


A Reflection of the Position that Social Work Played in Tackling Coronavirus in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Inopportunately, the coronavirus in the 20-21 epoch ubiquitously overwhelmed many countries around the globe, and those in Africa begging for interventions to surmount the quagmire. This article aims to reflect on how social work played a role in tackling the quagmire of coronavirus in the 2020-2021 coronavirus epoch in South Africa. The paper applied a literature review methodology by drawing data from twenty English-authored articles from various Google search engines such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Research Gate, monographs, books, and book chapters. This researcher thinks that social workers during the COVID era achieved the following: Fighting coronavirus-driven poverty, facilitating psychosocial therapeutic interventions, such as counseling to the victims of gender-based violence, mobilized communities to embrace the spirit of Ubuntu, and offering caregiving to those infected. This role, this researcher believes, unequivocally mitigated the impact of the disease and assisted in raising the societies' preparedness to handle the coronavirus pandemic astutely. The article recommends that government, NGOs, and philanthropic bodies collaboratively empower social workers in their social welfare interventions to face pandemics such as coronavirus. Societies have also been implored to embrace the spirit of Ubuntuism to strengthen their caregiving norms and spirit. The article generates knowledge that social workers will use to intervene in the event of coronavirus coming back or in any future pandemic. This article broadens the research horizon in pandemics such as coronaviruses and those that will come in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Although coronavirus appears to have disappeared or dwindled significantly, people have wondered about its epidemiological terrain and worry that it might bounce back as different variants. It is then important that social work operatives are strengthened to intervene. A notable characteristic of coronavirus erupted in its unique environment, like other erstwhile pandemics, with governments being caught unprepared to handle them.¹ The disease has manifested despondence, anxiety, uncertainty, sorrow, apathy, and an economic disaster of unprecedented proportions globally.² This article aims to reflect on the role social

¹ Iris Bosa et al., "Response to COVID-19: Was Italy (Un)Prepared?," *Health Economics, Policy and Law* 17, no. 1 (January 5, 2022): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744133121000141>.

² Silvio Daniel Pitlik, "COVID-19 Compared to Other Pandemic Diseases," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 11, no. 3 (July 31, 2020): e0027, <https://doi.org/10.5041/RMMJ.10418>.

workers in South Africa achieved during the COVID-19 epoch in allaying people's phobias, comforting, calming, and reassuring them while linking them to sources of help.³ Therefore, the objective that this article aims to fulfill is, among other things, to discuss how social work can give hope to the hopeless who succumbed to the disease, how social work can facilitate the much-needed packages of psychosocial empowerment, achieve demystification of the disease and how it can be a bridge to avenues of assistance. This was achieved through a review of literature drawn from variegated English-authored journal articles from various Google search engines such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Research Gate, monographs, books, and book chapters. The following outline has been followed. Introduction, methodology, thematic findings, summary and implications of social work, recommendations, conclusion, and bibliography.

Before the advent of vaccines, families had to stay with their patients who succumbed to the disease painfully, and this led to family concerns, especially due to fear of infections. Social workers were needed to persuade and advocate for families to apply the ethos and principles of Ubuntu to facilitate counselling in caregiving to their kin (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Inopportunately, the disease attracted stigma amid much development of innumerable myths surrounding it.⁴ This made it crucial that social workers first trained on the basic facts of coronavirus to educate community members on the aetiology and epidemiology of coronavirus, especially to dissuade them from falsifying the basic facts of coronavirus.

Unequivocally, coronavirus brought poverty and other concomitant poverty-friendly factors. This is especially due to the imposition of a lockdown, which saw many people abandon their jobs. At this juncture, social workers and other social service professionals, especially through nongovernmental organizations such as Childline South Africa, unleashed various psychosocial-based advocacy toward philanthropic organizations to step in and assist the desperate communities to meet their basic food needs.⁵ Further, coronavirus is believed to have caused *coronaphobia*, which yielded a plethora of psychiatric manifestations across the different strata of society.⁶ This necessitated the application of the social work repertoire of skills to offer confidence and reassurance and encourage people to look for alternatives to surmount the prevailing psychosocial and clinical problems presented by coronavirus.⁷

