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When embracing gender equality endangers women: Experiences of public transport female conductors in Gweru Town, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of female conductors in the public transport sector, particularly the parastatal, Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) regarding gender equality and women empowerment using the case of Gweru town. It employs the concept of women empowerment as its analytical framework and is based on qualitative research methods involving in-depth interviews with 15 participants comprising female conductors and male drivers. The article argues that the implementation of gender equality policies in the public transport sector without addressing misogynistic attitudes driven by patriarchal norms endangers women rather than empowering them. It found that ZUPCO female conductors experienced humiliating informal initiation into the job, negative labelling, inability to reconcile work and family and sexual abuse and harassment, which undermined the noble goal of enhancing gender equality in the public transport sector. Regardless of these negative effects, female conductors also enjoyed some degree of empowerment through employment and monetary gain, which gave them economic independence. The article concludes that the negative outcomes of embracing gender equality through women's employment in the public transport sector outweighed the benefits.

1. Introduction

In a world characterised by huge calls for the accelerated emancipation and empowerment of women in sync with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially number 5 on gender equality, the proportion of women entering into previously male-dominated professions including the transport sector is expanding (Raz and Tzruya, 2018; Nkete, 2015; Greed, 2000). Though slow, women are undoing the gendered nature of jobs by joining male-dominated occupations such as the transport sector (Adorean et al., 2023; Bagilhole, 2002; Porter et al., 2023; Porter and Omwega, 2022; Porter, 2008). Despite that, women still face occupational segregation in non-traditional jobs such as the transport sector with gender stereotyping continuing to pose significant barriers for women's career progress (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). The experiences of women in previously male-dominated jobs such as the public transport sector are worrying, especially in developing countries (Varghese and Kumari, 2017; Wright, 2019). Similarly, in Africa, men continue to dominate the transport sector with the few women joining that sector experiencing many challenges to progress ranging from sexual harassment to general gender discrimination (Muhoza, Wikman and Chavez, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024; Porter and Omwega, 2022;

Porter et al., 2023).

Zimbabwe has made significant progress in developing legislation, policies and institutions meant to promote gender equality and empowerment of women (Mhembwe, 2019). As of 2021, the country was ranked 7th out of 54 countries in Africa with progressive gender equality and equity standpoints (Nyahunda, Chibvura and Tirivangasi, 2021, p. 35). Zimbabwe is a signatory to a legion of international and regional conventions on gender and women empowerment. The international conventions include Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Beijing Platform of Action, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Declaration on the Right to Development. At the regional level, Zimbabwe ratified the Maputo Protocol and the Southern African Development Community's Declaration on Gender and Development (Chinyoka et al., 2018).

At the national level, the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe under section 24 mandates the state and other institutions and agencies of government at every level to adopt policies within the limits of resources available to them to ensure that every citizen is accorded an opportunity to work in a freely chosen activity to achieve a decent life both for themselves and their families. In addition to that, the Labour Act of

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Zimbabwe aims to protect women from all forms of abuse at workplaces (Dziva et al., 2023). Though the participation of women in previously male-dominated jobs increased over the past two decades, these women continue to experience negative stereotyping (Chuma and Ncube, 2010). In this context, the negative stereotyping of women in male-dominated professions such as public transport risks making them ‘intruders’ and perpetual second-rate actors. This impinges upon women’s ability to execute their duties freely and efficiently in sync with SDG 5 and relevant national, regional and global policies supporting gender equality and women empowerment in the public transport sector akin to other economic spheres.

Research on gender equality and women empowerment in Zimbabwe focuses on the extent to which the government and other sectors of the economy have embraced gender equality policies and the successes and challenges faced (Chuma and Ncube, 2010; Muchemwa and Erzingatsian, 2014; Shava and Ndebele, 2014; Zinyemba, 2013). Studies on the dynamics of women empowerment in politics (Phiri et al., 2022), the mining sector (Tiernan and O’Connor, 2020), and the agriculture sector (Tirivangasi et al., 2023) show that the genuine empowerment of women is still a pipe dream because Zimbabwe is largely a patriarchal society. On its part, research on the public transport sector in Zimbabwe focuses on other issues except how embracing gender equality in this sector has affected women (Gweshe et al., 2021; Mbara, 2006; Mbara and Pisa, 2019; Mazorodze and Ndawana, 2022; Muchadenyika, 2019; Munuhwa et al., 2020). Women’s experiences as passengers have also been covered (Manjokoto and Ranga, 2018). The dearth of literature discussing the dynamics of women empowerment in the public transport sector of Zimbabwe has motivated this study to analyse the extent to which embracing gender equality has empowered female conductors. It interrogates the experiences of the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) female conductors, particularly those working on local routes from the Gweru Central Business District (CBD) to different suburbs in the town.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it complements extant literature on the experiences of women workers in the transport sector in Africa, which scholars such as Turner and Fouracre (1995) and Porter et al (2023) observe is under-researched. Second, researching the experiences of female conductors helps to improve policy and practice about women and work, especially in the male-dominated transport sector. As Reskin and Padavic (1988) observe, research into women entering non-traditional occupations is quite important as it challenges the ideology of inherent differences that justify male dominance in the workplace. Accordingly, the running thread in this study is that the implementation of gender equality policies in the public transport sector without addressing misogynistic attitudes driven by patriarchal norms endangers women rather than empowering them.

