Housing and women's rights in Gauteng, South Africa: The role of social work in sharpening the focus

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ABSTRACT

Housing serves to connect the occupants with several interrelated rights. Adequate housing promotes women's social and economic rights – consonant with the social work agenda of advancing social justice for vulnerable populations. The values of social work resonate with the principles of human rights and social justice. The centrality of housing in conjoining the social and economic rights especially of women needs to be recognised by the profession. Using purposive sampling, this study selected two social housing institutions (SHIs) in Gauteng, South Africa. In South Africa, SHIs are accredited with the relevant government agency, they receive a financial subsidy to provide subsidised quality housing for qualifying low- to medium-income citizens. With each institution, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the housing supervisor and a focus group discussion was administered to the female beneficiaries. Findings showed that, applying a gender lens in housing delivery bolsters the rights of women. Furthermore, the study found out that gender-aware housing delivery promotes social capital upon which community maladies are addressed. In view of the multiple social and economic exclusions that women face in South Africa, the author recommends a gender lens in housing delivery. Social workers should be aware that there exists a strong correlation between lack of adequate housing by women and poverty and gender based and domestic violence.

KEY TERMS: gender, housing, human rights, social work, South Africa, women

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INTRODUCTION

Despite playing a pivotal social and economic role in their families and communities, most women have been side lined from housing delivery processes and ownership. As a result, some of them resort to precarious living environments, which exposes them to gender based and domestic violence. Gender based violence (GBV) and domestic violence (DV) are perpetual challenges in South Africa. Precisely, lack of adequate housing for women promotes gender inequality and feminisation of poverty (FoP). As a profession that prides itself with advancing the rights of vulnerable populations, social work needs to appreciate the intersection of housing and women's rights. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore women's housing experiences and the contributed of housing to their interrelated rights. This paper first gives the background overview, followed by a discussion on the theoretical lenses that guided the study. Thereafter, the paper gives the methodology, then the findings and discussions before the study conclusions and the implications to social work. The paper ends with the concluding paragraph.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The problem

This paper underscores that issues of human rights, housing, gender and women's rights lie at the heart of social work. Arguably, the intersection of these aspects has not been adequately articulated in social work, especially highlighting the 'multiplier' impact of housing in advancing the rights of women (Sobantu, 2020). Social work is a rights-based profession which is informed by the principles of democracy, human rights and dignity of all human beings (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2013). In the light of the numerous socio-economic challenges that confront women in South Africa and Africa – the profession needs to be reminded of its human rights obligation towards vulnerable populations. Even though social workers, for example, assess the prospective foster parents' housing and the living environment before placing a child in the latter's care, their overall "understanding of housing is rather shallow" (Shaw, Lambert and Clapham, 1998:9). As decried by Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013), the profession should not remain complicit in the reality of human rights neglect, violence and abuses against vulnerable populations. Today, the country is "dubbed the rape capital of the world" (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2018:8) with the majority of its seven million people living in informal settlements being women (Fish, 2003; Sobantu, 2020). This empirical paper highlights how adequate housing serves as a human rights enabler for women and calls for more deliberate gender-aware housing policies. Of note, the paper asserts that social work has a role in housing advocacy for gender-inclusive housing policy. Social work in South Africa and Africa does not engage vigorously on housing-human rights issues.

Theoretical lens

This section discusses gender as a theoretical lens, in the context of housing and human rights. As an analytical tool, a gender lens in housing delivery is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the "differences and the relevance of gender roles and power dynamics in [housing delivery]" (Muralidharan, Fehringer, Pappa, Rottach, Das and Mandal, 2015:7). The author concurs with Sobantu et al. (2019:2) that housing "cannot remain a [gender]-neutral exercise – but a process that should be predicated on social justice and human rights." This is because women and men experience housing and lack of it differently (Boje and Lena, 2000 in Saugeres, 2009:194). Despite strides in promoting gender equality in South Africa, the reality is that it is women who mostly bear the burden of unpaid "domestic [re]production of life and livelihood" (Waetjen and Vahed, 2009:262).

