



Social protection, food security and sustaining households during COVID-19: Experiences of single mothers residing in Umkhanyakude, South Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between access to state cash transfers, food security and the sustainability of single-mother households in the rural Umkhanyakude Municipal area in Kwa-Zulu Natal province, South Africa. We explored the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and cash transfers as a primary contributor to the economic well-being of single mothers from low-income rural communities. We also focus on financial transfers from non-state sources such as non-governmental organisations, kin and non-kin support systems. The sustainable livelihoods framework provides an analytical tool to understand how cash transfers from the state enable single mothers to navigate challenges during the pandemic. Drawing on interviews with 16 women from a rural community in Umkhanyakude, we analyse the distribution of family income to meet household expenses and the survival strategies such as livelihood activities initiated by single mothers to sustain households. The challenges and constraints that limit their livelihood outcomes, such as minimal state support and financial constraints to sustain

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their economic activities are highlighted. Three key themes are discussed in this paper: the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on food security, cash transfers as a strategy for reducing food insecurity, and access to sustainable livelihood activities to reduce food insecurities. This paper contributes to understanding single mothers' roles as actors and beneficiaries of the South African social protection system. It highlights opportunities for various state and non-state agents to advocate and support self-initiated economic activities in single-mother households.

Keywords: Food insecurity, single mothers, cash transfers, sustaining livelihoods

Introduction

Globally, most single-mother households face disadvantages, including lower income, gender-based violence, poverty and food insecurity (Agnafors et al., 2019; Sperlich et al., 2022; Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012; Raniga & Mthembu, 2017). A lower socioeconomic status strongly influences access to food, which has a ripple effect on the health and well-being of household members (Agnafors et al., 2019; Sperlich et al., 2022). Before COVID-19, food insecurity, which refers to limited access to or inconsistent availability of food due to a lack of resources or finances, was reported as a challenge in well-resourced and under-resourced countries. Although South Africa is a developing country, one in five households is reported to be food insecure, and rural communities bear the highest burden (Govender et al., 2017). Notably, most single-parent households from rural communities supplement the menial income received from state social grants by implementing income-generating and small-scale economic projects; however, during the pandemic, those economic activities came to a complete halt. Understanding how single mothers from rural communities sustain their households and the role of social protection in helping them survive the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic is critical for the social inclusion of women and the sustenance of families and children.

In Africa, single motherhood is associated with adverse health outcomes, malnutrition, and early childhood mortality (Ayebeeng et al., 2022). These

health risks can partially be attributed to increased stressful life events and high poverty levels (Agnafors et al., 2019; Ayebeng et al., 2022). In addition to socioeconomic factors, access to state social protection, social support, work compatibility, and family relationships impact single mothers' health (Sperlich et al., 2022). Despite these psychosocial and economic challenges, internal strengths like optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem and social support foster resilience in single mothers (Ma & Sebastian, 2021).

Single mothers are subjected to social discrimination and stigmatisation due to their status as single mothers and living in rural areas exacerbates this phenomenon (Raniga & Matsai, 2021; Kahn et al., 2022). Malinga and Modie-Moroka (2023) linked early single motherhood with exposure to various forms of abuse and neglect in the family of origin. Women reported exposure to excessive alcohol use, physical and emotional aggression, humiliation, intimate partner violence and deprivation (Malinga & Modie-Moroka, 2023). Malinga and Modie-Moroka argue that these experiences increase the likelihood of women feeling that they have no value or lower status than men and consequently accept abuse by future male partners. Many studies link single motherhood with poverty, unemployment, alcohol abuse, multiple life traumas and poor mental health (Malinga & Modie-Moroka, 2023). Early childbearing and single motherhood correlate with a decrease in socioeconomic well-being, poverty, poor health, abuse, multiple pregnancies and loss of educational opportunities (Malinga & Modie-Moroka, 2023; Callaghan et al., 2021).

Single-mother families are disproportionately affected by food and housing insecurity (Ma & Sebastian, 2021; Callaghan et al., 2021). Single mothers generally earn less than average wage, and their childcare responsibilities may constrain their ability to earn a better income (Ma & Sebastian, 2021). This is of particular interest to social workers as single-mother households have a much higher vulnerability to poverty, income insecurity and psychosocial stresses compared to two-parent households. Research conducted in Zimbabwe by Mupfumira (2017) in Masvingo province indicates that income insecurity is one of the major challenges facing single mothers (Matsai & Raniga, 2021). Azuka-Obieke (2013) added that single

mothers were prone to low economic status and that financial hardship was the primary factor mitigating sustainable livelihoods in these households. Malaba (2016) maintained that low educational levels, scarce jobs in the formal economy, ineffective state legislation and social protection policies for single mothers exacerbated their vulnerability to poverty in Zimbabwe.