Through the engagement between social workers and the communities in ubiquitous corners of the country, societies were reminded and encouraged to apply the ethos and principles of Ubuntu and embrace the principles of social justice that would manifest love, trust, mutuality, and reciprocity.⁸ Further, South African social workers in ubiquitous corners of the country needed to be praised for helping women and children who, while trapped at home with their abusers, suffered variegated bouts of gender-based violence during the lockdown.⁹

Caregiving of those who succumbed to coronavirus was imperative, especially in the nascent stages of the disease when the sick did not have space in the hospitals. In such circumstances, family support was imperative. It entailed the provision of medical needs, safety, love, and compassion, which proved to be a panacea to the awe-struck patients who fell victim to coronavirus. Social work advocacy to communities to accept a public responsibility to complement the already overburdened public health sector was imperative.¹⁰ Further, coronavirus was influenced by myths and misinformation that gave

³ Simon Murote Kang'ethe, "Unpacking South African Institutions of Higher Learning Efforts and Hurdles to Respond to COVID-19: Social Service Professionals' Lenses," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 21, no. 1 (2022): 84–99.

⁴ Tenielle Schmidt et al., "Myths, Misconceptions, Othering and Stigmatizing Responses to Covid-19 in South Africa: A Rapid Qualitative Assessment," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 12 (December 22, 2020): e0244420, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0244420>.

⁵ E O Aruma and Melvins Enwuvesi Hanachor, "Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Assessment of Needs in Community Development," *International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability* 5, no. 7 (2017): 15–27.

⁶ Souvik Dubey et al., "Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19," *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Reviews* 14, no. 5 (September 2020): 779–88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsx.2020.05.035>.

⁷ Jacqueline Safieh et al., "Interventions to Optimise Mental Health Outcomes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 20, no. 5 (October 15, 2022): 2934–55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00558-3>.

⁸ Jacob Rugare Mugumbate and Admire Chereni, "Now, the Theory of Ubuntu Has Its Space in Social Work," *African Journal of Social Work* 10, no. 1 (2020); C. Zastrow, *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare. Empowering People*, 10th ed. (United States of America: Linda Schreiber, 2010).

⁹ Kang'ethe, "Unpacking South African Institutions of Higher Learning Efforts and Hurdles to Respond to COVID-19: Social Service Professionals' Lenses"; D. Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19," *UNICEF South Africa*, September 7, 2020.

¹⁰ Kevin Mintz et al., "Enrolling Minors in COVID-19 Vaccine Trials," *Pediatrics* 147, no. 3 (March 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-040717>.

leeway to stigma and stigmatisation. It was then incumbent on the social workers through the mother Department of Social Development to ensure that communities were adequately educated about the aetiology and epidemiology of the disease. This was done to demystify the myths and help correct the misinformation surrounding coronavirus.

METHODOLOGY

This paper, which reflects on the role and position of social work in eradicating coronavirus, used a secondary review of the literature. Twenty English-authored journal articles, monographs, books, and book chapters were consulted from various Google search engines such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and Research Gate. The author used the following phrases to generate the requisite literature: *social work*, *social work and coronavirus*, *dynamics of coronavirus*, and *how to tackle coronavirus*. Through coding, piles of crude data were gleaned and reorganised to form some themes that constituted the thematic findings of this article.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Social Work Fighting Coronavirus-driven Poverty

Indeed, the impact of coronavirus in many countries of the world, South Africa notwithstanding, especially due to the governmental imposition of lockdown, set in an environment of worries, despondence, and poverty.¹¹ This is because compliance with the governmental directive of people locking themselves in their domiciles coerced them to abandon their jobs and other occupational processes that brought food to the table. In South Africa, as in many other countries, this exacerbated poverty among already poverty-stressed citizens.¹² People faced bewilderment as they pondered where their next meal would come from.¹³ This meant that many people did not meet their basic needs. This theoretically means that they could not meet the demands of at least two of the bottommost ladders of the Maslow hierarchy of needs, which failed to achieve food as an important psychological need and felt that they were no longer safe.¹⁴ Precisely, Abraham Maslow theorised that people are motivated by (1) Physiological needs, (2) Safety needs, (3) Love and belonging needs, (4) Esteem and prestige needs, and (5) Self-actualization needs. While all the motivation needs were negatively affected during the lockdown, poverty is usually driven by the lack of the bottommost ladder need, which is physiological needs.¹⁵

