

Article

# **Economic Participation among Older People: Key Influencing Factors and Social Work Practice Implications**

by

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## **Abstract**

Economic participation studies often emphasize challenges of accessing and engaging in formal employment after retirement. However, they tend to overlook personal factors, traditional values, and culturally specific elements in rural settings that influence participation in informal work. This study explored the factors that influence older people's participation in handcraft activities in the Masasi District in Tanzania. It provides a deeper insight into their continued engagement, and highlights its implications for social work practice.

This study explored the factors that influence the participation of older people in handcraft activities to provide a deeper insight into their continued engagement and its implications on social work practice. A phenomenology method was used, and in-depth interviews were employed to collect data from purposively sampled older people working in handcraft through the lens of decolonial theory. The analysis revealed that older people's participation in handcraft activities was triggered by poor living conditions, the need for income to meet essential needs, a lack of formal and inadequate informal support, parenting and grand-parenting obligations, as well as the desire to maintain personal agency and avoid dependence syndrome.

The findings suggest that the traditional role of extended family and community, as a pillar of care and protection of older people, should be enhanced to improve their working lives and well-being. Older people working in handcraft activities should be empowered in their socio-economic issues to improve their working and quality of life in rural communities. Collaboration between social workers and the community at the grassroots level is crucial, and social work knowledge and practice that reflect and promote indigenous knowledge and practices should be developed and adopted.

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## **Introduction**

As populations age worldwide, the well-being of older people is becoming a demanding concern. Therefore, it entails significant social and economic implications for governments, communities, households and individuals in both developed and developing countries. Countries need to prepare and adapt social protection measures, policies and programmes to address challenges and opportunities, and reap the social and economic benefits of the aging population. In response to an aging population, governments in several developed countries reformed their pension systems, and introduced policies to increase the labour force participation of older people (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2017). In addition to reforms of pension systems, various countries implement and promote active aging policies that encourage companies and organizations to introduce age-friendly policies and practices (OECD, 2018). The reforms and other measures, such as retention programmes, increased the labour force participation rate of older people, thus impacting their income, working conditions, health, and well-being.

Research affirms a global increase in older people's employment in Europe, Australia and Canada (OECD, 2017). The labour participation growth was attributed to the abolition of the default retirement age, the changing age demographic, subsequent labour shortages and the introduction of policies and age-friendly programmes (Flower et al., 2019). Japan is leading in older people's working participation with 80%, followed by 75% in Sweden and 70% in the United States of America and Germany (OECD, 2018). By continuing to work, older people in high-income countries, the majority of whom are working in formal employment, contribute to their families, society and economic development (Börsch-Supan & Weiss, 2016), therefore decreasing the health and pension expenditures by the government. According to the ILO (2018b) report, 70% of older people aged 60 to 64 in Sub-Saharan Africa remain in the labour force. Many older people continue to participate in economic activities without retiring to sustain themselves, while their involvement has not been given enough attention (Zelalem et al., 2023).

The aging workforce population in developed countries continues to transform labour market structures and employability, impacting overall productivity levels (OECD,

2018). The aging population faces health challenges, particularly non-communicable diseases, which affect their productivity, working hours and social security systems. These challenges also influence social cohesion and the overall development of a country (Gonzales et al., 2015). Population aging in the workforce highlights the urgent need for policymakers, governments and the private sector to collaborate in addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by older workers. This applies to both developed and developing countries, requiring inclusive strategies to support their participation (Wija et al., 2012).

While the above transformations were made to accommodate the aging workforce to continue to work in developed countries, the situation is not the same in developing countries, which experience the increase of older people amidst poverty with no existing legal protection frameworks (Rwegoshora, 2015). Governments in developing countries illustrated a commitment to advance the well-being of older people by signing frameworks on aging and the Plan of Action on Ageing (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2016). In these plans and frameworks, the governments have incorporated the issues and needs of older people into national policies and programmes, such as the Tanzanian National Aging Policy introduced in 2003. Despite efforts to implement interventions, many countries still face challenges in addressing the needs of older people. Older people continue to experience poverty, inadequate health services and pensions, and limited participation in socioeconomic agendas, impacting both their well-being and national development (Aboderin & Gachuhi, 2007; Cohen & Menken, 2006).

