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To cite this article: Ishmael Bhila & Edson Chiwenga (2022): Informal Street Vending in Harare, Interventions, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099938](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099938)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099938>



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Published online: 19 Jul 2022.



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INFORMAL STREET VENDING IN HARARE

How Postcolonial Policies Have Confined the Vendor in a Precarious Subaltern State

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Intersectionality
lifeworld
livelihoods
policy
postcolonial
subaltern
vendor
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The informal street vendor in Zimbabwe has become a subject of abuse and neglect. The condition of subalternity suffered by blacks under colonial structures has been transferred to the vendor in the postcolonial epoch. The apparatus used by colonial regimes to keep the blacks at the peripheries of the city-scape are the ones now used to keep the vendor in subalternity – a condition where the vendor is a subject robbed of a voice, agency and visibility. In this study we situate the position of the subalternised vendor, showing how an intersection of identities of vulnerability subjugate the vendor to a neglected place at the periphery of economic society. Using sociological and postcolonial analysis we show how the position of the informal vendor in Harare as a subaltern has led policy makers in Zimbabwe to turn a blind eye to their plight and to treat them as a nuisance and as enemies.

Introduction

The postcolonial project aimed at emancipating the subaltern, who was not only an ostracized colonial subject and product but also a voiceless, invisible, and neglected agent. The condition of subalternity in Africa was created by colonialism and perpetuated by external and also internal structures. Colonial development was based on exploiting and abusing labour, which was comprised mainly of blacks who had lost their source of livelihood, the land. Postcolonial reality has substituted the system by a continued rhetoric that claims to speak and plan for the subaltern, the marginalized in society. This rhetoric has largely failed to translate into action and results. Policies and reality *vis-à-vis* results have rarely converged. This essay analyses the relationship between small and medium enterprise policies (which are part of the postcolonial structure set up to remove black people from their subaltern position into the mainstream economy) and the street-vending informal sector in Harare. We consider the question of the *voice* of the subaltern, here considered to be the vendor whose livelihood is dependent on that sector. We question the structures set up to enable participants in the informal economy, and how these can (or cannot) play an emancipatory role for the subalternised vendors. We push forward a sociological and postcolonial typology that questions the efficacy of social, political, and economic structures meant to help vulnerable populations and groups.

In feminist postcolonial studies, Gayatri Spivak familiarized Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, arguing – mainly concerning women – that the subaltern was a neglected, impeded subject and mocked by structures put in place by colonialism (Spivak 2013; Morris 2010). Frantz Fanon (1986) argued that the psychological effects of colonialism would manifest themselves in African officials (who had themselves fought against colonialism) through their retention and perpetuation of colonial structures and abuses against their own people. In this essay we identify the position of vendors in Harare, most of whom are women, as that of subalternity, with structures put in place through the Small Enterprise Development Corporation (SEDCO) established by an Act of Parliament in 1983 yet to yield meaningful results (Odero 2006). Using a postcolonial critique, we analyse the position of the vendors who are at the extreme margins of economic and political structures. Postcolonial studies have mostly focused on the failures of former colonizers to fully embrace and integrate their former colonized subjects. In this essay we expand that scope to examine the structures and conditions adopted and/or set up locally – albeit without neglecting their colonial history.



Statement of the problem

Despite the Zimbabwean government and development agents' persistent focus on utilizing the informal sector for poverty reduction, a gap has remained between vending and policy surrounding it. With the priority of policy making being improvement of wellbeing and poverty reduction, vendors in Zimbabwe have remained at the side-lines of the economic sector. Street vending has become an established feature of the Harare metropolitan area, and its impact on the economy and livelihoods of the participants cannot be ignored. This research is aimed at addressing the problem of the position of the vendors and their relationship with government policy, the mainstream economy, and the informal sector itself.

The voices and lifeworlds of the poor in the streets are rarely considered in policy formulation. This thereby inherently brings complexities in the implementation of the policies, as the beneficiaries are silent in the formulation process. This research therefore explores the extent to which the street vendors in Harare can use their voices in order to utilize the capital tentatively provided and protected by policy. We also attempt to understand how best the vendors can utilize their suppressed agency to access different capital.