This article proceeds in four sections. It provides a literature survey on women empowerment and the transport sector followed by the methodology employed in this study. After that, the discussion turns to present and discuss the main findings of the study demonstrating how embracing gender equality endangered women in the public transport sector. The article ends with a conclusion and some policy recommendations on improving the public transport sector to ensure women are genuinely empowered.

2. Women empowerment and the transport sector

Though there are different definitions of women empowerment, there is a consensus among scholars that it involves giving women the necessary resources and opportunities to exercise their rights, get involved in decision-making, and exercise control over their lives (James et al., 2019; Reshi and Sudha, 2022). This means that empowerment must enable women to have self-worth and independence to define their wants and those of their communities. In this study, the engagement of women as conductors in the public transport sector must enable them to make choices and have control over their lives. This is in

sync with research showing that women’s ability to make choices and decisions, participate in the affairs of their communities and have access to resources is a prerequisite to sustainable development (Kabeer, 2005; Duflo, 2012; Mhembwe, 2019; Chigudu, 2021). This explains why gender equality and empowerment have been a central feature of global development agendas including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDGs and regionally, the African Union’s Agenda 2063 (Pathania, 2017).

Scholars also believe that the empowerment of women is critical in achieving gender equality and promoting women’s rights (Reshi and Sudha, 2022). In this context, women empowerment is an important process in influencing gender equality policies at workplaces, including making laws and policies that prohibit gender discrimination of women in non-traditional occupations such as the transport industry. For any society to thrive, men and women must have equal access to resources such as clean water, education, capital and technology (USAID, 2022). Economic empowerment of women, for example, can be a good foundation for self-reliance and positive development in communities. Giving women access to critical resources helps to build vibrant and resilient economies, reduce poverty and unlock human potential on a transformative scale (Wekwete, 2013).

Despite all the perceived and real benefits of women empowerment, barriers hindering communities and countries from fully achieving gender equality and women empowerment exist. Dube and Dziva (2014) observe that Zimbabwean women are still circumscribed despite the existence of national and international instruments to promote empowerment and gender equality in all spheres of life. Lack of political will is one of the obstacles to women empowerment in countries like Zimbabwe. For example, in 2013, the former and late president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe appointed a male-dominated cabinet (Dube and Dziva, 2014). This undermined whatever policies and rhetoric the country had toward women’s empowerment and equality because of their exclusion in government decision-making forums. Additionally, many women occupying managerial positions in the banking sector in Zimbabwe continue to ‘operate in men’s shoes’ as they have little influence in decision-making (Chuma and Ncube, 2010). Men are still being influenced by Schein’s (1973) think manager-think male idea whereby men are the only ones that are believed to be suitable for middle managerial posts. This limits the career advancement of women.

To have a nuanced understanding of the experiences of the ZUPCO female conductors in Gweru and their implications for gender equality and women empowerment, we draw on Eveline’s (1998) narratives of the segregation of women in masculinised occupations. First, the transport sector fits into the category of heavy work occupations. It belongs to a group of occupations considered dirty, noisy, dangerous and unhealthy and require much physical strength and power (Peters, 2013). This is called the ‘heavy work narrative’. Based on this narrative, women are considered physically incapable of being workers in the public transport sector. This is because they have to carry heavy loads to assist passengers and sometimes fight with competitors in the transport sector.

Secondly, the transport sector is associated with a ‘dirty culture’. This implies that work in the transport sector is conducted within a rough, dirty and aggressive culture (Dziva et al., 2023). In Zimbabwe, the dirty culture is associated with vulgar words, and dirty tricks such as stealing and running away from the police officers as well as a dirty environment punctuated by fights and quarrels. Similarly, in Abuja (Porter et al., 2023), as in Kampala, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (Muhoza et al., 2021), patriarchal norms marked women in the transport sector as prostitutes. Such negative labels influence the way women workers in the transport sector are perceived by their workmates and the general public. According to Eveline (1998), this ‘dirty culture tale’ implies that women are vulnerable in the transport sector and need protection. This suggests that a change of the workplace culture rather than the exclusion of women from occupying such jobs in the public transport sector has the potential to culminate in gender equality policies bearing fruits.

