

Twenty-five years of social work research in Rwanda: The need for a review

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Abstract

Over the past 25 years, social work research in Rwanda has steadily increased, predicting significant contributions to the socioeconomic well-being of the population. It is now worth assessing the scope of what has been done and what else could be further undertaken. This scoping review aims to analyse and evaluate the articles and research outputs produced by social work scholars in Rwanda from 1999 to 2024 to identify areas requiring further exploration. A comprehensive search strategy is developed to identify relevant research articles published by social work scholars in Rwanda. Peer-reviewed literature will be searched. Original articles published in English, French, and Kinyarwanda will be included. Additionally, a manual search of reference lists will be conducted. The screening process will consist of two stages: title and abstract screening, followed by thoroughly scrutinising the included full-text papers. Relevant information will be extracted, such as areas of focus, target populations, research methods, and study limitations, followed by thematic analysis and discussion of key findings. This review will synthesise research across multiple themes to better inform educators, policymakers, and practitioners in Rwanda and the wider region of East Africa on where the field stands and where it needs to go.

Keywords: Scoping review, social work, practice, research, Rwanda.

Introduction

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) introduced a new global definition of social work, which reads:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being (IFSW, 2014).

This definition highlights the importance of academic and scientific foundations for the profession, the need for collaborative approaches to solving social issues, and the recognition of macro and structural factors that impact how society functions (Ornellas et al., 2018). The definition also elicits a strong link between social work practice, education, and research. Quality social work research is one of the most reliable strategies to advance social work education and practice across settings (Engel & Schutt, 2017; Hodge & Kibirige, 2022). Social work research can be described as the process aimed at investigating the theory and practice of social work to empower professionals to find the best evidence to support social service delivery and optimise desired outcomes for the population (Strydom, 2008). In the context of this knowledge synthesis, we define social work research as the use of qualitative and/or quantitative research methods to address the challenges and experiences of social workers in Rwanda, Africa, and beyond. We focus on social work research publications authored by social workers or scholars affiliated with social work agencies, specifically those that present original research concerning Rwandan populations in social sciences journals.

Kreisberg and Marsh (2016) categorise social work research into seven types. These types pertain to research, information, or evidence about the following: (1) social problems or clinical diagnoses, (2) social work practice, (3) population groups, (4) social work ethics, (5) the social work profession, (6) theoretical perspectives, and (7) research methodology. Engel and Schutt (2017) also outline four categories of research used in social work: (1) Descriptive research, which involves defining and describing social phenomena; (2) Exploratory research, which aims to understand how people interact in a particular setting, the significance they attach to their actions, and the issues that are of concern to them; (3) Explanatory research that, on the other hand, seeks to determine the causes and effects of social phenomena. This type

of research helps to eliminate other explanations for the findings and demonstrate how two events are connected. Finally, (4) Evaluation research is used to identify and describe the impact of social programmes and policies.

The aforementioned categories represent a noteworthy progression in social work research across various countries in the global north and some parts of the global south (Roche & Flynn, 2020). Nevertheless, it is still in its emerging stages in Rwanda and East Africa, where it is slowly becoming a type of social work method used in practice (Twikirize et al., 2014). The field of social work in Rwanda became an academic discipline following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi (Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014), making social work research relatively young in the country. Hence, despite the development of social work research in Rwanda over the past 25 years, there has been limited synthesis of this research to inform practice and policy. A scoping review offers a valuable opportunity to identify trends, gaps, and areas that require further exploration, ensuring that social work education and interventions remain contextually relevant and evidence-based.

Rwanda is a relatively small, low-income East African country covering an area of 26,338 square kilometres with an estimated population of over 13 million (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2023). Social work education in Rwanda began during the colonial era, with high school training for female social worker assistants, or social assistants, specifically intended to work in the then-social centres established by the colonial system. The first assistant social workers school started in 1956 at “Ecole Sociale de Karubanda” and remained the only social work assistants’ secondary school throughout the 1960s (Buscaglia & Randell, 2012; Kalinganire, 2002).