Furthermore, a gender lens recognises that in the case of poor or non-existent services such as electricity, water and sanitation, it is women who spend extra time in finding alternatives (Chant, 2013). Domestic roles exert enormous pressure on them and invariably diminish their income-generating opportunities and quality of life. While lack of sanitation affects everyone, it is obviously women who are mostly inconvenienced by lack of water and sanitary facilities in carrying out domestic chores. There is a strong correlation between inadequate/lack of housing and crime, GBV, DV, HIV and AIDS (Gordon, Riger, Lebailly and Heath, 1980). Chant (2013:12), posits that women are:

> often so insecure about living without men that they opt to stay in abusive relationships with "real" or "make-do" husbands…women may be vulnerable to break-ins, theft and rape in their own homes…especially in slums, makes women twice as likely as men to suffer acts of violent aggression.

While urbanisation has been welcomed as a means of fighting poverty, especially for women, Chant (2013:9), posits that women are excluded from the urban economy because they earn less and thus, for most of them unable to access housing from the market. Fish (2003) points out that women have not been prioritised in mass

government housing and, as reported by Stats SA (2018), women dominate the lower echelons of economic production. It is not surprising that South Africa reports high cases of rape and GBV (Stats SA, 2018).

Advocating gender-aware housing delivery thus resonates with the ideas of Ubuntu which stresses fairness and social justice. This is because women in South Africa have suffered institutional discrimination from the economy and decision-making in most homes, despite their indelible role in shaping the housing and the domestic arena (Dietrich, 1987; Sobantu, 2020; Waetjen and Vahed, 2012). With women being the driving force behind maintaining healthy relationships that imbue Ubuntu – characterised by "reciprocity, selflessness and symbiosis" (Osei-Hwedie, 2014, p. 109), it is only fair to emphasise gender-aware housing delivery processes.

Literature on human rights, housing and social work

The notion of human rights means that people have rights because of "the mere fact that they are human beings" (Murdach, 2011:281). According to Ife (2008:12), human rights are "those rights which we claim belong to all people, regardless of...origin, race, culture, age, sex, or anything else." Murdach (2011) and Ife (2008) trace the genesis of human rights to the United States of America and the Enlightenment ideas of the 17th and 18th century in Britain, France and Europe. Noyoo (2017) argues that philosophies that stress reciprocity, collegiality and peaceful co-existence have been existent in many other cultures and traditions across the globe, well before the Western formalisation of the catalogue of human rights. It is uncontested, though, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights statement gave traction to the formalisation of human rights of all persons, including women.

Efforts to promote the rights of women are informed by the reality that the "extension of the rights of human beings to include women came about by a gradual process" (Kumar, 2014:74) and patriarchal attitudes that continue to suppress these endeavours. Discourses in many societies including housing policy formulation and determining access is determined by men (Kumar, 2014). With its unique history of colonialisation and apartheid, the post-1994 South African government has made remarkable progress in promulgating gender-inclusive housing and social policies (Sobantu et al. 2019). For example, Section 26 of 1996 Constitution of South Africa and the 1997 White Paper for Social Welfare guarantee that all South Africans are equal before the law and government should priortise vulnerable populations in delivering social welfare services such as housing. Because of housing and human rights backlogs in South Africa, housing delivery has since 1994 been intricately a human rights exercise to connect women and the poor to social and economic opportunities (Sobantu et al. 2019).

Despite the fore-going efforts, women today constitute the biggest percentage of the seven million people that reside in the informal settlements (Fish, 2003; Raniga and Ngcobo). Chant (2013) and Raniga and Ngcobo (2014) argue that, generally, women remain poorer than men and their rights to housing access and active participation in the economy are violated. As a consequence, many are victims of poverty, GBV, femicide, mental illnesses and suicide (Gordon et al. 1980; Raniga and Ngcobo, 2014; Sobantu et al. 2019). It is within these realities that the paper stresses a gendered approach to adequate housing access – and this emphasis is imbued in the principle of social justice, fairness and the philosophy of Ubuntu.

