

Gender, Poverty Reduction and Social Work: A View from Burundi

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Abstract

Gender affects the kind of opportunities and constraints faced in life; human beings are constantly divided into hierarchies. In looking at poverty reduction in Burundi, we can see the critical role that gender plays. In Burundi, among the poor are many women as a result of being primary caretakers. The focus of this paper is to examine the interconnection between gender and poverty reduction as well as the role of social work, if there is to be any reduction in poverty. Social workers need to work with women who are at the forefront of poverty through encouragement of more opportunities for women in education, business and in areas of decision-making. In many areas women are regarded as unable to participate with men in decision-making as they are considered not to be on the same level with men, intellectually, socially, economically or politically. When a woman is educated, she is better able to provide for her children. This means that the future generations are also protected against poverty. Social workers have the role of educating women and men in Burundi about the importance of women in poverty reduction. This paper presents a brief review of literature on gender disparities and poverty as well as the role of social work in poverty reduction in Burundi.

Keywords: gender, social work, poverty, development

Introduction

Poverty is for many people not only an economic but also a social, cultural and psychological phenomenon. Poverty reduction can be seen not only as increasing the income of households but also as empowering individuals to get themselves out of poverty, with participation of both women and men.

Gender issues refer to problems that arise from one being a man or a woman, and these issues hinder the commitment of a full and satisfying life. Social work – as a human profession founded on social justice – stands for rehabilitating the victims (Kalinganire and Rutikanga 2015, 109). Gender is a crucial aspect in Africa and

especially in Burundi where injustice occurs on the base of gender.

Burundi has experienced turbulent times in its history, especially since 1965 after gaining independence, and recurring over the years with the most recent in 2015. These horrific and repeated conflicts have affected Burundians economically, socially and politically (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Nzisabira 2019, 199). Political instability leads to an increase in poverty levels. Thus, the reduction of poverty in Burundi entails a critical aspect of gender play where social workers need to work not only with women who are at the forefront of poverty but also with the men.

Much has been done throughout the world in combating discrimination against women, but the situation is still wanting and social indicators for poverty, violence, sexual assault and maternal mortality show that women are still excluded from full and equal participation in society (Kalinganire and Rutikanga 2015, 114). This calls for change where women can be involved in bringing about development in their communities.

This article argues that a gender perspective in poverty reduction and the role of social work profession in dealing with the issue of poverty and gender inequality are critical. The focus will be on the participation of both women and men in development and an evaluation of the impact of the social work profession in poverty reduction in Burundi. This article uses desktop research as well as literature reviews to examine Burundi's history in terms of politics, its social and economic contexts, its poverty reduction strategy and social work, and also the role of social work in gender and poverty reduction.

Gender in Burundi

In almost every known society, women have had a lower status than men. Women have been bound by more social restrictions and have consistently received less recognition for their work than have men. Stereotyping makes it easier for discrimination (unequal treatment) to occur (Zastrow 2004, 443). This is no different in Africa and in Burundi in particular, that women have a lower status than men; this gender inequity then contributes to poverty.

Often living in poverty, many households are headed by young women with dependent children and by older women who have outlived their spouses (United Nations 2000). In Burundi, 27 per cent of households are headed by women (Burundi Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies 2010). It can be observed that these statistics show that women are at the forefront of poverty.

Since gender inequality is both a cause and effect of poverty, it has to be realised and acknowledged, and efforts have to be made to promote gender equality at the same time (Twikirize et al. 2013, 142). Burundi, among other countries, has been engaged

in eliminating any form of discrimination, promoting equity and equality between genders and promoting women (Falch 2010, 5). It can be argued that the aspect of gender disparity is a key factor for any developing country to consider in an effort to develop itself.

Young girls in many families are still raised by their parents to be mothers and homemakers and are encouraged to seek low-status and low-paid employment (Zastrow 2004, 452). Burundi is no different where girls are expected to become mothers and do not have much ambition in life apart from having a husband and children; as a result, many women end up in poverty in an effort not to look like they are outdoing the males in their families.

Traditional gender role socialisation also contributes to poverty among women. Women are socialised into putting family first before education and careers (Nichols-Casebolt and Krysik 1997). Thus, it can be argued that being a woman exposes one to poverty as a result of environmental and cultural influences.