Thirdly, the transport sector is characterised by high levels of

violence. Fights are prevalent in this sector across the African continent. As Porter et al. (2023) argue, the transport sector is an arena in which fear for personal safety is rampant due to the high incidences of physical violence. Drivers fight over non-observance of road rules, conductors fight for customers and passengers also fight with the touts, drivers and conductors. This is especially the case in Zimbabwe because of the prevalence of *mushika-shika* (unregistered transport operators) (Mazorodze and Ndawana, 2022, pp. 438-439). The prevalence of violence makes the transport sector unsuitable for women workers unless the sources of the violence are dealt with.

Regardless of the preceding and anti-women tendencies in the transport sector in Zimbabwe, there have been efforts to empower women through employing them in the public transport sector, especially ZUPCO. ZUPCO was established in 1985 as a parastatal that provides public transport for the commuting public in urban areas and subsequently also serviced urban-rural and inter-city routes. Though its operations over the years have been affected by government deregulation of the urban transport system, general inefficiency, corruption and mismanagement, the government reintroduced ZUPCO in urban areas operating along private omnibuses in 2019 (Mazorodze and Ndawana, 2022, p. 432). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ZUPCO assumed a monopoly on the urban transport system (since March 2020) across the country, which ended in the post-COVID-19 era (since mid-2022) when its incapacity was exposed resulting in the return of private omnibuses (Mazorodze and Ndawana, 2022, pp. 432-433). At the time of writing, though ZUPCO still provided services in urban areas, including Gweru, its operations had significantly decreased. According to available evidence, at its peak ZUPCO’s staff complement numbered 7512 and conductors, drivers and inspectors constituted 65 %, 6 % and 10 % respectively (Agere, 2021). The parastatal’s deliberate efforts to employ women as drivers and conductors resulted in half of its conductors being women (Matiashu, 2020). Only 10 females were drivers resulting in ZUPCO remaining a male-dominated milieu (Mahora and Valela, 2022). At face value, the statistics of female conductors show remarkable strides in promoting gender equality and women empowerment. However, as the findings of this study reveal, the negative outcomes of embracing gender equality through women’s employment in the public transport sector outweighed the benefits.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to answer the central question: how does embracing gender equality in the public transport sector empower or endanger female conductors? Using the case of Zimbabwe’s Gweru town, the study’s objectives were to examine the experiences of female conductors in the public transport sector and evaluate how women’s employment as conductors affected them. A qualitative research approach and a single case study research design were employed to gain an insider perspective of the realities that female conductors experience in their day-to-day work situations. A single case study research design enabled the researchers to closely examine the data within a specific context (Zainal, 2007, p. 4). In sync with this, this study utilised the single case study research design to contextualise the impact of gender equality policies within the specific context of the public transport sector of Gweru town. Therefore, the single case study design empowered the researchers to gain in-depth and extensive information about the experiences of female conductors while remaining with a wide range and real-life standpoint (Yin, 2014, p. 16). The single case study research design appeared appropriate to not only answer the “how” and “what” questions central to this study. It was also relevant in this study because it aimed “to capture the reality of the participants’ lived experiences and thoughts about a particular situation” (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014, p. 42). This allowed the researchers to gain a wealth of information, which was easy to comprehend and interpret (Fouche and Schurink, 2011, p. 322).

The data for this study were mainly gathered from 15 purposively

selected participants comprising 11 ZUPCO omnibus female conductors and four ZUPCO omnibus male drivers operating at the Gweru CBD terminus for local transport. Out of the 11 female conductors, nine were still working for ZUPCO while two had left the job to work as vendors. The demographic characteristics of all the research participants are shown in Table 3.1. Purposive sampling was preferred because it enables researchers to target some people for a particular purpose based on the wealth of their knowledge and experience (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014, pp. 60-61). Data were collected through unstructured interviews conducted between May and October 2023 with all the participants. These interviews were preferred because of their conversational nature, which provided a framework for the participants to freely share their experiences, thus avoiding straight-jacketed responses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

Most of the interviews (11) were conducted face-to-face and only four were done via WhatsApp. The interviews conducted via WhatsApp and mainly shared as audio messages after peak hours enabled the researchers to capture the experiences of those female conductors who could not be available for face-to-face interviews. All the interviews were recorded. Consent was mainly verbal since the conductors were uncomfortable with signing consent forms. The participants were prepared to participate in the research without having signed forms and the researchers respected their decision. As a result, anonymity was used to protect the identity of all the participants through pseudonyms (Novak, 2014, p. 38). Data from unstructured interviews were corroborated with direct observations as the researchers spent time at the terminus and used ZUPCO transport to commute to and from work. Direct observations enabled the researchers to glean the drivers, touts and passengers’ perceptions towards female conductors. In this context, the triangulation of the researchers’ observations and data from unstructured interviews went a long way in ensuring the trustworthiness of the study’s findings (Yin, 1994, p. 93).