Background

Subaltern existence in postcolonial Zimbabwe

The attainment of independence by Zimbabwe from colonial rule did not erode the subaltern but substituted the ethnic and racial basis of subalternity with a black elitist one (Mugari 2020). The westernized black elite who emerged under colonialism, Mbeki (2009) argues, were interested in being adopted into the colonial setup so that they too could benefit. This meant that despite an attempt to "help the poor", self-interest became influential in determining how policy formulation and implementation progressed. There is always a "class of intellectuals" or "cultural leaders" who first fight against the hegemony of an alien (external) force and then impose their own hegemony on those they are leading (Bates 1975; Robinson 2005).

It is important at this point to attempt a definition and understanding of the term *subaltern*. The subaltern is an elusive character in that they have neither voice nor recognition. This is an agent robbed of agency. The lack of voice by the subaltern does not mean an inability of locution but an exclusion of their words from the public sphere (Morton 2016). The condition of subalternity means lack of access to the institutionalized structures of

language and power (Mugari 2020). The Gramscian concept of subalternity applies to groups who lack autonomous political power (Smith 2010).

Instead of the intellectuals and elites speaking for the subaltern, Spivak (2013) argues that the subaltern should be given the space in the public sphere to speak for themselves. The public sphere is, according to Habermas, “an arena of deliberative exchange in which rational-critical arguments rather than mere inherited ideas or personal statuses could determine agreements and actions” (Calhoun 1993, 273; Habermas 1996). If the subaltern is given access to the public sphere, they have a chance to shape and determine their own livelihoods. Human beings, according to Habermas, are *homo democraticus* – democratic beings – and the existence of a public sphere allows them to exercise their nature (Flyvbjerg 1998). The position of the vendors in Harare has grown to be that of a denial of a voice and access to any meaningful structures. A successful public sphere can only be viewed as such when it provides for a discourse about shared societal concerns in a rational-critical and influential way (Calhoun 1993; Habermas 1996). The condition of the vendors in Harare since independence in 1980 has continued to be that of a group who have always been spoken for, never with a voice of their own.

There is a continual rhetoric “for the poor” and “towards poverty reduction policies and interventions” which are designed by a group separate from the target population which is resulting in the realities of the target population not being considered in the designs. In literature there is continuous acknowledgement on consensus converging on wellbeing, livelihoods capabilities, equality and sustainability as interlinked ends and means. Instead, development policies rarely consider issues of equality or they may consider issues of equality on paper but not in reality. For Marx, the material world is ultimately the ideal (Marx in MacGregor 2013). His analogy of the political economy clearly portrays how the ideal is impacted by the economic interests of the rich. Chambers (1998) pointed out how the rich and powerful are unwilling to step down, listen and learn from the weak on how to empower them. Interventions and policies in development follow this track in many circumstances. The divide along social categories has proved to be pervasive in developing countries where the political leaders and policy makers are continually neglecting the issues of concern among the weak.

Postcolonial emancipatory policy in Zimbabwe

Following independence, Zimbabwe embarked on policy formulation and reformulation in a bid to curb the implications of the settler’s stimulation and strangulation processes (on stimulation and strangulation, see Arrighi [1970]). This brought quasi-socialist policies which were said to have the

capacity to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. Ironically, instead of redressing economic imbalances, the policies and interventions created a new form of elites: black elites.

There is a continuation of policy reformulation which is said to be geared towards poverty reduction and black empowerment. The affirmative action group composed of many business moguls who are aligned to the ruling class is one of affirmative structures which aim to redress racial imbalances in the economic sector in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Policies and structures are continually being restructured in order to accommodate the poor and to bring equity in the distribution of wealth and resources. The ruling party ZANU-PF between 2000 and 2018 was known for its indigenization policy, empowerment programmes and the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation, which were mainly referred to as policy frameworks and interventions by the ruling politicians for empowerment, reducing poverty and improving the wellbeing of the general populace in Zimbabwe.

In 1983 the Small Enterprise Development Corporation (SEDCO) came into existence through Act No. 16 of the Parliament of Zimbabwe. This was meant to enable the establishment of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The government would provide loans, business support and other needs for the MSMEs. Since the 1980s, however, with the mainstream economy's continued collapse, the informal sector has grown to dominate the meagre economic structures that the country depends on.

