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# Female-specific perspectives in social work research in sub-Saharan Africa: literature review

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the focus is on social work in sub-Saharan Africa from a female-specific perspective. The article answers the following two questions: what are the most central questions around female-specific perspectives in social work research in sub-Saharan Africa and what kind of emphasis does social work have or recommend for working with women? The aim is to provide international dialogue and new openings for Nordic social work research and practice. The analysis is based on data collected by conducting an integrative literature review. The results show that the importance of women's perspectives in sub-Saharan Africa is an issue linked to gendered poverty, inequality and gender-based violence. The included studies deal with health issues, including maternal health, sexual health and reproductive health. Social work emphasizes measures based on spirituality and communities, where a female-specific perspective is understood as part of communal structures. An analytical examination of social work in African countries can develop Nordic social work practice and the discipline so that it considers the meaning of female-specific issues as part of communal resources, spiritual practices and global inequality.

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## Introduction

Social work in African countries is not often discussed in the Nordic social work education and academic field. In the worst-case scenario, this can uphold the hegemony of Western knowledge and white privilege and silence alternative knowledge and practice in social work (e.g. Clarke, Leece, and Ranta-Tyrkkö 2024; Levy, Okoye, and Ingram 2022). Therefore, this study focuses on social work practice in sub-Saharan Africa from a female-specific perspective. Our approach is based on the international framework of social work: discussions and studies that focus on demonstrating the diversity of social work and question the hegemony of Western theories and practices (Gray and Fook 2004). According to Clarke and Yellow Bird (2021, 2), the roots of social work in Western countries lie in modernization and the control of individuals, ignoring diversity and different experiences. Moreover, if our concept of social work is Western-centric, there is a risk that gender-sensitive social work is also only based on a Western way of understanding gender, femininity and women's life. Therefore, we need a wider perspective that considers the diversity of social work traditions. This is also important because Western modernity and individual-centred social work have failed to recognize alarming challenges such as ecological crises (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi 2021).

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The practices and traditions of social work in African countries often include a strong emphasis on the knowledge of indigenous people and taking communities into account (e.g. Twikirize and Spitzer 2019). According to Mwansa (2011, 11), social work education in African countries seeks to create a synthesis between the various social work traditions, and the key is to develop a holistic approach through which local issues and values are taken into account. In general, the underlying goal of social work in African countries is to respect the local knowledge of community and indigenous approaches (Twikirize and Spitzer 2019). We believe that awareness of social work in African countries can improve practices, theories and education in social work in the Nordic countries; research on social work in different contexts can also highlight critical awareness of social work's colonial past, which can help us to avoid the hegemonic thinking of professional social work in the Nordic countries (Ranta-Tyrkkö 2011). In many African countries, social services were largely founded as part of a colonial administrative culture, and social work was mainly used as a way to control the population (e.g. Levy, Okoye, and Ingram 2022; Mwansa 2011). Therefore, there is a need to acknowledge the colonial influences on social work in post-colonial Africa (Gray 2005, 232).

We are aware of colonial as part of social work practice as well as of some women's vulnerable position in African countries. Gender and feminists researchers in African countries have been interested in how the meaning of gender is constructed in relation to imperialism and colonialism (e.g. Ampofo et al. 2004; Beoku-Betts and Ampofo 2021; Ossome 2020, 160). The relationship between gender and colonialism can be examined from the perspective of how colonialism strengthened inequality in the colonial era, for example, in the private sphere, land rights and the privilege of Western elites (e.g. Shoola 2014). However, feminism in Africa is extremely diverse, and societies have very different backgrounds and relationships to colonial context vary (Mama 2011, 8). At the same time, as Beoku-Betts (2021, 60) mention, we need to acknowledge how patriarchy, heteronormativity, neo-liberal capitalism and global inequalities are situated in women's lives in African countries. African researchers and activists have challenged the definition of 'feminism' as based on Western knowledge and many gender researchers have criticized Western feminists' way of talking about the vulnerability of African women, which does not recognize their own racism and the different ways of experiencing a society (see Beoku-Betts and Ampofo 2021, 4; Rodriguez, Tsikata, and Ampofo 2015, xiii). Thus, social work has been part of colonial and white privilege-based knowledge, as well as feminism has often been located in Western ideology (Gatwiri and Tusasiirwe 2022).

This article aims to provide a broader picture of social work in sub-Saharan Africa, as it helps to understand the social, cultural and geographical context. In this article, the research interest lies in answering the following two questions: what are the most central questions of female-specific perspectives in social work research in sub-Saharan Africa, and what kind of emphasis does social work have or recommend for working with women? The female-specific perspective means that we are interested in women's life situations and social work practice with women. We are interested in questions of social work from the female-specific perspective because, in the global context, gendered inequality particularly influences women: for example, violence, poverty and lack of reproductive rights are gendered phenomena (Dominelli 2011, 62–63). Despite this, there is still little attention to women as service users in different welfare service institutions and contexts (Kuronen and Virokannas 2021). However, the female-specific perspective does not mean that all women share similar experiences of life and oppression. Indeed, gender as a female-specific perspective is complex, and there is a risk of creating an essential and stereotypical picture of women in African countries. We cannot talk about African women as a distinct, homogeneous group: instead, the life of an individual should be interpreted in relation to a specific time, place and global context (Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021, 4).

