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Social protection measures utilised by older widows in Kamuli, Uganda: An African feminist perspective

Deborah ATWINE, Mziwandile SOBANTU and Tanusha RANIGA

ABSTRACT

Globally, social protection has become a key policy trend to afford the 'greying' population an opportunity to age with dignity amidst escalating nutrition and health care costs. As people are living longer, countries are increasingly urged to come up with concrete social protection measures that will promote equal opportunities particularly for older persons. Despite the progress made by the Ugandan government, social protection policies are arguably not gender sensitive. Informed by the African feminist perspective, this paper explores and describes the social protection measures that are utilised by older widows in Kamuli, Uganda. The African feminist perspective provides a contextualised understanding of the vulnerability facing older widows against the backdrop of the interrelated forms of injustice that confront them. Data was collected from 16 widows and 4 key informants through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, respectively. The findings revealed that older widows in particular face a nexus of related challenges that puts them at a higher risk of poverty and deprivation. The older widows use formal social protection measures, while all also utilising indigenous pathways. Particularly for social work practice and education, this paper recommends greater sensitivity by social workers and policy to the social and economic realities of older widows in addition to the structural barriers that perpetuate their disadvantage.

KEY TERMS: African feminist, gender, older widows, poverty, social protection

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INTRODUCTION

Social protection systems have been implemented globally as strategies to prevent and reduce poverty among older people and other vulnerable groups. They have yielded positive outcomes in terms of food security, household income and access to social services. For example, programmes such as cash and asset transfers, as well as public works have been implemented in both low and middle-income countries since the mid-1990s and have registered noticeably positive results. However, some of these social protection programmes have been criticised for paying little, if any attention to gender- and age-related risks and vulnerabilities. First this paper covers the background of social protection and how this intersects with African indigenous social protection systems. Next, African feminism is discussed as a theoretical framework followed social protection in the precolonial era. Methods and materials, results, discussion, and conclusion are also discussed before the recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Particularly in Africa, older women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, and experience multiple vulnerabilities that are related to age, in addition to the undue burden for some caring for orphaned and vulnerable children (Nangia, 2016). Worsening the circumstances of many older women on the continent is the poor health and unequal access or lack of access to land and inheritance of assets from their spouse's family (Peterman et al. 2017). A focused attention on older women within the growing adult population is needed because of the gendered risks and vulnerability of women and because women live longer than men (UNFPA & HelpAge International, 2012). In South Africa, for example, cases of elderly abuse, neglect, rape and all kinds of violent crime are skewed against older persons (Sobantu, 2021). The existing policies and legislation on older adults in Uganda and most Africa countries pay little attention to the disparity in vulnerabilities between older women and men; therefore, many older women remain poor, abused and discriminated against.

The family structure and roles have changed immensely, and these affect choices and quality of care, support and protection for older people and widows. Family roles are no longer premised on African traditions and culture, as in the precolonial era; and this arguably creates uncertainty about who must provide care for the family and support the vulnerable, especially in times of crisis (Flynn, 2020). In a traditional African family, children take care of the older people and, in turn, the older people care for grandchildren and are the custodians of wisdom (Mupedziswa, & Ntseane, 2013). Colonialism and neoliberal capital doctrine has disintegrated most African societies, resulting in many in the younger generation and some families being unable to understand age and ageing, and thus not appreciating older people, who are considered burdensome and as people waiting to die (Sobantu, 2021). This is compounded by very few (if any) social protection measures that cater to the specific needs of older adults and older widows (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022).

