



Experiences and Agency of South African Black Rural Women of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa

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Abstract: This article seeks to highlight the experiences and agency of KwaZulu-Natal women through the theoretical lenses of African Feminism and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), foregrounding intersectional dynamics of gender, class, and rurality. The paper explores how rural women negotiate structural poverty, climate vulnerability, gender inequality, and socio-cultural constraints while exercising agency in livelihood strategies. Hence, it focuses on rural women's ability to survive in environments beset by poverty and limited resources, and deems this laudable. The study adopted a qualitative approach and was guided by a phenomenological research design. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with eighteen (18) participants who were purposively selected. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that rural women articulate diverse self-definitions and community roles shaped by intersecting socio-economic and environmental factors, and that climate change exacerbates livelihood insecurity, gendered labour burdens, and resource scarcity. The findings also revealed that although climate change negatively affected rural women, they demonstrated agency through collective and individual livelihood strategies, including stokvel participation, informal women's credit clubs, craft and agricultural micro-enterprises, and adaptive water-harvesting practices. The study contributes empirically to African feminist scholarship by illustrating how rural women's agency is embedded in relational, communal, and ecological contexts, and extends the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach by integrating feminist insights on power, patriarchy, and gendered resource access. Policy implications include the need for gender-responsive rural development, support for climate adaptation, and recognition of informal women-led economic institutions in national development planning.

Keywords: Black Rural Women, Resilience, KwaZulu-Natal Women, Lenses of African Feminism, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, Gender Inequality, Socio-Cultural Constraints

1. Introduction

Even though several African states are signatories, Onyenechere (2009) and Seekings (2016) point out that women continue to be marginalised in areas such as employment, access to resources, income, education, decision-making, social services, and networks. South Africa is not excluded in this regard. Although South Africa's policy discourse emphasises fair allocation of resources and a more balanced distribution of power and caregiving duties, the envisaged results have yet to materialise. For example, Tyekela & Amoah (2021) and World Bank Group (2018) declare that the slow and ineffective land reform, the inadequate execution of health and social service policies, and more general problems like unemployment and corruption are the main causes of South Africa's inability to attain equitable power and resource distribution despite policy rhetoric. The persistent marginalisation of women in economic activities has also been highlighted by Segalo (2013). Decrying the marginalisation of women, points out that women's stories remain untold, as their lived experiences are often concealed because of the few platforms available to talk about them. These structural constraints are embedded in broader macro-level dynamics, including neoliberal development policies, uneven integration into the global political economy, and persistent colonial and apartheid legacies that continue to shape socio-economic hierarchies and spatial inequalities in rural South Africa.

Previous studies revealed that Black South African rural women suffer from the combined effects of systemic oppression based on geography, gender, and race (Nanthambwe, 2025; Maleka et al., 2023). However, they demonstrate strong agency and resilience through economic resourcefulness, community organising, and upholding important social roles despite tremendous adversity. However, existing scholarship has insufficiently interrogated how local patriarchal systems, customary-based power relations, and colonial governance structures intersect with class and ethnicity to shape both constraints and possibilities for rural women's agency. The interrelationships among gender, class, ethnicity, and spatial marginality remain under-theorised analytically, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal's rural contexts, where customary authority structures coexist with constitutional democratic governance. Hence, this study adopts a feminist and intersectional epistemological stance, understanding rural women's lived experiences as situated knowledge rather than merely empirical data. It is submitted that women's narratives are understood as forms of knowledge embedded in daily life and as ways agency is negotiated within structural constraints.

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Because South African Black rural women experience a unique intersection of gender, race, and class inequalities that significantly affect their everyday lives and capacity to thrive, it is imperative to investigate their experiences and agency. In addition, studying the encounters and agency of Black South African rural women is crucial for highlighting their struggles and resilience, influencing policy, encouraging social change, and ensuring their contributions are acknowledged. Understanding their lived experiences goes beyond statistics, revealing the human impact of systemic issues and likely guiding more effective, inclusive, and rights-based interventions. While these women face heightened levels of poverty, limited access to healthcare and education, and gender-based violence, they also exhibit significant agency through leadership, community involvement, and survival strategies.

While previous studies have documented poverty, gender-based violence, and limited-service delivery in rural South Africa, they often focus on policy outcomes or socio-economic indicators, with limited attention to how rural women interpret, negotiate, and resist these conditions in their daily lives (Kehler, 2001; Dunkle, Jewkes, Brown, Gray, McIntyre, & Harlow, 2004; May, 2005; Gradin, 2013; Rammutla, & Sundani, 2024). There is also a paucity of qualitative research that foregrounds rural Black women's voices in KwaZulu-Natal, particularly regarding how they mediate agency within intersecting systems of patriarchy, tradition, and post-apartheid state structures. This study contributes conceptually by integrating intersectionality and feminist standpoint theory to analyse agency in rural contexts and empirically by providing in-depth narrative data from rural women in KZN. To get insight into rural women's experiences and how they mediate their agency, the following questions were formulated:

- What characterises the life of a woman in the rural community?
- What are the elements of poverty, climate change, violence, and inequalities that rural women face?
- In what ways do rural women cope with the effects and impacts of poverty, climate change, violence, and inequalities?