Bearing the above deliberations in mind, this paper presents empirical evidence from a larger study which adopted qualitative methodology to gain insight into the correlates of poverty and economic experiences from the perspectives of 16 single mothers who resided in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Using a sustainable livelihood framework as a foundational theory, this paper presents their biographical profiles. It discusses three themes: the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on food security in single-mother households, cash transfers as a strategy for reducing food insecurity, and livelihood strategies used to reduce food insecurities and sustain families. The paper concludes with some considerations for social workers to implement transformative interventions and advocate for community and government social protection policy changes to enhance food security and enable livelihood activities to supplement income in single-mother households.

Social work in rural South Africa

Social work in rural African communities' entails acting as change agents to catalyse grassroots and civil society initiatives (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). The social work methodologies underlying this are rooted in community empowerment and participation. This requires strong listening and communication skills and a demand-driven approach underpinned by a good understanding of the needs of groups of clients (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). It is here that social work and innovation intersect as both endeavours to bring about social change to transform communities (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). To enact the needed social change, social workers must critically view the status quo and its failures (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). However, Spitzer and Twikirize (2023) warn that social innovation can only occur with the

community's deep and careful active participation in the social development process.

The notion of social change and social innovation locates rural social work under the theoretical umbrella of developmental social work (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). Social innovation through developmental social work can drive rural development, addressing the deficits and lack of access to essential social work services that clients encounter (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). According to Scales et al. (2013), rural social work should not be confined to macro community-based interventions but requires a “person-in-environment” multisystemic approach, which considers interactions between the informal systems in the environment and transcends the micro-macro divide (Scales et al., 2013). Not enough attention has been paid to developmental social work practice rooted in indigenous knowledge strengths and assets (Scales et al., 2013). For social workers to work in a rural setting, they must have insight into the unique cultural context and indigenous knowledge systems of rural people (Scales et al., 2013; Raniga, 2021). Families and communities rely significantly on informal social support networks (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023). Social work is essential in the innovation of poverty reduction strategies, social development programs and welfare provisions for this vulnerable section of society (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2023).

Sustainable livelihoods in the context of this study

The sustainable livelihood approach is a critical framework that has been adopted for this study. According to Serrat and Serrat (2017), the sustainable livelihoods approach is a framework for poverty alleviation and which prioritises social development activities. Apart from the effort that women are engaging in livelihood strategies for survival, the government of South Africa through its social protection policies has developed a sustainable livelihoods framework to think about the poor. As a key developmental social work strategy for poverty alleviation the sustainable livelihoods approach helps to understand the vulnerability context of women, the capital assets (human, social, natural, physical, and financial) and what they used or achieved in their survival endeavour (Raniga, 2020). It is also important to

note that unemployed women were helped by government policies and institutions which incorporate the public and private structures and regulatory processes. Furthermore, based on the sustainable livelihood framework, the single mothers adapt the livelihood strategies (social entrepreneurship and informal trading) in anticipation to achieve notable livelihood outcomes that include but are not limited to sustainable use of natural resources, income, well-being, vulnerability and food and security. Premised on the foregoing conceptualisation of sustainable livelihood framework, this study sought to explore how single mothers survived economically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Oliveira et al. (2021) postulate that the livelihoods framework encompasses the skills and assets that include both the material social and approaches that single mothers in rural communities use to survive. Aligned to the purposes of this study, the sustainable livelihoods approach helped the women to confront their struggles to put food on the table and to overcome times of stress such as the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain or improve their skills and assets without exploiting the supply of their natural resources.

Research methodology

Context of the study

This study was conducted in Mbazwana, located in Umkhanyakude Municipal area in the Kwazulu-Natal province in South Africa. Mbazwana is home to about 5000 people who speak isizulu. The community is situated close to the beautiful Sodwana Bay, renowned for abundant flora and marine animals. The well-developed area is an excellent attraction to foreign and local tourists. Mbazwana is about a four-hour drive from the city of Durban. The lack of food security, proper housing and secure accommodation bear testimony to the extreme poverty and unemployment that is prevalent in the area. Furthermore, single mothers play dual mother-father roles and are primary caregivers to ensure that the psychosocial and material needs of children are met.