## Materials and methods

We approach social work from the female-specific perspective by conducting an integrative literature review. Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast geographical and social entity, so the limits were broad; however, this breadth enabled a diverse approach to previous research on the topic, which is the objective of an integrative literature review (Whittemore 2008; Whittemore and Knalf 2005). This method was justified because the choice of data was determined by focused research questions, and the aim was to create a qualitatively thorough description of the phenomenon under study. An integrative literature review creates an overall picture of the studied phenomena, and the data is not strictly limited on methodological grounds (Whittemore 2008; Whittemore and Knalf 2005). As a research method, it enables a wide-ranging perspective on previous research relating to women and social work in sub-Saharan Africa.

We searched for the research data in four social sciences electronic databases: Academic Search Premier, Social Science Database, Sociology Database and SocINDEX. We formed the search phrase allowing a sufficiently comprehensive overview of the existing literature: ‘social work\*’ OR ‘social work practice\*’ OR ‘social service\*’ AND gender or sex or female or women AND Africa. We did not use different country names in the search phrase because it increased the search results uncontrollably. However, the term ‘Africa’ includes 54 independent countries, and there are major social, cultural and geographical differences within and between these countries. According to Spitzer (2014, 16), it is essential to highlight the diversity of those countries and understand ‘Africa’ as a social construct which describes cross-cultural, complex and unique contexts of social work in African countries.

The study aimed to structure previous research on social work and women’s issues, and the corresponding use of gender, sex and female concepts increased the number of search results. However, we were aware that using these concepts could be problematic because we ignored issues relating to masculinity and men. In addition, if studies approach gender mainly as a factor concerning women and men, they ignore the experience of other gender such as transgender. However, the aim of the study was to structure previous research on social work with women. We interpreted the female-specific perspective more broadly in the context of religion, background, age and social class.

In the search, we used the ‘subject term’ function (select a file which contains the keyword) to filter the search results when needed. Due to our limited ability to understand studies written in other languages, we selected only articles written in English. It is worth noting that English as a dominant language in African countries is based on colonial history and represents certain regions in African countries. Naturally, research on social work in African countries has also been conducted in many languages other than English. We narrowed the search results to the years 2011–2021. In addition, one criterion was that the selected articles had to be based on empirical research and that it was possible to read the article online. The data comprise studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

After this search, we obtained 475 results from the databases. We checked the titles and subjects or read the summary of each article obtained from the database search. Then, we filtered the data so that the selected studies had connection with women, social work and/or clients and/or a phenomenon in social work in Sub-Saharan African countries. Numerous articles mention social work only in a few sentence. Therefore, we chose articles discussing social work, social work clients or relevant questions and phenomenon for social work. After this filtering, we obtained a total of 49 research articles. In an integrative literature review, the selection of data essentially depends on its content and its relationship with the research questions posed. We filtered the data so that the selected studies focus on women and/or girls and the articles have recommendations for social work practice, research or interventions. In an integrative literature review, there is sufficient data when enough has been collected to answer the research questions (Kangasniemi et al. 2013, 295). Consequently, 41 peer-reviewed research articles were selected for this study (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Table of included articles.