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualising African Womanhood, Rurality, and Intersectionality

Across many societies worldwide, widely shared expectations and beliefs about women's qualities, behaviours, and roles shape the social construction of womanhood (Schaan et al., 2016). In addition, Ntseane (2004) and Wodi (2005) argue that in many African contexts, long-standing beliefs and expectations about women are rooted in patriarchal ideologies that can profoundly impact women's health and self-esteem. Specifically, internalising notions of submissiveness and subservience can shape how a woman perceives her societal role, with substantial implications for her sexual and reproductive decisions. In addition, Dunkle et al. (2004) claim that actions influenced by these beliefs may include having unprotected sexual intercourse, engaging in transactional sex, and accepting violence within intimate partnerships. In defining the concept of African womanhood, Segalo (2013) argues that womanhood is often equated with biological femaleness, an association that implicitly assumes motherhood as a defining feature. She further points out that motherhood and nurturing responsibilities consequently serve as primary indicators of what defines women's femininity and womanhood. Decrying the inhumane reference, Segalo (2013) concludes by stating that most childless South African women she conversed with were made to feel inadequate in the absence of biological motherhood, arguing that maternal identity is positioned as a defining marker of femininity, which marginalises childless women.

Mungwini (2008, p. 204) is of the view that "the social construct of womanhood in Africa can be said to have two central defining elements: being a wife and being a mother, or 'belonging' and 'reproducing'". According to him, "playing these two roles requires specific qualities and behaviours in the African patriarchal context" (Mungwini, 2008, p. 204). Mungwini (2008) further argues that women, in their roles as wives or partners, are regarded as primarily responsible for domestic care, family upkeep, and preparing meals. Mungwini (2008) further asserts that the woman is also expected to display subservience and submission in many of her actions, particularly within sexual interactions. Mungwini (2008) again points out that within such a gendered environment, a wife or so-called 'good woman' is viewed as uninformed about sexual activity, with sexuality framed as an obligation to satisfy the man, whenever and however he wishes. However, feminist scholars caution that framing African womanhood primarily through patriarchy risks reproducing essentialist narratives that depict African women as uniformly oppressed and passive. Intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000) emphasises that gender interacts with race, class, age, rurality, and historical inequalities to produce differentiated experiences of power and marginalisation. Applying an intersectional lens is crucial in the South African rural context, where apartheid legacies, land dispossession, labour migration, and uneven development intersect with gender norms. Recent scholarship also complicates the binary of oppression versus agency by highlighting how rural African women negotiate gender norms in everyday practices. For example, O'Laughlin (2007) and Cole, Manuh & Miescher (2007) demonstrate that women strategically navigate patriarchal structures through kinship networks, informal economies, and collective action, thereby reshaping gendered power relations from within. Our findings resonate with this emerging literature, which, as it reveals, although women are aware of these societal perceptions about their womanhood, they, as a form of agency, refute them. This study, therefore, positions rural women not as homogeneous victims of patriarchy but as heterogeneous actors whose agency is shaped by intersecting structural constraints and opportunities.

Thus, it becomes imperative that researchers engage women on perceptions held by their communities, in relation to their own views and lived experiences. In many ways, the KwaZulu-Natal findings of this study align with emerging scholarship that foregrounds women's active economic and social contribution in rural settings, rather than presenting them merely as constrained subjects. Sharaunga and Mudhara (2021), for instance, demonstrate that women in Msinga are not passive recipients of poverty, but strategic economic actors who diversify their livelihood portfolios in ways that directly uplift their households. Their study reveals that women's choices, whether through small-scale trading, cultivation of niche crops, collective savings schemes, or informal service-based micro-enterprises, play a decisive and crucial role in moving families out of poverty. These strategies are neither incidental nor accidental; they reflect deeply considered economic calculus, negotiated within the boundaries of cultural expectations but also subtly transforming them by positioning women as central contributors to household sustenance and stability.

