

Factors Impeding the Participation of Rural Women in the Climate Change Discourse: A Requirement for Social Work Intervention

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Abstract

The disproportional impacts of climate change on rural women are undisputable. Climate change impacts that manifest through droughts, heat waves, floods, scarcity of water and depletion of the natural resource base are becoming more precarious in the lives and livelihoods of rural women. This study aims to delineate factors hampering the participation of rural women in the climate change discourse in the Vhembe District, Limpopo, South Africa. The study adopted the qualitative methodology guided by a multi-case study design. A sample of 24 participants was selected through multistage sampling techniques. Rural women and social workers participated in the study. The data were collected using focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews and were analysed thematically. The study established that rural women in the Vhembe District are not participating in climate change decision-making processes, especially when it comes to community level politics where climate change-related decisions are made. Furthermore, the pervasive patriarchal dominance in the district discriminates against women and prevents them from acquiring land and property rights as well as adequate information about climate change adaptation and mitigation. The low social status of women is reducing their efforts to participate in the climate change discourse despite their perennial vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. These challenges

faced by rural women in the climate change discourse are a cause for concern for the social work profession which is premised on enhancing human well-being.

Keywords: participation, rural women, climate change, social work, Vhembe District

Introduction

Climate change and its impacts place women at a more disadvantaged position than men because of the differential social status in which women occupy low social positions (Islam and Winkel 2017). Chanza (2014) defines climate change as an ongoing trend of changes in the earth's general weather conditions because of an average rise in the temperature of the earth's surface. Based on this, evidence of rapid climate change comprises intense weather systems with an increased frequency of heavy rainfall and longer drought seasons. In the light of this, the impacts of climate change manifest through droughts, floods, hurricanes, cyclones, heat waves, erratic rainfalls and geographical distribution of pathogens that cause diseases (Nyahunda, Matlakala, and Makhubele 2019). These impacts are more precarious for women than men because of the former's low social status, high poverty levels, low levels of education, limited social mobility, reliance on fragile livelihoods and the lack of an adaptive capacity (Mazuru 2019; UN Women 2013). According to Nyahunda and Tirivangasi (2020), vulnerability to climate change and its precarious impacts is gendered and socially constructed. This implies that women and men face different challenges because their societal roles have been constructed differently.

Earlier, Ndaruzaniye (2013) reiterated that women also face barriers that inhibit their capacity to cope and develop in the climate change terrain. These barriers manifest in the economic, social and political spheres of women's lives. Adaptation to climate change is more pressing to women than men because women shoulder a double mission for their own adaptation and ability to provide primary care to both their dependants and their men (Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2020; WHO 2015). To make matters worse, policy areas for climate protection tend to be male dominated, and women are underrepresented in areas of policy frameworks for climate change (Alam, Alam, and Mushtaq 2017; McKinney and Fulkerson 2015). Earlier, B athge (2010) contended that the capabilities of women as instigators of social change for climate mitigation are not given due consideration in South Africa.

Furthermore, the adaptive capacity among rural women is typically limited by several factors such as poverty, gender inequality, marginalisation from decision-making processes and planning procedures, lack of education, reliance on rain-fed agriculture and climate sensitive resources (UN Women 2013; Nyahunda, Makhubele, Mabvurira, and Matlakala 2020). To extrapolate from this climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing humanity. Social work practice has a long tradition of looking beyond its national borders and campaigning for human rights. In this regard, the values of social work such as social justice and service to humanity demand that the profession

clamour for an ambitious joint movement to tackle the differential effects of climate change on women (Drolet et al. 2014). In this respect, climate change falls within the purview of the social work practice. Therefore, social workers should take the lead in supporting families and communities affected by climate change following the values, knowledge base, skills and principles of the profession (Nyahunda, Matlakala, and Makhubele 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to delineate factors hampering the participation of rural women in the climate change discourse in the Vhembe District. A plethora of studies delved much into the vulnerability of women in the climate change discourse but failed to provide a succinct description of circumstances beyond their lack of participation in the terrain of climate change (Babungura 2013; McMichael and Lindgren 2011; Ndaruzaniye 2013). It is also important to note that the field of environmental social work is still evolving and the parochial literature on climate change and social work lacks the confluence of climate change and women within the province of social work (Dominelli 2018). This study sought to close this knowledge gap by exploring factors impeding the participation of women in the climate change discourse which serves as a requirement of social work.