A thematic approach was used to analyse and present the collected data. In the analysis of the data, patterns were identified, examined and recorded based on themes drawn from the main research question and objectives as a starting point. This assisted in organising and integrating divergent findings and opinions from the interviews and observations (Delpont et al., 2011, p. 299). The researchers used word-for-word quotes from participants to ensure that the explanation “remains directly linked to the words of the participants” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 3). In terms of presentation, themes and

Table 3.1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Job	Interview Method
F1	26	Female	Single	Conductor	WhatsApp
F2	28	Female	Unmarried	Conductor	WhatsApp
F3	40	Female	Single	Conductor	Face-to-face
F4	25	Female	Single	Conductor	WhatsApp
F5	27	Female	Single	Conductor	Face-to-face
F6	35	Female	Single	Conductor	Face-to-face
F7	31	Female	Single	Conductor	WhatsApp
F8	27	Female	Single	Conductor	Face-to-face
F9	35	Female	Married	Conductor	Face-to-face
F10	40	Female	Married	Former conductor, now a vendor	Face-to-face
F11	45	Female	Married	Former conductor, now a vendor	Face-to-face
D1	33	Male	Married	Driver	Face-to-face
D2	30	Male	Single	Driver	Face-to-face
D3	42	Male	Married	Driver	Face-to-face
D4	28	Male	Divorcee	Driver	Face-to-face

Source: Constructed by the authors using fieldwork data.

classifications and their sub-themes and classifications are presented as sections with their related sub-sections.

4. Not empowered but endangered: experiences of ZUPCO female conductors in Gweru

The main findings of this study are summarised in [Table 4.1](#).

4.1. Negative experiences

4.1.1. Humiliating informal initiation into the job

ZUPCO female conductors underwent humiliating informal initiation into the public transport sector, which undermined the ideals of gender equality and women empowerment. Apart from the conventional interviews done by the formal officials for one to be employed as a ZUPCO conductor, drivers and the touts informally initiated the female conductors into the job. Many female conductors shared that the informal induction was humiliating. The denigrating part of such informal orientation expressed itself through the use of threats and verbal abuse. For example, one female conductor said:

During the first days drivers always shout at us using offensive language that depict us as incapable humans. Sometimes they threaten us as if they are our bosses. Abusive language is always used on us. On one hand, it appears they want us to get frustrated and leave the job and on the other hand they want us to be subordinate to them (Interview with F4, 20 June 2023).

The preceding was humiliating because it was often done in front of passengers and other workmates. It lowered the self-esteem of the female conductors who then felt that they had joined a wrong job. One of the female conductors summarised her experience by simply saying: “The induction is not a welcoming one” (Interview with F6, 15 August 2023).

On their part, the drivers did not see any problem with the informal initiation process female conductors underwent. This is because, in sync with [Eveline’s \(1998\)](#), ‘dirty culture tale’, they believed that the public transport sector is well suited for men rather than women and their goal in informally inducting the female conductors was to help them become effective conductors. The drivers considered the initiation necessary to remove women’s pride. Literally, this implies that being a female

Table 4.1

An overview of the participants’ responses to the core issues in this study.

Key issue raised	Number of interviewees concurring	Main responses
Humiliating induction of female conductors.	3	The participants agreed that the induction was humiliating and the male drivers viewed such a humiliating experience as necessary.
Negative stereotyping of female conductors by drivers, male conductors and the general public.	4	The participants concurred that female conductors are heavily stigmatised because of misogynistic attitudes informed by patriarchal values.
Sexual harassment of female conductors.	3	The participants agreed that sexual harassment of female conductors is rampant in the public transport sector.
Challenges in reconciling work and family life.	3	The participants noted that it is very difficult to reconcile family life and work.
Positive experiences of female conductors.	9	The participants pointed out their positive experiences apart from the negative ones.

Source: Constructed by the authors from a synthesis of the study’s findings.

conductor means a deviation from a ‘normal’ woman who has to mind about her beauty or dignity. It means adjusting to some kind of an “*I do not care character*” associated with touting and the *mushika-shika* culture inclined to break the law. One of the ZUPCO omnibus drivers said:

These female drivers need proper induction in order to do this job well. In our profession we meet different people of different characters. Such people can scold, humiliate and in some cases do not want even to pay. As a result, we have to expose these conductors to such situations by scolding them, asking sexual favours from them so that they get used to what they will face on a daily basis (Interview with D3, 12 September 2023).

From the foregoing, it is clear that being an effective female conductor means that one is no longer shy, talks to customers and also organises passengers without the help of the males, either driver or tout. Therefore, though it was humiliating, the informal orientation female conductors underwent can be seen as necessary because of the masculine nature of the job.

Yet, most ZUPCO female conductors believe that they were just as capable as their male counterparts but that the males in the profession and even the public did not want to acknowledge that. They pointed out that the challenges they faced, especially from the passengers, were similar to those that were faced by male conductors. One female conductor remarked that:

The challenges we face as conductors are just the same regardless of sex. People sometimes try to avoid paying, sometimes they bring torn notes and just scold us for no good reason. Generally, the public sees a conductor as someone who is not educated and ignorant in various aspects. However, if this happens to us as female conductors, our drivers and the general public interpret that as emanating from our status as women. In some cases, our drivers intervene unnecessarily when we have an argument with the passengers just to prove that without their assistance, we cannot perform effectively (Interview with F8, 7 October 2023).

