

An Assessment of Financial Inclusion Challenges Among Women Vendors at the Bulawayo Vegetable Market

Nothando Tshuma; Ashley Takudzwa Kufa; Emmanuel Sibanda; Tsepeso Setoboli

National University of Science and Technology

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ABSTRACT

In the vibrant markets of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where women entrepreneurs thrive, a critical challenge persists: financial inclusion remains low. However, Mobile Financial Services (MFS) digital platforms have the potential to revolutionize access to affordable financial solutions for women entrepreneurs. Our study delved into the experiences of women vendors at the bustling Bulawayo Vegetable Market during the period from 2016 to 2023. Through a descriptive survey design, we aimed to uncover the hurdles faced by these enterprising women as they navigated the realm of MFS. Findings revealed that many women were unaware of the existence and benefits of MFS. The lack of knowledge hindered their participation. Proper documentation essential for accessing financial services remained elusive for some. Without it, women faced barriers in utilizing MFS. Limited education posed a significant obstacle. Basic financial literacy and digital skills were prerequisites for effective MFS adoption. The absence of digital skills impeded women from confidently using mobile platforms for financial transactions. Scarce availability of mobile money agents in the market area restricted women's access to MFS. To bridge this gender gap and empower women entrepreneurs, we recommend Financial Institutions to Collaborate with MFS providers to offer targeted training programs. These sessions should focus on MFS awareness, digital literacy, and documentation procedures. NGOs Community Initiatives should launch awareness campaigns specifically tailored for women vendors. These campaigns can demystify MFS, emphasize its benefits, and address common concerns. By dismantling these barriers, we can unlock the full potential of MFS, enabling women entrepreneurs to thrive and contribute significantly to sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The global drive for financial inclusion has made significant strides, yet gender disparities persist. Despite women constituting half of the world's population, their access to financial services remains unequal. A substantial financing gap of \$300 billion still exists for women entrepreneurs globally, and more than 70% of women entrepreneurs lack adequate access to Mobile Financial services (World Bank, 2023).

Efforts to address this gender gap have gained momentum among policymakers, development organizations, and practitioners in developing countries. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize a holistic approach to sustainable development, emphasizing gender equality and financial inclusion as key constituents. Gender equality and financial inclusion are complementary, with improvements in financial inclusion having a multiplicative effect on economic growth when combined with better gender parity (Springer, 2022). However, challenges remain, including social norms and regulatory issues that contribute to gender disparities in account ownership (World Bank, 2023).

In Zimbabwe, there is a significant gap between men and women in terms of Mobile Financial services usage, with men having higher adoption rates (Finscope, 2022). Eliminating this gap could unlock

substantial employment opportunities for women, contributing to economic growth and development (OECD, n.d.). The government has implemented policies such as “growth with equity,” Affirmative Action for women, and the National Gender Policy to promote equal opportunities and address women’s side-lining in national development (OECD, n.d.). While the 2021 Monetary Policy statement by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe acknowledged the need for financial inclusion, specific measures for women empowerment are not explicitly outlined. Advocacy for targeted policies and interventions remains crucial to bridge the gender gap in financial services access and promote economic prosperity for all.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Financial inclusion remains a critical global objective, yet gender disparities persist in gaining access to financial services. This study focuses on women vendors operating at the Bulawayo Vegetable Market, where financial inclusion remains a pressing concern. Despite efforts by mobile financial providers, financial institutions, and government policies (such as the National Financial Inclusion strategy), progress has been limited. Recent research underscores the persistent gender gap in mobile financial services (Bhalla, Singh and Kumar, 2023; Group Special Mobile Association (GSMA), 2023). According to the Global Findex (2021), since its inaugural survey in 2011, the proportion of adults worldwide with a financial account has risen from 51% to 76%. However, in developing economies, account ownership increased by only 30 percentage points, reaching 71% for adults in these countries. Digitalization aided this progression, yet substantial gaps persist based on gender, income, and education level (World Bank, 2023). The Group Special Mobile Association (GSMA), in its mobile gap report (2023), confirms that women are still 23% less likely than men to use mobile internet. This persistent trend underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to bridge this gap and ensure equitable access to financial services. Despite severe local currency shortages in Zimbabwe, evidenced by long queues at banks, women entrepreneurs continue to encounter challenges in accessing Mobile Financial Services. This situation impedes their growth opportunities and economic advancement. Given these realities, our study critically assesses the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in accessing and effectively utilizing mobile financial services. By identifying barriers and proposing targeted solutions, we aim to contribute to closing the gender gap and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

