Spaces for the Empowerment of Women: Rural Arts and Crafts Projects

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Abstract

The issue of empowering women has become topical at both continental and international level. Taking into consideration the reported challenges encountered by women, (especially women in rural areas) such as poverty, low literacy levels and unemployment, government and local initiatives are seeking ways to empower women so that they can become their own agents of positive change. Previous research has indicated that art and craft-making as a leisure-based activity yields numerous benefits for participants, including improved wellbeing, an enhanced sense of self and self-efficacy and economical gains. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, this qualitative study explored the contribution of leisure-based community arts and crafts projects toward the social empowerment of eighteen rural women in two district municipalities of the Limpopo Province (South Africa). Voice recordings and field notes were analysed through qualitative content analysis to develop themes. The results indicate that community based arts and crafts projects in rural areas empower women in four ways. These projects serve as a means for economic empowerment, enhancing a sense of community, establishing networks of support and are also therapeutic for the women. It is concluded that community arts and crafts projects make a positive contribution toward empowering women but require more support from available structures to ensure sustained benefits from participation for rural women.

Keywords: Rural women, leisure, social empowerment, community arts and crafts

Introduction

Numerous initiatives have been set up both at continental and international level to support women around the world with the goal of achieving gender equality and empowering women at all levels. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It recognises the critical role women play in society and the challenges they come across which include but are not limited to violence and unfair labour practices, and therefore advocates for the advancement of women in various arenas such as politics and the economy, and the ending of violence against women (United Nations, 2015). On the other hand, the African Union through its African Women's Decade initiatives aims to accelerate the status of women in various fields such as education, agriculture and governance (African Union, 2013). Thus, the year 2015 was also declared the year of Women Empowerment and Development toward Africa's Agenda 2063 by the African Union. The South African Department of Women also supports initiatives to advance women through the mainstreaming of women's socio-economic empowerment, with special regard to the formal economy and promoting a change in social attitudes toward women and girls (South African Department of Women, 2015).

With the empowerment of women having been identified as a global concern, efforts from diverse fields aimed at women's empowerment will be crucial in achieving this global goal. In the field of leisure, for example, it is noted that research on women and leisure has increased between the years 2006-2010, and empowerment and resistance through leisure has emerged as a theme in leisure research (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Many leisure activities are becoming a source of empowerment to women as evidenced by Roster (2007), who examined meanings of motorcycling as a leisure activity for women. Regehr (2012) explored how burlesque dancing, a historical movement dating back to the late nineteenth century and now re-emerging in modern culture in various forms and variations empowered women as a leisure activity. It was found that women expressed feelings of empowerment brought about by many elements of performing a movement. The present study explores the contribution of art and craft-making as a leisure activity towards the social empowerment of rural women taking part in a community arts and crafts project.

Rural women and Art and Craft-making

Craft-making has remained a popular activity over the years as another means of making financial gains but has, in recent years, become practised by both men and women in contempoary Western culture as a leisure pursuit (Pöllänen, 2013). In South Africa, craft-making still remains an essential part of rural living through its contribution to alleviating poverty by trading craft products as a means of generating an income. This is especially true for rural women who face a diverse number of challenges including poverty. This is because poverty is strongly biased toward individuals in rural areas and women, especially African women (Dyubhele, Le Roux & Mears, 2009). Many resort to a diverse number of ways to improve their livelihood. However, crafting as a sole activity for livelihood is not sufficient for the upkeep of the household and, thus, many crafters will devise strategies to split their time between crafting and other means of making a living (Makhado & Kepe, 2006). The trade of craft products for livelihood is an age old practice in many rural areas in the country, as seen through women involved in the making and selling of handcrafted brooms as explained by Shackleton and Campbell (2007). In addition, the selling of such objects provides a safety net which can be developed into a permanent strategy of making a livelihood if the conditions which propelled entry into such a trade persist or if the benefits of the trade are found to be worthwhile (Shackleton & Campbell, 2007).

Given the challenges associated with rural living such as poverty (Dyubhele *et al.*, 2009), cultural oppression (Bhengu, 2010) and low literacy levels (Shange, 2014), it is not surprising that women in rural areas resort to craft-making as a means of livelihood. In many of South Africa's rural areas, women live in conditions that leave them in a disempowered position. Reasons for their disempowerment are attributed to factors such as the feminisation of poverty, educational deprivation, domination and exploitation, domestic violence and cultural oppression (Bhengu, 2010). For example, *ukuthwala* is practised in some rural areas of South Africa and involves abducting a girl for the purpose of marrying her to a suitor, which can take place with or without the consent of the girl. For many women who have been through this practice, the experience is described as traumatic (Rice, 2014). Monyane (2013) equates the customary practice of *ukuthwala* to a forced marriage as this type of marriage places the abductee in a position vulnerable to experience domestic exploitation and abuse from her suitor and further places abductees in a subordinate position, continuing to perpetuate the on-going problem of domestic violence. Moreover, the practice infringes on the many rights of women and girls and perpetuates gender inequality and is in conflict with the promotion of the rights of women and girls in South Africa.

