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# *‘Women Can Do What Men Can Do’: The Causes and Consequences of Growing Flexibility in Gender Divisions of Labour in Kitwe, Zambia\**

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*Economic insecurity has catalysed growing flexibility in gender divisions of labour in Kitwe, Zambia. People’s resulting exposure to, as well as collective reflection about, a critical mass of women performing work that was previously presumed to be beyond their capabilities, and valorised because of its association with masculinity, appears to erode gender stereotypes relating to competence and status. It is this weakening of gender beliefs, rather than women’s increased access to resources per se, that appears to have directly undermined gender-status inequalities. This article’s portrayal of growing gender egalitarianism contrasts with (though does not dispute the empirical claims of) earlier accounts of economic crisis in Zambia, which emphasised women’s increased burdens. Some domains, such as unpaid care work, continue to be marked by persistent inequalities; however, drawing on ethnographic research (comprising life history narratives, group interviews and observation), it is argued that this is not necessarily an indicator of women’s low status generally.*

## **Introduction**

Historically, the rich copper deposits on the Zambian Copperbelt were mined, managed and administered by men – as wage labourers, breadwinners, trade union officials, civil servants and politicians. This pattern also held for related industries and the financial gains therein. Women thus became more dependent upon men, particularly husbands, for both economic support and social respect during the late colonial period (1950s). Anthropologist A.L. Epstein found that ‘[w]omen were not able to seek achievement and the esteem of their fellows in the same ways that had become possible for men’.<sup>1</sup> Women were largely stereotyped as housewives, while men tended to present themselves as masters of their households. Public leadership has also been male-dominated: women’s prescribed role has been to support men’s endeavours, by, for example, performing praise songs and dancing for them at rallies. The few women elected to public office endured tremendous scrutiny with regard to their sexuality and morality, and were then mocked if too timid or chastised if overly

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1 A.L. Epstein, *Urbanisation and Kinship: The Domestic Domain on the Copperbelt of Zambia, 1950–1956* (London, Academic Press, 1981), p.75; see also H. Powdermaker, *Copper Town: Changing Africa. The Human Situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* (New York, Harper & Row, 1962).

aggressive, and generally denied respect. Widely perceived as deviating from prescriptive gender stereotypes, female leaders might, at best, be accepted as 'honorary men'.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1980s, Ferguson observed that collective discussions of male mineworkers portrayed women as problematic 'sexual objects', naturally 'grasping, greedy, selfish creatures ... interested only in using and deceiving men in order to get at their money'. Misogyny was 'extreme and unremitting'.<sup>3</sup> Ferguson's explanation for such gender antagonism is that 'women's economic strategies were necessarily largely focused on ways of gaining access to male-controlled resources' because 'men dominate the Copperbelt labour market to an extraordinary degree'.<sup>4</sup>

If resentment, gender stereotypes and inequalities were due to sex-differentiated patterns of resource access, they should have been weakened by increased female labour-force participation. Yet this prediction is not supported by previous studies. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken in the 1980s and early 1990s in low-income areas of Lusaka, Hansen argues that

the declining economy, which has turned many women into important contributors to household welfare in the face of men's shrinking incomes from wage employment, has aggravated the built in tensions in the conjugal domain without transforming rights and claims in a manner that rewards women for their work efforts in their own right.<sup>5</sup>

A number of other studies similarly characterise poor Zambian women as unacknowledged 'shock absorbers' of neoliberal economic restructuring.<sup>6</sup> Such depictions are consistent with the wider literature on gender and development. In The Gambia, Costa Rica and the Philippines, for example, Chant finds that 'while the onus of dealing with poverty is being progressively feminised, there is no obvious increase in women's rights and rewards ... women see no justification to ask or expect more as a result of giving more'.<sup>7</sup> Reviewing research on the impacts of structural adjustment in a wide range of contexts, González de la Rocha and Grinspun argue that women

are working harder and longer hours, without any significant positive change in their status. ... Even though poverty and insecurity at work seem to be eroding men's traditional role as the family's main provider, the resilience of patriarchal systems of authority has prevented the changing roles of men and women in the productive sphere from translating into more equitable

2 G. Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating Autonomy, Incorporation and Representation* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004).

3 J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (London, University of California Press, 1999), p.188–9.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 194. For further discussion of historical trends in gender relations in Zambia, see A. Evans, 'History Lessons for Gender Equality from the Zambian Copperbelt, 1900–1990', *Gender, Place and Culture* (forthcoming).

5 K.T. Hansen, *Keeping House in Lusaka* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), p.103; see also A. Schlyter, *Recycled Inequalities: Youth and Gender in George Compound, Zambia*, Research Report No. 114 (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999), pp.10, 79.

6 R. Heltberg, N. Hossain, A. Reva and C. Turk, 'Coping and Resilience During the Food, Fuel and Financial Crises', *Journal of Development Studies*, 49,5 (2013), pp. 705–17; C. Moser and J. Holland, *Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability: Volume 4* (Washington, DC, World Bank, 1997), pp. 62–5; P. Mususa, 'Contesting Illegality: Women in the Informal Copper Business', in A. Fraser and M. Larmer (eds), *Zambia, Mining and Neoliberalism: Boom and Bust on the Globalized Copperbelt* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Note that alongside the general narrative of persistent inequalities and growing burdens, various Zambian studies also indicate female resistance to these changes: K. Crehan, *The Fractured Community: Landscapes of Power and Gender in Rural Zambia* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1997), pp.104, 133, 137; J. Parpart, 'Class and Gender on the Copperbelt: Women in Northern Rhodesian Copper Mining Communities, 1926–1964', in C. Roberston and I. Berger (eds), *Women and Class in Africa* (New York, Africana Publishing Company, 1986); Schlyter, *Recycled Inequalities*, p. 10.

7 S. Chant, *Gender, Generation and Poverty: Exploring the 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2007).

gender relations within the household. . . . [G]ender identities appear to be enormously resilient, even in the face of rapid change.<sup>8</sup>

This article argues that growing economic insecurity in the Zambian Copperbelt over the past 25 years has catalysed increased flexibility in gender divisions of labour. Contrasting with earlier studies of Zambia and other developing countries, it is further argued that such flexibility has actually weakened gender inequalities. Prolonged exposure to women demonstrating their equal ability to assume roles historically dominated by men seems to undermine gender stereotypes relating to competence and status.

This analysis draws upon interviews that I conducted with more than 200 participants in Kitwe, the largest Copperbelt city, between 2010 and 2011. I also lived with families from across the socio-economic spectrum, though predominantly in a low-income, high-density residential area. Fifty-eight interviewees provided detailed life histories, narrated over several days, while the remainder primarily contributed to group discussions. The sample was developed via a snowballing method, through interactions in different places, such as residential neighbourhoods, markets and political associations. Participants would then introduce me to their peers, kin, neighbours and co-workers. The sampling was not random, since it deliberately included those with differing experiences, perspectives and gender beliefs – those who ostensibly rejected and those who endorsed gender stereotypes (the latter group, for example, included men whom female leaders of a market association had identified as resistant to their leadership). This paper focuses on small-scale traders, for two reasons. First, since small-scale trading is a common livelihood in Kitwe, members of this group provide insights into typical circumstances. Secondly, this enables comparative analysis with earlier studies on female labour-force participation in urban Zambia, which also focused on traders.<sup>9</sup> Given that I met most participants in public places, my data are likely to be less representative of more socially isolated people, such as the elderly, disabled and chronically ill.

