



Zimbabwe Economic  
Policy Analysis and  
Research Unit

# Multidimensional Poverty in Zimbabwe: A Gender Perspective

**Advanced policy-focused  
poverty analysis in  
Zimbabwe**

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## Abstract

This study explores gendered multidimensional poverty at household level and its heterogeneities across pertinent socio-demographics in Zimbabwe. It utilises the 2011/12 and 2017 Poverty Income Consumption and Expenditure Surveys (PICES), and the Alkire and Foster Multidimensional Poverty Index. Results show that 17.3 percent of female-headed households and 16.8 percent of male-headed households were multidimensional poor in 2011. These percentages were of the same order, but this changed in 2017 where female-headed households faced higher multidimensional deprivation than male-headed households, 19 percent versus 13.3 percent (gender gap). Further, *de jure* female-headed households had higher multidimensional poverty than *de facto* female- and male-headed households. In particular, households headed by widowed/divorced men and women experienced a temporal increase in poverty while the reverse was the case for those headed by their single and married counterparts. The study also finds that the gender gap varies by geographic location, higher in rural than urban areas. Moreover, in 2011 and 2017 low asset base, low per capita consumption expenditure, lack of access to electricity and unclean sources of fuel for cooking were the greatest contributors to multidimensional poverty. These dimensions indiscriminately affected all households regardless of the heads' sex and time period. Lack of agriculture equipment and having no adult who surpassed grade 7 in the household were additional contributors to household deprivation in rural areas, as well as unemployment in urban areas. Overall, asset deprivation and having no adult who surpassed grade 7 in the household emerge as the key contributors to the increase in the gender gap from 2011 to 2017. These results champion for poverty eradication measures that are gender sensitive and cognisant of the highlighted disparities and contributory factors.

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## 1. Background and context

Many developing countries across the globe are striving to reduce the challenge of multidimensional poverty, for the sake of sustainable development. This requires inclusive counter-strategies which exceed addressing the challenges faced by multidimensional poor men, women and children in isolation to include those faced by male- and female-headed households. As such, headship is useful for identifying poor households in Africa, regardless of recent calls to abandon this dimension of welfare comparison (Brown and van de Walle, 2020). Poverty experiences may differ between male-headed and female-headed households due to differences in power dynamics, economic and labour market opportunities, cultural norms and lack of work-family support. However, currently there is no global consensus on whether female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households or vice versa, which calls for localised studies. This study explores the case for Zimbabwe as the country historically grapples with non-trivial levels of poverty, yet poverty eradication strategies have always been the major thrust of all economic programmes that the GoZ has been implementing since independence.

Poverty in Zimbabwe has closely followed the country's socio-economic developments where three unique economic phases can be identified: a stable period (1980-1997), a crisis period (1999-2008), and a recovery period from 2009 to date. Regardless of the recovery period, existing evidence shows that multidimensional poverty remains high at the national level. The country's commitments to gender equity also necessitate an understanding of multidimensional poverty varies by sex of the household head. Even more so in the economic recovery period, in order to assess the progress that has been made. Currently there is a lack of such studies, yet they are useful for designing relevant social assistance policies. While existing studies enlighten us on the existence of multidimensional poverty, they do not educate us on a more recent picture of the situation by sex of the household head, across all provinces and over time. This study addresses this omission in literature which is important for relevant policy analysis to feed into the preparation of the country's new comprehensive national development plan.

## 2. Objectives and methods

This study has three objectives. First it investigates whether there are differences in experiences of multidimensional poverty between female- and male-headed households in Zimbabwe during the economic recovery period, and whether this has changed over time. The second objective is to explore whether multidimensional poverty experiences of male-headed and female-headed households differ by geographic area and marital status of the household head. The third objective is to analyse whether there are differences in poverty dimensions that female- and male-headed households are deprived.

The specific research questions are:

- Do female- and male-headed households in Zimbabwe have different experiences of multidimensional poverty (gender poverty gap)?
- Does the gender poverty gap change over the period 2011/12-2017?
- Does the gender poverty gap vary by geographic area and marital status of the household head?
- What is the relative percentage contribution of Education, Health, Income, Living Conditions and Household Assets to the multidimensional deprivations faced by female-headed and male-headed households?
- Are there differences in poverty dimensions that female- and male-headed households are deprived?

