

## The Impetus of Social Work as a Catalyst to the Achievement of Millennium Development Goal Number Three in Selected African Countries. A Literature Review

Prof. S. M Kang'ethe

University of Fort Hare, Department of Social Work and Social Development  
Box X1314, Alice. 5700, South Africa  
Email: skangethe@ufh.ac.za

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n8p604

### Abstract

The aim of this article is, through a review of literature methodology, to debate, discuss and form discourses on how social work achieves women empowerment paradigms in a few countries of the developing part of the world. Findings indicate that social work enjoys some policy global support from social work global bodies such as International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council of Schools of Social Work (ICSW); is an engine of poverty alleviation; emphasizes on self reliance; broker the needy to sources of resources; facilitates the processes of closing the gender parity gap; is a platform of social justice such as fighting female genital mutilation (FGM); and facilitates the institution of women economic groupings, gender analysis and gender mainstreaming. The article recommends that the profession needs to be more conspicuous; international social work bodies to render more policy and growth of social workers in developing part of the world; social workers need to be adequately motivated through decent and modest remuneration; countries need to have a retraining policy so that social workers are enabled to handle emergent social problems; and the need to ensure gender equity in its training.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, poverty alleviation, self help, communities, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, women groups, social justice.

### 1. Problem statement

Eradicating or possible annihilation of the poverty of women and the girl children remains one of the core integral objectives of social work profession. This is to enable women and the girl children enjoy life as good as men and the boy children. However, sometimes the role of social work as a driver to different aspects of women empowerment is not conspicuous. This brings to the fore the importance of taking stock of different and variegated contexts in which social work application informs women empowerment paradigms, and therefore a score to the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goal number three. Such a stock taking especially in developing countries is critical in that it may form an opportunity for more accelerated efforts to social work application, and at the same time identify some gaps embedded within social work application to women empowerment processes

### 2. Article rationale

The article constitutes a bell ringing process to appreciate the different roles and tasks that social work application achieves. It also forms a platform to identify possible gaps that goes with social work application. This is to possibly recommend better ways of applying social work in women empowerment processes and therefore contribute to the fulfillment of Millennium Development Goal number three.

### 3. Methodology

The article has used a review of literature methodology to discuss, debate and form discourses appreciating the role of social work thrust in women empowerment processes in a few countries of the developing world. The article has used journals, books and this author's intuitive experiences in women empowerment processes in some few countries of the developing part of the world.

#### **4. Background and Introduction**

Succinctly, the role of social work discipline as a principal thrust to turn away individuals, families, groups and organizations' social dysfunctions and malfunctions cannot be overemphasized in any society of the globe (Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2007; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2008). Realistically, societies from both the north and south divide appear to be undergoing a shift as they pursue modernism, civilization and globalization (Kang'ethe, 2014a). This shift has produced a barrage of dysfunctions ranging from unemployment, family strives, divorce, suicidal tendencies, sexual abuse of various kinds including incest and rape, intolerance of individuals of different cultural and sexual orientation, hatred, xenophobia and homophobia etc (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). As social dysfunctions increase in individuals, groups and organizations, the application of social work values, principles and interventions is becoming critical.

Although the position and role of social work in developed and developing countries differ in various ways in that the application and the driving thrust of social work in developed countries is strong, the discipline in the developed world is perhaps modestly recognized by governments, organizations and the general populace itself, coupled perhaps with a relatively satisfactory salary package. However the principle thrust of social work discipline remains the same (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Occupationally, social work is believed to drive the thrust of philanthropy, to drive empathy that touches those who are well endowed by resources to consider sharing and supporting those who do not have, wants the children to experience good education and therefore be able to face their future live with knowledge, skills and therefore widen the scope of choice in their lives, wants families to function optimally, wants a society to have mechanisms of settling conflicts, and wants municipalities and administrative bodies to expedite service delivery (Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2007; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2008). In a nutshell, social work facilitates an array of service delivery that ensures that people enjoy life and that mechanisms of addressing social dysfunctions are in place.

Perhaps an important and a relatively new development in the developing countries is the emphasis of social work in ensuring gender equality and equity so that men and women can equally participate and enjoy the fruits of their countries economic and social resources (Kang'ethe, 2011). This is because for many decades if not centuries, developing countries' states of livelihood, cultures, traditions and customs have been gravitated towards having succinct clear cut role demarcation, differentiation and socialization that have left women in an oppressed and suppressed state of affairs (Afolayan, 2004; Kang'ethe, 2009). Although most societies from the developing part of the world never saw this as a challenge until it was too late, it possibly remains an incontrovertible fact that modernization and today globalization torches have reawakened a kind of renaissance making all to evaluate the social value of different genders and the treatment that their societies give them. Succinctly, this has been aided by viewing the gender terrain using the lenses of human rights (UNDP, 2008). Since the Millennium Development Goal number three envisages to see a world in which gender equality and equity remains an immovable norm as well as a situation in which women empowerment generally attracts the attention of all societal structures including the government, NGOs and other important gender friendly bodies, this author considers it important to evaluate and asses the role of social work discipline in driving the process of countries achieving a state of gender equity, equality and strengthening the thrust of women empowerment tempo, especially in developing part of the globe.

