Article

Social Rental Housing and Empowerment: Voices of Beneficiaries from Gauteng, South Africa

Mziwandile Sobantu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8516-4623
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
msobantu@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Adequate housing undergirds all social and economic relations, connecting communities with other related services that are key for people's optimum development. It is a key social welfare service and a basic human need whose empowerment function resonates with the social work agenda of enabling smooth functioning of the society and creating socially and economically viable communities. In this article, I report on the housing experiences of social housing beneficiaries in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Using an empowerment lens, I contend that housing has the potential to give people more control and self-determination over their lives by linking them to the economy. I employed purposive sampling in this qualitative study and selected three social housing institutions: two in Johannesburg and one in Pretoria. In each of these institutions a focus group discussion was conducted with the beneficiaries. The research findings indicate that adequate housing delivery bears numerous empowerment dividends, directly helping poor people to break from a cycle of poverty. Consonant with its mandate of empowering communities, social work needs to be more proactive in housing advocacy on behalf of poor people and marginalised individuals and groups.

Keywords: housing; empowerment; housing delivery; social rental housing; South Africa

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Introduction and Background

Housing has always been known to empower vulnerable individuals, families and communities (Sobantu 2019). Mulroy (1988, 19) stressed that "adequate housing is central for people's need for food, clothing, and shelter . . . is important to their physical and psychological well-being". Housing is therefore more than just brick and mortar; it is central to redistribution. Importantly, it undergirds all economic and social relations; supporting home-based enterprises which generate employment and income while also providing an opportunity for individuals to relate to each other, with dignity as human beings (Hohmann 2013). There is a strong correlation between adequate housing and improved citizenship, health, social capital and overall well-being for families and the society (Potgieter 2007; Sobantu 2019).

I concur with Hohmann (2013, 1) in that housing as an empowerment tool is "understudied and ill-defined" by government, academics and social services practitioners. Arguably, little has been done in South Africa to harness the housing dividend towards empowering poor people. Carter and Polevychok (2004, vi) strongly suggest that housing research needs to be strengthened and efforts accelerated to ensure that housing policy planning takes "place at the table with education and health care when spending priorities are discussed". Social work remains committed to "ensur[ing] the smooth functioning of society by trying to break the patterns in recursive cycles that affect the lives of people" (Potgieter 2007, 5). Owing to the significance of housing when dealing with poverty and human rights backlogs in the country, housing policy practice and research therefore also fall within the ambit of social work.

Post-apartheid South Africa is faced with a persistent housing challenge that perpetuates poverty and deprivation for poor people (Sobantu 2019, 2021). This is despite the country's progressive Constitution and the pro-poor social policies that have been promulgated by the democratic government since 1994. In line with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN 1948), the Constitution (RSA 1996) declares that "everyone has a right to have access to adequate housing [and] the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve progressive realisation of this right". Furthermore, in Section 26(2) of the Constitution, the government is mandated to ensure the "progressive realisation of the right to adequate housing". Such a policy stance is not coincidental but is informed by high levels of poverty that characterise South Africa (Stats SA 2019). The potential of empowering families through housing is recognised by the UDHR, which emphasises that housing is not "simply providing shelter from elements, creating sustainable, integrated housing settlements, and generating wealth through asset creation. For the indigent, it is also about social welfare and access to basic services" (UN 1948).

It is therefore germane for the government and related stakeholders to rethink the role of housing in spearheading "personal and socio-economic development processes that give power to people" (Du Bois and Miley as quoted in Potgieter 2007, 9). Empowerment in South Africa is largely enhancing poor people's access to livelihood

opportunities, clean water, electricity and sanitation, among other needs. As spelt out in housing policy, social rental housing (SRH) has been known to play an essential role in uplifting the socio-economic circumstances of the previously disadvantaged beneficiaries (Sobantu 2021). Through government funding, social housing institutions (SHIs) provide "quality, affordable housing for the low-income households that were excluded in colonial and apartheid housing delivery processes" (Sobantu 2019, 80). The proximity of SRH to livelihood opportunities and advanced services contributes immensely towards redistribution and empowerment.

