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Housing challenges encountered by single mothers heading households in Tyutyu Village, Bhisho Eastern Cape, South Africa

Athenkosi Ndima[1.1], Mziwandile Sobantu[1.2], Noel G. Muridzo[2.1] and Tatenda Sukulao[2.2]

[1.1] University of Johannesburg, Department of Social Work and Community Development, Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2678-3739 *ndimaathenkosi@gmail.com*

[1.2] University of Johannesburg, Department of Social Work and Community Development, Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4929-4623 *msobantu@uj.ac.za*

[2.1] Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Gweru, Zimbabwe
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3295-0305 *nmuridzo@gmail.com*

[2.2] Midlands State University School of Social Work, Gweru, Zimbabwe
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4699-6213 *sukulaotatenda@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

Access to social and economic opportunities, such as housing and property rights, remains gendered in many developing countries such as South Africa due to institutionalised forms of exclusion. Focusing on rural female-headed households (FHHs), this descriptive qualitative study explored the interconnectedness between housing and rurality challenges in Tyutyu Village, Bhisho, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study applied purposive sampling to select 10 female household heads to whom semi-structured interviews were administered. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. The study found that FHHs experienced several housing-related challenges, such as persistent unemployment and poverty, unsafe and insecure housing and neighbourhoods, and the absence of a father figure. Based on the findings, the study recommends integrated and inclusive gender-aware housing policy responses to cater for the housing needs of FHHs.

Keywords: female-headed households; gender; housing; social exclusion; South Africa; Tyutyu Village

INTRODUCTION

Most single mothers heading households experience extreme socio-economic challenges that undermine their prospects of accessing housing. Access to social and economic opportunities, such as housing, remains largely gendered owing to the institutionalised marginalisation of women. According to Hohmann (2013), housing plays a crucial role in shaping nearly all social and economic relations within society. Because of the multiple forms of exclusion experienced by single mothers heading households, housing is therefore critical for this population category as it helps to shield them from numerous social and economic associated risks. Female-headed households are homes that are headed by women, most of whom are single and without a father figure at home (Raniga & Mthembu, 2016). They are varied as some are headed by "older women…women with disabilities, women who are single parents, childless women, divorcees and women who are not and never have been married" (Tually, 2011, p. 38). Unique to this study is that it focused on single women who are heading households in a rural setup. The study was aimed at exploring the housing challenges experienced by FHHs. There has been very little social work research focused on the housing circumstances of FHHs in the rural areas.

Rural poverty in the country largely disadvantages women from accessing quality houses and homes for their families (Marutlulle, 2024; Masuku et al., 2023; Meyer, 2023; Sobantu et al., 2025). Therefore, many contend with poor housing and housing insecurity and unsafe living environment. As a basic human right, housing is an important asset for poverty alleviation and promoting the interrelated rights of families. It is of close interest to social work since the profession is mandated to promote human rights and the dignity of citizens, especially the vulnerable in society (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). This study was guided by the question: *What are the housing challenges that are encountered by single mothers heading households in Tyutyu village, Bhisho, in South Africa?* The next section is a review of literature focusing on the pathways to female headship, followed by a discussion on how rurality further worsens the poverty and deprivation of FHHs in rural setups. The theoretical framework is also discussed before the methodology that guided the study. Next, the findings and a discussion of the latter are given followed by the implications for social work, limitations of the study and lastly, conclusion and recommendations.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ROUTES TO FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADSHIP

There are various ways through which females become heads of families. The most common are cases where fathers deny paternity and paternal responsibility. In addition, when husbands and fathers pass away, the surviving wives and mothers by default take family headship (Matjila, 2020). The latter is common in South Africa, where the mortality rate for males is higher than that of females (Tshabalala et al., 2025). Rural-urban migration has also contributed to female headship. As a social and economic phenomenon, rural-urban migration by men for better livelihood opportunities also has implications for female household headship, most notably when the men do not return to their families in the rural areas, as was the case during the colonial and apartheid periods (Sobantu & Noyoo, 2022). It should be mentioned that female headship also exists in same-sex marriages, families and relationships. There has been an increase in scholarly attention on FHHs owing to the challenges and barriers that female heads face as they transition into single parenthood, assuming sole care of their families