#### **5. The Role of Social Work in Women Empowerment**

##### *5.1 Social work as an engine of poverty alleviation*

Incontrovertibly, many contexts especially of the developing part of the world suffer feminization of poverty. This is a phenomenon in which women compared to their male counterparts are affected by poverty (UNDP, 2008; Kang'ethe, 2013a). Statistically and among the world's 1 billion people living in abject poverty, women occupy the larger chunk of them (INSTRAW, 2004). This is due to structural factors such as male-female power dynamics, inadequate government spending on women projects, poverty and indebtedness, and general neglect of women compared to men in all socio-economic aspects of life (Mulinge & Mufune, 2003). Women discrimination in the wage sector in which women earn less than men performing the same work also explains their poverty (UNDP, 2008). This is social injustice that can be instrumental in increasing the poverty of women especially in rural areas. This brings to the picture the role of social work application of its repertoire of skills such as advocacy and lobbying for social justice in wage dispensation (Trevithick, 2005). Social work skills application in poverty alleviation is especially critical where people are still leading a traditional life (Mulinge & Mufune, 2003). To this end, it needs to be appreciated that in most rural areas, social workers advise people how to manage and harness their resources, how to appropriately use their personal, family and clan strength to improve their lives, how to extinguish bad behaviours from the youth and also the adults, and equipping people with

conflict resolution strategies to solve their conflicts (Trevithick, 2005). Facilitating community education, consultations and involving individuals, families and population groups in poverty alleviation processes are critical approaches that social workers have used in the past. Thus, social work endeavours affect and develop women who are usually affected by poverty than men and who also happens to be in the centre of rural development (Abrisham, 2011).

### 5.2 Social work emphasizes on self reliance

Social work endeavours to make people unleash their potential, come up with newer and innovative ways of economic pursuit and motivate people to be independent in their social-economic pursuit (Segal, Gerdes & Steiner, 2007; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2008). This is very important to countries such as South Africa where availability of social welfare help system has slid many people to develop a state of dependence syndrome (Kang'ethe, 2014b). With the government spending close to 100 billion on welfare grants annually, this kind of spending may not be sustainable. Therefore, the social work values, skills and knowledge packages need to be strongly applied to strengthen community education that could possibly effectuate a paradigm shift towards increasing people's state of self reliance (*vukuzenzele (Isixhosa; Go ipelega (Setswana)*).

Self reliance especially among women is a positive score towards reducing cases of gender based violence (GBV) and by extension it could strengthen their assertiveness which could work to reduce their vulnerability to diseases such as HIV/AIDS (UNDP, 2008).

### 5.3 Social workers brokering the needy to markets /credit schemes

In many community settings, especially of the developing part of the world, social work has been credited for offering community education on ways to strengthen people's social and economic aspects of lives, for example how to tap and harness their indigenous resources to make products that can be marketed. For example through international bodies such as UNDP and Skill share International, many social workers employed as International United Nation's Volunteers (IUNV) and Development Workers (DW) have spurred and facilitated socio and economic development projects especially in developing part of the world through education and brokering the communities to sources of resources such as funding (Ullah & Routray 2007; Botswana IYV Newsletter 2001; Kang'ethe, 2010 ). Social workers have also been on the front line urging credit schemes to consider partnering or helping the rural communities access them in order to drive economic ventures.

### 5.4 International social work bodies emphasize on women empowerment

To say the least, social work profession finds support and motivation from an array of strong global forces. For example, many of the global social work bodies such as International Federation of social workers(IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) aim at advocating and working towards policy strengthening that will lead to poverty alleviation especially in developing countries (Hall, 2006). These bodies' core objectives have been to tackle and address the plight of the excluded, especially women and children. This is because in many contexts of the world, women suffer an array of discriminations such as unfairness in resource allocation, exclusion of some jobs etc. Importantly, most of the global advocacy meetings to address the plight of the excluded have been held in consultations and with the blessings of these bodies: These meetings include

- The 1975 United Nations Conference on Women, held in Mexico City that launched the United Nations Decade on Women.
- The 1980 United Nations Conference on Women, held in Copenhagen..
- The 1985 United Nations Conference on Women, held in Nairobi at the end of the UN Decade on Women.
- The 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing.
- The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952),
- The Convention on the Consent to Marriage (1962).
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Hall 2006).

While these bodies can be credited for working hard to change the lives of women and children, apparently these bodies' role in women empowerment needs to be strengthened and their outcomes should be more conspicuous especially in the developing part of the world (Hall, 2006).

### 5.5 Social work facilitating to close gender parity gap

One of the pivotal challenges of addressing and expediting development in developing countries has been found to work towards closing the gender parity gap (UNDP, 2008). Although countries such as Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have closed this parity gap as far as enrollment of girls compared to boys in primary schools is concerned, many countries still experience a lower enrollment of girl children. More so, girls discontinue schooling more than the boy children. This phenomenon has a cultural dimension in that cultural factors undermine the process of attending and staying in school for a longer time. This is especially common in countries where some traditional communities believe in the girl children being an economic source of livelihood through dowry payment (Alderman & King, 1998; Kang'ethe, 2013b).