While poverty, on account of the coronavirus, continued to affect many people as time ticked away, social workers and other social service professionals are on record, especially through nongovernmental organizations such as Childline South Africa, engaging in unleashing various psychosocial-based advocacy toward the philanthropic organizations to step in and assist the desperate communities to meet their basic food needs. For this reason, Shahana Rasool, a professional social worker at the University of Johannesburg, in the Mail and Guardian Newspaper of 13th April 2020, offered an opinion that social workers are an untapped resource to address the psychosocial effects of COVID-19.¹⁶ Many social workers through civil society organizations are on record in contributing poverty-arresting tasks such as providing food parcels, hygiene, and medication supplies to vulnerable people and sometimes offering support counselling. This had some impact on fighting the poverty imposed by the effects of the coronavirus.¹⁷

Perhaps the whole country, alongside the social workers, needs to commend the government for initiating the R 350 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant to jobless citizens.¹⁸ This has had a huge

¹¹ Pitlik, "COVID-19 Compared to Other Pandemic Diseases."

¹² John C Mubangizi, "Poor Lives Matter: COVID-19 and the Plight of Vulnerable Groups with Specific Reference to Poverty and Inequality in South Africa," *Journal of African Law* 65, no. S2 (December 14, 2021): 237–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855321000292>.

¹³ Mubangizi, "Poor Lives Matter: COVID-19 and the Plight of Vulnerable Groups with Specific Reference to Poverty and Inequality in South Africa."

¹⁴ Aruma and Hanachor, "Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Assessment of Needs in Community Development."

¹⁵ Aruma and Hanachor, "Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Assessment of Needs in Community Development."

¹⁶ S. Rasool, "Social Workers Are an Untapped Resource to Address the Psychosocial Effects of Covid-19," *Mail & Guardian*, April 13, 2020.

¹⁷ Rasool, "Social Workers Are an Untapped Resource to Address the Psychosocial Effects of Covid-19"; Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19."

¹⁸ The Republic of South Africa, "Social Relief of Distress Grant," South African Government, 2020, www.gov.za.

psychosocial impact on reducing the effects of poverty on those rendered poor by the impacts of coronavirus and its concomitant effect of lockdown.¹⁹ However, perhaps social workers needed to be incisive and moot other strategies to help these jobless citizens access more resources. With the galloping state of inflation to which the country was subjected, largely due to the impacts of the disease and other economic imperatives, the R350 grant could not adequately cushion the effect of the coronavirus.²⁰ However, this thinking was proved to be fallacious through President Ramaphosa's communique, which hailed some citizens who prudently used the funds to kickstart some businesses. This pointed out to communities that the fund can be used prudently and productively.

Social workers, perhaps through the South Africa Department of Social Development, needed to expand the scope of their advocacy by persuading philanthropists to consider offering support to indigents in ubiquitous corners of the country. Perhaps it is at this gesture that the country, alongside the social workers, thanks philanthropists, such as Mr. Patrice Motsepe, who mobilised his friends to donate to the government R1-billion to fight coronavirus. Mosepe urged South Africans to unite in the fight against the scourge.²¹ Moreover, social workers need to woo and persuade other philanthropists to do the same, as the impacts of the disease are still being felt. Another cadre of philanthropists that need to be commended for taking a frontline stance in contributing to the initiation and establishment of blended learning in various universities of the country are the institutional alumni who donated many laptops to the institutions where they took their studies.²²

The Role of Social Work in Facilitating Psychosocial Therapeutic Interventions

Perhaps social work is different from other professions because it is considered to manifest many professional faces.²³ It is versatile enough to handle different tasks and offer different interventions. This is why Morales et al. call it a profession of many faces.²⁴ This researcher believes that these different faces, to some extent, guarantee the successful handling of several psychosocial deficits that the coronavirus presented.²⁵ To this end, and at the height of the disease, the director-general of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, urged global leaders to prioritise and strengthen social work support and relief to strengthen the psychosocial interventions that could minimize unintended distress imposed by the disease. This was dire in South Africa, where the lockdown exacerbated poverty among the already poor people.²⁶

