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CHALLENGES FACED BY SOCIAL WORKERS DEALING WITH VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF NATURAL DISASTERS

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Abstract

Social work practice is a very unique profession and its domain of practice has grown beyond the known traditional one. Due to its wider scope, social workers are seen as frontline workers during natural disasters. The aim of this paper was to explore the challenges faced by social workers dealing with victims and survivors of natural disasters. The study adopted qualitative research approach and exploratory research design. Five social workers were purposively sampled to form part of individual semi-structured interview from Tzaneen Municipality. Data was collected until the level of saturation and analyzed thematically. The study revealed that social workers lack resources and proper training to deal with the victims and survivors of natural disasters. Moreover, the study found that there is poor inter-professional collaboration, role ambiguity and shortage of staff when disasters erupt. The study concludes that social workers are understaffed, have too much workload and are likely to experience burnout in their effort to assist victims and survivors of natural disasters. To that end, the study recommends that Department of Social Development should employ more social workers so that they can to respond during and after natural disasters.

Keywords: Social Work, Natural Disasters, Victims, Survivors, Inter-Professional Collaboration

1. Introduction

Social work practice is a very unique profession and has a broader domain of practice. It plays a significant role especially in rural areas, as it is the voice of the voiceless and marginalized population. Due to social work practice wider scope of practice, social workers are involved in environmental issues. Their mandate comes from social work professional association (National Association of Social Workers) and United Nations to care for the environment while others take their obligation or responsibility from God (Hawkins, 2010; Mosher, 2010; Shaw, 2011; McKinnon, 2013; Smith, 2013). The involvement of social workers in environmental justice comes from the

fact that natural disasters affect the marginalized people and social workers have awareness of the interrelationships between humans and the biosphere (Besthorn, 2012; Dylan 2012; Dylan and Coates 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012; Dominelli 2014). Because of natural disasters, social ill such as poverty, lack of housing, health and child protection, and environmental degradation emanates. In line with that, Ramsay and Boddy (2017) posit that social workers should use their core social work values to respond and mitigate environmental degradation. In line with social work values of social justice and service delivery, social workers should advocate for social justice, against environmental abuse, and be able to provide vulnerable groups with social relief from distress (food parcels) during natural disasters.

Furthermore, social workers have the ethical obligation to enhance social welfare and to promote social justice for community members (Banks, 2006). The catastrophic effects of natural disasters leave vulnerable groups without food and houses (Nyahunda *et al.* 2019; Matlakala, *et al.* 2021). It is thus the responsibility of social workers to advocate for the vulnerable group to be provided with social relief for distress. In other words, in the face of disasters, whether man-made or natural, social workers should provide essential services such as counselling to the victims and survivors of disasters. However, just like any profession, social workers encounter challenges that make it difficult for them to execute their mandate during and after natural disasters. Adams *et al.* (2008) and Pulido (2007) state that social workers working with survivors of disaster face fatigues, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. This is to be expected as some social workers lack experience in dealing with clients who have experienced trauma and they do not have sufficient resource support from government. This is supported by the findings of Bian *et al.* (2009) who indicated that social work academics have done little research on disaster social work. On the same wavelength, Huang *et al.* (2014) aver that social workers lack supervision, support, cooperation, and coordination needed among agencies to address the ramification of climate change. Against this background, this paper was aimed at exploring challenges faced by social workers dealing with victims and survivors of natural disasters.

2. Methodology

The researchers used qualitative research approach in order to understand the challenges faced by social workers when dealing with victims and survivor of natural disasters. This approach was chosen due to its ability to describe the phenomenon in narrative fashion. Accordingly Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) enunciated that the advantage of using qualitative research approach is that it provided the researchers with rich and in-depth information on the phenomenon. It is against this background that researchers were interested in finding the rich information through narratives on the challenges faced by social workers when dealing with victims and survivors of natural disasters. In order to solicit rich information, researchers opted for exploratory research design as it is used when little information is known about the phenomenon (Kumar, 2011). Moreover, Yin (2014) averred that exploratory design is helpful in answering the question "what" in research. On that note, the researchers were interested in answering the question, 'what are the challenges faced by social workers when dealing with victims and survivors of natural disasters?' In answering the question, researchers purposively sampled five social workers from Tzaneen Municipality. When using purposive sampling or judgmental sampling techniques, the researchers use participants based on their qualities (Etikan *et al.* 2016). On that note, the researchers chose social workers as they are frontline workers who aims to enhance the social functioning of individuals, families, and communities (Hepworth *et al.* 2016). As natural disasters cause disequilibrium, the victims seek help from welfare sector. It is for that reason that researchers sampled social workers who are providing social relief of distress in their community.