Amongst the compounding challenges women already experience, there is also the challenge of domestic violence and abuse of women by their partners. According to Davhana-Maselesele, Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009), women who are abused in their homes by their partners report spiritual emptiness, emotional trauma, social isolation, financial problems and physical injuries as a result of the abuse they suffer at the hands of their significant others. Furthermore, their abuse is perpetuated by the women's lack of knowledge, failure to speak out about the abuse, cultural practices, insecurities and commitment to the relationship and sometimes in the hope that the perpetrators will change (Davhana-Maselesele *et al.*, 2009). In some cases, money becomes the cause of tension, where women can be denied access to economic resources by their partners, or have to submit their salaries to their husbands who take complete control of such monies. This often leaves women in a difficult position of having to choose between spending money to feed children in the home or being beaten by their husbands for spending money (Phaswana-Mafuya & Ramalepe, 2008).

In cases where the abuser is the sole breadwinner in the home, women feel insecure about leaving the relationship, using the children as an excuse and insinuate that they fear what would happen to the children (Davhana-Maselesele *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, it is not unexpected that women stay in such relationships because they depend on the abuser for providing for their basic needs. This is probably attributable to the fact that in the majority of households where males play the headship role, they are likely to be the primary income earner as stated by Posel (2001). The low-resourced state associated with rural living also creates a challenge, asadolescent girls drop out of school and get married at an early age due to limited resources (Were, 2007). Additionally, these girls are vulnerable to engaging in pre-marital sex in exchange for trivialities because they cannot meet their basic personal material needs. In their adulthood as women, they spend most of their time performing unpaid maintenance work or become a major part of the agricultural labour force, toiling for hours with inadequate remuneration when compared to men (Lumadi, 2012).

In the Limpopo Province, for example, nearly 90 percent of the population resides in rural areas (Statistics South Africa, 2003). Additionally, it is reported that after the Eastern Cape Province, Limpopo has the highest percentage of individuals aged between five and twenty-four years not attending school (Statistics South Africa, 2007). Even with gains in education, women are still more likely to occupy low-skilled jobs and remain disadvantaged in terms of earnings, and continue to dominate categories of lower earnings (South African Department of Women, 2015).

The lack of formal education will subsequently affect women in the future as it may become challenging for them to gain formal employment, further prolonging their dependency on their male counterparts for livelihood. All these challenges faced by women create a need to find ways to develop and empower rural women as they cope with such challenges in their daily lives and seek means to create a diversion from their daily life stressors. The South African Department of Women seeks to achieve this by accelerating socio-economic transformation and implementation for women's empowerment and participation through oversight, monitoring, evaluation and influencing policy (South African Department of Women, 2015).

Through their social, political and economic participation and empowerment efforts, the department seeks to create opportunities that exist within the social, justice and governance sub-sectors and also promote and protect the rights of women in related areas. This, they hope will aid in promoting the women's full participation in decision-making so that their social and basic needs move from the margins to the centre of development, planning and resource allocation.

Leisure time craft-making and Women empowerment

Participation in leisure activities yields many benefits for participants. Rossman and Jamieson (2008) state physical, social and emotional wellneing as benefits resulting from leisure participation. Both leisure and recreation are recognised as powerful forces for the improvement of the social, economic and environmental health of people in communities (Ziqubu, 2012). Social benefits of leisure and recreation are enjoyed by interacting with others and can positively enrich the lives of individuals, communities and the society as a whole. Leisure activities provide the opportunity to get and remain in touch with others (Edginton, Hudson, Dieser & Edginton, 2004).

With social behaviour involving the reciprocal exchange between two or more individuals and this often being during leisure (Russell & Jamieson, 2008), people will reach out to others and find opportunities to bond with one another and form a sense of community (Edginton *et al.*, 2004). Thus, leisure carries great potential for the improvement of quality of life. Leisure provides a platform that allows participants to experience positive emotions as it serves as a mediator for the improvement of self-definition, self-actualisation and a sense of empowerment (Russell &Jamieson, 2008). Such feelings of empowerment emerge as participants claim a leisure community through interaction with others and sharing a common interest, resisting social stereotypes, developing knowledge and skills and reconstructing their own identities as evidenced by Roster (2007). Craft-making as a leisure activity can also offer similar benefits for participants. Liddle, Parkinson and Sibbritt (2013), highlight that older women involved in arts and craft activities confirmed that the activity contributed towards their sense of self, as they could remain productive and stay useful to others and were able to do good things in their communities. At the same time, being able to share knowledge and skills in arts and crafts indicated a notion of generativity on the women's part, showing a concern for the welfare of subsequent generations.