Many older people (85.8%) in developing countries are living in rural areas and mainly work in informal jobs. They often face poor working conditions, and lack legal protections (International Labor Organization (ILO), 2018a). Most older people work in agriculture and other informal work, where their income is irregular and undefined. Consequently, the majority of older people are not part of any formal pension system (Rwegoshora, 2015). In Tanzania, only 5% of older people benefit from the formal pension system. Hence, the predominant majority depend on informal and non-state-regulated forms of social protection primarily provided through extended families and community support systems (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2016). The formal pension system benefits only those older people who were formerly employed in the formal sector

(Tanzanian National Aging Policy (URT), 2003). This provision of a formal security system was developed by capitalists during the 19th century, and inherited by many developing countries through colonialism (Mwami, 2001). This model of social security was introduced by British and French colonialists, and was similar and aimed at maintaining labour productivity, emphasizing work performance, and henceforth the realization of profit (Rwegoshora, 2015). This system was discriminative, and therefore excluded a large number of older people without a formal social protection system, leaving the majority in a vulnerable situation. Consequently, a decolonization of the system is needed to reflect on the current changes and diverse culture, knowledge and context.

The migration of young people to urban areas in search for jobs and education has disrupted the traditional extended family support system in rural Tanzania, leaving many older people without adequate care and support (Mabeyo & Kiwelu, 2019). These societal changes, driven by urbanization and economic changes, have significantly impacted the well-being of older people, thus increasing their vulnerability (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2011). In response to these challenges, the idea of indigenization emerges as a potential measure to address the socioeconomic needs and challenges of older people in rural settings. Indigenization emphasizes integrating local measures, cultural practices and values into policies and programmes to effectively support older people. Indigenization restores traditional community-based solutions, and promotes local practices that offer culturally relevant approaches to counter the adverse effects of modernization and urbanization, while still preserving social cohesion in rural settings (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019).

Research on older people and social work practice in Africa affirms the lack of local experiences and realities on indigenous knowledge and approaches that are contextually relevant to its vulnerable population, especially for older people (Zelalem et al., 2021; Mabeyo & Kiwelu, 2019). Older people in developing countries are engaging in several economic activities, including paid and unpaid work for their livelihood and their families (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2011). The growing claim that social and economic participation is a key driver of successful aging (De Leon, 2005) is a Western-based approach, whether the same is true in developing countries is an area worth studying. The handcrafting sector is largely rural-based, small-scale

industries that contribute secondly to rural economies after agriculture, and provide additional income to agriculture which is seasonal work (Kazungu, 2023). Handcraft products are handmade or produced using simple hand tools such as needles, carving implements or hooks. Handcrafts of many types are based on forms and purpose, including traditional, decorative, paper, functional and fashion crafts. They are manufactured from materials such as clay, fabric, wood, metal, beads and glass through life skills that include needlework, quilting, knitting, pottery and woodworking among others. The products include traditional mats, hats, baskets, decorations, wood carvings, local beddings, sculptures, clay pots, clay stoves and wooden cooking spoons among others (Kazungu & Mchopa, 2022).

In rural communities, where resources and formal and informal social support are often limited, the potential for exploring the factors behind participation in handcraft activities, particularly by older people, remains largely untapped. Several studies focus on the benefits of older people's participation in handcrafting activities (Chacur et al., 2022), and largely overlook the factors behind older people's participation in these activities. It is therefore the purpose of this study to address this gap to provide a deeper insight into the motivations that sustain older people handcraft practices in rural areas, informing social work practices aimed at creating culturally sensitive, and motivating programmes tailored to the unique culture and values of rural communities.

