SURVIVING COVID-19: SOCIAL WORK POLICY RESPONSE TO CHILDREN IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the necessity of urgent policy response to children in Africa. Undeniably, the deadly contagion has wrecked more havoc as impacts on children's psychosocial well-being and this situation poses legitimate concerns to the social work profession. Although the focus of attention has been elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has and is continuing to hit hard on the African region. Yet policy attention has been slim and scanty. Using an intervention approach, this paper rollouts a holistic policy response to degrading the after-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. While highlighting these guidelines, this paper summarised some empowering context necessary for intervention. This is not only amid the global contagion, but also in the aftermath of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic. Aside addressing ethical issues and underscoring the imperative of social work intervention, this paper notes that unless we register our voices and make our impact felt in the policy arena, we would continue to make minute impact in curtailing the grievous effect of the pandemic on children. To offset this, it proposes holistic intervention as a veritable channel for meaningful impact. Directions for its application and result orientation are considered. Hence, the outcome of this study could have a significant and extensive impact on the improvement of child social intervention research.

KEY TERMS: Children, COVID-19, social work, social protection, psychosocial, policy advocacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 plague presents the extreme test the world has encountered since the Second World War and the formation of the United Nations (United Nations, 2020). In January 2020 the World Health Organization, WHO (2020) confirmed the occurrence of a new disease, the coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, which became a public health concern and a global issue. The coronavirus disease started in 2019 and in Wuhan, China and extended to other countries of the world. Recently, WHO (2020) made the appraisal that COVID-19 can be considered a pandemic. At present, COVID-19 as it is popularly known has positively tumbled the world's social, economic and political dealings and has adversely impacted human lives and most cases lead to deaths. COVID-19, a global social issue is linked with a frightening wave in which the viral disease has brownout around the world; imply an incisive recap of the connections with world-streaming from mass cooperation to interdependence (Amadasun, 2020a; Omorogiuwa, 2020c; Ozili, 2020, Omorogiuwa & Amadasun, 2020). Subtly, just as news could spread at a speed, so likely would viral infections such as the coronavirus. Hence, the population affected in varying societies include the vulnerable; individuals with weak immune systems (Amadasun, 2020b; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Omorogiuwa, 2020c; Ozili, 2020), and children are sometime not left out.

Although captions and discourses have been elsewhere, the coronavirus pandemic has continued to relentlessly hit hard on the African continent. Unlike other regions, such as Europe, Asia-Pacific, and North America; COVID-19 has signalled a dual pernicious impact on Africa: immediate and continued loss of lives (arising from inadequate test kits), further impacts on children and slimmer policy response to stymie the fallout of the pandemic (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020a; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers IFSW, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Omorogiuwa, 2020c; Ozili, 2020). The latter is particularly pivotal in preventing the former, yet many African governments have lagged behind in addressing this core issue. Before considering the social work psychosocial engagement with caregivers of children and in bringing the attention of policymakers to the urgency of rapid policy response, it is necessary to appraise how the pandemic has affected and is continuing to affect children and their psychosocial well-being.

CHILDREN AND COVID-19

Children even face greater impact due to additional challenges of lockdown or stay at home. Hence, a question that arises is whether children experience burdens than their parents or adults. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) indicate that children encounter more pressures than adult. This study underscores children's manifold burdens due to COVID-19 crisis and its adverse consequences on their health, education and socialization. This potentiality presents ethical, cogent, right and legal concerns to the social work profession whose main significance and obligation is encircled on safeguarding and ensuring the functioning of human life (Amadasun, 2020b; Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020b; IFSW, 2020; Omorogiuwa, 2020a). Given that COVID-19 has and will greatly affect different populations, including children from diverse societies, geographical locations and regions of the world. It is important that COVI9 -19 should not be linked with people of a specific race, ethnic culture, group or nationality, specifically, when mentioning persons with the disease (WHO, 2020; United Nations, 2020). The social work profession emphasis the need to be empathetic to all persons affected, globally.

