



UN Sustainable Development Goals and Women Informal Traders in South Africa: Developmental Social Welfare Strategies and Lessons for Implementing SDG 1, 5 and 8

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Abstract

The UN 2030 agenda bring nations together to address global challenges for sustainable development. Social workers are increasingly expected to engage in intervention strategies to address the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The South African National Development Plan Vision 2030 serves as a domestication of the SDGs, guiding the country's efforts to prioritize sustainable development through its specific development agenda. This qualitative, descriptive investigation addresses the 3 (three) UN's SDGs, including no poverty, gender equality, access to decent work, and economic growth, and prioritises women's empowerment in South Africa. This study aimed to extract pivotal developmental social welfare strategies to inform social and economic justice in South Africa. The study highlights the multifaceted pillars of social development in relation to women's empowerment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 women from Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces in South Africa. The findings discuss three developmental social work strategies that the women adopted as informal traders, namely, active participation in meeting economic needs, nurturing social development partnerships and building social networks. The paper presents debates on globalization from below, solidarity economy and

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social development theories in the context of this study. This paper paves the way for future developmental social work research and policy development by identifying actionable strategies and theoretical insights that can inform both future research and policy initiatives.

Keywords: Developmental Social Welfare; Poverty; South Africa; Women's Empowerment

Introduction

The gender equality (SDG5), no poverty (SDG1), and decent work and economic development (SDG8) are important UN SDGs that are fundamental to social work research, policy, and practice (Gray and Lombard, 2023; Mupedizwa, 2020; Raniga, 2021, Patel, 2015). In contemporary times, the global economy is affected by turbulent political, economic, environmental, technological, and population demographic changes that threaten to reduce job opportunities in the formal economy at a time when the demand for employment is growing (Jayasooria, 2016). In the post-COVID 19 era, two major developmental challenges are faced by countries: the need for sufficient jobs in the formal work sector to absorb the supply of labour and the growing number of unemployed people who comprise the lower-income segment of the population (Daud et al 2024). The experiences of women who are in the informal economy are often overlooked by the state and private sector as a source of valuable economic contribution and benefit (Muridzo, 2023; Ojo, 2022; Raniga, 2021).

In South Africa, the apartheid system perpetuated economic inequalities amongst Black women as they were subjected to discrimination, lack of jobs, income insecurity, and vulnerability to poverty (Ross et al., 2024). In the post-apartheid context, the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) embraced developmental social welfare as a pro-poor policy to promote human rights, democracy, active participation, build partnerships and enable social and economic justice in society (Patel, 2015). Gray and Lombard (2022) argue that three decades on, the progress of social workers delivering

developmental social welfare services in South Africa has been dismal due to a heavy reliance on state social grants, remedial counselling services and insufficient funding support by government to respond to poverty and inequality in communities.

This paper builds on the work of Sherraden et al (2022), who argue that people must be financially capable and able to accumulate assets to ensure income security and reduce vulnerability to poverty. It further provides insight into informal trading as a local economic development strategy that 18 women in Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces implemented to mitigate poverty and attain financial stability in their households. This qualitative, descriptive study aimed to highlight the pivotal pillars of developmental social welfare to inform macro practice in South Africa. The objectives explored the economic benefits and challenges experienced by the women who worked as informal traders. Using solidarity economy and social development as foundational theories, this paper presents the biographical profiles of the women and discusses three themes: active participation in meeting economic needs, building authentic partnerships and nurturing social networks. It is important to take note of the socio-political and structural factors that shape the social and economic experiences of women who work as informal traders in South Africa (Raniga, 2022). The paper begins with a discussion of the role women play as informal traders in the economy, followed by debates on developmental social welfare and solidarity economy in the context of this study. Section three discusses the research methodology. This is followed by a presentation of the biographical profile of the women and presentation of the three pillars of developmental social welfare to mitigate poverty, enhance access to decent work and promote gender justice in society. The final section of the paper synthesises the women's reflections and presents considerations for social workers to implement macro intervention strategies such as community-based economic projects with women to enhance financial security in households. I also corroborate the call by Sherraden et al (2022) to engage social workers in the task of building financial capability and assets for all to reduce poverty and inequality in society. In sum, a call for social

workers to lobby and advocate for policy changes to spearhead developmental social welfare policy and practice to implement UNSDG 1, 5 and 8 is necessary.

Nature of Informal Trading and Women's Role in the Informal Economy

At the global level, women in the informal economy face persistent challenges including limited access to credit, social protections, and formal markets. Their work is frequently undervalued and undercompensated, resulting in heightened vulnerability to economic shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further exacerbated these inequalities, with many women losing livelihoods due to lockdowns and health restrictions. The informal sector's resilience, however, remains vital, especially during crises, as it provides a flexible means for women to generate income amidst limited formal employment opportunities (Ibrahim et al 2025). South Africa's high unemployment rates and economic exclusion have pushed many women into the informal economy. Women predominantly operate small businesses, engage in street trading, and participate in subsistence agriculture. The legacy of apartheid and ongoing socio-economic inequalities have perpetuated barriers to formal employment for women, making informal trading a vital livelihood strategy.

Poverty and economic exclusion of women in the formal work sector was exacerbated by the global financial crisis experienced in 2007, the coronavirus in 2020, and global civil strife and wars (Ibrahim et al 2025). In the post-COVID-19 period, the number of people living below the poverty line increased both in the Global North and South countries. Approximately 700 million people live in extreme poverty on less than \$2.15 a day, and nearly half of the world lives on less than \$6.85 daily, a figure unchanged since 1990 (World Bank, 2025a p12). According to the World Bank (2025a p15), Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 16% of the world's population, and 67% live in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2025a p23). Extreme poverty remains concentrated in countries with historically low economic growth and fragility, many of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2025b). Such

empirical evidence reveals that the distribution of poverty across the globe is highly uneven and unequal within nations and across nations (Sewpaul, 2016, Raniga, 2022).