To answer these questions, the study utilises Alkire and Foster (AF) Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The method is flexible to the inclusion of several dimensions of welfare. In this case these include: Education, Health, Income, Living Conditions and Household Assets. It identifies each multidimensional poor household, based on chosen deprivation and poverty cut-offs, and allows aggregation by sex of the household head. The gender gap is calculated as the ratio of the MPI for female-headed households to that of male-headed households. Further, the MPI is decomposable to show the relative contribution of deprivations in different welfare dimensions to poverty, by sex of the household head.

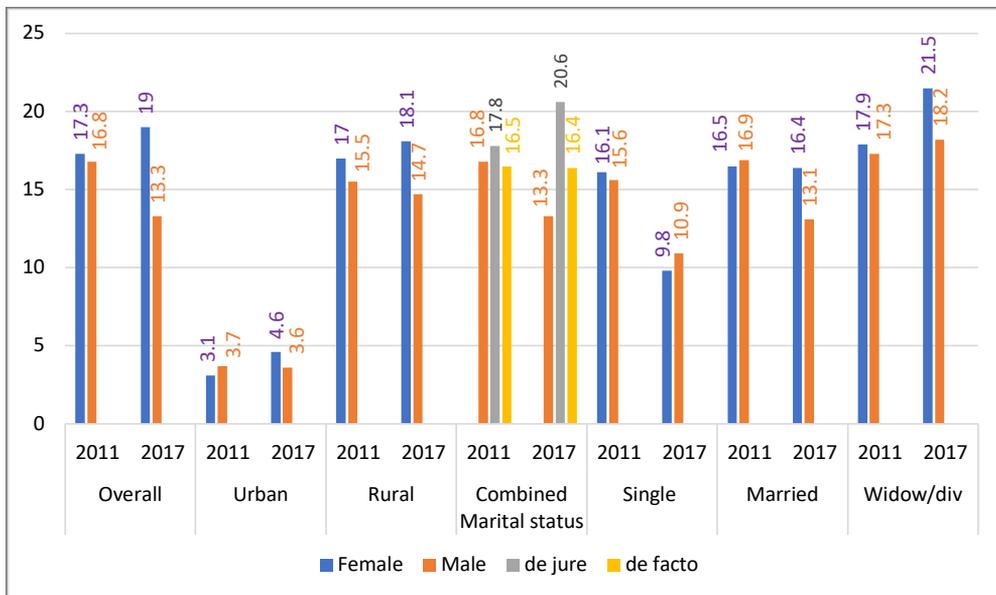
The analysis utilises data from the 2011/12 and 2017 Poverty Income Consumption and Expenditure Surveys (PICES) conducted by ZIMSTAT. These nationally representative household surveys allow for a comparative analysis of household well-being over time. They each cover about 30 000 households. In both 2011 and 2017, male-headed households comprised 62 percent of all households, while de jure female-headed households (single, widowed/divorced heads) comprised 63 percent of all female-headed households. Urban households were nearly 20 percent of all households in both periods.

### **3. Findings**

Figure 1 summarises some of the key findings of the study. It shows that 17.3 percent of female-headed households and 16.8 percent of male-headed households were multidimensional poor in 2011. These results do not present evidence of a gender gap. This changed in 2017 where female-headed households faced higher multidimensional deprivation than male-headed households; 19 percent versus 13.3 percent. This result is not unique to this study alone, it has also been discovered for other African countries such as South Africa, Burkina Faso and Togo. Figure 1 also highlights that de jure female-headed households had higher multidimensional poverty than de facto female-headed households

(married head) and male-headed households, in 2017. This welfare diversity among female-headed households in Zimbabwe has also been confirmed by ZIMSTAT (2019). Results disaggregated by sex of the household head and marital status (single, married and widowed/divorced), show that multidimensional poverty was generally higher among households headed by the widowed/divorced. Worse still, these households had a temporal increase in poverty, while those headed by their married and single counterparts had a decrease. The poverty increase poverty was however relatively higher among female-headed compared to male-headed households; 20.1 percent against 5.2 percent. The results also show that occurrence of multidimensional poverty differs by geographic location. In both 2011 and 2017, the percentage of multidimensional poor households was generally lower in urban than rural areas. Female-headed households in rural areas consistently had a higher poverty incidence than their male-headed counterparts, while this only applies to urban households in 2017.

