

## Empowering the Voiceless Rural Women: A Daunting Task in African Society

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**ABSTRACT** Illiteracy among the voiceless rural women is widely viewed as the root cause of unemployment and poverty ravaging African society. The purpose of this manuscript is to shed light on the concept of empowering unemployed rural women to sustain their indigenous culture so that they become self-reliant, both socially and economically. These silenced mothers are unable to participate in a wide variety of activities, such as contributing equally to household finances, standing up for their rights and campaigning against social ills. They are forever confined to looking after livestock and walking barefoot over long distances, carrying buckets of water and heavy bundles of fuel wood on their head, with their children on their back. Either by custom or constitution, rural women on the African continent still and inherit property. They are unable to obtain access to credit, attend school, earn an income and get promoted at work, free from discrimination.

### INTRODUCTION

Govender (2012) is of the opinion that rural women, who constitute one-fourth of the world's population, continue to face more difficulties than men in accessing public services, social protection, employment and markets, owing to cultural norms, security issues and lack of identification documents. Empowerment instils confidence in unemployed rural women and inspires them to take on leadership roles in their communities. Nevertheless, it is sad to note that unemployed rural women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights and entitlements for women. Furthermore, rural women are still widely underrepresented in decision-making in all spheres, both in the household and in the public domain. They give birth to numerous children and are supposed to take the lead in looking after their families. In this regard, rural women are being recognised by the United Nations as important catalysts for sustainable development and powerful agents against poverty and hunger (Peters 2001). Of the children denied education around the world, two-thirds are rural girls. Yet studies show that educated women have healthier children who are more likely to live longer and attend schools themselves. Educating rural women is thus an important first step towards beating poverty and hunger (UNICEF 2005). To address the gaps between reality and experience, stories have to

reflect past life and realise its events and accounts of reality as filtered through rural women's consciousness (Antikainen and Houtsonen 2001). Rural women's stories relate to personal change, which is linked to behavioural change. On the African continent, rural women are subjected to all forms of ill treatment, such as abuse, rape, unemployment and many arduous activities.

Rural women toil for longer hours than men, and their remuneration is grossly inadequate. The poor wages lead to poverty and starvation, and men take advantage of this situation by undermining rural women. Kamara (2012) is of the opinion that rural women make up 43% of the agricultural labour force worldwide. Hence financing for rural and agricultural development must prioritise rural women. *Some of the rural women are construction workers who build and maintain the water, sanitation and irrigation infrastructure to ensure clean water and healthy crops in rural areas. Their contribution is essential to ending poverty and hunger.* In subsistence economies, rural women spend much of the day performing tasks to maintain the household, such as carrying water and collecting fuel wood. In many countries, too, rural women are responsible for agricultural production and selling. Often they take on paid work or entrepreneurial enterprises as well. Despite progress in reducing educational disparities, there remains a wide gap in school attendance between boys and girls in many re-

gions. Unemployment of rural women is threatening those gains in the hardest-hit countries, and downward trends in education may only exacerbate the problem (Oxaal 1997; Omar 2001; Tengey et al. 1999).

### Conceptual Framework

This study is underpinned by the social support theory. In terms of this theory, social support may be loosely defined as feeling cared for by and having the assistance of other people; being part of a supportive social network. Razik and Swanson (2001) are of the opinion that these supportive resources can be emotional (for example, nurturance), tangible (for example, financial assistance), informational (for example, advice) or companionship (for example, a sense of belonging). Social support can be defined as the perception of having assistance available, actually receiving assistance, or the degree to which a person is integrated in a social network. The genesis of support may be the community, civic organisations, workers, family members, friends, teachers, among many others.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used in this study, with interviews and observation being employed as research tools for data collection. According to Brink (2006), in phenomenological studies, human experience is examined through the descriptions that are provided by the people involved. A phenomenological research approach was therefore suitable for this investigation because it provided participants with a golden opportunity to describe and interpret the experiences of the phenomena as they were lived out in a natural setting (Burns and Grove 2005; Leedy and Ormrod 2001). The study used purposive sampling, with four rural villages from Limpopo Province in Vhembe district (South Africa) selected as sites for the study. With the assistance of the *vhakoma* (headman) and *mahosi* (chiefs), rural villages selected from the district were chosen on the basis of the high unemployment and illiteracy rate of rural women. Twenty-four (24) rural women were purposively sampled and the participants were categorised as follows (Table 1):