Some researchers, such as Nkala-Dlamini and Moutloatse, opined that if the country wanted to disrupt the COVID-19 chain of transmission and wanted people to come out of lockdown victorious, psychosocial interventions, which are a mainstay of social work, needed to be strengthened.²⁷ This would guarantee a more integrated approach to this pandemic and reinforce a psychosocial model of dealing with health conditions in contrast to the medical approach that suggests a linear strategy.²⁸ First and foremost, the advent of the disease ushered in an environment of mass hysteria, acute panic, anxiety, obsessive behaviours, paranoia, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run.²⁹ This was attributed to various factors, such as the economic burden and financial losses. Many people had to shut down their occupational sites in response to the government's lockdown directive. This phenomenon, referred to as *coronaphobia*, yielded a plethora of psychiatric manifestations across the different strata of society.³⁰ This necessitated the application of the social work repertoire of skills to offer confidence and

¹⁹ The Republic of South Africa, "Social Relief of Distress Grant."

²⁰ M. Maluleke, "The Role of the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) in Reducing Food Insecurity: A Budget Analysis of the Resource Allocation and Expenditure of SRD Funds in the Western Cape, South Africa" (University of Stellenbosch, 2021).

²¹ T. Mathe, "Motsepe and Friends Donate R1-Billion to Fight Covid-19," *Mail & Guardian Newspaper*, March 28, 2020.

²² B. Lindeque, "Philanthropists Give over R1.7 Billion to 11 Local Universities," 2019, goodthingsguy.com.

²³ A. Morales, B.W. Sheafor, and M.E. Scott, *Social Work. A Profession of Many Faces* (USA: Pearson Education, 2009).

²⁴ Morales, Sheafor, and Scott, *Social Work. A Profession of Many Faces*.

²⁵ A. Makuyana, S.P. Mbulayi, and S.M. Kangethe, "Psychosocial Deficits Underpinning Child Headed Households (CHHs) in Mabvuku and Tafara Suburbs of Harare, Zimbabwe," *Children and Youth Services Review* 115 (August 2020): 105093, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105093>.

²⁶ B. Nkala-Dlamini and F. Moutloatse, "Social Workers Have a Critical Role to Play during the Lockdown," *Daily Maverick*, April 8, 2020.

²⁷ Nkala-Dlamini and Moutloatse, "Social Workers Have a Critical Role to Play during the Lockdown."

²⁸ Nkala-Dlamini and Moutloatse, "Social Workers Have a Critical Role to Play during the Lockdown."

²⁹ Dubey et al., "Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19."

³⁰ Dubey et al., "Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19."

reassurance and encourage people to look for alternatives to surmount the prevailing psychosocial and clinical problems presented by COVID-19.³¹

Through the engagement between the social workers and the communities in ubiquitous corners of the country, societies were reminded and encouraged to apply the ethos and principles of Ubuntu, to be there for one another, and to share the meagre resources at their disposal to afford all and sundry to pass away a bad time.³² Social workers were also on the frontline to emphasise that society should embrace the principles of social justice that would manifest love, trust, mutuality, and reciprocity.³³ Commendably also, in this epoch of coronavirus, social workers forged links with philanthropic organizations to donate food parcels to the communities made vulnerable by the impacts of the coronavirus. Several social workers, especially those who work with NGOs in different parts of South Africa, were on record for advocating for food assistance from the privileged. They also facilitated the sharing of these food handouts.³⁴ Further, social workers have been at the forefront in advising the communities to seek other plausible indigenous routes of self-sustenance, such as planting some vegetables in their backyard gardens during lockdown. To emphasize the role of social workers in offering advice on various aspects of improving livelihood, this researcher, a social worker, has been advising and challenging his students and staff to take an Indigenous route to development by mooted indigenous paths to surmount the prevalent societal challenges like those presented by a coronavirus.³⁵ This includes making some bakery products available for sale in their neighbourhoods. This can lead to the development of new skills and provide a better opportunity to pass the time during the lockdown.