Gender violence has a strong relationship with gender inequality as well as poverty. According to Wallace (2002, 370), family violence has a negative impact on taxpayers, businesses, medical costs and can result in loss of income (Wallace 2002, 370). In Burundian culture, men feel that it is within their right to discipline their wives in the form of violence. Since in some cultures, women are viewed as weak and subservient to men, it can be observed that the same women may be economically dependent on their husbands and thus unable to do anything about the violence. Poverty reduction needs to deal with the concerns of many women as well as cultural myths that facilitate gender violence.

Apart from the physical and emotional pain suffered, these practices of gender violence drive girls into early marriages, dropping out of school, preoccupation with reproductive roles and a perpetual cycle of poverty from one generation to the next (Twikirize et al. 2013, 152). Gender superiority plays a huge role in gender violence, hence women remain subjugated to men as a result of violence and this in turn gives rise to poverty where women are unable to advance themselves.

According to the IFSW and IASSW (2014), social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Thus, social workers need to encourage more opportunities for the reduction in the gender gap in terms of opportunities for women in education, business and in areas of decision-making.

Burundi: Social Context

It is difficult to understand the present-day challenges of Burundi without considering the lower social and economic status of women in society in general (Spitzer, Twikirize, and Wairire 2014, 152). Some of these challenges are discussed below.

Education

Literacy rates worldwide indicate that women are less likely to be able to read and write than men, with millions of women being denied access to even the most basic education (Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 2002, 226). A total of 45 per cent of Burundian women aged 15 to 49 years have no formal education (Republic of Burundi 2010). As a result of the lack of education, women are unable to choose better opportunities in terms of employment, family planning, family health, nutrition and children's education; this exposes the family to poverty.

A reason why women earn fewer advanced degrees than men is that women are socialised into choosing marriage and motherhood over long-term career preparation (Olson, Frieze, and Detlefsen 1990). In Burundi there is a saying that “*Amashure y'umukobwa n'umugabo*” (a girl's education is her husband). Thus, girls are raised to understand that marriage and having a husband are more desirable culturally than having education. The lack of education can be a contributing factor to poverty. As reflected in the lower completion grades, the risk of dropping out of school is particularly high among adolescent girls in higher education. In addition, girls who live in rural areas face specific challenges in that, as a result of tradition, they are victims of prejudices against education, their family seeing no value of sending them to school, especially after the primary grades (UNICEF 2018, 36). A local Burundian saying “*Nta mashure y'umukobwa yumukobwa*” (there is no point in educating a girl) reflects this attitude.

Kiboro et al. (2014) add that women often put up with the burden of bearing and caring for children. When people are deprived of education, the human capital of the next generation is negatively impacted. Women without education encounter serious difficulties in rearing healthy and productive children. A sad reality in Africa occurs where too frequently women end up having more children than they wish, exacerbating the pressures on themselves and their family (Kiboro et al. 2014, 85). In Burundi, women who live in poverty are more likely to have less education and more children and are thus unable to care for their children. In contrast, women who are educated are more likely to have fewer children and are therefore able to cater to their children's needs and to provide them with an opportunity for a better future.

Most African governments acknowledge empowering women as a key contributor to economic development. The fertility transition in Africa (from having many children to family planning for fewer children) – an important factor in sustained economic growth – has been much slower than in other regions of the world. Access to family

planning and maternal health services as well as education for girls typically results in improved economic opportunities for women and lower fertility (World Bank 2015). When women are given an opportunity to get an education, the effects are seen in how they make decisions with regard to their families; this then contributes to sustainable development and promotes poverty reduction.

The social work profession integrates individual, family, group and community work to contribute to sustainable development (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Nzisabira 2019, 206). In many areas, women are seen as unable to participate with men in decision-making as they are subservient to men culturally. When a woman is educated, she is better able to provide for her children. This means that future generations are protected against poverty. Social work can educate communities on the importance of educating their daughters to promote their community development.

Land Ownership

Gender is a basic determinant of social relations and rights in households and other resources like access to and control over land. The World Bank (2000) points out that if the rights of men and women are flagrantly unequal, it becomes very difficult to establish a democratic and participatory sociopolitical order and an environment of equal opportunity. Thus, apart from its intrinsic value, gender equality is fundamental in realising social development.

In Uganda, women constitute most of the agricultural labour force where the main resource is land. Ironically, they have the least ownership of land. They are expected to be productive with resources they do not control (Twikirize et al. 2013, 150). This is similar to the situation in Burundi where women are expected to be productive with the land but cannot have access to the resources that come from tilling the land.