Uganda has several formal social protection programmes, but this paper focuses on the Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE) programme, because it is the only formal social assistance programme that targets older people. SAGE was formally launched in 2010 by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) under the Expanding Social Protection Programme (Haynes, & Merttens, 2017). The chief aim was to mitigate chronic poverty to improve the quality of life of older people (65 years and older) and families without gainful income (Haynes, & Merttens, 2017; Nalwanga, & Lund, 2018). After a successful pilot of SAGE in 14 districts, the government decided to roll it out to the entire country, with all people who are 80 and older receiving 25000 Uganda shillings (approximately US\$6.50 per month as of 01 December 2023). There is plenty of evidence that has a positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022; Nalwanga, & Lund, 2018). However, it has been criticised as being too little to meet the needs of older people in the absence of other supportive social networks. Consequently, all beneficiaries rely on the indigenous support systems; but these are also dwindling, chiefly due to the interrelated effects of capitalism (Kasiram, & Hölscher, 2015). Holmes (2019) posits that formal social protective interventions must factor in the realities of gender inequality and unequal power relations and patriarchy. This paper aims to explore the social protection systems that are utilised by older widows and, in the process, analyse how these can be integrated.

AFRICAN FEMINISM AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Manning (2021), African feminism encompasses discourse relating to collegiality, understanding and confronting the intersectionality of challenges that constraint women empowerment mostly in the developing world. In other words, Global South indigenous identity and providing space for voiceless women from the Global South is imperative to this conceptual understanding. It is premised on the belief that male hegemony is reinforced through western liberal policies that perpetuate gender inequality and provide little space for addressing the nuances of the origin and sustenance of this inequality. This lens calls for gender social justice that prioritises the

opinions of girls and women (Chilisa, & Ntseane, 2010). Gatwiri and Tusasiirwe (2022, p. 124) argue that the framework is:

... a collection of multiple knowledges that are focused on returning to our forgotten and often marginalised ways of being, doing and knowing and reclaiming a somehow lost or disfigured identity which was and is continually altered by colonialism and its ever-lingering presence in Africa.

As such, African feminism advocates a platform for marginalised women in Africa, such as older widows, to participate in policy design and implementation. African feminism seeks to critically analyse and where possible target western feminist influence that also assumes homogeneity of all women (Chilisa, & Ntseane, 2010; Manning, 2021). In addition, it focuses on the challenges that vulnerable women in Africa face in contemporary times, and how they overcome them using ingenuity. It is worth noting that African feminism does not devalue western knowledge but critiques its tendency to dominate and override other views, especially indigenous views, as being traditional and less valued. Furthermore, it locates some traditional practices embedded in African culture as reinforcers of gender repression and feminisation of poverty (Chilisa, & Ntseane, 2010). In this paper, the lens enriches the understanding of the social, cultural, historical, and political experiences of older widows pertaining to social protection measures. It also enhances the understanding that measures meant for all older people may not be responsive to the needs of older widows. Thus, the need for integrated social protection interventions that are formal, and community based.

SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

As a prelude to the postcolonial challenges confronting older women, it is perhaps germane to briefly discuss how African families cared for their own before colonisation, with a focus on Uganda. Social protection in Uganda during pre-colonial times was strongly rooted in local institutions and traditions (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022). The traditional extended family, clans and mutual support systems in Uganda - as in most of sub-Saharan Africa - provided for the needs of family and community members in times of adversity (Barya, 2011). Care and support for vulnerable groups in society was everyone's responsibility and was deeply rooted in Ubuntu. Life was heavily influenced by religion and spirituality, i.e. a belief in the supernatural powers that influenced behaviour and attitude towards social care and support (Ahenkan, 2018; Mabvurira, & Makhubele, 2018). There was a strong belief that failure to support family and the community would result in bad luck from ancestors (Ahenkan, 2018).

Igboin (2011) notes the influence of colonialism and foreign religion, which 'demonised' African values, beliefs, and spirituality. Colonialism undermined the traditional system of kings and chiefs, who were the custodians of the norms and values that informed African indigenous social protection systems (AISPS), and were eventually outlawed after independence (De Coninck, & Drani, 2009). Additionally, Christian missionaries devalued traditional medicine, polygamous marriage, traditional religions, traditional care and support, in favour of modern medicine, monogamous marriage and institutional care (Chi, & Urdal, 2018). Igboin (2011) and Smith and Rasool (2020) assert that current social protection policy and programmes in Africa are heavily influenced by Eurocentric philosophy of individualism and the market, which disregards the values of reciprocity, social capital, solidarity, and community ownership and responsibility (Atwine, Raniga, 2021). Most of the African population lived and worked in rural areas and survived on traditional social protection systems. As rural areas became urbanised and industrialised, people migrated to look for paid employment, which weakened kinship ties and social cohesion (Barya, 2011).