Authors, year	Name	Country
Amenuke-Edusei and Birore (2020)	The Influence of Sociodemographic Factors on Women's Breast Cancer Screening in Accra, Ghana	Ghana
Balfour et al. (2020)	Lifeline: A Qualitative Analysis of the Post Intervention Experiences of Human Trafficking Survivors and At-risk Women in Ghana	Ghana
Boateng (2021b)	Pathways for the Economic Empowerment of Female Entrepreneurs in Emerging Economies: Implications for Social Work	Ghana
Boateng (2021a)	Accidental Opportunities? Women in Family Businesses Taking the Lead in a New Market Economy in Accra, Ghana	Ghana
Chereni (2017)	'You Become Two in One' Women's Representations of Responsibility and Emotional Vulnerability in Zimbabwean Father-away Families	Zimbabwean non-migrant women in Southern Africa
Corbin and Hall (2019)	Resettlement Post Conflict: Risk and Protective Factors and Resilience Among Women in Northern Uganda	Uganda
Dube (2021)	Attitudes and Perceptions of Young Community Members towards Older Persons: Their Influence on the Welfare of the Elderly in a Village in South Africa	South Africa
Dube (2020)	The Bio-Psychosocial Implications of Unemployment for Rural Young Women in South Africa: Revelations From Cassel, Northern Cape Province	South Africa
Hill et al. (2021)	Cash Transfers and Caregivers: Working Together to Reduce Vulnerability and HIV risk Among Adolescent Girls in Johannesburg, South Africa	South Africa
Hounmenou (2016)	Issues of Sexually Transmitted Infections and Violence Among Children in Prostitution in West Africa	Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger
Human et al. (2014)	Psychosocial Implications of Stillbirth for the Mother and Her Family: a Crisis-Support Approach	South Africa
Hutchinson (2019)	Research Evidence to Inform Strengths-Based Policy and Practice: Mapping the Coping Strategies of Young Women in Mozambique	Mozambique
Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko (2021)	Key Informants' Perspectives on Food Security Among Female-Headed Household in Kenya	Kenya
Ibrahima (2021)	Exploring Maternal Health in Ethiopia Using Indigenous Approaches: Policy and Practice Implications	Ethiopia
Korang-Okrah et al. (2019)	Solutions to Property Rights 'Violations' Experienced by Ghanaian (Akan) Widows and Their Children: The Role of International Social Workers in Addressing Human Rights	Ghana
Kusemwa and Tanga (2020)	Exploratory Research on Community Empowerment for Women Victims of Forced Migration: Implications for Social Work in Sustainable Community Reintegration	Zimbabwe
Leburu-Masigo (2019)	Urban and Rural Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence	South Africa
Leburu-Masigo, Maforah, and Mohlatlole (2019)	Impact of Victim Empowerment Programme on the Lives of Victims of Gender-Based Violence: Social Work Service	South Africa
Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga (2017)	Women's Social Movements and Social Development: Opportunities for Social Work in Tanzania	Tanzania
McLea and Mayers (2017)	The Grief and Trauma Project: a Group Work Approach to Restoring Emotional and Spiritual Health to Women in Bereaved and Traumatized Indigent Communities in the Western Cape, South Africa	South Africa
Mofokeng and Green (2015)	Exploring the View of Health Care Service Providers on Life Stressors and Basic Need of HIV-positive Mother in Rural Areas of Lesotho	Lesotho
Moss et al. (2019)	Lived Experiences of Street Girls in Côte d'Ivoire	Republic of Côte d'Ivoire
Mwenyango and Palattiyil (2019)	Health Needs and Challenges of Women and Children in Uganda's Refugee Settlements: Conceptualising a Role for Social Work	Uganda
Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen (2017)	HIV Transmission as a form of Gender-based violence: Experiences of Women in Tigray, Ethiopia	Ethiopia
Nyahunda et al. (2020)	Vulnerabilities and Inequalities Experienced by Women in the Climate Change Discourse in South Africa's Rural Communities: Implications for Social Work	South Africa
Nyahunda, Matlakala, and Makhubele (2020)	Factors Impeding the Participation of Rural Women in the Climate Change Discourse: A Requirement for Social Work Intervention	South Africa

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Authors, year	Name	Country
Osthus and Sewpaul (2014)	Gender, Power and Sexuality Among Youth on the Streets of Durban: Socio-economic Realities	South Africa
Oware (2020)	Informal Social Protection Actors: A Focus on Women Self-help Groups in Kenya	Kenya
Raniga (2017)	Participatory Experiences of Women in Economic Development Cooperatives in Bhambayi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	South Africa
Roos, Silvestre, and De Jager (2017)	Intergenerational Care Perceptions of Older Women and Middle Adolescents in a Resource-Constrained Community in South Africa	South Africa
Salim and Lombard (2020)	The Role of Social Workers in Curbing Girl Marriages: a Famsa Case Study	South Africa
Setlentoa and Segun (2017)	Political Participation of Female Social Workers in South Africa	South Africa
Skobi and Makofane (2017)	Reflections of Social Workers on the Experiences of Pregnant Teenagers During Group Work Sessions	South Africa
Sobantu (2020)	Revisiting Gender and Housing: Housing as Seen Through the Eyes of Women in Social Rental Housing in Gauteng, South Africa	South Africa
Slabbert (2017b)	Domestic Violence and Poverty: Some Women's Experiences	South Africa
Slabbert (2017a)	Coping Resources of Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: An Ecological Perspective	South Africa
Steinbrenner et al. (2017)	The Lived Experience of Help-seeking by South African Women after Sexual Assault	South Africa
Swart (2013)	Doing Survival: Strategies for Coping With Gender-Based Violence in Kenya's Kibera Slum	Kenya
Thabane (2017)	Prevention of HIV in Lesotho's Apparel Industry: a Social Work Perspective	Lesotho
Van Raemdonck, Seedat, and Raeymaeckers (2016)	Assessing the Capability Approach as an Evaluation Tool for Community Networks on Intimate Partner Violence in Seven Durban Townships in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	South Africa
Walker-Williams and Fouché (2017)	A Strengths-Based Group Intervention for Women Who Experienced Child Sexual Abuse	South Africa

The majority of articles were qualitative studies, and three studies were quantitative and four studies reported using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The geographical focus of the selected studies was clearly South Africa and did not include any countries from Central Africa. The studies were selected on the basis of being relevant to the research questions, and the aim was not to focus on specific countries. It is also worth noting that for the selected studies, the authors themselves did not necessarily come from the country where the study was conducted.