Overview of Women's Participation in Environmental Issues

Participation in environmental issues refers to taking part, active commitment, involvement and proportional representation in all processes in which climate change-related decisions are made (Mazuru 2019). Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin (2015) opine that women are inherently involved in environmental issues across the globe. These environmental issues encompass agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and climate change adaptation and mitigation. However, the participation of women in environmental issues is often limited owing to the structural barriers that they face (Babungura 2013). This reaffirms Angula's (2010) view that women have knowledge of managing natural resources. Hence, it is important to bring them on board when making efforts to solve environmental problems such as climate change. However, Alam, Alam, and Mushtaq (2017) found that policy areas of environmental protection tend to be male dominated, and that women are underrepresented in areas of environmental policy.

According to Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin (2015), the limited participation of women, and, in other instances, the exclusion from environmental issues, can be attributed to traditional gender roles in which men take active roles in many spheres while women are confined to domestic responsibilities which in turn hamper their ability to participate in decision-making regarding the environment. In corroboration, UN Women (2013) states that men easily get recognition before policymakers and planners because they utilise natural resources for commercial purposes which cause ecologists, policy developers and environmentalists to turn a blind eye on gender dimensions pertaining to the environment. On the flip side, the Food Agriculture Organization (FAO 2015) affirms that women are endowed with unique and critical knowledge of the environment.

Despite their daily interaction with the environment and its natural resources, women have less control over them compared to men. This is further perpetuated by the underestimation of their contribution to the environmental sphere and patriarchal dominance (Baten and Khan 2010; WEDO 2016). To argue further, the equal participation of women in environmental issues and the importance of gender mainstreaming in climate change policies and interventions are sanctioned by international instruments which many countries around the world are signatories to, particularly the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement (Nyahunda et al. 2020). Earlier, Otzelberger (2014) argued that systematic action on gender mainstreaming in environmental issues particularly climate change is still low.

Social Work, Climate Change and Women Issues

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline premised on the promotion of social change, social cohesion, development, liberation and people's empowerment (Clarke 2018; Zastrow 2017). In the context of this study, social work clamours to eliminate inequalities that manifest at all societal levels, including those evolving from climate change. In addition, the social work profession recognises the principles of social justice, collective respect of diversity and human rights as central to the practice through its engagement with people aimed at dealing with life challenges and enhancing human well-being (IFSW 2014). In this regard, climate change falls within the purview of the social work mandate. This is because climate change causes problems for social work clients which social workers ought to rectify by definition of the profession. The catastrophes dovetailed by climate change, which include, among other things, displacements, hunger, diseases, conflicts, poverty and gender inequalities, pose a burgeoning responsibility for social workers (Cumby 2016). In corroboration, Dominelli (2018) asserts that the social work profession has high regard for women's issues. In other words, the profession recognises the persistent discrimination against women in most facets of life and therefore strives to fight for their cause and also that of other oppressed populations.

Similarly, Deering (2014) posits that there is a nexus between gender inequality and climate change. In this regard, global efforts of promoting gender equality are being dragged by climate change because it is perpetuating poverty levels and accelerating traditional discriminatory patterns, thereby affecting gender-embedded livelihoods (UNDP 2014). In response, the promotion of equality through the eradication of all systems of discrimination is part of the main goals of social work. At this juncture, social workers can mitigate gender inequalities through the facilitation of women's access to formal education (Dominelli 2013). According to Alston (2015), social workers are well capacitated to reduce inequalities against women by initiating activities in which most women participate.