(Ndagurwa et al., 2023; Posel et al., 2023; Saad et al., 2022). Inadequate housing or lack thereof compromises their access to various social and economic resources. It has also been noted that rural FHHs are arguably neglected by policy, despite facing multiple cultural exclusions such as restrictions on inheriting their late husbands' estates, which include housing (Adonis, 2020; Zaroba, 2016).

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS TRAPPED BETWEEN POVERTY AND RURALITY

Perhaps some background on female household headship in South Africa is important to this study. In 2020, three out of every five households were headed by a female (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2021). Of the 18.5 million households that South Africa had in 2022, 42.5% were headed by women (Stats SA, 2023). Almost half of these households were in the rural areas compared to the 39.4% who were based in the urban setups. In the rural areas, FHHs are concentrated in the poorest provinces, for example Eastern Cape with 48.8% and KwaZulu Natal had 46.8%. Despite FHHs in rural areas experiencing disproportionately high levels of poverty, deprivation and persistent cultural and social exclusion, their housing and related welfare have arguably received little scholarly attention and policy focus.

Rural housing for FHHs can better be understood in the context of the country's persistent housing challenges. Currently, South Africa has well over seven million citizens who live in informal settlements, some of which lack electricity, sanitation and running water (Stats SA, 2021). Poor housing among rural female-headed households results from a complex interplay of factors. Institutionalised neglect of rights to quality education, for example, by the apartheid government which further excluded the Black population, particularly rural women, from gainful economic and social participation. As a result, most of them do not qualify for loans to build or improve their rural housing and surroundings (Vorster & Thaba, 2025). Another drawback of rural housing is the lack of recognition of their houses as collateral when applying for housing improvement loans. The rural-urban development divide in the country continues to undermine rural economies to create employment that would improve people's access to housing and opportunities (Krugell, 2011; Mudiriza & Edwards, 2017, 2021). Most of the female heads who are formally employed in rural areas are in low-paying jobs, having to augment their wages with various social grants at their disposal for their livelihood (Adonis, 2020; Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014; Tually, 2011). Consequently, it becomes very difficult for them to engage in quality homemaking processes, such as building more rooms, improving sanitation and water reliability, accessing other sources of lighting and power, and buying more furniture and household items.

It is also relevant to analyse rural housing and access to land for women from a human rights perspective. Sadly, housing research in South Africa neglects rural setups and female heads and their households. By so doing, critical aspects of human rights are often overlooked, such as the structural barriers that exclude rural women from access to housing and their ability to maintain stable homes and families. The UN 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (the Covenant) notes that "States parties […] recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing" (United Nations, 1966). Housing is a basic human right, and, in the case

of South Africa, it is enshrined in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) for all South Africans, including rural female heads. Literature indicates that there is also a direct correlation between poor housing and violation of women's rights through rape and other crimes (Lovell et al., 2025; Sobantu & Noyoo, 2022; Woollett & Thomson, 2016).

COMPOUNDED EXCLUSION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AFFECTING RURAL FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Rural areas in the country have been marginalised and excluded from meaningful development (Raboeane & Sigwela, 2024; Ramoroka & Maphosa, 2022). Gumede (2016) argues that rural underdevelopment is a consequence of colonial and apartheid racialised spatial planning, which by design created hostels which were proximal to farms and factories to serve the colonial economic interests. Perpetual water shortages, endemic poverty and poor housing infrastructure are synonymous with the rural areas, affecting mostly single women-headed households in rural South Africa. Their challenges were further exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS in the early 2000s, which Gilbert and Walker (2009) partly attribute to the labour migration of men, coupled with the men visiting their families in the homelands infrequently. Dayton and Ainsworth (2004) posit that AIDS played a major role in the creation of FHHs, because following the deaths of their husbands or partners, the wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters and aunts became primary carers by default. With added financial, psychosocial and mental strain, these new household heads could hardly cope with inadequate housing maintenance, as providing food was their priority.