Sub-Saharan African countries have been lagging in terms of mitigating poverty in comparison to the rest of the world because of corruption, misappropriation of state funds coupled with population trend changes, leadership challenges, and climate change (Juju et al., 2020; Mukwamba, 2023, World Bank, 2024). Women represent about 60% of the population in South Africa who live in relative poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2023). According to South Africa's Beijing Report (2024:17), unemployment numbers for women remain higher than the national average, with 35,7% of South African women actively looking for work, which exacerbates vulnerability to poverty. Given the economic exclusion consequent of the apartheid era, women have been ignored as attractive stakeholders and contributors to the informal economy. In this paper, the informal economy is conceptualized as the existence of a network of informal businesses, social enterprises, cooperatives and savings clubs, both statistically and functionally important enough to be perceived as a viable alternate economic system connected to the solidarity economy (Matthews, 2017, Raniga, 2021).

Many writers, such as Du Toit and Neves (2007), Matthews (2017), Patel (2015) and Raniga (2021), argue that women in Africa have been economically productive and have increased access to food security and decent work in the informal economy. In South Africa, informal traders are people who implement businesses that are not registered with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Statistics South Africa, 2020). These businesses are cash-based and do not contribute to state taxes (Darbi et al., 2018). As in other Global South countries, women who engage in informal trading play a productive role in the informal economy. While precise numbers fluctuate, it was estimated that around 47.6% of women are employed in the informal sector, particularly in trade, compared to 30.6% of men (Statistics South Africa, 2018:9).

The informal trader refers to those workers who are self-employed or who work for those who are self-employed (Meyer, 2018; Nguyen and Canh, 2020). Wegerif (2020) states that around 70% of households in South Africa have access to food, medication, and transport from trading in the informal economy.

Women are mainly street vendors and are a prominent category of traders who engage in a diverse range of selling goods to urban and rural residents and play a valuable role in advancing economic growth and access to decent work (Bhila and Chiwenga 2022). The main function of street vendors is to supplement income for those who are beneficiaries of menial monthly state cash transfers and provide a means for unemployed persons who reside in urban cities and rural communities (Arjun, 2008; Raniga and Ringson, 2021). According to Burton (2009), informal trading of fruit and vegetables provides jobs and income for unemployed people and a market for traders to sell their products. Meyer (2015, p 22) established that in 2013, there were 1,517,000 informal traders in the country. According to Sassen et al. (2018), economic activities in the informal economy comprise about 28% of South Africa's GDP. Evidently, the informal economy is increasingly becoming a focus of attention for social workers and public policymakers as it is perceived as great prospects for meeting UN SDGs of no poverty, enhancing gender equality and access to decent work and economic growth (Dey and Dasugupta, 2009; Willemse, 2011).

For women who are economically excluded, dependent on state social grants and cannot find jobs in the formal work sector, the option of informal trading becomes a supplementary source of income (Bhowmik, 2010; Patel, 2015, Raniga, 2022). Jenson (2003) claims that selling goods such as clothing, fruit, vegetables, and household products provides a significant portion of female-headed households' assets and income security. Almost, 47.6% of women engage in informal trading and extended families across provinces in South Africa benefit from this income. (Statistics South Africa, 2018). In fact, a substantial portion of street vendors' income is spent on rent, buying food,

school fees, and transportation (Raniga and Ringson, 2021). While some traders have savings or bank accounts, most of them invest in Stokvels (savings clubs) and funeral policies as social investment schemes and to ensure financial stability in times of economic crisis (Meyer, 2018, Raniga and Ringson, 2021).

Informal traders are primary distributors of food at cost effective prices for families in low-income communities in Gauteng and rural Mpumalanga (Arora and Taore, 2010). According to Dey and Dasugupta (2009), informal traders serve as a complementary link to many buyers and producers in the formal work sector. In addition, many workers in the formal work sector purchase food and household goods from informal traders at lower prices and tend to retail these goods to a buyer who has limited purchasing power (Austin, 1994; Bhowmik, 2010). Prahalad (2016), who conceptualised the base of pyramid theory, argues that this value chain model provides poor people with the opportunity to become economically productive and recognises the social connections of economic activity.

For this study, the 18 women were self-employed traders who had not registered their businesses with the South African Ministry of Trade and Industry. The central premise of this paper, is that women who are vulnerable to poverty, have the potential to actively participate in meeting economic needs, nurturing social development partnerships and building social networks, which are integral to developmental social welfare practice.

Solidarity Economy and Developmental Social Welfare Practice

Given the call for societal transformations to foster solidarity, social cohesion and mitigate the feminisation of poverty, social development is perceived as an integral part of the solidarity economy as it expands the access to decent work and prioritizes redistributive justice, human rights and gender justice. I consider in what way the solidarity economy as an alternate economic model, contributes to globalization from below and enhances active participation,

building partnerships and a focus on mutual social and economic goals, key pillars of developmental social welfare practice. I build on critiques of developmental social welfare policy and engage with the notion of women empowerment (Gray and Lombard, 2023; Ojo, 2022; Raniga, 2022, Patel, 2015).

The gaps persist regarding developmental social welfare's contribution to sustainability and sustainable development goals 1, 5, and 8 (Gray and Lombard, 2024; Midgley, 2013; Patel, 2025; Raniga, 2016). Chandra and Shang (2021) argued that the links to environmental justice, people-centeredness, solidarity, and economic equality are key pillars enshrined in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IFSW, 2012; 2020-2030), which social workers need to pay attention to (Campanini, 2020).