AIM OF THE STUDY

To critically assess the challenges faced by women vendors at the Bulawayo vegetable market in using and accessing Mobile Financial services

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women entrepreneurs encounter several obstacles when accessing mobile financial services. Mashapure, Nyagadza, Chikazhe, Msipa, Ngorora, & Gwiza, (2022) emphasize that women’s participation in the development sectors of a country is crucial for overall progress. In today’s global economy, women’s active involvement is essential for poverty reduction, economic empowerment, and contributing to the GDP. However, despite these imperatives, women face significant challenges in utilizing and accessing mobile financial services. Haque and Khondaker (2019) assert that women’s entrepreneurship development is particularly challenging due to existing economic and social disparities between men and women. Factors such as illiteracy, deprivation, lack of knowledge, and limited political representation contribute to women’s vulnerability.

CHALLENGES OF FINANCIAL INCLUSION AMONG WOMEN

Low literacy and Education Levels

Women entrepreneurs face challenges related to their limited understanding of mobile financial services.

Reynolds, Biscaye, Leigh, Brien-Carelli, & Keel, (2023) emphasize that women tend to be less educated than men in most developing and emerging markets, making it difficult to raise awareness about the benefits of mobile money and how to use it. Similarly, Suri and Jack (2016) highlight the need for targeted education to bridge this knowledge gap. Many women lack basic information on mobile phone usage, bill payments, and conducting business activities through mobile platforms (Potnis, Gaur & Singh (2020); Otieno, Liyala, Odongo and Abeka, (2016). Women and girls often experience unequal access to education. Supply-side constraints, such as inadequate sanitation facilities in schools, contribute to this disparity. Negative social norms favouring boys' education further exacerbate the situation when families have limited resources (Alliance for Financial Inclusion, 2016). Consequently, women are less financially literate than men and unfamiliar with banking and financial terminology (Kiconco, Rooks, Solano, & Matzat, (2019). The World Bank's Gender at Work report (2018) underscores the critical role of financial education. Lack of financial literacy not only restricts women's access to financial services but also hinders their ability to benefit from them (Grohmann, Klühs & Menkhoff, 2018). Globally, women face greater economic exclusion compared to men due to these educational gaps. Efforts to enhance financial literacy, address discriminatory policies, and promote gender equality in education are essential for bridging the gap and ensuring that women entrepreneurs can fully participate in mobile financial services.

Lack of Identification Documents

In numerous markets, women encounter significant challenges related to accessing financial services due to barriers associated with official identification (Alanzi and Alkhatb,2022). Women are often less likely to possess the necessary official identification documents required for opening a mobile money account. In certain markets, a man's signature is even mandated for women to initiate account opening and conduct domestic money transfers. The absence of a birth certificate prevents the issuance of an identity card, thereby restricting access to formal services. Researchers have highlighted a link between possessing an identity card and accessing formal services (GSMA, 2019; Bhalla et al,2023). Interestingly, in industrialized countries, where an individual's ability to participate in economic life is rarely hindered by lack of identification, this link appears trivial. However, in developing and emerging countries, many women and economically disadvantaged individuals face challenges in obtaining such documents due to inadequate birth registration (Potnis, Gaur & Singh (2020); Safeena and Kammani, 2018). Banks and mobile money agents typically require an identity card for customer identity verification. Unfortunately, without a birth certificate, the issuance of an identity card becomes impossible. Surprisingly, despite its significance, the problem of identification has not received prominent attention in research concerning access to financial services.

Low Levels of Mobile Phone Ownership

Phone ownership plays a pivotal role in bringing the financially excluded to be included (Perlman and Wechsler, 2019). According to a report by the Global Banking Alliance for Women (2014), women had lower ownership and usage rates of mobile phones compared to men. Various barriers contribute to this disparity, including cost, network quality, security concerns, and technical literacy (Ozili,2018). Mobile phones pose a specific challenge for women, especially those in poor rural areas, due to limited access caused by low literacy and numeracy levels, as well as social and cultural obstacles (Spencer, Nakhai, & Weinstock,2018)). Mobile financial services present an even greater hurdle, requiring familiarity with mobile devices and confidence in their use, qualities that women often lack due to educational, social, and economic constraints (Safeena and Kammani, 2018).