Generally, rural areas and residents across Africa and developing countries lack sufficient or any access to piped water, sanitation and electricity. Many families in rural areas erect their structures using simple basic materials within their means, unlike urban housing, which is highly regularised in terms of bylaws that specify building standards and processes. While providing a critical function of shelter for several rural households, this kind of housing is characterised by structural defects, such as leaking roofs, weak walls and environmentally unfriendly structures and temperature levels. As such, they are unable to withstand extreme weather conditions, such as floods and winds. During the 2021 floods in the rural Eastern Cape, numerous housing structures of FHHs collapsed. As reported by Damba-Hendrick (2023, p. 1), one of the victims was a 73-year-old single woman whose six-roomed mud house was destroyed by floods, leaving her with only one room with

> *a hole at the back wall covered by a zinc sheet. The roof is precarious, is leaking, and could collapse. The woman indicated that she's relying on an old age grant and the child support grants of two grandchildren... son, who assisted in building this house, passed away and she's left with granddaughter who is in East London looking for a job.*

The above excerpt best captures the extent of poverty among rural FHHs owing to intersectional vulnerability, which impacts their health and wellbeing. Some scholars (see Starke et al., 2020; Starke et al., 2021) argue that the spread and impact of COVID-19 could have been mitigated with adequate housing connected to reliable water and sanitation, to mention a few facilities. According to Shifa et al. (2021, p. 3)

> *while lockdown and social distancing policies [were] implemented to minimise the risk of infection outside the household, the secondary attack rate (the proportion of people infected as a result of contact with an infected person) varied depending on the [housing] living circumstances of the individual*.

The multiple housing-related responsibilities such as fetching water from the community taps and dams and collecting firewood for lighting, boiling water and cooking - in addition to the unavailability of radio and/or television to learn about the pandemic, increased the vulnerability of rural female household heads to COVID-19 (Shifa et al., 2021).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The work of the late Sylvia Chant is instructive in advocating gender-focused thinking with respect to FHHs, particularly those in rural South Africa. Informed by her articulation of gendered poverty and lack of access to housing by women (Chant, 2013), this study applied social exclusion as a theoretical framework to gain insights not only into the housing challenges of FHHs, but also to analyse the structural elements that perpetuate these challenges. Chant (2013) stresses that poverty is not neutral but has gender, age, spatial and racial dimensions in addition to the cultural factors that disadvantage women and female heads. Social exclusion is a crucial analytical tool that attempts to critically assess how individuals and groups are marginalised from participating in the economy and accessing the advanced services requisite for their upkeep and wellbeing. Rural female heads of households are among the poorest, with most having insecure livelihood activities in the third economy, such as farming, domestic work and micro-enterprises (Masuku et al., 2023; Raboeane & Sigwela, 2024; Raniga, 2022). According to Chant (2013) and Raniga (2022), some female heads suffer unequal rights within family structures, and therefore they may be unable to inherit property and assets after the death of their husbands and partners. Confronted with multiple financial responsibilities, they lack the wherewithal to improve their housing and surroundings, as they are compelled to provide food for their families as a priority. Thus, disasters such as floods and pandemics such as COVID-19, disproportionately affect rural FHHs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As advised by Creswell (2014), this study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of the housing challenges that rural FHHs contend with. In this study, a qualitative approach enabled rural female heads to share in their own words the associated obstacles to realising quality housing for them and their families. In the process, they further discussed some of those rural-specific cultural challenges that impact on their housing experiences. Women, particularly those in rural areas, have been excluded from housing, housing policy discourses and planning; thus, in this study the exploratory descriptive design afforded participants a platform to share their housing experiences.