During the 1970s and 1980s, early social work practice expanded its focus from just women to include the rural population as a whole. As a result, new social schools were established not only for females (such as Byumba in 1979, Rambura, and Rulindo in 1981) but also for boys in Kansi during the 1970s (Buscaglia & Randell, 2012). From that time until the Genocide Against the Tutsi in 1994, there were no tertiary social work education programmes (Kalinganire et al., 2017; Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014); hence, academic social work research was not available.

The Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 claimed the lives of more than 1 million people, substantially affected the social fabric, and further diminished scarce human resources (Pulla & Kalinganire, 2021). After the Genocide, Rwanda made remarkable progress in restoring social services and systems, including elevating the social work profession to a higher level and raising the number of more qualified social workers. Social work tertiary education started 25 years ago, in late 1999 (Kalinganire et al., 2017; Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014) at

the National University of Rwanda, now part of the University of Rwanda, with the main purpose of promoting the psychosocial well-being of children who had been traumatised. A few years later, in 2006, it was also introduced at the University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB), and in 2010, the Catholic University of Rwanda started offering social work programmes as well (Kalinganire et al., 2017; Spitzer, 2019). Over time, these academic programmes have advanced, and now students can pursue bachelor's, master's degrees, and PhDs and produce valuable social work research to advance the field. These educational and research improvements were made possible through a collaboration of local and international social work partnerships (Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014).

So far, social work practices and interventions have contributed significantly to reducing mental health problems, promoting unity and reconciliation efforts after the Genocide against the Tutsi, reducing poverty, strengthening families and domestic harmony, reintegrating children who were in institutional care or living on the streets, and responding to the issues of drug misuse and teen motherhood. (Fisher et al., 2021; King et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2018; Webb, 2019; Bimenyimana et al., 2023; Bimenyimana & Jeong, 2020).

The need for a scoping review stems from this rapidly evolving field of social work in Rwanda over the past 25 years. As mentioned, Rwanda has seen significant changes in its social policies, the socio-economic challenges of its population, and its approach to mental health, youth empowerment, and gender issues since the introduction of formal social work education in 1999. However, despite these advances, the body of research documenting these changes and guiding future practice remains scattered and under-explored. This review will synthesise research across multiple themes to better inform educators, policymakers, and practitioners on where the field stands and where it needs to go.

Literature supports this rationale for our scoping review by showing that social work research in Rwanda has not been well-documented or synthesised to inform practitioners of the available evidence base rooted in the local context (Uwihangana et al., 2020). According to a recent review of articles authored in the global South and published in the ten most prominent social work journals, East Africa, where Rwanda is located, had the lowest number of social work publications (10%) after West Africa (9%). The majority of publications (81%) came from Southern Africa (Roche & Flynn, 2020).

An analysis of author locations revealed that social work scholarship in the global South was geographically spread across 32 countries, with 132 articles identified. Among the 190 authors from the global South, there were 8 Sub-Saharan African countries represented, with South Africa having the highest

number of authors (39), followed by Kenya and Nigeria with five authors each, Botswana with four authors, Lesotho with two authors, and Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia each with one author (Roche & Flynn, 2020; Hodge & Kibirige, 2022). Notably, there were no authors affiliated with Rwanda. There is a critical need to appraise available research in Rwanda for future scientific improvement and findings that will inform social work practices in the country, East Africa, the continent at large, and globally.

This scoping review aims to analyse and evaluate the articles and research outputs produced by social work scholars in Rwanda from 1999, the year social work education started formally at a tertiary level (Nilsen et al., 2023), up to 2024, to (1) illuminate the evolution of social work research in Rwanda over the past 25 years, (2) elicit challenges and barriers faced by social work researchers in conducting and sharing their research findings and, (3) identify areas requiring further explorations.

We strongly believe that this scoping review will benefit the growth of social work in Rwanda and across Africa by providing a comprehensive overview of research trends and challenges. It will serve as a resource for researchers, educators, and policymakers to prioritise future research areas, enhance training curricula, and strengthen social work interventions in line with local needs. Similar reviews in other countries, such as those in South Africa and Kenya, have led to a more focused research agenda and greater collaboration between academia and practice (Roche & Flynn, 2020; Hodge & Kibirige, 2022).