2.2. Rural Socio-Economic Status, Transformation, Migration, and Access to Markets

There have been differing views on the socio-economic position of women in Africa, as exemplified by the scholars cited in the discussion above. In South Africa, despite the official endorsement of gender equality, many women remain marginalised, as gender disparities continue to shape social, economic, and cultural life (Segalo, 2013). Segalo (2013) attributes this situation to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Kiguwa (2006) attributes this situation to patriarchal social structures that obscure women's contributions, a phenomenon observable across various domains, including the church, the home, and the workplace. In a similar vein, Antrobus (2008, p. 3) argues that notions like "free trade and neo-liberalism led to less access and more privatisation, which directly affected women at the grassroots level". With free trade and neo-liberalism, the previously disadvantaged groups, for example, women, are put on the same pedestal as groups that had always enjoyed privileges. Within South Africa, the state faces ongoing challenges in addressing the deep-rooted racial, class-based, and gendered inequalities that stem from colonial and apartheid legacies. However, recent rural studies highlight that migration and market penetration have reshaped gendered household dynamics, often increasing women's economic responsibilities and decision-making power. Studies by Posel (2006) and Francis (2019) show that male labour migration has feminised rural livelihoods, with women increasingly managing farms, remittances, and household economies.

In this regard, Advocate of the High Court of South Africa, Rita Ozoemena (2018, p. 13) emphasises that dismantling obstacles to women's full realisation of their human rights is crucial for broader socio-economic progress. In addition, Kehler (2001) claims that political, social, and economic inequalities are largely driven by intersecting factors of race, class, and gender. Supporting this notion, Pui-Lan (2004) contends that the culturally prescribed roles of women, together with their social standing, directly shape the opportunities available to them for economic involvement. This sentiment is echoed in the African Union Agenda 2063, which decries poor government service delivery and its adverse consequences for women, especially in rural areas. In South Africa, inadequate access to basic services poses significant health and safety hazards for women and results in their spending several hours each day travelling long distances to fetch water and firewood (Funlayo, Adeleke, Ifunanya & Igbokwu, 2024; Ahmad, 2024; Rammutla, 2025). Yet policy discourse often frames women primarily as beneficiaries of development interventions rather than as co-producers of rural economies. This study engages critically with such policy narratives by foregrounding women's lived experiences and self-articulated strategies of survival and resistance.

The availability or absence of basic resources and services, according to Gradin (2013), affects not only living standards, health status, and well-being but also the socio-economic conditions of communities, thereby affecting overall quality of life. In defining the issue of Kgadima & Spaumer (2026), points out that women's position in society regarding their health should be examined within the broader context of poverty, class, gender inequalities, and unequal access to resources. He further states that broader issues such as political and organisational dynamics of health care, the legal framework, societal understanding of sexuality, parenthood and family, and prevailing economic systems have significant implications for childless women. Seleti and Tlhompho (2014) link land ownership with the status of South African women. They argue that despite land being a crucial socio-economic asset for rural livelihoods, South Africa's rural women continue to be excluded from land-related policy development, implementation, and decision-making processes because patriarchal traditions and cultural norms uphold existing power structures. While these studies underscore structural inequalities, they often under-theorise how women negotiate access to land and services through informal arrangements, kinship claims, and community-based institutions. Findings of this study show that women actively use customary systems, savings groups (*stokvels*), and cooperatives to circumvent formal exclusion from land and credit systems.

2.3. Gendered Access to Resources, Health, and Land in South Africa

The level of poverty is generally understood as the inability to secure a minimum acceptable standard of living, and, according to the World Bank (2005), it is assessed by basic consumption requirements and the income necessary to meet them. According to May (2005), in its narrowest sense, poverty can be understood as the ability of individuals, households or whole communities to access sufficient resources to achieve a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. The Food and Agriculture Organisation FAO (2015) reports that the United Nations 68th UN General Assembly confirmed 2015 as the "*International Year of Soils*". This declaration was informed by the fact that "rural women, who constitute one-fourth of the world's population, continue to face more difficulty than men in accessing public services, social protection, employment, and markets, due to cultural norms, security issues, and lack of identification documents". FAO (2015) further states that climate change and natural disasters negatively impact rural women's health, education, and livelihoods in ways that are distinct from, and often more severe than, the impacts experienced by men. Similarly, South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs (2017) report on strategies for adapting to climate change states that women are more severely impacted by climate change than men, owing to entrenched social roles, discriminatory practices, and economic marginalisation.

In addition, Pandey (2000) points out that failing to acknowledge the role women in rural environments play in family economic advancement through their agricultural activities is counterproductive and leads to the absence of targeted policies. Consequently, this leads to poorly targeted policies, which in turn intensify poverty and illiteracy and sideline women from participatory policy and programme planning processes that should be grounded in collaborative learning and responsive to the lived experiences of rural women. Further, Pandey (2000) and Rassool & Harms-Smith (2022). state that despite the important roles women play in the advancement of their communities, they are disproportionately affected by and present the most evident expression of poverty. However, feminist political ecology literature argues that women are not merely vulnerable subjects of climate change but key agents of adaptation and environmental stewardship (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011). Women's knowledge of soil, water, and crop diversity positions them as central actors in local climate resilience strategies. In our research in KwaZulu-Natal province, many rural women were found to fit the descriptions provided by the authors above.