These experiences are not peculiar to ZUPCO female conductors nor to Zimbabwe. ZUPCO female drivers also had similar experiences of coarse comments from male passengers, disrespect and lack of confidence from the public ([Matabvu, 2022](#); [Matiashe, 2020](#)). In Abuja, female bus conductors also bemoaned unscrupulous behavior of men who refuse to pay fares ([Porters et al., 2023](#)). This dovetails with the psycho-analytic feminists’ belief that men have an inherent desire to oppress and subjugate women. Men show their masculinity and dominance by resisting female authority and instructions ([Abbott, Tyler and Wallace, 2006](#)).

In sync with the above, some passengers refused to comply to the female conductors’ orders simply because they were women. In support of this, one of the ZUPCO female conductors said:

Sometimes when you instruct passengers to sit properly they give some insulting responses. On several cases I was told that an omnibus cannot be stretched. I think it is just a way of showing that they do not want to be controlled by a woman. Surprisingly, such utterances are from women insulting their fellow woman. If a male driver just gives the same instruction, they will simply obey without even questioning (Interview with F1, 10 May 2023).

This suggests that the exaggeration of the differences between male and female conductors in Zimbabwe has nothing to do with the capabilities of women but patriarchy. This reinforces [Chuma and Ncube’s \(2010\)](#) observation that people in Zimbabwe tend to resist instructions from women in public spaces.

The humiliating informal induction process constitutes what [Kanter \(1977\)](#) calls ‘boundary heightening’ where male drivers, conductors and touts over-romanticise the difference between themselves and female conductors whom they treat as ‘outsiders’. For most males in the public transport sector, the entry of women into this domain is mere tokenism.

Still, such tokenism is viewed as a threat to masculinity, especially if the numbers of women continue to rise (Zimmer, 1988). This is true especially considering the high levels of joblessness in Zimbabwe, which hovers around 90 % (Moyo, 2023) though the government agency, Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency is adamant that unemployment is approximately only 20 % (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2023, p. 4). The unwelcome induction is, therefore, a toolkit to tighten boundaries against increased women's participation in the profession.

Male public transport workers appeared to be actively involved in creating an atmosphere in which women do not flourish. Sometimes this is done through subtle means, which involve sabotaging female conductors' careers by issuing damning comments coupled with faint praises. Thus, the humiliating induction female conductors underwent can be seen as a practice by men of creating a masculine culture in which female conductors feel that they do not belong to the profession even without anyone telling them (Cockburn, 1991). A former female conductor (now a vendor at the terminus) captured this well when she said:

I personally resigned from this profession [conductor]. No one forced me to take that decision but the situation at hand pushed me to simply withdraw myself. The general work atmosphere required no further clarification for me to leave the job. I would rather die of hunger than join this profession again. Those who are still there are made of sterner staff (Interview with F11, 20 August 2023).

The negative experiences of female conductors during the informal induction process forced some to quit and pursue other livelihood options, which adversely affected the efforts to promote gender equality and women empowerment. The negative attitude against the public transport sector that developed among some female conductors risks hindering other potential female workers thereby furthering the gender inequalities in the sector regardless of policies and measures introduced to end them as in Portugal (Adorean et al., 2023) and Australia (Ghalebeigi, Gekara and Madani, 2023). Therefore, the informal induction into the profession experiences of the ZUPCO female conductors in Gweru reveal that efforts to promote gender equality and women empowerment without addressing patriarchal norms that give rise to misogynistic attitudes endangered women.

4.1.2. Negative labelling and inability to reconcile work and family

Akin to patriarchal norms that engender misogynistic attitudes and contribute to the labelling of women in the public transport sector as prostitutes in cities such as Abuja (Porter et al., 2023), Kampala, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (Muhoza, Wikman and Chavez, 2021), ZUPCO female conductors were generally perceived as loose and people who have failed in life. The public perception concerning the female conductors was that they were very promiscuous and most of them did not have stable relationships. Such sentiments were common amongst passengers, vendors at the terminus and male drivers, touts and conductors. When asked for her comments with regards female omnibus conductors, a former female conductor, now working as a vendor said:

In my view, women who join this profession end up being morally loose. I was once a female conductor and I resigned after realising that the profession is not in line with my values as a married woman. Most of the female conductors you see here are not married and some of them are divorcees. We witness a lot of illicit relationships between female conductors and the drivers and male conductors here. Female conductors are not suitable for marriage life. It is only poverty that pushes these women into this dirty profession (Interview with F10, 5 August 2023).

The researchers also came across passengers and vendors who subscribed to the above sentiments with some even noting that they had seen several female conductors who started as morally upright workers but were now 'beyond repair'. This negative perception of the public posed serious challenges for the female conductors in executing their

duties.