The adoption of structural adjustment programmes in the early 1990s compromised the continuation of socialist policies in Zimbabwe. This left most poor Zimbabweans vulnerable to the tragedies of elitist capitalist hegemony. In response to this, the Government of Zimbabwe established an array of support systems, like commercial banks (Agribank, CBZ) and vocational training centres, geared towards empowering informal sector workers (Odero 2006). Although government tried several policies and interventions, the gap between the rich and the poor still widened. The economic turndown which followed structural adjustment programmes and led to unemployment and an increase in urban poverty left people with very few options, with street vending being among low capital potential livelihoods for poor urban dwellers (Njaya 2014). Vending is among those informal activities that are essential livelihood strategies adopted in urban areas in Zimbabwe following the economic meltdown.

It has been argued that the performance of small business enterprises depends on the macro economy and the existent policy environment (Odero 2006). Despite the lip service offered by government in support of the informal sector, the Hawkers Act was enacted in 2003, giving the police and council workers the power to clear vendors from the city in the name of order (Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis & Research Unit &

Bankers Association of Zimbabwe 2014). This has resulted in countless beatings and human rights abuses by the police against defenceless and poor vendors.

There is a continual increase of street vendors in Harare. The Central Business District (CBD) is inundated with vendors stationed at street corners and traffic lights, with others selling their wares on the street and parking lots at shopping centres (Njaya 2014). The street vendors in the capital are suffering from the tragedies of illegality and they survive by playing hide and seek with law enforcers. The city council has legal vending sites in the CBD, but illegal vendors have taken up every open area and pavement in the city (Magodyo and Mugova 2016). The growth in vendors openly engaging in this informal trade, contrary to the municipal laws that regulate street hawking, is worrying and is a symptom of an underlying problem with the economy. However, law enforcement structures can hardly ignore the violation of legal structures in the name of economic hardship. Whenever there is an imposition of power, there is also counter-power (Castells 2009). This leads to the daily confrontation of street vendors and law enforcement agents and laws and policies are continually negating these informal traders. At the same time, informal vendors are linking their activities to different policy frameworks, such as indigenization and the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimASSET). This is mainly in line with the way they interpret these policies.

After 2017, when Emerson Mnangagwa became president of Zimbabwe, the indigenization and ZimASSET policies were abandoned and replaced by the National Development Strategy (NDS1 2021-2025). The NDS1 neglected the vendors and other informal traders outright, noting only that the focus would be on growing the formal economy, which would only be done through formally registering the informal sector (Republic of Zimbabwe 2020).

Methodology

In order to explore and capture the voices, experiences and practices of street vendors and policymakers, we utilized a qualitative research methodology. Using a qualitative research methodology allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of the voices, feelings and values of street vendors who have been relegated to a state of subalternity from their own frames of reference or in their social setting which was in line with the objectives of the study [on the importance of capturing participant voices in qualitative research, see Best (1993)]. The flexibility of a qualitative methodology also enabled us to probe deeply into the lifeworlds of different actors from different social groups.



The study used an exploratory research design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem of subalternity. The exploration focused mainly on the relationship between street vendors and policy, looking at the different problems, variables, and solutions within that complex relationship. Exploratory research allows for flexibility and adaptability, and is a good groundwork for theory formulation (Reiter 2017).

In collecting data, we conducted four focus-group discussions (FGDs) with 36 vendors, 24 of whom were women. We also conducted key informant interviews with 6 Harare city council officials and policymakers, and 5 informal traders identified through the FGDs. In order to gain first-hand information, we also visited Harare CBD, Mbare market, and Glen Norah A (Spaceman area), where we carried out observational research and transact walks.

Discussion of research findings

Based on the thematic categories used and developed during the process of data collection, we present the different situational positions in which vendors find themselves. At the same time, we also present the position of policymakers, their understanding of the structural positioning of vendors and the views of both parties on how to improve the position of vendors.

The data presented here were collected from a total of 36 respondents, 6 of whom were policymakers, while the remaining 30 were vendors, 5 of whom were in a sort of representative union for the vendors. We had planned 8 key informant interviews with policymakers but 2 were unavailable, with one commenting that it was a politically sensitive issue which he would not be comfortable discussing. We had also planned 15 key informant interviews with vendors, but we could only interview 5, the rest we made up through FGDs.