Interviews were generally carried out in Bemba, the local language. Participants were invited to tell me about their lives, reflect on their experiences and identify salient influences. Individual accounts of personal and broader social change (its causes, dimensions and extent) were triangulated by observation, and by separately interviewing others with different perspectives, such as spouses, kin, neighbours, co-workers and trade union representatives.

Group discussions focused on specific themes, such as historical gender roles in Kitwe. Because these groups were pre-established (and not artificially constructed for research purposes), contributors were often sufficiently comfortable to dispute each other's perspectives. Some urged others to modify or contextualise their claims, to accommodate diverse experiences. This enhanced their collective control over the agenda, though content was still clearly influenced by my presence and by group power dynamics.

The data were coded using themes that emerged during the research. Coding enabled the identification of trends across the sample, which are referred to when quoting individual participants so as to communicate the extent to which their narratives were shared across the socio-economic range of participants. These data are examined via a theoretical framework that understands sex-differentiated practices as resulting from internalised gender stereotypes, presumptions about cultural expectations and patterns of resource access.

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8 M. González de la Rocha and A. Grinspun, 'Private Adjustments: Households, Crisis and Work', in A. Grinspun (ed.), *Choices for the Poor: Lessons from National Poverty Strategies* (New York, United Nations Development Programme, 2001), pp. 64, 66. Countering this general trend, Tripp argues that urban Tanzanian women's entry into the labour force, although it was crisis-induced, actually enhanced their self-esteem, autonomy and social networks. A.M. Tripp, 'Women and the Changing Urban Household Economy in Tanzania', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 27, 4 (1989), pp. 601–23.

9 Hansen, *Keeping House in Lusaka*; Schlyter, *Recycled Inequalities*.

Gender stereotypes can be either descriptive (assumptions about the traits of the typical man and woman) or prescriptive (mandating how men and women should behave). Even if an individual does not personally endorse these gender stereotypes, they may still conform to them owing to concerns about cultural expectations. These are presumptions about the gender beliefs upheld by others in one's society. Having learnt through observation and personal experience, people anticipate that their behaviour will be praised or condemned according to the extent to which they conform to normative expectations for their presumed sex category. This motivates the careful management of behaviour and compliance with the norms dominant in one's society. Ridgeway uses these two concepts to explain the persistence of gender status inequalities in the United States. She argues that gender stereotypes concern competence and also status, terming the latter 'gender status beliefs'. Gender stereotypes are said to be infused with value judgements, such that stereotypically feminine and masculine traits are not equally appreciated. Because men are often assumed to be more competent in socially valued domains, they may be deemed more worthy of status, respect, esteem and influence.<sup>10</sup> In addition to exploring gender stereotypes, this article also explores how gender divisions of labour and gender status inequalities are influenced by changing patterns of resource access: how diminishing economic security has affected gender divisions of labour, and how a woman's independent access to income affects her bargaining power.

### **Growing Economic Insecurity and Flexibility in Gender Divisions of Labour**

Many Copperbelt residents rightly perceive economic security as having deteriorated over the past 30 years.<sup>11</sup> In 1983, a heavily indebted Zambian Government turned to the International Monetary Fund, which imposed neoliberal economic restructuring. This involved trade liberalisation, interest rate liberalisation, the removal of price controls, reduced government expenditure (on food and fertiliser subsidies) and public-sector contraction. During the 1980s and 1990s, living costs increased rapidly, while infant industries were crippled by trade liberalisation.<sup>12</sup> With falling copper prices and increased mechanisation, employment in mining fell from 62,505 in 1990 to 36,561 in 2000, in a context in which the labour force was growing.

However, the last decade has seen a significant macro-economic recovery in Zambia, with growth partly reflecting the boom in world copper prices between 2003 and 2007. Between 2000 and 2009 GDP grew by 5.4 per cent per annum, while employment grew by only 2.0 per cent per annum.<sup>13</sup> By 2010, employment in mining had risen to 69,922.<sup>14</sup> Despite this rebound, employment in mining remains precarious. Fraser and Lungu found that only 45 per cent of mineworkers were on permanent, pensionable contracts in 2006 (down from earlier decades). The remainder had been shifted on to three-month contracts at a lower wage,

10 C. Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender: How Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

11 See also Fraser and Larmer, *Zambia, Mining and Neoliberalism*.

12 B. Kalinda and M. Floro, 'Zambia in the 1980s: A Review of National and Urban Level Economic Reforms', Working Paper (Washington, The World Bank, 1992); L. Situmbeko and J.J. Zulu, 'Zambia: Condemned to Debt. How the IMF and World Bank have Undermined Development', World Development Movement Report (London, World Development Movement, 2004).

13 T. Sparreboom and A. Albee (eds), *Towards Decent Work in Sub-Saharan Africa, Monitoring MDG Employment Indicators* (Geneva, ILO, 2011), p. 34.

14 Central Statistical Office (hereafter CSO), *Zambia 2010 Census of Population and Housing Descriptive Tables* (Lusaka, CSO, 2012), p. 223.

without former fringe benefits or job security.<sup>15</sup> Yet such jobs are still sought after, in a province that had an unemployment rate of 28 per cent in 2010.<sup>16</sup>

Census data show that while the proportion of urban Copperbelt men who are employed has decreased over time, that of women increased from 13 per cent in 1980 to 21 per cent in 2000.<sup>17</sup> By 2010, 30 per cent of Copperbelt women were employed.<sup>18</sup> This trend was corroborated by my participants. It should also be noted that the definition of economic activity used here excludes non-market-oriented activities, and classifies persons by main occupation, thereby overlooking homemakers who also undertake market-oriented activities and potentially underestimating women's productive enterprises at all times.<sup>19</sup>

Participants said that men historically tended to oppose their wives going out to work. This was attributed to their status as and pride in being breadwinners, unwillingness to admit their inability to live up to that stereotype, and their concerns about women's independence through employment (in terms of physical mobility, finances and consequent changes to the domestic balance of power).<sup>20</sup> But with perceived economic necessity, people have increasingly sacrificed the social benefits accrued by adherence to earlier prescriptive gender stereotypes of male breadwinner and female housewife.