An integrative literature review aims to obtain descriptive answers to research questions by combining and comparing content. Therefore, we read through the selected studies several times and made notes. Attention on the data focused on similarities and differences, which formed image of the research object and laid the foundations for the next stage: the data analysis proceeded outwards from the research questions posed and the studies through analysing the studies, and further their grouping under themes and coding. The codes were community and environment, gender-based violence (GBV), health and HIV, economy, youth and girls, and forced migrant. We examined the recurring codes in more detail, considering how they differ and what common meanings can be drawn from them concerning the research questions. Various thematic categories began to arise from the research, which we then compiled in table (Table 2). We were interested in the theme's global, structural and communal context and asked how this context relates to the female-specific perspective. Finally, we looked for practices and interventions in social work from different thematic categories. As a result, the themes were formed on the basis that they were related to the research questions and were repeated in the approaches and results of the selected studies. An integrative literature review also aims to create new perspectives and frameworks based on previous

**Table 2.** The thematic categories for the female-specific perspective and social work.

Theme	Inequality, environment and women's economic agency	GBV and woman as a survivor	Health, sex and young women in a vulnerable life situation
Context	-colonial context -neo-liberal capitalism -climate change	-customary rules vs official legislation -economic dependence -HIV	-sexual rights and health -cultural beliefs and poverty
Female-specific perspective	-gendered poverty and housing -social protection and care -human mobility	-violence against women -widowed -lack of land and property right	-adolescent girls as a vulnerable situations -maternity and reproductive health -transactional sex
Emphasis and recommendations for social work	-political activism -right-based empowering -resource-based practice	-community work -survival and resilience -spirituality	-peerness -culturally sensitive practice -experiences of health and social care

research. To achieve this aim, we examined our table in relation to our research questions and named the themes so that they were not related to a single study alone but described broader contexts of meaning across the studies.

## Results: central questions of female-specific perspectives on social work research in sub-Saharan Africa

### *Inequality, environment and women's economic agency*

Gender is defined as a structural category associated with economic power relations and social problems intertwined with gendered poverty and inequality. This is connected to the historical context: during the colonial period, racialized and non-elitist women had no always space in the public sphere and women's roles were limited in private life, such as to bearing children (Boateng 2021b, 217; see also Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga 2017, 228). Women had a key role in nurturing families, but they also suffered more undernourishment and poverty, which appears in social work practice, where the point is to strengthen the economic, environmental and social resistance (Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko 2021). Women's vulnerable situations has to be understood in connection to deep-rooted socio-economic inequality, which included poverty and racial constructs in African countries. In South Africa, apartheid has a significant impact on the power relations and the structural inequality (Sobantu 2020, 71; Van Raemdonck, Seedat, and Raeymaeckers 2016, 6). At the same time, global issues such as the climate crisis affect women most painfully because of gendered poverty and limited possibilities in decision-making, as well as women's central role in securing food for their families (Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko 2021; Nyahunda et al. 2020, 2020b). Therefore, global issues of environment and food security are visible in social work in resource-poor communities.

The studies were critical of economic thinking based on neo-liberalism as an automatic solution to inequality. As Raniga (2017, 217) mentions, if social workers wanted to understand gendered poverty, they need critical thinking about neo-liberal economic policies and their negative effects of inequality. Neo-liberal capitalism or economic growth alone does not automatically protect vulnerable groups in sub-Saharan Africa and there is a need for broader informal social support to improve women's wellbeing when the formal social protection is weak (Oware 2020, 614; see also Ibrahim 2021, 349; Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko 2021, 81). For instance, in Tanzania, neo-liberal policies and a free market economy increased class segregation and poverty (Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga 2017, 228). Consequently, Western neoliberal policies can see

part of colonial processes and different global development projects and programs for women, which do not respond to the reality of grassroots social work practice (Ibrahima 2021, 349).

On the other hand, economic issues can be understood from a wider perspective, such as in relation to gender, care and housing. In this way, economic issues can be examined in social work from the perspective of geographical context, ageing and intergenerational relationships. In a low-resourced community, the market economy can create more opportunities for women if it enables them to start family businesses and assets to secure loans (Boateng 2021a). Moreover, older women have a significant role in providing physical and instrumental care for the younger generation (Roos, Silvestre, and De Jager 2017), and informal social protection actors such as women's self-help groups can improve resilience and economic empowerment (Oware 2020). Despite this, women's active agency to improve financial sustainability in communities is not well-recognized (Raniga 2017), and there is still little attention to housing from a gender perspective, although women take the main responsibility for home and children and suffer more from unsafe environments, for example, in rural communities or difficult housing circumstances (Nyahunda et al. 2020, 2020b; Sobantu 2020).