Population

The simple definition of a population, according to Ahmad et al. (2023), is persons or events that are the focus and basis for conducting research. In this case, the population included all FHHs in Tyutyu village. This village is in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and is

about 15 kilometres from Bhisho, the capital of the Eastern Cape. While there are no specific statistics on the proportion of FHHs in Bhisho, the 2024 General Household Survey released in May 2025 indicated that 42.4% of all households in the country had female heads, of which 47.1% of these were found in the rural areas. Eastern Cape registered 48.8% of FHHs, which was higher than the national average (Stats SA, 2025).

Sampling and recruitment

Instead of studying every individual or household of the population, the researchers selected a small number of individuals with characteristics that could help answer the research questions (Ahmad et al., 2023). Snowball sampling was applied, since the researchers did not know all the households that were headed by women. This sampling method involves identifying one candidate who meets the criteria, who will in turn refer the researcher to other prospective candidates. In gaining access to the village, the researchers first met with the community leader, with whom they shared their research intentions and requested permission to meet and recruit the prospective participants. The selection criteria were that participants must have been single, adult females aged between 30 and 80 years, have been residing in Tyutyu village for the past five years, and be heading households and raising children and/or dependants under their care. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants who took part in this study.

Table 1: ***Demographic profile of the participants***

Pseudonym	Age	Status	Livelihood activity	No. of dependants	Type of house (all free standing)	Length of stay in years
Nokuthula	64	Widowed	Pensioner	2	Cement brick, corrugated iron	11
Nontando	75	Never married	Pensioner	5	Mud brick, corrugated iron	20
Pamela	55	Widowed	Employed	3	Cement brick, corrugated iron	16
Siziwe	42	Never married	Unemployed	2	Mud brick, thatched roof	12
Nontuthuzelo	63	Widowed	Pensioner	3	Cement brick, corrugated iron	23
Londi	35	Never married	Unemployed	1	Mud brick, thatched roof	16
Lulu	28	Widowed	Employed	3	Cement brick, corrugated iron	11
Sindiswa	46	Divorced	Employed	4	Cement brick, corrugated iron	25
Nosakhele	62	Widowed	Pensioner	6	Cement brick, corrugated iron	18
Xoliswa	58	Widowed	Retired	5	Cement brick, corrugated iron	22

Data collection

The study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each of the 10 participating female heads. To facilitate a structured interview process, an interview schedule with open-ended questions was used with each participant. According to Geyer (2021), qualitative interviews empower participants by affording them a platform to share their views freely and broadly. The methodology was very useful in following through emerging themes that elaborated on participants' housing experiences within the context of multiple social and economic exclusions that they face in their rural setup. Some of the interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, which is the native language of the two primary researchers. English was also used with those participants who could understand the language and were comfortable with it. The individual interviews were conducted in the comfort of the participants' homes, with each session lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. With their permission, all sessions were audio recorded using a digital device to have a record of the conversations (Geyer, 2021). Additionally, note-taking and journaling documented non-verbal cues that the tapes were unable to capture.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was applied to identify, describe and interpret key themes and report on the transcribed data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The authors had to reread the transcripts to familiarise themselves with their initial impressions. Data sets were grouped using alphabetical letters, for example, A, B and C. Colour coding was also used for the initial codes, which were later translated into themes, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2006). Furthermore, the authors reviewed the coded themes to check for coherence and ensure that each theme was adequately represented by the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In addition, the themes were modified by allotting related data to the relevant categories, followed by further more elaborate definition and description of the themes.

Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities' Research and Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg to ensure that the study adhered to "research protection norms, standards, and requirements" (Ndebele et al*.,* 2014, p. 3). The approval number for this study is REC-01-227-2020. During recruitment, the participants were given the participant information sheets (PIS), which was written in simple English. The researcher and the participants discussed the study further, clarifying any questions that were posed pertaining to the study, including clarifying and agreeing on the roles of each party. The aim was to ensure that participants were aware of all the relevant details about study, so that they could make informed decisions about whether to participate or not. The research must at all costs guarantee that participation is voluntary (Mumford et al., 2021), thus no one was coerced to take part in this study. Participants were further requested to sign dual consent forms for participation and for having the conversations recorded. To ensure that participants' responses are not traced back to them, the study made use of pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. Transcripts and audio recordings were kept safe in the researchers' password-protected laptops. This procedure is in line with the principle of confidentiality as

