

Review Article

The impact of poverty alleviation of women's initiative on rural female-headed households: A case of Amatikulu area, KwaZulu-Natal

Mpunzana Thobeka*

Department of Development Studies, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In 2000, the United Nations developed the Millennium Development Goals, with goal number 3 aiming at poverty reduction, undoing feminized poverty and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which reinforced this commitment. This resonates with challenges faced in South Africa since 1994. South Africa's post-apartheid era has significantly been framed with experiencing increasing poverty, unemployment and inequality. The study is underpinned by womanism theory, which argues that black women have been oppressed because of their race and class. The study employed a qualitative research design to collect data. A total of ten (10) women were purposively selected from the Amatikulu community, in KwaZulu-Natal of South Africa. The semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed to answer the research questions. Findings revealed that not only women were seen and discovered to be poor; but similarly, men in the Amatikulu area were also unemployed and thereby depending on women's initiatives for support. The findings also revealed that it is important for women's agencies to be involved, as women play a crucial role in the development of economic and social conditions. The role of women in poverty reduction is further advanced by the womanism theory, which takes into significant consideration women's participation in socio-economic activities.

Keywords: Womanism, Millennium development goals, Sustainable development goals, Household poverty traps, Poverty eradication

INTRODUCTION

Globally, approximately 689 million people live in extreme poverty, defined by the World Bank as living on less than \$1.90 a day (World Bank, 2021). Women comprise a significant proportion of this population, contributing to the persistent gender disparities in poverty rates (United Nations, 2022). In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), number 5 focused on women's oppression and this goal advocated for an end to all discrimination against women and girls (Mubecua & David, 2019). Another South Africa like other African countries, South Africa faces gender inequality and other social issues, which led to the introduction of the National Development Plan (NDP) to solve the issues of gender inequality by 2030. The Integrated Development Plan Review (2021), and the Integrated Development Plan (2020) UMLalazi

Municipality estimates that 234,327 people are living below the poverty line. From this figure, women constitute 53% while men are estimated to be 47%.

Literature (Aldrich & Duflo, 2021; Esquivel, 2022; Mazzucato & Penna, 2023) demonstrates that women play a vital role in development, actively engaging in various activities to combat poverty. These studies emphasise that women's involvement is crucial for sustainable development outcomes, highlighting their contributions to social and economic progress. For instance, women are increasingly participating in entrepreneurial activities and community development initiatives that address the root causes of poverty, ultimately fostering resilience and empowerment within their communities. Women engage in the informal sector, in trading, serving as labourers, homeworkers and family workers. Except that there were studies conducted in the field of women and

*Corresponding author. Mpunzana Thobeka, E-mail: thobekampunzana@gmail.com

poverty alleviation, it cannot be ignored that these studies were not conducted in South Africa. From a theoretical perspective, the work of Rodgers (2017) has shown that womanism encourages women to participate in different initiatives to address gendered poverty.

This paper therefore explores the agency of women and initiative in addressing poverty at Amatikulu within the uMlalazi local municipality in KwaZulu-Natal. World Bank Report (2018:91) "Poverty is higher in rural than in urban areas, and the gap between rural and urban poverty rates widened between 2006 and 2015". Seemingly, Walker (1983) opines that the marginalisation of black women will always make them to be oppressed and remain in poverty although they want to provide for their households but remain handicapped by resources. World Bank Reports further that "a profile of the poor shows a typical poor household as rural and headed by a single, economically inactive female black South African" (The World Bank Reports, 2018).

According to recent studies, poverty has been predominantly experienced among women, particularly in female-headed households, since the 1970s in the United States and other developed countries (Ede'O et al., 2020; Hanmer et al., 2020; Sharma, 2023). The number of female-headed households continues to grow, often accompanied by children who also experience poverty. Mwangi's (2017) report has shown that half of the African population is unable to meet their basic needs, additional for example, sub-Saharan Africa constitutes half of the poor population. Likewise in Botswana, Magombeyi and Odhiambo (2017) also mention that gendered poverty is rampant among household heads, especially among women who experience a high unemployment rate. Notably, the feminization of poverty is increasingly attributed to women due to various economic and social issues, such as low wages and high rates of unemployment among women (Sarker, 2020; Khan et al., 2022). Relatedly, the feminization of poverty is rooted in the concept of female-headed households, which are often more entrenched in extreme poverty compared to male-headed households Khan et al. (2022). Similarly, Jones et al. (2010) state that female-headed households are more vulnerable to poverty compared to the male-headed households expressed view. This study focuses on exploring the role played by women in alleviating household poverty in rural areas of Amatikulu within the uMlalazi Municipality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The women's engagement in various economic activities cut across different sectors according to their locations in society. Similarly, Irene (2017) posits that the involvement of women in most vocational skills is necessitated by the need to reduce poverty traps, especially the rural women in South Africa. Nziku and Struthers (2018) agree that women who are domiciled in rural areas, are mostly engaged in agricultural activities of planting and harvesting various crops, rearing livestock animals, and others are into vocational skills. While Agyapong and Matlay (2018) assert that the engagement of rural women in agriculture provides food security for their communities and not only their families; Ugwu (2019) asserts that agriculture is critical to food production as well as the improvement of livelihoods of rural people where agriculture is significantly the primary occupation, and this ensures lower-paying roles such as those found in agriculture. Additionally, the persistence of the gender pay gap, attributed to discriminatory