Social workers have mandates around social justice, relationships, empowerment, and liberation of people (Muridzo, 2024). These values of upholding human rights, unconditional respect and dignity for all are core functions of social workers. I acknowledge the limitations of neoliberal policies, economic globalization and its dire consequences for prosperity, economic growth, and poverty within and across nations (Harms-Smith, 2020; Engelbrecht, 2019; Sewpaul, 2016). This confirms that social work is a political profession as social workers are concerned primarily with the vulnerable and poor, challenging inequalities and social and economic exclusion as key global development challenges.

Ife and Tesoriero (2006), Zelnick and Ambrovitz (2020), Sewpaul (2016), Bond (2019), Bhorat (2017) have pointed out that 'globalisation from above' which has been about the exclusive interests of the powerful controllers of the global economy, has been undemocratic and unaccountable, and been to the detriment of women and their access to the labour market. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IFSW 2012)

acknowledges the unequal consequences of such global, political, and economic ideologies, which have resulted in high levels of human rights violations, increased poverty and inequality both in the Global North and South and advocates for a “new world order which makes a reality of respect for human rights, solidarity and a different structure of human relationships” (The Agenda: 2012:1). Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) and Ife and Tesoriero (2006) expand on alternate economic models for community sustainability and put forth the concept of 'globalisation from below'. This form of globalisation is democratic, fosters solidarity, is person-centred and participatory, which are key pillars of developmental social welfare practice (Patel, 2015, Raniga, 2016; Weyers, 2011). The process of 'globalisation from below' aligns with indigenous principles that real development encompasses the active participation of women in local economic development. Raniga and Ringson (2022) conclude from a qualitative study with informal traders in Gauteng province, South Africa, that to maintain financial stability and food security in their households during the COVID-19 pandemic, women entrepreneurs formed support groups, shared challenges, and sought expertise to enhance business skills and engage in action campaigns.

The UN SDGs and the Global Agenda (2020-2030) strengthen the commitment and profile of social workers to make a foundational contribution to developmental social welfare policy formulation and implementation. In turbulent times, social workers can no longer be satisfied with providing psychosocial and remedial therapeutic support to women, struggling with the effects of structural poverty, which is associated with the failures of neoliberal economic policies, underscored by capitalism. For social workers globally and locally, this commitment forms the basis for enhancing a human-rights and citizenship-based egalitarian empowering and transformative agenda. Zelnick and Ambrovitz (2020) argue that institutional injustices and the privatisation of services need to be universally acknowledged as they underpin social justice and human rights for all citizens. Social workers need to recognise, confront, and address pervasive

structural oppression and economic inequality and link women who struggle with poverty to community-based livelihood strategies to ensure income security in households.

The solidarity economy is primarily about expanding the economic space where women-centred organisations, savings clubs, stokvels, income-generating projects, informal trading, cooperatives and business forums can operate (Raniga, 2019). Given the deep-seated consequences of colonial and apartheid history in South Africa, a solidarity economy will promote social and systemic transformations while enhancing redistributive justice, economic inclusion, and sustainability alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Utting (2015) argues that a solidarity economy includes organisations and enterprises engaged in the production and exchange of goods and services, which are autonomous from the state and are guided by cooperation, mutual trust, solidarity, and building partnerships between stakeholders in the social development sector. Such perspectives resonate with Afrocentric philosophy and the norms of ubuntu or communitarian values that prioritise social well-being, peace, and justice (Mugumbate, 2023). Developmental social work is inspired by Ubuntu, and this paper provides insight into women's roles as informal traders as they seek to transform the informal economy to achieve gender justice, social cohesion, and partnerships and to put the economy at the service of human needs, instead of focus on privatisation, new managerialism and commodification of services (Zelnick and Abromvitz, 2022; Engelbrecht, 2019; Govender, 2023).

To achieve financial stability, people must be financially capable and able to accumulate assets (Sherraden et al 2015). Sherraden et al (2015) aptly argues that social workers need to engage in the task of building financial capability and assets for all to reduce poverty and inequality in society. This grand challenge focuses on two initiatives that have broad implications for social work practice, education, and research. First, I propose a solidarity economic model that aligns with developmental social welfare pillars, including human capacity development, active participation in informal trading, and building

authentic partnerships that would provide unemployed women with the opportunity to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty in South Africa. Building on Sherraden's (2015: 8) proposal that "access to funding flows from multiple public, nonprofit, and private sources, the investments and capital would enhance income security in women traders over time". As such the empirical evidence from this study discusses how mutual social and economic needs, social development partnerships and building social networks, enhances gender justice in society.

According to Herrington et al. (2010), fostering creativity is essential for seizing new opportunities, boosting productivity, and generating employment during uncertain economic periods. According to Raniga and Ringson (2021), women working in the informal economy have seized opportunities to implement livelihood projects to ensure income security, increase productivity, and create jobs while also tackling the COVID-19 pandemic economic impact.

Akinyemi and Adejumo (2018) state that local economic development policies have been adopted in developing countries to encourage income-generating activities. President Ramaphosa, in his 2025 State of the Nation address, affirmed women and encouraged entrepreneurial activity in the country (Department of Social Development, 2025).

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach and descriptive design were employed in this study. This aligned with the objectives of the study, which sought rich, in-depth experiences of women who worked as informal traders in urban Gauteng and rural Mpumalanga provinces. A descriptive design was appropriate as it assisted the author in analysing the linkages between the outcomes and impact of informal trading on the lives of informal business owners and the economy of Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces in South Africa. The objectives of the study were to explore the economic experiences of women who were informal

traders, exploring the coping resources adopted by women traders and analysing women's access to different sources of financial assets to sustain their livelihoods.