The study area

In and around the CBD of Harare there are more than five designated vending areas. Vendors do not use these areas and instead pursue their activities in the CBD where most of the vending is done in the four main bus ranks in the city: Copacabana, Fourth Avenue, Market Square and the ‘Charge Office’ rank. These bus ranks are strategically crucial for vendors because that is where the most human traffic is concentrated, meaning that more customers are highly likely to be found commuting to and from different residential locations in the City of Harare and beyond. Based on observation through transact walks, we discovered that some of these ranks, like Copacabana,

have designated vending areas where the government put structures. However, these structures mainly shelter used-clothes vendors and exclude all the other types of vendors. The city has vendors who sell used clothes, groceries, vegetables, toys, books, recycled bags, electronics, phone recharge cards and fast foods among various other tradable stuff. In Spaceman, Glen Norah a single area is designated for vending, but vendors cover the whole space between the informal taxi/kombi rank and shops. Some vendors also move around selling their goods in households.

We also observed that the vendors desisted from having a single place per person where one could claim long-term ownership as most are always moving. However, there are some who are known for consistently being in the same place where customers can easily find them. Regardless of the vast differences in traded goods, there are mainly two types of vendors. The first type goes and occupies spaces in designated areas, street corners, near entrances to shops (where they usually sell goods that are found in the shop at a cheaper price) or anywhere convenient. These are not very mobile, and among them are those who are known for monopolizing certain spots where customers can easily locate them.

The second type (touted as most elusive by police and policy makers) are the mobile vendors. These carry their goods or push them in carts, roaming around looking for where the customer traffic may be highest.

A general view of vendors' position

In the first instance, all the respondents – vendors and policy makers – acknowledged that the position of vendors, both in the economic and socio-political structure, was very precarious. Policy makers voiced that the vendors, as one respondent put it, were “a headache because of their problems and the problems they cause”. There was consensus that vendors suffered from dire financial constraints, poverty, and social hardships. The situation of vendors was worsened by the economic situation of the country. One of the participants in an FGD pointed out, “The situation of vendors is worsening every day due to the worsening economic situation in the country”. Participants in the same group agreed that there was a time when street vending was lucrative, and they made good profits from the business, which was between 2010 and 2015. One of the participants pointed out that it was at that time when they managed to do “meaningful” projects and that the environment was enabling as compared to the current situation. The current earnings of vendors are very low, and vendors are only clinging to the activities just for survival due to livelihood constraints. One of the participants pointed out that “in vegetable vending, for example, one can hardly get a profit of 40 bond a day, which is only US\$1”.



Access to information and space

“What I know is that I am here to survive. The only information that I have is that the *kanzuru* (council police) will rob me if I don’t run. That’s all I can do”. This is the response of one lady who sells vegetables on a street corner in Harare CBD. All the respondents voiced that communication channels between vendors, policy makers and the police were almost non-existent. The vendors, as the most vulnerable group among the three, not only lack the space to carry out their business, but also lack information on how, where and with which help they can do their trading.

The vendors voiced that they do not know where the laws about vending come from, as many politicians, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and the City Council officials all sent different messages, with the last two mainly employing violence on defenceless people. Vendors proved that they do not know where exactly they are supposed to carry out their activities in Harare. One key informant who is a policy maker explained that there are designated areas which are specifically designed for different products in line with the Public Health Laws and related by-laws. He pointed out that vendors do not want to use those areas which are specifically designed for their activities. On the other hand, the vendors pointed out that they do not have clear information on where exactly they should be and which procedures to follow to secure those spaces. Some of the participants pointed out that such information is shared at political rallies and especially among ruling party cadres.

Participants in an FGD pointed out that those with power occupy all legitimate vending sites and they are able to acquire required documents to legitimize their activities. They are the ones who benefit from previous policies like the indigenization policy and ZimASSET. At the time of writing, there was a policy lacuna, with respondents referring solely to the indigenization policy and ZimASSET.

Composition of the vendors

Street vending in Harare is largely dominated by women. Among the 36 respondents, 21 were women and they were less in policy makers’ respondents list. Women who participated in the research pointed out that their direct involvement with feeding the family is growing, as they are either household leaders or their husbands are struggling to feed their families due to the economic situation. It was also noted that women are the majority due to cultural constructs related to the activities in street vending. Some women, in confidential key informant interviews, pointed out that sometimes street vending can only help them in a very insignificant way, leading them to

resort to prostitution by night and street vending by day. Both trades, they pointed out, put them at risk of physical harm by police. The vendors who participated in the research were also composed of the elderly and disabled people. People who are in vending have different academic qualifications and some even have degrees, but the economic situation and rate of unemployment is pushing them into vending.