Linking gender issues to poverty, UNESCO (2012) argues that women's contributions are often limited by unequal access to resources, persistent discrimination, and gender norms, which need to be addressed to allow the realisation of their full potential. The report further points out that gender norms dictate the roles of women and men and their opportunities in terms of the types of work they do, in both urban and rural areas. In some communities, such expectations curtail women's freedom of movement and their ability to engage in paid or productive work outside the domestic sphere. For example, in a rural area of KwaZulu-Natal, we found that women's entrepreneurship was not widely accepted. Women indicated that negative attitudes

posed significant challenges to initiating, stabilizing, and expanding sustainable businesses, and reported being advised to join existing initiatives. The UNESCO report cited above on International Women's Day further points out that discriminatory property, family, and inheritance laws and customs frequently obstruct women in their attempts to provide a livelihood for their families. Thus, it becomes crucial for researchers and development agencies working with women to be cognizant of the realities women face, e.g., poverty and illiteracy, which are commonly found in the rural areas of the two provinces we studied. There is evident existence and practice of social norms that confine women to specific roles, which tends to restrict them to low-wage, low-status employment with reduced prospects for skills training or upward mobility, thus maintaining their subordinate position. According to the UNESCO Report (2012), vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes for rural women tend to focus on a narrow range of gender-stereotyped activities, thereby reinforcing traditional roles. Typical offerings include sewing or knitting. This highlights the need for policymakers and development actors to deliberately expand women's opportunities for income generation, as such limited training pathways prevent women from accessing emerging and nontraditional sectors that offer higher earnings and more technically or managerially oriented jobs (UNESCO, 2012).

This study adds to the existing literature by documenting how rural women articulate their agency, negotiate patriarchal norms, and engage in economic and social transformation, thereby challenging essentialist portrayals of rural African women as uniformly marginalised.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

A variety of theoretical frameworks are frequently employed in the study of South African rural women's agency to provide a thorough understanding of their complex realities (van der Waldt, 2024). In the current study, African Feminism and Sustainable Livelihoods Approach were used as theoretical frameworks. African feminism is grounded in African belief systems and seeks to understand women's experiences within their own historical and cultural contexts. It is especially helpful for examining the agency of rural women functioning within customary rules and patriarchal institutions, which are common in rural South Africa. Because this study assesses the lived experiences and agency of South African rural women, this theory was considered pertinent. As mentioned above, another theory deemed relevant to the study is the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which is used to evaluate how stokvels contribute to rural communities' long-term existence and to fight poverty. It helps in understanding how women use the collective capital from stokvels to support their families in achieving more stable and sustainable means of subsistence, obtaining credit, lessening their susceptibility to economic shocks, and even financing entrepreneurial endeavours. According to this theory, stokvels are more than just financial instruments; they are intricate social structures that provide African rural women with a vital safety net and a pathway to empowerment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This article explored womanhood as defined and experienced by women in selected rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. The study was qualitative in nature. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that the qualitative method seeks to study phenomena from individuals' perspectives, with careful attention to the contexts in which these experiences occur. Qualitative methods are thus well-suited to capturing subjective meanings, social practices, and power relations in everyday life. Given the study's focus on gender relations, cultural norms, and household economic dynamics, an interpretive approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how women perceive, negotiate, and enact agency within patriarchal rural contexts. Thus, the method was regarded as appropriate because the study focused on exploring the experiences of rural women.

3.2. Research Strategy

A phenomenological research design was employed in this study. Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 53) define "phenomenology as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view". This design was considered appropriate because it facilitated an in-depth interpretation of participants' lived experiences through their narratives and expressions.

3.3. Research Method and Ethical Considerations

Face-to-face individual interviews lasting approximately 40–50 minutes were conducted in isiZulu, the respondents' home language. Drawing on the research questions presented in the introduction, the researchers formulated interview questions to guide interviews conducted between December 2024 and May 2025. The interviews were carried out at the participants' trading stands in Durban. Participants agreed to have their interviews audio-recorded. Ethical approval was granted by the (*to be inserted later) University. The study followed internationally recognised ethical principles, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, research procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, either in writing or verbally (for those with limited literacy) and in isiZulu. They were also informed that participation was voluntary, and withdrawal could occur at any time without repercussions. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying details were removed from the transcripts and final reporting.

