

Review Article

# The Practice of Clinical Social Work in Namibia: A Review of Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Clinical social workers are essential in the provision of mental health services for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders in the community. They have a crucial role in improving and maintaining the mental health functioning of individuals. The extent to which clinical social work services are used in Namibia is poorly understood. This paper examines the evolution and practice of clinical social work in Namibia based on review of documentary evidence. Results indicated that there is a great need for clinical social work services in Namibia as the field is relatively unknown with most social workers doing general social work duties. Challenges and solutions are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Clinical social workers are essential in the provision of mental health services for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders in the community.<sup>1</sup> They have a crucial role in improving and maintaining the mental health functioning of individuals and communities. Clinical social work aims at improving social functioning of individuals through enhancing meaningful life experiences and the provision of a broad spectrum of choices for individual behavior.<sup>2</sup> It also takes into consideration the availability of supportive environments for those

with or at risk for social or emotional problems. Several services are provided in clinical social work which include prevention of future difficulties, effective coping of current life situations and stabilization of coping skills attained. The fundamental nature of social work entails working with persons in diverse settings who may be served as individuals, families and/ or in small groups. The rudiments of social work includes social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity.<sup>3,4</sup> This means that social work is not only focused on helping people but also tries to change systems that oppress and disadvantage them.<sup>5</sup> The role of a clinical social worker is to orient patients and their families or significant others to their roles in the healing process.<sup>6</sup> Although the practice of clinical social work in other parts of the world have been well documented, it still remains poorly understood in Namibia.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Given the significant contribution of clinical social work to mental health care, it is apposite to explore the extent to which such services are utilized in the country. Thus, this paper examines the evolution and practice of clinical social work in Namibia based on review of documentary evidence.

## BACKGROUND OF NAMIBIA

The Republic of Namibia is located in Southern Africa and borders with Zambia, Angola, Botswana and South Africa. Following the Namibian War of Independence, Namibia gained its independence in

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1990 from South Africa. The country has a population of 2.6 million people and the life expectancy is 65.8 years.<sup>10</sup> The country is still hugely burdened by the HIV pandemic with an estimated prevalence of 13.9% in 2019.<sup>11</sup> The major languages include English (official), Afrikaans, German, Oshivambo, Herero and Nama. The governance framework for Namibia is a semi-presidential democracy where there is a president and a prime minister. Its political structure also includes traditional leadership structure and currently recognizes 51 traditional authorities and leaders. The most popular political parties in the country with parliamentary representations includes South West Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO), Popular Democratic Movement, Rally for Democracy and Progress, All Peoples' Party and United Democratic Front. The country is rich in several minerals like diamonds, gold, uranium and copper but despite having abundant minerals the country still faces poverty and high unemployment rate. However poverty levels in the country have been steadily declining.<sup>12</sup> Since Namibia is mostly a desert, it is hot and dry and receives very little rainfall, which increases its proneness to prolonged periods of drought thereby threatening food security. With all these social problems social workers has so much to do to their respective communities.

### **Historical Perspective of Social Work Development in Namibia**

The Dutch Reformed Church introduced social work into the country in the early 1950s for the congregants and white Namibians. In the late 1950s, the establishment of the Welfare and Pensions Administration led to the introduction of state social services. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in 1951 also introduced social services for the disabled resulting in the establishment of two old-age homes in Windhoek. From there, churches expanded their social services and more homes were established for both the old aged and the children in need. Communities went on to initiate poverty

mitigation projects and feeding schemes. Zed Ngavirue was the first black Namibian to be employed at the local municipality as a social worker in 1959. Between 1970 and 1990, there was rapid growth of social work and that when it started being recognized as a profession. This led to the development of standard of service delivery where service was offered to anyone despite of his/her race or color. The first clinical social worker was employed at a state hospital in 1972 and Department of Prisons in 1973. They were inequalities in terms of resource and budget allocation until after independence when all welfares were put under Ministry of Health and Social Services and since then the ministry has been the primary employer for all social workers.<sup>13</sup>

### **Social worker training**

When social work was started, the country had no dedicated training center for the program. Social workers were trained at the Academy for Tertiary Education in South Africa from 1980 up-to 1992 when the University of Namibia (UNAM) was established. The university remains the only training institution for social workers up to this day offering undergraduate, post graduate up-to PhD degree levels. The social work program at UNAM is a very popular drawing students from Namibia and other parts of Africa, such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland, and Malawi. As there is only one institution training social workers and that social work is still a young profession the country, the country is facing a huge shortage of social workers. Additionally, the university trains general social workers and is not yet offering specialization in clinical social work.

### **Social work activities in Namibia**

The Social Work and Psychology Act 6 of 2004 provides for the establishment of a Social Work and Psychology Council to regulate the registration and practice of social workers, psychologists and social auxiliary workers. Social workers are required to register with the Council to practice social work, and

they must possess suitable social work qualifications. There is a social work department in almost every health facility in the country. Hospital social work service is supposed to be administered through the Chief Medical Social Worker. The office of the Chief Medical Social worker is responsible for the overall administration of social work programs, for initiating and effecting changes in methods that will promote efficient practice, and for the coordination of the service with other programs in the hospital and the community. A small group of social workers came together and decided that a professional organization was necessary to further develop professional knowledge, build cohesion within the profession, and raise its status. The National Association of Social Workers (NASWA) was there before independence but was revived in 2008 and was meant for all social workers in the country. The objectives of the association include promoting the image of social workers in Namibia, marketing the profession, offering continuing education opportunities for its members, and encouraging social development projects. However it is not clear whether these associations are making any progress or not.

The Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS) provides support for families and individuals with social welfare needs in the country. The government of Namibia each year tries to come up with a budget to cater for the social welfare services for the vulnerable groups. The Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare (MoPESW), focuses on school feeding schemes to enhance the nutritional status of children. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGECW), is responsible for support of children with disabilities up to the age of 16 years through a special maintenance grant. Individuals 16-59 years are cared for by the MoPESW. There are also various NGOs that provide social services to vulnerable groups in the country. For instance, the Red Cross Society offers home based care to orphans and vulnerable children living with HIV and employs a number of social workers who are responsible for counselling these children.

### **The role of social workers**

Based on currently available literature, it would seem fair to suggest that the role of clinical social workers in the country remains not so clear because of broad range of activities they undertake including some that are believed to breach other professionals. To the authors' knowledge, there is currently only one clinical social worker working with mentally ill patients and families at one government institution. However it is possible that some social workers could be providing clinical social work services in other institutions especially private setting which unfortunately may not be within reach of many citizens due to costs involved. Evidence exists though on the roles of other general social workers. For instance, social workers in Namibia have been reported to help families with various resource systems like worker compensation.<sup>14</sup>

Social workers also take part in crisis management where they are responsible for identification of patients in acute stages of serious ailments. Their role is to identify and lessen the immediate impact of disruptive, stressful events, mobilizing the manifest and latent psychological capabilities. Social workers are also responsible for interpreting and communicating their findings to the other hospital staff so as to be included in diagnosis. Social workers also take part in disaster management, where they do an assessment of risk and vulnerability of populations.<sup>15</sup> They also take part in after disaster counselling and psychological support to all affected individuals.

Clinical social workers offers their patients counselling services. Counselling involves helping patient to understand their diagnosis, their anticipated level of functioning, prescribed treatment and they also discuss follow up plans with the patient. In dealing with mental health patients, social workers counsels with patients and may also involve significant others and family members in the counselling. In the process social workers tries to show a positive, warm and accommodating attitude towards the patient.<sup>9</sup>

Since some sections of the Namibian population suffer from extreme poverty and cannot afford hospital bills prior to admission, social workers are responsible for linking their patients with various social services like International labor organizations for employee compensation, child services for issues to do with minors, Red Cross Society for the provision of clothes to those in need. They also link their patients with social services who link old peoples and children to special homes. They also link their patients to rehabilitation services in the country. Social workers have also a role of assessing patients. They assess the person in totality (physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually) be it a patient or client. The social worker has a role to explain clearly how patients and family members are responding to diagnoses of life-limiting illnesses and the prospect of end of life.

## DISCUSSION

### Challenges faced by social workers

The role of social workers in a hospital setting is mostly misunderstood by other health professionals and other professional roles are well established but the social workers are yet to establish theirs.<sup>16,17</sup> Due to such misunderstandings, most social workers tend to be more concerned with defending or explaining their role.<sup>16</sup> This results in breaching of boundaries between social workers and other disciplines thereby leading to rise of conflicts (interpersonal or organizational). The social workers' role in hospital settings especially in rural areas is mostly impacted by economic imperatives and legislative directives.<sup>18</sup> A study done by Davis *et al* pointed out that social workers focus more on assessment and counseling when more attention should be given to post discharge and community issues.<sup>19</sup> There is lack of supervision of social workers by their more experienced counterparts meaning that they often practice in isolation and they do not seek guidance from their counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Social workers also face inadequate training in developmental social work it means that their practice in social work would not be

inconsistent with prevailing trends and needs.<sup>20</sup> Social workers also face the changes of having lack of funding to undertake their various interventions in their field resulting in most of their activities not being done in the country. There is also lack of equality and equity in distribution of the little resources that are there for social services activities in the country.<sup>20</sup>

### Proposed solutions for challenges faced by clinical social workers

The foregoing discussion has highlighted a surfeit of challenges facing clinical social work practice in Namibia. Consequently, a number of solutions to the challenges faced by social workers are discussed below. The department of social work should engage in frequent research activities.<sup>21</sup> There is need to foster in-depth research in the country and the African region at large so as to stop relying on findings from the western world which consists of a totally different economic, social and political characteristics from that of the African continent. Studies could be conducted to further explore how use of clinical social workers can be scaled up both in public and private settings. There is need to encourage social workers to develop cost-effective interventions to tackle challenges affecting vulnerable populations such as those living with mental illness. In light of limited funding available for clinical social work activities, there is need to foster public-private partnerships and to increase government allocation for social welfare services.

To address the issue of understaffing of social workers in health institutions and since University of Namibia is the only institution offering social work degrees, there is need for opening of more training institutions for social workers which would result in alleviating the heavy burden on the few social workers in service. Social workers also need to come up with field associations in which they discuss new ideas and interventions that are in consistence with the revolving world. Through these associations there is enhanced member to member communication as well as provision of avenues for



communication between professional leaders and rank and their subordinates.<sup>22</sup> They can also make use of social media to link up with social workers from all over the world with an improved social work practice and learn from them.

To address the issue of inequalities in the distribution of resources meant for social service activities, there is need to involve the political involvement so the country have social and economic equality. However social workers need to show the government, its political will through adopting a developmental social welfare policy.

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided a cursory description of clinical social work practice in the country alongside the roles of social workers. Challenges faced by these social workers have also been described. The main challenge that was noted is lack of funding to undertake social service activities and interventions as a result social workers tend to focus more on assessment and counselling rather than community based intervention like post discharge. While these preliminary results are promising, further research is warranted to fully understand the landscape of clinical social work practice in Namibia. There is need for future studies to collect primary data on the practice of clinical social work where respondents could be interviewed so as to compliment secondary data.

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