Since Turner's (1972) classical focus on the use-value of housing, other scholars who include Malpass (2001) and Sobantu (2019, 2020) have added their voices on the social and economic dividends of adequate housing. Dietrich (1987) and Gandhi (1987) have also, through their theoretical papers motivated for gender-aware approaches to housing delivery. With its social work inclination, this this empirical paper stresses the value of adequate housing in conjoining the social and economic rights of women. This is important, because, despite being "frontline human rights workers" (Healy, 2008 in Murdach, 2011:281), social workers, according to Shaw et al (1998) have little understanding of housing and its role in linking the related rights of the poor. Especially in South Africa with high rates of GBV and DV, social work should appreciate adequate housing in enhancing women's rights to privacy, safety, security and in reducing their vulnerability to GB and DV violence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to explore the housing experiences of women and how housing contributed towards promoting their housing-related rights in Gauteng, South Africa. The study adopted a qualitative approach and employed an exploratory design. Qualitative approaches are useful in obtaining rich data on the participants' experiences (Fouche and Schurink, 2013). An exploratory design was useful in establishing and analysing linkages between housing, social work, human rights, women and gender (Fouche and Schurink, 2013). The population of this study consisted of tenants and supervisors in each of the two social housing institutions (SHIs) which were purposefully selected from Gauteng province, South Africa. As per the Act, SHIs are registered with Social Housing Rental Authority (SHRA) for regulation and funding. With this funding, they build rental-housing stock for qualifying low- to middle-income applicants. While it is not delivered at scale, SHIs have a special policy focus of reconfiguring apartheid spatiality by drawing the low- and middle-income earners towards the city – closer to services. It is lauded for altering apartheid spatiality (Sobantu, 2019) to make affordable quality housing

more accessible even to black women post-1994. In the two SHIs, the researcher applied volunteer purposive sampling to recruit willing participants to take part in the study.

In the recruitment process, housing supervisors in each SHI were requested to act as gatekeepers. The sampling criteria was that: 1) only females could participate in the study, 2) participants needed to be registered tenants in their SHIs for a minimum of two years, 3) participants needed to be willing to participate in a focus group discussion. The demographic details of the 14 volunteer participants are summarised in Table 1. In collecting data, the researcher started with semi-structured interviews with the two housing supervisors (one from each SHI) who were also purposefully selected. Interviewing them was key to gain insight into the broader management and human rights dividends of social housing. Some of the questions that were posed to the participants include: *Please share with me the range of services that are available to you through your housing? In what ways has housing contributed to your rights as a woman? As a woman/man, please share with me how different this housing is to your previous living arrangements?* Both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English, tape-recorded in order to capture the discussions accurately and complemented by note-taking. All data was transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis in order to "mak[e] sense of the raw data" (Merriam, 1998:178).

Table 1: Profile of Participants (n=14; all females; two years and above in their SHIs)

SHI	Participant Pseudonym	Age	Livelihood activity	Marital status	Home type
1	Angela	32	Clerk	Single	Room
	Elsie	21	Student	Single	Room
	Ntombi	36	Self-employed	Single	Bachelor
	Agnes	42	Secretary	Married	Bachelor
	Faith	33	Metro police	Single	1 bedroomed
	Lillian	36	Hairdresser	Married	I bedroomed
	Sonto	40	Bank call centre	Separated	Room
2	Thembi	34	Housewife	Married	2 bedroomed
	Nozi	22	Student	Single	Room
	Nokwanda	35	Self-employed	Single	Room
	Samu	20	Student	Single	Bachelor
	Annah	20	Student	Single	Bachelor
	Nomah	28	Waiter	Married	1 bedroomed
	Martha	37	Self-employed	Divorced	Room