Methods

Design

We chose the scoping review methodology because it allows for a comprehensive mapping of the literature on social work research in Rwanda over the past 25 years. This approach is appropriate for identifying gaps, trends, and research areas requiring further investigation. Other methodologies, such as systematic reviews, focus more on specific questions or interventions and may not capture the broad scope of research trends needed for this synthesis (Smith & Duncan, 2022; Munn et al., 2018). We hope that our methodological choice can inspire social work scholars in Rwanda and other African countries interested in creating similar knowledge syntheses to map the landscape of the scholarly work conducted in their regions and contexts.

This scoping review will be conducted using a six-step design initially described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and further expanded by Levac et al. (2010). The steps include: (1) identifying the research questions, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting the studies, (4) organising the data, (5) summarising and reporting results, and (6) consulting with stakeholders (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The reason for choosing a scoping review is that it

aims to systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, often irrespective of source within or across particular contexts (Munn et al., 2022). Thus, the scoping review will allow us to achieve the aim of this study.

Step One: Identifying the Research Questions

The research question is a critical component of undertaking a scoping review, providing direction and focus for the entire process. It determines the scope and direction of the review, ensuring that each step aligns with the overall research inquiry (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Research questions are typically broad to ensure a holistic coverage of the topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). As a research team, we met several times to decide on the research questions for this scoping review. During these discussions, we noted that it has been twenty-five years since social work was introduced at the university level in Rwanda, and it is now time to examine what has been accomplished so far and draw lessons for the future. As a result, we decided to conduct a scoping review to extensively scrutinise the literature and illuminate the evolution of social work research in Rwanda. We generated the following overlapping questions to guide this scoping review process:

1. What areas of focus have social workers been researching, and what themes have emerged from social work research conducted in Rwanda in the past 25 years?
2. What are the prevailing research approaches and methods used by social work researchers in Rwanda, and who are the primary target populations or demographic groups studied?
3. What are social work researchers' challenges and barriers in conducting and sharing their research findings?
4. What areas require further exploration by social work researchers?

Step Two: Identifying Relevant Studies

This step has a key focus on identifying relevant studies through a well-defined search strategy. It involves selecting appropriate search terms, specifying databases to be accessed, setting a specific time frame, and taking into account language and other inclusion criteria (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010).

The Search Strategy

To ensure that our review covers the past 25 years since the introduction of the social work bachelor's degree in Rwanda, we will search for articles published between January 1999 and January 2024. We will focus on peer-reviewed academic databases and include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. To bring about all relevant social work research papers, we used general search terms and combined them using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine search results (Table 1). We also used truncation (*) to capture variations of

search terms (e.g., "social work*" will capture "social worker" and "social workers"). To keep the review locally relevant, we applied language filters to include articles published in the country's official languages of English, French, and Kinyarwanda.

To identify additional publications, a list of names of potential researchers will be compiled by researchers and will be used to search in Google and Google Scholar. The same list will also be used to send emails to potential researchers with a Google form attachment requesting them to list their publications. The network sampling method will also be used, where known researchers will be asked to identify other researchers' publications. Finally, the references of eligible articles will be reviewed to retrieve any other relevant articles. It is worth noting that our research team consulted with a librarian and shared the search strategy for review. The following search words and combinations will be used alternatively:

Table 1: List of Search Keywords

("Social Work*" OR "Social Services") AND ("Rwanda") AND ("Research" OR "Study" OR "Dissertation" OR "Thesis" OR "Paper" OR "Publication" OR "Article" OR "Chapter" OR "Report") AND ("Qualitative" OR "Quantitative" OR "Mixed Methods")

Search Databases and Resources

The search will be conducted using peer-reviewed academic databases. Several academic databases will be searched, including MEDLINE (Ovid), PsycINFO, EMBASE, PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, AJOL, and others. Table 2 provides a list of academic databases that will be used in the search. Any additional eligible articles that were not found during the initial database search will be sought in the reference lists of all included articles.

