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## **Medical Social Work Practice in Tanzania: A Critical Review of the Literature on Challenges and the Way Forward**

**Iddi Chedieli Mkojera<sup>1</sup>, Seni Lusambagula Masale<sup>2</sup>, Boniphace Richard Kasindi<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

<sup>2</sup>University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

<sup>3</sup>Moshi Co-operative University, Tanzania

Corresponding Author email: [mkojerasocialwork@gmail.com](mailto:mkojerasocialwork@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

**Background:** Medical social work is essential component of holistic healthcare addressing the psychosocial, economic and environmental factors that influence health outcomes. However, in Tanzania literature indicates that the practice remains underdeveloped and encounters structural and professional challenges within the healthcare system.

**Methodology:** This review employed a critical review of the existing literatures on medical social work practice in Tanzania. Sources included peer reviewed journal articles, policy documents, academic thesis and reports published between 2005-2025. Databases such as google scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, academic repositories and ProQuest central were searched using relevant keywords. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring challenges and proposed way forward for improvements.

**Results:** The review identified several challenges affecting medical social work practice in Tanzania. These include excessive caseloads and understaffing of medical social workers, poor professional recognition in medical settings, limited financial resources, inadequate medical social work specialized training in the country, absence of national level standardized guidelines and absence of defined organizational hierarchy and reporting protocols across the country. Despite these challenges, the literatures highlighted the way forward for enhancing and strengthening the practice through policy and regulatory reforms, education and capacity buildings, clearer role definition and enhanced multidisciplinary collaboration.

**Conclusion:** The review concludes that addressing these challenges will enhance patient centered care and contribute to improved healthcare outcomes within the Tanzanian healthcare systems.

**Keywords:** medical social work, healthcare, challenges, way forward, Tanzania

### **INTRODUCTION**

Health and illnesses are increasingly understood as an outcome of the complex interactions between biological, psychological and social factors (Rahman et al., 2024). This holistic understanding has informed a global shift towards integrated and patient centered healthcare model that extends beyond clinical treatment to address the social determinants of health (Lee & Lee, 2025; Matos et al., 2025; Gavalda-Espelta et al., 2023; Litchfield et al., 2022). Medical social work has emerged as a critical professional field within this paradigm, contributing to improved health outcomes through comprehensive psychosocial assessments, counselling, advocacy, discharge planning, referral and linkage of patients and their families to community-based support services and resources (Noel et al., 2022; Mesca & Storace, 2025; Ruffin, 2022). In many countries, medical social workers form an integral part of the hospital multidisciplinary team addressing social determinants of health that influence diseases prevention, treatment adherence, recovery and overall wellbeing (Deng et al., 2025).

In low- and middle-income countries including Tanzania, the burden of diseases is compounded by a wide spread of poverty, stigma associated with particular diseases, understaffing, limited access to healthcare services and weak social protection systems (Oleribe et al., 2019; Bommakanti, 2025; Langat et al., 2025; Bello et al., 2024; Solile et al., 2023). These structural and social challenges deepen patients' vulnerability and underscore the need for medical social work in healthcare facilities and it is within this context where medical social workers have the potential to play an important role in bridging the gap between clinical care and patients' social realities or circumstances.

Despite the crucial role that medical social workers play in healthcare settings, the development and institutionalization of medical social work practice in Tanzania is limited. Existing literatures highlight that medical social workers are characterized by inadequate professional recognition, limited specialized training, operating without clear national guidelines, practice standards and weak integration within the healthcare multidisciplinary teams due to limited awareness regarding the scope, value and depth of medical social work leading to underutilization of social work services in healthcare settings (Mzungu et al., 2025a; Mzungu et al., 2025b).

While the growing body of literatures highlights the significance of psychosocial interventions in improving health outcomes, there is a notable scarcity of context specific literatures critically examining medical social work practice in Tanzania. Much of the existing literatures focus broadly on social work or healthcare delivery with limited attention to the challenges and future direction of medical social work as a specialized field of practice. This gap in scholarship hinders evidence-based practice and policy development as well as effective integration of medical social workers into national healthcare system.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides a critical review of literatures on medical social workers in Tanzania with a focus on identifying the challenges and proposing a way forward. By critically reviewing the scholarly works and contextualizing it within Tanzania health and social welfare landscape, this paper seeks to contribute to strengthening medical social work practice and advancing holistic, comprehensive, integrated and seamless healthcare delivery in the country.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This narrative synthesis of literature aimed to critically review existing literatures on medical social work practice in Tanzania, identify key challenges affecting the practice and proposes evidence-informed direction for strengthening practice. The article draws upon both peer-reviewed academic sources and gray literature. It adopted a traditional narrative literature review approach as described by Okech (2018), which entailed an online search for publications focusing on medical social work practice within the healthcare settings.