Urban parents increasingly want their daughters to become educated and to work, not just to marry. This is reflected in growing gender parity in reported school attendance in the Copperbelt – now roughly equal until age 16–18, when it falls to 68 per cent of girls compared with 75 per cent of boys.<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with 2012 Afrobarometer survey data for Zambia, which indicate that only 7 per cent of urban men and 4 per cent of urban women very strongly agreed that 'if funds for schooling are limited, a boy should always receive an education in school before a girl'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in response to the statement, 'A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl', 39 per cent of sampled Zambians expressed disagreement. A further 36 per cent strongly disagreed – this proportion was slightly higher (40 per cent) among persons aged over 50.<sup>23</sup> Given that older persons now appear particularly supportive of girls' education, yet were not so in earlier decades (as maintained by participants and evidenced in historical ethnographies), there appears to have been a change in gender beliefs within a generational cohort.

Rising support for female education and employment seems partly motivated by parents' concern for their daughters' well-being, and partly by concern for economic security in their old age. Encouraged by their parents, and having observed the perils of financial dependence, virtually all young urban women interviewed expressed aspirations for financial independence. Annette, a 24-year-old trainee soldier, supporting her grandmother and chronically ill brother, commented:

15 A. Fraser and J. Lungu, *For Whom the Windfalls: Winners and Losers in the Privatisation of Zambia's Copper Mines* (Lusaka, Civil Society Trade Network of Zambia and Catholic Centre for Justice Development and Peace, 2007), p. 3.

16 CSO, *Living Conditions Monitoring Survey Report 2006 and 2010* (Lusaka, CSO, 2011), pp.102–3. Here, the unemployed population is defined as, 'persons who, at the time of the survey, were either looking for work/means to do business or were not looking for work/means to do business but were available for work/business' (p. 99). Importantly, this formulation does not distinguish between the formal and informal economies.

17 CSO, *1990 Census of Population, Housing and Agriculture* (Lusaka, CSO, 1994), pp. 55–7; CSO, *2000 Census of Population and Housing: Copperbelt Province* (Lusaka, CSO, 2003), p. 66.

18 CSO, *Zambia 2010 Census*, p. 216.

19 As noted more broadly by L. Benería, in 'Conceptualising the Labour Force: The Underestimation of Women's Economic Activities', *Journal of Development Studies*, 17, 3 (1981), pp. 10–28.

20 Evans, 'History Lessons for Gender Equality'.

21 CSO, *Living Conditions Monitoring Survey Report 2006 and 2010*, p. 57.

22 Online data analysis, Afrobarometer, 2013, available at <http://www.afrobarometer-online-analysis.com/aj/AJBrowserAB.jsp>, retrieved 15 July 2014.

23 World Values Survey, 'Online Data Analysis' (Stockholm, World Values Survey, 2013), available at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>, retrieved 15 July 2014.

I wanted to be independent, not to be lazy, to give up, but to deal with things by myself, with my own strength. . . . I came to see that things are difficult. . . . There's no dad and no mum, so I came to see that if I just sit then I'll ruin myself, so I should work hard and look to my future. . . . Even if I marry, I don't want to rush into marriage but to work hard like a man, not just to sit.

Annette and other young women who gave similar accounts may have overstated their aversion to economic dependency in order to be seen to comply with contemporary social condemnation of such dependence. But even such self-presentation provides evidence of changing beliefs about cultural expectations. It indicates that women increasingly wish to present themselves as striving for economic independence. Indeed, participants commonly maintained that women now accrue more respect through paid work in the public sphere than through being a housewife. BanaDavid,<sup>24</sup> a 44-year-old married market trader selling tomatoes, stated:

A long time ago women weren't selling, the reason being that their husbands were refusing them, not wanting to be made shy in front of his friends, as if, 'I don't keep you well' . . . But now this time things have reversed. This time husbands long to have a woman who is selling. . . . People are jealous of us traders because we help our families. They say, 'They're strong, they live well, they eat, and the reason is because their wives are strong in selling' [translated].

Here BanaDavid asserts that cultural expectations have changed: husbands are now proud of wives who trade at the market. While this account might be biased by BanaDavid's desire to present herself as socially respected, it was consistent with accounts from men from across the socio-economic and generational spectrum. As Stephen (a 26-year-old unmarried mechanic working at an informal roadside garage) described his ideal partner, 'I like women who work, so that she's working and I'm working, we're both helping each other, we're solving problems' [translated]. Indeed, it was very rare for young men (whether students, working or unemployed) to express a desire for a partner who was 'just a housewife'. To the extent that female labour-market participation no longer contravenes cultural expectations, there are no associated social costs of shame or disapprobation (even for husbands).

In a context of economic insecurity, parents seem more inclined to support their daughters' aspirations for stereotypically masculine occupations, owing to the greater availability and higher wages of such work. These financial benefits were also referred to by women who were themselves pursuing stereotypically masculine occupations. Rose, a 42-year-old mine explosives engineer and single mother, explained:

As a woman you have to think twice about your future. If you just think about what women can do you can't do anything. . . . I don't depend on men. . . . Many people want work. Now work, when it's available, you enter anything that is seen, even men's work [partly translated].

Desperate to provide for her family, Rose found work clearing the bush for mine expansion. With an eye on promotion she successfully trained as a dump-truck driver and explosives engineer. We might explain her expressed disdain for cultural expectations about the kind of work women should do by reference to a shift in perceived interests. Given financial hardship, she (and many other women) seemed to de-prioritise the social benefits to be gained from compliance with cultural expectations about women's prescribed roles.

Furthermore, because there is widespread recognition of common economic difficulties, Kitwe residents seem less inclined to penalise gender-atypical behaviour if it allows women to earn more. Even if an occupation was historically regarded as an inappropriate performance of gender, it is increasingly permitted because a woman in such an occupation is

24 'Bana' means mother of; 'BaShi' means father of. I have used these terms when participants introduced themselves in this way.

perceived as trying to support her family. 'I think, in the economy as it stands, no job is for women and no job is for men. . . . Everyone can do it', commented Mwelwa (30 years old, married, supplier of contract labour to the mines, and church deacon).

Despite widespread recognition of financial hardship, some forms of work are still deemed inappropriate for women because they require behaviour that is not respected. When sitting on a bus waiting for it to fill with passengers before travelling, it is common to be approached by men selling drinks, biscuits and phone credit. While women also trade these same items, they sit at kiosks and wait for customers to come to them. Only 'prostitutes' approach or call out to strangers; respectable women should not – according to most participants. Concerns about female sexuality evidently persist. Only once did I see a young woman walking up and down at a bus station selling phone credit to waiting travellers. She was not reprimanded in any way, but nor was she as vocal as typical male vendors. Instead she stood quietly among us, clearly advertising. She was exceptional, however. Worsening economic insecurity does not appear to have catalysed a shift in all gender divisions of labour, nor in acceptance thereof.