Unequal structures also relate to gendered mobility and immobility. In this case, research often focuses on immigration, urban-rural distance and migration between African countries. In the resource-poor environment the man of the family often travels to another country or city for work, whereas the woman stay behind to look after the children and the home (Chereni 2017; see also Roos, Silvestre, and De Jager 2017, 105). Masculinity is associated with expectations of providing support and financial security (see Osthus and Sewpaul 2014). This individual mobility has transformed gender roles: according to Chereni (2017), the forced mobility of family members resulted in the division of parenting roles into marginal father involvement and intense mothering. Gender is also central among the vulnerability factors associated with forced mobility; for example, unsafe living conditions and a lack of healthcare services in refugee camps in Uganda left women in a fragile position (Corbin and Hall 2019; Mwenyango and Palattiyil 2019). Moreover, adolescent girls lacking access to education and family support, migrate to urban areas and have an increased risk of child domestic work and human trafficking (Balfour et al. 2020; see also Kusemwa and Tanga 2020; Moss et al. 2019, 151). Therefore, it is important in social work to consider how economic inequality and gender roles affect forced migration.

### ***GBV and woman as a survivor***

A clear majority of the studies dealt with the vulnerable position of women in relation to unequal social structures such as GBV. Violence was defined as physical, mental, property and sexual violence against women and girls (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Leburu-Masigo, Maforah, and Mohlatlole 2019; Moss et al. 2019; Salim and Lombard 2020; Slabbert 2017b, 2017b; Steinbrenner et al. 2017; Van Raemdonck, Seedat, and Raeymaeckers 2016; Walker-Williams and Fouché 2017). The phenomenon of GBV covers a wide range of social work practice with youth, families and communities in the NGOs, shelters, child welfare and health care. GBV was associated with other social inequalities, such as poverty, lack of housing and unemployment. For example, women's economic dependence on their partners or family member led to a situation where women could not satisfy their basic human needs without a partner's support (Balfour et al. 2020, 341; Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; Salim and Lombard 2020; Slabbert 2017b; Swart 2013). According to Leburu-Masigo (2019, 8), women did not seek help for violence as long as they were economically dependent on a partner (see also Slabbert 2017b). Therefore, we must analyse how social, material and inequality contexts impact women's agency because women have limited choices to leave abusive relationships (Swart 2013, 49).

Violence against women was related not only to exercising power in a relationship but also to structural problems in society. This was linked to women's and girls' experiences of inappropriate and violent treatment by the authorities, such as health care, social service, police and courts

(Corbin and Hall 2019, 926; Hounmenou 2016, 485; Steinbrenner et al. 2017; Swart 2013, 47). Despite legislation that entitled women to inheritance and land ownership, in some communities and rural areas, this was not put into practice, which made the position of women who were widowed or became single parents more difficult (Chereni 2017, 370; Corbin and Hall 2019; Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Nyahunda et al. 2020; see also Boateng 2021b, 217). Lack of land and property rights are significant factors causing rural women to have very few opportunities to make decisions and resist climate change impacts (Nyahunda et al. 2020, 2020b). Indeed, being widowed at an older age signifies that an individual is in a vulnerable position, for instance, in some communities in Ghana and rural South African village (Dube 2021; Korang-Okrah et al. 2019). Older women living alone could be labelled as witches in some communities in South Africa, which put women at risk of discrimination and violence (Dube 2021, 111–112). In social work it is important to recognize the relationship between violence, ageing and gender in the whole life cycle of a person.

In the case of GBV, it should be noted that HIV is a gendered disease: HIV-positive status is more prevalent among women than men (Hill et al. 2021; Moss et al. 2019; Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; Thabane 2017). Contracting HIV was, in some situations, a consequence of GBV; for example, when a woman's partner was unfaithful and refused to take tests for HIV while blaming the woman for contracting the disease (Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; see also Osthus and Sewpaul 2014, 334). Inequality such as poor working conditions in industry or economic dependence means that women have sometimes limited opportunities to negotiate the sexual relationship or their partner's other sexual relationships (Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; Thabane 2017). Moreover, some women do not want to ask their partners to use a condom because they fear their reaction or try to protect themselves or their children from discrimination (Mofokeng and Green 2015, 52). HIV is related to stigma and discrimination, which create barriers for women to have an HIV test or get antiretroviral treatment, for example, in rural areas or refugee settlements or when women need their partner's financial support (Mofokeng and Green 2015; Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; see also Mwenyango and Palattiyil 2019). This can also be the repetition of vulnerability: GBV was entwined with factors that cause marginalization and studies also highlight other aspects of inequality, such as material deprivation. Despite this, research and interventions of HIV do not often recognize local social work view, but focus on medical and health treatment (Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017, 951).