Yet, indigenous social protection systems remain the primary source of social protection and support in Uganda, and in many other post-colonial African nation (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022; Noyoo, & Sakala, 2018). They have withstood the test of time in dealing with the devastating effects of social and health crises such as HIV and AIDS, rural-urban migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and limited government support (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022). Traditional social support systems have evolved over time to suit current circumstance; nevertheless, they are still guided by the African values and principles of reciprocity, solidarity, sharing and mutual trust (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022). These principles keep them intact and also determine the utilisation of formal social protection services (Vincent, & Cull, 2009). Just like other African countries, Uganda has embraced the implementation and expansion of social protection for their citizens (Mubangizi, 2018; Nalwanga, & Lund, 2018) at the expense of indigenous systems, which are slowly weakening, while yet being the primary source of social protection for the vulnerable in society, such as older people.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative exploratory and descriptive approach with the intention of gaining in-depth understanding of the social protection measures that are utilised by older widows who are also beneficiaries of the SAGE social protection programme in Nawanyago sub-county in Kamuli District in Kampala. Using non-random snowball sampling, the study selected 30 older women (65 and older), who were widows, resided permanently in Kamuli District, beneficiaries of the SAGE programme, household heads, available and willing to participate in the study. According to Creswell (2013) and Patton (2015), these were determined as being able to provide the most relevant data consonant with the aim and objectives of the study. The local council chairperson acted as a gatekeeper into the community.

The study utilised two focus group discussions (FGDs) with eight elderly widows each, and face-to-face in-depth individual interviews with four key informants (KIs). The KIs included one official from the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), local council leaders, and a social worker. An interview schedule with open-ended questions allowed for probing and flexibility during the semi-structured interviewing process (Finch, Lewis, & Turley 2014). The FGD discussion guide listed the broad themes for discussion, in line with the objectives of the study and served as a checklist to ensure that all relevant themes and emerging sub-themes were followed through (Finch et al. 2014). The individual interviews lasted 45-60 minutes on average, while the FGDs lasted about 90 minutes. Interviews with older widows were conducted in Lusoga, a vernacular language that is used in Kamuli District. Both the principal researcher and the study participants are conversant with the language. Besides field notes, an audio recorder was used to record the interview discussions to capture the exact conversations, with the consent of the participants. This is in line with the Afrocentric framework, which is premised on representing African voices (Pellerin, 2012). More importantly, the qualitative approach and the Afrocentric framework allowed the participants to explain the linkages between African indigenous social protection systems and the SAGE benefits.

All interviews were transcribed and translated from Lusoga into English. Thematic content analysis was then used to analyse the data, as per by the five-step process suggested by Creswell and Poth (Creswell, & Poth, 2018). The five-step process is as follows: managing and organising data; reading and ‘memoing’ emergent ideas; describing and classifying codes into themes; developing and assessing interpretations; description of the themes. Memoing and reading was done to become familiar with the data. This was followed by coding the data, with similar codes being combined into larger categories and sub-categories identified by new or focused codes relevant to the study. Developing and assessing interpretations was guided by the existing literature about formal and indigenous social protection systems, and African feminism theory.