This gender gap persists in several markets. For example, a financial inclusion survey in Pakistan revealed that 80% of men owned mobile phones, while only 38% of women did (GSMA, 2019). Many women still lack personal ownership of mobile phones, relying on their husbands' devices. Consequently, accessing

mobile financial services becomes difficult, hindering their business activities. While phone availability remains a barrier in some regions, mobile phone penetration in Ghana is relatively high, with 80% of adults reporting phone ownership in 2018. Nevertheless, men in developing economies are more likely to have accounts for storing money than women (Demirguc-Kunt, Klapper & Singer, 2018).

Lack of Access to Technology

A study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2007 reveals that women have less access to technological innovations than men, primarily due to self-confidence issues and under-utilization of modern technologies. The absence of training in modern technological tools, such as internet usage, e-commerce, e-trade, e-banking, mobile devices, and telephony, consistently hampers the progress of women entrepreneurship (Mabrouk, Bousrih, Elhaj, Binsuwadan, & Alofaysan, 2023). Notably, outdated technologies and limited availability of modern technology pose significant barriers for women seeking mobile financial services. Addressing this constraint is crucial, as both financial and digital literacy play essential roles in fostering financial resilience and ensuring inclusive access to financial services (Lyons, Kass-Hanna & Liu, 2021).

Lack of Confidence

According to Bucher-Koenen, Alessie, Lusardi & van Rooij (2023), approximately one-third of the disparity in financial knowledge between men and women can be linked to women having lower confidence. Women tend to feel less certain about their financial knowledge, and this lack of confidence contributes to the gender gap in financial literacy. Women often exhibit less confidence in their ability to utilize mobile money services compared to men. This lack of confidence has been identified as a potential barrier to the widespread adoption of mobile financial services. Research indicates that women tend to be more cautious and risk-averse, especially when they bear significant responsibilities for managing household finances. To engage with these services, women need to feel assured and secure in their choices. However, the predominantly male presence among bank officials may make women uncomfortable during interactions (Silverstein, Smith & Johnson, 2019). Additionally, women frequently engage in numerous small, routine transactions such as shopping, receiving remittances, and paying school fees and bills. A potential contributing factor to their hesitancy in using mobile banking services could be a gap in digital literacy (Lyons *et al.*, 2021).

Lack of Easy Access to Mobile Money Agents

According to Lehmann-Uchner & Menkhoff (2020) convenient access to mobile money agents is crucial for women. They emphasize that the adoption and sustained use of mobile money services hinge on the availability of agents who can instil trust in the system. Similarly, the GSMA (2020) notes that women often have less free time than men, making it challenging for them to visit mobile money agents for transactions. In a study conducted by the World Bank in 2017, it was revealed that a staggering 99% of Mobile Financial Services (MFS) agents in Bangladesh were male. However, despite this male-dominated landscape, the majority of current and potential female MFS users expressed a strong preference for female agents. This preference was deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of the country. Women often felt uncomfortable sharing their personal information with male agents, and there were instances of harassment reported. To bridge this gender gap and enhance inclusivity, MFS providers should strategically optimize their distribution networks by ensuring greater representation of female agents.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Women face economic, social, and cultural demands, including household responsibilities, child labor, and

child marriage. Despite these challenges, women entrepreneurs remain underrepresented due to societal attitudes that limit their ability to start businesses (Tadesse, 2020). Additionally, women and girls frequently experience gender-based violence, including practices like female genital cutting or mutilation. Discriminatory legislation and policies hinder equal access to quality education, impacting their overall opportunities (Alliance for Financial Inclusion, 2016). Family responsibilities, marital status, and religious factors further constrain women's success as entrepreneurs or business operators. Beauclair, Constant, Serge & Elie Ngasseu (2023) underscores the importance of customizing financial inclusion strategies to account for cultural, religious, and structural nuances.

Legal and Regulatory Barriers

According to a Women Digital Financial Inclusion in Africa report (2019) some countries maintain formal laws that explicitly restrict women's access to commercial credit. Customary laws may also discourage investment incentives. Furthermore, women often lack the necessary documentation to open accounts. For instance, they may not possess a driver's license or be registered as homeowners or bill payers. According to World Bank research, in 2014, approximately 2 billion people worldwide lacked any formal identification documents, disproportionately affecting women.