sustainability of the environment. Megbowon (2018) posits that women especially rural-based women, play a significant role in agriculture, and ensure that the environment is well protected. Bastian, Sidani and El Amine (2018) argues that the involvement of women in various entrepreneurship activities has significantly improved the living standards of many families in Africa, aside from contributing to the national economies of various countries.

Women constitute at least 80% of the total agricultural population in Africa, and play a prominent role in agriculture, especially the rural economic development in Africa (Saquina, 2013). Studies establish that African women who are rural-based produce more than 80% of various basic staple food crops such as cereals, potatoes, legumes, cassava, vegetables and many others; and these women also raise poultry birds, pigs and other small ruminants in small scale for the consumption of their households and commercial purposes (Ajani, 2008). Ajani (2008) further explains that women's activities are also expanded to other post-harvest activities that include shelling, grinding, drying, storing, and other post-harvest processing activities. The United Nations (2006) confirms that the importance of women in various social and economic spheres is crucial to the economies of various African countries and their involvement in agriculture accounts for more than half of the world's food production.

This implies that women engage in various domestic activities to provide for the needs of their families. Furthermore, Fudge and Hobden (2018) argue that women in most levels of economies are traditionally confined to domestic work to create or improve their economic power or resources. In another study, Poo and Tracy (2021) assert that fear of poverty or an attempt to break away from poverty forces many women into the labour force, where they engage in various domestic work. Casale and Shepherd (2021) posit that women aged 18 and over are significant entrepreneurs in South Africa with some of them doing domestic work. Similarly, Osinuga, Hicks, Ibitoye, Schweizer, Fethke and Baker (2021) assert that many rural women engage in different domestic works and they are motivated to do these for financial gains; hence, engagement of rural women in many domestic tasks is aimed at supporting their families, and to provide basic needs for the family (Osinuga, Hicks, Ibitoye, Schweizer, Fethke, and Baker (2021). Despite women's involvement in different and numerous initiatives to manage household poverty, women still encounter challenges in their attempts. Women are confronted with several challenges in their bid to alleviate poverty; and some of these challenges include lack of leadership skills, lack of socio-economic opportunities, and employment inequalities.

Existing studies affirm that women's poverty remains higher than that of men in South Africa (Makhalima, 2023; Bhorat et al., 2021; Steyn and Jackson, 2022). Research indicates that women in the labour market encounter numerous challenges across various sectors, often exacerbating their economic vulnerabilities (Gonzalez and O'Connor, 2024). Specifically, female-headed households rely heavily on their incomes to support their families, which frequently comes from low-paid employment, placing them at a greater risk of poverty than male-headed households (Khan et al., 2023). Access to capital is a significant issue for many households in poor rural areas, as highlighted by the findings of Chauya (2021) and Veeran (2023), which indicate that access to quality jobs is often limited for women, leading to a prevalence in practices in the labour market, continues to undermine women's financial stability (Gornick and Boeri, 2023; Steyn and Jackson,

2022). Overall, the ongoing inequalities in employment opportunities and the increasing number of female-headed households underscore the urgent need for policy interventions aimed at addressing these disparities and empowering women to escape poverty (Ndzabela and Lukman, 2024).