Regarding ethics, the study obtained clearance (REC-01-109-2019) from the University of Johannesburg’s Research and Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Humanities. The ethics of care applicable to working with elderly people were taken into consideration throughout the recruitment and data collection process. Patience, respect and ensuring that the older people understood the study was ensured, with the principal researcher explaining the participant information sheet that was shared with the elderly widows during the recruitment process. The participant information sheet (PIS) was written in the vernacular language, and the researcher responded to the questions posed by the elderly widows during the recruitment and data collection processes. No-one was coerced into participating in the study (Strydom, & Roestenburg, 2021). Dual consent for participation and digitally recording the interviews was obtained through respectful discussion and negotiation. It was also useful to obtain continuous verbal consent during the data collection process, so that the participants were aware of their involvement at every stage of the data collection process. Furthermore, they were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity of participation and that their responses would not be traced back to them, as pseudonyms would be used instead of their real names (Strydom, & Roestenburg, 2021). At regular intervals during the interviews, the primary researcher reminded the participants that they could withdraw at any stage or not respond to questions that they were not comfortable answering. To avoid creating expectations among the participants, the researchers explained that there was no benefit to be obtained from participating in the study.

RESULTS

The study aimed to explore the experiences of elderly widows who were beneficiaries of the SAGE social assistance programme. An Afrocentric lens was employed, and the study focussed on the intersection of this formal social protection mechanism with indigenous pathways. It is germane to first discuss the risks and vulnerabilities that confront and constrain older women in general, before dealing with their experiences of the AISPS and the SAGE programme. The discussion integrates literature and uses some verbatim responses to amplify the participants’ voices. Their real names have been replaced by pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants and guarantee confidentiality.

Risks and vulnerabilities of elderly widows

The participants revealed that they have little or no control over land. They reported that land has become scarce due to commercial farming of sugarcane, moreover they have less control over how it is utilised. In addition, customary laws were framed on patriarchy and consequently denied them access to land. The findings reveal that the heir to their deceased husband, who is usually the eldest son, or the brother of the husband takes ownership and control of land when the household head (the man) dies. The older widows who had no land reported that their land was sold by the children after the death of their father, leaving the widow with a very small piece of land, or nothing, as illustrated by the following narratives from the older women:

The sugarcane plantation is not mine; that land was passed on to the children when my husband died. But they sold to sugarcane growers! Moreover, it is where their father was buried. Imagine selling the remains of their father! ... Children have become dictators: they think now that we have aged, we cannot reason. They want to reason for us. (Happy)

When my husband died, land was divided among the sons; each wife was paired with her children. I was left in the care of my oldest son. Unfortunately, along the way, he sold the land without my knowledge, including all my gardens. I am struggling for survival of grandchildren. I use the Social SAGE money to rent land for cultivation, but the landlord gave us notice to vacate the land after this season. I don't know what I will do. (Peace)

The findings also revealed that the changing structure of the family poses serious social and economic risks to the elderly widows. While some participants said that taking care of their younger dependents was fulfilling, some reported that it was burdensome, given the diminishing energy related to their age, and especially those that received minimal financial and social support from their extended families. Those who were living alone were lonely and distressed as shown in the excerpts below:

I take care of my elder sister; she does not have her own children. The pain of not giving birth - hmmm! Moreover, she is disabled and sickly. I look after her with the help of my daughter that I live with. My other children live in Jinja town, and they send us food and other necessities. I have decided to take on this responsibility as my relatives do not want to take care of her. But I do it along with my daughter. She washes and does housework, I clean her and feed her. (Jolly)

I have become the mother and father to these children. I am the only parent they have, yet I am very weak and sickly. They are young and still have many needs. They need good food, beddings, clothes, which I do not have. My nephew's wife, who is my neighbour, helps me out; but they are entirely my obligation. (Hope)

I took her up when she was 6 months, when her mother abandoned her. The mother separated with my son and remarried another man. She has never come back to check on her daughter. I took her up since then up to now. The father also is not bothered about her since he has other children with his current wife. (Blessing)

This is common in many African societies and families, with most older women shouldering the undue burden of care due to the impact of HIV and AIDS, while older widowed women are less taken care of (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022). Moreover, vulnerability and poverty are more pronounced among older people due to their dependency on subsistence farming, which is affected by climate vagaries (UBOS, 2017).