## **Country context**

In Tanzania, an individual is recognized as an older person if he/she attains 60 years of age, responsibilities and status in society (URT, 2003). This definition is useful for this article, since it recognizes both social and chronological aspects of old age. Many older people in Tanzania are working in the informal sector, and work through retirement age after a lifetime of poverty and deprivation, poor access to healthcare and a poor diet (Mabeyo, 2014).

Studies revealed that transformation due to modernization (in particular, education, urbanization and migration) and industrialization are the key factors impinging the traditional participatory role of older people in the community (Mabeyo et al., 2019).

Trends in modernization lead to challenges, such as a lack of care and protection for older people. The declining significance of kinship ties and relations in society has led to marginalization and an undermining of the system of security for older people (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2011). In many African societies, including Tanzania, traditional extended family systems have weakened, making it increasingly difficult to provide adequate care, social and economic support for older people (URT, 2003). As a result, a significant number of older people are compelled to work tirelessly to sustain themselves due to inadequate support from both families and communities, which were previously their pillar of care and support (Kreitzer, 2012). Although families may still feel a sense of responsibility for older people's care, structural and economic challenges often limit their ability to effectively fulfil this role, leaving many older people in vulnerable situations (URT, 2003).

Nevertheless, the current social work practice has had a limited scope in addressing the challenges faced by older people, despite its obligation to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, including the elderly (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Given these realities, a paradigm shift in social work practice is necessary. Incorporating indigenous knowledge and cultural values into interventions can ensure that approaches are relevant to the lived experiences of older people, especially in rural contexts. Such frameworks can strengthen social ties and revive traditions of care, addressing both the social and economic vulnerabilities of older people.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study employed decolonial perspectives rooted in the works of critical colonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1952) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), exploring the impacts of colonialism and the necessity to reclaim identity and agency, and in linguistic and literature, respectively (Fanon, 2000). It was extended by the works of Mignolo and Quijano, who explored the idea, and enriched the understanding on how historical and systemic structures from colonial rule continued to shape and impact the contemporary realities (Mignolo, 2020). Other scholars like Mbembe (2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) emphasize an understanding of current problems from a historical perspective, in addition to the need to break away from Eurocentric knowledge systems that persist in modern societies. The theory is relevant to this



study because its assumption emphasizes how the historical impact of colonialism continues to marginalize indigenous knowledge and practices in modern societies.

The economic participation of older people, particularly in handcraft activities, is not integrally negative. It promotes a productive aging by fostering independence, self-worth and economic stability among older people. However, the weakening of traditional extended family systems of care and support due to urbanization and globalization has often made this participation a necessity rather than a choice, especially in rural communities. As a result, many older people continue to work under difficult conditions due to economic hardship and inadequate support systems. Another assumption of this theory is the advocacy and empowerment of indigenous knowledge, culture and epistemologies (Fanon, 1961). By engaging in handcraft activities, older people contribute to- and support the local economy, and generate income. This lessens dependency, and promotes local made handcraft products for the sustainability of the rural economy.

The urban migration of many young people searching for opportunities in big cities and towns broke the traditional support system, which was a safety net and pillar of care and support for the well-being of marginalized people, including older people in the community. Currently, older people are left alone to care for themselves with inadequate support from older people's family, community and the government. As a result, many older people in rural communities are facing economic insecurities due to the disruption of their informal traditional system of support. Hence, they rely on informal and low-wage work which provides little financial benefit on top of the burden of unpaid domestic work in their households. The situation has increased both social and economic vulnerability for many older people, thereby reinforcing the need for social work knowledge and practices to address the gaps in care left by the weakened traditional support systems.

Older people in rural communities primarily depend on local practices of the economy in the face of marginalization and exclusion from the formal economy, which prioritizes younger able-bodied workers. Older people in rural communities are dependent on traditional informal economic activities such as handcrafting and subsistence farming without formal safety nets and a formal pension system, and

thus continue to be marginalized. Therefore, transforming the rural economic system to be inclusive to all ages is significant, especially for older people as argued by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), who asserted that decoloniality should focus on challenging embedded systems and advocating for an economic reformation that benefits the marginalized people.