The fact that society generally perceived the female conductors as morally loose meant that they were at the risk of sexual harassment at the hands of the general public, workmates and sometimes their bosses. One of the female conductors narrated her ordeal:

For the general public and our workmates, being a female conductor implies being unmarried, desperate and morally loose. This explains why men always ask sexual favours from us, use abusive language and touch our bodies in an abusive way. It is not all of us who are morally loose but that perception is strongly held by people in Zimbabwe (Interview with F2, 20 May 2023).

The above excerpt echoes the general experience of women in the public transport sector in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Kampala, which remains perceived as a male domain and a wrong place for women (Muhoza, Wikman and Chavez, 2021). The reality that women who join the transport sector suffer from social stigma and criticism accounts for their few numbers most of which are only there because of desperation.

Some of the participants told the researchers that drivers and inspectors promised to marry the female conductors so that they get out of the 'dirty and risky' job. In many cases, women have to trade sexual favours to not only get promotion but survive in the public transport sector work. In other instances, male drivers solicit sexual favours from their conductors in exchange for teaching them how to drive. Most female conductors also indicated that the time they spent at work also influenced how they were perceived by the public, their workmates and family members. For example, most public transport operators in Gweru start to work at 5am and end between 8 and 9 pm. Unlike women who work in other public sphere jobs from around 8am up to 4 pm, female conductors work in the evening which is normally regarded as the 'peak hour.' This time of the day is normally reserved for commercial sex workers who are popularly referred to as the 'ladies of the night' (Makondo and Makondo, 2014). Working at night is risky for women who can be raped or sexually harassed.

One female conductor who was the only married woman among the female conductors who participated in this research indicated that she faced a lot of challenges with regards evening time. She said that each time she got home around 9 pm she found her husband angry. Her circumstances were worsened by her in-laws who always pressurised her husband to stop her from working because she can become promiscuous. She had this to say:

My husband's relatives believe that a typical wife must be settled at home by 6 pm. When I come at around 9 pm I find them angry. Even if they know that I work with a male driver, they always ask whether I was still at work or I was in other unscrupulous activities. They insist on my husband to ban me from working as a conductor (Interview with F9, 15 October 2023).

The foregoing exposes the degree to which, akin to the experiences in Greater Tunis (Murphy et al., 2024), the negative perceptions and narratives society has on female workers in the public transport sector anchored in patriarchal cultural norms undermine their efforts to work within it.

In sync with the idea that investing the same time and energy in two different activities is almost impossible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985, p. 77), female conductors found it challenging to reconcile the duties of a mother, wife and conductor. One female conductor admitted that reconciling work and family responsibilities was hard for her. She remarked that:

The work is just too much. I do a lot of household chores early in the morning, including preparing my child for school to the extent that by the time I go to work I will be already tired. As a mother and wife, I have to ensure that I perform all my expected conjugal duties properly. It is only that I want to complement my husband's meagre

salaries. If it was not the case, I could have left the job (Interview with F9).

The female conductors' struggle to balance work and family demands is not unique to the public transport sector because many women employed in both formal and informal sectors in Zimbabwe face similar challenges (Wallace, 2006). What makes the female conductors like any other working women in patriarchal societies in Africa in general and Zimbabwe, in particular, is that marriage and family life are highly valued and prioritised to the extent that most married women are not prepared to sacrifice marriages at the altar of professional duties (Chireshe and Chireshe, 2010). This dovetails with Chuma and Ncube's (2010, p. 181) observation that, in Zimbabwe, "culturally, a woman must execute her [domestic] duties irrespective of her 'other' duties 'elsewhere'."

Almost akin to experiences in Abuja (Porters et al., 2023), the ZUPCO female conductors struggled to balance work and family needs with far-reaching implications for the health and wellbeing of those involved, from the mother to the children. One conductor indicated that:

I always come from work at around 8:30 pm and very tired. I start cooking the evening meal and assisting my two children with their homework. Sometimes I find them [children] already asleep on empty stomachs or after eating cold food like bread and drink (Interview with F3).

The failure of the female conductors to balance family and work demands endangers the conductors themselves and the children's personal and health security. While most young single mothers interviewed shared that they had sent their young children to their mother-in-laws and other maternal or paternal relatives because work commitments left them with no time to attend to them, they risked being accused of not taking care of their children like female drivers in South Africa (Komane, 2013). Therefore, the experiences of the female conductors in Gweru support our overarching argument that the implementation of gender equality in the public transport sector devoid of undoing misogynistic attitudes anchored in patriarchal norms endangers women rather than empowering them.