According to the United Nations (2020, p. 2), "children are not the face of this pandemic, but they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have thankfully been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 - at least to date – the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing". Although, a number of helping professionals and authorities are working globally to control the COVID-19 plague, however, the crisis is engendering ills throughout populations. Specifically, children in varying societies are being affected and, in some cases, by the alleviative procedures that could unintentionally pose additional hurt. This is a collective crisis and for some children, the impact will be long lasting. Additionally, the harmful effects of this contagion may not be spread alike, as the situation could perhaps be most detrimental for children in vulnerable circumstances, underprivileged neighbourhoods and societies (Amadasun, 2020a). The reflections in this study are to support social work psychosocial well-being in children during the pandemic. Hence, to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on children locally and globally, it is useful to social work psychosocial measures, in which the lives of children can be improved during the pandemic.

The dreaded coronavirus pandemic has continued unabated, hitting hard on the bio as well as the psychosocial realms of reality and for which children are disproportionately affected (Amadasun, 2020a; Omorogiuwa, 2020a; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Unless urgent holistic policy response is initiated and directed to ameliorate the threats the contagion poses on highly undervalued and underserved population, we may continue to lose significant portion of our most future resourceful population. This is especially the case for Africa- a continent where policymakers and critical stakeholders like social workers have remained aloof to policy action and disinterested in the policy arena respectively (Omorogiuwa, 2020c). As is commonplace in Africa, policy actions

are frequently initiated through highly coordinated, strategic, and sustained push by stakeholders whose response often involves multidisciplinary and multisector approach (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020a; IFSW, 2020).

SOCIAL WORK PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREGIVERS

Given that COVID-19 influences negatively on people and societies, social workers are on the frontlines of providing measures of safeguarding, supporting and preventing services to promote the health and well-being of the individuals they assist (Omorogiuwa, 2020c) including children. Hence, in societies where a number of persons or family members are infested with the disease, it is the duty of social workers among other helping professionals to assist children, in order to provide them with services, such as psychosocial counseling, promoting hygiene measures, preventing seclusion, and stigmatization and ensure their protection (IFSW, 2020; Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020b; Omorogiuwa, 2020a, b). Additionally, is the sensitization of children, parents and other community members, by spreading tangible information to lay off concerns, worries; and connecting them with agencies to support with awareness, enlightening extensive efforts and promoting governments supports. This implies intensifying public sensitization, hotlines and other services for children that are vulnerable to abuse; whether at home or online (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Importantly is the need to help children find encouraging ways to convey their feelings, emotions such as anxiety, fear, grief and unhappiness. Children have their own different ways of displaying sentiments and reactions. Participating in a resourceful activity, including drawing and playing can expedite this process (Omorogiuwa, 2020a). Children feel relieved if they can express and link their emotions in a safe and reassuring environment (Amadasun, 2020b; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Omorogiuwa, 2020a; WHO, 2020). Keep children close to their parents and family, once reflected secured, then prevent keeping children from their parents or guardians. When there is need to keep children from their main caregiver, social work practitioners are to ensure that suitable substitute care is available and frequently engage in follow up on children. Further, practitioners are to ensure that during periods of separation, consistent interaction with parents and caregivers is sustained, which can be carried out through telephone, social media video calls, which are age-appropriate means of interaction (Alderson, 2001; Omorogiuwa, 2020b).

Considerably, it is significant for service providers to uphold recognizable schedules of activities every day, specifically to ease off pressure on children during the stay at home. However, these play and learning activities should be child-friendly, and suitable for their ages. In this way, it is needful to support children to play and socialize with other family members, while maintaining social contact. It is often common to see that in times of pressure and crisis, children are likely to strive for greater affection from parents or guardians. The discussion of COVID-19 with children in candid and friendly manner is imperative. Therefore, if children have fears or worries, tackling such issues together may relieve their concerns. Additionally, a number of children are likely to copy parents or adults' behaviours and reactions on how to cope with their individual feelings in challenging situations such as pandemic.