3.4. Research Participants and Sampling Methods

The research participants were rural women. Moletsane and Ntombela (2010, p. 11) define rurality as an area that is remote from a city or a developed county, with minimal resources, resulting in its population having difficulty accessing them. In this article, rurality is understood as geographic areas that lack access to essential public services and amenities, including water and sanitation, and are characterised by inferior infrastructure, low income, inadequate site conditions, inconsistent water resources, and limited access to health care. The research participants were selected through a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture diversity in women's lived experiences across age, marital status, household position, and economic roles. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research that seeks to understand complex social phenomena. The inclusion criteria were: (1) adult Black women aged 18 years and above; (2) permanent residents of the selected rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal; and (3) active involvement in household, agricultural, or informal economic activities. Women were identified through community leaders, local women's groups, and snowball sampling to reach individuals with varied socio-economic and familial positions. To ensure diversity, the sample included women across different age cohorts (young adults, middle-

aged women, and older women), marital statuses (married, single, divorced, widowed), and household positions (female-headed households, co-resident wives, daughters-in-law, and extended family members). Participants also varied in educational attainment, livelihood activities, and access to social grants and remittances. This sampling strategy enabled an intersectional analysis by capturing how gendered experiences intersect with age, marital status, class, and household power relations. Rather than treating “rural women” as a homogeneous category, the study considered differences in women’s expressions of agency and livelihood strategies across these intersecting social positions.

Eighteen (18) participants were purposively selected as women who travelled from rural areas to cities to access better resources and fulfil their economic needs. The women were mainly rural subsistence farmers, with a substantial portion of their produce sold to community members. The farmers’ categories ranged from chicken and pig breeders to seasonal vegetable sellers. The rural women studied mainly lived within eThekweni Municipality, and some stayed in informal settlements, even sleeping at their trading stands to be closer to the marketplace and stalls where they sell their products. However, their main home and what they regarded as communities were the rural villages of Camperdown and Scottburg, that is, oThwebe, eMkhambathini, eNtshanga, eMandawe, and eMahlongwa, geographically placed about 25-50 kilometres from the city of Durban, one of the main economically active cities of South Africa.

3.5. Reflexivity and Power Relationship With Participants

The research process was guided by sustained reflexive attention to positionality and power relations. As researchers, we share linguistic and cultural affiliation with the participants, and all engagements were conducted in isiZulu. We are confident that this facilitated nuanced expression and reduced epistemic hierarchies that often arise through translation or outsider mediation. Attention was also given to personified dimensions of research interaction. We were intentional about being contextually appropriate in our dress and had stayed in the communities for previous studies and for this study. These were deliberate strategies to minimise class distance and to foster relational trust. On the other hand, while we recognise that shared language and cultural familiarity do not eliminate structural power relations associated with academic status and institutional affiliation, power was therefore approached as relational and negotiated. Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted as free-flowing engagements in which participants were positioned as knowledge holders and encouraged to guide the discussion’s direction and emphasis. We are confident that this reflexive stance sought to mitigate hierarchical dynamics and to support the co-construction of knowledge in ways consistent with feminist and anthropological methodological principles.

4. Data Analysis

To develop familiarity with the dataset, the researchers engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts. After transcription, segments of the data were labelled with concise words or phrases taken from the participants’ responses, generating inductive codes. These codes were subsequently grouped, leading to the identification of recurring themes. Data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis approach informed by feminist and intersectional theoretical frameworks. Interviews and field notes were transcribed. A verbatim transcription of interviews and field notes, and the isiZulu-to-English translation were conducted. The analysis proceeded in several iterative stages. Firstly, open coding was conducted to identify significant statements, meanings, and recurrent patterns in women’s narratives. Codes were generated inductively from the data to capture women’s descriptions of gender norms, household dynamics, economic activities, and expressions of agency. The researchers refined categories into core themes that addressed the research questions, including women’s agency, gendered power relations, and socio-economic transformation in rural contexts.

4.1. Findings, Discussion, and Analysis

Drawing on our research and informed by Othman et al. (2024), we argue that pollution, climate change, and broader ecological crises are the planetary challenges driving global food insecurity. In this section, we report on how women reflected and interpreted their lives. They described how climate change has affected their lives and rural livelihoods. The women in the study also highlighted that water scarcity, a direct result of climate change, has created social problems. For instance, due to the division of household labour, rural girls confronted particular challenges such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment because they were expected to search for water farther away from home.