Whitehead and Kabeer (2001) argue that ignoring gender inequalities comes at a great cost to people's well-being and countries' abilities to grow sustainably and thereby reduce poverty. Not taking gender issues into account may result in programmes that are technically successful but that negatively affect women and supplement social and economic stratification. Gender equality has the potential to bolster productivity (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001, 86).

The access and control of resources determine the level of productivity of different population categories and therefore has a strong bearing on poverty and social development (Twikirize et al. 2013, 149). With women rarely owning land as well as their inability to control resources, places women at a higher risk of living in poverty.

Employment

Women now make up one third of the world's labour force. Worldwide, women tend to work in jobs that have little prestige and low or no pay, where no product is

produced and where women are the facilitators of others. Women are also likely to hold positions of little or no authority within the work environment and to have more frequent and longer periods of unemployment (United Nations 2000). It is crucial that women have access to decent jobs like men and have the same access to opportunities present in their environment.

In Burundi, almost 1 in 10 women (9%) and 39 per cent of men were paid only in cash for their work. Most working women (86%) were not paid for their work compared to 56 per cent of working men. Furthermore, among the working women who received cash for their work, two-thirds report making less than their husband or partner (Republic of Burundi 2010). For many years now, women have proven their capability and competence when they are given opportunities. For far too long, women and girls in Africa have faced discrimination and inequalities in the workforce which have not only hurt them, but also their families, communities and countries. It is worth mentioning that poverty cannot be reduced without working to achieve gender equality.

Politics

The most recent census of the population emphasises that women represent more than half of the total population of Burundi. Also, women are regarded as vital stakeholders in all sectors of national life. Burundi has registered the advancement of women among its priorities. In this respect, 30 per cent of political positions are reserved for them in accordance with the constitution. Moreover, the electoral law facilitates the promotion of the participation of women in communal councils. However, in spite of these provisions, it is estimated that women occupy only 20 per cent of the positions of responsibility in central government. At the level of provincial and communal government, women account for only 18 per cent of posts of governors and 12 per cent of posts of communal administrators (Republic of Burundi 2011, 76). As mothers and main educators, women play an important role in the determination of the future Burundi. Burundi has made a step forward in promoting women's participation in the life of the nation.

Engagement in politics and governance also reveals glaring gender disparities. In addition, although the importance of active involvement of women in civic participation has been stressed by UN-Habitat, the number of women holding political positions globally is very small compared to that of men. For example, only in 23 countries of the world do women constitute more than 30 per cent of the lower or single house of the national parliaments (United Nations 2010). As mentioned above, Burundi is working on getting more women involved; there is still much to be done and this will need the creation of awareness of the importance of women getting involved in politics and governance for the betterment of society.

Having women in leadership positions is crucial if there is to be any poverty reduction. Women can help to develop policies that support girls and facilitate

provision of opportunities for jobs, education and other services that in turn provide a way of poverty reduction. In Burundi, women are represented in decision-making positions starting by the parliament and in the government where the constitution provides for a minimum of 30 per cent of women. In other decision-making positions, women's participation rate is 12.7 per cent (Republic of Burundi 2010). This is progress and this opens the door for many other women to get involved in leadership.

Burundi: Economic Context

There is growing recognition internationally that gender equality is good for economic growth and essential for poverty reduction (Ellis 2004). When a country is seeking to develop itself, gender must be considered for there to be economic gain.

Where gender inequalities constitute barriers to women entering or participating fully in markets, economic growth and private sector development will be constrained with less investment, less competition and lower productivity (Blackden and Bhanu 1999). Thus, opportunities must be created for women to get involved in the development of their country economically.

It can be argued that when women and men are excluded from the developmental process, the result will be poverty at all levels of society (Twikirize et al. 2013, 142). It is important to include both men and women in the developmental process so that they can be motivated to seek change for their communities.

Small and landlocked, Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world; close to 74.7 per cent of its population of 10.8 million lives below the poverty line. It is also the second most densely populated country in Africa with about 470 inhabitants per square kilometre. Its economy is heavily reliant on the agricultural sector which, despite the extreme paucity of arable land, employs 80 per cent of the population (World Bank 2018). This translates to a lack of enough resources to satisfy the needs of the population.