Research context

Elukwatini area in rural Mpumalanga and Ekurhuleni Municipal areas in Gauteng were two target areas for this study. Most of the households were headed by women, and they were dependent on at least one state monthly cash transfer either from the child support grant or foster care grant. The population of Elukwatini in rural Mpumalanga province is about 41,780 and falls under the Chief Albert Luthuli Municipality (Chief Albert Luthuli Municipality Annual Report, 2021). Ekurhuleni Municipality, located in Gauteng province, was the target urban area for this study and had an estimated population of 4,066,691 (Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Report, 2022).

My research investigated the economic experiences of women as informal traders which aligns with UN Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5 and 8. Throughout the data collection phase, I took note of women's role as informal traders and the structural challenges they faced while working in economic uncertain times. The experiences and lessons shared by the women to enhance developmental social welfare practice formed the basis of my partnership with these two target communities. Both these communities were characterised by chronic poverty and dire levels of unemployment, which require a careful analysis of the ways in which livelihoods are shaped and mediated by women in the broader political and social contexts. The dominant language spoken by residents in rural Mpumalanga is SiSwati. The dominant languages spoken by residents of Ekurhuleni Municipality in Gauteng are Xhosa, Sepedi, and isiZulu.

Population and sampling

To recruit participants, the author posted adverts in community centres in the respective areas and sent WhatsApp messages to women's groups to explain the purpose of the study. The criteria for selection included women who were working as informal traders for a minimum of two years, they were residents in Elukwatini, Mpumalanga or Ekurhuleni, Gauteng. Women who were single and heads of their households and they were available and willing to participate in a face-to-face interview.

For this study, purposive, convenient sampling was adopted, and 8 female informal traders resided in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng province, and 10 resided in Eluwatini in Mpumalanga province of South Africa (n=18). Terre Blanche et al. (2006) state that purposive convenient sampling entails selecting participants “because they have particular features or characteristics which enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions which the researcher wishes to study.” A total of 18 single mothers participated in this study.

Data collection tool

To gain an understanding of the outcomes and impact of informal trading on women in South Africa, the author conducted one semi-structured interview with 18 informal traders. Greeff (2011, p. 43) argues that semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with “the opportunity to explore the participants' opinions, approaches, and ideas about definite phenomena”. The single mothers were asked open-ended questions about the benefits and challenges of informal trading. The author aligned the narratives with literature on social development, globalisation from below and solidarity economy. The face-to-face interviews provided a safe and private platform for the women to share their experiences as informal traders. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted about 60 minutes. The purpose of recording the interviews was to gain a permanent record of the participants' stories and field notes supplemented this data and ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Marlow et al., 2017).

To make sense of the raw data, thematic content analysis was applied, which involved active listening to audio recordings of the interviews several times and compared this with field notes and transcripts to identify common themes. According to Gibbs (2007), thematic content analysis involves identifying and grouping text that is connected through a theme. From the transcripts, the author was able to divide the text into different “meaning units” (Elingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017, p. 97).

Ethical considerations

Prior to collecting the data, ethical approval was obtained from a higher education institution in South Africa and the Research Ethics Committee granted permission in December 2021 (REC-01-207-2021). Furthermore, each participant provided verbal and written consent forms to confirm their participation in the study without any form of coercion. The principle of confidentiality, anonymity and respect for privacy was adhered to by the author and written informed consent letters were signed by all the women. Kruger et al (2014) aptly states that it is always important for researchers to take note of their ethical conduct in research as protecting the physical and emotional well-being of participants is paramount.

Findings

The discussion of the findings is presented in two sections:

- A biographical profile of the participants
- A discussion of three themes, namely active participation in meeting economic needs, nurturing social development partnerships and building social networks.

Table 1: Biographical Profile of the Research Participants

Participant number	Age	Number of years working as an informal trader	Province of residence	Number of people in a household	Level of education
1	34	5	Elukwatini	4	Matric
2	35	7	Elukwatini	3	Grade 11
3	28	5	Elukwatini	6	Grade 11
4	32	5	Elukwatini	4	Grade 8
5	27	4	Elukwatini	5	Grade 11
6	35	5	Elukwatini	7	Grade 7
7	32	12	Elukwatini	6	Grade 11
8	35	6	Elukwatini	5	Grade 10
9	25	4	Elukwatini	8	Matric
10	35	10	Elukwatini	6	Grade 10
11	60	15	Ekurhuleni	2	Matric
12	44	10	Ekurhuleni	2	Matric
13	40	8	Ekurhuleni	1	Degree
14	32	8	Ekurhuleni	1	Degree
15	38	9	Ekurhuleni	2	Diploma
16	30	6	Ekurhuleni	2	Matric
17	35	5	Ekurhuleni	1	Diploma
18	52	17	Ekurhuleni	2	Matric

Table 1 shows the biographical profile of the 18 participants. All the participants were single mothers and worked as informal traders for an average of eight years. Table 1 reveals that Participant 5 had worked a minimum of four years. All the participants were Black South African residents. The age distribution shows that Participant 9 was the youngest, 25 years, and Participant 11 was the oldest at 60 years. With the mean age of participants being 36, it underscores the increasing involvement of women in

informal work during this age group, which is a growing trend highlighted by the ILO (2018). Specifically, the data indicates that all participants were single mothers working as informal traders for an average of eight years which corroborates the ILO's (2018) observation that informal employment among women in their mid-30s is on the rise globally. Furthermore, Bonnet et al. (2019) emphasizes that the informal economy serves as a vital livelihood platform for women such as single mothers, providing opportunities to generate income and establish small businesses to secure financial stability. The participants' long-term engagement in informal trading demonstrates how the informal economy functions as a crucial avenue for survival and economic empowerment for women facing unemployment and other economic challenges. Together, these references substantiate the study's findings that informal work remains a key livelihood option for women in their mid-30s, especially for single mothers seeking financial security.