Table 2: Search Databases and Resources

Peer-Reviewed Literature
African Indexing Platform: AJOL
CINAHL Plus with Full Text (Ebsco), Family and Society Studies Worldwide (Ebsco), Family Studies Abstracts (Ebsco), ERIC (Ebsco), Education Reference Complete (Ebsco), Social Work Abstracts (Ebsco), SocIndex with Full Text (Ebsco)
MEDLINE (OVID), APA PsycINFO (OVID), Embase (OVID)
Scopus (Elsevier)
Sociological Abstracts (Proquest)

Step Three: Studies Selection

The research questions determined the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 3) for finding relevant articles.

Table 3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	
1.	Articles must be original empirical research papers
2.	Published in peer-reviewed journals
3.	Articles must focus on social work research conducted in Rwanda by a Rwandan or foreign scholar/entity or published in a social sciences journal.
4.	Among the authors, there has to be a social worker or someone affiliated with a social work faculty or institution
5.	Studies can be qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods.
6.	Papers can be written on other countries but include Rwandan populations on the Rwandan territory.
7.	Articles must have been published between January 1999 and January 2024.
8.	Articles can be in English, Kinyarwanda or French.
Exclusion	
1.	Not original studies (e.g., knowledge synthesis or literature reviews such as systematic, scoping, or integrative reviews; editorials, commentaries, conference proceedings, book reviews, and book chapters that are not reporting on original empirical studies)

Papers Screening

All the articles identified in our comprehensive search will be imported into Covidence, a tool for conducting systematic reviews, to manage and consolidate them while removing duplicates. Once duplicate articles (as shown in Figure 1) were removed, the remaining articles were screened for relevance and eligibility in two steps: (i) title and abstract screening and (ii) full-text screening as shown in Figure 1 (Page et al., 2021). Two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts to determine whether an article should be included or excluded.