Burundi's efforts at poverty reduction are constrained by a myriad of challenges, such as a weak rural economy, a heavy reliance on development aid, an economic policy that does not allow for the equitable distribution of resources, vulnerability to environmental events, and a strong population growth (World Bank 2018). An important step to observe is that Burundi has tried to reduce the poverty levels but there are some constraints which make it difficult. However, the way forward is for social work to contribute in finding ways to enhance poverty reduction strategies in the community.

Poverty reduction starts at the grassroots level, which means looking at the family. As a result of recurring conflict and political crises in Burundi, there are many female-headed homes. According to the World Food Programme (2017), households headed

by women have limited access to productive assets as they are more likely to be landless than households headed by men. Half of Burundi's women are food-insecure, with food consumption scores below the "acceptable" level and low dietary diversity (World Food Programme 2017). With this state of food insecurity, low dietary diversity means that the children in female-headed households are likely to suffer from problems of malnutrition and thus make them prone to childhood illnesses. This also means that there may be a high infant mortality rate because during these years of development it is important for parents to ensure that their children consume the necessary food groups for their optimum development.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2012) adds that, despite progress, gender inequality persists in many socio-economic areas. Data from the 2006 Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire survey indicate that in urban areas, the poverty rate is much higher in female-headed households (49.3%) than in households headed by men (28.5%). Overall, the national incidence of poverty in Burundi is much higher in households headed by women (IMF 2012, 61). This situation is present in many developing nations where there is feminisation of poverty as a result of economic and sociocultural factors which promote poverty among women.

Poverty reduction also looks at providing equitable access to land. As mentioned above, Burundi is a country that heavily relies on agriculture, however, the land is in the hands of the men and women are not allowed to inherit land. Culturally, women are not allowed to own land which provides the resources necessary to reduce poverty. Crehan (1997, 85) points out that the distribution of land ownership especially in developing countries is heavily skewed toward men. As a result, women till the land but the income goes to the men – who, in many cases, use the money to buy liquor – which reduces the women's decision-making capacity with regard to income. Thus, this sociocultural inequality makes it difficult for the women to progress and thus help their families move forward.

Kiboro et al. (2014) add that although there have been massive reforms of women's legal rights, such as inheritance, in many countries, even though they are entrenched in constitutions, such legal provisions have usually proved slow and ineffective in ensuring land assets get to women (Kiboro et al. 2014, 85). This is to be expected as most of the beliefs surrounding land ownership are deeply ingrained in culture, thus, it may take a while for this to change.

The World Bank (2018) also reports that land inheritance among women is limited; women only hold about one per cent of registered land titles, while five to six per cent of registered titles are held in joint names. Joint ownership of land between a woman and a man does not necessarily guarantee the woman full control of the land. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) points out that when women gain land-use rights through their male kin, the men may still control the key aspects of land use; women's rights often end when there is divorce or when their husbands

pass away, thereby forcing them to return to their natal home, often with no access to land (IFAD 2001). This becomes risky for the women and children after the death of a spouse because often they are left at the mercy of the in-laws who, in many instances, show them the door. As a result, they face a life of poverty.

Burundi is a country that is doing its best to recover from the years of cyclical civil unrest. Socially it is considered among the poorest countries and as a result of the years of instability has high rates of poverty. Economically, Burundi relies heavily on agriculture where the land is inadequate for the population. In addition, the economy is struggling as a result of the recurring periods of political violence. This in turn has an impact on gender equality, as gender equality in all sectors plays a crucial role in the economy of the country where the positive impact can be seen in the increasing agricultural products, improvement of income of households, assurance of food security, and sustainable development of the country at large.

Burundi's Poverty Reduction Strategy

Many African countries have been concerned with reducing poverty since they attained independence. However, poverty reduction is still an elusive goal and most Africans are still among the poorest in the world to date (Wairire et al. 2014, 22). This means that there is still much for social work to do in facilitating the improvement of the lives of those living in Burundi.

Poverty is associated with poor health outcomes, destitution, child neglect, social and livelihood insecurity, teenage pregnancies and early marriage, school dropout, orphanhood, domestic violence, and most forms of gender-based violence (Twikirize et al. 2013). These factors lead to the increased risk of remaining in a cycle of poverty for most families.

Society cannot escape poverty as the economic, political and social facets of life change. According to Wairire et al. (2014), poverty means different things to different people and in different places. Poverty can be defined as lack of capability to function in society (Sen 1985, 18). Generally, poverty is the inability to meet one's basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter.

