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## Social work impediments in providing effective services to families confronting family violence in South Africa

NTSHONGWANA Zintle and TANGA Pius

### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper was to examine impediments that hinder social workers in providing effective services to families confronting family violence at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Violence within families is both a global and gendered issue. In helping victims to cope with the effects of family violence, social workers provide a number of services. However, social workers encounter numerous challenges that hinder the effectiveness and efficiency of their services. A sample of 10 participants was selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which yielded rich information on a host of challenges experienced by social workers. Findings showed clearly that the funding required for ensuring the sustainability of the organisations is insufficient, and that the human resources are unstable. Findings further indicated how culture hinders social workers into properly interact with families confronting family violence. It can be concluded that these challenges delay social workers to achieve the aim of the profession as well as playing their roles fully. Eradicating family violence calls for a multi-sectoral model, as it has broader implications beyond the social welfare system.*

**KEY TERMS:** impediments, social workers, effective, services, families, family violence, South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of family violence is of great concern and the impact on those involved is becoming more widely acknowledged. With the complexity of family violence, response is required to ensure that the needs of all those affected are met. Therefore, social workers use their skills in responding to family violence by providing a series of services to those vulnerable and affected by the violence. However, the aim of this paper was to explore challenges that social workers encounter in the provision and delivering of effective services to families confronting family violence at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used with a sample of ten (10) social workers which was purposively selected. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. This paper begins with an outline of the background of the study and an overview of literature review as well as theoretical framework. This is followed by the research method. The paper also presents study findings and a brief discussion. The paper draws the conclusion from the findings and recommendations are presented.

## BACKGROUND

Family violence has a long, painful and disquieting history probably extending back to the origin of the family. According to Mshweshwe (2020), family violence can be defined as when a family member imposes harm, which can be physical, psychological or sexual to another family member. It is an issue of great concern for families causing negative consequences and ramifications. Furthermore, family violence not only affects those who are abused, but also has a substantial impact on other family members, friends, co-workers, other witnesses, and the community at large (Pretorius et al., 2012). Generally, in response to social issues such as family violence, social work as a profession promotes social change, problem solving in relationships between family members and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being. As a result, they become agents of change in societies and in the lives of individuals, families and communities they serve. The reality of family violence is not new and is becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. The concern of families confronting family violence is increasing and becoming an acknowledged issue. However, previous studies showed that social workers had insufficient contact with families due to high caseloads, thus exposing vulnerable family members to further harm (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Moreover, the shortage of funding for programmes in organisations continues to overwhelm social workers. Organisational problems have been identified as the causes for the confusion and ineffectiveness among social workers, such as insufficient training, lack of role clarity, inadequate leadership, and unrealistic expectations by the Department of Social Development, lack of resources or funding and low salaries. Insufficient training led to misconceptions, misunderstandings and role confusion among social workers regarding social work services as outlined in the new South African legislation (Mashigo, 2007). Therefore, the few available social workers are overloaded with legislative responsibilities such as the investigation of many foster care cases and the compilation of reports, which lead to an emphasis on paperwork and meeting court deadlines. Consequently, social workers become frustrated, insecure, sceptical, disillusioned and anxious instead of being the major role players in addressing the needs of South African society. Studies have tried to address the issue of family violence but nothing much has been done to evaluate their services and how these challenges impact the effectiveness of social work services.

## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The main role of a social worker is to support and enhance the well-being of individuals, groups, families and communities so that they can succeed psychologically, socially and emotionally (Spitzer, Twikirize & Wairire, 2014). Social workers provide preventative and responsive interventions to the needs of individuals affected by family violence. They are an on-going support person to the families and communities by advocating for their best interest. They are typically the first point of contact in the community for all potential family violence situations and hold the role of an on-going support person to the affected family. However, in South Africa, social workers encounter a number of challenges as societies have developed indistinct values, principles, religious and social boundaries. Social issues are on the rise despite numerous campaigns to address them. Nonetheless, many people still enter the social work profession because they want to advocate for social change and social justice (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012). In examining the challenges that social workers encounter in the provision of services, systems and ecological theories were found as relevant frameworks because the systems theory focuses mainly on the social aspect. Systems theory requires professionals to think about the social and personal elements in any social situations and at the same time to see how those elements interact with each other. Similarly, ecological theory views social problems and psychosocial challenges as contributing to human wellness and cannot be ignored in the helping process. Therefore, when a social worker is faced with challenges in various aspects such as in the work place that one aspect can impact negatively on other systems. Smeeton (2013)

acknowledges how systems such as families and work place have an influence on an individual's life. Furthermore, system theory in management should be viewed as interrelated and having influence on the other systems within the organisation. Using systems and ecological theory is therefore be useful in terms of understanding how different systems contribute towards the social and psychological aspect affecting social worker's wellness and work productivity.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A qualitative method was used as it allows participants to share their experiences and points of view without the researchers being perceived as judges. The purpose of this research was not to generalize findings but to rather gain insight into the impediments that social workers encounter in providing services to families confronting family violence (Omona, 2013). The sample comprised of social workers from Christelike Maatskaplike Raad (CMR), Social Development and Child Welfare. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and used as the primary data collection instrument. The interviews were conducted with 10 social workers in their offices. The interviews were audio recorded, with the full consent of the participants. Notes of discussion were also hand written. Before conducting interviews, a detailed explanation of the study and consent forms were issued to the participants. It must be noted that a permission letter was received from the Director of Child Welfare Agencies and Social Development. Furthermore, the personal details were not disclosed, therefore codes (SWP) for social work participants were provided for the purpose of anonymity. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) and accepted on the basis that the researchers followed and obeyed the rules of ethical research practices provided by the institution and the ethical clearance certificate was obtained, with an ethical clearance number: TAN111SNTS01. Data was analysed qualitatively. Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to analyse thematic data were followed. The first step involved familiarization with the data by engaging in and repeatedly reading the data transcripts. The second step involved taking note of any initial analytical observations. This step was furthered by making notes of ideas that came to mind (initial codes). These codes were generalized from the sets of data and then organized into main themes. This stage was ended by recoding all relevant data to each theme to created sub-themes. Lastly, the 'core' of each theme were identified and created a brief, effective and instructive name for each theme. These themes were further linked to the existing literature and the aim of the study.

## FINDINGS

Most social work participants in the study were females. The reason there is a gender imbalance of participants in the study and in the profession as a whole, as reported by the South African Council for Social Service Professions is that the social work profession has mostly been considered as a female profession as it falls under the caring professions. Usually, women have outnumbered men in the caring professions like social work, nursing and education. Nonetheless, there are more males coming to the social work profession. The findings of this study were consistent with SACSSP which found that more female social workers registered with the council than men. The preponderance of them was junior social workers, whilst a few were senior social workers (supervisors). Data elicited from the interviews shows that none of the participants had less than one year of work experience. Of the ten (10) participants, most of them had 5 to 14 years of experience while a few reported having less than 5 years of work experience in the field by the time of data collection of this study. The findings highlight a theme, challenges encountered by social workers in the provision of social services in responding to family violence.

*Table 1: Challenges encountered by social workers include lack of resources*

<b>Main-themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>Lack of resources</b>	Lack of funds Shortage of mobile facilities
<b>Shortage of staff</b>	Lack of supervision and support Impaired/Incompetent social workers
<b>High case load</b>	Multiple role responsibilities More areas for one social worker
<b>Cultural issues</b>	Patriarchal belief Family secrets

**Theme 1: Lack of resources**

Two subthemes emerged from this theme and these include lack of funds and shortage of mobile facilities.