Data was collected by means of individual semi-structured interviews until the study reached the level of saturation. The researchers opted for semi-structured interviews due to their flexibility to allow the researchers to ask series of questions without being restricted by the data collection tool (Lune and Berg, 2017). Then, the collected data was analyzed thematically using thematic content analysis. The researchers used TCA due to its ability to identify themes and/or patterns within the data (O'Leary, 2014).

The study was conducted at The Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality, which is found in Mopana District. According to Statistics South Africa (2011), the municipality consists of Tzaneen, Nkowankowa, Lenyenye, Letsitele and Haenertsburg town and 125 rural villages with almost 80% of households residing in rural villages. Moreover, the local municipality has a total population of 390.095 with 80% of the population residing in rural areas, among those in rural areas 5.7% of the population are the elderly. Republic of South Africa (2007) avow that majority of the land which was privately owned was mainly used for commercial farming and a small portion was under the leadership of tribal authorities. However, this study was conducted at N'wa-Mitwa, Runnymede Village. The community was selected because it was convenient, and the District report also highlighted that the area was a lowveld area and exposed to floods and heavy rainfalls. Moreover, the village was chosen because of its accessibility and it is prone to floods and heavy rainfall (Republic of South Africa, 2007).

3. Findings and discussion

In this study, the following themes emerged: lack of resources, lack of training, poor-inter-professional collaboration, role ambiguity and shortage of staff members. The highlighted themes are discussed herein.

3.1. Lack of resources

Social workers have a responsibility of ensuring the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. Likewise, during natural disasters, social workers serve as frontline workers to ensure that victims and survivors of natural disasters are provided with services such as counselling. However, social workers cannot fulfil their mandate due to lack or insufficient resources at their disposal. Resources refer to anything that an individual need to accomplish the task or goal (Halbesleben *et al.* 2014). In this study, participants, social workers indicated that they cannot assist community members due to lack of capital resources (stationery and vehicles). One possible reason for the lack of financial support was documented by Gray and Mueller (2012) who postulated politicians have cut the financial support for social workers due to their narrow mind and their lack of understanding of the role of social workers amidst natural disasters. As such, they do not see the need to put money in social development programs, as they believe they do not contribute to the economic growth of the county. This has adversely made social workers to lack stationery for record keeping and vehicle to conduct home visits to survivors and victims of natural disasters. One of the key informants, a social worker shared that:

"The main challenge that we encounter is lack of resources, such as a car. When we have to go to the field and assist families, you find that there is not even one single car available for home visit." (Participant 3, Social Worker)

In corroboration, another social worker said:

"We provide social relief of distress and counselling to victims of natural disasters. But sometimes we are unable to go to rural communities to provide victims of natural disasters with counselling as we do not have enough cars in our disposal." (Participant 5, Social Worker)

In every department or career, tools of trade are of the utmost importance. Their availability encourages one to go an extra mile in rendering the services. However, social workers have limited financial support, which is a bad for service delivery (Skhosana *et al.* 2014). Nielsen *et al.* (2017) pointed out that productivity and organization growth can be achieved as a result of the availability of resources at employees' disposal. In essence, the unavailability of resources makes it impossible for social workers to visit the victims and survivors of natural disasters in rural areas and provide them with social relief of distress.