Awareness and Lack of Information

Numerous research studies highlight that women in diverse low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) exhibit lower familiarity with and utilization of Mobile Financial Services (MFS) (Potnis et al., 2020; GSMA, 2021; Mndolwa & Assan, 2020). Initial findings indicate that gender disparities in MFS adoption stem from a dual challenge: women's limited awareness of these services and their lack of trust in them (Spencer et al., 2018; Minischeti, 2017). **Men and women** seek information about financial products from **different sources**. Understanding these disparities in media exposure and engagement is crucial for financial providers. They must identify effective mediums to reach women and tailor their advertisements or educational campaigns accordingly. Previous research indicates that **men** tend to be **better informed** about **mobile financial services** than **women**. Specifically, **33 percent of women** have **limited knowledge** about how to use mobile money, compared to **14 percent of men**. Women often rely more on **friends and family** for information about mobile money, while **radio or television** are less common sources for them (Tadesse, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher made use of the descriptive research design. 136 Questionnaires were distributed to women vendors and only 100 were returned. 30 interviews were conducted. Stratified random sampling was used. The population was divided into strata according to the type of business they do that is vegetables vendors, fruits vendors, herb vendors, food vendors and grocery vendors. The research spanned from 2016 to 2023, a period during which the economy embraced Mobile Financial services due to cash shortages, increased cash withdrawal fees, and reduced withdrawal limits. Additionally, this period encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic which caused mobility restrictions accelerating the shift towards Mobile Financial Services.

Ethical considerations

Several ethical factors were carefully considered while performing this research to ensure the study's integrity and the well-being of the participants. Participants learned about the study's objective, risks, benefits, and procedures. We acquired written agreement, emphasising voluntary participation. Personal information provided by participants was kept strictly secret. Data anonymization was used to ensure privacy. Efforts were made to reduce the potential harm to participants. Interactions took into account

cultural contexts and sensitivities. Gender-specific problems were recognised hence Gender stereotypes and biases were avoided. Benefits were maximised while hazards were minimised for participants. All participants received fair treatment. Appropriate research methodologies were chosen in accordance with ethical standards. Transparency was maintained regarding study aims. Findings were also reported truthfully and honestly.

FINDINGS

The respondents were questioned about the challenges they face in accessing Mobile Financial services. The following results were obtained;