**Figure 1: Percentages of households that were multidimensional poor in 2011 and 2017**



Results for the gender gap in multidimensional poverty by provincial location are summarised in Table 1. In 2011, 7/10 provinces did not present statistical evidence that male-headed and female-headed households experience multidimensional poverty differently. In 2017, female headed households were more deprived than male-headed households in all provinces except Harare and Bulawayo. However, the extent of deprivation varied across provinces. For example female-headed households in Mashonaland East were 34 percent more deprived than male-headed households, while the comparable figure in Mashonaland West was 9 percent.

**Table 1: Percentage by which female-headed households were more deprived than male-headed households**

	2011	2017
Bulawayo	2.8	-11
Manicaland	5.4	28*
Mashonaland Central	1.6	33*
Mashonaland East	10.5*	34*
Mashonaland West	5.5	9*
Matebeleland North	6.3*	15*
Matebeleland South	10.7*	30*
Midlands	-0.1	10*
Masvingo	-0.9	25*
Harare	-31	-11

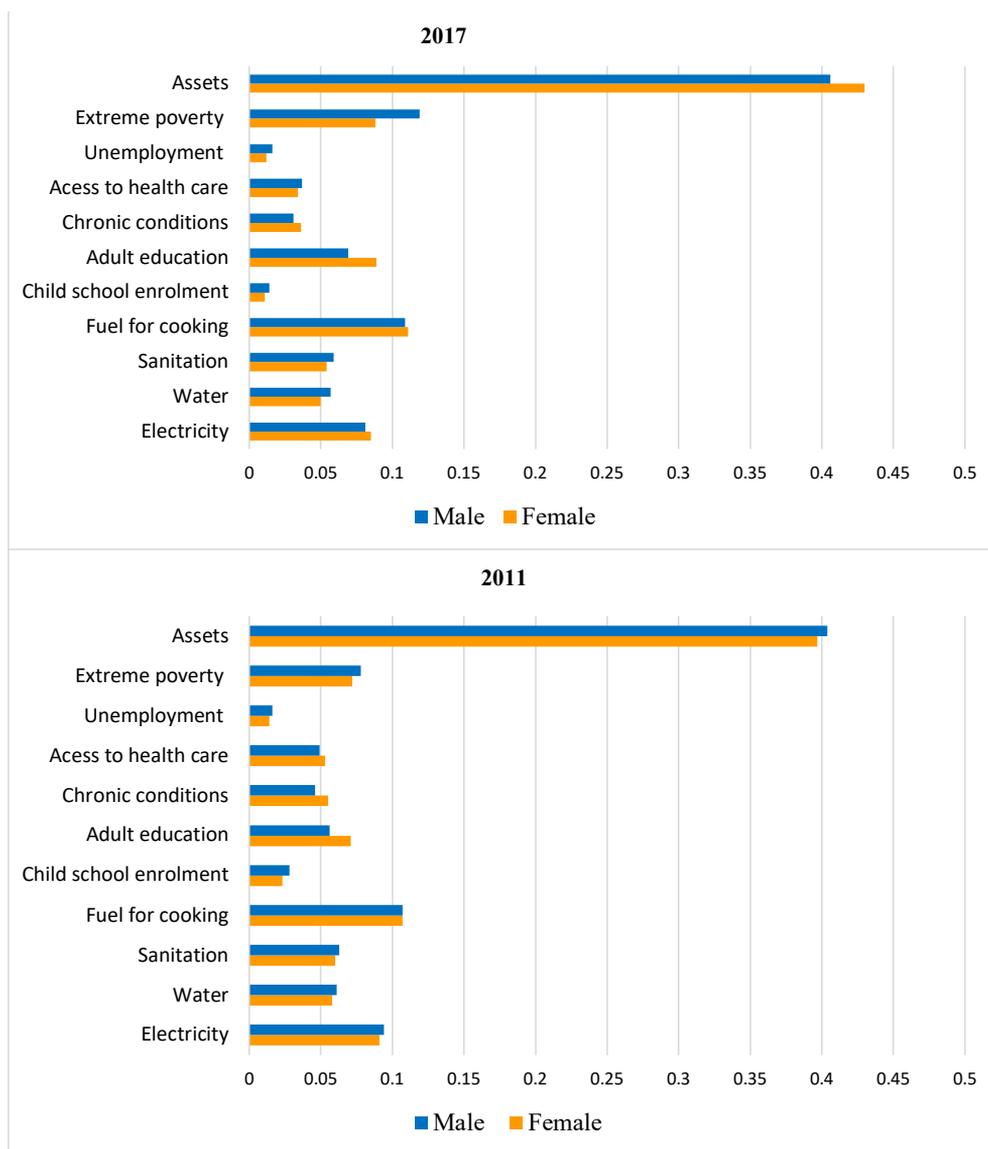
**Notes:** \*means the MPI was statistically different by sex of the household head. A negative value means male-headed households were relatively more deprived