This study therefore aimed at investigating the housing experiences of SRH beneficiaries in Gauteng. It was informed by three objectives, namely to (1) explore the beneficiaries' expectations from housing and investigate their experiences of SRH, (2) establish the relationship between SRH and beneficiaries' participation in the economy, and (3) investigate the implications of SRH on the accessibility of management by the beneficiaries. In essence, this article reports on the findings of these three objectives.

Firstly, in this article, I discuss empowerment as a theoretical lens in the context of housing delivery. Next, I outline the methodology that was applied in the study. The findings of the study are discussed thereafter, in integration with the literature on housing, empowerment and social work. Throughout this article, I deliberately interweave the relevance of social work as a profession in housing delivery and empowerment.

Empowerment as a Theoretical Lens in Housing Delivery

As a theoretical concept, empowerment has a huge footprint in psychology and social work by which it is understood to refer to individuals assuming control over their lives and participating in affairs that pertain to them (Zimmerman 1995; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1998, 726). From a social justice perspective, empowerment advocates access to resources for the socially and economically disenfranchised populations so that they can also play an active role in their development. It stems from the premise that marginalised people are powerless and therefore often feel worthless and without dignity. The social services professions therefore have a duty to devise "measures [that are] aimed at protecting the welfare of vulnerable in society" (Noyoo 2010, 23) and improving their social and economic lives.

Hohmann (2013) asserted that housing delivery plays an integral role in empowering poor people as it is both a physical and an emotional asset that fulfils the basic need for shelter and boosts the occupants' self-esteem and human dignity. Inherent in its shift towards developmental approaches to social welfare and developmental social work to redress poverty and inequality, social work's mandate is that of empowering communities to access housing and other services. Empowering poor and marginalised people is the essence of social work. Discrimination from housing during colonial and

apartheid laws and continued exclusion at the level of gender, race, sexual orientation and disability means that many people are today powerless in informal settlements and backyard dwellings (Noyoo and Sobantu 2019). Kleinhans and Elsinga (2010) and even government in its 1994 White Paper for the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) recognised the potential of housing to empower poor people by generating income, creating wealth and therefore promoting redistribution and social justice.

In housing research, empowerment has been linked to "how people acquire power, status and positions and how their perceptions change accordingly" (Kleinhans and Elsinga 2010, 44). In South Africa, where "waiting for the state-provided homes is normal . . . and [an] intergenerational condition" (Oldfield and Greyling 2015, 1100), access to housing gives poor people a real sense of achievement, pride, hope, status, power, self-esteem and control (Sobantu 2021). When she underscored that housing has a multiplier effect, Huchzermeyer (2001, 308) simply meant that housing delivery bears numerous empowerment benefits. For example, conveniently located housing promotes the occupants' access to piped water, sanitation, electricity, transport services, advanced services and amenities and employment opportunities (Sobantu 2019). As an empowerment asset, housing therefore facilitates nation-building through "alleviation of poverty as well as contributing to the redistribution of wealth" (Charlton and Kihato 2006, 262). Adequate housing correlates with enhanced access to education, food, healthcare facilities, nutrition for children and stability and security for families. In a significant way, housing is a social investment that contributes to the "future functioning of people" (Lombard 2011, 535).

I argue that empowerment and adequate housing are synonymous with developmental social work and implore social workers to familiarise themselves with the value of housing. Ncube (2019) pointed out that somehow, social workers struggle to apply developmental social work in practice when confronting the structural challenges such as lack of housing and poverty in South Africa. With numerous housing-related challenges in South Africa, the social work profession probably needs to rethink its individuals, groups and community empowerment strategies towards prioritising adequate housing delivery.