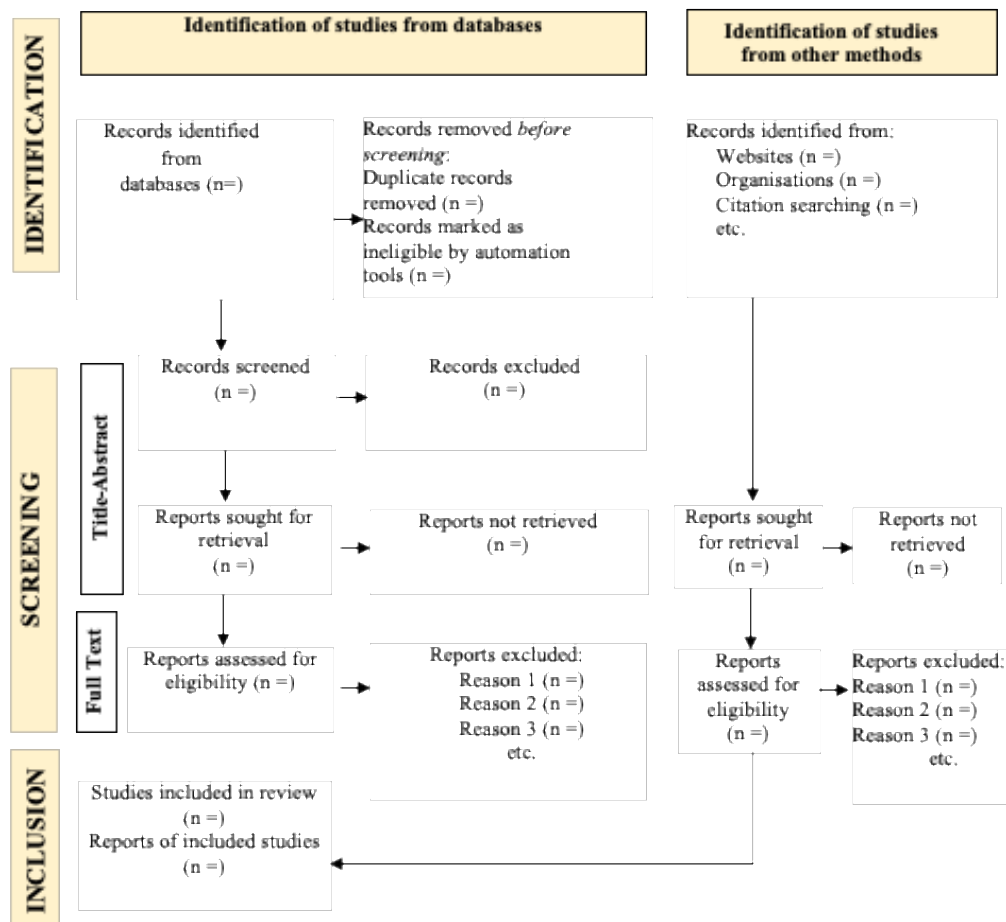


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Search and Selection Process for the Scoping Review

Before conducting the review, we will perform an exercise where 50 titles and abstracts will be randomly selected and reviewed by two independent reviewers. This process will help us confirm that both reviewers consistently apply the inclusion/exclusion selection criteria and then confirm interrater reliability. If any disagreement arises between the two reviewers, a third reviewer will be consulted to resolve the issue. Next, a full-text review will be conducted for abstracts that meet eligibility criteria at the title-abstract screening. Additionally, full-text abstracts that require more outcomes information to help determine eligibility will also be reviewed. The same two reviewers will conduct a second round of independent review to ensure accuracy and consistency. Once the full-text review of articles has been completed, the articles that meet the criteria will be considered for data extraction. The reviewers will resolve any disagreements by consensus. However, if they cannot agree, a third reviewer will act as an arbitrator.

Step four: Charting the data

The main goal of this step is to gather important information. To accomplish this, a data charting form is created to collect data from each study (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). To extract contextual or process-oriented information from each study, a "narrative review" or "descriptive analytical" method will be utilized (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). Below is a data extraction chart for information abstraction from the identified studies (Table 4).

Table 4
Data Extraction Chart to Extract Information from Identified Studies

Reviewer	#
Extraction date	#
Author(s)	#
Authors' affiliations	#
Title	#
Journal	#
Publication type (peer-reviewed)	#
The study's aims and objectives	#
Study questions	#
Study design	#
Study approach (quantitative/qualitative/mixed)	#
Study setting/Province	#
Study population	#
Sample size	#
Field covered (mental health, social protection, child welfare, etc.)	#
Themes and sub-themes in the findings	#
Limitations	#
Implications, suggestions, recommendations	#
Reviewer comments	#

Step Five: Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting Results

We will provide a numerical analysis of the studies using tables and charts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). We will use NVivo 12 Plus, a software specializing in qualitative data analysis, to process the extracted texts. For data analysis, we will use Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA is a method by which a researcher explores and develops an understanding of patterned meaning across the dataset. The ultimate goal is to produce a coherent

and compelling interpretation of the data grounded in the data itself. RTA is performed in six stages: familiarisation with data, generating codes, constructing themes, revising and defining themes, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Step Six: Consultation

At this step, it is essential to involve knowledge users and stakeholders, as they can provide valuable insights beyond what is available in the literature and suggest further references (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The field of scoping reviews is constantly evolving, and it is now recommended to incorporate the "knowing, being, and doing" of the population of interest (Brodie et al., 2023). This means that consulting with the population of interest throughout the scoping review process is necessary to better understand the evidence that is important to them (Brodie et al., 2023).

Anticipated Results

Over the last 25 years, there has been a significant increase in research publications in the field of social work in Rwanda. The research priorities have shifted from post-genocide trauma and rebuilding efforts to the role of social work in various areas like sustainable development, youth empowerment, inclusivity, mental health, child welfare, gender issues, social protection, social work practice, social work education, and social justice, reflecting changing social dynamics and needs within the Rwandan population. The research further evolved around the indigenisation of social work education and practice to better respond to contextual needs.