The foregoing discussion points to the need for policy interventions to enable female conductors to balance their responsibilities. As Porter and Omwega (2022) note, improving child care to avoid jeopardising the lives of children in a bid to empower their mothers will go a long way in removing some of the challenges associated with employed women's failure to balance work and family responsibilities. In addition, women should be given flexible working hours following the liberal feminists' understanding that enacting policy and legal changes in all aspects of human life is required to advance women's interests (Abbott, Tyler and Wallace, 2006). Some developed countries such as the United Kingdom are already implementing these policies with better results (Wright, 2016). In this light, the development of policies that provide flexible working conditions for women in the public transport sector can go a long way in realising the goal of gender equality and genuine women empowerment.

4.1.3. Sexual harassment and abuse

Female conductors revealed that they experienced sexual harassment in its various forms. Among others, verbal harassment was common. The actors in the public transport sector in Zimbabwe, especially the touts and conductors who are predominantly male and, in sync with Eveline's (1998), 'dirty culture tale', are known for their use of vulgar language amongst themselves and against the public (Chirisa, 2017). Such behaviours were applied to the ZUPCO female conductors too. The use of sexual connotative language was common and most female conductors believed that this was one of the mechanisms used by touts, male conductors and drivers to lure them into promiscuous behavior. All ZUPCO female conductors interviewed concurred that they experienced verbal sexual harassment daily. Words that were widely used to describe

their physical appearance in a sexually offensive manner picked from both interviews and direct observations include *Mutumba asekuru* (meaning a woman with a highly built physical structure usually with large hips and buttocks), *Twuslender* (meaning tall and thin) and *Simbi* (meaning a very beautiful woman). Consistent with Dziva et al., (2023), this was essentially body shaming and body naming which is also rampant in Zimbabwe's informal sector. Still, one of the conductors remarked that:

The use of sexually connotative language is a test of character for us. Men in general and touts, male drivers and conductors in particular use such kind of language to see the kind of people that we are. If your reaction shows that you are not into sexual business, they leave you and start to call you names. If you show interest in their language, then they will quickly make some sexual advances on you. In essence, the use of sex language is meant to lure us into sexual activities (Interview with F7, 25 September 2023).

The above sentiments suggest that the experiences of ZUPCO female conductors are inconsistent with the objectives of gender equality and women empowerment. This is because some of the ZUPCO female conductors were dehumanised and left without control of their lives in the course of discharging their duties.

Female conductors also indicated that they experienced unwanted touching as a form of sexual harassment. Touting by nature is associated with what is commonly known as *chikudo*, meaning mock fights. Among men, such mock fights are natural and normal as they help to reduce stress and because of the nature of the man's body no one is aroused sexually. However, when the fights involve women they become unusual because of the nature of the female body. From the interviews conducted, the female conductors complained that their male counterparts usually took advantage of the mock fights to abuse them. In most cases, male conductors and drivers touched the breasts and buttocks of their female workmates in the name of mock plays. One of the female conductors remarked:

Sometimes you think we are just playing but you then end up discovering that the men are now targeting your body. This is because they target our breasts and buttocks. Even if you reprimand them seriously, they will not desist from their behavior (Interview with F5, 10 July 2023).

Male drivers and conductors were also quite aware of such kind of abuses in the public transport sector. Revealing male chauvinism, most of the male drivers interviewed indicated that they did not want to see their wives or sisters work as female conductors because the job is associated with a lot of abuses, which they did not only witness but also participated in (Interview with D1, 20 May 2023; D2, 23 June 2023; D4, 18 September 2023).

Another form of sexual harassment experienced by the ZUPCO female conductors is exposure of private body parts by drivers and passengers. This involves public urinating in front or at the back of the vehicle or just beside the road. This was also confirmed during direct observations. At times the terminus toilet was locked because of lack of water or as a result of blockages. This forced drivers and the touts to urinate on the walls of the nearby buildings or the rear of the omnibus while their female conductors watched. One female conductor lamented this behaviour saying:

It is boring, my brother. At times we just keep quiet when they do their things because the reaction they make when you rebuke them is also sexually offensive. One day I was told that I should not complain about things I am used to. I was told that all people of my age know the private parts and there was no reason for me to be ashamed. Sometimes you can see that their actions are intentional (Interview with F3, 7 June 2023).

It is clear that male transport workers normalise sexual harassment and do not mind the consequences of their actions. This dovetails with

Gruber and Bjorn's (1982) observation that sexual harassment in non-traditional occupations is a weapon employed by men to reaffirm their dominance and control over their female counterparts. It appears the female conductors represented a direct challenge to masculinity and therefore such "emergent and powerful women must be cut down to their sizes through sexual means" (Cockburn, 1991, p. 141).