- six (6) young rural women between the ages of 26 and 32

- six (6) rural mothers between the ages of 33 and 40
- six (6) middle-aged rural women between the ages of 41 and 50
- six (6) old rural women, aged 51 and above

**Table 1: Details of participants: Rural women**

Rural villages	Ham-anen-zhe	Tshi-pise	Mas-isi	Ham-ukunde	Total
<i>Participants</i>					
Young	06	06	06	06	24
Mothers	06	06	06	06	24
Middle-aged	06	06	06	06	24
Old	06	06	06	06	24

### (a) Ethical Considerations

Ethical researchers do not fabricate or falsify data in their publications. If a researcher discovers that the data published are erroneous, it is his or her responsibility to correct the error through retraction, an addendum, or other appropriate means. Prior to beginning the study, consent was obtained from the participants (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Rural women were briefed about the general nature of the study, as well as about any potential harm or risk that the study might cause. They were assured of confidentiality, and they were also told that they were free to decline the invitation to participate. In addition, they were offered the opportunity to receive a report on the results and conclusions of the research project.

The overall aim of the study was explained and it was decided in advance to use pseudonyms for the participants. The purpose of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was also elaborated on. The participants reported feeling at ease when their anonymity was guaranteed. They viewed their critical voices as public testimony.

### (b) Recording

Prior to beginning the relatively arduous process of empirical data collection, it was necessary to consider alternative data collection methods, including

- finding the information in existing texts and literature
- interviewing participants who are in possession of the required data

- observing participants' experiences of the phenomena as they were lived out in a natural setting
- using phenomenological meditation, a process whereby the researcher uses his or her own memories and earlier experiences as material

The gathering of empirical data is usually the most expensive phase in a research project and, as such, needs to be planned carefully.

### (c) Transcriptions

Those who undertook the transcription of the recordings were given guidance on how to "tune into" the data before transcribing it. In addition, they received an explanation of how to perform a rough transcription. This was followed by training on conversation analysis.

### (d) Categorisation and Thematic Analysis

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research, but also one of the most mysterious. Data were categorised into three themes.

## RESULTS

Twenty-four (24) participants told their own stories of factors that contribute to the high rate of illiteracy and unemployment among rural women. Analysis of data involved a process of transforming and modeling data with the goal of highlighting useful information, suggesting results and supporting decision-making. The following three themes emerged from the interviews with the various participants.

### Theme 1: Proper Education

Investing in proper education is a lofty strategy that empowers rural women to live better and foster healthier families within their African societies. Moreover, this strategy ensures that more children are looked after and more mouths are fed. Broadly speaking, education is the master key to success in all countries, rich and poor. Illiteracy remains a huge impediment to reducing poverty rates, especially for rural women on the African continent. According to UNICEF (2005), nearly a billion adults worldwide are estimated to be illiterate; and two-thirds

of these are rural women. Without the ability to read and write and do basic arithmetic, rural women are going to be forever trapped in very low-skilled jobs, if they can find employment at all. It would be a mammoth task to grow a business or operate a farm while hampered by illiteracy (Peters 2001). Some of the complaints registered by rural women from Hamanenzhe and Masisi were as follows:

*"I am an illiterate rural mother who cannot even write her name. At least I know how to sign by putting a cross on a paper. When we look for jobs we are told, jobs are meant for the educated ones who are fluent in English. We are told interviews are conducted in English and Afrikaans and not Tshivenda. I am a 35 year old rural mother who is unemployed. I have 10 children, but it is difficult to look after them because I do not have money. My unemployed husband is alcoholic and he smokes dagga. All that he does is to assault me when I do not cook meat. I am compelled to open accounts for at least chicken feet at the nearby supermarket. The little I get from children's grant which is R250.00 per child is for buying a bag of 80 kg maize meal. My daily routine is to fetch buckets of water and carry heavy bundles of fuel wood from the mountain and sell to the community".*

Since it is common in African communities for rural women to be the caretakers of the children and the household, they need to be empowered with the knowledge and proper education that will allow them to pursue better opportunities for themselves and their families. Education is one of the most important means of empowering rural women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process (Peters 2001). Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for rural women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of rural women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Investing in education for rural women is one of the most effective ways to eradicate poverty and combat crime. An investment in secondary school education for rural women pays high dividends (Govender 2012). Rural women who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families.