This study was conducted in the Amatikulu area, which is situated within the uMlalazi Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The study employed a qualitative approach that explored the impact of poverty eradication initiatives on rural women in the Amatikulu area. An exploratory design was chosen for this research, aiming to gather descriptive data and enhance understanding of the subject. This design, as a collection of data collection methods, adds depth to research (Rocha, 2004). The research framework utilized in this study aids in developing new worldviews and perspectives on previously held understandings of reality. The motivation for the criteria of the approach was to investigate the women's role and initiative in poverty eradication within their households (Kabeer, 2021). The study constituted a sample size of 10 black women, who were unique individuals qualified to represent the target population (Neuman, 2011). An in-depth interview was utilized as the primary data collection instrument. The researcher employed open-ended questions to allow participants to share their feelings, opinions and perceptions regarding the research questions, as well as their own experiences. A total of ten women (as indicated in Table 1 below) were selected and were available to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' households, with these participants purposively selected to gain rich information on the initiative of female-headed households.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding procedures, where responses were categorized to identify patterns and themes

reflective of the participants' experiences and strategies in poverty eradication. Limitations of this study include the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the views of ten women may not represent the broader population of rural women in KwaZulu-Natal. Additionally, potential biases may arise from the purposive sampling method, where participants who voluntarily agree to participate might have characteristics or perspectives that differ from those of other women in similar circumstances. The research needs to acknowledge these limitations to ensure transparency and rigour in understanding the complexities surrounding women's roles in poverty alleviation. The rights to confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent, voluntary participation, and protection from harm were communicated to the participants and adhered to in the study. Ethical clearance to guide the researcher due to the nature of the study was granted by the research committee before the execution of the fieldwork, with the ethical clearance number UZREC 171110-030 PGM 2021/18.

Presentation of findings

Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret interview data in this study, which took a qualitative approach. Raw data was transcribed from the audio recording and looked over the field notes carefully. From a mass of words and stacks of paper to a final report, you'll need a system for organizing and tracking the text (Maree et al. 2010). The themes were derived from the data that had been coded and transcribed. The themes were created by listening to the participants repeat common events while using the study's research questions to gain clear explanations and knowledge of the research (Table 1).

Table 1. The profile of the participants on the paper.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation status	Source of income
1	Hleziphi	Female	56	Self-employed	Poultry farming, sugarcane farming, traditional beer selling, tuck-shop, and commercial farming
2	Zekhethelo	Female	31	Self-employed	Owning a tuck shop at home, and sugarcane farming
3	Nandipha	Female	40	Employed	Domestic worker (laundry lady)
4	Ntombizonke	Female	55	Self-employed	Owning a tuck-shop
5	Bongekile	Female	58	Self-employed	Owning a tuck-shop and sugarcane farming
6	Fundile	Female	35	Self-employed	Owning a tuck-shop and sugarcane farming
7	Zandile	Female	48	Self-employed	Owning a tuck-shop
8	Fikelephi	Female	59	Self-employed	Sugarcane farming

9	Dorothy	Female	71	Self-employed	Sugarcane farming and owning a tuck shop. She is also receiving a government grant for old age
10	Thandiwe	Female	60	Self-employed	Taxi business owner and sugarcane farming

Participants in this study were women, involved in different economic activities, to generate income and for household poverty alleviation. Moreover, some of the women were the head of their households. The themes of the study were generated through thematic analysis of the interviews, based on the common concepts or ideas the participants expressed with the research questions of the study. This has helped to obtain relevant information and views about the research focus. participants' responses were sorted into themes of the study with the motive of answering the research questions of the study. In life with confidentiality ethics, the use of pseudonyms was employed instead of each participant's name. These women engaged in different farming projects (livestock and crop farming). In crop farming, they participated in sugarcane ploughing; while in livestock farming, they engaged in poultry farming. Some women in Amatikulu also engaged in entrepreneurship, while others were working as domestic workers. The three broad themes are presented in detail as follows.

Theme 1: Survival techniques of women in poverty alleviation projects

It has been shown that the participants who engaged in fighting against poverty were between the age of 31- 71 years, as shown in Table 1. The participants of female-headed households were discovered to be playing a significant role in formulating self-employment opportunities for themselves as a means of fighting against poverty and managing within their households in the form of living. Women were found partaking in self-employment and community activities such as agricultural work, farming projects and entrepreneurship as the means of alleviating poverty in their households. Lukhele (2013) avers that these women are empowered by these socio-economic activities to manage poverty. The researcher recognized that female-headed households of women in rural areas were involved in different activities purposely to generate income for their household. An initiative that women partook in was found to be creating a huge role in their families' lives.