Figure 2 presents overall results for the percentage contribution of each indicator to multidimensional poverty by sex of the household head in 2011 and 2017. Generally, low asset base, low per capita consumption expenditure (extreme poverty), lack of access to electricity and unclean sources of fuel for cooking were the greatest contributors to multidimensional poverty in both periods. These dimensions indiscriminately affected all households regardless of the heads' sex and time period. Lack of agriculture equipment and having no adult who surpassed grade 7 in the household were additional contributors to household deprivation in rural areas, as well as unemployment in urban areas. To some extent, these results are similar to those obtained in an earlier study on changes in national level multidimensional poverty in Zimbabwe (Stoeffler et al., 2016) over the period 2001-2011, and by Rogan (2016) in South Africa. A meticulous analysis of the results also shows that, overall, asset deprivation and having no adult who surpassed grade 7 in the household were the key contributors to the increase in the gender gap from 2011 to 2017.

Overall, we find differences in experiences of multidimensional poverty between female- and male-headed households in Zimbabwe. Over time, the welfare of female-headed households deteriorated while that of male-headed households improved, although both still experienced multidimensional poverty. Also, the gender poverty gap is sensitive to marital status of the household head. It is larger between de jure female-headed and male-headed households when compared to that between de facto female-headed and male-headed households. This follows as widowed/divorced female heads are more vulnerable to poverty than their single and married counterparts. Further, the gender gap is sensitive

to geographic location of the households. Lastly, similar policy actions should be pursued to reduce poverty among female- and male-headed households in Zimbabwe.

**Figure 2: Percentage Contribution of Each Dimension to multidimensional poverty for male-headed and female-headed households, 2011 and 2017**



## 4. Policy Recommendations

Poverty eradication strategies in Zimbabwe need to be gender sensitive rather than being blanket in nature. Female-headed households face higher and increasing multidimensional deprivation than male-headed households, especially when the head is widowed or divorced. Mitigatory strategies for the gender gap should also be cognisant that more efforts are required in rural as compared to urban areas, and that there is provincial heterogeneity in experiences of multidimensional poverty and the gender gap thereof.

Several recommendations to the GoZ come out of this study's findings. Importantly, policies that relax constraints to asset ownership and strengthen poor households' welfare and their economic empowerment are essential. This could include strengthening land rights for poor households with particular attention to female heads, and promoting alternative forms of collateral to improve poor female household heads' and other vulnerable groups' access to credit.

The GoZ and its stakeholders can also implement graduation-type ('cash-plus') social protection approaches to equip poor households and poor female heads in particular, with a package of assets, skills, and livelihoods that can help them emerge from poverty.

Low household income/expenditure can be improved by promoting the creation of decent jobs and bolstering small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). For instance, the GoZ can support training programs which teach female entrepreneurs socio-emotional skills (personal initiative skills) that can help them to thrive economically and in turn boost household income. In addition, the GoZ can implement innovative microfinancing programmes that support expansion and start-up of viable enterprises, and offer standard managerial training.

Concerted efforts to improve general living conditions and access to basic services (water, electricity and ablution facilities) are also essential. As an example, the GoZ can promote the supply and use of alternative clean sources of energy such as solar power and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). It can increase the supply of LPG and affordable gas stoves and cylinders by imposing low or no import duties on LPG and its related products.

Devolution policy should contain unique poverty reduction strategies and funding for each province since there is spatial variation in the incidence of multidimensional poverty. Priority should be accorded to provinces with the highest incidences of multidimensional poverty such as Masvingo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South, without neglecting other provinces. The same applies to Matabeleland South, Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland East when it comes to closing the gender gap. The GoZ and its development partners should also concentrate their efforts on the gender gap in rural as compared to urban areas. Lastly, donor programmes and the GoZ's targeting of social safety nets should be sensitive that de jure female-headed households (widow/divorced heads) are more deprived than their de facto counterparts.