Indigenous social support systems

The older widows utilised various indigenous social protection measures, including extended family and kinship ties; community and neighbourhood, and faith-based support, mostly from church. Extended family and kinship ties were the most common, with 83% of the participants utilising this form. They indicated that their biological children sent cash remittances, food, medical care, provided physical care (especially for the frail and those with disabilities), and general physical security and comfort that comes from knowing someone is around in case there is a problem. See the excerpts below that represent these different support systems.

I stay with my daughter. She is my only child, and she takes good care of me. She prepares all the meals before she goes to work in town, where she has been working for a long time. She prepares my porridge and lunch and returns early and prepares dinner. (Favour)

Because she is the one that is taking care of me, I am like her child. Being too old means becoming a baby again. She is like my parent, despite being my daughter. I rely on her for everything. (Fatuma)

I have many relatives, but they also have their problems. My brother is still alive and has many children. They are willing to help, but they have a lot of responsibilities, paying school fees especially. (Agnes)

I belong to a community burial association. As a woman, according to our community norm, when someone dies, I carry food to the funeral, participate in cooking and grieving with the deceased's family. The other day, when my grandchild died, they were also her with me. They comforted me...spent some good days here with me. (Angel)

If you lack a good language, you cannot eat. But if you speak well with your neighbours, you cannot sleep hungry. (Aisha)

When all my brothers died, I was so sad; I was always in tears and life was meaningless. Then my fellow churchgoers came to pray with me. We prayed and I got saved. (Mary)

The other day I was almost dying in the house alone. My church members mobilised funds and bought me medication and food. (Mastula)

The prayer group usually goes around the community, praying and comforting the sick and bereaved families in our community. (Zaituni)

Poverty, immigration and individualism make children and close family members very unreliable in supporting their older people (Maniragaba et al., 2018). Another layer of support, which includes the community and a faith-based organisation, becomes central to cushioning the older widows against social and economic challenges.

The SAGE formal social protection

All the older women who were interviewed were beneficiaries of the formal SAGE social protection programme. The research findings reveal that as much as the SAGE grant targets older people, it is hardly utilised by them, because they do not live as individuals, rather, they live and survive as members of a larger extended family and community. Thus, it benefits the entire family for most of the beneficiaries. While the grant has had a positive impact in their lives, such as improved access to food, they reported that it was inadequate to meet their needs, given their responsibilities as household heads. The following narrative extracts explain this.

I am chronically sick, and I use all the SAGE money for my medication. When you go to government hospital, they will tell you to buy medication for yourself. All my resources and those of my children are spent on my medication. What can this money do without my family support? I would be happy if the government also thought about my family members who take care of me, or at least pay school fees for my grandchildren. (Pearl)

I spend all my money on medication. It is my sister-in-law who gives me food and takes care of my other needs. Medication is very expensive, unlike our traditional medicine - it was strong and affordable. There were herbalists for every disease, they specialised in various fields - childbirth, snake bites, paediatricians, immunisation for diseases and so on. But modern medication is expensive, even when a patient dies, they still give you an enormous bill to pay. (Precious)

This programme segregates other family members. Assuming they gave a cow to every household with an older widow, the entire family would benefit, because with just money, these grandmothers cannot even cook for themselves. Most of them are disabled and can hardly help themselves. Even picking money, they go with someone. The family remains central to survival and livelihood of the older persons; so family programmes should be thought about. (Key Informant)

The social protection in Uganda should not focus only on western dominated policies; rather, it should rethink the needs and challenges of older women from the African feminism lens, which calls for understanding their family structures, daily lived challenges, and their creativity and resilience in their struggle for survival. Western dominated theories and research tend to be silent on salient forces that disadvantage women, because they assume that older women are a homogenous group and so their concerns can be solved by a single grant. The SAGE programme has improved the welfare of older people, although it is inadequate to meet their overriding needs in the absence of other social protection safety nets and services, such as social work, health, housing, and funding the education of their grandchildren. Policy makers therefore need to rethink a gender-sensitive social protection