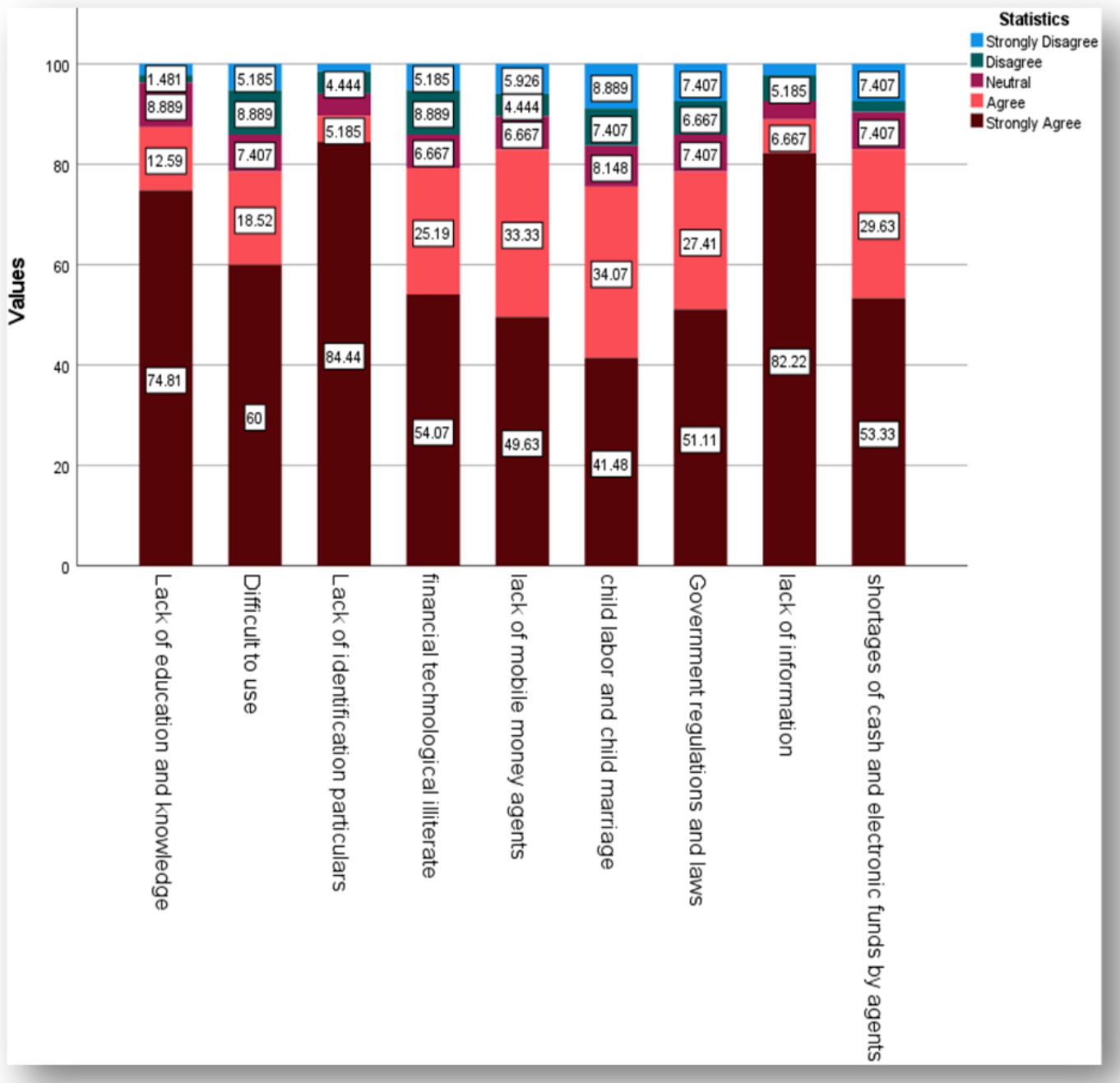


Figure 1: Challenges faced by women vendors in accessing Mobile Financial services

Source: Researcher’s findings

The data revealed that about 88.82% were of the notion that lack of information is a challenge in accessing Mobile Financial services and only a few respondents of about 5.1% strongly disagree. The respondents cited that they lack proper awareness and information about the use of MFS. One respondent had this to say,

“At the end of the working day, we are so tired that we do not have time to watch television or listen to the radio, where awareness programs are done. We will now be attending to household chores and fulfilling our marital duties since we spend most of the day at the market”.

Other respondents were genuinely unaware and lacked understanding of the availability, value and benefits of mobile Financial services which made them pay less attention to related advertisements or awareness programs as shown by this comment from a respondent,

“Mina ngifuna ukubhadalwa ngemali ethengayo. Lokhu okwemali ezisencingweni angikuzwisisi njalo angikuthembi. Ngiyake ngibone kumabonakude kodwa eqinisweni angilandaba lakho, ngakho angikukhangeli kangako. Angenelisi ukugcina imali yami ecingweni ngoba ngizayehluleka ukuwoda.”

Meaning, “Personally I prefer to be paid real money. I don’t understand or trust this money in phones. I have seen adverts on Television but I really don’t care much about this money on phones so I don’t look at these advertisements that much. Besides I cannot keep money in my phone because I will not be able to reorder.”

Another respondent added, *“It is useless to keep money on the phone, it just doesn’t work around here. People just want to use cash because no one trusts this money in the phone. It is difficult to convert into cash”. Hence this lack of trust often makes them wary to adopt, use or listen to awareness programs on MFS.*

84.44% respondents strongly agreed that lack of identification particulars is a major hindrance for women vendors to access Mobile Financial services. They lack proper identification documents such as National identification documents and birth certificates. This is because most of the respondents had lost their identification documents and due to work and family demands they do not find time to do replacements since the process requires much time which women cannot afford to lose. A respondent had the following to say which was a common sentiment amongst respondents;

“I have one of those old short birth certificates, and in order to get an ID card, I need to first change the short birth certificate to a long one, then begin processing the ID. I cannot afford to spend more than 2 days as the process takes time. I will lose a lot of money. The problem now is that these mobile money agents require an ID which is something that I do not have. Hence I cannot register for the service.”

In addition, 87.4% respondents agreed to the view that lack of education is surely a barrier for women vendors to access and use MFS and 79.26% agree that financial technology illiteracy is also a challenge. This is as a result of economic hardships leading to a gender gap as men will be the only ones who will continue with education after primary and secondary level. Due to economic challenges some of these women were forced into child marriages and labour leaving them with no opportunity to pursue an education. Low levels in education will affect the decision making of the women vendors hence affecting their access of MFS. About 10.4% of the respondents strongly disagree. This is because some of the respondents have attained higher levels of education but still facing challenges in accessing as they revealed that they are not aware of the use of MFS. Basically most women are financially illiterate, they are not well acquainted with concepts of finance and as such find it difficult to understand the benefits of mobile financial services. This manifests itself as a strong aversion in anything related to mobile financial services.