A decolonial approach to social work emphasizes restoring traditional and local systems of care and support, and empowering older people through community-based programmes rooted in a traditional knowledge of the specific context. Policymakers should integrate informal rural economies challenges into national agendas, ensuring access to resources, markets and social protection of the marginalized in rural communities. Structural transformations must address systemic inequalities mainly in rural communities caused by urbanization and globalization by improving rural infrastructure, healthcare systems and social services. An emphasis should be placed on skills development, intergenerational collaborations and entrepreneurship training to all to improve productivity and well-being. These measures should advocate for context-specific inclusive policies that value older people's contributions, and strengthen rural economies through sustainable, culturally relevant interventions (Mbembe, 2016).

## **Methods**

This study adopted a qualitative approach and phenomenological design, with 12 in-depth interviews and non-participant observation with older people working in the handcrafts sector. Phenomenology is recommended when a study aims to understand how people experience and perceive a phenomenon, describe it and make sense of it when talking to others (Creswell, 2014). The design allowed a description and interpretation of the meanings of human experiences (economic participation) by older people working in handcrafting to obtain an in-depth understanding of the matter (factors behind their participation), which was not previously studied in-depth. Hermeneutical phenomenology was applied, as it explores personal experiences, and incorporates a description and interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation, as argued by Chambliss and Schutt (2013).

Purposive sampling (Neuman, 2014) was used to select 12 participants for the study. The sample size of this research was limited to 12 participants based on the concept of data saturation, when the interviews were consistent and provided no new information. The fieldwork was carried out by a researcher in the Masasi District in the Mtwara Region, Southern Tanzania. This region was selected since it is the second largest in the country with the highest number of older people (Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics (TNBS), 2022). The region has also been a neglected part of research about older people in the country, as affirmed by Help Age International (HAI) (2012).

### *Tools and data collection procedures*

Data was collected between August and September 2023. The initial appointments on place and time were made through the District Social Welfare Officers and the Village Executive Officers (VEO), who work directly with the older people in the communities. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants' residents, with a few done at the ward and village offices. Many participants preferred to be interviewed in their households, and a few in VEO and ward executive officers (WEO) offices. These choices were safe and comfortable for both the researcher and the participants. A total of eight interviews were conducted in participant's households, while four interviews were done at the ward or village offices of the local government. The interviews took between 40 to 60 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. All interviews were done in the Swahili language, since the majority of the participants were native Swahili speakers.

### *Study participants and sampling procedure*

The study employed a purposive sampling to select participants based on two inclusion criteria: the first was to be an older person aged 60 and above, which is a definition of an older person by Tanzania law (URT, 2003). Secondly, he/she had to be working in the handcraft sector for his/her livelihood. The researcher made contact with the Social Welfare Officer at the Mtwara Municipal Council (MMC) with a letter of permit from the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH). The MMC gave the researcher an official introduction letter to the Masasi District Council

(MDC), which referred the researcher to the Social Welfare Officer in MDC, who then introduced her to different wards and VEOs. They linked the researcher directly with the study participants in their localities. The study's final sample size was 12 older people working in the handcraft sector. The participants were derived from four wards in different villages. The sample included four males and eight females aged 60 to 77 years.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analysed based on the phenomenological analysis guidelines adopted by Creswell (2014), Braun and Clarke, (2006). A thematic analysis was used to analyse data as recommended in qualitative research, to explore people's experiences, ideas and perceptions on specific topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method identifies, analyses and reports patterns (themes) within qualitative data, which helps to uncover concepts embedded in participants' narratives. After collecting the raw data and following the principles of thematic analysis, the researcher transcribed specific sections of the data, and began coding them according to themes right away while in the field. The digitally recorded data was first transcribed in Kiswahili, and then the Kiswahili text was translated into English. After the process of data transcription, the process of formulating themes followed, and later on other emerging/recurrent issues were developed from the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were employed to systematically analyse data. First, the researcher became familiar with the data from the field by reading and identifying initial ideas. Next, codes were generated to capture key points and then grouped into broader themes reflecting patterns and insights. The themes were reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance to determine the significance and meaning of themes, with a final reporting of findings done to present a clear and meaningful analysis.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study obtained research approval from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee MAKSS-REC protocol number 05.2023.661, and the research permit from the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) with permit number 2023-458-NA-2023-761. Ethical issues, including

informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and procedures for protecting basic human rights, were adhered to by the required standards (Creswell, 2014). Clearance introductory letters and informed consent were sought from all participants, both verbal and written, before conducting the study. Participants were informed of their freedom not to respond or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Alongside the researcher's oral clarification, all participants were provided with the informed consent form to read, ask for clarifications if any, and complete it before taking part in the study.

## **Findings**

Based on the research question of the study, five major themes emerged from the in-depth interviews done. These themes were poor living conditions, income for meeting essential needs, a lack of formal and inadequate informal support, parenting and grand-parenting obligations, and a desire to maintain personal agency and avoid dependence syndrome.

### *Poor living conditions*

The participants from the study articulated various challenges they experienced while working in handcraft activities in rural communities. These difficulties and poor conditions in the villages are the leading reasons for their continuing engagement in multiple economic activities. Almost all of the participants reported on difficult living and working conditions, from the collection of raw materials to the selling of their products. Participants narrated their distress on their hard lives due to inadequate income from their former and current economic activities, which has led to their economic vulnerability. The income earned was not sufficient to meet their daily needs: therefore, they participated in multiple economic activities to survive. The rural economy challenges and limitations were reported as constraining opportunities for several participants. Some participants mentioned the lack of pensions, whereas others narrated on a lack of financial support systems as a critical factor that pushed them to remain economically active. They were also suffering from agricultural difficulties, including a decrease in the capacity of farming in old age: thus, they had low harvests which could not meet their needs. They also faced crop failures due to the rudimentary farming systems (farming without using proper manure) and changes

in climate conditions, which largely affected agricultural activity in the rural areas. The quotes below elaborate on some of these claims:

My child (referring to researcher), life in the village is very difficult (with a sad face), which is why young people run away to town and leave us here alone. I am too old and poor to farm a large area on my own. I have a small land in which I plant maize, millet and cassava depending on the season for me to live. Hand hoeing is heavy for older people since it needs a lot of energy. I don't have money to rent a tractor to farm, so I do it myself. (female older person)

Village life is hard compared to urban, where everything is available easily, and at a good price. There is a very big inflation of some products here in our village. Just imagine, one kilogram of sugar is 5000 shillings, while a kilogram of maize is 1000, so, you're forced to sell 5 kilograms of maize to buy 1 kilogram of sugar. The government should be considerate in the pricing of our agricultural products as well. It has been like this for a long time, and it is not fair. All other products are rising in price except our agricultural products; it is very bad, especially in the village, because we don't have a proper market, and no choice but to accept the situation. (male older person)

In addition, older people engaging in handcrafts are experiencing difficulties in accessing services such as safe water, inadequate health services and poor transport in the rural communities. These enduring challenges are brought about by the nature of the rural economy, which provides limited options for older people, who are mostly physically incapable. As a result, they are compelled to engage in handcraft activities to survive.