"I identify my home as a better home now than before because I can get what I want whenever I have thoughts of doing something I do it. The activities that are assisting me in generating money are such as selling chickens, having a well successful tuck-shop full of fridges with meats and other basic needs, traditionally beer and I have sugar cane outside in my yard that I take to hullet sugar cane every year and small gardening with vegetables such as spinach and tomatoes". (Hleziphi). The majority of women in rural areas depend on agricultural activities to be able to feed their households (Meinzen-Dick, Quisumbing, Doss and Theis, 2019); and the participants' involvement in agricultural activities suggests their efforts to enhance and maintain the survival of their family members from poverty. One of the participants revealed how she

has outdone herself in the struggle against poverty. Dorothy also strongly agreed with Hleziphi by saying that:

Theme 2: Lack of employment and capital

It can be discerned that some women still encounter some challenges that lead them to poverty in their households in terms of not achieving everything they want to have. However, some participants indicated that they were involved in other activities such as domestic work. Nandipha stated that:

"To sustain myself and fight poverty I am working as a domestic worker in one of our community members and they do not pay me much" (Nandipha).

The participants shared the same sentiments about how they perceived themselves. Another participant responded that:

"I am more like them who are poor but if I look at someone else, I see myself better because I try to have food on the table. I am selling cigarettes which generate lots of money and chips and cakes for children. (Zandile). Women's empowerment is the main weapon to use in argumentative conflict of poverty in women's households (Walker,1983). In addition, womanism is concerned with women's role in their families, society, and individuals based on differences in race, culture or class (Izgarjan and Markov, 2012). Interviews with Amatikulu area women headships revealed that they perceived themselves as poor; however, the initiatives have impacted their living standards. In the literature review, previous studies (Kimani and Kombo, 2010;Sebolai, 2017; Team and Doss, 2011) have indicated that women's roles in different agricultural sectors are observed as contributors to GDP (Gross Domestic Price) and poverty alleviation. Fighting against poverty remained and was discovered as a continuing issue, as the majority of women were self-employed, except one employed woman amongst these women. This study has exposed how women are struggling with employment as women remain concentrated in lower-paying jobs and jobs with low benefits. Female-headed households as a phenomenon is a major cause that leads many women back to poverty, and one of the participants complained as follows:

"I observe myself and my home as being poor because I am the only elder who is working and I do not earn much but a cent" (Nandipha).

Theme 3: Income-generated

The participants were asked about their income-generated needs, and the researcher further interviewed women if the income covers their family's needs, and how much they end up spending to meet those needs. One of the responses is as follows.

"The money does not meet all the household needs, but it does cater for my family's needs as we can put food on the table and take my children to school" (Nandipha).

It is common to see women who are unable to meet their basic needs because of not having enough personal savings for their families. The poverty circumstances exceed daily bases of day to day. In addition, this can lead to the continuation of poverty because the attempt to fight is paying the woman less which leads to other needs not being met. The participant wished she had enough money to get more stock of other things, but the funds were not enough:

“I wish, I had more money to buy other things for me to sell besides these small things, but the money issues are holding me back because the profit I use it to buy us food and for a child to attend school” (Zandile, 22 February 2021, Homestead).

Women’s vulnerability to poverty has made them attempt to improve their living standards; however, the participants’ needs are beyond what they can personally improve. The participant revealed that her household’s needs were beyond the salary the participant was receiving. She also disclosed that women were earning less. Another woman shared the same sentiment as a self-employed person. She stated that what she was getting was insufficient to meet every need of the household but only cater for the basic needs. The participant stated that:

“... the fact that I can put food on the table and my child goes to school like any other children, I think it caters for what matters and I have one room shelter not like other people who have no food and shelter” (Zandile).

Additionally, female-headed households do not have a fixed budget for the amount they spend on their family needs, however, it causes experience poverty in their household. Similarly, another respondent said:

“I do not have a secure budget on how much I should spend because I normally use what is available at that time however it is not always that I have sufficient money for things that I need. (Zandile).

The participants have comparable views about the money they generate for their living which can symbolize one of the challenges women face in their attempt to fight against poverty within their household. This shows that women share the same sentiments of clothing, and daily needs. The findings revealed that most, if not all women were involved in agricultural and entrepreneurship activities which were discovered to be common amongst the women of Amatikulu. Meinzen-Dick, Quisumbing, Doss and Theis (2019) concur that the majority of people in rural areas use agriculture as a tool for survival and rural development as they generate income to feed their households. Such agricultural initiatives have enabled them to provide food and other basic family needs within their household. In addition, these initiatives made women to be self-confident, self-reliant and less vulnerable to poverty.