However, a discussion with participants in a focus group made it clear that the numbers of men in street vending is continually increasing as people are faced with new realities. One participant said, “if you take a close look on the composition of vendors you can see that men are joining the industry and their numbers are increasing as compared to the past years”.

Legal and policy confusions in vending

The research established that the vendors and policy makers have conflicting views on their understanding of development policy and development. One city council official who was engaged as a key informant interviewee pointed out that street vending is guided by the Food Hygiene by-laws of 1975 and those who do not sell food are guided by the Hawkers and Street Vendors by-laws of 1978. He further pointed out that vendors operate without the required licence documents. He explained that there are many guiding laws which are ignored by vendors, including Chapter Four of the Regulation (EC) 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs. The legislation, he clarified, allows only healthy people to participate in food vending. The other participant pointed out that both vendors and food outlets that are selling food to the public are failing to conform to health by-law requirements.

On the other hand, the informal traders complained that the authorities overlook their challenges and the solutions which are in place do not consider the realities of the informal traders in the city. There is a lack of objective communication between the policy makers and the informal traders. The informal traders pointed out that the places designated for them to sell their products are far from customers. They pointed out that those areas are inaccessible to customers and the CBD is the best place to sell their products. For these reasons they prefer to operate in the city centre, where there is a big market. These vendors go against Hawkers and Street Vendors by-law 4(1)b, which requires them to work in specified areas.

Informal traders pointed out that the policies which guide their activities are implemented without their inputs being incorporated and that there are many ambiguities on how the guiding structures are communicated to them. The informal traders referred to ZimASSET and the indigenization policy as among miscommunicated policies which they thought were

enabling them to operate with less persecution. They claimed that clean-up campaigns which are being executed as a way of sanitizing the city by authorities in Harare undermine their position within the mentioned policies. Some of the participants in the research accused politicians of misguiding them in their understanding of the provisions of these policies. They pointed out that this created a totally confused understanding of the provisions of the policy, which in most cases was contrary to the real provisions of the policies which should be guiding them.

The informal traders are more concerned with their livelihoods regardless of them not following the established structures. For example, with policy makers pushing for a cleaner city to avoid preventable diseases and ways which ensure revenue inflow to the city council, the informal street vendors are worried about their livelihoods and they see law enforcing agents as a threat to their sources of income. Interviews conducted with those who are into vending brought out that they do not pay for licence discs because “they are charged more money for a hawker licence and allocated a space for selling where no one comes, they said that between 2010 and 2015 the hawkers licence was US\$140”.

The vendors continually linked their illegal activities to different policies. They regularly referred to policies like indigenization and ZimASSET. One of the participants in a focus group discussion said, “Chivendor ichi nguva yaMugabe chaive chichitenderwa, taive neZimASSET ne Indigenisation policy uchinyatsoziva kuti mudhara anosupporta maindegenous” (“This trade was allowed during Mugabe’s time, we had ZimASSET and the Indigenisation Policy, being sure that the old man supported indigenes”).

On the other hand, policy makers saw no link between the informal activities of vendors and policy frameworks. This clearly portrayed a conflicting understanding of policies between different social groups. The policy makers’ structures were designed to put an end to these informal activities that were negatively impacting the city’s esthetics. This resulted in a cat and mouse game between vendors and law enforcers, with vendors yearning for enabling structures in their businesses, most of them pointing out that poverty continually forced them to remain on the streets regardless of the constraining structures and enforcements which are put by different authorities.

Vendors in one of the FGDs pointed out that policy makers seemed not to understand the prevailing situation in Zimbabwe and they seemed to be “coming from the mars while we live on earth” (as narrated by a participant). They pointed out that the policy makers do not consider their conditions and their situation and that they are largely marginalized and never consulted in the policy formulation process. They pointed out that the policy makers do not know the realities of the general populace in Zimbabwe and they make policies which seem to be relevant in other countries but not in Zimbabwe.