prescribed in the Code of Ethics governing the conduct of social workers (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2007), which obligates them to guard the information shared by clients. Counselling services were organised prior to the interviews to refer participants, if the conversations triggered painful emotional experiences, as housing in South Africa is a sensitive issue connected to the country's violent history of land dispossession, separate development, and ongoing exclusion and segregation (Sobantu & Noyoo, 2022). None of the participants utilised the services, though.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore and describe the housing challenges faced by rural FHHs. The empirical data revealed interrelated challenges, some of which are structural but very pertinent to the perpetual housing challenges in South Africa and specifically to low-income households. This article reports on only three related themes: 1) poverty, poor quality housing and nutrition; 2) the loss of husbands and poor maintenance; and 3) lack of safety and security at home and in the neighbourhood. As pointed out, the authors are aware that the themes are very closely related but opted to report on them separately because they each contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with rural housing for female heads of households in the country. In this discussion the literature on housing, FHHs and social exclusion is integrated throughout. Verbatim responses have also been used to enrich these empirical findings.

Poverty, poor quality housing and nutrition

The findings showed that participants are under severe financial strain because of unemployment and gendered poverty among rural female heads. These factors impacted on their ability to afford quality building materials such as cement bricks, corrugated iron sheets and roofing tiles. For example, three participants had their houses built with mud bricks and utilised grass for roofing, which they indicated was old and leaking. According to the broader definition of housing articulated by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, housing quality and experience are also determined by access to (or lack of) food, nutrition and clothing, to mention a few considerations (United Nations, 1966). Poverty emerged as a key factor that participants identified as influencing their housing experiences and limiting their access to other rights. Some of their comments are indicated below.

> *No, there are no positive experiences; there are just struggles. My family is suffering; I [am] pensioned, but the money is not enough to take care of all my and my family's needs. We are poor, as you can see; we hardly make it to the end of the month. The food never lasts, the kids need clothes, school fees, and the peer pressure from the outside is not helping. Even their grant money is not enough; I have two children, and they're not out of school yet. I stress every day that they look presentable, and poverty is not written on their faces. But we struggle a lot*. (64-year-old Nokuthula)

> *Being unemployed while heading a household is hard; I have debts I cannot clear because the money is never enough. All my children are unemployed too; some are still at school, and the social grants and the piece jobs are not enough to take care of all our needs. I am living in poverty, and I feel like I am voting for nothing. I have educated my children, but*

they do not get jobs after finishing school. Instead, the government wants them to volunteer, and then they come back hungry and empty-handed. I am just grateful that I do not have to pay any rent or rates since I own a house in a rural area; things would be much worse if I did. (55-year-old Xoliswa)

I have my own house, but because I am unemployed, it is really hard to run away from poverty. I also do not have a man to take care of me. Family members and friends get tired too, so I try to not bother them. I hope my child finds a job soon, but even when he does, it does not necessarily mean that he is working for me because they have their problems too. But it would definitely be weight off my shoulders if he helps around the house. (35-year-old Londi)

The significant impact of historical and gendered poverty on the participants was that almost all of them relied on state grants for survival. They reported that this support was insufficient to afford quality nutrition for their families or to create a comfortable home and living environment, emphasising that the concepts of 'house' and 'housing experience' are very broad, including access to food and clothing. More responses are quoted below.

Sometimes we spent days eating a single meal; lacking a breadwinner in the family meant that there was no adequate and sustainable income for buying basic needs; however, after we registered the grandchildren as beneficiaries of the child support grant, at least now we could buy basic needs like food for the children. (75-year-old Nontando)

For a living, I sell fruits and sweets. My business is neither even official nor registered, and so I do not get any funding for it. This means that it is still crawling. Also, being an unemployed single mother means that we have to depend on a child support grant as the main income for buying groceries and general survival because the business is not making enough profit. There is a lot that I can't do to make my house comfortable because I can't afford [to]. (42-year-old Siziwe)

According to Raniga (2022), more women in post-apartheid South Africa are trapped in poverty with very little prospect of improving their prospects. Their responses reaffirm their entrapment in deprivation, hopelessness and substandard housing.

