

SOUNDS OF COOKING

Meghan Mast: Those are the sounds of men...learning to cook.

Today, we're bringing you to the Mwenezi district of Zimbabwe.

To a program that cooks up more than just food...they're also...stirring up the patriarchy!

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Before we get started, I wanted to give some context to the story today.

We're talking about some of the ways women are mistreated in communities in Zimbabwe.

A lot of this is systemic. It's common.

But it's also important to know that women here weren't always treated this way.

A lot of the inequities were introduced with the violence of colonialism.

We don't have time to get into all the details of that here, but I'll link to some resources in the show notes if you'd like to learn more.

Today, a story of what happened when Zimbabweans from MCC's local partner SCORE Against Poverty came together to create a program that addresses gender inequities in their community.

The program is called Men Can Cook!

SOUNDS OF COOKING

Men Can Cook provides monthly trainings.

The program ends with a cooking competition. Contestants are grouped into teams of five and are required to grow, prepare and cook each part of the meal they serve.

I visited the Mwenezi district of southern Zimbabwe in August last year and stopped by the Men Can Cook program one day.

We were greeted with a song and dance from the women in the group when we arrived.

SOUNDS OF WOMEN SINGING AND CLAPPING

Meghan in the recording: Is this for us?

Community member: Yes, you are welcome.

Meghan: Ohhhh. Is it the same response, to clap your hands together like this to say thank you.

Community member: Yes.

Meghan: Yeah? Wow!

SOUNDS OF WOMEN SINGING AND CLAPPING

Meghan: The smell of peanut butter, beef and pan-fried veggies wafted in the air.

The men in the group were huddled around small fires, stirring pots and chatting noisily.

PLAY SOUNDS OF COOKING

In this part of Zimbabwe, women are expected to cook and raise the children. They're also expected to do all the other household chores, AND fetch firewood and water AND work in the fields. The labour load is heavy.

I spoke with Joyce Mundoko who said she remembers having to stay up all night in order to grind corn into flour for meals the next day.

Joyce Mundoko and Margareth Chauke: Toward four o'clock in the morning you were supposed to have completed the grinding so that you go to the field, so they had no time to rest. While they were in the field they were supposed to come back and the cooks sadza while the man is now resting.

Meghan: Sadza, that she refers to, is a popular Zimbabwean dish made of corn flour.

The belief that cooking is exclusively a woman's role is not unique to this part of Zimbabwe.

Many cultures have placed the burden of domestic skills on women for thousands of years.

When staff at Score Against Poverty (SCORE), an MCC partner in the region, began a project to teach farming skills to give families better access to food, they noticed that the rigid gender hierarchy prevented the project from being as effective as they hoped.

Crops were culturally defined by "male crops" and "female crops." And while women were expected to help men with all aspects of the harvest and tending to the male crops, they were on their own when it came to managing the "female crops," which were the legumes.

Men Can Cook is designed to improve food security by encouraging men and women to share the farming workload.

And the hope is that helping men get involved in cooking would lead to more equality everywhere.

Jairos Wachi, a participant, recalls how he lived before starting the program.

Jairos: I was like someone who was more like a wild animal. I'll just go where I would go. Then I would come back home. I was I was not going to assist with anything. Neither would I cook neither do any other domestic I would never entertain, I've been just come in, to get into my house and sleep.

Meghan: He admits that he acted this way in part because he didn't respect women. He spent time with men who talked badly about women, and he would join in.

Jairos: When I go out to drink beer with my friends we would sit together with other friends of mine, even to discuss to agree that wives and women are not important at all. They're just like objects.

Meghan: Things changed though when he joined the Men Can Cook program.

Now he spends more time with men who are unlearning the ways they have traditionally thought about women and gender roles.

Jairos: Remember we had people from different background setups. We discuss a number of issues here. While we are here. So I'm noticing a lot of changes there are a lot of changes in my home which are good for me that I see that are good that I learned here from the interactions that I do with other men here.

I no longer implement those foolish things, no.

Meghan: He doesn't believe this anymore?

He no longer believes the negative things people say about wives, I no longer implement that because I'm a changed man.

Meghan: Participants develop cooking skills and also learn about gender inequities.

They develop relationships with other men in the group who are also trying to break cultural norms.

The hope is men realize that sharing work not only benefits their wives, but themselves as well and their relationships improve.

Meghan: Can you give some examples?

Jairos: We share tasks at home. I sweep at home. Is also things to do with money. I come back with the money, I give the money to my wife. And we plan together with that money.

Meghan: It's a bit hard to hear what he's saying here because of the people cooking in the background, but he's talking about how when he brings money home, he now gives it to his wife and they plan together how they'll spend that money.

I also spoke with Mhurai and Timothy Zvikwari, an elderly couple who are part of the program. Mhurai says through much of their marriage, her husband was a tough man. Even abusive sometimes.

Meghan: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like before? Give some examples?

Mhurai Zvikwari: She's saying this really helps because before the kids who are afraid of their father, even the wife was afraid. So the father, if the father is away, then he comes back. As soon as you heard your husband coming, then you like, you'll be like my kids go in sleep, because they were not able even to interact with their father, even as his wives we will usually be beaten by our husbands. Even if we are pregnant, we would be told to do some of the chores that were not meant for pregnant women.

Meghan: Now, late in life, thanks to the Men Can Cook program, he is softening. And they are becoming more like equals.

Timothy Zvikwari: Okay, this training session, this program has actually changed our lives for better because now some of the household chores like going and fetching water, fetching firewood, cooking, at home we are now helping each other. So personally, from my own perspective as an elderly person, this program is good for us.

Meghan: And I'm curious to hear from both of you if you've noticed improvements in your relationship with each other, and if so what have they been?

Timothy Zvikwari and Mhurai Zvikwari: So he's saying, ah, this program really helped even in our relationship. Now we are very close like we are one we can't take it to lose one another or else even if the other is out. Then it takes time when he's not back then you're like you're thinking where is my friend? So the relationship is stronger. We are now friends in this program is come late. It was better off if it was, it came while is two very young and now we are old. Then now I can even hug my husband even in public. And even to bath together, we can bath together and help each other to bath. So it really helps now we I know he's my friend. I can play with him. He can play with me we can laugh we can chat, yeah.

Meghan: *At this point, we'd finished speaking with people and the food was ready.*

Participants lined up one by one to explain what they'd made.

Paenda Obert: *So they are bringing the recipes that they've prepared and they give a brief description of what they've made. They describe how they've prepared the dish. This is sadza from small grain, it's called pure millet grain. In Shona, it's called mashashara. 250 grams of peanut butter and then some goat for mixing. Peanut butter and mashashara. Thank you.*

Meghan: *Thank you.*

Did you want to taste?

Meghan: *They served up a plate for each of the visitors and I bit into one of the juiciest, most tender pieces of beef I'd ever eaten.*

Okay, and it's delicious (*laughs*).

Meghan: *That's it for this episode.*

Thank you to each of the participants from the Men Can Cook program for speaking with me.

And thank you to Paenda Obert and Caroline Pugen for translating.

Next month we'll bring you a conversation with a partner in Afghanistan supporting women as they learn to read.

If you like this podcast, consider subscribing. You can also rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

Show notes

Here is some extra reading on the ways colonization has impacted gender inequality in African countries and around the world:

- [Feminist movements in Africa with background on colonization and impacts on marginalizing women](#)
- [Colonial legacies impacting violence against women around the world](#)
- [A colonial legacy of African gender inequality?](#)

MCC story by Jason Dueck about the Men Can Cook competition: [The great Mwenezi cook-off](#)