One of the participants pointed out that the policy makers just replicate policies from other countries without an understanding of the lived realities and experiences of Zimbabweans.

The policy makers and law enforcers pointed to the activities of vendors as direct violations of the law and as detrimental to development. The council authorities rued how the activities of street vendors compromised the quality of the capital city. The council authority forces vendors out of the streets and vendors are forcing themselves back to the streets to earn a living, since vending is the only option for poor and unemployed urban dwellers in a calamitous economic environment. However, the interaction between street vendors and law enforcing authorities is one of power struggle, with law enforcers using their legitimate position to deal with street vendors. Street vendors who have no say on policy formulation are at the same time at the receiving end of all the implications resulting from policy failure.

Available policy structures

The Government of Zimbabwe intervened to improve the conditions of small and medium enterprises through different loaning and capacity building programmes led by the Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises and Cooperatives Development, but the interventions proved not to cater for the realities of the informal vendors. Requirements such as registration and those needed to get a loan were out of reach for the poor people in the streets. “Could I possibly seek a licence to sell a box of bananas?” one respondent mused.

The government also put on loaning schemes through the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development, but the collateral requirements and registration processes for both ministries proved to be alien to poor vendors in the streets of Harare. It was revealed in the research that formal registration of the vending businesses was avoided by most of the vendors as they agreed that it would attract nothing but taxation, which was going to be a burden on already dwindling income from the business. One of the participants pointed out that many of the initiatives to fund vending benefited those who were loyal to the ruling party and not the general populace – those who benefited were also those who held influential positions or those who had stronger networks in the ruling party. They pointed out that most of the funds were aligned to the ruling party. The informal sector was rather accused of causing price hikes due to their lack of discipline and lack of productivity, as well as a failure to adhere to policy and legal structures.

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The policies continually formulated and restructured in an economically struggling country do not consider the challenges faced by informal vendors in Harare. Participants in an FGD in the CBD pointed out that political and economic instability in Zimbabwe had its largest impact on poor urban dwellers. All the vendors in the research complained that no one would ever heed their voice if they complained, and even mainstream newspapers like the *Herald* never bothered.

Some vendors attested that in a quest to improve their position they support and attend rallies of the ruling class in a bid to secure and try to lure the hearts of policy makers, who in return seem not to understand the poor street men and women. Politicians, the respondents said, held the power within the structures to give access to resources and space to whom-ever they liked, so it is imperative for vendors who want to survive to “dance to what’s playing at the moment”. However, one vendor cautioned that Zimbabwean politics is too volatile to be trusted, giving as an example Grace Mugabe, the former first lady of the country, who went around giving vendors free reign in the city only for Mnangagwa and other politicians to come and “soil” all the plans. Vendors complained that they are being used as political pawns by those in power without any real concern about their livelihoods, rights and dignity.

Conflicts between vendors and law enforcement

One elderly vendor summed up the physical violence, discrimination and dehumanization the vendors face at the hands of authorities like this: “Smith [former colonial Prime Minister] is here, wearing a black face, preaching a different gospel, now with more helpers”. He explained that the same violence the black people used to be subjected to for going into “white” areas of the town is now being deployed against vendors who are in fact a huge part of the population: “I was young during Smith’s time, but I hated how we could not have the freedom to do anything in our country. I vowed that the new Zimbabwe would have to be different. Now we are where we started”. The municipality constantly deploys police to force vendors out of the streets. Participants in FGDs narrated how they were harassed, beaten, chased or assaulted by the national and council police. Some showed the researchers their bruises where they were beaten, fell or injured themselves while running from the assault by the police.

Compounded with the physical assaults is the robbery of vendors’ goods by the council police or the Zimbabwe Republic Police. “If they take your stuff, don’t expect to get anything back, they are worse than thugs, they rob you in uniform while smiling”, one respondent voiced when asked to elaborate on the clashes with the police. Most vendors in the research were

of the belief that the reason why police assault the vendors was not necessarily to clean the city but to rob or to get bribes. In one FGD a vendor stated “these people would never survive if we were not there, they actually want to see us on the streets so they can plunder from us. We hunt money, they hunt us”. Most of the vendors, regardless of how old they may be, learn to run from the officials. In order to “combat the problem of elusive vendors” the city council now deploys its police in civilian clothing. This enables them to acquire bribes more easily, while also arresting a few vendors to show their superiors.