The proposal for this study was reviewed and granted ethical clearance (reference number 01-033-2016) by the University of Johannesburg's Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Humanities. In addition, each of the participating SHIs gave approval letters, allowing the researcher to collect data in their organisations. As stressed by Strydom (2013), participation in the study was voluntary, with all the participants requested to sign consent letters for participation and tape-recording the interviews. The researcher gave the participants the research information sheets (RIS), the contents of which he also detailed verbally in simple language. The principles of confidentiality and anonymity were applied as advised in Strydom (2013). The researcher regards communicating findings to the participants and respective community/ies as important as soliciting participation and informed consent (Ferris and Sass-Kortsak, 2011 in Hintz and Dean, 2020). As promised in the RIS, the researcher also communicated the findings verbally, first to the management and secondly to the beneficiaries who took part in the study. Such feedback fosters the "ethical principles of beneficence (the provision of benefits to participants),

respecting autonomy (the capacity for decision-making), and non-maleficence (doing no harm)" (Ferris and Sass-Kortsak, 2011 in Hintz and Dean, 2020:39). Equally, the participants and management were informed about the intention to publish the findings in both community and academic spaces, of which some of the articles have been shared with them. So far, both the beneficiaries and the management appreciate the researcher's feedback and his continued community research work in the SHIs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This paper reports on the two major findings that dovetail best with gender, social work and housing delivery. These findings are that housing:

1) Advances women's right to essential services and economic opportunities
2) Galvanises their right to safety and security.

Housing facilitates the right to essential services and economic opportunities

In line with literature (Chant, 2013; Sobantu *et al.*, 2019), all the participants in the study indicated that housing had contributed immensely in helping them access basic services. As a reminder access to adequate housing is a perpetual challenge in South Africa (Waetjen and Vahed, 2012). For these women participants to have accessed housing in post-1994; that alone serves, in the very least, as a barometer of government's commitment to promote their housing and associated rights. Hence, just access to the physical structure of a house *"as a woman in South Africa makes me happy, gives me pride and hope that one day most of my problems will be over"* (Angela). Faith added that: *"Thank God that, as a single parent, I have a roof over my head."* Sobantu (2019) posits that a house gives the occupant an address and thus a sense of self-worth, which is an important intangible right for women in post-apartheid South Africa.

As a basic service, a house has a functional purpose of giving the occupants shelter, protecting them from the vagaries of weather. Reflecting on her previous housing conditions, Martha indicated echoed that:

> *Imagine as a human being, a woman staying in one waist-high room in an informal settlement that offered no privacy, in a structure that's made of plastics and no protection from cold, hot weather and rain. I cried every day and feel blessed now that I'm renting here, staying in this beautiful quality house means a lot to me.*

Implicit in Martha's excerpt is the emphasis on the quality of her current housing and the safety and the psycho-emotional fulfilment that she derives therein. Quality housing structure is an essential service provides more protection and hence boosts self-esteem and self-worth of the occupants, especially women who are more vulnerable to crime (Chant, 2013; Noyoo, 2017). Ordinarily, quality housing is associated with stability, security and a sense of ownership, which translates to material and emotional investment in human settlements (Sobantu, 2019). Furthermore, secure and stable quality housing gives the occupants more time to engage in income-generation activities (Sobantu, 2020)

Martha, Faith and Angela's excerpts should be understood in the context of neglect of basic social and economic services and rights of women in the country (Sobantu, 2019). Access to conveniently located housing has multiplier effects in linking individuals to economic opportunities. Elsie elaborated that, "*[a]s you see here, we're close to forms of transport, schools for children, recreational facilities and some are inside our place. There're are shops for everything and we have choice. I wish all women had access to such places."* Other than facilitating access to sanitation, water and electricity services, SRH has been known for its convenient location, bridging the occupants to economic opportunities (RSA, 2008; Sobantu, 2020). Well-located settlements are a human rights enabler because, as reflected in the above excerpt, they enhance the occupants' rights to work and more economic opportunities.