The premise that some occupations are becoming less segregated by sex is corroborated by labour-market data. The percentage of Copperbelt women employed in professional and technical occupations increased between 2001 and 2007 from 7.7 per cent to 12.4 per cent – a greater increase than among men.<sup>25</sup> Between 1990 and 2010, in urban areas of Zambia, the proportion of female managers increased from 12 per cent to 29 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, in the Copperbelt, the proportion of employed women working in skilled manual occupations more than doubled between 2001 and 2007, from 3.5 per cent to 7.9 per cent.<sup>27</sup> The proportion of urban Copperbelt women in production and related work also doubled between 1980 and 2000, though it still remains below 10 per cent.<sup>28</sup> Data for urban areas similarly point to a rising female share of stereotypically masculine industrial employment, such as in mining and electricity.<sup>29</sup> Since the vast majority of mines are in the Copperbelt, this urban statistic probably reflects Copperbelt trends. On the other hand, industry level data do not tell us the particular jobs that women have been doing. Historically there may have been a higher share of women in manufacturing, for example, but my participants suggested that this was largely in support roles.

Presented with sufficient information that contradicts their internalised gender stereotypes, such that they now regard women as sufficiently competent, some people have become less prone to ridicule or question women's incursions into gender-atypical occupations. This is reflected in a locally popular slogan of gender equality: 'women can do what men can do' (translated from the Bemba, '*abanakashi kuti babomba incito sha baume*'). Changing attitudes at workplaces are highlighted in the following conversation between two chairpersons of mine union branches:

Daniel: A long time ago they used to say to a woman found with men doing men's work, 'You don't understand, prostitute'. But this time they accept, she's not a prostitute. There's no problem. We've all agreed, both women and men.

25 CSO, Central Board of Health, ORC Macro, *Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2001–2002* (Calverton: CSO, 2003), p. 38; CSO, *Labour Force Survey 2005* (Lusaka, CSO, 2009), p. 44.

26 CSO, *2000 Census of Population and Housing* (Lusaka, CSO, 2003), p. 85; CSO, *2010 Census of Population and Housing: Descriptive Tables*, p. 228.

27 CSO *et al.*, *Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2001–2002*, p. 38; CSO, Ministry of Health, Tropical Diseases Research Foundation, University of Zambia, *Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2007* (Calverton, CSO and ORC Macro, 2009), p. 44.

28 CSO, *1990 Census*, pp. 64–5; *2000 Census: Copperbelt Province*, p. 73.

29 CSO, *Zambia 2000 Census* (Lusaka, CSO, 2003), p. 88; CSO, *2010 Census*, p. 225.

Kupela: The work culture is sound, you give them respect, they respect you. . . . Generally today there's a change. They're very confident.

Daniel: Things done by a man can also be done by a woman.

Kupela: In the past companies only took in a few women, to see if they can work. . . . Companies came to find that 'Yes, women can do men's work'. . . . Performance was there, discipline was there. . . . At the workplace there will always be that friction but women will always stand their positions and they will forge ahead [partly translated].

The reference to 'prostitute' refers to historical gender stereotypes. Given the paucity of women in employment, particularly in skilled manual work, people often lacked evidence of their aptitude and so assumed that they were there only as a result of sexual favours, not on merit.<sup>30</sup> The term 'prostitute' is now less commonly used to refer to women in gender-atypical domains.

The branch chairpersons may have exaggerated the extent of mutual respect among the workers they represent, so as to give a positive portrayal of their mines, not only to me as an outsider but also to each other and to the national leader present. To triangulate their accounts I interviewed male and female mineworkers: they similarly suggested that attitudes have shifted significantly. However, several male mineworkers (with no female colleagues) denied that women could or should work underground. Further, some women in gender-atypical occupations (such as mining and mechanics) reported difficulties with colleagues. Unemployed young men also sought to discourage them, in the hope of finding employment themselves. Despite resistance from these quarters, occupational desegregation appears to be increasing with exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour, thereby generating a positive feedback loop, initially triggered by growing economic insecurity.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. It first explores the impact of increased flexibility on women's gender beliefs, and, secondly, discusses their social relations with others. It then seeks to identify the kinds of flexibility and salient features of the socio-economic context that have enabled an erosion of gender stereotypes in the Copperbelt. A final section interrogates the hypothesis of weakening gender-status inequalities.

## Working Women's Gender Beliefs

Former housewives maintained that they previously thought themselves less intelligent than men, and so would follow men's suggestions (in community politics and at family funerals, regarding, for example, burial arrangements and asset redistribution). By virtue of performing the socially valued role of financial provider, however, working women (from across the socio-economic spectrum) explained that they no longer underrate themselves. As discussed below, many attributed their enhanced self-esteem to association with others and prolonged exposure to demonstrations of equal competence. While these are features of most jobs in the public sphere, this section focuses on market trading – a common occupation for many low-income women.

By gathering together at the market, and journeying across provinces and national borders, female traders interact with a wide range of people, beyond the comparatively narrow social sphere in which many used to remain when housewives. Market women

30 For the same reason, this label has also been used to describe female traders and heads of households: I. Schuster, 'Marginal Lives: Conflict and Contradiction in the Position of Female Traders in Lusaka, Zambia', in Edna G. Bay (ed.), *Women and Work in Africa* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1982), pp. 116–7, 120; Moser and Holland, *Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability*, p. 60.

commonly inspire, advise and encourage each other, sharing practical information about how to increase their incomes and manage family life.

Through association with others, women undertaking paid work in the public sphere also (rather more subversively) reflect upon prevailing gender inequalities. Former housewives explained that they used to regard gender-based violence as 'normal'. Some were privately critical of this practice yet assumed that everyone else thought it permissible (a presumption about prevailing cultural expectations). By collectively developing a safe space to articulate non-stereotypical beliefs, these women learnt that their concerns were widely shared. Such external validation seems to enhance women's confidence in their own beliefs and lead them to expect a more sympathetic response from others. I also observed market women collectively commending women undertaking 'masculine' occupations. Such praise probably affected others' presumptions about cultural expectations: mothers might encourage their daughters to pursue gender-atypical careers if they believe that such pursuits would be respected. These findings are illustrated below:

Nancy (a 41-year-old divorced rice seller and leader in a market branch of the Patriotic Front [PF] party): [Previously] we weren't wise, we weren't moving up and down. Only if people come here, selling in town, can they be getting so much intelligence, not just staying at home; you can't have intelligence [translated].

BanaBecca (a 36-year-old former housewife who subsequently set up a hair salon in her front yard, before selling *kapenta* [dried sardines] at the market): I started to learn about different ways of living. Customers were coming with different stories. I saw that people overcame their problems by discussing them together. So I myself wanted to discuss things in marriage. . . . Before I had started associating with many people, like when I was just trading from home, I didn't know how people lived . . . I was living like a slave . . . – like a person without a right to talk about the problems that they're going through. . . . At first I was thinking that things were fine but then I started to be awakened. . . . We started to change, slowly slowly [translated].

BanaNkandu (a 34-year-old married market trader, formerly a housewife): Women leaders see the suffering that we pass through. . . . Men have been ruling over us very much. Men use us. So for the elections we want women. . . . In the past we thought that women leaders couldn't explain the truth. . . . We used to respect men so much, so much . . . [This was partly because] we didn't associate with other people [translated].