4.2. The Characteristics of the Life of a Woman in a Rural Setting in South Africa

Two subthemes emerged from reflecting on the life of a rural woman: an understanding of rural womanhood and of poverty. Regarding the first theme of womanhood, the findings of this study revealed that rural women defined themselves and their roles in the community differently, depending on their individual life experiences. Some women linked their self-definition to the roles they played and to the expectations within their immediate families and communities at large. One participant, a woman of about forty years of age, described herself as “*isikhukukazi sekhaya*,” an isiZulu metaphor likening her to a hen that looks after its chicks. A hen is well known for protecting its chicks from crows, a common occurrence in rural settings. Another woman referred to herself as “*insika yomuzi*”, indicating that she is the pillar of her own household. The pillar is the middle post of the hut, holding it upright and preventing it from collapsing. Therefore, these middle-aged women were trying to demonstrate that their duties as mothers were to protect their family members, that is, their own children as well as young community members at large. This research shows that although Black rural women continue to be essential to survival, their agency is frequently limited by patriarchal standards. In discussing understanding of womanhood in rural settings, another participant stated that the childbearing role is an important characteristic of a woman. She indicated that in her community, a woman who bears a child “becomes a fully-fledged woman despite her age”. This implies that community members, including in-laws if married, would not recognise her as a fully-fledged woman if she were childless, just like her peers. They mentioned that they will be publicly questioned when they have children, using derogatory words in their language: “*Kanti umndeni uwukhulisa nini makoti?*” meaning, “When will the number of family members increase now that she is married?” Sadly, this belief has a negative effect on women who cannot bear children and puts pressure on women who may not be emotionally and financially ready to have children.

This result is consistent with research conducted by Attachie, Maimets, and Pilkington (2025). Motherhood and pregnancy loss in the African environment were the study’s main topics. The study’s findings showed that childbearing is regarded as the primary goal of marriage in many rural African communities, where motherhood is considered the essence of womanhood.

Women who do not bear children frequently suffer grave social, psychological, and bodily repercussions. Until a woman has a child, she is often viewed as incomplete or abnormal. Successful childbirth is seen in many cultures as the pinnacle of marriage and the sole path to a woman's full adult status and respect (Attachie, Maimets & Pilkington, 2025). Another participant in her early thirties stated that a woman is a "homemaker." She explained that a family without a woman should not be considered a proper home. She elaborated that a woman is responsible for the family's "existence" and well-being. She further explained that anyone who is hungry looks to the mother/woman of the family to provide food. This participant further noted a perception that a woman is expected to be the family's role model and a firm disciplinarian. "In instances where your children misbehave, people in the community look at you..."

Such is the pressure that is exerted on women. Therefore, a woman is socially held responsible for the behaviour displayed by her children even more than their father". Women are expected to be good leaders who must be excellent in training and teaching children the values and culture of the society. In the same vein, another participant mentioned that womanhood refers to a woman who does not share the family secrets with the public. She responded in isiZulu, saying, "*umfazi uhlala phezu kwehlazo lomuzi wakhe*." This means that being a woman implies keeping the family secrets to yourself. In isiZulu culture, the dignity of a home is reflected in the dignity of the woman or a mother. The other participant mentioned love and respect for in-laws and other adult community members as important parts of womanhood. This participant demonstrated another good of the in-laws: being accepted as a prominent member who blends well with the family and its relatives. She further pointed out that if one respects one's in-laws and adult members of the community, they fondly recognise one as a woman, and even one's husband cannot chase them away (divorce) without the permission of the in-laws. "Once you have that recognition, people respect you and make you feel you are one of them". For example, amaZulu would say "Umfazi wamaFaku." This means a Faku woman, Faku being a clan name for the family to which the woman is married. Thus, when researching rural women and seeking to advance their development, researchers and policymakers must be familiar with the perceptions, expectations, and aspirations of women. These elements should be understood by external agencies working with rural women and carefully handled as socially and culturally constructed.

The second subtheme is poverty: Most rural women characterised themselves as extremely poor people. One participant described her position as having nothing to cook. "Floods had contributed negatively as they have destroyed their crops and animals, and they are not fully recovering." She further described herself as having no money to buy food or school uniforms for the children. She mentioned that poverty manifested not only in the lack of food but also in other areas. She cited the example of a family or community function in which people are expected to contribute money towards ceremonial preparations. She said that such moments were embarrassing, as one's poor status would be exposed to many people. She concluded, "That situation does not make me happy at all." This indicates how a woman's social status would be constructed by circumstances beyond her control.

Another participant defined her status as having no food and, as a result, going to bed on an empty stomach. "Life is hard for us; it is not easy to live a normal life if your stomach is empty." She used an isiZulu idiom to describe her situation, lamenting, "*ikati lilele eziko*." This literally means that the cat is sleeping on the fireplace. It is obvious that the cat sleeps on the fireplace, where there is no cooking. It is also worth noting that this idiom is used by both isiZulu and isiXhosa-speaking people to define poverty. This participant further mentioned that observing her children sleeping on empty stomachs was a painful experience by saying: "As adults, we can tolerate poverty, but the children find it difficult, and they sometimes cry. The most difficult moment where they feel that they are hungry is at night". Responding to the same issue, another participant said, "...When you have nothing to cook, you cannot even make fire". She described her situation as lacking basic necessities, such as food and clothing. She further pointed out that no one in the family was receiving income and, as a result, they relied on the state social grant, which was not enough to sustain the whole family until the end of the month. She decried the fact that although several family members deserved the state social grant, unfortunately, they did not have the transport money to travel to offices to apply for identity books, and money to take photographs, which are requirements for identity books, and hence, the prerequisites for them to apply for grants were impossible. The researchers observed that poverty worsened with the number of children and grandchildren in each household. It was obvious that birth control was not practised.