### *Income for meeting essential needs*

The participants reported that they engage in handcraft activities to obtain income to meet their daily essential needs. The money they earned was for buying indispensable needs, which included foodstuffs (vegetables), salt, sugar and medicine during sickness. Engaging in handcraft activities for the purposes of obtaining cash to buy the aforementioned essential needs was because the rural community life of the older people studied was almost completely monetized. Therefore, earning income was necessary to meet these essential needs for their survival, and in a case where they lack customers for a long time, they exchange their products with food, such as a tin of maize as a last resort:

I am doing this work so that I can see tomorrow. Without it, I cannot afford to live because everything needs money to buy. You need to have money to buy essential items, such as food, sugar and salt. (female older person)

I depend on this job to get minimum food and some clothes since the income earned is small, but I am trying my level best to budget it. It is little, but not the same as

nothing. There are times you may get good money when we get customers from town, but there's also a time when you can pass the whole month without a single customer. So we are struggling with uneven income and when it comes to worse, you look for someone with maize who needs a mat so that you can exchange like what we used to do in the past. (female older person)

The above quotes imply that several participants engage in handcraft activities as the only main source of income to meet their essential and basic needs. It also infers that engaging in handcraft activities is a major means of securing income to meet the essential needs of many participants. However, the income earned from handcraft activities does not reliably and consistently enable older people to meet all their essential needs.

### *Lack of formal and inadequate informal support*

The need to survive due to inadequate informal support, and a lack of formal support systems, was among the notable causes for older people's engagement in handcraft activities among many participants. There is a limited access to health services and pensions (formal support) and inadequate care and support from their families, hence forcing older people to engage in handcraft activities as a means to ensure their livelihood:

I am doing this work as a means to alleviate poverty. I am living in poor conditions, and life is difficult. I am forced to do this work even though I am too old, but I have no choice. If I don't work, I will surely die because I don't have any support. Working is my survival. Better for others who get a pension but for us, we have nothing. So, continuing working is our way of life. (male older person)

My grandchild (referring to researcher), life is very difficult in the village. It forced me to do this work. Because I have no family support as you can see, I am living alone. My wife passed away. I do everything on my own, including cooking. I am living in a very difficult condition. If I don't weave these mats, hats and local beds, I will not get money to survive. (male older person)

My child (referring to the researcher), poverty is very bad. Until this old age that I am in, I continue to work to lessen the poverty situation. Honestly, life is very difficult. I am required to work to get my daily food. My family does not have enough income to support me; I mean my biological children are also struggling with their lives and their children. Therefore, I don't have a choice but to work to continue to live. (female older person)

The above quotes imply that adverse poverty at the individual and family level, and the associated hard life, including inadequate formal and informal support, leaves old people with handcraft activity as the only option to work and earn a living for their survival. Handcraft activities are practical means and survival mechanisms for older

people to maintain their livelihood and navigate the challenges of the poor rural environment.

### *Parenting and grand-parenting obligations*

The participants indicated that they engage in handcraft activities to meet their main duties as parents and grandparents. Some participants still had children and grandchildren who needed their primary care and support, such as feeding, clothing and nurturing. The grand-parenting role was due to ill parents, absence due to migration, death and the difficult life of some of the parents. Therefore, older people were engaging in handcraft activities to meet their own subsistence needs, along with their children and their grandchildren, which increased their vulnerabilities:

To be honest, I am doing this work to support my children. I still have children who need my provision. So, I am engaging in carving work to provide them with school fees and other school needs like uniforms. My wife is helping me with farming so that we can get food, and I am here working in carving to sustain our lives. (male older person)

I am an older person still working here not only for myself, but also for my daughter and my grandchildren. I am a primary caregiver for my grandchildren and poor daughter, who was deserted by her husband with three children. She is a poor housewife with no job. I am struggling to work in carving so that I can support them to get food and school needs such as uniforms and exercise books, because I have no formal education. (female older person)

The quotations above reflects the socio-economic difficulties faced by older people in rural communities, whereby a lack of formal education leads them to informal works such as handcrafting with no pension, which increases their vulnerability. Economic instability and limited family planning often lead to delayed parenthood, larger family sizes and late childbearing among older people in rural communities. The continued parenting care to older children highlights the intergenerational poverty trap, as older people continue to work into their later years to support their children. The need to work long for some older people to provide basic necessities for their families highlights rural poverty due to an inadequate access to education, healthcare and other essential services. This reflects the economic marginalization of older people and their families, thus relying on informal labour markets as formal systems of social support, are insufficient.