Analysis

The intersectional analysis, embedded in postcolonial theory, highlights the precarious position of vendors in Harare and the complexity and impossibility of their relationship with policy makers and law enforcers.

Perpetuation of historical subalternity

An appraisal of colonial history and a juxtaposition with the current position of many Zimbabweans, particularly the vendors, would show that there is nothing new. During the colonial era, policies were made to protect the few white people who were not only in power but also rich, prejudiced, entitled and unapologetic about their position (Mbeki 2009). This was done to the exclusion of the majority who were black and different from the colonial master. Now, 40 years after independence, 95 per cent of the population is unemployed (Ratisai 2018) and most of that unemployed population is engaged in informal vending to make ends meet. An estimated population of less than 1 per cent control politics and the economy and benefit from it while consciously excluding the majority. In contrast, the official unemployment statistics show that only 5.73 per cent of the population are unemployed in Zimbabwe (as of 2020) and the unemployment rate has always been portrayed as steady at an average of 5 per cent by government (O’Neill 2021). This is mainly because the informal sector is regarded as formal, with the National Development Strategy 1 admitting, however, that there needs to be a formalization of informal sector players to bring down unemployment rates. Most academic and media publications range the unemployment rate between 90 per cent and 95 per cent (Worstell 2017; BBC News 2017).

The subaltern has ceased to be the rural folk with black skin but has become the old woman carrying a basket of bananas, the young graduate

selling phones on a cloth on the street corner, and the middle-aged man shouting for people to notice the discoloured oversized coats he is selling.

Policy makers have proved unwilling to move beyond colonial structures. Laws that still govern “loitering”, vending and public conduct were simply carried over from colonialism. The vestiges of colonialism are still being felt by most of the population, not only vendors, and not only in Zimbabwe, but all over Africa and all the former colonized world. The subaltern has continued to exist, not only under the former colonial master but also under a new master of the same colour but using a colonial apparatus to control the population.

Compounded layers of vulnerability

During this research we were taken aback by how levels of vulnerability come together to leave the vendor in a precarious state of subalternity. As a starting point, most of the vendors come from poor backgrounds – a characteristic shared by the majority. Locations like Hopely Farm, Epworth, Mbare, Mabvuku and others are known for their high levels of poverty. The poverty is all too evident when it comes to access to water, electricity, transport, housing and other scarce necessities in those areas. Even the means of educational attainment for the children of those people are measly compared to those in rich places like Borrowdale and Avondale, among others. As most respondents confessed, vending would therefore be the only viable option for survival.

It was also evident that most of the vendors were women, who themselves are a vulnerable group, especially when exposed to such conditions of poverty. Some women, as already shown in the findings, had their vulnerability exacerbated when they resorted to prostitution to supplement their income. Some of the women are single mothers who must take care of their children at the periphery of the economy and society. These women are highly likely to own nothing of significance, land or other fixed assets.

Besides women, elderly and disabled people are involved in vending. They find themselves in a position where no social services exist for them and where relatives, despite their will, are not able to offer any assistance. In Glen Norah some elderly and disabled people sit outside their gates selling fruit, vegetables, airtime or other small-scale trading goods. In the CBD they can also be seen on street corners and fixed places where they are vulnerable to stampedes when people are running from the police. They are an easy target for corrupt officials.

The most able-bodied, whom one would expect to be the economically active group, the youths, do not own anything, have their paths to resources, structures and livelihoods blocked and see vending as the only viable option.

Their vulnerability emanates from their lack of access, lack of a future and lack of ownership. They have become what Zygmunt Bauman (2004) characterized as “wasted lives”, the “outcasts” created by modernity, people who are disposable, redundant and a nuisance to the government. Our understanding of vulnerability must change for us to see how youths have become a group with no future or place in society dominated by the few. For these youths, race and place play a crucial role in keeping them under subjugation, with the confession that one is from Zimbabwe closing so many doors if one tries to go abroad. The rights, liberties and leisure that characterize youths elsewhere are alien to the Zimbabwean youth who is left with only vending as an alternative.