The loss of husbands and housing maintenance

All the widows and divorced participants had heterosexual relationships with their previous husbands and partners. They shared that their late husbands were playing a significant role in meeting the costs of housing and maintenance-related and homemaking activities. This aligns with Dankwa's (2018) assertion that male figures in most African traditional families are of huge significance; provide protection, both physically and in terms of maintaining family, bloodline and identity. In the context of housing, this sentiment was also expressed by these rural female participants, as shown below.

Because things often do not go as planned when you no longer have a husband to take care of you and your family. You feel the financial and emotional decline, and it is draining, as you always get reminded of the absence of your partner whenever a challenge comes up. (28-year-old Lulu)

It is not easy at all; my children need their father, and I need my husband. Losing him was the worst thing; it hurt us all. My husband did all he could for us as his family until his last day. We now feel his absence, and we can see the difference. The home is not the same, the money is not the same, and the environment too; everything just changed, and it was not [for] the better. I'd rather have him back than head this household with these children without him. (55-year-old Pamela)

I would be lying if I said things were easier with the father of my children being absent after we separated. The children miss him a lot; I miss him too sometimes. We can all feel his absence when things get tough. Although he still supports us, that is never enough these days, because he is not here physically and emotionally. I often feel like I am not woman enough as I see other women all around me getting along with their husbands in happy families. I see myself as a failure because my marriage did not work, and now I am left to raise these kids, heading this household, something I never thought would happen to me. (46-year-old Sindiswa)

These responses illuminate the economic vulnerability of women in the country. It is sad that after the loss of their husbands, they remain behind with multiple financial responsibilities that include buying food and paying fees for the dependents. Consequently, housing maintenance becomes a secondary priority.

Lack of safety and security at home and in the neighbourhood

The much older participants notably expressed concerns about their safety and security, citing poor housing conditions and the absence of a father figure in their families as contributing factors. This study was conducted in the rural Eastern Cape, which has the second highest proportion of FHHs in the country (Stats SA, 2025). As shown in the participants' responses, the lack of a neighbourhood watch committee, and an unresponsive police force exacerbated their vulnerability to crime and violence.

We don't have the neighbourhood watch in Tyutyu; you will see for yourself how you keep safe. It is worse for us who have no man in the household. There is a prison nearby, and the convicts often escape. Tyutyu village is often their first stop. We are constantly subjected to living in fear even in townships. I don't see people being united in protecting the children; we are on our own. The community does not care about us when it comes to fighting crime (64-year-old Nokuthula).

*There is a huge lack of safety in this village; even when you call police, they are unresponsive or arrive when everything is done, and they are not needed anymore. My house once got broken into; the police came 4 hours after being called. Until this day the perpetrators have never been caught. I fear for the day they break into my home with me and my children being inside; I fear for what they would do because we can hardly protect ourselves (*62-year-old Nosakhele).

The prevalence of crime and poor neighbourhood policing are disappointing in South Africa. The impact of this bears heavily on the elderly and children. The perceptions of fear in the housing environment and experiences of crime in this rural Eastern Cape study align with the

findings of a study that was conducted by Noyoo and Sobantu in Alexandra township near Johannesburg in 2022 (Sobantu & Noyoo, 2022). On the other hand, they found out that the older individuals with quality housing with security fitments had positive perceptions of security and a higher sense of psychosocial wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

Informed by the social exclusion framework, this qualitative study was designed to investigate the housing challenges experienced by single mothers who head families in Tyutyu village in Bhisho, Eastern Cape. To start with, it is important to stress that housing is more than just a physical structure, as described in international law. The material and historical conditions of the concerned population determine access to this socio-economic asset. Unemployment and poverty are the main structural barriers that constrain female heads and their households from experiencing meaningful family lives in their housing and surrounding environment. In South Africa, housing is a constitutional right to which all citizens, even those in rural areas, must have access (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In this study, the female single parents struggle on their own to maintain their houses and provide food, as most of them are not gainfully employed. Their housing challenges are a microcosm of the social and economic struggles faced by millions of poor women who head households in South Africa.