### ***Health, sex and young women in vulnerable life situation***

One category of the studies deals with health issues, including maternal, sexual and reproductive health, particular for women and girls of childbearing age and heterosexual relationships. Also women who have experienced a stillbirth participate in social work interventions (Human et al. 2014). According to Ibrahim (2021, 344), maternal health must be understood from the perspective of the social context; pregnancy, birth, and postpartum are part of cultural and traditional practices, and spiritual support during pregnancy can play a vital role for women. In some cases, women may not seek help from health care due to cultural beliefs (Amenuke-Edusei and Birore 2020). It is also important to understand women's health from a broader social perspective. Experiences of loss, grief or trauma, for example, are often understood from the Western worldview perspective as individualistic experiences, even though culture, spirituality and community can play a vital role in individuals' healing processes and support their psychological health (McLea and Mayers 2017, 425). A study of women's attitudes towards mammography in Ghana shows that cultural beliefs linked women's attitude to healthcare, but sociodemographic factors, such as educational level and employment, were also associated with women's attitudes for mammogram screening, which is important to recognize in health social work practice (Amenuke-Edusei and Birore 2020). Nevertheless, many maternal health programmes and international health policies do not recognize traditional norms related to maternity and birthing (Ibrahim 2021).

The data indicate that gender is significant throughout the life of an individual: factors related to reproduction limit wellbeing at a young age, while early parenthood signifies a transition to adulthood. The relationship between age and gender is associated with a lack of sexual rights. Young people were seen to have few opportunities to use or obtain information about contraception, which resulted in child marriages, maternal deaths and unsafe abortions particularly in resource-poor environments, in situations of GBV, or when young people are in vulnerable situations, such as living on the streets (Hounmenou 2016; Hutchinson 2019; Moss et al. 2019; Salim and Lombard 2020; Skobi and Makofane 2017). However, even though child marriages uphold the patriarchy, there were also peer-pressured child marriages as a social norm and solution for the family income status (Salim and Lombard 2020, 192; see also Skobi and Makofane 2017, 228). Consequently, girls, who are stigmatized or marginalized, are key group in social work, because their schooling is likely to be interrupted due to pregnancy, marriage at an early age or financial struggles (Hutchinson 2019; Skobi and Makofane 2017). However, there is still little research in social work on the relation between sexual health, youth and, for example, sexually transmitted diseases (Hounmenou 2016, 490).

The approach to sexual health is typically connected to the risk factors of girls in heterosexual relationships. The data indicate that gender and young age are significant throughout the risk of transactional sex, unprotected sex and sex while using substances for example in families with low-income status or young people living on the streets (Hill et al. 2021 105; see also Hounmenou 2016; Moss et al. 2019). Limited opportunities for employment, socio-economic deprivation and gendered poverty mean that some young women are forced into commercial or transactional sex (Dube 2020, 53–54; Moss et al. 2019; Ni Raghallaigh, Morton, and Allen 2017; Osthus and Sewpaul 2014; Skobi and Makofane 2017, 230; Thabane 2017, 1623). Transactional sex must be understood in a complex context related to poverty and gender: for example, female youth living on the streets of Durban used transactional sex to survive in the difficult situation, but at the same time, a male partner can provide care and protection for their female partner (Osthus and Sewpaul 2014). On the other hand, even though there are few options for girls who live on the street, girls can rationalize commercial sex as a way to manage their lives (Moss et al. 2019, 155). Therefore, the reasons for commercial or transactional sex are not only economic needs, but also emotional needs, such as feeling uncared at home when the families' resources are used for material survival (Hill et al. 2021, 111). Gender and age are defined as a structural category associated with geographic and economic power relations, as well as emotional needs and social ties.

### **Emphasis on and recommendations for social work practice with women**

Insufficient resources and poverty reduced social workers' opportunities to work constructively in African countries (Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga 2017). Social work was found to be a female-dominated occupational group whose political inclusion has been weakened by gender-based discrimination (Setlalentoa and Segun 2017). The meaning of gender was, therefore, significant in the lives of women and social workers alike, which reflected other aspects of social inequality. Structural inequality must be dismantled on various levels, and social workers should critically examine their activities and attitudes in the light of gender and assess the gender impact of measures. For example, providing to land is not always sufficient if it is directed to the family in general, because it will often be controlled by the man in the family (Mwenyango and Palattiyil 2019, 1542). It is therefore important to promote women's economic opportunities, for example, supporting women's cooperation and women's economic agency, such as reducing structural and normative barriers to women's economic empowerment (Boateng 2021a, 2021b; Raniga 2017; see also Leburu-Masigo, Maforah, and Mohlatlole 2019, 13451).