In the colonial and early postcolonial period, inter-female aggression was reinforced by widespread economic and psychological dependence on husbands, and by spatial segregation as housewives.<sup>31</sup> However, women undertaking paid work in the public sphere increasingly express great pride in their collective identity – as exemplified in the following conversation with BanaChola (aged 43). Her husband has been unemployed for six years. She is a leader in a local PF branch and sells dried sardines in Kitwe's central market, having commenced small-scale trading aged 17. Her own economic activity notwithstanding, BanaChola reportedly used to revere men, thinking they were more intelligent. 'But in today's generation things have changed. Women have more intelligence than men. . . . Things have reversed here in Zambia. . . . It's women who are keeping men and children, and paying school fees. . . . Women have pushed themselves forward [translated]. To support her argument that women are outnumbering men in the struggle to provide for their families, BanaChola added that in the bus to the border town of Nakonde (where she buys second-hand clothes for resale) there will be only four men out of 68 passengers. Seeing a critical mass of women performing the socially valorised role of household financial provider seems to have changed her perceptions

31 Evans, 'History Lessons for Gender Equality'; I.M. Glazer, 'Interfemale Aggression and Resource Scarcity in a Cross-Cultural Perspective', in K. Björkqvist and P. Niemelä (eds), *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression* (London, Academic Press, 1992); Parpart, 'Class and Gender on the Copperbelt', p. 156; Powdermaker, *Copper Town*, pp. 157, 164, 167, 207–14.

about women's importance. Even though she had always worked, it seems that she adopted a more egalitarian outlook only when a critical mass of other women became breadwinners.

Mobility also seems important in exposing BanaChola to other 'strong' women. Had she traded in the small market of her low-income peri-urban settlement (where I observed marked gender divisions of labour), it seems unlikely that she would have been exposed to evidence that challenged her gender stereotypes.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, autonomous local women's groups in residential areas (comprising those less exposed to flexibility in gender divisions of labour) generally promote compliance with (rather than critique of) gender stereotypes, such as women being primarily responsible for unpaid care work. Housewives, domestic workers and home-based traders also identified their limited social circles and perceived limited knowledge as reasons why they defer to their husbands in decision-making.

## Working Women's Social Relationships

Former homemakers, employed women and third-party observers (families, neighbours and co-workers) all agreed that women had become more respected as a result of labour-force participation. Many husbands were said to have previously underestimated their wives but now appreciate both their efforts and financial contributions:

BanaBecca (a 36-year-old market trader): At the beginning it was difficult, he [my husband] was too proud to recognise women's rights ... But now he's different... He saw that my efforts bring progress. At the end he started to change... We help each other provide for the family at home and to provide for ourselves in the future... [The previous situation, of me being a housewife] made him conceited, thinking there's nothing I can do [translated].

BanaMwimba (a 41-year-old market trader): Before, if I spoke, he couldn't hear me ... I didn't underrate my own thoughts. It's just men who are difficult... [But he came to think.] 'Therefore this young woman has great intelligence. We'll be able to take care of each other'. He used to think there was nothing I could do [translated].

Both these women subsequently suggested that their husbands had previously regarded them as less intelligent and so sidelined them when making decisions. Their husbands (who independently corroborated these accounts) came to perceive and treat their wives differently upon seeing them undertake socially valued (masculine) roles.

BanaChola's narrative provides another example of conjugal transformation. She stated that her husband (BaShiChola) had previously perceived her income as merely supplementary. Upon his retrenchment in 2005, BanaChola sought to build a house. Dejected, BaShiChola wanted to return to the village instead. However, when he saw the house completed up to window level he realised that his wife was cunning, determined and hard-working. BaShiChola promptly obtained a loan and gave her money to complete the project. From that day forth, he gave her much greater respect and was keener to hear her thoughts. BanaChola had always been a market trader, never a housewife, but it was only when her husband realised her financial importance (relative to his unemployment) and ingenuity that, according to her, their relationship became more egalitarian. Building a house (an impressive feat in Kitwe, given capital requirements) provided tangible evidence that disconfirmed BaShiChola's gender stereotypes. At a time when he was losing hope, BanaChola demonstrated her ability single-handedly to provide a solution to their problems.

32 On the significance of mobility in enabling exposure to egalitarian practices and thereby undermining gender beliefs, see also P. Dannecker, 'Transnational Migration and the Transformation of Gender Relations: The Case of Bangladeshi Labour Migrants', *Current Sociology*, 53, 4 (2005), pp. 655–74; N. Kabeer, A. Khan and N. Adlparvar, 'Afghan Values or Women's Rights? Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan', Working Paper (Brighton, IDS and Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, 2011).

Female traders maintained that women are today less commonly dismissed as less competent. The following claims indicate revised presumptions about cultural expectations of how women think they will be perceived and treated by others.

Gloria (a 66-year-old chairwoman of a local PF branch, formerly a housewife, now divorced, living in a single room in an informal settlement where she sells dried caterpillars): A long time ago they underrated us, saying, 'A woman can't do anything'... When they knew that we women can also work that's when people stopped underestimating us [she then proudly told me of a woman who drives a bus from Kitwe to Dar es Salaam] [translated].

Hilary (a 44-year-old widowed market trader, selling oranges, and leader in a local branch of PF): The most important thing that has yielded fruits is that they [men] have realised that we are equal partners in development and would like to work together with them.<sup>33</sup>

Men's narratives of growing flexibility in gender divisions of labour generally echoed those of their wives, sisters and co-workers, though in some cases different influences were identified as pivotal. Matthew (47) used to be formally employed in the mines but was retrenched in 1987 and so turned to trading vegetables in the market. Business was unreliable and risky. At first his spouse, a housewife, was frustrated. Equally exasperated, he beat her. As life became more difficult, they sold household assets and rented a smaller house. At this stage his wife started trading from home; from Matthew's perspective this is how she came to understand and empathise with his business-related difficulties. In Matthew's opinion she was previously reliant upon him, for ideas and financial support. Other men, accustomed to women as housewives, similarly stereotyped women as 'passive', 'dormant', 'lazy', 'expectant', and/or 'ignorant' (translated). But Matthew's perceptions changed upon seeing women 'stand up, to fight ... and solve particular problems as equals', financially providing for their families (that is, performing a masculine, socially valued role).

Alternatively, one might attribute changes in conjugal relations to improvements in working women's 'fall-back position' – their ability to survive outside marriage.<sup>34</sup> Interest-based explanations of gender inequality might posit that men purposely take advantage of wives who are economically dependent upon them because they believe that their wives cannot leave. Thus once a woman is economically independent, her husband may be motivated to treat her better, in order to prevent her departure.

