year every season"*

(Women participant in her 30s)

The findings from the study highlight the transformative impact of watermelon farming on women's economic empowerment in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district. Participants reported significant increases in household income, which has enabled them to invest in essential needs such as food, education and healthcare. This sentiment is echoed in the literature by [15] who noted that engaging in agricultural activities, particularly high-value crops like watermelon, can lead to substantial economic benefits for women. [25] found that women involved in watermelon projects in Bangladesh experienced enhanced financial stability and improved social status, similar to the experiences shared by participants in this study.

#### *Women Financial Stability*

In addition, some women also reported that increased income received from watermelon sales allow them to have financial stability to make meaningful investments in their families' health and education. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"..With the money I get from selling watermelons at this Masvingo - Beitbridge highway road, I am financially stable to take my children to the hospital when they're sick. It feels good to know I'm providing for their health."*

(Women participant in her 30s)

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*"...I used to struggle to pay for school fees, but now, thanks to watermelon farming, I can not only cover those costs but also buy my kids' books and supplies. It has changed our lives."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"...I get the money to feed my family and not forgetting my grandmother and siblings, we are surviving from watermelon business income"*

(Women participant in her 50s)

Sentiments above indicate that the financial stability achieved through watermelon sales significantly enhances the quality of life for women and their families in Ward 18, as evidenced by improved nutrition, healthcare access, and educational opportunities for their children. The financial stability also assist relatives and extended families through food and money assistance from the one involved in watermelon selling. Such empowerment is crucial in sub-Saharan Africa, where rural women often face systemic barriers that limit their economic potential. As highlighted by [15], agriculture serves as the primary livelihood source for many women, underscoring the importance of initiatives like watermelon farming that enable them to diversify their income streams. The ability to invest in their families' well-being fosters a positive feedback loop, where increased household income leads to better health and education outcomes.

### **Diversification of Income Sources**

Another theme that emerged was that women who engage in watermelon farming frequently enhance their economic resilience by diversifying their income through the sale of watermelon by-products, such as juice and seeds. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...I realised that by making juice from the leftover watermelons, I could earn extra money. Now, people come to me specifically for the juice, and it has become a popular item in our village."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"...selling watermelon seeds in addition to the fruit has really helped me. It means I have income coming in even when the harvest is low, which makes a big difference for my family."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

The findings highlight the importance of income diversification for women engaged in watermelon farming, highlighting how the sale of by-products like juice and seeds significantly enhances their economic resilience. As participants noted, creating juice from leftover watermelons has not only generated additional income but also established a market niche, attracting customers specifically for this product. Similarly, selling watermelon seeds provides a safety net during low harvest periods, ensuring a more stable income stream. This practice aligns with [28], who assert that women in agriculture often face systemic barriers that restrict their economic potential. This means that diversifying their income sources, these women not only strengthen their financial independence but also elevate their status within their households and communities.

### **Economic Independence**

Women participants also reported that the stable income generated from their watermelon enterprises has empowered them to support their families more effectively and invest in their children's education. This economic independence brought about by the watermelon business is being celebrated by women especially looking at the patriarchal society in Mwenezi district. In Mwenezi district, women have very limited access to resources, limited decision making, and limited access to financial streams, all being left in the hands of their male counterparts. In most cases, when these women questions their male counterparts on financial supports, it usually results in gender based violence. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

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*"...growing watermelons has given me the financial freedom I never had before. Now I can pay for my children's school fees without worrying about where the money will come from."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"....I am grateful to the income from watermelon farming, I can buy books and supplies for my kids. It's rewarding to see them excel in school because I can provide for their education."*

(Women participant in her 30s)

*"...having my own wallet, with cash and being the one decides how to use the money gives me much confidence and to me it is healthy..."*

(Women participant in her 30s)

The findings above shows the economic benefits of watermelon farming for women in rural areas, particularly in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district, are significant and transformative. Participants in the study expressed how the income generated from watermelon farming has provided them with financial independence and the ability to support their families, particularly in terms of education. This sentiment is supported by [15] who highlight that engaging in agricultural activities can enhance women's decision-making power and social status within their households and communities. Furthermore, the findings align with the work of [25], which emphasises that women involved in high-value crops like watermelon experience economic empowerment, allowing them to invest in their children's education and improve their overall quality of life.

### **Challenges women face in engaging with watermelon farming Ward 18, Mwenezi district.**

Despite the positive impacts, women faced challenges in watermelon farming and selling in Mwenezi rural community. Some of the themes that indicated challenges facing women in watermelon farming and selling included, limited access to financing, insufficient inputs, lack of training and poor access to market.