A rural mother kept on shedding tears while relating the following story:

*"I am a divorcee who works at a farm for an Afrikaner. My job is to look after cattle, sheep and goats where I earn R315-00 salary on monthly basis. Last month, I forfeited my salary because one cow was missing. The owner was upset with me and I was told if I do not get the cow this month, I will lose my job. It did not just end up there. I was even flogged for the missing sheep and I cannot report him because I need a job desperately. In three days to come, it will be the end of the second month. The likelihood is that the cow might not be recovered any longer. I think this cow might have been stolen by our neighbours across the border. From the look of things, there will be no miracles except to be fired. What about my 9 children and four grand children? I asked one of my daughters to get married to someone who is a bigamist with two wives. If she accedes to the request, she will be a third wife to that man."*

Educated women recognise the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps rural women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them. However, rural women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most developing countries. Getting married is vitally important for society, but it does not mean that rural women should stop getting an education, working and building their personal financial strength (Tengey et al. 1999). Rural women need to be educated about family planning and related rights so that they can protect themselves and bring an end to abusive situations. Rural girls should be given the opportunity to study at higher education institutions and to pursue whatever type of qualification they desire. This type of education can equip rural women with understanding, knowledge and competence to advance their careers, live a good life and uplift their family and friends. By educating rural women, organisations can empower entire communities: whenever these women are educated, a multiplier effect is created, whereby knowledge and skills are reinvested in families and neighbourhoods (Moser 1989).

## **Theme 2: Economic Prospects**

If the small businesses of rural women are to succeed, these women must have not just capi-

tal, but entrepreneurial skills. There must also be a market for products and these must be accessible. Moreover, these women must be able to get their products to market, which requires various forms of transport and roads. For whole nations and regions within nations to improve their standard of living, there must be macro-economic policies in place which foster growth. That, of course, must include international trade (Castillo and Jenkins 1994).

There are unique challenges in making a living from agriculture everywhere on the African continent, but poor women in rural areas of developing nations are particularly vulnerable. This study has shown that rural women's voices and lived experiences – whether as domestic workers or in some other form of employment – are still largely missing from debates on developmental and financial affairs. During times of crisis, rural women often have no choice but to accept low-paid work or to work overtime, as well as to endure degrading working conditions, just to ensure that their families do not starve (Social Watch 2005). Illiteracy is also associated with early marriage and multiple pregnancies, which is closely linked to poverty.

*"I am a 54 year old mother who is a Christian. I have 11 children who are still studying. For the past 8 years, we tried to get jobs by all means but in vain. Opportunities are meant for the young horses that are still galloping. It is disgusting for people who are supposed to hire you when they force you to resort to sexual activities prior being offered a job. Some of the immoral rural women end up being trapped, for the sake of getting jobs. Unfortunately it becomes a long term relationship and no longer a once off act as initially promised. Some rural women lose their marriages for such unscrupulous acts. It is a shame to see desperate rural women prepared to do anything to get money which will enable them to look after their families. Early this year, it was an unfortunate incident that I compelled my four daughters, who are still teenagers to drop out from their secondary school education and get married. With their lobola, I will manage for a while to raise the young ones who are seven."*

One thing rural women on this continent have in common is that they bear the brunt of raising numerous children. Child-rearing consumes precious resources that poor women have little of to begin with, as well as enormous en-

ergy and time, which makes it even harder for these women to work on farms or in other jobs (Carrel et al. 1999). This remains a serious problem in Soutj Africa because, unlike rural women in impoverished countries elsewhere on the continent there are few resources to help rural women in terms of child care and other services.

Financial support is one of the most important factors in empowering people to make important life decisions. To live a life of freedom, rural women need to have financial power and financial independence; and in order to gain this power and independence, they need to be educated about financial planning and money management. For example, rural women from Vhembe district know how to catch *mashonzha* (mopani worms) and prepare *makhethe* (sour milk) to sell locally. To sustain their indigenous culture and promote/market it internationally perhaps these women could establish an organisation that sells *mashonzha* and *makhethe* in the community through high-end international retailers. In order to make a decent living from *mashonzha* and *makhethe*, which normally take between 3 to 7 days to produce, rural women could enrol for courses at the adult centres or nearby secondary schools, such as Hanyani, Niani and Fhetani, where they could learn the necessary entrepreneurial and health skills. Rural women should not settle for being the silenced mothers of food security; if they are confident that they can support themselves, it will make them less likely to rely on unhealthy activities, such as prostitution, to keep themselves afloat financially.