4.3. The Elements of Climate Change, Violence, and Inequalities That Rural Women Face

The study revealed that climate change negatively affected rural women. For example, one participant mentioned that during a drought, they found it difficult to access water because they relied on rain, dams, rivers, and wells. Since such water sources dry up during droughts, they sometimes share the available water with animals. She also mentioned that sometimes cows, which were affected by drought, died in the dam, making it impossible for people to fetch the already unclean water. The participant also observed that such cases pose health hazards, including disease. She explained that during periods of water scarcity, when people must share dirty water with animals, they wake up very early in the morning in the hope of getting "clean water". Another participant indicated that drought negatively affected them, as they relied heavily on subsistence agriculture. She pointed out that during drought, they could not plough their fields and found it difficult to feed their livestock. A participant highlighted that drought was not the only enemy of their agricultural endeavours in rural areas, since such drought is often followed by heavy floods that threaten their houses, mealies, and animals. So, drought and heavy floods, both results of climate change, seem to conspire to exacerbate poverty. Another participant, a street vendor, also complained that during rainy seasons, they found it difficult to display their goods because they were not protected.

Women also confided that they were vulnerable victims of gender based and domestic violence. One participant gave, as an example, an incident that had recently taken place in Harding (a town in KwaZulu-Natal), where her drunk husband killed a woman over chicken livers. This shows how women have become victims of gender-based violence. Another participant who was in her mid-forties said that since both her husband and children were not working, some of them resorted to alcohol and drug abuse. She mentioned that alcohol and drugs perpetuated a lot of domestic violence in their area. Another participant revealed that in her location, there were people who raped and killed women at night. These people were called "*onontwayibonwa*," literally meaning "something that is not visible." She mentioned that women had suspicions that those people were local but operated at night. The participant further mentioned that households without men were targets, the armed hooligans who were aware that these women had helplessly attacked them, and the women could not fight back. She appealed to the government to save them, as all the victims were children and women. Domestic violence was not reported to the police,

and perpetrators were aware of this. This emboldens them to continue with such violence, and women victims are trapped in such relationships with the fear of shame and the fear of losing financial resources.

Regarding inequality, most participants cited limited access to opportunities as a barrier to their success. One participant mentioned that many job opportunities were available only to men and, as a result, many women were not working. She further mentioned that women stayed home and looked after children. She indicated that although they were in an important role, their efforts were hardly ever recognised. Another participant mentioned that inequality affected her regarding inheritance. She explained that she was not allowed to inherit her father's mealie field and livestock, although she was the only child. She explained that her father's brother inherited everything. She said, "I was treated as if I did not exist, and I am sure my father's properties will now be inherited by his brother's male children. This is quite strange because I am not even married". This statement shows how women were undermined by the community based on cultural beliefs. Women were never involved in decision-making. Their voices were never heard or considered. One woman said that women were treated as "forever young adults." She said that it was worse when there were ritual ceremonies or other events. They did not come close to making any decisions or preparations. Their duty was to cook and feed the guests on the day of the event. Young married women experienced inequality from their mother-in-law and sister-in-law. You never achieve the status of a fully-fledged woman if the mother-in-law is still alive. Always referred to as "*umasbanani*", i.e., use of a woman's maiden name.

4.4. Strategies Used By Rural Women to Cope With Poverty, Climate Change, Violence, And Inequality

Despite the hindrances mentioned above, rural women managed to survive and could count some successes under the circumstances. Successes in coping with the challenges they encounter were passed down from their parents and other community members, as that is how they have been living. Women were made to believe that it was on them to build or break their families. Regarding coping with poverty, one participant mentioned that she invested the government grants she received as capital. She explained that she joined a "*stokvel*" where they saved money monthly. She further mentioned that they distributed this money in January each year to buy uniforms for their school-going children, as they received relief on school fees. They applauded the government for the national school nutrition programme, as their children received balanced meals at school, but complained that during long school holidays, the onus fell on them to feed the children three meals, which was beyond their financial means. She also mentioned that she joined another women's club where they loaned money out and got it back with interest. She called this "*umashonisa*." Literally, this means "to sink", but in this context, it is used to refer to money lenders, some of whom charge astronomic interest and are generally referred to as loan sharks in English. This result is consistent with the Sustainable Livelihood Approach, which served as one of the study's theoretical frameworks.