For women engaging in arts and crafts activities not only yields social benefits but has the potential to positively influence health. When Chetty and Hoque (2012) explored the impact of a volunteer-based arts and crafts group on Indian women diagnosed with depression, it was found that the activity had been effective in reducing the level of depression. Similarly, Liddle *et al.* (2013) found that for women in the late adulthood stage, taking part in art and craft activities contributed to subjective wellbeing, as it is through participation that women get to experience a range of emotional experiences which seem to enhance their emotional repertoire, allow them to make mistakes, deal with frustrations and difficulties and still allow them to learn as part of the process. Pöllänen (2015) also confirms that previous research has proven that there is an existing link between craft and wellbeing and that because of its popularity, it is essential to understand how craft contributes to wellbeing for craft-makers.

Pöllänen (2015) thus identified eight elements of craft that contribute to wellbeing. These elements included artefacts, raw materials, a sense of achievement, personal growth, development of physical and cognitive skills, control of own body, thoughts and feelings; cultural and social dimensions. According to Pöllänen (2015), these occur as craft-making is seen as a flexible activity that allows crafters to face their life challenges, provides inner strength, aids in developing a sense of control over their lives while creating a diversion from troubling thoughts and allows them to experience positive emotions.

For some women in economically disadvantaged communities such as Bushbuckridge (Shackleton & Campbell, 2007), Mpozolo and Ntubeni in the Eastern Cape Province (Pereira, Shackleton & Shackleton, 2006), craft-making extends beyond the traditional state of being an activity of self-expression, identity-creation or an emotional experience. Craft-making also

becomes economically beneficial to participants. Many craft-makers produce craft products for exhibition and sale, some form collaborations with other creative businesses to develop bespoke new work (Yair & Schwarz, 2011). Still, others offer consultancy services while others deliver services to consumers such as selling leisure opportunities in the form of arts and craft workshops (Yair & Schwarz, 2011). Therefore, art and craft-making can form a viable source of creating a livelihood which is essential for economically disadvantaged women in rural areas. As women continue with their craftwork, receiving acknowledgement and economic benefits thereof, their sense of worth and identity is enhanced and this forms the first step for women toward selfhood which when mixed with more opportunities for self-expression, will direct women toward independence in many aspects (van der Merwe, 2014). This also becomes a further step toward the process of empowerment as it involves, among other things, freedom (Zimmerman, 1995), self-efficacy (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010), access to resources and control (Zimmerman, 1995).

Although empowerment is not an easy concept to define, many field-related definitions emerged in the process of seeking to conceptualise empowerment. For example, Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) define empowerment as a process that increases one's personal, interpersonal or political power to enable the individual to take action to improve their own life situations. In the field of psychology, empowerment is defined as a sense of personal control and freedom which allows people to become their own agents and masters regarding those issues that concern them and how this is supported by having access and control to resources (Zimmerman, 1995). Kabeer (1999) further defines empowerment as a process of change, whereby those who were previously denied the opportunity to make strategic choices about their lives gain such ability.

The common factors among the various definitions of empowerment include a personal sense of freedom or power and access to resources or opportunities to enable an individual to take control of the situations confronting them. Empowerment is viewed as a process that engenders power, ability and control, which when used, allows people to act on important issues in their lives, communities and society. Empowerment involves shifts in the experience of power gained by interacting within a social world (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2014). This study focuses on women's social empowerment which according to Rewani and Tochhawng (2014), can include variables such as economic independency, control over income, self-confidence, decision-making skills and social participation.

According to Huber, Stephens, Bradley, Moller and Nielsen (2009), a woman's economic dependence/independence is important in shaping gender inequality in society. For example, women who are in abusive relationships where their partners are the sole breadwinners in the household are insecure about leaving such relationships due to fear of what would happen to their children (Davhana-Maselesele *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, economic independence is an important variable to measure women's social empowerment (Rewani & Tochhawng, 2014). Although economic independence forms part of social empowerment, Knapp, Fisher and Levesque-Bristol (2010) also support the argument that self-efficacy is also connected to social empowerment.