This scoping review highlights the growing significance of social work research in Rwanda. The increasing number of publications may reflect a commitment to evidence-based practice and an acknowledgement of research's role in shaping social work interventions. Furthermore, the research outcomes highlight the need for close collaboration between social work researchers, practitioners, and policymakers for evidence-based social policy and programmes that advance successful community practice. Various research methods are at play and include qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, quantitative surveys, and mixed methods. The scoping review will help assess which ones are predominantly used.

The study identifies challenges to social work research over the past 25 years, which include lack of collaboration between academia and industry. Another challenge concerns the language: most of the studies are written in English, whereas the majority of Rwandans do not speak English, and the work within the community is carried out mainly in the local language, "Kinyarwanda". Who are we writing for? To whom is the research addressed? Who will benefit

from the research outcomes? All these are relevant questions Rwandan social work researchers should keep reflecting on.

The study also identified diversity in people involved in social work research. For example, a good number of social work publications were found to be from clinical psychology, gender studies, the Center for Conflict Management (CCM), sociologists, community health, etc. It was also noticed that there is a gender gap in social work research in Rwanda whereby male social work researchers are far beyond female social work researchers in the 25 years covered by the current scoping review. This appeals to a need to mobilize more females in social work research to bridge the gap.

Anticipated Discussion

Social work researchers encounter several challenges and barriers, including the expenses associated with research, inadequate facilities, insufficient expertise, and restricted availability of publications (Darlington & Scott, 2020; Carey, 2017). In the Rwandan context, such challenges are compounded by the fact that social work research remains relatively nascent. This scoping review protocol seeks to shed light on these issues while also identifying key areas for future research and development.

Social work researchers should focus on investing more effort in various areas of work, such as community development, school social work, social work administration, gerontology, and clinical social work. This includes developing expertise in working with children and families, elderly care, mental health and psychosocial support, persons with additional support needs such as disabilities, teen parents, especially mothers, offenders and probation, emergency and disaster management, drug addiction rehabilitation, migration, and agility with digital technologies (Webb, 2019; Weissbecker et al., 2019). Every domain presents prospects for cultivating a comprehension of specific intricacies of facilitating constructive transformation.

Also, the collaboration between academia and industry should be enhanced through actively contributing to research consultancies, co-creating projects that contain a research dimension, and promoting social work research dissemination through conferences, workshops, seminars, or other community gatherings. Social work researchers need to promote partnerships and attract research funding to strengthen the research culture and widespread dissemination of research outputs/outcomes.

Policymakers, practitioners, and academics can use these findings to guide future research and interventions, ensuring that Social Work in Rwanda remains responsive and relevant to the changing social landscape. The study suggests that there is a need to invest more effort in collaborative research among social

work researchers, testing theories and methods from other fields in the field of social work. The study also suggests that research of social work education and practice utilising comparative case studies should encourage learning from others and sharing Rwandan experiences through its adoption of the Home-Grown Solutions (HGSs). It is crucial to document HGSs and other cultural practices and to decolonise social work education and practice to make the profession more relevant to the Rwandan context.

There is a need to translate research findings into actionable plans and projects to solve identified problems. To reach out to the community members who, most of the time, are research participants at the same time as beneficiaries, research findings should be rewritten in simple and comprehensive Kinyarwanda language and communicated using different ways such as social media, community meetings, flyers, panels (signs) in the public spaces, etc. Social work research will contribute to evidence-based policymaking by providing policymakers with easy and practical readings and policy briefs that are not entirely scientific papers for everyday practical use.

We hope that readers' takeaway from this review will be a clear understanding of how social work research in Rwanda has developed, the challenges it faces, and the areas that require further exploration. This will serve as a foundation for future research agendas and will guide social work education and practice not only in Rwanda but across the African continent. It will provide invaluable insights for academics, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to enhance the impact of social work interventions in Rwanda and beyond.

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