***Subtheme 1: Lack of funds***

Research findings established that lack of funds is a challenge that hinders social workers from performing their duties well. Environmental aspects such as office furniture, ventilation, noise and cabinets for files are some of the challenges that social workers face. Social workers mentioned that during summer, they have to bring their own fans and during winter, they have to bring their own heaters because the Department has not yet fulfilled its promise to supply. Sharing an office is almost normal for all social workers; they have to attend their clients in the presence of their colleagues, which compromise confidentiality. Some social workers stated that it is sometimes very difficult for them to remove children from their homes because there are not enough places of safety such as child and youth care centres, some of those that exist are full. Moreover, the lack of funds for an organisation leads to poor salaries. Most participants in the study are working for Non-Governmental Organisations so they depend on the donors to support them financially, such as the Department of Social Development and Lottery, to name the few.

*I just work without any incentives, there is no danger allowance, and my life is in danger due to the nature of our jobs as social workers (SWP 8).*

*I am now experiencing burnout due to the stress caused by unrealistic expectations from the managers and supervisors, who keep on forcing you to perform and do tasks that are beyond abilities in terms of time, in terms of competence, and in terms of resources (SWP 10).*

***Subtheme 2: Shortage of mobile facilities***

The success story of any organization depends on the availability of resources. Limited resources deprive employees of an opportunity to utilize their talents and skills fully. Data collected through semi-structured interviews with the social workers indicated that most service offices do not have enough transport to attend to their cases. In some service offices, they only have 3 cars for more than 15 social workers as a result they end up not attending all their cases. Social workers also mentioned that some offices do not have internet at all, it is only accessible at the service office manager's office and at the reception. It came to the attention of researchers that in social workers' offices there were insufficient printers and telephones for them to call their clients and other stakeholders. Those who did not have telephones had to make calls in other offices, and that again compromise confidentiality.

*Imagine in this office as big as it is, we only have four cars. That disadvantages us because we have to make turns to use the cars. If one receives an emergency case, that person has to use his/her own car (SWP 2).*

**Theme 2: Shortage of staff**

Two subthemes emerged from this theme, lack of supervision and support for the social workers and impaired/incompetent social workers.

***Subtheme 1: Lack of supervision and support***

Supervision is a crucial aspect of any organisation that aims at maximising its success potential. One of the main hindrances in an organisation to achieve its potential is poor supervision. The study findings revealed that most social workers receive poor supervision. However, this was a conclusion drawn from the junior social workers; supervisors did not mention anything about having problems on supervision. When there is lack of supervision in any organisation, mistakes are likely to happen. The findings of the study also revealed that most social workers suffered from occupational stress in their implementation of various social work functions and roles. Due to lack of supervision, they cannot perform their duties well. For some, they believed that occupational stress leads to poor service delivery.

*One of the factors that contribute to the stress I'm experiencing right now is not getting adequate supervision and support from my supervisor. The management team just turns a blind eye on the circumstances, poor working environments and shortage of resources that we face as social workers (SWP 4).*

### **Subtheme 2: Impaired/incompetent social workers**

Most social work supervisors reported that some social workers are incompetent due to various reasons of which some are personal. They stated that some social workers are unable to control their personal stresses; as a result, they abuse alcohol. This violates the social work code of ethics. Some of them cannot acquire professional skills or even integrate the skills they have been taught. So due to incompetence, they provide inferior services to the clients.

*I have social workers who come to work smelling alcohol, and I always ask myself how are they going to perform their duties but sometimes when you report someone, they take it personally yet you are trying to help them (SWP 3).*

### **Theme 3: High caseload**

Two subthemes emerged from this theme and these include multiple role responsibilities and more areas for each social worker.

#### **Subtheme 1: Multiple role responsibilities**

The majority of social workers reported that they performed multiple role responsibilities and this strained them. Almost all social workers indicated that they had difficulties to cope as they were overwhelmed by foster care applications. Social workers also mentioned that they spent most of their time with foster care applications because there are new applications almost every day, so before placing a child, they had to do thorough investigations, write reports and take them to court. There were always foster care grants that needed to be reviewed so they had to do investigations again whereby they had to ensure that the child is still taken care of and is schooling, so they had to write reports. Moreover, social workers were expected to provide therapeutic services, as well as monitoring community projects, so they felt overwhelmed by the workload.