Bandura (1989) is cited in Ohmer (2007) defining self-efficacy as an individual's self-judgement about his or her capabilities to organise and execute the actions necessary to achieve desired goals. As a result, individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy are able to approach stressors with the belief that they have control over them. According to the empowerment model by Cattaneo and Goodman (2014), empowerment is achieved when individuals set meaningful power-oriented goals, take action toward those goals and with the use of self-efficacy, knowledge and community resources, observe the impact of their actions.

Self-efficacy, skills, and community resources are essential elements of the empowerment process (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). To achieve one's goals, opportunities to gain knowledge and skills about actions serve as requirements for success. In addition, the support of community resources which can be friends, family, neighbours, or public services may contribute to empowerment as an outcome. The empowerment process model as described by Cattaneo and Goodman (2014) supports the model proposed by Johnson, Worell and Chandler (2005) who included outcomes related to empowerment in their development of the Personal Progress Scale-Revised to measure empowerment. Considering the variables of social empowerment, this study explores the effect of art and craft-making on the social empowerment of women residing in the rural areas of Limpopo Province.

Methods

This study employed qualitative research methods which Walliman (2011), describes as a range of tools and techniques for doing research. It is these tools that provide the researcher with ways to collect, sort and analyse information to come to conclusions. These techniques were used to collect data from a target population consisting of women living in the rural areas of Limpopo Province's two district municipalities (Sekhukhune and Capricorn) taking part in a rural-based community arts and crafts project. Only the two district municipalities were considered because the majority of residents are Northern-Sotho speaking which makes easy as the researcher is also Northern-Sotho speaking, hence limiting communication problems. To be included in the study, participants had to be females residing in the rural area within the selected district municipalities, have been participants in a community arts and crafts project for at least one month, have comprehension of either English or Northern-Sotho and aged 16 and above.

Sampling

After identifying a target population, a sample was obtained through the purposive sampling technique to identify women from the target population. The sample comprised only of eighteen women due to poor attendance. According to Guarte and Barrios (2007), purposive sampling is a sampling technique that involves selecting a portion of the population who possess the most information on the characteristic of the research interest. This sampling technique was found to be ideal due to the number of craft projects founded within the province. The arts and crafts projects were found to be diverse and the researcher focused only on arts and crafts found to be sharing similar characteristics. Moreover, the women had to be taking part in the arts and crafts projects during their leisure time to qualify to take part in the study.

The researcher made use of a booklet obtained from the Limpopo Province Department of Sport, Arts and Culture which contained a list of arts and crafts projects operating within the province and based within rural areas.

Data collection instruments

Data were collected with the use of a semi-structured questionnaire administered within a focus group setting as well as individual interviews. Questions asked were carefully structured by the researcher based on indicators identified by Golla, Maholtra, Nanda and Mehra (2011). These indicators included 'reach and process' indicators, 'economic advancement' indicators as well as 'agency or power' indicators.

Data collection and Analysis

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HSS/0267/015M). Contact was made with project leaders identified from the booklet obtained and arrangements for a time and place were made to conduct the focus group and interview discussions. Information sheets were provided to participants and after their consent was given, the focus group and interview discussions were conducted. A pre-test study was conducted with five females and necessary changes were made to the question list, after which the data collection process commenced. Focus groups were conducted with women who were participants in rural-based community arts and crafts projects while individual interviews were conducted with project leaders and recorded on a tape recorder with the aid of field notes. Once both sets of discussions were concluded, the researcher remained on the premises for any questions that arose and such conversations were noted as secondary data to be included in the data analysis process if it was found that they had some relevance to the study.

Tape recordings from both interview and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim onto Microsoft word and analysed through qualitative content analysis. Schreier (2012) describes the qualitative content analysis process as a method used for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data through the classification of material as instances of the categories of a coding frame and this can be used when working with rich data requiring interpretation, verbal data, visual data, data sampled from other sources as well as data that the researcher has collected. The goal of such a method is to systematically describe the meaning of the data. Data were transferred to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data management tool and analysis software where codes were identified and data were condensed into themes supported by extracts from the data, from which interpretations were drawn and conclusions made. Related segments of data were organised using the software to produce themes. These themes were determined by evaluating participants' responses to the questions asked. Moreover, narratives were reread to ensure that they were related and conformed to an identified theme.