This assumes that husbands of working women believe that the latter will terminate the relationship if the former do not adopt more egalitarian practices. But such an event seems rare: some women interviewed who were financially independent had endured years of unhappy marriage. For example, BanaMulenga (a 38-year-old bank employee) resented and did not love her husband, with whom she rarely spent time, but was reluctant to divorce for fear of other people's reactions and gossip, and out of concern about her children's well-being. Research carried out in Lusaka similarly notes that 'the stigma of single parenthood – and its association with prostitution – means that women try to remain married whenever possible'.<sup>35</sup> In 2007, 65 per cent of Zambians surveyed expressed disapproval of single parents.<sup>36</sup>

33 Hilary's use of development discourse may raise questions about the extent to which stereotypes have been undermined by gender sensitisation, rather than exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour. This possibility is considered and largely rejected in another paper, which draws upon interviews as well as observation of sensitisation in schools and communities: Evans, 'Gender Sensitisation in the Zambian Copperbelt', working paper.

34 For discussion of this term, see Bina Agarwal, "'Bargaining' and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household', *Feminist Economics*, 3, 1 (1997), pp. 1–51.

35 Moser and Holland, *Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability*, p. 60.

36 World Values Survey, 'Online Data Analysis', available at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>, retrieved 15 July 2014.

Women's increased access to resources seems to have improved their economic but not their social fall-back position: cultural views on divorce seem to constrain its desirability. Furthermore, my research does not indicate that husbands perceive their relationships as having become more precarious: they did not voice concerns or gossip about women instigating separation. There does not appear to be any extrinsic pressure motivating men to behave in a more egalitarian way.

As women enter the labour force, many are supporting their natal families. Historically, in the 1970s and 1980s, even if a daughter was contributing financially, her father might still refuse her participation in decision-making. Participants suggested that people previously tended to assign a low status to all women, regardless of their individual characteristics or contributions. Women who are breadwinners for their natal families, however, maintain that their siblings and parents bestow great respect upon them in recognition of their financial importance. 'She helps the natal family like a man', BanaMuyunda (a 39-year-old mushroom trader) said of her sister, BanaFlo (a mine dump-truck driver and single parent). Accordingly, when visiting, she 'gets a lot of respect, they receive her very well', with the slaughter of a chicken or even a goat. 'A person who helps the family is respected, loved and blessed' (translated).

This is not to suggest that gender-status beliefs have disappeared. On the contrary, BanaMayunda's unemployed brother begrudges the lack of respect he receives in comparison. He feels entitled to preferential treatment and is disgruntled that he does not receive it. For the rest of his family, however, financial provision rather than sex category has become the primary determinant of status. Furthermore, because of the importance of financial provision, they have overlooked the proscriptive stereotype against single motherhood.

Many men, from across the socio-economic and generational spectrum, maintained that their views have changed as women have shown themselves to be important financial providers:

Scott (a 42-year-old divorced onion wholesaler and leader in a market branch of PF): I used to think 'It's just a woman'. Women of that time were regarded as people who can't do the things that men do. . . . We were keeping them.

[A man comes along, through the corridor where we sit in the market, among bags of onions. He is middle-aged and wears work overalls. He overhears our conversation and interjects]: They didn't do anything but this time they're active, they're more than you a man, because everything they're in forefront and they're sharp than we! This time, me I cannot compete with a woman.

Scott: No.

[unknown man]: I'm very very far.

Scott: Very far.

[unknown man speaks with passion]: They are sharp. . . . We are nothing this time, we are only under the people feeding us, that's only what I've observed myself. [unknown man goes on his way]

Not all attitudes have changed, however. While women leaders working with Scott in PF maintained that they felt respected as equal partners, women leaders in different market associations and political parties complained about their male counterparts. When interviewed, these men expressed opposition to women managing projects independently, and doubted their efficacy. Given others' gender stereotypes, some women shun politics in order to avoid expected insults and hostility, or quieten when confronted with persistent male resistance to their initiatives, opting to preserve cordial relations with colleagues. The erosion of gender-status beliefs is therefore limited.

But change is occurring none the less, especially with exposure to occupational desegregation. Formal employment in the mines, for example, has long been a source of status in the Copperbelt: mineworkers have historically been respected for undertaking the arduous work essential to the country's economic prosperity.<sup>37</sup> Besides its economic history, mining is further privileged because it is typically undertaken by men and is thus endowed with their higher social status. Women working in the mines (like those in factories and garages) often said that wearing protective clothing enhanced their self-esteem because it symbolises their ability to undertake relatively high-status work, which was historically reserved for men. By contrast, stereotypically feminine professions are often regarded as undemanding extensions of women's natural abilities and are rarely valued to the same extent as men's occupations. Even if female teachers, secretaries or nurses demonstrate their equal ability to earn money, their equal competence in other masculine (valorised) domains is often doubted.

Women commonly voiced great pride in seeing other women undertaking occupations historically dominated by men, taking this as evidence of the equal potential capabilities of their sex. Having long been told that they were incapable of certain privileged tasks, women exposed to flexibility in gender divisions of labour now visibly rejoice in perceived proof of their equality:

Author: Tell me what you like to see women doing.

BanaMwimba (a 41-year-old market trader): Leading, working hard, employed in men's jobs, repairing cars, sweeping in the road, employed at the mine, driving trucks – those things make me very proud [translated]. [BanaMwimba's face lights up with pride as she tells me about her two friends who work as electricians.]

Male participants accustomed to women undertaking stereotypically masculine occupations also expressed great enthusiasm. Their comments corroborate such women's claims of being widely respected:

Charles (a 46-year-old trade unionist, speaking at his office in Kitwe): If a woman can drive that big bulldoze [*sic*] in the open pit of Nchanga mine, your fellow womens are now handling these big big wheels, the Caterpillars [large trucks], and in the first place, it was amazing to see a girl like you jumping on the big wheels, going into the open pit. The first time it was amazing! You see a woman, clad in overalls and a hard hat; she's underground!

Samuel (a 24-year-old auto mechanics student, from a family in which boys are forbidden to do domestic work): We came together and saw her lying down under the motorcar and I said, 'I'm very surprised', 'Have you ever seen a girl in a garage?', 'No, this is my first time'. I was impressed, very very impressed. . . . She even started teaching us. She has confidence in working and talking. Customers are surprised, they are so impressed. . . . She is extremely strong. She has inspired me very much when it comes to the way she works. . . . She does everything in the house but she's not married. I used to think that a woman who lived by herself can't possibly live well like in the way Daisy does . . .

Owen (a 25-year-old studying auto mechanics): The reason that made me have confidence in other women is that I've seen Daisy repairing cars at the garage, working hard, providing for her young ones and taking them to school, doing men's work. Living without a man – that's also important. . . . As for Daisy, she can just be married just because she wants to, not the fact that she needs help. She's able to live on her own. Daisy is just like other women, we all have five senses, but other women underrate themselves [partly translated].

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37 Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*; M. Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia: Labour and Political Change in Post-Colonial Africa* (London, Tauris Academic Studies, 2007).