The research process

Qualitative methodology deemed appropriate to meet the objectives of this research. Marlow (2011) stated that: “qualitative methods enhance the understanding of people and the environment they live in, giving a clearer picture of what people go through and how they make meaning of their life”. In particular, the researchers applied an interpretive design to understand the economic experiences and food security challenges experienced by single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Umkhanyakude.

Ethical considerations

According to Shah (2011), ethics refer to an “ethos” or “way of life”, “social norms for conduct that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour”. The researchers were acutely aware of adhering to research ethics, protecting the anonymity and dignity of the participants, and obtaining written consent confirming their participation and the audio-recording of the interview (Marlow, 2011).

Ethical clearance was obtained in June 2019 from the University of Johannesburg’s Research Ethics Committee to conduct this study. This paper reports on one sub-set of data from the more extensive study, which aimed to explore the relationship between single mothers, state cash transfers and the economic well-being of these families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key objectives of this sub-study were to:

1. To examine the economic impact of COVID-19 in single-mother households
2. To explore the role of cash transfers in reducing food insecurity in single-mother households during the pandemic and the value of livelihood activities during the pandemic
3. To identify livelihood strategies that sustained single-mother households during the pandemic

Selection of the women

The selection of participants followed a purposive process where 16 single mothers were selected using the snowball sampling strategy. The researchers

requested a list of single mothers who received services from a local NGO providing social work services to residents in Mbazwana. Snowball sampling is called ‘chain referral’ until an adequate number of participants is obtained (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The advantage of this sampling method was that it allowed the researchers to understand and utilise the existing social networks of the women in the community (Marlow, 2011). A total of 8 women were referred by the social worker from the records at the NGO, who invited the women for an interview to clarify the purpose of the study and gain permission to participate. Subsequently, each single mother referred one other single mother who resided in Mbazwana and was willing to participate in the study. Data saturation was reached with 16 single mothers who were heads of their households, willing to participate in the study, and who resided in the area for more than two years and cared for children under 18. Two social workers were employed to conduct the interviews with the women.

Data Collection Process

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with sixteen single mothers. The interviews allowed the researchers to clarify the study's purpose and objectives and explore whether the women were willing to share their life stories (Marlow, 2011). Secondly, it provided the platform to engage the women in understanding their biographical profiles and experiences within the broader socio-economic and gendered framework. Each life story collected during the interview provided insight into how single mothers living in an impoverished community with high levels of unemployment, crime, and poverty had a profound impact on their survival experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Topics covered in the interview included primary sources of support systems, challenges (faced) and coping strategies for survival. The use of open-ended questions allowed for probing and clarity about the single mothers’ life experiences and coping strategies.

Each interview session was one hour long. Since this study presents the findings from a small sample of 16 women, the results cannot be generalised. However, prolonged engagement and the rich descriptive details shared by the participants about their experiences enhanced the trustworthiness of the

findings (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The researcher enhanced the study's credibility through member checking, which allowed participants to clarify their intentions, correct any possible errors, and provide additional information when necessary.

The interviews were conducted in Isizulu by both social workers, who were fluent in the local language, so there were minimal errors when transcribing the interviews into English. Furthermore, several supervision meetings were held to peer review the transcripts, enhancing the data's credibility and trustworthiness.

The data from the literature on sustainable livelihood and social development theory was thematically analysed (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Clarke and Braun's (2013) five-step framework guided the analysis. The first step comprised preliminary data exploration: the researchers transcribed the interviews using audio recordings. The second step entailed coding the data. Saldana (2014:3) defines a code in qualitative research as "short words or phrases that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing evocative attributes for a portion of language-based or visuals". The researchers referred to the transcribed interviews and then segmented and labelled the text. The third step involved the use of similar codes to develop preliminary themes. Step four included connecting the interrelating themes and aligning them to those that were either common or different. Step five focused on synthesising the findings into three key themes, forming this paper's central premise and the discussion below.