system that focuses on the needs of older widows, and addresses their multi-layered challenges, rather than bundling all older people together.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that elderly widows are constrained by a nexus of social and economic challenges. These emanate from feminisation of poverty owing to interrelated factors such as patriarchy and excluding women from participating in the economy. While these are common in other contexts, they are dominant in Uganda and other African societies, where women are denied access to land and property after their husband's death. That is why an Afrocentric understanding of their challenges is important, and of how formal and indigenous systems can work together to mitigate the problems that confront them. Climate change, immigration, globalisation, the impact of geopolitical conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict demands that government come up with initiatives that will protect the rights of the poor and vulnerable individuals such as older widows. In Uganda, there is a need to make constitutional provisions compatible with the current reality of unequal access to property rights for men and women, because of cultural dictates that disadvantage women (Atwine, & Raniga, 2022). These practices perpetuate women's structural vulnerability, as they cannot make key decisions on land use, which compromises their empowerment and violates their human rights. An African feminism perspective in social protection should lead to gender-sensitive policies and programmes and should address the negative forces that disadvantage women. Social protection should be transformative and empowering to women so that they have control over circumstances that affect them. The African feminist perspective calls for the participation of older people in designing and implementing policies that aim to benefit the vulnerable groups such as older widows and older women. Older widows suffer from boredom, loneliness, and emotional and financial abuse, as some are left alone, while others are compelled to divert their SAGE payout to cater for the needs of younger children whom they are left to take care of (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2015). This means that the SAGE grant will need strengthening social intergenerational and relational ties while for those who are frail, institutional care may be an option. There is evidence that shows that programmes that make younger generations understand age and ageing can help them appreciate the value of older people and the need for social care and community support, particularly for older widows whose resources are dwindling due to multiple interrelated factors. Such non-statutory efforts resonate with the Ubuntu philosophy, which is premised on collective responsibility and sharing, instead of on individualism (Mabasa, 2020). In addition, religion and spirituality not only obligates care, kindness and concern, but it also fosters emotional healing, social order and material support for the poor in the community. This aligns with traditional African values of respect and care for elders in society (Aju, & Beddewela, 2020). The implication is that governments must invest and integrate these indigenous measures to ensure the holistic and sustainable social and economic wellbeing of older widows. The immense role played by indigenous support systems means that government must improve capacity in terms of these measures, since most (if not all) older widows utilise them. The African feminism perspective seeks to integrate locally generated knowledge and solutions in policy and planning while reducing the dominant western feminist influence that assumes universality of circumstances of all women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings and the discussion, we make the following recommendations:

1. There is an urgent need for the recognition and strengthening of the indigenous knowledge and the AISPS as part of efforts to promote the wellbeing of the vulnerable such as older widows.
2. Governments must incorporate the indigenous knowledge and AISPS into designing the formal social protection systems.
3. Due to the interrelated exclusion of women, the social protection measures must be gender aware to promote equal access to health and nutrition opportunities for older widows.
4. Since the SAGE programme excludes many older people (as it targets those people who are 80 and older), indigenous systems that target the majority should be supported to increase coverage.
5. Policy makers must learn to develop bottom-up policies that are informed by the specific needs of the targeted populations from the grassroots, rather than sitting in boardrooms and creating non-responsive policies.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an account of social protection in the pre-colonial era and discusses the impact that colonialism has had on traditional social protection arrangements. The results presented in this paper add clarity to the existing large body of evidence that highlights on the challenges faced by older people and the existing social protection measures in Uganda. These findings support the views about the inadequacies of the formal

social protection system that is dominated by western ideologies. On the other hand, the authors posit that both the formal and the indigenous social protection systems are better viewed and utilised as complementary to each other. Social work prides itself as a profession that is guided by the principles of human rights and social justice, and thus must always ensure that in the application of these systems, the rights and dignity of women particularly widows are protected. This is imperative within the shifting social and economic realities in almost all societies, where the likelihood of marginalisation of older persons and widows is high.

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