Vending as subalternity

The vendor does not only become a subaltern because of the various intersections of vulnerability we have mentioned, the assumed identity as a vendor in Zimbabwe itself has become a source of subalternity, of risk, of ridicule and of a muffled voice. This subaltern is different from the one in Gayatri Spivak’s analysis because she remains in a place where she would otherwise call home but robbed of all the comforts of home. The space that the colonized subject had been robbed of before independence has been recaptured by an elite few who continue to milk the blood out of the relentless toil of those without voice.

What is most significant in our analysis is that the same apparatus used by colonial regimes (police brutality, lack of access to information, deprivation of space, restrictive rather than enabling laws, concentration of the means and modes of production in the hands of the few, among a host of other measures) are the ones used to keep vendors at the periphery of the mainstream political economy. Karl Marx’s words ring true in this inescapable reality, the “revolutionaries” are simply conjuring “up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language” ([1852] 2006). Those in power can only express the language of colonialism because that is the language they know, and their target colonized subject can only be the powerless, defenceless vendor who can only beg and scrap for a living. Their only frame of reference is in the past, with subjugation and abuse of large populations the only ways they know for running government.

The vendor is part of a large group of people who were forced into a trade out of necessity, not out of choice. As our findings show, most of the vendors interviewed had acquired an education and trained for various jobs, only to

realize that there was no opportunity for them to work in any professional capacity, with unemployment at such high levels.

Of relationships, animosity and invisibility

The relationship between the vendor and the policy maker is unique. Whereas the vendor is invisible to the policy makers when it comes to decision-making, she becomes important when the government needs to pad the official statistics for those who are “employed”. They are also essential not only in providing revenue but also in keeping the law enforcement authorities happy through officially sanctioned robberies and bribery. The findings clearly showed that it has become commonplace for council officials and national police to disguise themselves as civilians in order to make asking for bribes much more efficient and easier.

This relationship is not even that of a polarized nature; the vendor is a silent and subjugated partner between the two – without voice and power for bargaining. The vendor is therefore left to his own fate, running for his life and surrendering anything he may have earned to an avaricious authority that imposes itself uninvited. Whether the vendor gets a place to trade or not is immaterial to policy makers because they will still get paid by the vendor, either through high licence fees or through bribery or confiscation.

The vendor is invisible in so far as policy making is concerned. Power resides with politicians, city council officials and the police. Social difference inherently results in conflicts in development interventions and the development policies will become inherently skewed against the poor if these conflicts and power relations are not managed. This is being witnessed in the case of street vending in Harare, where the weak are being suppressed and their voices are muted and not heard in policy making, which results in their needs not being considered in policy and their condition is not catered for in policy.

Solutions?

The Government of Zimbabwe has always appeared to offer solutions for small-scale traders. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development is the parent ministry for the informal sector. As per the Ministry’s mission “to create and maintain an enabling environment that promotes the development and sustainable growth of micro, small and medium enterprises and cooperatives”, street vendors hope that the Ministry comes up with favourable policies for their sector (ZIMCODD 2016). However, this study discovered that at times there is

policy discord within the government which affects the concerned section of the Zimbabwean population. Secondly, the informal vendors themselves cannot easily fit into the category of “SMEs” because of their lack of a documentable structure. Most of the vendors ply their trade in order to survive, not as a business entity meant to grow. As one confessed, it would be absurd for one to go through the licencing process in order to sell a box of bananas.

Conclusion

The position of vendors in Zimbabwe has become precarious, with them being pushed to the peripheries of society. They have become subalterns who do not have a voice (in policy making and voicing their concerns) and a space, both in the society envisioned by those in power and the geographical space to ply their trade. Vulnerabilities of vendors are compounded by an intersection of various positions and identities, including gender, single motherhood, age, location and their positioning away from the policy-making, economic and social spaces. The vendors have become subalterns who are at risk from physical violence, neglect, indignity and abuse by law enforcing officials, among others.

The lawmakers and enforcers, on the other hand, see the subalternised vendor as a nonentity without a significant voice, a nuisance who causes problems for the esthetic goals of town planners, and a source of easy money for corrupt officials. It has become a job for these officials to gain from the struggles of the subaltern vendor.

The structures that have been put in place to maintain the vendor in the position of a subaltern have been borrowed from colonialism, with the apparatus like police brutality, closing of spaces and dehumanizing tactics being a feature plucked from colonial administrations. The subalternity of the vendors has therefore emanated from having a few individuals assume the role and functions of the former colonial system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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