Table 1: The Biographical profiles of the participants

Participant Number	Age	Education	Occupation	Number of Biological Children	Grand children in the household
1	32	Grade 12	Educators Assistant	3	0
2	56	Grade 12	Unemployed	3	0
3	46	Grade 6	Unemployed	4	1

4	76	No Schooling	Unemployed	2	2
5	32	Grade 11	Unemployed	3	0
6	26	Grade 11	Unemployed	3	0
7	62	No Schooling	Unemployed	5	6
8	32	Grade 10	Unemployed	4	0
9	41	Grade 12	Unemployed	2	0
10	67	No Schooling	Unemployed	1	5
11	80	No Schooling	Unemployed	4	6
12	21	Grade 12	Unemployed	1	0
13	47	Grade 11	Unemployed	2	0
14	22	Grade 12	Unemployed	1	0
15	36	Grade 10	Unemployed	2	0
16	37	Grade 12	Unemployed	3	0

Presentation of findings

The findings emerged from the semi-structured interviews with each of the 16 single mothers from low-income families in South Africa. Table 1 shows that the mean age of the participants was 44, with educational levels ranging from no education to grade 12. Research from previous studies has demonstrated a strong positive association between the lowest levels of education and food insecurity in South Africa (Fraval et al., 2019; Lee & Kim, 2019).

It was not surprising that only one household had employed adults, a reflection of the unemployment crisis in the country, particularly among adults without post-matric education. In addition, previous research suggests that single-mother households often have fewer employed adults (Hall et al., 2018). The participants reported that they were the heads of their households responsible for caring for their biological children, who averaged 2.6, while the grandchildren averaged 1.25. As reflected in the number of dependents, single mothers carried caregiving responsibilities, reflecting the dominant view about most women carrying the burden of informal care to family members. As expected, the participants in this study were in receipt of social grants, including child support, old age pension and disability grants, which

ranged between R480-00 and R3110-00, the average being less than R2000-00 per month. Eight participants did not have any alternative sources of income; they depended solely on social grants, five received less than R500-00, and three received between 1000- 4000 per month. Initiating productive self-initiated income activities was difficult for most participants, as these figures reflect.

In the following section, we discussed three interconnected themes that emerged from the findings: socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on food security in single-mother households, cash transfers as a strategy for reducing food insecurity, and access to sustainable economic opportunities to reduce food insecurities.

The impact of COVID-19 on food security in single-mother households

Food insecurity emerged as a critical socio-economic challenge in low-income single-mother households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown regulations from March 2020 were a key contributing factor to single-mother household food insecurity, and this was exacerbated by school closures, which translated into children spending prolonged time at home. Consequently, there was also a lack of access to the Department of Education's school feeding programs which served as an important safety net for poor families and increased the risks of hunger in low-income communities. Empirical evidence reveals that school disruptions impacted overall household food security in most low-income families (Alaba et al., 2022). The study participants shared the following:

“The expenses during the pandemic were too much because children stopped going to school during lockdown, which meant they spent more time at home and had to eat regularly. When they were at school, it was different because they only had a quick breakfast and supper when they came back.” (P10)

“The expenses increased because we had to buy more groceries since children spent more time at home and had to eat regularly.” (P8)

Due to the economic effects of COVID-19, specifically the loss of income and higher food prices, South Africa experienced a 6-12% increase in

household hunger in 2020 compared to pre-2020 levels, with significant fluidity in the proportions of families entering and exiting hunger (Jacobs et al., 2023). As expected, most households spent their cash received from the state social grants on food and, in some cases, medical expenses. The general increased expenditure and rise in living costs caused unintended negative consequences for the mothers and many expressed that they had to sacrifice their own meals to ensure that the children in the household had enough food to eat. In fact, the option of not eating had become a norm rather than an exception for many of the women. Some of the sentiments shared:

“Sometimes I opt not to eat and give grandchildren as its hard them to understand this situation. Sometimes I do the garden and plant sugar beans, spinach and mealies. The garden assists us a lot because when its ready it reduces the cost of spending more money on the grocery” (P15)

“Yes, just as long as children get something to eat before they sleep and in the morning before the go to school” (P6)

“Yes, we limited ourselves by eating maybe once a day” (P9)

“...when the month is about to come to an end a lot of things get short in the groceries for example sometimes there would be so little that is left and for it to cover the rest of the month the adults in the house would opt not to eat in order for children to have enough food. Adults would eat less or would eat bread while children enjoy cooked food, or adults eat amadumbe in order for children to enjoy a full meal”. (P7)

Mkhize, et al. (2022) noted that in single-mother households with no formal education and those dependent on social grants such as the old age pension remittances and having no additional income, the household showed a higher prevalence of experiencing hunger or being at risk of hunger. Flatø, et al. (2017) present some of the reasons that make single-mother households vulnerable to poverty. These include fewer assets and less productive resources such as land and financial capital. In addition, despite being single earners, single mothers carry a higher dependency burden as they fulfil both domestic and breadwinner roles. These findings suggest that although the

social relief grant was introduced to curb the economic effects of COVID-19 on poor households, all the women not in receipt of this benefit due to tedious administrative processes of the government departments, and this inevitably increased vulnerability to food insecurity in these single-mother households.