While this is a common phenomenon among the nomadic communities in Kenya, the role of social workers in educating communities on the need to have girl children educated so that they can be assets of economic development of their communities and countries at large has been critical. Having girls not access education as the boys has serious implications in development. This is because girls and therefore women are likely to lag behind men as far as development issues are concerned (Kang'ethe 2013b). This would make it hard for them to attain the much desired gender equality and equity. This may pose challenges to efforts of poverty alleviation, combating HIV/AIDS and oppression of women. The state would also mean attaining a poor score in the achievement of countries' Millennium Development Goal number three (UNDP 2008).

### 5.6 Social workers and community development bodies against female genital mutilation (FGM) in Kenya

Since the world appears to agree that some cultural rites such as female circumcision violates the rites of girl children and women generally, social workers and NGOs in the community development domain in countries such as Kenya are at arms with the communities that are removing children from school so that the girls can undergo the rite of FGM (Kang'ethe, 2013b). This is because of the realization that once the girl is removed from school, chances that such a girl will go back to school are slim. This means that such a girl child's destiny is transferred into the hands of the husband to be. Her opportunity to improve her socio-economic life as well as national building is lessened. Critically, the marriage of a female adolescent minor cuts short her education and therefore lessens her chance of being employed and therefore raise her state of economic freedom. It also often costs her life, because early pregnancy is a leading cause of maternal mortality (Kang'ethe, 2013). Through the interventions of government in tandem with social workers usually employed in community development docket in countries such as Kenya, women have been organized to participate in awareness campaigns against child marriage (Kang'ethe, 2014b). This is because of the realization of how the countries stand to have women lag behind in issues of development and therefore slacken countries' chances of doing well in achieving MDG number three.

### 5.7 Social workers encourages institution of women groups

In some countries of the developing part of the world such as Kenya, social work values of empowerment, discussions, brainstorming and community development have been used by governments, NGOs and private individuals in different contexts to facilitate women empowerment through women group economic empowerment groups (Trevithick, 2005; Toseland & Rivas, 2011). Such groups share ideas, give hope to one another and are able to pool resources together. They have been developing social capital from which all the parties benefit. Strengthening women groups using social work values of community development ethos such as community participation is critical especially in rural areas where unemployment, and literacy levels may be low. In Kenya such women groups includes

- Mabati group that have bought iron sheets for building houses
- Nyakinyua women group-have bought farms
- Merry go rounds to raise money to pay school fees

### 5.8 Social workers employing social justice to fight against Gender based violence

The role of social work in emphasizing social justice by educating communities against gender based violence can be a way of empowering women (UNDP, 2008). This is because gender based violence makes women not to release or tap most of their capabilities, strengths, freedoms that they can use to better their lives (UNDP, 2008). Using social work norm of social justice to advocate and fight against GBV is important because the prevalence of gender based violence is

still rife in many countries such as Botswana and South Africa. It threatens to widen the parity gap between men and women as well as their enjoyment of resources. Importantly, gender based violence exacerbates the position of women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. This is because they may not be able to negotiate for safer sex practices or even win in convincing men of the need to use contraceptives in sexual engagement (UNDP, 2008).

### 5.9 Social work in gender mainstreaming and gender analysis

Alongside other social based subjects such as sociology, social work education is critical in effectuating gender based education such as gender mainstreaming and gender analysis. Gender mainstreaming is the process of effectuating and giving education on gender dynamics to individuals, communities and organizations and how these dynamics influence development and possibly what can be done to address them. According to Kang'ethe (2011: 1-2), gender analysis" looks at the roles of women and men, their relationships and issues of access to and control over resources. It asks some basic questions, such as: Who does what? What do women do and what do men do: who has access to social and economic resources, and who has control over these resources? The purpose of gender analysis is to effect interventions that can address gender inequalities and inequities. This is a process of realizing MDG number three.

## 6. Conclusion and The way Forward

For social work to be a social and an economic thrust to reckon with, the profession needs to be more conspicuous. This challenges the global bodies such as International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Council of Social Workers (ICSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), regional and national bodies supporting social work growth to increase their policy advocacy and policy strengthening of the profession

Social workers need to be motivated through a modest remuneration. This is to give them impetus to handle many of the vulnerable cases that confront them day in day out. This could also reduce their attrition as well as capital flight to countries that remunerate them well.

Developing countries in particular need to train more social workers and ensure all the social institutions such as hospitals and schools have the services of social workers. This is because of the increase in social vices in virtually all the social institutions.

Governments of the developing countries need to constantly have stronger policies on retraining the social workers in order to face emergent social challenges. For example after the advent of HIV/AIDS, some countries' social workers took a lot of time to adjust to the phenomenon.

Perhaps advocating for a gender balance in the training of social workers can be a desirable process of effectuating and driving the process of gender equity and equality in the social institutions. This is because social workers are increasingly becoming a woman's job in some developing countries such as Botswana and South Africa. In South Africa, for example, close to 90% of the social workers are women. This would be a stronger score in bolstering millennium Developing Goal number three.

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