Results and Discussion

Eighteen women aged between the ages of 33 and 61 (mean age=44.6) took part in this study. The majority of the women (44%) were between the ages of 40 and 49 years. All the women were participants in a community arts and crafts project within a rural community and had been participating for at least a month and some, for years. Of all those who disclosed their marital status, only nine (50%) indicated that they were married, one was divorced and six were single. All the women had dependants whom they were taking care of at the time. One participant reported to be caring for seven dependants, which was the largest number and almost twice the average dependant number of 3.44. Of those who indicated their highest level of education, it was found that nearly 70% had not completed a level of education beyond secondary, conforming to the findings of Shange (2014) who reported that levels of literacy in rural areas are low resulting from a number of factors that impede on their education.

Reasons for joining the arts and crafts projects:

To understand the impact of being a member of a community-based arts and crafts group, it is important to understand what drew the women to such environments. Therefore, the following themes were identified as pull factors for women joining community arts and crafts projects.

- The learning of an economic skill in a social environment

The women's choice to participate in the project provided an outlet for the women to share expertise, as all of them came from diverse backgrounds and transferred skills among themselves as a group. The project also allowed them to be part of an entity and placed them in a power position where they could make decisions, engage in debates, make resolutions and implement such. This conforms to the notion by Green (1998) that women-only environments that facilitate autonomy and freedom from caring responsibilities enhance autonomy and empowerment. Additionally, such environments provide the women with a platform to reconstruct gendered identities, especially those elements which challenge what society accepts as "womanly" behaviour. Referring to her project to which she lacks comprehension for why many women in the community would not want to become part of, one participant described it as follows:

> "It doesn't have those boundaries. Its law is that, it's autonomy (it is autonomous), it has...it is free but looking at it, a person might think, eish this is a monstrous thing."-D1

While the majority of the projects were established to provide learning opportunities for women, these projects also have other benefits. It is a result of participating in such projects that women are provided with platforms for social interaction and mutual support as well as opportunities for leadership. Consistent with Forstner (2013) is that, on numerous occasions, opportunities for leadership are provided to members of the projects, especially when the leaders are not available to take on their role due to commitments such as travel, thereby giving others an opportunity to take on the role of leading. The learning of a skill also proved to be a major motivator for taking part in the group project, especially because the women were not in formal employment, leaving them with ample time to spend at home, which they found not to be useful and better replaced with an opportunity for learning a skill that could potentially have economic benefits. One participant commented:

> "Mmh...Skill...we have the bead-making skill, earrings...yes...to make mats from plastics. These plastics (bags) from (stores)...we cut them and cut them and make mats with crotchets. Yes...and sell in the streets. Make some hats."-P2b.

This is also consistent with Forstner (2013) who also affirms that becoming a member of a craft-producing group provides rural women with a platform for technical skills related to producing craftwork while at the same time, providing them with an opportunity to learn about issues affecting women.

- Playing an active role in the community

Apart from learning a skill, women expressed a level of generativity which they found that played a role in their becoming part of the project. Generativity is achieved by the women through teaching the youth craft-making skills so they too can become a part of the project. This skill, they believe, will teach the youth to be able to make things for themselves and refrain from having to purchase goods all the time. The need to leave a legacy is a socio-emotional characteristic associated with middle adulthood. According to Barnett and Blanco (2006), people aged between the ages of 40 and 59 years experience the desire to leave a legacy of themselves to the next generation. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as making a contribution in their community in a manner that will be remembered. This can be true as the majority (67%) of the women who participated in this study were aged between 40 and 59 years. It is therefore not surprising that women would comment that transferring a craft-making skill is a motivator for joining the art and craft-making project.

- Preservation of culture and heritage

Moreover, preserving an African identity which they believe is perishing is of some importance to the women. The women are of the opinion that youth are less interested in issues regarding African culture and tradition. The majority of the women's work is commonly traditional African utensils, attire and accessories worn mostly by black South Africans of diverse ethnicity. They see the need to continue along this line of art and craft as a way of preserving their African heritage. As explained by one of the participants, *"...we have realised that the youth do not care about heritage matters."-P3B.* Through their participation, the women believe they are creating an environment from which the youth can be able to learn about their heritage and continue with its preservation. As also found in Tzanidaki and Reynolds (2011), the meaning of crafts for women is also associated with satisfaction of preserving cultural arts and crafts traditions and the satisfaction of maintaining traditions through teaching. This result is also consistent with van der Merwe (2014) who found that story cloths/pictorial embroideries as a form of craft was a crucial element for rural women from communities plagued by illiteracy as a form of relaying information from one generation to another.

The story cloths that often depict the women's culture are sold all over the world and often communicate a number of topics such as rituals and rites of passage and rituals after mourning for a certain period of time and many others (Joubert, 2009). These creative products by the women have some connections with traditions that have shaped and influenced them in their daily lives. These stories conveyed through such mediums depict traditional practices and rituals forming part of their communities, thereby creating a platform for others to learn about them.