*With limited resources and poor salaries, one has to perform different duties; some of them are outside office so we have to go to the communities. I feel like the government should employ more social workers so that we can share this work. It's frustrating to have many cases that are not moving (SWP 1).*

#### **Subtheme 2: More areas for each social worker**

Social workers mentioned that since they have many areas, they do not really have time to do their work thoroughly. The backlog grows because they are few and are allocated many areas and that leads to poor service delivery because social workers tend to neglect other cases and only focus on foster care placement and urgent cases. Social workers also pointed out that travelling long distances in rural areas impedes their regular contact with their clients. All these challenges lead to occupational stress whereby social workers would not fully perform their duties and that leads to poor service delivery, which disadvantages community members.

*I have more than 5 areas, imagine, how I am going to build relationships with my clients because I have a lot of areas. At times, I even forget about other cases because there is too much work (SWP 8).*

SWP 4 said:

*There are many unemployed social workers, but the government is taking forever to place them. I feel like I'm not doing enough to help the communities (SWP 9).*

### **Theme 3: Cultural issues**

Patriarchal beliefs and family secrets were the only subthemes that emerged from the last theme.

### **Subtheme 1: Patriarchal beliefs**

Study findings revealed that some societies still hold onto patriarchy, whereby men are regarded as the heads of the family and are believed to hold power. Due to patriarchal belief, men do not want their families to disclose the violence, especially if they perpetrate it. It has been found that women do not have any right to report the violence to anyone or share it with their neighbours. Some black African families believe that when a man is abusing the family, he is instilling respect. In some communities, women are still oppressed and do not have any say in matters concerning their families and this lead to violence being underreported.

*Most of my cases about intimate partner violence involve men as perpetrators. Women are victims because they have to be submissive to their partners, failing to do that they are abused. We are trying our best to remove the mentality that men are more powerful than women; we are balancing inequalities in the societies (SWP 3).*

### **Subtheme 2: Family secrets**

Social workers reported that family secrets sometimes hinder them from doing their job properly. They defined family secrets as issues that happen within the family and which cannot be shared with an outsider. Social workers believed that in some families, violence becomes a family secret even if it has been reported; it is not easy for social workers to get information about the violence; especially in families where a man who is the head of the household is abusing his wife or sexually abuses his children. Social workers mentioned that those families do not cooperate when they are doing their investigations, they do not want to admit the violence, do not want to open up about the violence so sometimes in such cases they have to work with the South African Police Service.

An SWP maintained that:

*A man was sexually abusing his stepdaughter; a community member reported the case. Then, I went to school to talk to the child, fortunately, she told me everything I went to this family and I met with the mother of the child, only for her to tell me that her husband will never do that, the child is lying so she can't entertain me by saying things that she will regret (SWP 9).*

*This other old man was abusing his wife, so, when I tried to intervene he told me that I'm not part of the family, who told me about their family matters, I have nothing to do with it. It was so sad because you could see bruises on her face and she was scared to even talk about it to me but as I tell you, the man is in prison (SWP 5).*

## **DISCUSSION**

The study indicated that lack of resources such as funds that most social work organizations especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) encounter and it hinders them to effectively provide services to the vulnerable communities. Lack of funding in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been a topical issue in the media. Across South Africa, organizations have difficulties to provide continual and important services to vulnerable societies, yet the South African government denies having any information regarding lack of funding in NGOs. Many organizations are disempowered and others are on the edge to shut down. Additionally, Social workers are expected to initiate programmes, yet when it comes to the implementation, they are told that there are no funds (Skhosana, Schenck & Botha, 2014). Social workers also mentioned the shortage of mobile facilities such as cars and telephones. Some service offices have one telephone and all social workers are dependent on that one telephone to call their clients. Cars have also been found to be another factor that delays social workers from visiting their clients to assess them and to do follow-ups on their cases (Nhedz & Makofane, 2015). In addition, many service centres operate using one or two cars to do home visits or to go to court for an example. Ecological and systems theory view social problems and psychosocial challenges as contributing to human wellness and cannot be ignored in the helping process. Therefore, once a social worker is faced with challenges in various aspects such as in the work place that one aspect can negatively influence other systems.