“Ini handina kudzidza, izvi zwemari yemaphone zvinonditemesa musoro. Handina basa nazvo nekuti h andisikunzwisisa.” meaning, “Im not educated...this money on phones issue gives me a headache....i don’t care about because I don’t understand it at all.”

Others cited language as a barrier as shown by this statement.

Chirungu chinonetsa, dzimwe nguva kutadza kunzwisisa chirungu chacho” meaning “English is a problem. Sometimes it is a matter of not understanding the English in the app”.

78.52% of the respondents were of the notion that Mobile Financial services are difficult to use. Most of the respondents find MFS difficult to use as they require familiarity and confidence to use it and this maybe as a result of lack of training programs specific for women vendors hence they find MFS complex to use.

“I only know how to receive and answer calls on my phone. Anything else is a challenge as I don’t understand the multiple screens that come out and I get confused as to what to do next. Sometimes I get very scared that I will block my phone or cause it to malfunction because I am pressing so many buttons as I do not know what to do. At times I get scared to ask for help because I am afraid someone will steal my phone or just laugh at me. If only there were people to train us ”.

Another respondent had this to say;

“I find it very difficult to do transactions on my phone because I cannot understand anything. If I want to transfer money or do anything on my phone I ask my husband and my older children to do it for me as they know it very well. Honestly, I am not confident in my ability to use it on my own”

82.96% of the respondents were of the notion that lack of mobile money agents is a challenge in accessing Mobile Financial services and 17.04% disagree. Women tend to have less spare time due to household chores and work and might find it difficult to reach a mobile money agent. A respondent shares their experience with mobile money agents;

“ Its hard to find agents near us. We are so busy that we would prefer to get these agents here at the market so that we get the services. There is chaos in this country....one day you find an agent in a certain location and the next day they have moved.... or you find they are just not offering the full services. I take Ecocash sometimes in US dollars but when I want to cash out agents near me do not have that facility. The ones cashing out in USD are far from me, which is an inconvenience. Sometimes I get there only to find they do not have the funds for me to cash out which is frustrating”.

Another had this to say *“I feel uneasy interacting with male agents. Certain matters are better discussed with women. It’s disheartening that the majority of agents are men. If only there were more women everywhere”.*

Hidden within this statement is frustration due to socioeconomic factors. In this instance the respondent would rather work with female agents but there is a shortage since they can’t be found everywhere.

78.% of the respondents were of the notion that government regulations and laws are barriers to access and use of MFS. MFS providers require Know Your Customer (KYC) documents such as National ID, proof of residence and pay slips for one to access MFS, therefore absence of these documents are a challenge to women vendors accessing MFS as these documents are legal and regulatory requirements for the access of MFS. One vendor had this to say,

“I do not have a payslip here at the market. My husband lost his job a long time ago so he doesn’t have a

payslip either. I am currently a lodger in somebody’s house. To get proof of residence I need an affidavit signed by the owner.... this is really troublesome as my Landlord is a very troublesome person. She will start thinking I want to do something shady with her signature and property.... I really do not want to go through the farce”

Majority of the respondents were of the notion that lack of awareness, lack of education and knowledge, lack of identification documents, government regulations and lack of mobile money agents as the major challenged faced by women vendors in accessing and using Mobile financial services.

Analysis of Challenges Affecting Women Vendors in Accessing and Using Mobile Financial Services

Challenges faced by women vendors were analysed by use of descriptive statistics and the following results were obtained;

Table 1: Challenges faced by women vendors in using and accessing MFS.

Statements (Challenges)	Mean	Standard deviation
Lack of education and knowledge to access and MFS	4.56	0.886
Difficult and complex to use	4.19	1.212
Lack of identification documents	4.67	0.872
Lack financial technology and digital skills to use MFS	4.14	1.192
Lack of mobile money agents to access MFS	4.16	1.121
Lack of awareness of Mobile Financial services	4.61	0.946
Lack of training to improve technical know-how about MFS	4.08	1.234

Table 1 shows that women vendors have no education and knowledge to access and use Mobile Financial services. The mean value (4.56) and the standard deviation result of (0.886) strongly validate this finding. A mean value which ranges from 4.21 to 5.0 implies that respondents strongly agree hence the respondents were strongly in support that lack of education and knowledge is a challenge to access MFS. It shows that, most women vendors on average have low levels of education, and technical and vocational skills can only be developed on a strong foundation of essential primary and secondary education. Thus, limited access to education and knowledge limit the opportunities of women to be financial included because access to technology requires education and knowledge.