According to Mayoux (2005), micro lending or micro financing is the practice of lending small amounts – approximately R1 000 – on a wide scale. This has been one of the most promising developments in alleviating poverty in recent decades. Micro lending has been responsible for some significant success stories, enabling poor rural women to start small businesses. The idea later spread and was expanded to include other financial services, such as savings accounts and insurance. Rural women from Tshipise and Hamukununde, who allegedly possess certain entrepreneurial skills, related the following:

*“We heard over the radio that women can get a loan at the bank to start their own small businesses. We went to Messina and Thohoyandou banks being five. Unfortunately we were*

*told that we do not even qualify because we do not have banking accounts and we are unemployed. They talked about collateral and we did not have money. We cannot start farming or any other project like women in other countries. The bank manager did not even want to see us. I told the manager that my daughter will be married in two months because she is currently pregnant. Little did I know that it will not pay dividends. It is sad because we thought after the 1994 elections things will change for the better. When it is time for elections, politicians promise us heaven and earth even though we are not educated. After elections, you do not see them any longer”*

But perhaps rural women’s expectations of micro financing are too high. In both developed and underdeveloped countries, most of the labour force earns a living as ordinary employees, and even where educational levels are high, infrastructure is good and there is considerable institutional support for small enterprises, starting and sustaining a business is difficult and the failure rate is high (World Bank 2002). Micro financing cannot be seen as a panacea for ending poverty; it is simply an important means of fostering economic opportunity. Studies of the effects of micro finance highlight the truth that there is no magic solution to alleviating poverty – and certainly not in rural areas where there are so many barriers (Mayoux 2005; Kabeer 2001).

### **Theme 3: Health Issues**

Providing sufficient qualified health care workers to attend to the pressing health care needs of women and children in rural communities across Africa is a daunting task. Cultural barriers make it hard for rural women to leave their homes and travel to seek the health care they need. Families need to be educated about proper sanitation and hygiene issues (Dale 2004; UNICEF 2005). A growing number of unmarried rural women on the African continent are sexually active. However, a discussion about sex and reproductive health for these women is taboo. This means that rural women do not have the knowledge to protect themselves from dangers such as prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and unplanned pregnancies. Rural women from Hamukununde and Masisi argued as follows:

*“I do not like family planning because I want to have more children. The more children I have, the more grant for children I get. I was also told by friends that if you embark on family planning, you may die. I once tried injection and gained too much weight and my husband did not like it. He said I should stop it because the injection also makes him weak and he may end up dying. Since then, he is going out with a concubine and he does not use condoms because he said AIDS is just a myth and not a reality. I am always scared about this issue because I am no longer safe. The same concubine he is going out with is not reliable, as she has an affair with other men working at the mine. I tried to advise him about that but instead, he beat me up. Although I reported him at the nearest police station, it was just a waste of time.”*

Poor parents must often choose which of their children to educate. Educated rural women are more likely to be part of the labour force and may make them more aware of further education opportunities. These educated women, who have fewer children, are then able to devote more attention to their children (Cummings 2006). Patients suffering from high blood pressure and sugar diabetes can be treated with medicinal herbs. Moreover, rural women who are herbalists could receive formal training so that they are able to export their herbs to international markets. Rural women from Tshipise and Hamanenzhe made the following comments:

*“I have a problem of sugar diabetes and high blood pressure. I cannot consult the doctors because I do not have a medical aid. The only thing, I rely on are herbs from the traditional doctors. I lost my elder sister who was 49 years old from the same sicknesses. I learnt she died because of overdose from the herbalist. I visited the nearest clinic in the village and the nurse advised me to stop drinking and smoking cigarette. I was also instructed to eat a certain diet but it is difficult because I cannot afford to purchase certain food. How can I eat food without salt? To me this is unhealthy and unacceptable. I was also advised to do a lot of exercises but I cannot do that because I weigh 105 kg. I spend sleepless nights about these sicknesses. My late father was also big and prior his death, he suffered stroke and was confined to a wheelchair.”*

Ensuring that rural women's rights are respected is not just a matter of social policy for

South Africans. It should also be extended to development and other policies. Rural women are supposed to be active participants in the national literacy campaign. As far as health issues are concerned, maternal mortality has been significantly reduced through the training of expectant rural mothers, the early identification of risks and better follow-up. To ensure that rural women receive proper care and deliver their babies safely, a system of maternal houses has been set up to provide care 24 hours a day (Schwier et al. 2007).