Role of social workers in addressing coronavirus-driven gender-based violence

Empirical evidence abounds that South Africa and its surrounding countries, such as Botswana, experience high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children (VAC).³⁶ Further evidence was poignant that South Africa experienced a surge in gender-based violence during the recent epoch of lockdown that many governments imposed to surmount the effects of coronavirus. Statistical evidence suggests that in a spate of one week of the lockdown, 87,000 complaints related to gender-based violence were made to the police.³⁷ This begged for spirited interventions to address the effects of gender-based violence. Social workers in ubiquitous corners of the country needed to be praised for helping women and children who, while trapped at home with their abusers, suffered variegated bouts of gender-based violence during the lockdown.³⁸ It may not be clear why cases of gender-based violence were on the increase. However, suspicion holds that men and women were reacting to the new milieu they had not found themselves in, where spouses/partners were locked in a confined area with their children without an alternative avenue to process their frustrations. Possibly, the new milieu heightened anxieties, fear, and despondence.³⁹ However, social workers were documented to have worked tirelessly to surmount the effects of gender-based violence during the spate of lockdown. For example, the social workers linked to Childline South Africa, a non-profit organization providing free counselling services during the South African lockdown, confirmed to have registered so many cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and various aspects of gender-based violence. Credit needs to be extended to the social workers for engaging

³¹ Safieh et al., "Interventions to Optimise Mental Health Outcomes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review."

³² Mugumbate and Chereni, "Now, the Theory of Ubuntu Has Its Space in Social Work."

³³ Zastrow, *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare. Empowering People*.

³⁴ Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19"; Rasool, "Social Workers Are an Untapped Resource to Address the Psychosocial Effects of Covid-19."

³⁵ T. Nomngcoyiya, R.M. Kajiita, and S.M. Kang'ethe, "Indigenous Social Work Education and Interventions: A Viable Path to a Culturally Friendly Social Work Service Delivery in Africa," in *Critical Social Work Studies in South Africa - Prospects and Challenges*, ed. A. Keet, N. Peremal, and V. Goliath (Stellenbosch: Nelson Mandela University Press, 2022), 213–32.

³⁶ S.M. Kang'ethe, "The Woman and the Girl Child Phenomenon and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Botswana," in *Human Rights and Social Equality: Challenges for Social Work*, ed. S. Hesse, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Ashgate Publishers, 2014), 125–32; Gender Link, "The Gender-Based Violence Indicators Study Botswana," 2012, <http://www.genderlinks.org.za/article/the-gendr-based-violence-indicstudy-botswana-2012-03-28>.

³⁷ Kang'ethe, "Unpacking South African Institutions of Higher Learning Efforts and Hurdles to Respond to COVID-19: Social Service Professionals' Lenses"; M Elijah Baloyi, "The Escalation of Gender-Based Violence during Lockdown as a Practical Theological Concern in the South African Context," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 103–15.

³⁸ Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19."

³⁹ Kang'ethe, "Unpacking South African Institutions of Higher Learning Efforts and Hurdles to Respond to COVID-19: Social Service Professionals' Lenses."

in this precious task of comforting and debriefing to manage grief and bereavement, as well as counselling the victims to recover easily.⁴⁰ The victims needed to be psychotherapeutically assisted in processing their pent-up anger, coming to reality with the phenomenon, and the road to recovery.⁴¹ On the other hand, all the processes of handling the perpetrators needed to be completed, ranging from bringing them to books, as well to offering them the much-needed psychotherapeutic interventions, such as helping them realise the dangers they had put others into, owning the perfidy of taking the law into their hands, as well as helping them achieve behavioural modification.⁴²

Importantly, victims needed to be removed from the presence of abusers. This was a complex situation, especially in a family setting, where the husband and wife or partners stayed together. There might not be an alternative domicile to separate the duo and possibly the children. This then required social workers to consider looking for places of safety to place the victim while reconciliation was sought.⁴³ But this posed a huge challenge in many rural areas with no safe places for the abused. This landed women and their children in a very precarious situation when the government did not have any shelter to domicile the victims of gender-based violence. Even where shelters were available, they were too far, meaning that the women's and the children's lives may have been put at a very high risk. Other challenges may have included looking for newer schools for children and the women abandoning their jobs. This social worker is persuaded to take this paper as an advocacy forum for the government to consider adequate and decent places of shelter for victims of gender-based violence.⁴⁴ The escalation of gender-based violence statistics needs to implore the government to move fast to fill in this gap.