Contribution of community arts and crafts project toward women's empowerment

Empowerment is a broad concept drawing on numerous meanings. As Cattaneo and Goodman (2014) define it, empowerment involves a meaningful shift in the experience of power attained from interacting in a social environment. Their definition further expands to convey empowerment as a process requiring,

> "...a person who lacks power to set a personally meaningful goal oriented toward increasing power, take action, and make progress toward that goal, drawing on his or her evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, skills, and community resources and supports, and observes and reflects on the impact of his or her actions." (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2014:6)

In the case of the women in this study, the implication is that if their life situations are taking away their power, the women would be empowered if taking part in the arts and crafts projects restored their power. As a result, this study begins by identifying factors taking power away from their lives and further looks at how these were addressed by their participation in the arts and crafts projects based on the women's responses.

Table 1: Factors disempowering women (Authors' own)

Participants' Quotes	Factors
"Eish…you know I feel very proud…when I mentioned the issue with children…I have children and they stress me at home." **-P3B** *(Laughs)…This one of shouting at the children. I have children at home, when you spend the day with them, all you do is shout the whole day…shouting at the children without knowing why."* **-P3B** *"Actually, not working gives you a lot of stress. When you're sitting in the house, you wrinkle a lot because you are thinking about a lot of things."* **-P3B**	Stress caused by: • Children • Family needs • Lack of employment
"...and I want my children all over, to hear my name on the radio so they can be proud, so they too can feel good." -**P3**	Perceived lack of pride in parents from children
"I understand that ever since coming here, especially me. Back from what I used to be, I used to struggle you know what, my husband was not working…I …I…was disrespected" **-P4**	Spouse's unemployed status Disrespect from community
"You know…to…I felt myself feeling sorry for myself and wondered, if I feel sorry for myself…what do other people who see me say?" **-P2B**	Self-pity over own circumstances
"Gambling the whole day." **-P4B**	Negative leisure behaviour
"You understand…we are single parents. Unemployed…you understand? Right now what I can say we…we…we depend on, are the children's social grants." -**P2C**	Lack of income resulting in dependency on children's grants for survival

A number of issues contributing towards the women's powerlessness were identified and it seemed common to most women that unemployment was a major factor which they also associated with stress. As such, it was a factor that led to many other worrying factors for the women. Being disrespected by other community members because of joblessness, taking frustrations out on the children, resorting to negative forms of leisure such as gambling, feelings of self-pity and a perceived lack of pride toward parents from their children all seemed to be contributing to the women's disempowered state.

A number of these issues stem from not having a formal job, leaving women to resort to other means of income such as gambling and depending on the children's social grants for survival. For most rural areas, dependency on social grants to meet household food requirements is not uncommon (Musemwa, Muchenje & Mushunje, 2015). Even though social grants are meant to be a remedial intervention (Statistics South Africa, 2007), many households continue to use grants as the only source of income which on their own, are still too low to cover household requirements and do not increase proportionally with inflation (Musemwa *et al.*, 2015).

While still drawing on the definition of empowerment by Cattaneo and Goodman (2014), taking part in the community arts and craft projects will empower the women by addressing factors contributing to their disempowered state. Comparing their lives before and after having joined the community arts and crafts projects, it is clear that the women's lives have been improved by participation. Feelings of positivity about life, pride in what they do, goals for the future and not having stress, reduced dependency on social grants, independence, respect from the community, being able to make an income, pride, self-acceptance, contentedness, optimism

and a positive outlook on life are associated by the women as a result of joining the community arts and crafts projects. These results based on the women's responses, are presented in Table 2 below. Although craft-making is not a direct cure for the women's life stressors, the women-only environment in which they operate makes a significant contribution toward the women's expressed views of improvements in their lives. As the women interact with one another in a women-only environment, they engage in women-talk. This kind of talk is powerful enough for the formation of friendship, construction of identities and maintaining gender divisions. This talk is also arguably one of the most satisfying and sustaining kind and is also key within a leisure setting (Green, 1998). Furthermore, talk in a woman-only environment as a commonly chosen form of leisure across all ages, ethnic and social boundaries, creates a platform for women to explore and review the many facets of changing, multiple identities.