3.2. Lack of training

Social work profession prides itself on enhancing the social wellbeing of the individuals, families, and communities. More so, the profession is anchored on an evidence-based approach. However, several authors globally have seen that there is a dearth of literature on the training of social workers when dealing with victims of natural disasters (Chou, 2003; Rock and Corbin, 2007; Bian *et al.* 2009). Due to a lack of training, social workers cannot sharpen and improve their skills when dealing with victims of disasters. In this study, participants expressed the desire to gain more training on how to deal with victims of disasters, be it man-made or natural. One of the social workers stated that:

"As Social Workers we lack knowledge on how to deal with the victims of natural disasters. We need more training on natural disaster to respond effectively." (Participant 1, Social Worker).

Learning is a continuous process, workshops and research are designed to broaden the knowledge of individuals. The above findings show that social workers are not knowledgeable and lack skills to assist victims of natural disasters. On that note, Rasool (2020) documented that social workers are the untapped resource in South Africa during and after natural disasters. But it is not that they are an untapped resource; social workers lack training.

3.3. Poor inter-professional collaboration

Social work, just like any other profession, does not work in an isolation; it has other professions that support and work with it for the wellbeing of clients. To Craven and Bland (2013), collaborative care involves different professionals coming together to provide care to individuals and families. The benefit of collaborating is that it eradicates barriers among professions, combine skills and expertise from different professions that could assist in early, effective intervention strategies, in this context, disaster preparedness strategies (Glaser and Suter, 2016). With the enormous benefit of collaboration, for centuries, social workers have been collaborating with health care practitioners (Auslander 2001; Cleak and Turczynski, 2014) and as such their collaboration is also visible amidst natural disasters (Ambrose-Miller and Ashcroft, 2016). However, that does not mean all professions collaborate for the well-being of the community members even amid natural disasters. In attempting to answer the reason for lack of collaboration, Mandy *et al.* (2004) found that lack of inter-profession collaboration is as a result of stereotypical rivalry between professions. In essence, other professions want to appear more effective than others at the expense of those they serve. This is as a result of colonial and apartheid legacy where, it was emphasized that each profession must focus on its mandate, negating the relevance and applicability of other professionals. For instance, there is a dearth of literature that shows the collaboration between social workers and disaster management team. In this study, some of the social workers shared that:

"During disasters, we do not work with the disaster management team. The only institutions that we collaborate with are psychologists, chiefs and Indonas." (Participant 2, Social Worker)

Another participant, social worker said that:

"We hardly collaborate with the disaster management team. The disaster management is found in municipality, which is the oversight of the municipality. So they do not work with us and some of the things they do without our knowledge through ward councilors." (Participant 3, Social Worker)

When asked of the benefits that could be gained as a result of inter-professional collaboration, the participant (social worker) indicated that:

"For me, there is no master in these things so the best way is to learn from each other. I admit that inter-professional collaboration is very essential because through collaboration we can share best practices and collective measures that would foster resilience in our clients in the wake of disasters" (Participant 5, Social Worker)

There is no doubt that natural disasters have an enormous impact on the livelihood of individuals. After experiencing disasters, be it man-made or natural, victims and survivors experience posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, amongst others and it is during this time that they need social workers to provide them with psychosocial counselling. However, in this study, it was mentioned that the disaster management team did not collaborate with social workers at a local level. This indicates that the disaster management team just evacuate community members and leave them without visible support and later communicate with the district, as they do not collaborate with social workers and/or psychologists. This might be good but it should have been done during planning for evacuations and post evacuations so as to minimize the psychosocial impact. In their role, they forget the principle of co-existence and as a result, victims and survivors are left to deal with their mental challenges alone. In terms of one of the key tenets of Vulnerability Theory (capabilities), there are resources in the community that protect the community members from being exposed to impacts of natural disasters. In this instance, not only does inter-professional collaboration promote co-existence amongst profession it also provides community members with sufficient human resource after and during natural disasters.