An online literature search was performed using the following predefined keywords: medical social work, hospital social work, healthcare settings, Tanzania, Sub Saharan Africa, professional practice, challenges and recommendations. Keywords were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to identify relevant peer-reviewed and gray literature. Electronic searches were conducted across Google scholar, ResearchGate, PubMed, ProQuest central and African Journal Online. Articles published between 2005 to 2025 were included to capture both foundational and contemporary development in medical social work practice in Tanzania. Data were extracted and synthesized using a thematic rather than quantitative approach, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, key arguments and gaps within the existing literature. A total

of 98 articles reviewed; of these, 23 met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the study, while the remaining 75 were excluded.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and discusses the key findings from the reviewed literatures on medical social work practice in Tanzania. This section was combined because the article adopted an integrative review approach to allow empirical evidence from the literatures to be immediately contextualized, critically examined and compared across studies rather than reported in isolation. The article revealed below challenges and emerging opportunities for strengthening the practice.

### ***Excessive caseloads and understaffing of medical social workers***

The literatures revealed that medical social workers in Tanzania encounter high caseloads and shortage of medical social workers which undermine their abilities to provide timely and comprehensive healthcare services. This situation contributes to rushed social interventions, insufficient attention to patients' needs and higher risks of gap in care (Mzungu et al., 2025). This finding aligns with the previous research conducted in Zimbabwe which revealed that this situation largely stems from administrative officials' limited understanding of the scope and depth of the medical social workers' roles (Mavuka et al., 2024). Critically, this condition places medical social workers in an ethically precarious position where professional standards, like quality of comprehensive care, are difficult to uphold under these constraints. In the context of Tanzania, these findings imply a need for policy reform that prioritizes the recruitment, equitable deployment of medical social workers within the healthcare system alongside clearer staffing norms at different levels of care.

### ***Poor professional recognition in healthcare settings***

Medical social workers in Tanzania hospitals have been reported to experience poor recognition from other medical professionals (Musuguri & Pittman, 2024; Mzungu et al., 2025). However, poor recognition of social work profession in healthcare can be contributed by inadequate understanding of other medical professionals on medical social workers' roles, scope of practice, and dominance of biomedical perspective in healthcare settings.

This inadequate recognition by other professionals has contributed to poor integration of medical social workers in multidisciplinary hospital teams, job dissatisfaction, frustration and reduced effectiveness in delivering holistic patient care. This challenge has been also reported in other sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Enemaku, 2024; Mavuka et al., 2024). This situation constrains medical social workers' ability to effectively deliver comprehensive and patient-centered care, thereby compromising the quality of healthcare services.

### ***Limited financial resources***

The significant challenge encountered by medical social workers in Tanzania is the shortage of financial resources for implementing their interventions (Mzungu et al., 2025). Limited financial resources resulting from a constrained budget allocated to social work interventions contribute to poor working conditions, limited incentives, insufficient access to technological tools required for effective service delivery, extended working hours, high risk of burnout, occupational stress, job dissatisfaction, rushed interventions and declining service quality. This challenge is not unique to Tanzania; similar findings have been reported in Namibia and Nigeria (Chipare et al., 2020; Enemaku, 2024). The shortage of resources limits the capacity of medical social workers to

provide comprehensive psychosocial and effective intervention that address social determinants of health and promotion of holistic care.

***Inadequate medical social work specialized training***

Literatures indicate that medical social workers in Tanzania have limited essential skills to address psychosocial needs of the patient, largely contributed by the inadequacy of training specialized in medical social work at both college and university levels (Mzungu et al., 2025). Although medical social workers in Tanzania are reported to contribute to patient outcomes, many competencies required for medical social work practice are acquired through on-the-job training rather than formal education. This challenge aligns with findings from a study conducted in Namibia which highlight that higher learning institutions provide inadequate training specialized in medical social work, hence medical social workers in Namibia lack adequate skills required in healthcare (Chipare et al., 2020). Additionally, Mavuka et al., (2024) asserted that medical social work in Zimbabwe has limited knowledge to practice in healthcare settings. This situation limits the ability of medical social workers to effectively address psychosocial needs of patients and constrains their capacity to contribute within multidisciplinary hospital teams.