For a women vendor to successfully access and use MFS there is need of financial technology and digital skills which most of the respondents lacked. This is depicted by the mean value of 4.14 which ranges between 3.41 to 4.20 which implies that the respondents were in support that lack of technology and digital skills is a barrier to access and use of MFS. The other issue is lack of identification documents. A calculated mean value of 4.67 and standard deviation of 0.872 shows that respondents strongly support the view that lack of identification is a barrier that hinders access to MFS. To access MFS, there should be more mobile money agents closer to the Bulawayo Vegetable market.

Findings revealed that, respondents agreed that they lack mobile money agents to enhance their trust on the use of MFS. Respondents feel that they do not have enough time to move around in search of mobile money

agents. This is supported by a calculated mean value of 4.16 and standard deviation of 1.121. A mean of 4.19 and standard deviation of 1.212 shows that respondents agree to the fact that MFS are difficult and complex to use. The respondents feel that they lack training and technical know-how to improve their use of MFS. This is shown by the mean value of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 1.23. As the above findings show limited access for training, complexity of use, lack of technical know-how to improve use and non-contentious training programs are the major problems relating to access and use and MFS. Therefore, these challenges may limit women from using MFS and successfully run their own business and such issues may create an obstacle for them to be financial included.

The findings show that the most important barrier to access Mobile Financial services is lack of identification documents, and the most second most important barrier is lack of awareness. Lack of education came in as the third most important barrier to access of MFS.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Women in this study encountered difficulties when obtaining official identification documents. Without proper IDs, accessing Mobile Financial Services (MFS) becomes problematic. This issue aligns with the research conducted by Alanzi and Alkhatb (2022) and Bhalla et al. (2023), who emphasize the significance of having proper identification papers for accessing MFS. Simplifying ID acquisition processes and advocating for digital IDs can enhance women's access to financial services.

Societal norms often discourage women from independently engaging with financial services. One common challenge is the difficulty in finding nearby mobile money agents. Expanding agent networks is crucial. Lehman et al. (2020) highlight that easy access to a mobile money agent is essential for women. Uptake and continued use of MFS depend on the availability of agents who can build trust with users. The perceived or real lack of nearby access to an agent hinders women's active adoption of mobile financial services. Interestingly, women in our study expressed a preference for female agents. Therefore, gender-responsive policies and regulations are essential to address women's unique needs in MFS.

Furthermore, ownership of a mobile device plays a key role in accessing MFS, as pointed out by Mabrouk et al. (2023). Initiatives promoting phone ownership among women are vital. However, despite having access to mobile devices, some women lack confidence in using MFS due to fear of making mistakes or security concerns. Education and awareness campaigns can help address these challenges, as supported by findings from Bucher-Koenen et al. (2023). In essence, recognizing women's specific needs, promoting phone ownership, and addressing confidence barriers are essential steps toward empowering women in the realm of mobile financial services.

In our study, women cited challenges and difficulties when using Mobile Financial Services (MFS). These findings align with the research conducted by GSMA (2021), which emphasizes that mobile phones pose specific challenges for women. Their ability to access and utilize phones can be severely limited due to factors such as low literacy, numeracy skills, and lack of confidence. According to GSMA's research, the most critical barriers to MFS access are digital skills and awareness. Demirguc-Kunt et al. (2018) further emphasize that training and technical know-how are essential for women to fully benefit from new technological opportunities.

Child marriage disrupts education and economic independence, directly affecting women's ability to engage with MFS. Additionally, many women indicated that their multiple roles within the home leave them with limited time and energy to explore and adopt mobile financial services. In summary, addressing literacy gaps, promoting awareness, and providing targeted training are crucial steps toward empowering women in their use of MFS.

CONCLUSIONS

The research concludes that the most significant barriers to MFS accessibility are lack of information and awareness; Proper identification documents as well as lack of education and knowledge. These conclusions align with previous research by Odoyo et al. (2016), GSMA (2021), and Alanzi and Alkhatb (2022), who also highlighted similar issues affecting women's access to MFS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Address lack of education, knowledge and digital literacy through training.