Cash transfers as a strategy for reducing food insecurity

In the 2018-2019 financial year, an estimated 17.8 million people received social grants in South Africa and during COVID-19, the numbers increased to over 18 million, reflecting the overall economic needs of most South Africans (SASSA, 2023). The General Household Survey of 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2019) indicates that rural households largely depend on social grants as their main source of income (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The benefits of social grants, including alleviating poverty and increasing social development, are well-recognised (Patel et al., 2023). Despite these benefits, researchers have raised concerns about the higher levels of poverty, unemployment and food insecurity in single-mother households, particularly in rural areas, due to not enough jobs in the formal economy and gender-related discrimination in wage levels (Raniga, 2021; Flatø et al., 2017).

The impact of the global economic crisis during the pandemic and the disruption of the global supply chain contributed to higher food prices. The survey conducted by the Social Research Foundation (2023) indicated that most single-mother households earned less than R2000-00 per month, yet the Household Affordability Index on core foods such as maize, dairy, vegetables and fruit cost consumers an average of R2,706.13 in 2023. The participants shared strong sentiments about the overall food price increases as this participant shared: “...*the (grant) increase is not felt because everything is rapidly going up in the shops, such as food, transport, school fees and medical costs. It is very difficult for the family to survive on a grant alone.*” Despite the increase in social grants, the participants noted that during the pandemic, higher food costs reduced the value of the grant increase: “...*Before the pandemic, the financial situation of the family was not very bad as it is currently. The rise in food and other essentials after COVID-19 made it worse.*” (P6).

“The child support grant is very helpful because it has been the only source of income the family uses to buy food, school uniform and clothes for the children.... the grant increase was in April 2022 as it happens every financial year, it increases by R20.00, it did not do much difference because it increased during the same time that food in stores also increased its costs. The little increase was, however noticed” (P15)

Social grants, therefore, cushioned single-mother households against extreme hunger and helped them meet the basic needs of their families: *“The social grants received by the family has a huge impact because it takes care of some of the family's basic needs” (P2)*. Whilst most participants valued receiving social grants, it was inadequate to meet all the basic needs of the family: *“I am happy about the grant although it is not enough to support all of us, and I cannot fulfil the needs of the whole family” (P5)*.

Previous studies suggest that reliance on social assistance is a strong predictor of food insecurity, and in Canada, for example, 60% of households dependent on social assistance from the state are food insecure (Tarasuk et al., 2014). This suggests that although social grants are beneficial, it does not always translate into household food security due to the menial amount given to beneficiaries.

Sustainable livelihood activities to reduce food insecurity

Previous studies have indicated that single mothers living in low-income communities often initiate livelihood activities to support themselves; however, these economic activities do not lift women and their families from poverty (Sewpaul, 2005; Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014). Similarly, in this study, single mothers unanimously shared their concerns about the absence of active, sustainable economic opportunities for unemployed women in their communities. They initiated short-term livelihood activities to supplement their grant income as one woman stated as follows: *“There are no economic activities in my community; I sell fruits and vegetables”*. Another woman commented about her involvement in economic activities, indicating, *“I am involved in a chicken project, but it does not sustain us due to financial*

constraints. The insecurities associated with managing self-initiated livelihood activities, particularly during the COVID-19 were reported as this participant indicated: “My daughter has tried to raise money by baking and selling cakes in the community and also by selling chips and sweets; she eventually stopped when she felt she was not making any profit”.

Lack of economic opportunities for women in rural communities, as well as inadequate support for women to initiate and sustain their livelihood activities, kept women in a cycle of poverty and dependent on state cash transfers. Even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa had faced the challenge of low labour absorption capacity in the formal economy, which forces women, particularly single mothers, to start businesses in the informal economy. Raniga and Ngcobo (2014), in their qualitative study of unemployed single mothers from an informal settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, indicated that a lack of support from the local government for sustainable livelihood activities impacts the growth and development of economic activities. Therefore, despite the post-apartheid transformative social development agenda, the economic position of single mothers from low-income communities remains low, and those from rural communities are more prone to poverty (Raniga, 2020).