## When Does Flexibility in Gender Divisions of Labour Weaken Gender-Status Beliefs?

Paid domestic work is a counter-example to the proposition that flexibility in gender divisions of labour undermines gender-status beliefs. This job was previously the preserve of men, owing to European concerns about African women's sexuality.<sup>38</sup> But by 2001, only 8 per cent of employed Copperbelt men (compared to 27 per cent of employed women) were engaged in domestic service.<sup>39</sup> Undertaking this historically male-dominated livelihood does not enhance women's status. This is partly because the job never was high-ranking to begin with. In 1954, 'domestic servants' were accorded one of the lowest rankings for occupational prestige by educated young men in Lusaka.<sup>40</sup>

The case of domestic work implies that women do not gain respect from undertaking what was men's low-status work. But this inference is inconsistent with other findings: a number of participants stressed the impact of seeing women performing other poorly paid but stereotypically masculine activities, such as clearing drains with picks and shovels. Others appeared impressed by such 'strong' women fighting for their families, visibly proud of their own fortitude in gender-atypical terrain. Many participants explained that they previously stereotyped women as being incapable of slashing grass and digging ditches for drainage. Exposure to such activities appears to undermine their gender stereotypes. By contrast, it seems unlikely that people ever thought that women were incapable of paid care work, since women have long undertaken these very tasks (such as childcare, cooking and cleaning), albeit without remuneration. While male domestic servants in the colonial era did learn new skills – such as how to prepare European food – by the time women entered paid domestic labour en masse the job had been deskilled.<sup>41</sup> Hence by receiving payment for domestic work, women entrants to the occupation did not gain an opportunity to demonstrate skills that were previously in doubt.

It seems that women gain status when they demonstrate their capacity to perform a role that was historically dominated by men, which is (i) valorised because of men's higher status; and (ii) embodies stereotypes about gender differences – such that women's demonstrable success in this occupation undermines those stereotypes.

This explanation is complicated by the fact that some women undertake multiple gendered roles, which are perceived in different ways by different people. For example, female domestic workers and market traders do not demonstrate an ability to undertake an occupation that is esteemed, but those making important financial contributions to their families do show that they can provide just like men. By virtue of performing this socially valued role they are often revered as 'strong' by their low-income neighbours.

But individual women's lone encroachments into male domains need to be understood within the socio-economic context in which they occur. Occasional, sporadic sightings seldom undermine gender stereotypes. Such women are often dismissed as exceptional, referred to as honorary men, presumed to be 'prostitutes' or seen as rudely assertive. Gender stereotypes and presumptions about cultural expectations seem to shift only with prolonged exposure to contradictory information, which has resulted from growing flexibility in gender divisions of labour.

38 K.T. Hansen, *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900–85* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989).

39 CSO *et al.*, *Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2001–2002*, p. 38.

40 J.C. Mitchell and A.L. Epstein, 'Occupational Prestige and Social Status among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia', *Africa*, 29, 1 (1959), pp. 22–40.

41 Hansen, *Distant Companions*, pp. 247, 259.

Additionally, the critical process of sharing and learning from others' experiences of flexibility in gender divisions of labour can occur only when a number of people have been exposed to this phenomenon. In previous generations, pre-dating society-wide flexibility in gender divisions of labour, people may have presumed that others were not exposed and so would be less supportive of such discourses.

The following is an extract from a lunch-break discussion among women working at a co-operative house-building scheme. For the previous couple of years they had made weekly financial contributions to the scheme, received training and collectively built two-room houses – supported by the People's Process on Housing and Poverty in Zambia (a civil society organisation).

BanaCarola (a 54-year-old married home-based trader): A woman should work, she can build. . . . A woman can dig foundations. . . . But people were laughing, saying, 'What are you doing over there? You're just playing'. But this time, now that we've built, they praise us, 'Oh, what you're doing is very sensible'.

BanaBwembya (a 53-year-old widow and market trader): Our neighbours give us great respect. . . . Those that have seen how we work praise us saying, 'You women are working on a big job, it's brilliant'. They tell their friends, 'Those women people are strong, they're working very hard'. . . . Those who know have agreed we're working very hard. And they feel shy about the way they underestimated and laughed at us before. . . . If I passed them they would say, 'She's suffering', but these days it's, 'my goodness, how you've worked!' They understand us [translated].

As BanaCarola explains, they were once ridiculed for attempting to encroach on the traditionally male domain of house-building. Without prior exposure to women demonstrating their ability to undertake this stereotypically masculine role, the neighbours publicly expressed their gender stereotypes about presumed female incompetence. BanaCarola, co-workers and the female NGO project manager informed me that others, with insufficient self-belief and social support, felt foolish for even trying and so gave up, believing the gender-atypical task to be impossible. However, once the neighbours had seen that women can indeed build houses, they expressed admiration. Many have even asked to join the scheme.

Seeing a large number of women building their own houses appears to have undermined widely shared presumptions that this job can be done only by men. By collectively reflecting on the benefits of women undertaking this kind of work, some communities have agreed upon its social importance. Instead of mocking or pitying these widows, they now applaud them as champions. Perceptions of an individual woman's employment status or economic activity appear to be affected by the extent of flexibility in the society as a whole. This critical mass of incursions seems to erode gender beliefs.

The economic situation also influences people's attitudes towards flexibility in gender divisions of labour. Because of pervasive difficulties, people increasingly applaud 'strong' women who fight to support their families or physically build their own homes. Moreover, their earnings are now crucial to household survival, and less commonly denigrated as merely 'supplementary'.

## Weakening Gender Status Inequalities?

The evidence presented above contrasts with research undertaken in Lusaka in the 1980s and 1990s, which found that although many urban women had become breadwinners, they rarely acquired commensurate social respect.<sup>42</sup> Those studies are consistent with participants'

42 Hansen, *Keeping House in Lusaka*, p. 107; Schlyter, *Recycled Inequalities*, pp. 91, 115, 305.

narratives of those earlier times: they denied that increased female labour-market participation had immediately affected gender-status beliefs. This is exemplified in BanaBecca's narrative (above) that even when she had a makeshift hairdressing salon in her front yard she was still just a 'slave ... [But] we started to change, slowly slowly' (translated). BanaMwimba similarly recalled that although she started selling in the early 1990s, women did not start participating in family discussions at funerals until a decade later.

The delayed erosion of gender-status inequalities does not seem to be due to increased resource access during the intervening decade or income differences between the samples in these studies. My participants who traded in the market seemed as poor as those described in the work of Hansen and Schlyter. Without sufficient access to capital, some sold goods on someone else's behalf, for which they were paid very low wages. Others, who invested in their own micro-enterprises, stressed that profits had fallen over the past decade owing to market saturation. This article argues that gender-status inequalities have weakened with prolonged exposure to information that contradicts gender stereotypes, and with collective reflection upon these shared experiences.