The research recommends financial institutions to close the gender gap in the use of MFS by women entrepreneurs through addressing constraints that affect women accessing MFS. This can be addressed through training, awareness campaigns and seminars that solely target women vendors in using MFS. For example, these programs should concentrate on safety concerns, knowledge and digital literacy using content designed to be accessible to women vendors.

The study also recommends financial institutions to offer tailor made MFS that explicitly cater for the needs of women vendors. This can be in form of easy to operate applications that are not sophisticated for use by women vendors. This will enhance the acceptability of MFS as a medium of transactions by women vendors. However, the acceptability of such services should be supported by adequate legal and financial frameworks that enhance sustainability of use of MFS.

Mobile service providers should teach women vendors how MFS can help them, how to use it, and how to keep it safe. They should use different ways to spread the information, such as meetings, radio, and messages. They should make easy-to-understand materials that explain MFS using local languages e.g. like Ndebele and Shona and examples that women can relate to. They should work with local groups to teach women about money management, such as planning, saving, and using MFS well. They should hold workshops at the Bulawayo Vegetable market to clear up any doubts or worries. They should bring MFS experts to answer questions and show how it works. They should make MFS apps and platforms easy to use, especially for beginners. They should show how MFS is secure and protected. They should share stories of other users who have benefited from MFS. They should set up local agents to help users sign up and make transactions. Additionally, more women agents must be employed to encourage use by women who are uncomfortable working with male agents. Agents can give personal advice and solve problems. They should give rewards for using MFS, such as discounts or cashback. They should motivate users to try out MFS features. They should get local leaders to support MFS in their communities. NGOs can help with workshops and awareness programs.

Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Address the issue awareness, education and security

The researcher recommends NGOs to fund and conduct trainings, information awareness campaigns and also to advocate for victims of fraud by pressing for better legal and regulatory frameworks to promote the use of MFS by women vendors. Furthermore, the study recommends NGOs to conduct robust financial literacy trainings developed to improve decision-making autonomy by equipping women with the knowledge and tools to separate business and family household expenses.

The research recommends NGOs to partner with financial institutions in quest of addressing the challenges faced by women vendors in using MFS. This may be in form of specialised schemes directed at women vendors for example financial institutions offering a service that is particular to the women vendors only.

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APPEDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following statements are about the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in using and accessing Mobile Financial services. *Indicate your opinions on the following statements using a 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree.*

	1	2	3	4	5
Lack of education and knowledge of Mobile financial services is a challenge					
It is difficult and complex to use mobile financial services					
Lack of identification particulars such as National IDs hinders access to Mobile Financial services					
Lack of Financial and technological Literacy is a challenge in accessing Mobile Financial services					
Mobile money Agents are accessible all the time					
Child labor and child marriage is a challenge to women use of Mobile Financial services.					
Government regulations and laws is a barrier to use and accessing of Mobile Financial services.					

Women lack information and do not know more about Mobile Financial services.					
Shortages of cash and electronic funds by agents reduce the use of Mobile Financial services by women vendors.					

INTERVIEW GUIDE

How familiar are you with mobile financial services?

Have you received any formal education or training related to using these services?

How informed are you about the benefits and processes of mobile financial services?

Have you received any guidance on using these services effectively?

What sources of information do you rely on to learn about mobile money options?

Do you encounter any language difficulties when interacting with mobile money agents or using mobile services?

Are there specific terms or instructions that you find challenging due to language differences?

How accessible are mobile money agents in your area?

Have you faced any obstacles in reaching these agents (e.g., distance, operating hours)?

Have you experienced shortages of cash or electronic funds provided by mobile money agents?

How does this impact your usage of mobile financial services?

Do you believe having female mobile money agents would improve your experience?

What advantages do you see in dealing with female agents?

Do you personally own a mobile phone? If so, what type (smartphone, feature phone)?

If you don't own a phone, how do you access mobile financial services?

How comfortable are you with using mobile apps or USSD codes for financial transactions?

Have you received any training on using mobile money platforms effectively?

Are there cultural norms or practices that influence your use of mobile financial services?

How do societal expectations impact your decision to engage with these services?

Have you encountered situations where child marriage or forced labor affected your ability to access mobile money services?

How can these issues be addressed to improve access for women?