As stressed by Chant (2013), most rural female heads disproportionately assume the enormous burden of ensuring food security and sourcing water and wood for cooking and lighting. This is well articulated by Dietrich (1987, p. 1793) who contends that

> *women and men are affected by the housing problem in very different ways…[such as challenges relating to] access to building materials, water, roads, sanitation, drainage, postal services, fuel and other energy, access to open space, safe environment, access to health and education*.

Rural poverty and unemployment remain major challenges that undermine gender equity and economic redistribution in the country. The study revealed that most female heads are discriminated against following the death or separation of their partners and husbands. The very low employment opportunities for women in the rural settings must also be viewed within the broader context of gender exclusion in the country. The Quarterly Labour Force report for the second quarter of 2023 revealed that:

> The labour force participation rate for women stood at 54,3% compared with 64,9% for men, a gap of 10,6 percentage points. Only 54,3% of women of working age in South Africa participate in the labour force either as employed or looking for work. The female labour force participation rate has seen an increase over 10 years by 4 percentage points from 50,3% in Q2:2013 to 54,3% in Q2:2023. However, women remain less likely to participate in the labour force compared to men (Stats SA, 2023, p. 2).

Discriminatory cultural beliefs and patriarchal values exacerbate the economic exclusion of women and thus deepen the financial burden for many rural female leaders (Dankwa, 2018). For example, the inheritance of land is reserved for men in some South African communities (Raboeane & Sigwela, 2024). Even in urban setups, there are women who face challenges in

inheriting family houses after the death of their husbands. Noyoo and Sobantu (2019) further maintain that the disparities in urban and rural housing mirror the legacy of segregation under British colonialism which was formalised and legally entrenched by apartheid legislation.

Closely linked to their poor rural housing and poor housing maintenance is the participants' frustration at the lack of safety and security. Some indicated that their houses had been broken into, and thus they called for greater police visibility and expeditious responses to crime scenes; they also suggested a neighbourhood watch committee in their area. There is ample evidence that women and girls in poorly maintained rural and flimsy housing are very vulnerable to GBV (intensified during COVID-19), and such violence has been normalised and internalised (Nyashanu et al., 2020; Sobantu & Noyoo, 2022). According to Sobantu and Noyoo (2022), most impoverished households reside in substandard housing that lacks the necessary safety and security measures. The heads of these families often do not have access to home improvement finance and lack the technical skills to carry out maintenance tasks on their own.

Commenting on the government's incremental housing process and its negative implications for FHHs, Chenwi and McLean (2009, p. 534) wrote that "a significantly larger percentage of male-headed households had made more improvements to their houses than FHHs" and they concluded that "male-headed households had more finances and technical skills to make the improvements envisioned in terms of the incremental housing process". In this study, some participants wished that their husbands and/or partners were still alive to provide financial support, safety and security as well as to maintain the home. It must also be noted that South Africa is grappling with cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), femicide and GBV (Maphosa, 2022). In some cases, family members and even spouses choose not to report their partners and husbands for rape, IPV and GBV for fear of losing financial support (Maphosa, 2022).