#### **Limited Access to Financing**

Women also reported that lack of access to finance to buy inputs like seed, chemicals and fertilizers was a persistent barriers that affect their operations and profitability. Participants expressed a strong need for overcoming these barriers is essential for their enterprises to thrive and for them to achieve long-term sustainability. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...getting a loan is incredibly difficult for us. Without financial support, it's hard to expand our businesses or invest in better equipment."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

*"...the roads to our markets are in poor condition, which makes it hard to transport our watermelons. If the government could help with infrastructure, it would make a huge difference for all of us."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

*"...high breed seeds, fertilizers and chemicals to use during the course of farming cycle for our melons is very difficult to acquire them....distance to Masvingo town further makes it difficult for use to acquire the inputs..."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

The findings above also point to the challenges faced by women in watermelon farming in Ward 18, Mwenezi district, are significant barriers to their economic empowerment and sustainability. Participants highlighted limited access to financing as a persistent obstacle, with many expressing frustration over the difficulty of obtaining loans to invest in their enterprises. This aligns with the findings of [10] which found that rural

women often encounter multiple constraints, including inadequate access to productive resources and financial services. Additionally, the poor state of infrastructure, lack particularly roads leading to markets, compounds these challenges, making it difficult for women to transport their products and access broader markets.

### **Lack of Access to Land for Farming**

Another theme that emerged as an important challenge facing women in watermelon farming and selling in ward 18 of Mwenezi District was lack of access to land for farming. The following were verbatims;

*"...the challenge of access to land is common here, most land is owned by men and I am only assigned to use a small piece of land to do my watermelon farming"*

*(Women participant in her 30s)*

*"Huh, one challenge we have is lack of access to adequate land, sometimes we choose to buy watermelon on wholesale prices from those with land because we cannot grow our own because land is used for other agricultural crops."*

*(Women participant in her 40s)*

The findings above indicate that lack of access to agricultural land was a socially created economic barrier that surfaced as a major obstacle for women in Mwenezi District who grow and sell watermelons. According to numerous women, men hold the majority of the land, which significantly restricts their capacity to grow watermelons on their own. The findings agree with literature by [32]; [21] who claimed that despite the fact that Zimbabwean rural women constitute the backbone of the farming industry and contribute significantly to agriculture, men still own the vast majority of the country's land, manage the activities of women, and decide agricultural decisions which are backed by social structures that are patriarchal. This social norms condition affects women's economic empowerment by forcing them to rely on tiny gardens, which are frequently insufficient for significant productivity. In addition to reducing the opportunity for revenue, being dependent on buying watermelons rather than growing for themselves feeds poverty and dependency tendencies. Therefore, women's restricted access to land limits their ability to make decisions about crop production, which significantly hinders their farming efficiency and their financial independence.

### **Insufficient Inputs**

Interviewed women also noted that they struggle to secure agricultural inputs, which then limit their ability to invest in necessary inputs like seeds and fertilisers. This lack of seeds, pesticides and other required inputs not only hampers their productivity but also inhibits their growth potential, making it difficult for them to expand their operations or improve their agricultural practices. The following sentiments were from key informants;

*"...I wanted to buy better seeds and fertilizers to improve my crop yield, but without a loan, I simply can't afford it. It's frustrating to see my efforts limited by a lack of funds."*

*(Women participant in her 50s)*

*"...every time I try to apply for a loan, I face so many obstacles. If only there were more accessible financial options for women like us, we could really thrive."*

*(Women participant in her 50s)*

*"...the tricky party about water melons is size and shape matters therefore without proper seed and chemicals to spray, the fruit will have deformities and might be small in size hence poor pricing..."*

*(Women participant in her 40s)*



The findings shows that another challenge faced by women was securing agricultural inputs, as highlighted by the participants, resonate with the broader literature on women's economic empowerment in agriculture. The sentiments expressed by the women regarding their struggles to access loans and necessary agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers reflect the systemic barriers that limit their productivity and growth potential. As noted by [29], women's limited access to financial resources significantly hampers their ability to adopt agricultural technologies and improve their livelihoods. Furthermore, [21] emphasizes that inadequate access to agricultural inputs is a critical constraint for women in rural areas, which aligns with the participants' experiences of frustration in trying to secure funding for better agricultural practices. This lack of financial support not only restricts their immediate agricultural productivity but also undermines their long-term economic independence and stability, as highlighted by the findings of [15] regarding the importance of diversified income sources for women's empowerment.