This can be achieved through social work involvement in the analysis of information pertaining to social relationships and gender differences, and the devising of appropriate means of resolving inequalities arising on the grounds of gender. In addition, Sims, Chenu and Williams (2014) aver that the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development was launched in 2010 by social workers and social development practitioners to shoulder the responsibility of alleviating the catastrophes that people, communities and societies face by focusing on environmental sustainability. The Agenda provides a firm baseline for the involvement of the social work profession when dealing with challenges stemming from environmental irregularities, including climate change (Lombard 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The Ecofeminism Theory is a feminist stance on environmental issues. In this regard, ecofeminism links ecological issues and feminism driven by social and political motives as a movement (Gaard 2015). The theory argues that inequalities, poverty, discrimination and gendered social roles faced by women exacerbate their vulnerability to climate change (Mies and Shiva 2014; Tuana 2013). On that note, women are more susceptible to natural disasters than men. Accordingly, the deterioration of the natural environment is shouldered by patriarchal systems because men own and control the land and oppress women (Mies and Shiva 2014). In corroboration, Gaard (2015) avows that ecofeminism maintains a strong relationship between the patriarchal dominance of nature and the oppression of women. In this regard, Sturgeon (2016) avers that the nucleus of the Ecofeminism Theory is envisioned on the elimination of male dominance over women in contemporary societies in which gender equality, inclusivity and environmental conservation and preservation are achieved equally by men and women. According to Gaard (2015), the ecofeminism perspective is crucial when examining the solutions proffered to climate change through the analysis of environmental sciences.

In view of the above, the authors selected this theory because of its direct linkage to the exposed position of rural women being more on the frontline of the climate change impacts than men. The principles underlying the theory, among other things, affirm that women are unevenly encumbered by climate change impacts as compared to men. They are often excluded from climate change decision-making processes and face the hefty effects of climate change because of their primary roles as caregivers, food producers and their heavy dependence on climatic savaged natural resources. In addition, women are more important role players in the management and preservation of ecosystem services and food security than men, yet their valuable efforts need to be considered at all levels (Mies and Shiva 2014). Furthermore, women are situated in the frontlines of climate change impacts mainly because they play an important role in food provision and security for their families (Baten and Khan 2010; Cherotich, Saidu, and Bebe 2012). Ndaruzaniye (2013) reported that women are frequently sidelined from decision-making processes that involve climate change and environmental management initiatives, but the ecofeminist views by Gaard (2015) affirm that women are not passive victims to

climate change effects. They are essential role players in proffering solutions to deal with the effects because of the important indigenous knowledge that they possess.

With that being said, the Ecofeminism Theory was used within the framework of feminist social work to determine the causes of women's exclusion from climate change initiatives in the Vhembe District (Dominelli 2012). The same lenses were adopted to navigate the role of social workers in fighting for the plight of women who are plagued by climate change injustices. The ecofeminists' view finds relevance in the social work practice in which feminist writers such as Dominelli (2012) view the personal predicaments of women as stemming from their social position and status in society. From this perspective, social work thrives to liberate and empower women in the quest to improve their well-being.

Research Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in the Vhembe District Municipality which is located in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The district comprises the Makhado, Thulamela, Musina and Collins Chabane Local Municipalities. There are approximately 1.3 million people in the district, with females accounting for 54.4 per cent of this population (Stats SA 2011). The majority (48.7%) of the population live in the Thulamela Municipality. The rest of the population is distributed as follows: Makhado 44.4 per cent, Collins Chabane 6.6 per cent and Musina 3.3 per cent (Madzivhandila 2016). Tshivenda-speaking people constitute 69 per cent of the population, followed by Xitsonga-speakers who constitute 27 per cent (Stats SA 2011). This study was conducted in four villages randomly selected from the four municipalities in the district. In these municipalities, a significant portion of the land is used for agricultural purposes. Most smallholder women farmers are influenced by climate change impacts, and most parts of the land receive an annual rainfall of between 300 mm and 400 mm (Mpandeli and Maponya 2014).