The relevance of convenient location and access to economic opportunities were also echoed by Agnes who conveyed that "*unfortunately, most women stay in informal settlements where they wake up and sell just few sweets. Here, transport is there and we can go and search for work in firms and government offices where pay is far much better.*" In the same vein, one supervisor echoed that:

> *Most people like this place and that's why we're always full. People change jobs every now and then and they choose because various kinds of transport are available for people to look for work and we're near to town, firms, hotels and universities where people find work* (Monwabisi).

In this manner, housing performs a key function of coupling the occupants with various housing-related services and rights. The UDHR stresses the indivisibility of rights and the role of housing in conjoining these rights and services. Linking these rights and services is critical for women, most of whom have child care and family responsibilities as articulated in Mwansa, Jankey and Lesetedi (2015:215), below:

Women are more likely to spend their incomes on food and children's needs. Available evidence indicates that a child's chance of survival increases by 20% when a mother controls the household budget. It is therefore imperative that women's position in society should be appreciated as integral to human development…This is especially true for female headed households who tend to be vulnerable to the capriciousness of these factors.

It is in this regard that Waetjen and Vahed (2012) posit that a gender lens in housing benefits women socially and economically, a reality that social work should be aware of in their endeavours to promote gender equality.

Housing in promoting the right to safety and security for women

In this study, participants commented that with their SRH, they had a high sense of safety and security from various kinds of risk and abuse. In line with Sobantu *et al.* (2019), Waetjen and Vahed (2012), Nokwanda stressed that "*housing is the number one priority that government needs to consider to curb violence against us women and promote our rights of movement and safety.*" The issue of women's safety and security in South Africa is topical because of the rampant incidents of GBV and DV (Stats, 2018; Sobantu *et al.*, 2019). Social work therefore needs to play a more active role in sharpening its integrated focus towards promoting the rights of women. Stat SA (2018) reports that "68.5% of sexual offence victims were women" and it is still true that today "women are afraid to walk in their neighbourhoods at night… [as] the fear of rape … keeps women off the streets at night" (Gordon *et al.,* 1980:145-145). Participants strongly expressed the role of access to housing as a basic human right and advancing their rights of movement and participation in social and economic development:

> *Staying here has helped me in a huge way in terms of my safety and that of my children. My children need a safe place to stay. Our strong, lockable and the place has security guards. That's what we need especially as women. Unfortunately, the outside environment is not as safe as here, our children can't play comfortably and we can't sell our vegetables till late because of risks of abuse as women* (Lillian).

> *We've stayed in informal settlements where rains and fire destroy our property. I wish all the women can have such kind of housing and I'm aware that it's for rental. But my child is safe. As a single parent, I feel safe also because case of burglary are very few. More still needs to be done in this area though because we're targeted for fraud, sexual violence and rape.* (Faith).

Consonant with literature, participants agreed that housing enhances their rights (and their children) to safety and security. The role of adequate housing in creating viable, crime-free, sustainable and integrated human settlements is articulated in the White Paper for Housing (RSA, 1994). Sobantu (2019) underscores the need for viable housing partnerships in order to realise integrated settlements that will offer meaningful housing experiences for women − free from crime, rape, GBV and DV. In terms of engaging other stakeholders to ensure the safety and security rights of women, one supervisor remarked that:

> *As you can see, we're trying, we have individuals that clean and patrol the street, we also work with other housing institutions in the precinct. We pay for all these services. We also work with metro and other NGOs, we try* (Nathan).

As stressed by Mwansa *et al.* (2015), the right to adequate, quality housing and settlements and safe environment plays a critical role in children's rights to food, nutrition, education and play. The availability of safe and clean playgrounds and surroundings for their children affords the participants, many of whom are female single parents, more time for other social and economic production activities. The participants' narratives should be understood in view of the deaths of children in South African settlements due to collapsing walls and others drowning in open manholes (Sobantu, 2019). As articulated by both participants, housing quality, maintenance and security all contribute to a sense of safety and security. This is in contrast to government subsidy housing that is known to be of poor quality, exposing the occupants to numerous risks (Manomano and Tanga, 2018).

