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International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) African Social Work Conversation Forum: Sharing social work practice stories and interventions in Africa

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ABSTRACT

African social workers' voices and practice stories have largely remained undocumented and untold. The many good works and things that social workers are doing in enhancing lives of citizens, communities and society remains largely unknown and unrecognised. To address the silence, increase visibility of social workers on the African continent and amplify African social workers' voices, International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Africa Region introduced African Social Work Conversation Forum, a web-based discussion platform. This short paper reports progress, challenges and future prospects of the African Social Work Conversation Forum. In addition, the documentation is part of the amplification of African voices of social workers on issues affecting Africa as well as the globe on matters related to social work practice. We argue that the African Social Work Conversation Forum is an extension of the indigenisation of social work agenda on the continent.

KEY TERMS: Africa, social work, social work voices, webinars, indigenisation

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INTRODUCTION

Social work in Africa is a profession that was largely imported by the colonial governments in response to the social challenges that were associated with the problems that were generated by colonisation itself (Mabeyo 2014). According to Mupedziswa (2020) social work was 'exported from' the Western world in the early 1900s. Spitzer and Twikirize (2014) sadly observe that despite the critical role that social work plays in social development of the continent and the enhancement of human welfare, the profession has remained underdeveloped and unrecognised. While IFSW and IASSW define social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers 2014), the deafening silence African social workers' voices has visibly been loud for a long time despite the many good things that social workers are doing to enhance the lives of citizens, communities and nations. While the African narrative is important to tell the African story, the voice has been silent on the continent in the global context. Mugumbate (2016) argues that social work in African countries is affected by a number of factors. Firstly, the professional voice is compromised by the exodus of social workers into the diaspora due to depressed salaries, poor working conditions and lack of solidarity. Secondly the occupation of social work position by non-social workers compromises the professional voice. Lastly the lack of among social workers weakens their voice. For Spitzer and Twikirize (2014) social work's recognition and contribution is diminished by limited local social work research and publication.

BACKGROUND TO IFSW AFRICA AND PROJECT OBJECTIVES

International Federation of Social Workers (2020) describes itself as a global membership driven organisation that strives for social justice, human rights and social development through the promotion of social work, best practice models and the facilitation of international cooperation among its 141 member associations. IFSW has five regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America and North Africa. The African Region comprises of 25 members.

Informed by the argument for greater visibility came a strong conviction to start bi-weekly webinar conversations with social workers across Africa that discuss and share practice experiences and best practices. Although social work is a global profession, that challenges injustice, inequality and promotes social justice the realities and environments that social workers find themselves differ. In addition, the meaning given to the guiding principles and standards in relation to the specific needs of different peoples and regions differs (Mwansa 2012). This has led to many voices correctly beginning to question the relevance and appropriateness of the remedial social work approaches leading to the call for social work education and practice on the African continent to be rooted in local cultures making it relevant and appropriate (Mupedziswa 2020).

The introduction of the African Social Work Conversation Forum (IFSW Conversation Forum) through the current webinars is an attempt to share social work practice stories and interventions in the wake of COVID-19. The webinars are also meant to amplify the voices of social workers on issues affecting Africa as well as the globe on matters related to social work practice. In addition, the platform is an attempt to share what Mupedziswa (2020) describes as developmental social work. Another silent objective of the platform is to document and record social work interventions on the continent taking advantage of the various social media platforms. Mupedziswa further argues that many in the field of social work tend to think publishing is a preserve of those in the education and training sector alone. He suggests cross-fertilisation, meaning those in practice are obliged to document their experiences (if only) for use in the classroom, and beyond through publication. The webinar series is an extension of Twikirize (2014) non curriculum activities towards the indigenisation agenda of social work on the continent. She argues that while problems on the continent may be similar to those in other parts of the world, the problems demand a different approach that is informed by magnitude and context of widespread poverty and deprivation.

With support from the British Association of Social workers and in partnership with Children and Families International, the bi-weekly webinar conversations are expected to enhance the habit of sharing practice stories within the region and beyond as well as highlight indigenous practice lessons from an African perspective that will enrich the knowledge base of the profession. The webinars will also enhance an exchange of Afrocentric social work practice, cultural diversity and the role that service users play in problem solving.

PROGRESS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

The IFSW Africa region managed to run a series of webinars on different topical issues giving Social Workers across the region an opportunity to tell their practice stories. The first webinar was held on 2 August 2020 under the theme Child Abuse and Teenage Pregnancies: The law and social protection during COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by another webinar on 2 September 2020 under the heading Africa Women tackling injustice.

The third webinar was on 19 September 2020 under the theme Indigenous social work practice in Africa: telling our practice stories amid COVID -19 interventions.

There has been a progressive realization of one of the project objectives meant to bring together social work practitioners to share and document their practice stories in order to contribute to the global narrative of social work practice. The webinars enhanced the sharing of social work best practices from an African perspective within the region and the globe at large. We believe that the Social Work Conversation webinars reached a wide range of social workers within Africa and outside the continent. Most of the webinars were streamed live on IFSW Global and Africa Region Facebook pages. The webinars also stimulated the culture of storytelling about social work practice experiences and provoked the interest in documentation in order to contribute to knowledge generation.

The African Social Work Conversation Virtual Forum project was not without challenges. Limited internet bandwidth was a challenge, hence need to increase the bandwidth in the second phase of the project. Limited internet access on the continent. This challenge potentially limits participation of social workers on the continent. The platforms may consider use of cheaper and accessible platforms such as WhatsApp. Prohibitive cost of internet services on the continent. Again, use of cheaper and accessible platforms such as WhatsApp can mitigate the challenge. Providing recordings of discussions through email and WhatsApp platforms to social workers.

CONCLUSION

The African Social Work Conversation Virtual Forum project provides an opportunity to amplify social work voices. In addition, the project is part of the broader indigenisation agenda that seeks to breathe relevance of the profession within the context that social workers find themselves. Again this is a breakaway from the thinking that only social workers in academia can publish. It is also a realisation that practitioner's own stories would contribute immensely to social work education. The forum provides a platform for cross-fertilisation of ideas and meanings. This means that those in practice are able and inspired to document their practice experiences which can potentially be used in the classroom setting and beyond through publication.

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