Although women and men share many of the burdens of poverty, they often experience poverty differently, have different poverty reduction priorities and are affected differently by development interventions. These gender differences are insufficiently captured in conventional poverty analyses, designs and monitoring systems. This deficiency weakens the chances of success of poverty reduction interventions (Zuckerman 2002, 3). Most of the time women are not involved during the process of needs identification and other steps of development projects. Consequently, interventions do not meet the real needs of women because they have

not been implicated during the conception thereof. It is therefore argued that development projects have to take into account the gender diversities.

Most women who are from rural backgrounds do not have economic assets. The rural woman is poor, as is her urban counterpart, because the majority has only limited access to credit. Vision Burundi 2025 intends to set up a proactive policy for the promotion of women in particular, through the improvement of their access to education (Republic of Burundi 2011, 77). It is evident that rural women should be involved and empowered in order to equip them with the skills and means which will enable them to improve their economic situation.

In addition, women as mothers are very important in the community. They play a significant role in nurturing and reconciling household disputes. In Burundian society, the woman is referred to as a pillar of the family because of her irreplaceable role as mother. Similarly, the United Nations (2010) states that women are important partners in community reconciliation and rebuilding processes, as they can often tap into their role in the local communities during conflict and draw on their authority as mothers in helping former combatants and victims of conflict to successfully return and reintegrate into a peaceful society (United Nations 2010, 57).

According to Brand (2018, 12), a National Gender Policy in Burundi was developed for the period of 2011–2025, with gender integrated as a cross-cutting issue of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. To date the Gender Ministry has succeeded in establishing sector-based entities in each ministry, with the objective of mainstreaming a gender perspective into policy at all levels.

According to the IMF (2012, 63),

The Burundi government has in place some strategies in poverty reduction. These include: strengthening the institutional framework to implement policies promoting equality, equity, and social stakeholders' awareness of gender issues, in order to reduce the impact of traditional customs that inhibit girls' and women's fulfilment; promoting women's rights and ensure that women are equitably represented in all spheres of activity; promoting mechanisms to prevent and deter gender-based violence and provide comprehensive assistance for victims; and creating conditions favourable to: increasing access to and control of resources, increasing women's contribution to Burundi's social economic development, and strengthening women's capacities to reap greater benefits from development.

These strategies in collaboration with social work will serve to enhance the capacity of women, and which in turn will give the women greater access to decision-making as well as economic opportunities, resulting in the long run in benefits reaped in poverty reduction.

The Role of Social Work in Burundi in Gender Issues and Poverty Reduction

Social Work is a practical-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW and IASSW 2014). Social work is relatively new in Burundi, where according to Spitzer, Twikirize, and Wairire (2014), social work began in upper secondary school at the *Ecole de Gitega*. In 2004, tertiary social work training was introduced by the Hope Africa University. By 2013, it had qualified more than 600 social workers (Spitzer, Twikirize, and Wairire 2014, 153).

An International Social Work Conference held in Bujumbura on 16 to 18 March 2015, led to the establishment of a National Social Worker's Association in Burundi in an effort to accelerate the promotion of the profession. Thus, social work in Burundi has a large role to play in facilitating progress towards poverty reduction in the country.

Historically, social work has been concerned with problem-solving at the micro, mezzo and macro levels in order to enhance human well-being. The profession is particularly concerned with people who are poor, vulnerable and oppressed (Hare 2004). Thus, the profession is well placed in Burundi to facilitate problem-solving at all levels of society.

The role of social work is of great importance in eliminating all forms of discrimination and oppression (DiNitto and McNeece 2008, 118). Social work in Burundi has much to do in empowering the communities to eliminate discrimination so that there can be sustainable development.

Social change, respect of human rights, social cohesion and empowerment of people are among the values of the social work profession. Therefore, gender equality is an important aspect the social work profession needs to integrate in its efforts to bring about change in Burundi. According to the World Bank, women are essential to ending poverty around the world. Nowhere is this truer than in sub-Saharan Africa. Strengthening women's roles as leaders, entrepreneurs, consumers and economic stakeholders will transform the continent for the better (World Bank 2015).

Given their direct role in promoting gender equality and social development, social workers must be well equipped with skills to integrate gender issues in their practice (Twikirize et al. 2013, 153). Through these roles social workers enhance sustainable development.