Research Methodology

In this study, I applied a qualitative approach which enabled me to gain an in-depth and rich understanding of the participants' experiences of SRH (Fouché and Schurink 2013, 308). An exploratory design was deemed appropriate and useful for the study because of the need to probe and follow emerging themes (Fouché and Schurink 2013). Both the approach and design were appropriate, especially considering the paucity of social work research that combines housing and empowerment.

Population

This study targeted beneficiaries who resided in registered SHIs in Gauteng, specifically in Johannesburg and Pretoria. I checked with the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA) for the most recent list of accredited institutions which are based in Johannesburg and Pretoria. In addition, I consulted with both the Department of Human Settlements which registers SHIs through its agency SHRA and the National Association of Social Housing Organisations. The aim of the consultation was to check for registered SHIs to approach for this study. Some SHIs on the list turned down the request to conduct this study, leaving only three institutions that agreed to their tenants' participation.

Sampling and Recruitment

In the three institutions, I recruited participants through volunteer and purposive sampling (Ritchie et al. 2014, 113). Jupp (2006) defined volunteer sampling as the self-selection of participants to take part in the study either in response to an advert or when directly requested to participate. Purposive sampling underscores that participants are selected because they possess key characteristics that will help the study answer the research question (Ritchie et al. 2014). In the advert, I highlighted that the study was interested in those individuals with experiences of (1) SRH, (2) the linkages between SRH and participation in the economy, and (3) implications of SRH on accessibility of management.

With the help of housing supervisors, I distributed adverts to the tenants in each SHI. The participants had to be (1) a mix of both males and females, (2) registered with their SHIs as beneficiaries of SRH, (3) in their current SRH for a minimum of two years, and (4) willing to participate.

Socio Demographics of the Participants

Altogether, 21 participants (seven from each institution) registered interest to take part in the focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 16 participants were female and five were male. Among the male participants was one white pensioner and the other participants were black Africans. Of the 21, seven were married, 11 were single, two were separated, and one was divorced. Of interest and in line with the literature on feminisation of poverty, all six who were self-employed as hairdressers and street vegetable vendors were females. The other six were formally employed as secretaries, waiters and cashiers. The balance of the female participants were students. The men also occupied low-income jobs, namely bricklayers, drivers and mechanics. All the married participants lived with their spouses and children in bigger units (such as "bachelor" units which comprised one or two bedrooms). Those participants who were single, divorced or separated lived alone or with a sibling in smaller units.

Data Collection

The study used FGDs to gather data from the beneficiaries, with each discussion lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Three FGDs were conducted as part of this study, with each comprising seven participants. An FGD guide consisted of broader themes to be explored in the discussions and this guided me in facilitating the discussions (Finch, Lewis, and Turley 2014). The main themes which informed the discussions were: (1) expectations from housing and experiences of SRH, (2) linkages between SRH and economic participation, and (3) implications of SRH on accessibility of management. English was used in gathering the data and the discussions were tape-recorded to have a "permanent record of what was and was not said" (Gill et al. 2008, 293). In addition, note-taking was done to capture the non-verbal expressions of the participants and processes.

Data Analysis

I transcribed all the data using thematic content analysis to identify key and emerging themes and to "make sense of the raw data" (Merriam 1998, 178). This involved the rearrangement and reorganising of piles of field data into meaningful codes (Cresswell 2014). The data were assigned to the three main themes which aligned with the objectives. The verbatim responses were retained to enrich the analysis and to empower the participants through their voices from the field.