The women shared in the interviews that the COVID-19-health crisis caused economic disruptions and increased food prices necessitated single-mother households to develop multiple strategies to survive and reduce the risk of hunger. The voices of some of the mothers are as follows:

“Sometimes I do the garden and plant sugar beans, spinach and mealies. The garden assists us a lot because when its ready it reduces the cost of spending more money on the grocery”. (P11)

“...it always happens that the family struggles to have enough food for the month, to manage the situation the family asks for assistance from extended family members who are doing better in life financially and they are always willing to assist. Another thing the family does to manage is to grow food in the garden such as amadumbe and imifino” (P7)

In the area, there are no economic projects that are active; the only way to make extra income is to do laundry in the community, which is usually for R100.00, R200 OR R300.00, depending on the load of the washing. I also work in the fields for the number of days the person has asked her and makes a R50.00 a day. Any family in the neighbourhood often asks me to look after the children". (P15).

In sub-Saharan countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe, unemployed women often initiate livelihood strategies to support themselves and their families economically (Raniga & Mthembu, 2016; Matsai & Raniga, 2021). While the benefits of these activities are evident, their sustainability during economic crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of sustained support from the state make them unstable and unreliable as a consistent source of economic support.

Discussion

The findings reveal that single mothers faced an increased risk of hunger and food insecurity. The mothers stated that increased food prices exacerbated during the pandemic contributed to household food insecurity to the extent that many had to go to bed hungry.

In this study, all the participants received one or two means-tested social grants. Access to social grants, one of the social protection strategies in South Africa, prevented single-mother households from sinking into poverty during the pandemic. One of the social protection programs is the National School Nutrition Program (NSNP), which is a government program that provides nutritious meals to learners from poorer schools. Previous research has indicated that in low-income households, the NSNP could be the only source of nutritious meals for children (Mulaudzi et al., 2024). In line with the COVID-19 regulations, school closure inevitably abruptly closed access to this primary source of nutrition, and children remained at home with a limited supply of food. Previous research highlights the mental, social, educational and developmental consequences of COVID-19-regulated school closure and in low-income single-mother households, the impact could be devastating

(Lee, 2020; Chaabane et al., 2021). In addition, school closure was linked to food insecurity in middle and low-income countries, particularly among children (Mayurasakorn et al., 2020). In future pandemics, school-based social protection strategies such as NSNP must remain accessible to children, including the days when schools are closed.

In rural communities, sustaining self-initiated livelihood activities is difficult, as evidenced by the systematic failure of most economic activities initiated by the participants. This, in part, speaks to the rural-urban divide and the legacy of apartheid, where rural communities largely remain underdeveloped and with a lack of market economic activities. The absence of inter-institutional government support for economic activities implemented by single mothers exacerbates social isolation and increases the risk of vulnerability to poverty. Activities that related to subsistence farming, benefitted the participants the most, whilst others relied on their social networks, including relatives and neighbours, for material support. Previous research has highlighted the value of social networks for cash and non-cash resources, particularly in low-income households (Hartwig, 2016; Boecker, Raniga & Mthembu, 2021). In African communities, such networks are part of the communitarian philosophy of 'Ubuntu', loosely translated as: I am because we are. Therefore, it was heartening to witness that there was a sense of increased sharing and mutual support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

This study explored social protection and food security in single-mother households from a rural community in KwaZulu Natal province during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, most participants heavily relied on social grants as the main constant source of income. The participants noted the value of social grants in reducing food insecurity and the risk of extreme hunger; it was a life support. However, high food prices and limited income to supplement social grants undermined their value. Therefore, social grants are an important social protection strategy for single mothers as they enhance

social dignity and minimise inequality. There is a need for social workers to acknowledge the impact of structural factors and economic shocks, such as the pandemic on single mother households. It is critical to advocate and plan for innovative developmental social welfare interventions beyond social protection mechanisms. Social workers in rural communities must recognise opportunities offered by the concept of ubuntu for enhanced human capital potential. Identifying financial capital, such as untapped community assets and resources that promote active community empowerment, sustainable livelihood strategies, and resilience, is critical for single mothers to sustain their households and ensure food security.

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