Research Approach and Sampling

The study adopted the qualitative research approach guided by a multiple case study design that operates within the traditional framework of an exploratory study. The qualitative method was adopted to allow participants to provide a thorough detailed account of their experiences of climate change in the following sectors: agriculture and food production, livestock production, water resources, health resources, and wild resources. Qualitative research allowed the researchers to interact with the research participants to gain their insights into the effects of climate change on their lives and livelihoods (Babbie and Mouton 2012). A multi-case study design produces utmost sturdiness to the conclusions to proceed out of the study. The use of multi-case studies is synonymous with the replication of a study or experiment. This means that results

from one case should be simultaneously equated to the results from other cases (Stake 2013).

Furthermore, the researchers adopted the multistage sampling technique in which more than two sampling methods were used at different stages. Akhavan and Pezeshkan (2014) argue that in multistage sampling, clusters are selected at the first stage using the probability sampling method, in particular stratified sampling. Four municipalities were considered different strata in which villages with women who met the criteria were selected following the simple random sampling method. Systematic random sampling was adopted to select the four villages in different municipalities, namely, Tshilungwi in Thulamela, Folovhodwe in Musina, Nkavale in Collins Chabane, and Ramunangi in Makhado. The sampling frame was constructed using two-digit figures starting with 00 for the first community listed. At this point, the researchers selected each tenth community on the list. Purposive sampling was then used to select participants that consisted of rural women and social workers who served as key informants of the study. Purposive sampling allows the selection of participants according to the study's needs clearly aimed at gathering information on the phenomena under study (Rubin and Babbie 2014). A total of 24 participants participated in this study and were distributed as follows: 20 rural women and 4 social workers.

To qualify for inclusion in the study, community members (women) had to practise subsistence farming and have resided in the same village for a minimum of 10 years. Furthermore, social workers were included because the study required a social work perspective regarding challenges emanating from climate change. In the light of this, only social workers involved in community development issues in the selected communities qualified to participate in this study. All four selected social workers were female. The dominance of female social workers made the adumbration of gender dynamics in this study more detailed as it resonated with their experiences. The researchers ensured trustworthiness by verifying collected data and dealing with biases that might affect the process of drawing conclusions (Babbie and Mouton 2012). This was done by ensuring that the findings closely and possibly reflect the meanings as described by the participants. Credibility was also achieved when the researchers demonstrated that a true picture of the phenomenon under investigation is being presented (Rubin and Babbie 2014). To enable dependability, the researchers provided a detailed account of the way in which the data were collected through the provision of the research designs used in the study (Akhavan and Pezeshkan 2014).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. Focus groups consist of individuals selected and gathered in a group to discuss their personal experiences of the subject under study (Smith and Firth 2011). Focus group discussions were used to interview the community members, and semi-structured individual interviews were used to interview the social workers who served as key informants. One focus group discussion was held per community. Each focus

group had five participants (female community members). The individual interviews with social workers were done separately to complement themes explored in the focus group discussions. The key issues which dominated the focus group discussions were strategies employed by women to withstand the impacts of climate change and challenges that they face in the climate change discourse. The interviews with social workers were centred on the interventions of the profession in rescuing women from the catastrophes in which they are trapped.

A thematic content analysis was used to analyse the findings. The researchers used the steps developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data collected from focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews. In the initial stage, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by rereading the transcripts, and generated initial codes by means of data reduction to align themes with the study aim. After the data reduction, the researchers developed preliminary themes which were aimed at focusing on the problem statement of the study. The themes were reviewed to ensure that they are on a par with the aim of the study and were defined to see if there is a need for the development of subthemes. Given that there was no need for subthemes, the researcher went on with the last step of writing up the manuscript.

Ethics

Walliman (2011) points out that working with human participants in research always raises ethical issues about the way in which they should be treated. Clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Limpopo Research and Ethics Committee. An ethical clearance letter (TREC/186/2018) was issued in this regard. Permission was also obtained from the Vhembe District Municipality. Furthermore, the participants were requested to sign a consent form stipulating that their participation was voluntary, and that they were at liberty to withdraw at any time. The researchers presumed that the nature of the study had the potential risk of causing emotional and psychological discomfort. The researchers therefore put mechanisms in place of referring such participants to area psychologists and social workers for counselling in the event of such discomfort.