Ethical Considerations

Regarding the ethics, this study was cleared by the Research Ethics Committee (approval number 01-033-2016) of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg. All the participating SHIs issued a permission letter allowing me to conduct the interviews with the willing participants. Before embarking on the data collection, I detailed the purpose of the study to the participants and guaranteed them confidentiality and anonymity of their contribution to the study. The participants were assured that the study would use pseudonyms to protect their identities (Strydom 2013). Furthermore, they were guaranteed that their responses and discussions would not be shared with their SHIs. In the same vein, I clarified the information contained in the participation information letter to those participants who posed questions. This was crucial to empowering interested individuals in making informed decisions about their participation. In respecting the participants' right of self-determination, consent to take part in the study and to have the interviews audio-recorded was obtained from all the participants (Strydom 2013). Consent was obtained through having the participants signing consent forms. Furthermore, the participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable about going ahead.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The data that were gathered indicated that the participants shared valuable experiences which the researcher adapted to the empowerment lens. The findings and discussions were based on the three interrelated themes, namely, (1) beneficiaries' expectations and experiences of housing, (2) SRH and economic participation, and (3) accessible management. In addition, there were challenges that the participants shared with me, which are important to reflect as the fourth theme in this discussion. The discussions integrated literature on empowerment and in some instances verbatim responses were used to amplify the participants' voices. The participants' real names were replaced by pseudonyms.

Beneficiaries' Expectations and Experiences of Social Rental Housing

The participants in this current study shared that they expected housing to advance their basic human rights. Among other rights, they cited safety and security as central to promoting peace and dignity in their neighbourhood. For housing and neighbourhoods to provide safety and security, the participants insisted that housing be constructed using good quality materials and maintained accordingly. The participants' expectations and experiences of SRH were therefore centred on safety and security including the way in which this was made possible. These are reflected in the following excerpts:

> Just like everyone would, I expect to experience real sense of being safe, secure and stable in my house. (Esther)

> I love the house because it's good quality; locks, windows, doors and the security wall are strong also. I'm here as long as I want. (Grace)

> The place is quiet, security is tight and because of crime and as a woman, I must also be vigilant of rape and violence. (Nomawethu)

> I feel safe here with my children, I'm at peace when children play outside. (Nonceba)

> We have electricity, water and flushing toilets. (Nosipho)

A total of 16 (76%) of the participants were women who underlined that they had long awaited housing which would provide secure and dignified shelter for them and their children. These expectations were not unreasonable nor their experiences coincidental. Rather they were informed by rampant crime against women, gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence (DV) and femicide occurring in South Africa (Sobantu 2021). Nomawethu's fears represent those of many women in the country who live in perpetual fear because of unsafe housing and neighbourhoods. Raniga and Ngcobo (2014) and Sobantu (2019, 2021) elaborate on the entrenched socio-economic exclusion of women from quality education which leads to feminisation of poverty. Evidence from this study shows that women relied on meagre incomes from working as hairdressers, vegetable vendors, waiters and cashiers. Evident in the findings is a nexus of pertinent

empowerment issues which include gender equality and the need to analyse and redress women's housing and human rights issues from a broader structural lens. Attending to these issues is in the interest of social work which is implored to take interest in rights-based and pro-women approaches to housing delivery.

From Grace's experience, SRH provided quality infrastructure which boosted security and therefore longer tenures. Such experiences of quality housing are a break from the subsidised housing popularly known as RDPs (now referred to as Breaking New Ground) in which defects are common (Manomano and Tanga 2018). Housing quality is not restricted to physical walls, but it also incorporates connections to services and amenities, refusal disposal, security and supportive relationships. Linking occupants to these services empowers communities in numerous related ways. To start with, longer tenures because of quality housing fosters stability of families which in turn gives them confidence to invest (socially and economically) in their housing and communities. As most parents in this study, Nonceba pointed out the safety of her children in SRH. According to Lee (2017, 54), safe housing and neighbourhoods "relieve the burden of younger family members' carer roles . . . [to] concentrate on work and productivity" and therefore generating incomes and nutrition for the families. Work productivity and improved income are social investments that bear long-term human development benefits for both the parents and their children.

Enhancing Participation in the Economy

As briefly hinted in the foregoing paragraph, quality housing generally results in safer environments, longer tenures and therefore stability for the occupants to invest in their structures and to engage in livelihood activities. Extending economic opportunities to the previously disadvantaged groups such as black people and especially women is a barometer of empowerment and guaranteeing peace, development and nation-building (Sobantu 2021). Below are some of the excerpts from the participants which highlight their experiences of SRH pertaining to their participation in the economy:

> I don't have to worry about my children's safety when I'm at work. (Pamela)

> . . . because our belongings are safe here, we can spend as much time as possible at work, I can even work overtime. (Thomas)

In the immediate term to long term, this progress tackles poverty and crime in the neighbourhoods. Poverty and crime undermine human rights and human dignity. Any effort that improves people's access to housing and opportunities contributes to the goals of achieving cohesive, sustainable and caring communities (Gauteng Provincial Government 2018).