Social workers have a role to play in dealing with vulnerability and social exclusion of all forms (Mabeyo and Mvungi 2019, 67). This is crucial as women and children are vulnerable as well as being at risk of social exclusion; thus, social workers in Burundi have a role in facilitating the process through which the people who are vulnerable can get access to better services that can lead to sustainable community development.

Social workers can also facilitate and promote non-formal education through programmes that are not necessarily based on a classroom setting. Kiboro et al. (2014) add that social workers can introduce non-formal education programmes for training in technical skills. Social workers can also enhance the capacity of women through empowerment programmes that seek to remove the barriers that work against them. This in turn will enable women to participate in political processes and local decision-making (Kiboro et al. 2014, 87).

Gender inequality is often perpetuated by social and cultural systems with their long-held beliefs and values which can be demystified through sensitisation by social workers (Twikirize et al. 2013, 155). This is because people's ideology is deeply rooted and thus for change to occur, social workers have to dig deep and understand the culture, belief system and religion. Then they must then find a way of reaching the particular community with the intended message of change as well as be ready to explain why the change is necessary.

The social work profession also has a role to play in educating men and women on culture which has led to the discrimination of women, thus decreasing opportunities for women to better their lives. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2002), social norms and values can sometimes become barriers that contribute to the deprivation of essential resources for human development. The beliefs and practices that constitute the local culture can be detrimental in reducing gender inequality (FAO 2002, 87). In many African cultures, women do not inherit land from their fathers or husbands, which increases the risk of poverty. When a woman's husband dies, she might be thrown off the land. However, it is not only the woman who suffers but also her children. Thus, the profession must step in to educate the community on these cultural conceptions so that women can have access to opportunities to improve the future of their children.

Another key social work role is empowerment. This involves a process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. Thus, social workers strengthen the capacity of women as well as enhance their self-esteem (Twikirize et al. 2013, 156). Through this enhancement of self-esteem women are able to develop their communities.

The social work profession can also get involved in training through the facilitation of seminars and workshops in which the community is invited to participate. In these forums the community is taught and educated on the importance of empowering women. For example, the men can be taught on why it is necessary for their daughters to be educated and not only their sons. The community can also be taught on why it is important for women to get involved in decision-making within the home and outside of the home. Men and women can be trained to acquire entrepreneurship skills which can assist them in starting small- to medium-business enterprises to help themselves economically.

Social workers can also create an awareness in the community regarding social policies, cultural and religious beliefs that are unfavourable and that may lead to gender discrimination which has direct consequences on the quality of lives. If there is to be any change, social workers need to start at the grassroots level; what better way to bring about change than to start with the ideology that touches at the heart of every human society. Once social workers have brought about change in the ideology with proper understanding, then society can begin to see change in the way society deals with issues pertaining to gender and thus pave the way for poverty reduction.

In addition, through research social work can effectively contribute to the reduction of gender-based violence and discrimination by gathering scientific data on gender inequalities as well as social relationships and analysing them in order to assess, understand and resolve inequalities which are based on gender.

The social work profession in Burundi is still young and, as a result of Burundi's sociopolitical history, faces a myriad of challenges brought about by various conflicts. Burundian society still needs social work at the grassroots problem-solving process to shape policies. Social workers are needed in many areas to help people to resolve their problems and to promote gender equality.

Conclusion

This paper examined the concepts of gender and poverty reduction in Africa and specifically in Burundi, and the role of social work. Like many African countries, culture and tradition play an important role in the society's structure of life. In traditional Burundi, the girl child was not regarded as having the same importance as the boy child. Women have been treated unequal to men; they were not regarded as smart as men to study, reconcile people and perform many other functions in society. As a result, women's self-esteem is low and they are marginalised in society.

Recently, through advocacy efforts of feminist movements and civil societies, Africa began to understand the irreplaceable role of women in the community and their contribution to the socio-economic development of the family and community in general. In addition, it is believed that if a woman is educated, the whole community benefits. It is evident that women are considered vital stakeholders in all sectors of national life. As mothers and main educators, women play an important part in the determination of the future of the country. Therefore, women should be empowered and equally allowed to contribute to and benefit from all dimensions of development so as to bring about sustainable development.

Social work can help in the process of changing the mindset by raising gender awareness through participatory family and community discussions. Social workers can challenge the barriers that work against women by enhancing the capability of women through empowerment programmes.

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