Implicit in this study is the psycho-emotional burden that many rural female single parents face as a consequence of poverty and poor housing. With very little to non-existent livelihood opportunities, most rely on either their old age grants (for those over 60 years of age) or the child support grants for their children and/or grandchildren (Chant, 2013; Shifa et al., 2021; Sobantu et al., 2025). This meagre income is spread thin to cater for needs such as children's education, nutrition, clothing and housing maintenance, creating a cycle of deprivation. As shown in the study, their children are also emotionally impacted by the poor housing and their poor socioeconomic status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The study was designed to investigate the housing-related challenges facing female single mothers in Tyutyu village in Bhisho. This study underscores the necessity for a social work perspective on housing that extends beyond the physical aspects of brick and mortar, bamboo and mud. Against the backdrop of GBV, femicide and rape, among other social ills in the country, social workers have a social transformational role in influencing identity politics and the social and economic relations of their clients' housing. Such knowledge is important for building safe homes that foster gender equality, tolerance and a sense of belonging. Although housing has been extensively researched in many disciplines, very little research has been conducted in the social work discipline, despite the issue being profoundly important in terms

of its social, economic, human rights and social welfare issue (Zufferey et al., 2020). The social work profession is dynamic and responds to an ever-changing environment. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), social work is founded on the ethical principles of human rights, social justice, dignity and worth for the person, as well as the importance of human relationships. Sobantu et al. (2025) links social work, human rights and housing, stating that housing connects the occupants with several interrelated rights and, that as a human rights profession, social work needs to appreciate the intersection of housing and women's rights. If social workers are concerned about promoting the rights of vulnerable populations, such as FHHs, they are implored to critically engage with the role of housing in altering the gendered social and economic relations of the occupants and the neighbourhood.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study focused only on Tyutyu village in the Eastern Cape, so the sample was not representative of all FHHs. This limits the generalisability of the findings. Despite this limitation, the findings are still an outcome of rigorous data collection and analysis processes. The findings show that the FHHs are more concerned about quality housing experiences for their children and dependants. This study did not interact with these children, who would have shared their perspectives on their housing and experiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed and described the interrelated housing challenges that confront FHHs in a rural environment. The article attempted to conceptualise how some of these challenges affected the quality of their housing experiences. At a theoretical level, the intersection of poverty, patriarchy, and lack of safety and security continues to perpetuate the social and economic exclusion of FHHs in rural areas. This affects their dignity and worth and undermines their human rights. Thus, the authors draw the attention of social workers, human services professionals and policymakers to tap into the definition of housing by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966), which underscores the relationship of food, clothing and education with housing. There has been very little attention devoted to rural housing and FHHs from the perspective of social work. This article has attempted to provide a broader and nuanced understanding of housing and its impact on the wellbeing of rural FHHs; it is hoped that social workers will better target those housing-related social and economic barriers that continue to exclude this population category. At a policy level, it must be borne in mind that South Africa has progressive housing, gender equality and human rights-informed policies, but their implementation nonetheless remains arguably weak. Through advocacy, it is thus imperative for social workers to highlight the multiple exclusions that rural FHHs experience as the basis to call on the government to implement housing and social policy as prescribed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Future research could concentrate on the coping mechanisms employed by FHHs to remain resilient in facing these housing-related challenges.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Athenkosi Ndima was a postgraduate Master's student at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa where he studied and graduated with a Masters in Community Development. He is currently a lecturer and researcher at the University of Fort Hare. His research niches include, among others, development and housing. This article emanated from his research and he took part in the data collection and drafting of this the article.

Mziwandile Sobantu is an Associate Professor at the Department of Social Work and Community Development at the University of Johannesburg. In addition to teaching and supervising postgraduate students, he coordinates the Master's in Community Development programme. His areas of research are housing and social development. He supervised the first author during his studies and conceptualised the input of the other co-authors.

Noel Muridzo is a social worker with over 20 years of experience in practice and academia. He is the current Director of the School of Social Work, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe and a Research Fellow, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. His research interests include child protection, climate justice and international social work. Noel assisted with the writing of the draft article and final editing.

Tatenda Sukulao is a lecturer at the Midlands State University, School of Social Work, Zimbabwe. His fields of specialisation are social entrepreneurship, social policy and community development. He has a Bachelor of Social Work and a Master's degree focusing on developmental social work. Tatenda also assisted by providing his insights into some sections of this article as well as with the final editing.

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