The issue of housing is unfortunately misunderstood or underestimated as a factor that contributes towards the safety and security rights for women (Sobantu, 2020). Some of the above excerpts regarding *"...strong, lockable…"* (Lillian) housing and *"individuals that clean and patrol the street"* (Nathan) refer to housing quality as a contributor to safety and quality of life in housing and human settlements environment. Participants in this study shared that their structures are of good quality, which is a result of committed and dedicated workmanship

(Streimikiene, 2015). While good workmanship in housing construction is integral to housing quality and enhancing the rights of the occupants, participants also stated that continued housing maintenance had contributed to keeping the structures in good quality to perform the functions of safety and security. For example, "*clean[ing] and patrol[ing] the street*" (Nathan) relate to maintaining the quality of neighbourhoods. Housing maintenance refers to keeping the building and the environment "in an acceptable standard to perform its required function" (Kerama, 2013:1) of safety and security.

The centrality of housing quality in conjoining the different rights was explained by Monwabisi, a housing supervisor who elaborated that: *"we pride ourselves with quality in our infrastructure. We avoid overcrowding and do maintenance all the times to make sure that our residents are safe and happy. Street lighting and cleaning reduce incidents of crime."* It is important for social work also, to understand that housing is not just the 'four walls', but its quality determines the "quality of life...tightly related with such issues as freedom, human rights and happiness" (Streimikiene, 2015:140).

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the housing experiences of the participants and further investigated if housing promoted the rights of women. The study concludes that access to adequate housing:

- Gives occupants a sense of hope that government cares about their social and economic rights.

- Boosts occupants' sense of self-worth and human dignity, which are important intangible rights especially to women with their history of exclusion.

- Serves a 'multiplier role' in linking occupants with other socio-economic rights such as water, electricity, sanitation.

- Advances occupants' rights to safety, security and privacy which improve their quality of life.

- Enhances occupants' access to their livelihood and other economic opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Both for social work and social policy, this empirical study has stressed the positive correlation between adequate housing and improved self-worth, human dignity, privacy and reduced crime and incidents of violence against women. This study does not only assert social work's contribution to housing research and practice, but it also reiterates the need for gender-aware housing in conjoining the social and economic rights of women. Consonant with Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013, p. 41) I stress that "the place of the social work profession on the human rights arena is beyond doubt [especially relating to vulnerable population such as women]." Based on the conclusion that housing improves the right to safety and security, I strongly implore social work in South Africa to advocate improved access to adequate housing for poor women who reside in informal settlements and continue to experience rape and violent crime. With the reality of FOP and gender inequality in South Africa and Africa and the profession's strong agenda to improve the economic rights of the poor, I urge the profession and social policy-makers to prioritise women in delivering affordable adequate housing. In terms of research I also implore social workers to gain interest in housing research. As a profession that prides itself with addressing the micro, mezzo and macro challenges affecting people's wellbeing (Sobantu, 2019), I recommend further housing research that will investigate the role of housing delivery in impacting women's lives at these levels. I believe this will "provide [more] critical analysis, evaluation and ... lead to strong[er] policy development" (Carter and Polevychok, 2004, p. vi).

CONCLUSION

Based on findings, this paper has reflected on the intersection of housing, social work, gender and the rights of women. The paper stressed that a gender lens in housing delivery has more likelihood to connect women to other related rights of privacy, security, work, human dignity and their children's rights to education, play, health and nutrition. More important in this paper is the call for social work to actively advocate gender-aware housing practices. This is because of the widespread FOP amongst women in South Africa, exacerbated by serious housing shortfalls amongst this group and high rates of GBV and DV. Of note, the paper positioned social work at the centre of spearheading advocacy for gender-aware housing delivery and engaging in housing research so as to provide evidence-based policy recommendations. All these resonate with the profession's goals of promoting social justice for vulnerable populations such as women.

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