Findings further revealed shortage of staff, which leads to poor supervision of newly qualified social workers. In meeting the demands of the organization, which is to deliver effective services to the communities, it is important to place newly qualified social workers under the mentorship or supervision of senior competent social workers. Moreover, numerous studies indicate that in promoting a positive and healthy work environment, it is important to provide team building activities as well as continuous support sessions (Maseko, van Wyk & Odendaal, 2019). The shortage of social workers who provide effective and efficient services to vulnerable communities mandates for capacity building, especially implementation at local level. Another challenge that

hinders social workers from performing their duties well is the incompetence among some of the social workers. The profession must strengthen its effort to identify impaired practitioners and respond to them in a meaningful way. Like any other professionals, social workers may be unwilling to challenge impaired colleagues. Nonetheless, it is compulsory for the profession to challenge incompetent and unethical behaviour in an attempt to offer considerate assistance. System theory in management should be viewed as interrelated and having influence on the other systems within the organisation. The difficulties or pressure of social workers to cope with a lot of work has led them to perform multiple responsibilities. Numerous studies found that social workers are not able to cope with the demands to attend to statutory and family services efficiently (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017). Findings also indicate that social workers are allocated many areas and that makes it difficult for them to build a good rapport with their clients. Because of dealing with many areas, the backlog grows and they end up suffering from occupational stress, as it is not easy to deal with many cases. Workload is viewed as taking some aspects of the general concept of job demand, which is the amount of needed effort, under certain work conditions, which in turn places the employee under a significant pressure. It is evident that cultural issues are also a challenge for social workers to provide effective services to families. These findings relate to Makama's (2013) definition of patriarchy, which is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. According to the findings, women in other societies are oppressed, as they do not take part in family decisions. Furthermore, in most cases men perpetrate violence since they know that traditionally they are regarded as the heads of the households so they believe that they have a right to abuse their families, especially their wives. Findings further indicate that family secrets make it difficult for social workers to do their job well especially in cases of violence. Some families still hold onto the notion that what happened within the household should not be shared with the outsiders, so it becomes a challenge for social workers to do their investigations and assessments. It is a challenge for social workers to utilise social work knowledge, ethics and skills on cultural diversity in developing cultural competence to engage families effectively across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

The findings warrant some pertinent recommendations. Most social workers in the study mentioned lack funds, especially NGOs so government should inject more funds in every social work agency so that they can be able to provide services to communities and meet the needs of their clients. More social workers should be employed as many social work participants mentioned that they have a high caseload and many areas to cover as well as performing multiple responsibilities. Social workers should expand their coping strategies and should consider physical exercise and relaxation mechanisms, as these strategies will help them to avoid burnout.

## CONCLUSION

Even though the findings seem to convey a bleak picture about delivery of services to families encountering family violence, some social workers are still determined to deliver services against all odds. As service providers that deal with social development of individuals, groups, families and communities, they are expected to offer services to diverse groups; hence they are unable to cope with the high caseloads. Considering the host of challenges faced by social workers at different levels when providing services, it has been concluded that effective social services cannot be offered without the required human, communal, financial resources and organisational support required for the success of the programme. These challenges may also delay social workers to achieve the aim of the profession as well as playing their roles fully. Unless drastic measures are taken by government and Non-Governmental Organizations to address challenges that social workers encounter, provision of effective services to address numerous challenges faced by families will remain inadequate.

## DECLARATIONS

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