### **Lack of Training**

Also, women participants expressed that without adequate training, they often struggle to implement effective techniques that could enhance their productivity and profitability. This knowledge gap not only affects their immediate outputs but also their long-term sustainability as entrepreneurs. Due to lack of trainings to boost their knowledge, they end up doing watermelon farming as a passion or for the love of business but it is affecting production. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants.

*"..I wish I had more opportunities to learn about modern farming techniques. Without training, I feel like I'm missing out on ways to improve my harvest."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"...marketing my watermelons is challenging because I don't know the best strategies. If I had access to training, I could sell more and grow my business."*

(Women participant in her 30s)

*"...I was never trained on watermelon production, but it is just passion and admiring other women that are into watermelon production. But am seeing the need for the trainings so that I improve production and know how to deal with diseases that are destroying my crop..."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

The findings also indicates another challenge faced by women in watermelon farming, particularly regarding the lack of training, highlight a significant barrier to their economic empowerment. Participants expressed a desire for more opportunities to learn modern farming techniques, which aligns with findings from [29] who noted that women's limited access to training and resources restricts their ability to adopt effective agricultural technologies. This gap in knowledge not only hampers immediate productivity but also threatens long-term sustainability as entrepreneurs, as emphasized by [21], who found that inadequate training leaves women ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of agricultural markets. Furthermore, the sentiments regarding marketing challenges echo the observations of [1]; [7] who highlighted that women often lack the necessary skills to effectively promote their products, thereby limiting their income potential.

### **Poor Access to Market**

Women reported difficulties in accessing markets due to transportation issues and lack of information on market demand. Participants highlighted that poor road conditions and inadequate transportation options make it challenging to get their watermelons to buyers in a timely manner, often leading to lost sales and waste. Poor roads often led to high transport costs for the watermelons. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

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*"... sometimes getting my watermelons to the market is a real struggle. The roads are bad, and I often lose time and money just trying to transport my produce."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"I never know what the market wants, and that makes it hard to decide how much to grow. If I had better access to markets, I could sell more effectively."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"...I stay 30km from this highway but we use dust roads with potholes resulting in limited vehicles which charge exorbitant transport fares.....at times we end up making losses because there is no way I can transport my water melons back home if sales are poor, I will just sale with a give-away price..."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

The sentiments above also showed that women face a challenge in accessing markets for their watermelon produce underscore significant barriers to their economic empowerment. Participants reported difficulties stemming from poor road conditions and inadequate transportation options, which hinder their ability to deliver products to buyers in a timely manner. This aligns with findings from [9], who emphasize that inadequate infrastructure is a critical constraint affecting rural women's access to markets and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the uncertainty regarding market demand, as expressed by the participants, resonates with the observations of [21], who highlighted that lack of market information limits women's ability to make informed decisions about production. The inability to effectively reach markets not only leads to lost sales and wasted produce but also diminishes women's potential income, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty.

### **Support Mechanisms Needed to Promote Women's Entrepreneurship in Watermelon Farming**

The study highlights several support mechanisms that could enhance women's participation in watermelon farming. Some of the themes which emerged from interviews with women participants included, provision of agricultural extension services, improving access to market opportunities and access to microfinance.

#### **Provision of Agricultural Extension Services**

Women entrepreneurs indicated that participation in agricultural extension services related to farming techniques, marketing, and financial management significantly improved their business acumen and confidence. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...the training I received from local agricultural extension officer was a game changer for me. I can keep track of watermelons, which has made my farming much more successful."*

(Women participant in her 40s)

*"...If I could attend training programs on farming by Agritex officers, I would feel much more capable of growing my business and reaching more customers."*

(Women participant in her 30s)

*"...learning about modern agriculture would help us understand how to operate our farms better. Having the right skills can make a difference in our business."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

The insights above shared by women participants regarding the need for agricultural extension services underscore the critical role of training in enhancing their entrepreneurial capabilities in watermelon farming.

Participants emphasized that training in farming techniques has significantly boosted their confidence and business acumen, which aligns with findings from [9], who stress the importance of access to education and training for improving agricultural productivity among women. Furthermore, the positive impact of marketing training on sales, as noted by the participants, is supported by [7], who highlights that knowledge in marketing strategies can empower women to effectively reach customers and increase income. This need for training resonates with the broader literature, including insights from [26], which advocates for supportive measures that enhance women's entrepreneurial skills and capabilities.