### *Desire to maintain personal agency and avoid dependence syndrome*

The participants continue to engage in handcraft activities to maintain their self-reliance and personal dignity. Older people engage in handcraft activities as a means to fight dependency syndrome, which is negatively associated with aging, as society labels them as helpless and a burden. Therefore, older people are working in handcraft activities, and are determined not to quit working to stave off devaluation, and retain their self-respect. One participant's quote goes as follows regarding working in old age:

We, old people, have been labeled as a burden to family and society, but this is not true. We are working hard, but our contributions are invisible. The majority of us hate to be dependent on other people. That is why we are working so that we can contribute to our families, and maintain our independence and respect. (male older person)

Other participants explained their determination to work and not quit, so that they remain active and useful. They desire to continue working until they can no longer do so, even when given support from their families and the government. These participants believe working is a lifetime role. Therefore, they are not planning to quit, and feel content by engaging in work throughout their old age. One of the participants explained:

I feel good when I work; I feel too respected and honoured when I work. Thus, I will never stop working since it makes me feel like an active member of society. (male older person)

Other participants engage in handcraft activities as a means to cope with physical aging, as one of the male participants described: 'If I don't work, my body will rot.' another participant explained their opinions in the quote below:

Indeed, the income earned from handcrafting is not enough to cover all my needs, but it helps me to be active physically and mentally. Thus, it makes me feel good. (male older person)

The quotes above suggest that older people participate in handcraft activities for various reasons, as it highlights how older people view work as more than a means of securing income. It reflects other social benefits of working, such as providing a sense of identity, belongingness and respect in the community. It suggests that work is a source of personal dignity and self-worth, which counters the societal traditional view that associates aging with dependency and inactivity. It emphasizes productive engagement as a way of maintaining cognitive sharpness and physical liveliness despite economic difficulties and a buffer against physical and mental decline.

However, the participants' statements also underscore systemic challenges in rural communities, such as inadequate income security and a lack of pension to the majority, which forces older people to continue to work regardless of their physical limitations. It entails that older people work in handcraft activities, not only for their survival, but also as a way of empowering themselves.

## **Discussion**

The study explored factors influencing older people's participation in economic activities, particularly in the rural Masasi community. The study brings to light challenges faced by older handcrafters in rural Tanzania, which included poor living conditions, a lack of formal and inadequate informal support and the strain of caregiving obligations. These structural barriers stem from the colonial systems and policies which continue to marginalize rural economies, and disturb the traditional support systems. The predominance of informal economic activities, such as handcrafting, underscores the vulnerability of older people who must continue working to meet their essential needs in an environment with minimal infrastructure and market opportunities (Rwegoshora, 2016; Zelalem & Kotecho, 2020). These findings are supported by a study by Zelalem and Kotecho (2020), which reported that older people in rural communities suffer from poverty and a plethora of plights due to contextual factors such as a restricting environment, crop failure and others beyond their control. The limited employment opportunities in the rural economies have led the majority to engage in manual labour, which is physically incapable for some older people, thereby increasing their vulnerability (Rwegoshora, 2016). The findings are similar to a study done by Zaidi (2014), which reported on how contextual and temporal factors contribute to inequalities and vulnerabilities in old age.

The weakening of extended family systems as a consequence of urbanization and globalization is among the significant challenges identified in the study. Traditionally, extended families provided care and support for older people, ensuring that their social and economic needs were met. However, as younger generations migrate to urban areas in search for better opportunities, older people are left behind with diminished familial and community support (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2011; HAI, 2014). In

addition to economic and social isolation, many older people are burdened with caregiving responsibilities for their grandchildren, often as a result of health crises such as HIV/AIDS or family breakdowns. While some derive a sense of purpose from these roles, they also face significant physical and financial burden, which aggravates their vulnerabilities. These caregiving dynamics reflect broader societal changes, including the unraveling of traditional family systems and the impact of economic crises (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Addressing these issues requires policies that support older caregivers, and acknowledge their role and contribution in sustaining intergenerational bonds.