Table 2: Elements of art and craft-making that empower women (Authors' own)

Participants' quotes	Associated result
"When I walk out, I want others to…to pay attention I want them to see I am somebody's grandmother, look at her, what she does. The reason I will get that response is because I am not sitting with my hands, it is because I hustle, I do not just want to sit in the same place that will make me sick. That is why when I look at myself in the mirror I smile and say, man...…unlike other women, I do not want to be seen as a pensioner." **-P1**	• Reduced dependency on old age grant • Being able to provide for oneself even during old age/ Continuity of self in old age
"It's like…the other day I went to a funeral at a relative's, you know when I got there, they were saying what is happening with you these days? Why are you so beautiful? And I said, you know, I sew!" **-P2**	• Pride in the newly found activity resulting in respect and admiration from community embers
"...Meaning that…the way things have changed in my life…eish…I feel proud when I look at myself in the mirror…and then I wish I could have progressed beyond where I am already at." **-P2B**	• Finding purpose in life, from having a new commitment that helps generate money/ Financial aspect of craft-making
"But being here…I feel free…even in my soul…I feel alright. Yes. Stress-free." **-P2B**	• Therapeutic and cathartic nature of craft-making resulting in reduction of stress
"We are proud...we have no problems with ourselves." **-P1C**	• Pride in self and feelings of self-acceptance and positive self-image
"I feel...I just feel comfortable, I am thankful for being in this thing, this cooperative. I feel that life will change in the future... Yes! It's not like before, everything has changed." **-D3**	• Contentedness with self and positive outlook on life
"It's like...Through everything, you tell yourself that I will get somewhere. Even if you might have challenges, have things that disturb you, you must not lose hope. One day...we have that now with this cooperative, we would like to see ourselves having... things that please people. So we motivate ourselves. You motivate yourself, you are not motivated by...sometimes you are motivated by seeing people do wonderful things. But if you stay demoralised, pitiful, you are not going to go anywhere." **-D2**	• Hopefulness about the future, self-motivated and acknowledgement of benefits of optimism.

Based on the quotes from the respondents, the following themes were established to help explain how arts and crafts projects continue to be helpful in contributing toward rural women's empowerment.
- Theme 1: The therapeutic nature of art and craft-making

An aspect of craft-making that the women found beneficial was its therapeutic nature. All women have dependants for whom they care and admit that at times, it can be stressful for them when they are bombarded with the responsibility of taking care of others within the household where children often make demands they cannot meet. As a result, their relationships with members of the household can be strained by the frustration such responsibilities create. However, making crafts plays a therapeutic role because it creates a positive diversion from the frustration and gives women calmness, allowing them to restore their relationships with household members, especially their children. This is consistent with Pöllänen (2015) who found that crafting had a calming effect on crafters and also aids in adapting to stressful situations beyond the crafters' control.

Crafters express crafting as a form of healing the mind. At the same time, craft-making allows crafters to resist being overwhelmed by difficulties even though circumstances shake their autonomy. While other circumstances affecting the women's lives cannot always be controlled, craft is an area in their lives over which they can exercise control on their own terms. Therefore, crafting promotes a certain sense of control in their lives and also aids in achieving a feeling of life management and fully functional personality in situations where all other parts of life cannot be controlled (Pöllänen, 2009).

- Theme 2: Established networks of support

Craft-making not only served as a way to help the women deal with their life circumstances, but also gave them feelings of hope for the future, a sense of optimism, pride in themselves, a positive self-image and a gained sense of respect from their communities. Such feelings of optimism and positive self-image have also been noted in Reynolds, Vivat and Prior (2008). It can also be noted that because the women's arts and craftwork takes place within a social environment which allowed for the sharing of knowledge, experiences and appreciation of their art and craftwork, this has allowed them to form networks of support and encouragement with other women. The benefits derived from forming highly meaningful, supportive social networks with others have also been documented by Reynolds (2010). Through art and craft-making, social contact is enhanced thereby allowing connectedness with others who form pillars of support to rely on at a level different from that of family and relatives which is usually accompanied by expectations and connotations for the women to assume the responsibility of caring for.

- Theme 3: An enhanced sense of continuity

Moreover, craft-making contributes to a sense of continuity, especially for the older participants in or approaching retirement age. Late adulthood is often characterised as a period of increased dependency on others resulting from debilitating physical and cognitive abilities. A drop in self-esteem is also associated with the late adulthood stage stemming from a number of reasons (Barnett & Blanco, 2006). It is extremely important for individuals in the late adulthood stage to experience feelings of usefulness or self-efficacy (Barnett & Blanco, 2006). Therefore, individuals who are in or near late adulthood stage find craft-making a useful activity because it reinforces their sense of continuity and self-efficacy.