Social work in African countries should be understood as wide-ranging advocacy, where the significance of local laws and politics must be acknowledged as well as human rights and citizenship-based empowering (Amenuke-Edusei and Birore 2020, 771; Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga

2017; Nyahunda, Matlakala, and Makhubele 2020, 14; Raniga 2017, 217; Salim and Lombard 2020, 197; Setlalentoa and Segun 2017; Sobantu 2020, 64). At the same time, environmental justice issues must be considered in social work practice (Nyahunda, Matlakala, and Makhubele 2020, 14). Many social work practices described in the data were at the meso level, where community-based support and an understanding of community dynamics could enable an empowering approach to the work (Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko 2021, 72; Kusemwa and Tanga 2020; Oware 2020; Van Raemdonck, Seedat, and Raeymaeckers 2016). Among other matters, this involved promoting women's rights to inheritance and land ownership through community-based activities during which the topic could be discussed (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019). With this in mind, social work should consider political advocacy on a macro level, where social workers are active citizens and political activists (Setlalentoa and Segun 2017).

Women's lived experience of GBV shows up unequal social structures, but women still have agency in coping in the oppressive situation (Swart 2013). Studies examining GBV relied on a perspective that was based on the victim's resources and was associated with the concepts of empowerment, resilience, strength-based and survival (e.g. Leburu-Masigo, Maforah, and Mohlatlole 2019; Walker-Williams and Fouché 2017). The practice that emphasized resources, strength-based and resilience had some elements in common with Western individual-centred work (Hutchinson 2019). In the context of African countries, the question is about what the concepts of survival and resources have to offer in the lives of some individuals who do not have access to basic human needs (see Mofokeng and Green 2015, 51). For instance, there is relatively little knowledge on food insecurity as an issue in social work practice (Icheria, Carbonatto, and Nontembeko 2021, 70), and less privileged socio-economic areas relate to how women can cope emotionally for grieving (Human et al. 2014, 577). Therefore, in addition to psychosocial support, the material opportunities in women's lives must be reinforced (see Swart 2013, 49).

These criticisms aside, the data showed that resilience and survival were also interpreted from an ecological perspective, which meant social workers observing the life of women as part of the environment and the community (Dube 2020, 49; Slabbert 2017a). From this perspective, the life purposes and survival strategies of individuals were constructed as an integral part of the environment (Hutchinson 2019; Moss et al. 2019; Slabbert 2017a). Community work can improve awareness about violence and harmful contexts such as patriarchal structures (Van Raemdonck, Seedat, and Raeymaeckers 2016). In a group of women who had experienced violence, shared experiences allowed them to disengage from the violence (Slabbert 2017a, 10; see also McLea and Mayers 2017; Walker-Williams and Fouché 2017). In other words, the resource-based perspective and community empowerment was justified by pointing out that social work often focused only on keeping vulnerable groups alive and on their momentary survival, even though factors improving the quality of life should be considered in the long run (e.g. Kusemwa and Tanga 2020; Walker-Williams and Fouché 2017).

Factors associated with spirituality were also present in the analysed studies. Culturally sensitive social work should consider how spirituality can improve women's survival (McLea and Mayers 2017). Communal traditions and spiritual practices were perceived as factors that supported individual wellbeing, and their significance was further emphasized among marginalized individuals (McLea and Mayers 2017; see also Moss et al. 2019, 157). Studies questioned the view of religion as an institution that only subordinates women; in contrast, they showed that spiritual practices reinforced women's agency and improved their quality of life. According to Swart (2013, 44), faith was the main coping strategy for women who had an experience of GBV. Women who had experienced violence in a close relationship preferred to seek help from a priest instead of the authorities, and going to church was perceived as a factor that enhanced wellbeing (Slabbert 2017a, 8; see also McLea and Mayers 2017; Corbin and Hall 2019, 927). According to Thabane (2017, 1625), for some women in apparel industry who were HIV-positive often perceived attending church as the only meaningful way to spend their free time.

Age and gender were approached as factors enabling ‘peerness’: teenage girls who had had a child experienced loneliness and stigmatization, but peer groups organized by social workers improved their self-esteem (Skobi and Makofane 2017). In other words, it is possible to consider gender-specific questions in practices related to community social work and peerness, and harness them to improve wellbeing. It is also important to have an understanding of girls’ sexual health from both a financial and emotional needs (Hill et al. 2021, 111), and to recognize sexual health issues from the view of gendered inequality, for instance in the case of homelessness (Moss et al. 2019; Osthus and Sewpaul 2014). In this vulnerable context, there is a need to take into account multi-professional practices: for example, cooperation between social workers, health care, educational professionals and other stakeholders (Moss et al. 2019, 159; see also Dube 2020, 58; Skobi and Makofane 2017, 242). As a conclusion, gender is an analytical category that makes it possible to examine social questions from the different perspective of life situation and cycle.