In a similar vein, Arku (2006, 385) strongly argued that adequate housing has a huge empowerment value as "it generates economic growth, creates wealth, creates employment and income, redistributes income and serves as a macroeconomic

stabiliser". The participants shared that proximity to various means of reliable transport gives them quicker access to different livelihood opportunities. Kleinhans and Elsinga (2010) posit that central to empowerment is presenting accessible and sustainable options to poor and marginalised people. The responses from this study indicate that SRH has empowered the participants to have a greater sense of control and with more opportunities and income to have a positive impact on their life courses. It is therefore more appropriate for social work in South Africa to validate its role in housing through research and other forms of advocacy in its quest to improve the social functioning of poor citizens.

Accessible Management

All the participants appreciated the accessibility of their housing managers by all beneficiaries irrespective of gender, language and tribe. The following three responses from the participants show the managers' accessibility and responses regarding complaints:

> She is easily accessible because she's here with her family. She is not the kind of person that will judge you based on the language that you speak and she is a kind of a person that is always around our premises, notices faults and is quick on reporting them and making sure that they are fixed. We're lucky because our maintenance guy stays here also. (Nonceba)

> He's a nice young man. He also stays in here with us and his family. He is an example and inspiration to many because he is approachable anytime. He doesn't stay with our problems but makes sure he works on them. (Grace)

> This place is clean, management is approachable and quick. I'm happy to continue paying my rent. (Ernest)

In private and SRH, management plays a critical role in determining the emotional and physical well-being of the beneficiaries (Priemus, Dieleman, and Clapham 1999, 211). It is pleasing to note that these managers who are popularly known as housing caretakers play a positive part in creating meaningful empowering experiences for the beneficiaries. An accessible manager in rental stock has an empowering function, especially for the low-income earners who "often express a sense of hopelessness, powerlessness, humiliation and marginalisation" (Mantle and Backwith 2010, 2386). Accessibility and quick turnovers in maintenance demonstrate care for the tenants' health and well-being. This is because blocked drains, uncollected garbage and neglected infrastructure pose a health risk as these create a breeding environment for cockroaches, rats, bacteria and fungi (Cozens and Tarca 2016).

Most empowering in the above excerpts is that the relationship between the managers and the participants have matured with regard to the principles of democracy, human dignity, respect, partnerships and human rights. However, it should be remembered that these experiences are not representative of the entire SRH sector and a focus on altering

human relationships in the broader sector is urgently required. Mantle and Backwith (2010) highlight that both tenants and especially landlords have a duty to partner with each other to cultivate ownership of their housing and communities. Such an inclusive project is empowering for the occupants as they get actively involved in co-planning and implementing strategies to fight crime, GBV and DV. The value of social work should stretch beyond conscientising poor people about their responsibilities in shaping relationships in their respective neighbourhoods to dismantling the barriers that hinder them from doing so.

Challenges with Social Rental Housing

On the other hand, the participants also shared some of the challenges with their housing. These are not uncommon and are a consequence of restrictions in the SH policy. This article reports on only two challenges, namely, the lack of an ownership option of the units that they are renting and the rising monthly rentals. These responses capture some of the participants' frustrations with SRH:

> Even though we're happy here, but this isn't my house . . . I wish I could be paying my monthly rental towards my own bond, but I've upgraded my qualifications and recently got a promotion and I'm searching for my own house. (Joyce)

> At times I feel frustrated that I don't qualify for an RDP and I also can't qualify to buy my own house from the market. I'm trapped here. (Angel)