Sexual abuse of ZUPCO female conductors was not only confirmed in Gweru but also featured prominently in Zimbabwe's popular newspapers, which revealed the degree to which women's lives were endangered at the workplace. Most headlines spoke to issues of sexual exploitation of ZUPCO female conductors. For example, the *Zimbabwean Mail* dated 13 November 2020 had an article entitled "ZUPCO Inspectors Impregnate 6 Conductors". Similarly, *Masvingo Mirror* dated 26 July 2022 released a headline "Sex, Nepotism scams hit Masvingo ZUPCO". The fact that employment in the parastatal was on a temporal basis incentivised sexual abuses of female conductors at the hands of their supervisors and other managers who recommended renewal or non-renewal of the contracts. Akin to the widespread experiences of sexual abuse and gender-based violence found by Wright (2018) in Cape Town and Nairobi, the foregoing shows that the sexual abuse of female conductors, which occurred not only in Gweru but across the country, endangered women instead of empowering them.

4.2. Positive experiences

Despite the negative experiences discussed above, some positive benefits of women being employed as conductors in the public transport sector were shared. Akin to the findings of Porter et al., (2023) in Abuja, Cape Town and Tunis, most of the ZUPCO female conductors regarded the job as a safety net that cushioned them from the severe unemployment situation in Zimbabwe. Getting employed even in those jobs that have been looked down upon or that are not in line with one's qualifications and gender such as the public transport sector made most of the conductors interviewed satisfied. Out of the 11 female conductors who participated in this study, only three were holders of Ordinary level qualifications. In this light, joining the public transport sector was beneficial for the female conductors in a country where nearly everyone survives on the basis of what Jones (2010) calls *kukiya-kiya* (make do) whose primary goal is just "making things do" or "striving in order to eat" (Jones, 2010, p. 286). The fact that joining the public transport sector was part of the *kukiya-kiya* survival strategy for most of the female conductors was well-captured by one conductor who noted that:

I did not join this profession by choice. I have always felt that this job is naturally for men but because of high unemployment rate I have no option. For your own information, I am a holder of an honours degree from a reputable university but I could not get the job I wanted. If any opportunity arises, I am ready to leave this job (Interview with F1).

In agreement with the above, most female conductors interviewed indicated that they were not willing to be full-time conductors but the job was just a stopgap measure as they look for other professions. In sync with Eveline's (1998) narratives of the segregation of women in masculinised occupations, many female conductors concurred that their experiences of the job reinforced the view that it was for men and not well-suited for females. Further reinforcing the deep-rooted patriarchal norms in Zimbabwean society, the female conductors in question reiterated that the job did not tally with typical moral women in an African society. They joined the job mainly to just make do whilst looking for better things to do because they found it not worth to continue depending on their parents for buying clothes when they had done their part by educating them. Some of the conductors praised ZUPCO for opening up opportunities for women in the transport sector with one saying 'half a loaf is better than nothing' (Interview with F5). In this light, whether the female conductors were pushed by their economic necessity, as in Karnataka in India (Varghese and Kumari, 2017), or not,

there is no doubt that such employment meant some level of economic independence and empowerment. That temporal empowerment, as they described it, was very crucial in creating a sense of self-reliance and economic independence.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the experiences of ZUPCO female conductors regarding gender equality and women empowerment. It adds to the extant literature on both gender equality and women empowerment and transport in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular that had hitherto elided discussing the extent to which embracing gender equality in the public transport has empowered women. Using the case of Gweru town, the study demonstrates that embracing gender equality in the public transport sector without addressing misogynistic attitudes driven by patriarchal norms largely affected women negatively rather than positively. There is no doubt that ZUPCO female conductors were left more endangered than empowered. They experienced humiliating informal initiation into the profession, negative labelling, inability to reconcile work and family responsibilities and sexual abuse and harassment, which undermined the noble goal of enhancing gender equality in the public transport sector. Still, female conductors also enjoyed some level of empowerment through employment and monetary gain, which gave them economic independence.

Considering that the negative outcomes of embracing gender equality through women's employment in the public transport sector outweighed the benefits, this study suggests four policy interventions. First, there is a need for the Zimbabwean government to formulate and enforce laws that address patriarchal norms influencing misogynistic attitudes and gender inequalities in the workplace. Second, there is a need to improve child care and social support for employed women to avoid jeopardising the lives of children in a bid to empower their mothers. This will go a long way in removing some of the challenges associated with employed women's failure to balance work and family responsibilities. Third, women should be given flexible working hours that will not make them vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment by either the public or workmates. Lastly, there is a need for more support and investment in skills training of female public transport conductors to address the humiliation and vulnerability that come with the informal induction by male actors within the sector. In this light, the development and implementation of these policies are likely to improve the working conditions of women in the public transport sector culminating in the attainment of the goal of gender equality and genuine women empowerment.

It is worth noting that this study has limitations inherent in its research design and methodology. The fact that the study's data were drawn from the views of a few participants in Gweru town makes it a small-scale exploratory study whose findings cannot be generalised to the experiences of women beyond the studied case. Therefore, future research can broaden the sample size and quantitatively explore the experiences of female conductors in Zimbabwe's urban areas. There is also a need for a comparative analysis of the experiences of women in the public transport sector of Zimbabwe and other African countries.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Moses Changa: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Enock Ndawana:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

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