### Improving Access to Market Opportunities

Another theme that emerged was the provision of access to local and regional markets was identified as crucial for the sustainability of watermelon enterprises. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...the farming and selling of watermelons has changed everything for us. We can negotiate better prices for our watermelons and reach customers we wouldn't have been able to on our own."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

*"...at first, I struggled to find buyers. Now, we work together to sell our products at local markets, and it feels great to see our hard work pay off."*

(Women participant in her 50s)

The findings above from highlight the critical role of watermelon farming cooperatives in enhancing women's economic empowerment in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district. Participants highlighted that access to local and regional markets significantly improved their ability to negotiate better prices and reach a wider customer base, which aligns with the literature emphasizing the importance of market access for women's entrepreneurial success. For instance, [7] notes that female entrepreneurship through cooperatives can facilitate progress in meeting development targets, while [25] illustrate how women in Bangladesh benefited from engaging in high-value crops like watermelon, which are in demand due to their nutritional benefits. Furthermore, access to markets not only allows them to compete more effectively but also fosters a supportive community where women can share knowledge and strategies, thereby reinforcing their entrepreneurial efforts. This also corroborates with [15], who assert that access to markets for agricultural produce can enhance women's empowerment.

### Access to Microfinance

During interviews women also noted that establishment of microfinance opportunities tailored to women can facilitate investment in watermelon farming. This is because modern financial institutions often overlook women's needs, leaving them with limited options for obtaining capital. The followings are verbatim quotes from interviews with women participants;

*"...having access to microfinance would change everything for us. Just a small loan could help me buy the inputs I need to grow more watermelons."*

(Women participant in her early 40s)

*"...I see so many opportunities for our farms, but without financial support specifically for women, it's hard to make those dreams a reality."*

(Women participant in her early 50s)

The findings from the interviews with women participants in watermelon farming in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district highlight critical support mechanisms that can significantly enhance women's economic empowerment. Access to local and regional markets emerged as a vital factor for the sustainability of watermelon enterprises.

This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the importance of market access in enabling women to negotiate better prices and share knowledge within cooperative frameworks, thereby reinforcing their entrepreneurial efforts [7]; [15]. Furthermore, the establishment of microfinance opportunities tailored specifically for women was identified as a crucial support mechanism. This is consistent with research indicating that women often face barriers in accessing financial resources, which limits their ability to invest in agricultural activities [29]. The sentiments expressed by participants resonate with findings that suggest microfinance can empower women by providing them with the necessary capital to enhance their agricultural productivity and economic independence (UN Women, 2020).

### Limitations of the Study

The article had some limitations. First and foremost, the study was case study and findings may not be generalised to larger population because the study sample size of 30 women interviewed was small and only sufficient to offer insights on women's empowerment, especially for a case study in Mwenezi district's Ward 18. Another limitation was the conceptual focus of the article of watermelon farming and selling to the economic empowerment of women in rural areas and lacked comparison of watermelon growing to other agricultural pursuits. This leaves a suggestion for future studies. Also, the methodology purely focused on qualitative and lack of quantitative data. However the researchers used interviews with 30 primary sources and a completely qualitative analysis and were able to gather rich, complex narratives that represent the varied experiences and viewpoints of women involved in watermelons' farming and selling thanks to the right methodology. This increased the credibility of the findings.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study illustrates that watermelon farming can serve as a powerful avenue for women's economic empowerment in rural communities, particularly in Ward 18 of Mwenezi district. The findings reveal that while women experience significant economic benefits, including increased household income and financial stability, they also confront numerous challenges such as limited access to financing, insufficient training, and poor market access. Addressing these barriers through targeted support mechanisms is crucial for enhancing women's entrepreneurship and fostering sustainable development. Based on the major findings, several key recommendations are proposed for practice to enhance women's economic empowerment in watermelon farming in rural areas. First, comprehensive training sessions should be developed and provided, focusing on modern agricultural techniques, marketing strategies, and financial management specifically tailored for women farmers. In addition, establishing microfinance initiatives that cater to the unique needs of women entrepreneurs is essential, enabling them to secure funding for necessary inputs and equipment. Policymakers should facilitate better access to local and regional markets by establishing cooperative networks that empower women to negotiate better prices and share resources effectively. Furthermore, increasing the outreach and availability of agricultural extension services is crucial to offer ongoing support, advice, and resources to help women optimize their farming practices. Lastly, there is a pressing need to advocate for policies that support women in agriculture, addressing systemic barriers such as land ownership rights, access to resources, and social norms that limit women's participation in economic activities.

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