The transition of rural economies from subsistence agriculture to cash-based systems has created both opportunities and challenges for older people. On the one hand, monetization has extended the potential for trade and economic progress. On the other hand, it has marginalized those unable to participate in cash economies, particularly older people with limited access to formal employment and financial resources (ILO, 2019). The continuing rise in the cost of living has further engrained poverty in rural areas, thus making it difficult for older people to sustain themselves and their families. The economic exclusion continues to impact the structure of rural economies, where informal labour remains the main source of income for older people. This marginalization highlights the need for a decolonial approach to economic policy and transformations that value and integrate indigenous economic practices. By promoting local economies, production and trade, rural economies can become more resilient and self-sustaining, therefore fostering economic improvement for older people (Mabeyo & Kiwelu, 2019).

The study also emphasizes the significance of integrating indigenous knowledge and practices into social work education and practice. Current methods applied often fail to address the unique cultural and historical context of Tanzania, particularly for the rural communities. By incorporating indigenous values, such as community-based care and collective problem-solving strategies, social work can become more responsive to the needs of older people, as argued by (Rutikanga, 2019; Twikirize, 2014) on the relevance of homegrown solutions. This shift would not only enhance the effectiveness of social work interventions, but also restore the dignity and agency of older people. Community-based initiatives provide valuable models for addressing

the challenges faced by older people and other marginalized groups in the community. These approaches emphasize collective action and resource-sharing initiatives, which align with traditional societal values of solidarity and communal care. Revitalizing and adapting these practices can help rebuild the social safety nets that have been eroded by urbanization and globalization, thus ensuring that older people receive the care and support that they need (Mabeyo & Kiwelu, 2019).

The findings also highlight the need for transformation into policies that address and intervene in the root causes of poverty and inequality in rural areas. This includes improving social services such as access to health services, entrepreneurship training, as well as creating inclusive economic opportunities for all, including older people. Social workers and other stakeholders can play a crucial role in advocating for these transformations to influence policy and practice at both the local village and national levels (Spitzer & Mabeyo, 2011; Zelalem et al., 2023). Finally, addressing the challenges faced by older people in Tanzania requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that involves policymakers, social workers and community members, including the older people themselves, as highlighted by Twikirize and Spitzer (2019). By focusing on indigenous values and practices in policy and practice, Tanzania can create a more equitable and inclusive society that honours the contributions of older people, while addressing their unique needs. This decolonial approach offers a pathway to sustainable development that respects the cultural and historical context of rural communities.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges faced by older people in rural Tanzania, particularly due to the decline of traditional family systems and the shift from Agrarian to industrial economies. As the traditional extended family system has weakened, older people, particularly those in the informal sector like handcrafting, are left with inadequate care and support and protection. The lack of formal and inadequate informal support systems further exacerbates their challenges, leaving them reliant on informal work without adequate safety nets. They are compelled to continue working in physically demanding and poor conditions with insufficient income and resources, thus resulting in increased vulnerability.

To help address these issues, the study emphasizes the need for social work interventions that incorporate indigenous knowledge and community-based solutions. Revitalizing intergenerational solidarity and traditional support systems empowers vulnerable families with older persons and communities in improving the well-being of older people. Social work should adopt a decolonial perspective by integrating local culture and knowledge systems, and address the collective responsibility of the community to improve working and living conditions of older people in rural areas. Empowering families and communities, while fostering collaboration with stakeholders and implementing community-based programmes and initiatives are indispensable to create a sustainable and inclusive support system for older people. This approach will help to improve and provide older people with the necessary tools to contribute meaningfully to their community's economic and social development.

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