Engaging in crafts makes the elderly maintain acceptance from society and also to be seen as individuals of value as opposed to being categorised by age or disability and other stereotypes commonly encountered in later life (Reynolds, 2010). This feeling of self-efficacy gained through participating in an arts and crafts project enhances the women's confidence in their abilities to still be active members of a community and contribute positively toward bettering the lives of others within their community. At the same time, it provides the women, especially the elderly, a platform for role-modelling to inspire others to still continue being active and less reliant on supportive sources despite their age. This also helps challenge stereotypes

associated with later life where the elderly are often viewed as more dependent and less capable of surviving without the help of others.

- Theme 4: The economic benefit of making art and craft

Very few of the women involved in this study had successfully completed secondary schooling and proceeded to attain a tertiary qualification. Referring to a specific ethnic group, Wells, Sienaert and Conolly (2004) attribute the poor educational opportunities afforded to particularly black rural communities as a legacy of the apartheid era and also as having led to the disempowerment and disadvantaged status of the women. That alone predisposes the women toward experiencing challenges in attaining formal employment as a qualification would be expected to be a requirement for formal employment. Not having a formal job with a stable income results in women having to resort to other means to make a living.

Even though the majority had not reported a significant increase in their income post joining the arts and crafts projects, there were still those who reported substantial increases in their income resulting from taking part in the arts and crafts project. For the majority of the women, the selling of their craft is their only source of income when ignoring the social grants received for their children.

This result is consistent with Shackleton and Campbell (2007), who reported that the majority of women involved in the craft of producing traditional brooms were reliant on the sale of their brooms as an only source of income. At the same time, it is also reported that there are other women who have joined the projects and have since dropped out of the projects to continue with their own art and craft from which they are able to make a living because of the skills they learned when still participating in the arts and crafts project. This result is also consistent with Makhado and Kepe (2006), who reported in their study that there are many crafters, specifically weavers who produce their craft for the purpose of selling with the popular reason of seeking to supplement their household income.

Other reasons for producing craft for the purpose of selling included developing a more dependable source of income and the drive from poverty. These products are usually available for sale at craft centres and some of the women continue to sell their craft at the grant-receival stations which is similar to findings by Shackleton and Campbell (2007). Although the women appreciate the little income made from trading their crafts, there is a significant need to have access to an even greater market to be able to generate more from their craft. Being able to generate an income from craft gives the women some degree of financial freedom as they are becoming less totally dependent on their spouses for money. Segalo (2011) also found that gaining financial independence also allowed women to gain a new sense of self and freedom. This, the women also found restores peace in the household as dependency on others for money can cause conflict within the household. Moreover, the women's involvement and ability to make an income from their efforts resulted in pride from their children, as they were now able to approach their mothers for financial needs without the fear of being reprimanded for seeking money while knowing that it was not available. This freedom and pride from their children also allowed the women to have positive relations with their children compared to when they were not taking part in the projects, thereby restoring happiness and joy within the household.

Conclusion and Limitations

Previous studies such as those of Green, (1998), Roster, (2007) and Moswete and Lacey, (2015) have established strong links between various types of leisure and the empowerment of women. Leisure contexts serve as an avenue for women to resist societal gender stereotypes, formation of gendered identities, establishment of social networks of support as

well as improvements in wellbeing. Therefore, this study examined how art and craft-making as a leisure activity contributes to the social empowerment of rural women. Arts and crafts, although serving as an undervalued contributor to development due to the argued lack of coherent policies, hold numerous benefits for women. Rural art and craft-making projects play a significant role in the empowerment of women by positively contributing to their collective empowerment and aiding in alleviating issues disempowering them, such as poverty, stress, negative self-image and negative leisure behaviour. Firstly, rural arts and crafts projects are an easy way for rural women to participate in as these usually take place within their own communities and do not add a financial burden for women in order to be able to access them. Secondly, these projects serve as a source for the transfer of skills which can be relied on for livelihood. Lastly these projects create a women-only environment which allows women to create networks of support and also provide them with a comfortable platform to discuss issues that affect them.

To maximise the benefit of arts and craft-making, there is a need to create awareness in rural communities of the value of art and craft-making. There is a need for productive partnerships between rural women crafters and governmental organisations. Considering the rural context from which these women operate, local organisations and governmental departments need to open channels of communication and find possible ways to communicate with the women about opportunities available for them to grow. Additionally, they should also create an information base which the women can access. Creating cross-project communication channels among the projects themselves could also aid in improving the status of struggling projects by connecting them with thriving projects so other women can mimic those who are successful in their projects. However, the results of this study cannot be generalised to a larger population of women with similar characteristics to those involved in this study as focus was placed only on the experiences of 18 women. At the same time, the women involved in this study were involved in different types of arts and crafts. A more focused study involving a similar type of craft with a larger sample could have potentially yielded different results, which could have had some generalisability to a larger population.

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