All the women in this study were heads of households and were caring for an average of four people in their respective households. In the 10 households from rural Elukwatini forty-seven children were beneficiaries of the state child support grant (28 USD per child at the time of data collection in 2022), four children received the foster care grant (56 USD per child in 2022) and three dependents were older than eighteen (Social Assistance Act, 2008). In the Ekurhuleni urban Gauteng province, the eight households had a total of 13 children. Ten of the children attended primary school (Grade 1-7), and three were adolescents attending secondary school (Grade 8-12). All the children were in receipt of the child support grant. In South Africa the total number of children who benefit from the child support grant is 2 873 197 (SASSA, 2024). At the provincial level, the highest number of beneficiaries comes from KwaZulu Natal with 590,959 (24%), followed by Eastern Cape with 509 612 (18%), and the lowest number of beneficiaries comes from the Northern Cape with 74,919 (3%), followed by Free State with 17,2103 (5%) (SASSA, 2024b). The implications of the above information are multifaceted and significant for understanding the socio-economic context of the study population. The reliance on state grants (child support and foster care grants)

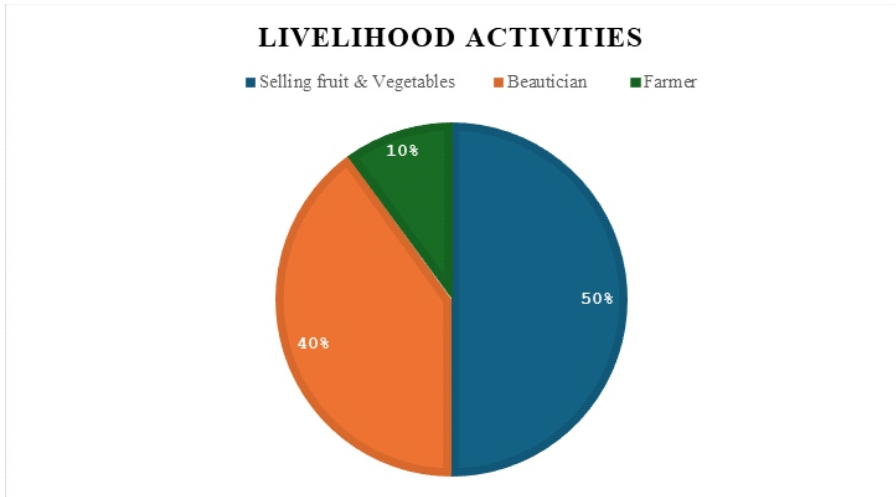
highlights the economic vulnerability of the households. It indicates that many households may have limited income sources, which can influence household wellbeing, access to services, and overall quality of life. The fact that all children in the households receive the child support grant or foster care grant suggests that social protection mechanisms are actively reaching vulnerable children (Social Assistance Act, 2008). The data on school attendance underscores the role of these grants in supporting education, which is critical for child development and long-term socio-economic mobility. The distribution of beneficiaries across provinces indicates regional disparities in social grant coverage, which can influence local community development, resource allocation, and policy implementation strategies. Ultimately, the information provides essential context for interpreting findings related to household wellbeing, child development, social protection effectiveness, and gender dynamics. It helps to understand the baseline socio-economic conditions, which are crucial for assessing the impact of social grants, identifying gaps in social protection, and formulating policy recommendations aimed at reducing poverty and improving child outcomes in different regions

All the women were sole income earners in their households, and with the rising costs of living, all the women shared that they struggled to put food on the table for their children due to insufficient income. Participant 4 expressed that children's needs are increasing as they grow older, while the grant money is not increasing. Participant 2 stated: *“I am a mother and a father at the same time to my children, and I am the one putting food on the table for my family to survive”*.

Participant 6 commented: *“Things did not go well and my children lifestyle changed and their eating routine changed due to lack of money to buy enough food and they did not dress like they used to dress before COVID-19 everything was limited. I even began to have stress because my business was not functioning”*.

Table 1 illustrates the varying levels of education, including tertiary and postgraduate qualifications of the participants, which have a close correlation to financial stability and asset accumulation in households. Eight (44%) of the participants did not complete school and had low literacy levels. Five (28%) participants completed school with a matric pass. Considering that more than 70% of the participants had low literacy levels and no other adult income support, it corroborates empirical evidence that women's caregiving responsibilities resulted in lost opportunities for education and jobs in the formal work sector (Raniga & Motloun, 2013). Rasool (2022) views such gendered identity as a central feature of internalised oppression and relates this to the difficulties associated with changing norms around the responsibilities of single-mother family caregiving.

Table 1 also reveals that four (22%) women had completed a post-graduate qualification. Participants 15 and 17 had completed a diploma level, and Participants 13 and 14 had completed a bachelor's degree, which gave them the confidence and finance skills to start their businesses. It is important to take note that these four women were from Gauteng province where access to education and business networks are prominent (Raniga, 2019). Raniga and Ringson, (2021) argue that many unemployed women in South Africa are forced to engage in informal trading due to the lack of gainful employment in the formal work sector in the country. This indicates that the study considers participants across various levels of higher education, including tertiary and postgraduate levels. The study notes that women with tertiary education had the confidence and financial capability and skills to start their businesses, implying a positive influence of education on their entrepreneurial capacity. It infers a difference in opportunities and possibly outcomes based on education level.