In rural Serenje (in Zambia's Central province), Seur similarly found, in research published in 1992, that prolonged exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour eroded gender stereotypes. Here, envy and hostility towards successful female entrepreneurs were most prevalent in the early years of their encroachment on the male domain of cash-crop farming. Some accused the women of sorcery – implicitly denying that they had succeeded by virtue of their own merit. Over time, however, the female pioneers became admired, and were asked for advice. Weakening gender-status beliefs were also manifest in women's increasing participation in the masculine domain of funeral discussions.<sup>43</sup>

Research in more economically developed countries also finds that gender beliefs commonly track increased flexibility in gender divisions of labour, and that such attitudinal change lags behind such increased flexibility. This is said to be because people's gender stereotypes influence their interpretation of information, such that contradictory cases are either overlooked or regarded as exceptional, rather than disproving presumptions about the traits of the typical man or woman.<sup>44</sup>

It is possible, however, that my findings contrast with earlier studies because my participants exaggerate the extent of gender equality: perhaps female discussants sought to present a positive account of their lives despite financial hardship. Their narratives were corroborated by others, however: by husbands, children, siblings, co-workers, neighbours, employers and voters. In addition, many women did emphasise negative consequences of financial responsibility, such as stress and related health problems. Several female breadwinners used the term '*ukutitikishiwa*' (which usually refers to domestic patriarchal oppression) to describe their feelings of struggling alone. Furthermore, almost all participants contrasted contemporary hardship with nostalgic narratives of the economic security enjoyed during the Kaunda era (1964–1991) – that is to say, they did not present an optimistic account of the present.

However, even if some people now espouse egalitarian beliefs, these are not always reflected in practice. This discrepancy was sometimes identified by participants themselves, sometimes discovered through observation. Helen (an elected councillor for a low-income area), for example, stressed in our first interview the importance of gender equality in political representation. She then proudly volunteered that her son performs domestic jobs such as washing up. But I never once, in all my months of living with them subsequently, saw

43 H. Seur, *Sowing the Good Seed: The Interweaving of Agricultural Change, Gender Relations and Religion in Serenje District, Zambia* (Wageningen, Landbouuniversiteit Wageningen, 1992), pp. 257–62.

44 Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender*.

him do this: Mulwila, aged 17, was only ever at home to eat meals and sleep, occasionally helping to water vegetables (a stereotypically masculine chore). It appears that Helen sees shared care work as the logical extension of her quest for equality in public decision-making, but has not yet achieved this at home because she is too busy trading and campaigning for political change. Given such potential inconsistencies, I triangulated accounts by observing behaviour in private and public contexts (such as homes and classrooms, and market and political associations). Some narratives may reflect a change only in aspirations; I did not observe all participants' lives.

Women's greater share of unpaid care work<sup>45</sup> could be interpreted as evidence of persistent gender-status beliefs: it is generally regarded as a display of respect to the male household head, and the labour itself is rarely appreciated; housewives were often referred to as 'just sitting' (translated). One way of accounting for women's larger share of this low-status activity, without denying that paid work has enhanced their status in other domains, is that it is a performance not only of status but also of gender. Indeed, it is commonly labelled 'women's work' (translated). Arguably, gender beliefs are more salient in domestic environments, since these are often based around a heterosexual union of two different sexes, and socially constructed as gendered contexts.<sup>46</sup>

Another possible reason why unpaid care work continues to be stereotyped as women's work is that the few men who do help inside the home are largely hidden from public view. Some recent rural immigrants to Kitwe explained that their husbands had started to help out occasionally since they saw other men doing so in town. This indicates the importance of exposure to other men undertaking unpaid care work. Since this remains limited, many presume that it is 'not normal' (meaning neither common nor appropriate). This may explain why women (even those who privately resented the asymmetrical division of care work) appeared resigned to their fate – they had no reason to believe that this tradition was likely to change. Cultural expectations were also cited by a number of male participants, who raised concerns about social condemnation (of themselves and their wives) by onlookers for carrying out domestic work. The significance of cultural expectations (rather than internalised gender beliefs) is also evident from comparisons of different social contexts. For example, some women maintained that they kneeled when serving food to their husbands only in the presence of visitors. Similarly, John (a 14-year-old boy in a low-income compound) would sweep only inside, not outside, the house, so that he would not be seen or laughed at by his friends passing by. Since sweeping inside the house is perceived as no different from sweeping outside, we cannot explain this behaviour by reference to John's internalised gender beliefs. It seems instead to reflect his concerns about other people's appraisals of his behaviour.

Besides gender beliefs (influenced by insufficient exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour), we might also explain gender divisions of unpaid care work by reference to perceived interests, stemming from lopsided marriage markets. Many young men are unemployed, and therefore delay marriage because they do not feel financially able to provide for a household. This causes a low supply of men seeking marriage. However, the demand is high – on the part of women looking for husbands or boyfriends to provide financial support, in a context of their own unemployment and stereotyped dependence on men's earnings. Intimate relationships can be insecure because there is so much competition from other women. This generates suspicion and divisions between married and unmarried women.<sup>47</sup>

45 As also found in low-income areas of Lusaka, see Moser and Holland, *Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability*, pp. 63–4.

46 As argued in Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender*.

47 See also I. Glazer Schuster, *New Women of Lusaka* (Los Angeles, Mayfield, 1979), pp. 83, 127, 149.

In this context women are being advised, in women's church groups especially, to redouble their efforts in unpaid reproductive work, making the home nice for the husband, so as to discourage his departure. Thus while men increasingly appreciate women's financial contributions and participation in household decision-making (seeing this as advantageous), many wives are reluctant to push for a redistribution of other gender roles for fear that this will push men away. There are thus a number of ways to explain women's share of low-status, unpaid care work, without positing that it reflects their low status generally.

## Conclusion

Worsening economic insecurity has meant that Copperbelt men are generally less able to provide financially for their families single-handed. The evidence presented in this article shows that many have thus forfeited the social respect historically secured by complying with cultural expectations, in exchange for the economic advantages of female labour-force participation and occupational desegregation.

Women's increased access to resources does not appear to have immediately undermined gender-status inequalities. These have weakened only gradually, with prolonged exposure to a critical mass of women demonstrating their ability to perform work that was previously presumed to be beyond their capabilities and which has high status because it is associated with privileged masculinity and with economic output. While a prestigious position lends status to the individual actor, women's encroachments on stereotypically masculine domains appear to have wider consequences, undermining the assumptions of gender difference upon which status beliefs are predicated.

Historically, isolated instances of flexibility in gender divisions of labour seldom created a positive feedback loop: vanguards were more commonly perceived as deviating from (rather than disconfirming) gender stereotypes. This has changed owing to two features of the contemporary Copperbelt. Owing to greater economic insecurity, women's financial contributions are increasingly recognised and appreciated as crucial to household survival, not merely supplementary. Further, society-wide flexibility in gender divisions of labour has created a critical mass of information that contradicts gender stereotypes, so much so that their flouting can no longer be dismissed as exceptional. Opportunities for association with others seem equally significant. Women sharing experiences of performing socially valued activities provides external validation of tentative egalitarian beliefs, and also shifts views about cultural expectations. Association by itself, however, without exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour, does not seem so transformative. Observed homemakers and home-based traders congregating in compounds generally discussed how to fulfil rather than challenge their cultural expectations of ideal domesticity.

This argument should not be interpreted as implying that gender-status inequalities have disappeared – unpaid care work, for example, continues to be shared very inequitably. The point of this article has been to highlight and explain partial change.

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