Findings and Discussion

In this study there were four major themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and individual semi-structured interviews. The first three major themes that emerged from the focus group discussions were the lack of adequate information about climate change adaptation and mitigation, inequalities and discrimination, and the lack of property rights. The fourth major theme that emerged from the semi-structured individual interviews was the contribution of the social work practice.

Lack of Adequate Information about Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation

This study did not seek to establish statistical comparisons between men and women in terms of knowledge of climate change and the vulnerability of its impacts. Rather it aimed to explore the factors that plunge women at a disadvantaged position in the climate change discourse as compared to men. Notably, this study found that the lack of participation by rural women in the climate change discourse is hinged by the lack of adequate information about climate change as a phenomenon, and the roles they can play in reducing their vulnerability to climate change. Inequalities and discrimination are the epicentre of women's marginalisation. The lack of adequate information about climate change mitigation and adaptation aggravates their exclusion and insubordination. The following quote confirms this:

We have been farming for more than 50 years. It is very painful that we do not understand most of the things that come by the changing weather and we are being taken advantage of by those who understand. (FGD, Tshilungwi village)

The lack of adequate information about climate change and mitigation makes most rural women in the Vhembe District unaware of what they are dealing with (climate change) and the way in which they have to manoeuvre through its impacts. In as much as a significant number of participants acknowledged to have heard about climate change, they lamented the lack of critical information about the role they have to play to relieve their plights through active participation in the climate change processes. Furthermore, most participants submitted that the way climate change information is packaged and disseminated does not suit their literacy prowess because the majority of them are uneducated. The following quote confirms this.

It is very difficult to understand the information about climate change. We have never received information on how to protect ourselves from the challenges we are facing. Most initiatives in this community favour men than us but we are the most affected. (FGD, Ramunangi village)

The above quote gives credence to the Ecofeminism Theory, which opines that the vulnerability of women to climate change impacts is aggravated by the low levels of education that they have, limited social mobility, exclusion from decision-making processes, and unequal access to resources, assets and opportunities (Gaard 2015). This is further supported by Luruli (2016), who contends that the lack of adequate information on mitigation, adaptation and climate hazards, and reduced education increase women's social and economic dependency on their male counterparts. From this point of view, the researchers underscore that the ability to act decisively in the face of climate change is a product of information in which people can weigh options available in tandem with their circumstances. Sadly, the pervasive patriarchal dominance in the Vhembe District is plummeting access to information that is essential to adaptation in the wake of climate change impacts for women.

Inequalities and Discrimination

This study revealed that the lack of participation by rural women in climate change decision-making processes stems from inequalities and discrimination which appeared to be rampant in most rural communities of the Vhembe District. Inequalities are evident in decision-making processes in which women are absent in the distribution of critical resources such as land, deliberations in community politics and access to opportunities. The participants submitted that in most cases, men take the lead in suggesting crop seeds to plough in the fields despite the fact that some crops such as maize are no longer able to survive the long dry spells owing to the climate change. The following excerpts summarise the situation in most rural communities:

Some of the suggestions from our male counterparts who claim to be knowledgeable about farming are not conducive to what I see but I do not have much power to say no. We end up growing crops that are not yielding anything because our inputs are considered to be irrelevant. (FGD, Nkavale village)

If our ideas were considered to be relevant, I do not think we were going to suffer from hunger like this. We know how to farm but our inputs are always disregarded. (FGD, Ramunangi village)

The above excerpts demonstrate the way in which women, particularly from male-headed households, are captured in the snares of powerlessness resulting from their marginalisation from decision-making processes related to climate change. In this way, they end up being sidelined even in policymaking because it is assumed that they do not have knowledge of the subject (Arora-Jonsson 2011). In corroboration, Garutsa, Mubaya and Zhou (2018) made similar findings among the Shona culture in Zimbabwe, which show significant similarities with both the Tsonga and Venda cultures. The authors reported that women's inputs are deemed less important hence they are excluded from participating in other social roles. Sriram (2018) posits that generally, women have less decision-making powers compared to men either in the home or in the community. They are frequently left out in decision-making spheres in which they can easily influence best household or community practices. This study further established that women have less or no secured land rights. Gender determines who receive inputs essential to adaptation where men are situated at a more advantageous position than women. The Ecofeminism Theory encapsulates that inequalities, poverty, discrimination and gendered social roles faced by women exacerbate their vulnerability to climate change (Gaard 2015).