Figure 1: Livelihood activities

The information presented in the figure aligns closely with the perspectives of the scholars cited, reinforcing their observations about livelihood strategies in similar contexts. Borzarga et al. (2019) emphasize that employment within the agriculture sector, including activities such as street vending and community gardening, constitutes a significant portion of livelihood activities this is reflected in the data where 60% of participants are engaged in these forms of agricultural trading. Their assertion that such jobs require farming skills is corroborated by the involvement of women in community gardens and selling produce, which necessitates agricultural knowledge and skills.

Similarly, Michael and Skinner (2020) highlight that selling fruit and vegetables on the streets is a common survival strategy for single mothers in South Africa, aimed at improving food security and alleviating household poverty. The data revealed that 50% of women are street vendors selling fruit, vegetables, and foods like pap and amagwinya supports this claim, illustrating that such activities are vital for household sustenance. Overall, the livelihood activities depicted in Figure 1 resonate with these scholarly insights, underscoring the importance of informal trading as a means of economic survival and food security for women in rural and urban settings.

It was interesting to note that 50% of the participants' trading activities extended to not just selling fruit and vegetables but also selling clothes, electrical goods, and food such as chicken, chips and bread. As indicated in Table 1, most of the participants were single mothers who were sole income earners in their households, which infers that they were dependent on the state social grant as the main monthly source of income and their trading activity supplemented income in the household. The distribution of the women-led trading projects shows that the women are also engaged in selling beauty products and/or offering services as beauticians, mainly in Gauteng, South Africa. The types of trading projects in the agriculture sector were predominantly found in Elukwatini, as Mpumalanga is a rural province where community gardens are prominent compared to the beauty industry, which was dominant in urban Ekurhuleni, Gauteng.

The distribution of the trading activities, as depicted in Figure 1 does not infer any dominance in profitability in the agriculture, food and beauty sectors but affirms the active participation of the women in meeting their economic needs and to break the cycle of poverty. In their endeavour to maximize the policy directives of the UN SDGs and the South African National Development Plan Vision 2030, it is commendable to note that the women were contributing to alleviating poverty, creating access to decent work and gender economic justice in South Africa. While participants may not explicitly cite SDGs or policies, their participation contributes to the overarching goals of poverty reduction and gender equality. The connection is often strategic and survival rather than explicitly policy-driven at the individual level. The alignment between trading activities and social protection systems have been instrumental in many Global South countries, in respect of the expansion of social development policy objectives indicating a systemic relationship with solidarity economy (Borzaga et al, 2019).

Whilst profitability cannot be ignored from the stories of these women's trading activities, the trading activities also contributed to building a strong social business network amongst women in their communities. In the context of emerging social and economic needs, the key issues concern the relationship between the formal work sector and the informal economy. The women shared that they provided an important source of food, goods, and beauty products for workers in the formal work sector, who were their regular customers. The capacity to perceive the informal and formal economy as complementary and the polarization between low-wage and high-wage workers has characterized the evolving economic space in recent times (Borzaga et al., 2019). Given this context, women informal traders are explicitly devoted to economic productivity, responding to social needs and work integration in both the formal and informal economy.

Despite their diversity and heterogeneity, the trading activities of these sectors women participants will be explained further in the following discussion of the themes, namely active participation in meeting economic needs, nurturing social development partnerships and building social networks. I argue that these macro-level intervention pillars of developmental social welfare services are central to bottom-up livelihood strategies that emerge within local communities as a response to shared psychosocial and economic needs among women (Raniga, 2022). As aligned to the solidarity economy the governance structure of these informal trading activities are inclusive and democratic, while alleviating poverty, enhancing gender justice and access to decent work, which are linked to the implementation of UN SDG goals 1, 5 and 8.

Active Participation in meeting Economic needs

A large part of the trading activities, as illustrated in Figure 1, is predominantly focused on farming and garden projects which has a synergy with the selling of food and catering business sector. Women's involvement in community gardens and farming projects enhances local food production, contributing to

food security and improved nutrition for households (Raniga, 2014). Recognizing women's roles in agriculture and community gardening in mainly rural Mpumalanga tends to be more attentive to the creation and preservation of indigenous practices and are empowering ways of working in the solidarity economy as women traders own and manage their own social enterprises (Mugumbate, 2020). The economic activities derived from community gardens, such as selling food and catering, provided the women with income-generating opportunities, helping to alleviate poverty. Community gardens foster social cohesion, resource redistribution and a spirit of ubuntu within urban and rural settings, contributing to an alternate economic model that enhances collective ownership and sharing of resources. The synergy between women's activities in community gardens and UN SDGs underscores the importance of supporting indigenous, grassroots and community-led efforts to realize sustainable development objectives. Historically in Africa, women's role in the agriculture sector, has been acknowledged by government, faith-based organisations and cooperatives as a means for self-employment while increasing their economic and market power. In the post-apartheid era, the South African National Department of Education encourages food gardens to be established in schools to offer nutrition to primary school learners (Patel et al, 2020). Patel (2015) and Raniga (2014) argue that community gardens have not only ensured food security in urban and rural households but have been characterized by redistribution of resources through social investments by the state and made a significant contribution to economic growth in South Africa (Aliber and Cousins 2013).

It is important to note that after three decades of democratic rule in the country, the agricultural sector remains unchanged as it consists of two distinct sectors: large-scale commercial White farmers and emerging Black farmers. This dual agrarian economy consists of predominantly male emerging farmers who are typified by inadequate access to land, inefficient on-farm infrastructure, and uncoordinated production (Aliber and Cousins 2013). These systemic race, class and discriminatory gender inequalities

occur against the context of South Africa's historical land disparities and remain evident in contemporary times (Sihlobo and Kirsten, 2021). Such structural inequalities permeate the daily lives of African women and require the attention of developmental social workers to facilitate local economic development interventions to mitigate poverty, foster solidarity, mutual trust and sharing of resources in communities.

