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EDITORIAL

SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVES OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19)

MUNDAU Langton & NYONI Chamunorwa

Guest Editors

ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 which causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019. The flue like condition spread rapidly. To contain the condition, several measures were put in place including but not limited to social or physical distancing, quarantine or isolation, lockdowns, travel restrictions, wearing of masks and personal protective clothing (PPE). Services moved to online/remote delivery where feasible. Those who fell ill were isolated but some required emergency hospital management, including supply of oxygen using respirators in emergency care units. When we made the call for this special issue in May 2020, the virus had killed over 350 000 people, infected over 5.5 million people in 215 countries with over 2.4 million recoveries. By the time of publication in December 2020, the virus had killed over 1,5 million people, infected over 68 million people in 215 countries with over 44 million recoveries. For Africa, infections stood at 2.2 million people with recorded deaths of 54,500. What could be the role of social work in particular, and social science in general during and after the pandemic, and in dealing with pandemics in future? Surely, the pandemic relates to developmental, indigenous, decolonial but also international and clinical social work as well as human rights, governance, culture, spirituality and other elements important for African social work. But we needed to find out more from African writers so a call for manuscripts for a special issue on COVID-19 was released. The response was overwhelming. Thirty-six abstracts were accepted. A decision was made to release two special issues, and this one is the first one. The major themes emerging from this special issue are the implications of COVID-19 on social policy, disability, teaching and learning, spirituality, occupational safety and mental health. We hope, you will find the papers presented here timely, informative and interesting.

KEY TERMS: Africa, corona virus, COVID-19, social work, pandemic, policy, poverty

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The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 which causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19) started towards the end of 2019. It spread rapidly. To contain the condition, several measures were put in place including but not limited to social or physical distancing, quarantine or isolation, lockdowns, travel restrictions, wearing of masks and personal protective clothing (PPE). Services moved to, online/remote delivery where feasible. Those who fell ill were isolated but some required emergency hospital management, including supply of oxygen in emergency care units. When we made the call for this special issue in May 2020, the virus had killed over 350 000 people, infected over 5.5 million people in 215 countries with over 2.4 million recoveries. By the time of publication in December 2020, the virus had killed over 1,5 million people, infected over 68 million people in 215 countries with over 44 million recoveries. For Africa, infections stood at 2.2 million people with recorded deaths of 54,500 (African Social Work Network, ASWNet, 2020). What could be the role of social work in particular, and social science in general during and after the pandemic, and in dealing with pandemics in future? Surely, the pandemic relates to developmental, indigenous, decolonial but also international and clinical social work as well as human rights, governance, culture, spirituality and other elements important for African social work. But we needed to find out more from African writers so a call for manuscripts for a special issue on COVID-19 was released, supported by the National Association of Social Workers in Zimbabwe (NASW-Z). The response was overwhelming. Thirty-six abstracts were accepted. A decision was made to release two special issues, and this one is the first issue. The major themes emerging from this special issue focus on the implications of COVID-19 on social policy, disability, teaching and learning, spirituality, occupational safety and mental health.

COVID-19 has been recognized as the largest global health and social crisis of this 21st century (UN, 2020), and has caught many public and private institutions and organisations unawares. It has induced enormous and deplorable repercussions for the life, protection and effective realisation of the rights of many. Most governments have responded by instituting national lockdowns in a bid to limit physical and social contact in order to curtail the spread of the disease as according to the World Health Organisation guidelines (WHO, 2020). However, this has resulted in unintended and devastating social and economic ramifications for individuals, families and communities. Vulnerable populations; children, women, people with disabilities, and the aged are also bearing the brunt of the virulent pandemic. Old debates have been reignited; social exclusion, racism and inequality. Access to health care services and social protection mechanisms becomes a preserve for the elite, however to the surprise of many, the pandemic knows no creed, nationality or social status of its victims. At the economic front; major global economies and the upcoming ones are being shaken as the pandemic continues to ravage the global space.

Like many health and behavioral health professionals, social workers are equally concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their clientele, their families, communities as well as their well-being. As informed by the core values of service to community, social justice and the dignity and worth of every person, social work professionals are called upon to be active participants in the community responses to emerging public health crises of this nature. Several interventions were put in place across countries, notwithstanding the varying capacities to manage. This gives a clarion call for collective efforts in mitigating the impact of the viral scourge.

Social workers in various contexts have been rendering a variety of services in the fight against COVID-19. These range from promotive, preventive and treatment services to ensure the health and well-being of the people they serve (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2020). Distribution of factual information to dispel myths and unwarranted fears of the pandemic, reaching out to agencies, assisting with preparedness, ensuring inclusive planning efforts and advocating to governments for increased support has been at the heart of social workers' efforts. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that the delivery of social work assessments and interventions can no longer remain as usual. One must harness innovation and creativity to circumvent these modern catastrophes. The popularisation of e-social work is right before us; provision of remote counselling services, telehealth, remote supervision, virtual workforce support, remote case management and advocacy. Furthermore, organizing ways to overcome isolation and ensuring access to needed services in lockdown circumstances are some of the tasks faced by social workers at the front lines.

Once again, the major themes emanating from the papers in this issue are submitted are:

- social policy
- disability
- remote teaching and learning
- spirituality
- occupational safety and wellbeing
- mental health

There is no doubt that the role of social work in discovering medicines and organics of this 'mask disease' is limited, but there is no doubt too that we have a role in recovering our societies. We hope, you will find the papers presented here timely, informative and interesting.

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