According to this theory, *stokvels* are more than just financial instruments; they are intricate social structures that provide African rural women with a vital safety net and a pathway to empowerment. Another participant mentioned that they sold some items on the streets and on days when old-age grant payments were made. She argued that those who could produce certain products themselves made a lot of money. This middle-aged woman mentioned that she was selling beadwork and crafts she made herself. Their main customers were teachers at the local schools. The advanced groups collaborated with NGOs or church organisations that bought their products and supplied them to flea markets in nearby cities. A respondent mentioned that she joined a women's club focused on raising chickens and pigs. She said that they made money, but feeding the animals was expensive, and they had not established regular customers. She appealed to the government for assistance. Another participant indicated that she was selling fruit, vegetables, and seedlings, while yet another one pointed out that to fight poverty, one should either increase the number of children so that one got a lot of money from the government in the form of a children's support social grant or foster care parent grant. She revealed that she was receiving more than a thousand rand from the government for her two children and the other two that her daughter left with her. One participant suggested the importance of having a vegetable garden. She said, "If you plant some vegetables, even if at a small scale, you cannot be hungry, and you do not have to buy everything; you only buy supplements." Another participant mentioned that sending children to school was a long-term investment and could keep poverty at bay. She explained that if children were educated, they would be guaranteed permanent employment and, in most cases, would be able to change the status of their homes once employed.

On how to cope with climate change, the participants unanimously agreed that it posed a significant threat to rural areas that relied on subsistence farming. One participant mentioned that she decided to increase the number of water tanks so that, during the rainy season, she could store a lot of water to sustain her family and animals during times of drought. On the same topic, another participant mentioned that among the cattle breeds she had, there was the "Nguni breed," known for its ability to withstand harsh weather conditions, especially drought. The other participant mentioned that planting drought-resistant maize seeds could be a solution for emerging farmers, helping them avoid significant drought-related losses. Many participants mentioned that, although they tried hard to cope with the drought, government intervention was important in assisting them. In this regard, one participant mentioned the intervention by their local municipality in the 2015 drought. She said that almost all the locations were equipped with "Jojo" water tanks to bring water closer to people. She appealed to the government for assistance in feeding their livestock during droughts.

Regarding coping with violence and inequality, the participants noted that community members should work together and that more power should be granted to local chiefs. One respondent said, "The people who rape and kill us are not strangers; they are our grandchildren and children. Parents must stop being protective and expose the vigilantes to law enforcement authorities. Therefore, we need robust local structures capable of handling them. However, to achieve this, we need to work as a group rather than as individuals. We also need to be proactive". Another participant said that they needed to work hand in hand with the law enforcement agents. She said, "The police cannot succeed on their own, but the local people can assist with the information." On domestic violence, one participant mentioned that it was high time that women should expose those men who perpetrate violence. She called upon women to stop keeping quiet about domestic violence. Regarding inequality, the participants highlighted their suffering linked to cultural factors. They appealed to the government to implement policies that protect women. One participant pointed out that even though men are more employable than women, their financial contribution at home is very limited. She said, "When some men receive their salaries, the first thing they do is to pay the money they owe to the *shebeen* and forget about their children...if you are a woman, children look at you when they are hungry, not at their father, in fact, even their father also looks at you when he is hungry."

5. Conclusion

The study set out to examine and illuminate the lived realities of women in rural settings of KwaZulu-Natal. We demonstrated in this article that rural communities face unprecedented challenges arising from climate and environmental change. This study concludes that social structures exacerbate the obstacles faced by women in rural South Africa. However, women are resilient and often develop strategies to adapt to social structures. Our discussion highlighted that while these effects are inevitable and experienced globally, they disproportionately and more severely affect the poor and rural populations. In South African rural settings, where environmental changes are largely linked to human activities, solutions should be sought with cognisance of the need for change in human behaviour, attitudes, and lifestyles, especially those of rural communities. Based on the findings, this study has demonstrated that, despite challenges, women still manage to meet their families' needs. They are the custodians of families and, in turn, of the communities in which they live. They surpass patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles by diligently involving themselves in decision-making activities to build their homes and maximise resources for a good living in their homesteads. They outdo the cultural expectations that restrict them and prioritise ways to improve their socio-economic statuses. They serve as farmers and household managers, still maintaining some traditional family and marriage practices while caring for children, the elderly, and the sick. We thus submit that for any solution to be sustainable, it should first be thoroughly researched, taking into account critical issues of gender inequality, poverty, and rurality to which women are exposed. Women drew from their belief systems to survive patriarchal socio-cultural structures. This practice is defined in African feminism as an understanding of comprehending one's experiences in relation to historical and cultural circumstances. Furthermore, the women's demonstrable ability to use collective capital from *stokvels* to support their families and achieve more stable and sustainable means of subsistence is regarded as consistent with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, i.e., agency to fight poverty.

The limitation of this study was its focus on one province. Ideally, a qualitative study of this nature should have been conducted across different provinces to be representative of the entire country, so that the findings could be generalised to a larger population.

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