The empirical evidence reveals that there were some women who worked as emerging farmers in Eluwatini and who had combined their social grant income to enable livelihood resources, which helped with cost-cutting and financial stability. The women spoke about forming strategic agricultural partnerships with public buyers and private consumers as a strategy to mitigate risks of limited profitability. Utting (2015) states such collective management and ownership serves as a means for redistributing surplus food and goods to the wider community.

When compared to the beauty industry or other service sectors, the women shared that they are paid less and more prone to role conflicts and exploitative labour. The study compares women in agriculture, food, and beauty sectors, emphasizing that women in these sectors face greater disadvantages such as lower wages and more exploitation due to weaker organizational structures and limited protections. There is less organisational structure in the agricultural, food and beauty sectors as traders have minimal labour protection and government funding support in times of economic uncertainty. Consequently, the risks of poor coordination and fragmentation of services are a concern for women traders in these two target provinces. Midgley (2014), Patel (2015), and Sherraden et al. (2015) advance the integration of economic and social development policies through statist and organizational arrangements. Social workers need to combine economic and psychosocial interventions, build financial capabilities and implement entrepreneurial skills to promote economic participation of women in the economy (Patel, 2015). Bozarga (2019) provides empirical evidence from Italy during the

economic crisis of 2008-2013, where solidarity economy organisations, such as development cooperatives, mutual savings clubs and social enterprises became a prevalent solution for the provision of decent work in Europe. This theme is explored further in the connected theme on nurturing social development partnerships.

Nurturing Social Development Partnerships

The findings regarding partnerships among emerging farmers, private businesses, and the Ministry of Agriculture in Elukwatini, Mpumalanga, align with the insights of Samoggia et al. (2019), who highlight the significance of community-supported agricultural initiatives. Their study emphasizes how such collaborations particularly between small-scale farmers and vendors serve to share risks and responsibilities, leading to socially, economically, environmentally, and nutritionally sustainable food systems.

In the context of Elukwatini, the partnership involving the eleven women street vendors exemplifies this model. As Participant 10 noted, the vendors source their produce from local farmers, demonstrating a collaborative relationship that benefits all parties involved. This aligns with Samoggia et al.'s (2019) assertion that such partnerships facilitate sustainable farming practices and income generation, ultimately improving livelihoods. Therefore, your findings reinforce the importance of multi-stakeholder collaborations in fostering sustainable agricultural development and supporting vulnerable groups within local communities. Participant 10 stated that *“the fruit and vegetables we sell in the market are grown by local farmers, and this partnership works well for us, and it involves all members in the business process”*. This form of mutually beneficial partnerships ensured that quality food was produced using sustainable farming practices while boosting income through trading activities and improving livelihoods for the women. Bozarga et al. (2019) stated that building partnerships are a key principle of solidarity economy and pillar of developmental social welfare practice. Such partnerships facilitate participatory governance relations and enhance

women's participation in decision-making processes related to their businesses.

Reflecting on the interviews with women working in the beauty service sector, it was evident that the rising demand for personal-care services driven by media trends and advertising was a significant issue highlighted by the participants. This increased demand had two major implications: it influenced their professional growth and underscored the importance of industry partnerships. Participants 13, 14, 15, and 17, all of whom held tertiary qualifications, expressed confidence in their skills and knowledge gained through their education and training. Notably, all four participants had established contracts with salon owners in Gauteng, which enabled them to integrate effectively into the industry and build strong, collaborative partnerships. Their ability to form these relationships contributed to their professional success and demonstrated the value of industry networks in fostering growth and stability within the beauty sector.

Evidently, the solidarity economy could play a vital role in alleviating wage polarization for women traders, creating new jobs and sharing a complimentary relationship with formal sector workers who serve as their regular consumers. Hence, social workers, as core service professionals in the social development sector, could intervene to address poverty amongst unemployed women by implementing income generating projects in communities. Bozarga et al. (2019) argues that the solidarity economy could provide more 'future-proof' jobs that contribute to wealth redistribution between the formal and informal work sectors and curtail job insecurity for single mothers who work as informal traders.

In South Africa, social development and economic growth are essential and can assist in bringing about the reduction of UN SDGs 1, 5, and 8, namely, no poverty, access to decent work, and gender equality. Holden *et al.* (2017) suggests that the developmental social welfare model is grounded on three imperatives: meeting basic human needs, enhancing economic justice, and

paying attention to gender discrimination implications for women's economic empowerment. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2020-2030) put forth a balance in economic, social, and environmental targets.

However, numerous aspects play a significant role in public policy and meeting developmental imperatives. Upright governance is regarded as the imperative value for achieving sustainable development, and it is viewed as a critical component to being involved in development policies. According to Kardos (2012: 1166), “upright governance promotes accountability, transparency, efficiency, and the rule of law at all levels and allows efficient management of human, natural, economic and financial resources for equitable and sustainable development, guaranteeing informal traders' participation in decision-making processes.” Kardos (2012) states that upright governance and sustainable development are often matched together; although upright governance does not ensure sustainable development, the absence of good governance can limit sustainable development and hinder it. In addition, social development interventions and policies that respond to the social, economic and educational upliftment of women through capacity building, business skills and leadership opportunities, building social networks and active engagement in government and civil society organisations is a key theme that forms the basis of the discussion below.

Building social networks

Social capital is an outcome of building social networks and resonates the African philosophy of ubuntu and is a key pillar of developmental social welfare services. Ubuntu is based on the relationships people have with each other and the desire that they must do things for and with others within their social networks (Mazama, 2003). The women in this study shared sentiments of forming support systems with private businesses and government as well as with other traders, which facilitated growth and productivity in their own businesses. Participant 4, who worked as a street vendor selling fruit and vegetables in Elukwatini commented: *'I would not be able to make money and*

could not do this on my own. My friends who are commercial farmers supply me with the goods to sell in the market weekly'. Raniga and Ringson (2021) provide evidence from a qualitative study in Gauteng that the relationships nurtured during trading build the business with residents and other traders in their community.