3.4. Role ambiguity

Social workers are at the forefront of providing services during and after natural disasters. However, there is no clear definition or explanation of the role that they should play during natural disasters, thus leading to role ambiguity. McCormack and Cotter (2013) found that there is an association between burnout and role ambiguity. This is because when natural disasters erupt, social workers find themselves not knowing which role they should assume. To Wacek (2017) social workers overwork themselves because they do not do what is expected of them due to the inability of their employers to explain their roles. As a result of role ambiguity, social workers are also prone to the stress-generating situation where they overload themselves with responsibilities (Wacek 2017). More so, when they are dealing with a victim of natural disasters, they might be unable to tell if they are appreciated and acknowledged or not. One key issue about the role ambiguity is the lack of harmonization of policies governing disaster management from different stakeholders. There is no uniform approach across professions, hence the challenge of role ambiguity. On that score, they will not efficiently provide the desired service, leading to their competence being questioned. In the study, one of the participants stated that:

"We are not given a clear definition on our roles as social workers during and after natural disasters. Even in our performance agreement, our role in disaster planning, preparedness and response is not even mentioned." (Participant 4, Social Worker)

Victims and survivors of natural disasters are fragile and emotional. It is during that time that harm can be created by a social worker who lacks confidence or who is uncertain of his or her role. In this study, social workers indicated that their role during and after natural disasters remains unclear. It is for that reason that it can be deduced that disaster management should be included in the social work profession.

3.5. Shortage of staff

The performance of an organization is dependent on the availability of competent staff and it is equally so in the social work profession. Social work is a profession that has been declared as skill-scarce and has insufficient professional to effectively provide services (Goliath, 2018; Skhosana 2020). Curtis *et al.* (2009) found that social work is even listed in the national

occupational list. As a result of the shortage of staff (social workers), Department of Social Development (2009) reported that they were unable to implement policies aimed at addressing social issues such as food insecurity. In an attempt to close the gap of lack of staff members, Department of Social Development embarked on recruitment drive to get new students to be trained and equipped with required skills to provide services to community members. However, Skhosana (2020) states that the gap even to date is not closed as there are social work graduates who are unemployed and social workers who are employed and are unable to breathe due to heavy workload. As a result of the department's inability to employ social workers, vulnerable groups are at a greater risk of harm caused by the impact of natural disasters. In this study, it became visible that there was insufficient number of social workers. One of the social workers stated that:

"Staffing is a big challenge for us, like right now I have three big communities that I am struggling to meet the demands as I have too many cases that need my urgent attention." *(Participant 1, Social Worker)*

On the same wavelength, another social worker stated that:

"We have a backlog due to high volume of cases and few social workers. This results in low quality of our job because we focus more on quantity than quality." (Participant 3, Social Worker).

Shortage of staff member leads to heavy workload on the shoulders of social workers, which makes them unable to keep up with cases. In this study, the participants indicated that they were overwhelmed with workload that leads to backlog of cases. As a result, social workers cannot provide quality work as they are struggling to keep up with the number of communities to serve and become unable to respond to emergencies on time. Thereby, due to workload and shortage of staff, social workers are more likely to experience burnout in the task of assisting victims and survivors of natural disasters.

4. Conclusion

The researchers found that there is plethora of challenges that social workers experience when dealing with victims of natural disasters. Firstly, social workers do not have resources (tools of trade) to do their work. In light of that, it is highly recommended that social workers be provided with tools of trade to be able to provide professional support and counselling to victims and survivors of natural disasters in rural areas. Secondly, social workers are not knowledgeable and lack skills to assist victims of natural disasters. On that note, the researchers recommend that social workers be provided with training through workshop on how to deal with victims and survivors of natural disasters. Thirdly, there is no co-existence or collaboration amongst different profession on the local level. Thus, it is recommended that there be an inter-professional collaboration of social workers, disaster management officers and community workers in disaster preparedness, during and after natural disasters on a local level. Fourthly, social workers have uncertainty in terms of roles that they should perform prior, during and after natural disasters. As a result of that, they end up performing various roles that predispose the burnout. Therefore, the study recommends that social workers be given clear roles that they should use when dealing with victims and survivors of natural disasters. Lastly, social workers were understaffed and had too much workload and were likely to experience burnout in their effort to assist victims and survivors of natural disasters. To that end, the study recommends that Department of Social Development employ more social workers so that they can respond during and after natural disasters.

The authors do not generalize the findings due to their small size and the nature of the research approach. Again, the findings were from social workers who offer their services in Tzaneen Municipality under Mopani District.

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