## DISCUSSION

In the analysis of data, it became evident that rural women face discrimination in accessing assets and resources and are more likely to be involved in unpaid family-related work or in low-paid work. They are also at higher risk of being subjected to violence, with far less access to redress for the human rights violations they suffer. A legal and policy environment that is responsive and promotes independence and empowerment of rural women is also essential for rural mothers to seek remedies for violations of their rights (Cummings 2006). Empowering rural women not only improves their lives, but also boosts their economic situation, encouraging entrepreneurship in both rural areas and across the country. By educating and empowering rural women in factories and creating a stronger supply chain, suppliers realise greater efficiencies in their factories, which should result in higher quality products, lower prices and better availability of products for customers. Education is the key to empowering rural women in the developing world, where they often play subservient roles and are victims of honour killings, sexual slavery and genital cutting (Brants 1998). Not only does education cause rural women to delay childbearing and reduce the number of children they ultimately have, but it gives them skills to join the formal labour force so they are not just herding goats, sheep and cattle. An educated rural woman has more dignity and is also respected and less likely to be ill-treated by her partner. Furthermore, she is more likely to ensure that her own children receive proper education. This is viewed as an escalator out of the whirlpool of oppression. Keeping a rural girl in school may prevent her from engaging in sexual activities with older

men (sugar daddies) who are HIV- positive and cause the girls to end up pregnant. Such men deceive gullible rural girls with their stylish BMWs, laptops, cellphones and money.

### CONCLUSION

The plight of Africa's rural women mirrors that of women throughout African society. Rural women make up a quarter of the global population, yet they routinely languish at the bottom of every economic, social and political indicator, from income, education and health to participation in decision making. They perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas and are a major part of the agricultural labour force, making up almost half a billion smallholder farmers and landless workers. On the African continent, rural women lack land ownership rights and access to credit; their children are also significantly more malnourished than those of other women. Therefore, the empowerment of rural women may help to end the development tragedy of stunting, which affects millions of children.

Rural women are viewed as the voiceless pillar of African agriculture. Their reduced access to resources and the lack of attention to gender in macroeconomic policy adds to the inequity, which, in turn, perpetuates gender gaps. When young girls approach adolescence, rural women typically expect them to spend more time on household tasks, while boys are expected to spend more time on farming or wage-generating duties. As soon as rural girls and boys become adults, the young women generally work longer hours than the men. This applies even to those who enter the labour force: the women not only earn less, but also have less time for leisure and recreation. This has far-reaching implications for investments in the next generation. If rural women perceive girls as being less likely to take paid work or earn market wages, they may be less inclined to invest in their education, which is rural women's fastest route out of illiteracy and poverty. Boosting the self-esteem of rural women drives the African society. Nevertheless, such a programme must be sustainable if it is to be successful. Gone are the days of charity (simply giving money to impoverished people); empowerment is the ultimate form of charity. It is what empowers rural women and makes them proud of their sta-

tus. If rural women are proud of themselves and of their achievements, they will invest their skills and energy in sustaining their community.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The empowerment of rural women should be viewed as a fundamental human right. The energy, talent and strength of rural African women are the most valuable untapped natural resource.

#### Theme 1: Proper Education

- Rural women must be taught the basics of reading and writing. Young rural girls must have access to a proper education so that they do not face the same predicament of illiteracy as their mothers.
- Equal participation means that rural women must be able to access relevant information and be empowered through educational and technological access.
- Rural women from minority groups, such as the poor, the elderly and those with disabilities, must also receive access to education. This is fundamental to democracy and justice.

#### Theme 2: Economic Prospects

- Strategies should be developed to empower rural women by providing them with economic opportunities, thus combating their poverty and powerlessness. This would increase economic growth significantly.
- Provision should be made for entrepreneurial skills training and small business loans to rural women.
- More effort is needed to improve the active participation of rural women in all political and economic decision making processes at district level. Equal rights and opportunities underpin healthy economies and societies.

#### Theme 3: Health Issues

- Rural women need to be educated about family planning and related rights so that they can protect themselves and bring an end to abuse by their male partners and employers. Reproductive health and family planning services should be encouraged;

- rural women should be helped to see that there is more to life than having babies.
- There should be an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign and rural women should be encouraged to practice safe sex.
  - Rural women must be educated about 'silent' diseases such as high blood pressure, sugar diabetes, breast cancer and many others.

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### NOTES

1. Hamanenzhe, Tshipise, Masisi and Hamukununde are rural areas in South Africa in the Limpopo Province. TshiVenda is the language spoken in these areas.

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