In the Vhembe District, women are trapped in various webs of discrimination, which manifest in their segregation in the planning of community developmental projects. Moreover, they lack access to climate information, early warning systems and equal control over natural resources. What emerged from all the villages is that women occasionally attend meetings that are specifically convened for them. The following quote confirms this:

We only attend meetings that are specific on who should attend. We normally have few meetings convened for women. We normally do not attend general meetings because our presence is of no significance there. (FGD, Tshilungwi village)

This gives credence to the tenets of the Ecofeminism Theory that men tend to benefit more from the opportunities than women (Mies and Shiva 2014). In the same line of argument, Duggan (2012) posits that the discrimination that exists regulates opportunities at people's disposal and also the barriers that they face when dealing with risks particularly posed by climate change. Gender inequality is amplifying the effects posed by climate change by limiting women's access to critical resources or by restricting them to act when faced with climate change.

Lack of Land and Property Rights

Most women in the Vhembe District were reported to be running short of land, which is the most vital determinant for climate change adaptation. Information gathered from the focus group discussions reveal that in accordance with customary and structured traditional systems land was only allocated to men. In addition, if the male figure dies, passing land ownership to other family members is aggravated by relentless conflict between a surviving female spouse, her in-laws and other traditional leaders vying for ownership of that land. The following statements confirm this:

We have smaller portions of land, which we do not even enjoy freedom over; it is difficult to survive. It is very problematic to acquire land as a woman. (FGD, Tshilungwi village)

We do not enjoy freedoms over the land in as much as we work very hard on it. (FGD, Nkavale village)

We also need to own land like them [men]. We cannot be expected to feed the families when we do not own the land like men. (FGD, Ramunangi village)

It emerged that land is typically allocated under the name of a male figure. Those who are married and the widowed are in control of the land through inheritance with no rights guaranteed in terms of ownership. In the context of married women, the study found that they do not have equal control regarding what should be cultivated on the land. In support, Wilson (2013) reports that African customary laws are characterised by discriminatory patterns such that women face unequal land ownership and land control. In corroboration, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD 2015) reports that African customary laws and land tenure systems prioritise men over women in terms of land ownership.

Because women are deprived of the right to own land by customary systems, their repetitive tillage of the same land has rendered most soils infertile for crop production. The common theme that emerged in most villages is that inheritance customary laws

favour the eldest male son to assume ownership of the land after the death of his father. The following statements confirm this:

The problem we face is that, our requests to get fertile land are not considered simply because we are women. (FGD, Folovhodwe village)

The land I am using is not mine, it is under my son's name. I do not know what should be done to give us the same rights as men when it comes to land ownership. (FGD, Ramunangi village)

The researchers argue that land is an essential vehicle through which women could exercise their freedom to decide what should be done to sustain their livelihoods since they are more pro-environment than men. The findings of this study justify the tenets of the Ecofeminism Theory on the segregation of women from owning land. In the light of this, inequalities manifesting through unequal access to land between men and women are hampering their efforts towards climate change adaptation (Mies and Shiva 2014). This is because most women in the Vhembe District depend on agriculture for their livelihood. In support of this, UN Women (2013) opines that when women have freedoms over the land, they make productive outcomes that can cushion them from climate change impacts.

Contribution of the Social Work Practice

This study established that social workers have a parochial understanding of the nexus between climate change and social work. Factors that emerged from a lack of understanding about climate change are the lack of exposure to climate change issues during training, and the failure to relate problems faced by their clients to climate change. Such knowledge deficiency of the linkage between social work and climate change points to a lack of involvement by social workers in climate change interventions in the Vhembe District. This gives credence to Cumby's (2016) argument that inaction issues to climate change by most social workers can be attributed to the lack of exposure to these issues during training.