## Discussion

This article shows the importance of examining female-specific views and social work together: it can improve social work practices to become more gender-sensitive and shows the significance of the female-specific perspective of social work in the African context. As a conclusion, we suggest the following ideas for Nordic social work practice and discipline:

- Social workers must understand global inequality issues, such as poverty and climate crisis, from a female-specific perspective.
- In a resource-poor environment, the actual and material possibilities for living must be taken into account. This also requires changes in the one-sided economic and individual-oriented thinking of social work.
- Social work should adopt women’s world of experience and communal meanings as a starting point. Social work with women and girls can take into account the possibilities of spirituality and peerness.
- Sexual rights and health issues must be included in social work education. In this context, female-specific perspectives can be studied from different life cycles of an individual, such as youth, parenthood, widowhood and ageing. Health must be approached holistically, taking into account cultural practices and beliefs.

The studies showed that the meaning of gender, as other social categories in social work, should be understood as an element of unequal structures. At the same time, as African feminists and researchers emphasized we should avoid an impression of women living outside the Western world as victims of oppression without any agency and activism in the surrounding society (e.g. Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021, 3). Rather as Gatwiri and Tusasiirwe (2022) mention, African women’s knowledge, experiences and agency challenge the Western individualistic view and offer holistic knowledge of collectively and resistance. Examining social work in African countries can help to increase awareness of the significance of female-specific issues in unequal structures, while social work view based on agency, communality and peerness can dismantle gender-based discrimination.

However, the studies often discussed female-specific issues from the perspective of motherhood, heterosexual relationship, and in relation to men. There is a risk that being a mother and a wife are seen as the only ways to represent women and gender roles in African countries (see Beoku-Betts 2021, 46). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the studies shows female-specific view also from broader context, for example, relative to generations, age, community and housing. Based on the literature review, there are many practical examples and studies of improving women’s rights and attention to women’s different backgrounds and positions in social work in sub-Saharan Africa.

Resource-based practices aimed to strengthen the position of women, and spirituality and communality were perceived as important factors that improve wellbeing in the life of women.

Moreover, perspective of sex should not be limit only to (Western-centred) monogamous, heteronormative and romantic relationships. Rather is important to understand, for example, sex with multiple partners and transactional sex from wider social, economic and cultural context. The studies indicate that promoting sexual health improved women's right to self-determination and reduced the risk of HIV. However, African women's sexual and reproductive health has been a central issue in development policy which has also been criticized for its Eurocentric perspective in looking at population growth without the colonial context, and ignoring social and cultural conditions (see Ampofo et al. 2004, 689–691). We, therefore, propose that Nordic social work education should enhance the awareness of sexual health that can facilitate the fulfilment of human rights as well as understand health holistically, taking into account cultural practices, historical context and social realities.

As we mentioned at the beginning, Nordic social work education and the academic field need critical thinking on the hegemony of Western knowledge and silencing of alternative knowledge on social work, which does not correspond to the reality of the global environment in which social workers operate (also Clarke, Leece, and Ranta-Tyrkkö 2024; Ranta-Tyrkkö 2011). Findings of this study highlighted the challenges of individual-centred social work when it ignores structural poverty and the importance of community. One-sided economic growth or neo-liberal thinking was not answer to improving women's empowerment. Rather anti-racist and anti-capitalist approaches can address deeper inequalities to resist, for instance, gendered inequity and GBV (Ossome 2020, 165). Also, the Western orientation in social work does not always recognize challenges such as ecological crises and global inequalities (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi 2021). Studies of social work in African countries show that the ecological crisis and poverty have the painful impact on women. Better knowledge of social work approaches and phenomena in African countries from a female-specific perspective can support the Nordic social work academic field to understand environmental issues and gendered poverty from the ecological perspective.

However, the purpose of the article was not to create an essential and binary setting for Nordic and African social work; instead, the goal was to obtain research knowledge about social work in African countries, as examining such knowledge can provide new openings for international dialogue and research on Nordic social work. For example, GBV is a common human rights issue in the Nordic context as well and there is a need to pay attention to women as service users in different welfare service contexts (Kuronen and Virokannas 2021). However, the knowledge of African gender researchers and feminists is often overlooked, not cited, or even discriminated, which maintains the hegemonic Western production of knowledge (Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021, 15). It is important to develop gender-sensitive social work practice to take into account the diversity of social work: based on the literature review, spirituality, peernees and community can be factors for the agency of women who have experienced GBV. On the other hand, we should avoid thinking that all women share similar experiences of oppression in African countries. Instead, gender-sensitive social work must consider the historical context of the privileged position of whiteness and the middle-class social work profession in the Nordic welfare services.

## Limitations

The studies approached gender primarily from the perspective of heterosexual relationships, and there was little mention of LGBTQI+ people. In the future, the relationship between social work and female-specific issues could be analysed more intensively in terms of the diversity of gender and sexuality. In addition, the material in this article does not geographically cover all of sub-Saharan Africa, and the results cannot be generalized to all women's lives and social work practice in African countries.

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