

# GROWERS' VOICE

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Women are looked down upon by institutions yet they are the bread winners in most households where they look after children including those from extended families who would have succumbed to the Aids virus.

I am Mayiwepi Jiti a lady farmer aged fifty three. I was born and bred in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. I am the first born in a family of six. I attended my primary and secondary school in Harare and later moved to Masvingo where I trained as a primary school teacher.

Even though I trained as a school teacher my passion was always in agriculture. While I was still in primary school I was a member of the young farmers club and at home I used to keep poultry and did most of the flower and vegetable production for home consumption, which later became my passion. I remember when I was young my late grandfather would pick us all children, every holiday to go to his farm where we would be involved in his fish farming, piggery and crop production. This motivat-

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ed me to be what I am now and also our country's economy is agro based. I could visualize a bright future in the agriculture industry. I was also lucky to marry a man who came from a farming background, his parents owned a small scale farm. He attained a Diploma in agriculture at Chibero Agriculture Institute and worked for seven-teen years as a farm manager growing over 100 hectares of tobacco, over 100 hectares

of maize and beef production. He worked hard and passionately but had nothing to show for it which frustrated me and I managed to persuade him to try farming on our own. He agreed and eventually bought our own farm in September 1996 and immediately moved to our farm.

It was a tall order to start our own business because the farm had no infrastructure. Imagine clearing land, making bricks, constructing tobacco barns, preparing the land and planting a crop in just three months to produce a 50 hectare crop in one season but through perseverance we managed. I still remained employed as a teacher whilst my husband was now a full time farmer but I would help here and there, after work. In the next season we managed to finish construction of the neces- ▶



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sary infrastructure to do a 80 hectare crop of tobacco, which is the biggest foreign currency earner in my country, 50 hectares maize and 50 hectares wheat. To supplement our incomes we ventured into vegetable production which became my area of specialty up to now.

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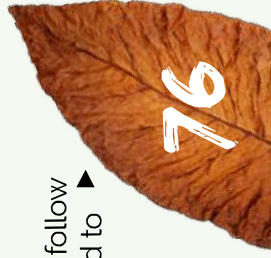
My husband then persuaded me to leave teaching to concentrate on our family business but I refused arguing that one day things would go wrong and we would not have any source of income to sustain our family. In 1999 I was double pregnant and I was always in and out of hospital and frequently off sick. He took this opportunity to make me resign. He was the councilor in



our area and one day he asked me to accompany him on the pretext that he wanted to attend a meeting. I accepted but later discovered that instead of his meeting he drove me to our Education offices where he asked the Education officer to provide me with resignation papers. I did not argue but

just resigned, little did I know that he was preparing me for the unforeseen tragedy. He was involved in a car accident which claimed his life four years later.

I did not take much effort to follow in his footsteps and I am proud to



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say that through him I managed to venture into the then men and mainly white dominated industry. I became a champion farmer and won several national and international awards. I assisted and I am still assisting several small scale farmers in my area.

I have travelled in challenging paths and my most hiccups were in financial institutes. They looked down upon women as none performers. They favour men instead, but women are the ones who do most of the donkey work. They refuse to recognize that behind every successful man there is a woman behind, bankers think men think and work better than women. They flatly refused to assist me during the trying times but grabbed the opportunity to be an inter mediator when I started my export business by handling my foreign currency. It was and still is difficult to get finance and now it is scary to be financed because the banks demand collateral in the form of a house with title deeds in Harare of which very few serious farmers have houses in Harare. The interest rates alone make it impossible to grow any crop and service the loan, so in

most cases you will be rendered homeless that is if you even own the house unless if you are a cellphone farmer who is employed elsewhere and own a farm. My best bet is to grow on contract where you are provided with everything then sell through the con-

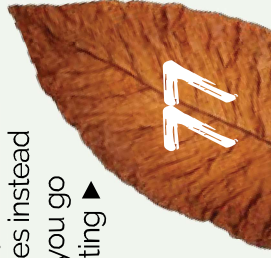
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tractor. This has a lot of challenges because the company which contracts the farmer is the same company which sets the selling

prize which in most cases is not favorable. I have also had challenges with middle man. These people take advantage of the not so organized marketing system and take the farmers' produce for next to nothing for resale making a huge profit themselves. The farmer has no option because he is not empowered to transport his produce and let alone the market itself. If he dares go to some markets he is harassed by police on the way and made to fork out money and if he does not have cash he is made to wait on the road for hours thereby compromising the quality of his produce. Some travel at night to avoid these road blocks thereby endangering their lives or if they manage to get to the market they fall prey to ever ready and waiting thieves. There is absolute need for safe and organized markets for the farmers.

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system then rewarded with a small percentage as export incentive for the hustles after exporting. The cost of freight also hinders growth of the export industry.

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Women are looked down upon by institutions yet they are the bread winners in most households where they look after children including those from extended families who would have succumbed to the Aids virus. Married women in some cases husband lives in town where he would be employed while she is tilling the land. This has always been a traditional practice and hence many men and institutions look down upon such women.

To my fellow women I would like to encourage them to join farmers Unions where their voices will be heard because

as a group you are heard than a single voice. I encourage them to take leadership positions in order to be at the same level with our counterparts even though we respect our husbands. Take farming as a business and show results especially to those who look down upon women. do it properly to achieve high yields and quality products because in tobacco production there is no short cuts. I know women as generally hard workers they can do it and always associate with farmers who know more than you do. Try to strategize your production and aim for turning your raw products into finished products in order to get more income. Invest on water harvesting if you can access cheap funds because rain fed agriculture is no longer sustainable and lastly diversify to high yielding, high paying but easy to manage projects and incorporate technology into all facets of production. ■

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