***Absence of national level practice standards and guidelines for medical social work services***

The absence of nationally standardized practice guidelines for medical social work practice has resulted in fragmented service delivery, delayed interventions and suboptimal case management within the healthcare settings (Mzungu et al., 2025). Empirical evidence from Zimbabwe further substantiates this challenge as Mavuka et al. (2024) reported widespread misinterpretation of the professional roles of medical social workers. Consequently, social workers employed in healthcare institutions are often required to undertake tasks that fall outside the scope of social work practice undermining professional effectiveness. This role ambiguity is largely attributed by the lack of formal national standardized practice guidelines governing medical social work practice. In the context of Tanzania, the article underscores the urgent need for the development of standardized national guidelines that clearly delineate the scope and space of practice for medical social workers in order to enhance quality of service delivery, interprofessional collaboration and interventions as well as consistent case management practices for social workers within the healthcare settings.

***Absence of defined organizational hierarchy and formalized reporting protocols across the country***

The literatures highlight that the absence of a well defined framework undermines accountability and operational efficiency, thereby constraining social workers' capacity to respond effectively to patients' needs and eroding their professional autonomy (Mzungu et al., 2025). Similar finding from South Africa indicates that this situation creates professional subordination of social workers (Maxhakana & Sithole, 2024). In the context of Tanzania, this challenge is intensified by the biomedical orientation of the health system and limited policy recognition of the medical social work as a specialized field of practice within the health care settings. This condition brings practice implications for the social work practitioners in healthcare institutions as it constraints advocacy capacity within the multidisciplinary healthcare teams and reduced professional effectiveness. This calls for the hierarchical reforms to strengthen the position of medical social work practice in Tanzania.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

Based on the critical review of the challenges of medical social work practice in Tanzania, this article argues that in order to enhance and strengthen medical social work practice in Tanzania, coordinated efforts across policy, education, institutional and research domains are required. This article proposes the following recommendations for enhancing and strengthening medical social work practice in Tanzania.

**Establishment of independent medical social work departments:** The article recommends establishing independent medical social work department within hospitals to formalize the profession and enhance its authority within multidisciplinary healthcare teams. The department should clearly indicate its scope, reporting protocol, manner of communication, the eligible staff, and the professional qualification of the head of department from the national level down to local level.

**Allocation of adequate fund for medical social work interventions:** This article recommend that the government of Tanzania should allocate adequate funding for medical social work services within the national healthcare budget, recognizing their role in addressing social determinants of health and improving patient outcomes. Also, strengthening partnerships with non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and development partners can supplement government funding.

**Education and capacity building:** This article recommends that education institutions in Tanzania should revise social work curricula to include specialized medical social work contents. Moreover, higher learning institutions should introduce specialized degree programs in medical social work at undergraduate and postgraduate level to adequately equip students with knowledge and skills specialized in healthcare practice. This will ensure that medical social workers are better prepared to contribute meaningfully to holistic patient centered healthcare. Additionally, strengthening Continuous Professional Development programs (CPD) will enhance the competencies and recognition of medical social workers who are already in service. Furthermore, the article recommends that healthcare institutions with medical social workers should initiate inter-professional education and sensitization within their institutions to enhance role awareness, collaboration and mutual respect among healthcare professionals.

Finally, investment in research and knowledge development is critical. This article recommends more empirical studies to be conducted on the impacts of medical social work on patients' outcomes, health system efficacy and health equity to provide a strong evidence base for policy advocacy and practice environment as well as strengthening local research capacity.

## **LIMITATION OF THE REVIEW**

This review is subject to certain limitations. The scarcity of empirical studies focusing explicitly on medical social work in Tanzania constrained the breadth of available literature. Additionally, reliance on English language publications may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant local documents not available in English. Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources and inclusion of grey literature enhanced the comprehensiveness and credibility of the review.

## **CONCLUSION**

This critical review focused on challenges facing medical social work practice in Tanzania. The literatures reviewed reveal that medical social work practice in Tanzania is constrained by multiple systemic and structural challenges, including absence of national guidelines and standardized

policies, lack of clear organizational hierarchy and reporting mechanisms, excessive caseloads and understaffing, limited financial resources, poor professional recognition and inadequate medical social work specialized training. The review concludes that enhancing and strengthening medical social work practice in Tanzania requires addressing the gaps in awareness, resources, education, policy, institutional practice, and research domains. Addressing gaps in these domains is significant for enhancing recognition, accountability, consistency of services and equipping practitioners with the competencies required to function effectively within multidisciplinary healthcare teams. Enhancing medical social work in Tanzania is not only the professional's agenda, but also the strategy for achieving holistic care and integrated healthcare. Strengthening this field will contribute to improved patient outcomes and health system efficiency.

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