The women of Amatikulu experienced poverty caused by unemployment, lack of adequate education, and low-paying jobs. Most, if not all women were discovered to be self-employed and only one was employed during the interviews that were held with women that participated in the study. The above signifies that lack of employment is a cause of poverty, for instance, based on the identity of gender, class, and race which womanism has revealed as the main reasons for women's oppression. The participants complained about low-paying jobs. This indicates that women only get jobs that are low paying and it is for that reason the women of Amatikulu might have resulted in self-employment and not being employed. The women experienced challenges such as

not securing what they lack within their household even though they are involved in other activities. Most of the money that these women generate is being spent on their family needs to take care of members of the household.

DISCUSSION

The women identified themselves as poor even though they were involved in some initiatives as a means of poverty alleviation. Most of the women did not have proper shelters and were unemployed with those who were employed complaining of low-paying jobs which failed to cover their family needs. Unemployment and low jobs amongst gender have been observed as the root of the inequality towards female-headed households according to scholars and the finding’s revealed poverty is the main factor that has led these women into poverty. Poverty has been observed as a global issue and women are being categorized to be the face of poverty. The researcher determined to explore and uncover the gendered factors that implicate women-headed households and poverty.

The initiative activities for women to sustain their household and contribute towards poverty management in Amatikulu female-headed households were discovered and they were gardening (vegetables such as spinach, cabbage and tomatoes), sugarcane farming, chicken-stock, selling at tuck-shops, owing taxi business, and engaging in domestic work. These initiatives have remained effective towards fighting against poverty in the Amatikulu area and within the participants’ households. The roles and initiatives of women also contributed towards poverty alleviation through their skills. These involvements in the community are assisting their household members to improve their lives and living standards. The capital that is generated by the activities is mainly used to provide for the needs of the household and assist in poverty alleviation, this has also helped in developing female-headed households in the Amatikulu area. These projects have created employment for these women and thereby alleviated the rate of poverty that manifests in terms of inadequate housing, lack of the inability to secure funds to do business and in turn, fight poverty attempts. The income generated was observed to be spread to cater for numerous family needs that must be met by the family head.

The majority of the participants frequently mentioned income generated as a consequence of their agencies. The study has demonstrated that women were mostly running the same initiatives as sugarcane farming which brought money once a year. It is deducible that these women have a lot of needs such as taking children to school, buying food, arranging transportation for children to school, providing clothing, securing shelter for their household, buying electricity and buying their stock alongside other social and basic needs for their households. From literature, the challenges are not limited to cultural issues as the participants revealed.

The challenge of income generation faced by the women has affected their budget. The finding revealed that women experienced challenges of having unemployed men in their households, and many have even passed away and made women to be single parents. Poverty is revealed as a challenge that most of the households in Amatikulu households suffer from. It can be concluded however that the nature of poverty that is affecting these women is a socio-economic issue, which limits them to

manage poverty properly within their households.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that the initiative activities for women to sustain their household and contribute towards poverty management in Amatikulu female-headed households were discovered and they were gardening (vegetables such as spinach, cabbage and tomatoes), sugarcane farming, chicken-stock, selling at tuck-shops, owing taxi business and engaging in domestic work. Most, if not all women were involved in agricultural and entrepreneurship activities which were discovered to be common amongst the women of Amatikulu. The study further revealed that not only women were seen and discovered to be poor; but similarly, men in the Amatikulu area were also unemployed and thereby depending on women's initiatives for support. Research findings indicated that all the participants interviewed had no other income besides the initiatives as they were self-employed. The women experienced challenges such as the inability to secure funds to do business and in turn, fight poverty attempts. However, several potential barriers to implementing these recommendations were identified, including limited access to financial resources, lack of training opportunities and societal norms that discourage women from entering male-dominated fields. The income generated was observed to be spread to cater for numerous family needs that must be met by the family head. It is recommended that these women need to be empowered and supported by the government by providing entrepreneurship skills and agricultural education. The women seem to be more involved in those fields. The study recommends women should be encouraged to be involved in male-dominated fields and works such as construction, electricity and engineering. Despite these recommendations, barriers such as gender bias in hiring practices and the need for supportive infrastructure must be addressed to ensure successful integration into these sectors. The researcher also recommends women be trained for professional qualifications which can reduce the inequality pay gap and gendered poverty existing between women and men. This may assist the SDG and AUC 2063 to meet their goals. It is recommended that these women need fundraising assistance for their initiatives to bring social change. Addressing these barriers will be crucial for the successful implementation of the proposed initiatives and for fostering sustainable economic empowerment among women in Amatikulu.

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