As prescribed in the Social Housing Act, SRH is not for ownership but only for rental purposes (RSA 2008). While using their SRH units, the beneficiaries are expected to improve their financial circumstances so that they could move into better units in SRH or acquire their own housing from the market. A process that allows tenants "alternative housing options . . . housing choices according to their incomes" is referred to by the Madulammoho Housing Association (2018, 1) as a housing ladder. In view of the existing barriers of poor people, moving up this ladder should be the collaborative responsibility of SRH landlords, government, the tenants, private housing developers and other stakeholders including social workers and advocates of pro-poor adequate housing delivery (Sobantu and Nel 2019).

As reflected in Joyce's response, the second most common challenge highlighted in this study was that of the high subsidised rentals. Consonant with Charlton (2013) who argued that SRH excludes the poorest of poor people, the participants agreed that their rentals were going up annually. The participants doubted if they will be able to continue paying these rentals in the near future. Exacerbating this challenge is the low incomes that most SRH beneficiaries receive. Ironically, these incomes are above the minimum qualifying threshold for RDP houses but are far too little to enable them to acquire housing from the market. These are some of the structural impediments that social workers need to be aware of and work deliberately to engage government in their bid to empower many South Africans who are stuck in SRH.

Relevance of Housing, Empowerment and Social Work

Throughout the article, I endeavoured to emphasise that housing delivery is ultimately a social policy and a social work concern which contributes hugely towards the empowerment of individuals, families and communities. Especially in the empirical findings, this article established the multiplier empowerment impact of housing in that it links the occupants to essential services that are integral for the human development of children and optimum development of families and communities. Emerging from the history of colonial and apartheid discrimination, housing helps people realise their rights to sanitation, electricity and running water; services that add value to human life and proffer dignity, self-worth and human rights. Because housing undergirds all social and economic relations (Hohmann 2013, 13), social work and other stakeholders will need to rethink their empowerment strategies towards advocating adequate housing that is premised on the empowerment frameworks. Such strategies are more likely to result in peaceful, safe, stable, secure, integrated and enabling settlements that promote healthy human relations among older persons, children, men and women of all colours, creed and sexual orientation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experiential voices of 21 SRH beneficiaries in this Johannesburg- and Pretoria-based study have shown that housing is not just bricks and mortar, but it bears key empowerment implications to beneficiaries' social and economic well-being. In this article, I examine the SRH experiences of beneficiaries with regard to access to management and the bearing of this type of housing in integrating participants into the economy. The empirical evidence substantiates that SRH empowers the living and neighbourhood environment for raising families in safe and secure housing. The participants, especially the women, in this study demonstrated the centrality of safe and secure housing for themselves and their children. They also appreciated the quick responses that they receive from their housing managers pertaining to the faults in their units and other complaints. This is chiefly because of the violent crimes and abuse against women and children, most of which are perpetrated by their significant others in the built environment. In addition, the findings resonate with the literature and policy which stress that the essence of SRH is to empower poor people by positioning them proximal to job opportunities. This has a redistribution effect in a highly unequal society such as South Africa. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the participants expressed frustration over high rentals and challenges of progressing up the housing ladder.

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- An urgent policy is needed in which the mandate of SRH is reconsidered, from occupying a subsidiary role and allowing more SHIs to registering and providing more housing stock to the market.

- The SRH beneficiaries and the public need to be educated on the available options that may be chosen if they need to move up the housing ladder. For example, the Department of Human Settlements provides the Finance Linked Subsidy Programme, an initiative to help first-time home buyers to buy and own their own houses.
- SHIs and other interested stakeholders could boost the incomes of SRH beneficiaries through more developmental strategies, for example, by helping them to register as enterprises which may also compete for tenders for cleaning and laundry services in their respective SHIs.
- This study represented a limited sample of 21 SRH beneficiaries in three SHIs and did not reflect gender dynamics. I therefore recommend that more studies be conducted that would be informed by a gender lens. Other studies may focus on other SHIs across South Africa.

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