Regardless of their lack of involvement in climate change issues, there was a general consensus that social workers have a role to play when assisting clients affected by climate change. What should be underscored is that after being taken through pointers compelling social workers to be involved in climate change issues by the researchers, which resonates with their experiences and observations, key informants unanimously acknowledged that climate change should be incorporated into their day-to-day work because most problems prevailing in the community evolve from climate change. The following quotes confirm this:

Of course, from the developmental social work point of view, I think we have a role to play in addressing problems caused by climate change, we are called to address all forms of inequality in the communities. (Social worker, Makhado)

Thank you for making us realise that we have a duty to play when it comes to climate change. I agree that climate change is affecting women than men and we have a role to play and ensure that they are protected. (Social worker, Musina)

Some social workers attested that they obtained climate change information in some workshops on environmental management but that these workshops did not equip them with tools to make interventions. However, it was acknowledged that women are more affected by climate change than men. Stereotypical prejudices against women worsen the situation. The following quote confirms this:

Yes, climate change is affecting women the most and I think women need to be educated and empowered by social workers to stand against injustices they face. (Social worker, Thulamela municipality)

This study documented some of the suggestions on the role played by social workers in the climate change terrain once they receive adequate training. The following statement confirms this:

Social workers must eliminate prejudice between roles of men and women that a woman is obliged to do this and that is the mindset drawing our societies backwards. With the support of men things can be easier for women. Social workers must find solutions through empowerment of women. (Social worker, Collins Chabane Municipality)

Despite the inaction by social workers regarding climate change issues in the Vhembe District, their acknowledgement of the nexus between climate change and the dictum of the profession is a departure point for climate change interventions on which social work practitioners could receive further training. The interventions could be tailor-made for the empowerment of vulnerable groups, and in this regard, rural women. In support of this, Boetto (2017) posits that social workers must stimulate the enhancement of social justice and dislodge the long-embedded roots of women's subordination and patriarchal dominance, which disproportionately subject women to vulnerability to climate change impacts. In the same vein, Dominelli (2018) avers that the social work practice is required to respond appropriately to deal with climate change-induced disasters on its clients.

Limitations

This study lacks information from other important sectors affected by climate change in which women are presumed to face challenges and their roles are disregarded. For instance, women's role is disregarded in the management of biodiversity, wildlife, fisheries, tourism, and waste disposal. The fact that this study was conducted in one

district of Limpopo sets conditions for the generalisation of findings because climate change experiences differ from place to place.

Implications for Social Work

This study sought to set a ground-breaking departure point on the importance of rights-based and people-centred interventions when dealing with climate change issues, especially in the social work fraternity. Efforts to craft and implement sustainable climate change solutions should be hinged on the importance of climate justice in which the equal participation of men and women is guaranteed at all levels. The centrality of social justice to the social work profession connotes that social workers are charged with the responsibility of eliminating gender inequalities that are being widened in the face of disasters such as climate change. As adumbrated, the underrepresentation, powerlessness and discrimination of women in the climate change discourse is the root of their vulnerability which social workers should clamour to rectify by definition of their profession. This is because the vulnerability of women in the climate change terrain is not innate, but a product of gendered social roles, poverty and discrimination championed by patriarchal dominance. In response, social workers should advocate interventions that entail equity and equality in the distribution of environmental risks, participation and involvement in the processes of environmental management policies, and recognition of experiences of affected communities and groups in which women and children top the priorities to achieve environmental justice.

Conclusion

Evidence from the findings of the study points to the fact that women in the Vhembe District are assailed by a web of setbacks serving as barriers to their participation in climate change issues. Gender determines who is vulnerable and who has the ability to adapt or participate in climate change initiatives. The barriers experienced by women in the climate change terrain are socially constructed through differential roles hinged on cultural beliefs and patterns. The barriers experienced by women remain unsurpassable as long as cultural patterns that discriminate against women are not changed. To extrapolate from this, the social work profession needs to scale up its significance by flagging the importance of social justice at the frontlines of climate change, which is still missing in the Vhembe District.

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