BLUEPRINT TO HOLISTIC INTERVENTION

Given the extensive reach of COVID-19 in terms of its impact on the psychosocial frame of reality on children, social work intervention should commensurately be broad if we are desirous of preventing the pandemic and its grievous effect on vulnerable groups such as children (Omorogiuwa, 2020a). This necessitates the question: how can we make meaningful contribution in this regard? Given our profound insights in social organization and human behaviour as is consistent with the person-in-environment focus of the social work profession, we can draw on the central theme of some of our theoretical expositions to make significant impact. Classic examples reflect in strengths-based practice (anchored around building hope, resilience, optimism, relationship, and resources-some of which are innate and many of which are in the natural environment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Saleebey, 2006; Omorogiuwa, 2020a, b & c), anti-oppressive practice (premised on challenging systemic exclusion and discrimination of select groups (Dominelli, 2002; Clifford & Burke, 2009; Baines, 2011; Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020b), developmental practice (edged on advocating for investments in social protection programmes and services (Midgley, 2010; Amadasun, 2020a; Omorogiuwa, 2020a, b), and indigenous practice (predicated on according value to indigenous knowledge and practice [e.g. supplementing caregivers care with community-based care for children). Again, the question goes: how do we operationalize these actions? Pointedly, there is a no "how to" menu or formula for intervention, but there are demonstrable roadmaps to intervention. These guidelines are by no means exhaustive or linear in application, but rather they should be construed as a comprehensive approach to responding to the challenges children face during the pandemic. Of course, our involvement in policy planning and advocacy will always be at the mainframe of our intervention.

IMPLICATION FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Advocate for a paradigm shift in terms of the prevailing harmful impact of COVID-19, depriving them of education and subjecting them to warrantless further vulnerabilities. Involving community members, parents, caregivers' is a policy response for making impact in this context.

- Advocate for the establishment of COVID-19 child protection services through the creation of federal and states child protection agencies. Social workers can get their voices heard through letter writing to policymakers, pointing out the importance of such agency by employing mass media channels as well as lobbying through collective votes of vulnerable children.

- Engage in strengths - and relationship-based therapeutic intervention for vulnerable children. Children should be empowered mentally in order to not only overcome the trauma and travails of the hardships due to COVID-19 they have endured but to also strive to become responsible citizens against all odds. This would require building the tenacity of children to remain in school.

- Advocate against abuse on children, while concurrently canvassing for sanctions against erring parents and guardians or older adults or persons, who deliberately act to harm children. Such action, when enforced, could serve as deterrents to custodians or perpetrators who may have considered such line of actions.

CONCLUSION

As the coronavirus rages on, a number of children will be vulnerable not only to the pandemic but also to its after-effect. In Africa, as large segment of the population remains untested, the promulgation of lockdowns may linger for some time, fuelling further complications for vulnerable groups. As disproportionately affected populations, children amongst others require urgent social work psychosocial intervention in order to outlive the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper has set in motion strategies for attaining such comprehensive response and the means by which they can be concretized. Through these efforts, requiring highly coordinated action, it is hoped that the rampaging impact of the pandemic on children's psychosocial well-being in Africa will be tremendously reduced. This paper has momentous inferences for social work intervention in the global sphere. Implementing the suggestions of this study pertains to the need for social workers to continuously create pathways to address the issues of coronavirus and supportive of psychosocial well-being for children. Given that COVID-19 has had a broad bearing on all realms, so also should our intervention in order to prevent the pandemic and degrade its grievous influence on children and the society. Hence, the outcome of this study could have a significant and extensive impact on the improvement of child social intervention research. Child protection social workers should be sensitive to interventions and measures intended to ensure prevention and remediation through building and promoting strengths suitable for children (as is consistent with the person-in-environment focus of the profession). Hence, unless we (social workers) roll our voices and make our impact felt in the policy arena, we would continue to make minute impact in curtailing the grievous effect of the pandemic on children.

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