The 18 women in both provinces reported that private businesspersons and members who work in the formal labour market are the customers who are an integral part of their social support. Participant 8 stated: *"My friends who are my customers are the ones who spread the word to people they know and refer them to my fruit and vegetable stall"*. Participant 10 from Gauteng shared, *"Anyone who needs vegetables is directed to me"*.

The participants reported that establishing mutual trust with their customers was fundamental for informal traders. Participant 9 reported that *"when informal traders do their work honestly without any scams, then customers will also be reliable and will refer other people to their business"*. They believed strongly that a business venture is not an entity without supporters, so providing help to the community is another way of sustaining existing social networks. Participant 3 in Elukwatini emphasized that: *"the closer I am to the members of the community, the more reliable my customers buy from me weekly."*

The social benefit is that the traders can connect and network with suppliers in the value chain and meet the needs of their customers (Raniga, 2024). As one beautician informal trader asserts:

I have built a relationship with my customers, who come to me monthly for their personal care and products. I have built relationships through advertising my business on Facebook because I also get customers on that page who need me to deliver beauty products to their homes.

Clearly, the sentiments shared by the women in all three trading sectors, agriculture, food and beauty, provide evidence that social networks help with

the sustainability of the business because the informal trader has a strong relationship with her customers. In addition, the women felt that through networking with different formal business owners for the supply of goods and services, they were able to negotiate prices that were reasonable and assisted with curbing expenses to sustain their businesses. Participant 11, who operated a food stall, remarked:

I made friends with some drivers who owned motorbikes to deliver my food to my customers who were ordering my food through WhatsApp and phone calls.

This approach aims to democratize economic opportunities by curbing the dominance of big businesses, thereby fostering a more equitable distribution of resources and economic participation. Such initiatives can serve as mechanisms for social inclusion, empowerment, and the reduction of economic disparities, aligning closely with principles of social justice. Implications for social development and developmental social work include but not limited to supporting marginalized groups through local markets enhances their economic independence and social inclusion, contributing to overall community development. Local markets rooted in social justice can strengthen community bonds and resilience, especially when they are supported through partnerships and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, the findings also reveal that the use of digital platforms and technologies is reshaping the nature of trading in the informal economy. All the women shared in the interviews that the use of social media and digital technology through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter had helped them communicate regularly with their customers. Frey and Osborne (2013) analysed the effects of digital devices on the future of employment, pointing out that digital computerization and flexible working from home would affect all jobs in both the formal and informal economy. This also helped the women as informal traders to secure more customers and enable solidarity because they realized “Ubuntu” was a reality in their work experiences, and they valued people in their community. The empirical evidence from this study corroborates Sherraden et al. 's (2022) conclusion that it is the task of social

workers to build financial capability and assets for all to reduce poverty, inequality, and access to decent work. The women in this study built partnerships and had positive social networks, which connected them to many influential people within the sector in which they operated their trading activities. Such support networks created more opportunities for advancement and development. As participant 2 commented: *“When you build relationships, it helps grow the business than one whose social circle is small.”* All the informal traders were able to network with employees in the formal work sector and other traders to share their business resources and ideas and tap into their skills to sustain their businesses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The empirical evidence in this study has analysed how developmental social welfare strategies can enhance gender equality, economic inclusion, and poverty alleviation as aligned to UN SDGs 1, 5 and 8. The voices of 18 women traders from urban Gauteng and rural Mpumalanga provinces, as informal traders has affirmed that active participation in meeting mutual social and economic needs, building partnerships and support networks brings an empowering approach to reshaping the economy. Such initiatives attract the attention of social workers, policymakers and academics across both Global North and South countries.

Clearly, if developmental social welfare strategies are to be effective in addressing the feminization of poverty, they must embrace the complex socio-economic needs and historical realities of women's struggles to survive in the economy. More specifically the findings recognise communitarian, democratic principles as aligned to the solidarity economy, raising consciousness among women to build partnerships and networks for income security. In addition, fostering stakeholders' cooperation and collaboration is key to women economic empowerment thereby contributing to SDGs 1, 5 and 8.

Based on the discussion above, an urgent call is made to the South African Ministry of Social Development to employ social workers to implement macro interventions to enhance local economic development projects in communities. Additionally, social workers need to advocate for changes in labour relations and organisational structures to facilitate social and economic justice for women and much-needed access to government funding to sustain women's businesses. Hence, it is imperative for social workers to devote attention to lobbying for funding from the private sector and government for women entrepreneurs, given their high risk and vulnerability to income insecurity in precarious political and economic climate. The focus on social and economic empowerment goals, building partnerships with stakeholders and lobbying for legislative policies for traders in the informal economy are necessary.

Social workers and policymakers do need to acknowledge that developmental social welfare interventions could benefit poor households disproportionately. Hence, further action research is needed to draw attention to the plight of unemployed and vulnerable populations across countries in Africa. Further scholarly investigation using mixed-methods could be conducted across SADC countries to assess the sustainability of women's livelihood activities, beyond the food-agriculture and beauty sectors. I am convinced that further reflection on the pillars of developmental social welfare practices linking solidary economy will be fruitful. The future for evidence-based research into exploring these two alternate socio-economic approaches is bright, although not yet coordinated. The future for evidence-based research with multiple-stakeholders such as social workers in government, non-profit organisations, and private sector companies is needed as there are many social development solutions and experiences emerging, involving alternative social investment and community-based economic projects committed to the implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals of no poverty, access to decent work and gender equality.

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