Role of Social Work in mobilising communities to Offer caregiving to Coronavirus Patients

During the nascent stages of the coronavirus eruption, many countries' medical and clinical amenities were overwhelmed. Many coronavirus patients had to be sent home as there were no beds to accommodate all patients, and South Africa was no exception.⁴⁵ However, the situation was not as dire as in many other African countries.⁴⁶ Indeed, community members needed to take responsibility for caring for their kin/s when government resources were stretched thin. It was also painful for families to keep patients in hospitals with dwindling care facilities.⁴⁷ In such circumstances, family support was imperative and, among other things, entailed the provision of medical needs, safety, love, and compassion, which are services proving to be a panacea to the awe-struck patients who succumbed to the disease. Opportunely, in many resource-deficit countries, such as those from Africa and South Africa, notwithstanding, it is a public responsibility to complement the already overburdened public health sector.⁴⁸

This researcher thinks social workers need to increase their advocacy, driving countries to moot their indigenous or homebred interventions to fill in the gaps when modern-based interventions fail.⁴⁹ This places the role of family caregiving as critical, where community members can provide home-based care for their patients. This calls for communities to strengthen human relationships, tackle the common enemy with might, and invigorate goodwill.⁵⁰ However, strengthening human relationships echoes the

⁴⁰ Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19."

⁴¹ Safieh et al., "Interventions to Optimise Mental Health Outcomes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review"; Hartford, "Social Workers on the Frontline during COVID-19."

⁴² Steph Scott et al., "The Impact of Time Spent in Natural Outdoor Spaces on Children's Language, Communication and Social Skills: A Systematic Review Protocol," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 19 (2022): 12038.

⁴³ D. Nyamutinga, "An Evaluation of the Contribution of Shelters in Offering Psychosocial Empowerment to Survivors of Abuse. A Study of Selected Shelters in Pretoria" (University of Fort Hare, 2018).

⁴⁴ Nyamutinga, "An Evaluation of the Contribution of Shelters in Offering Psychosocial Empowerment to Survivors of Abuse. A Study of Selected Shelters in Pretoria."

⁴⁵ Nancy Stiegler and Jean-Pierre Bouchard, "South Africa: Challenges and Successes of the COVID-19 Lockdown," *Annales Médico-Psychologiques, Revue Psychiatrique* 178, no. 7 (September 2020): 695–98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amp.2020.05.006>.

⁴⁶ Stiegler and Bouchard, "South Africa: Challenges and Successes of the COVID-19 Lockdown."

⁴⁷ Pedro Tavares, Carlos Rodrigues, and Isabel G Neto, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Palliative Care: Perspective of Healthcare Professionals," *Cureus*, November 13, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.19522>.

⁴⁸ Mintz et al., "Enrolling Minors in COVID-19 Vaccine Trials."

⁴⁹ Mintz et al., "Enrolling Minors in COVID-19 Vaccine Trials"; Kevin J. Mahoney, "Self-Direction of Home and Community-Based Services in the Time of COVID-19," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 63, no. 6–7 (October 2, 2020): 625–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2020.1774833>.

⁵⁰ Nkala-Dlamini and Moutloatse, "Social Workers Have a Critical Role to Play during the Lockdown."

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) theme for 2020, titled “Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships”. This reiterates the importance of human relationships as an intervention.⁵¹

Further, through its horde of social workers, the Department of Social Development engaged and persuaded communities to accept to conduct care for those who fell victim to coronavirus. This required some community consultation between local leaders and their communities on how best to conduct it and what administrative assistance was required. The would-be informal caregivers needed to be exposed to some sort of training, such as skilling them to handle some tools of a care package such as a bandage, use of scissors, etc.⁵² These are training packages that ordinary social workers can do or arrange with some suitable personnel, such as the community nurses attached to community home-based care programmes.⁵³ This collaboration follows the tenets of community development, where different players come together to achieve a community development goal.⁵⁴ It was incumbent upon the social workers to collaborate with respected local leaders who could consult with their communities to allow the social workers and other community development pragmatists to conduct some educational debriefings to guide the would-be caregiver/s.

Role of social workers in demystifying and de-stigmatising coronavirus

Unequivocally, myths that develop to explain the phenomenon of a disease wreak havoc or confound the interventions geared towards subduing a disease, and the situation of coronavirus is no exception.⁵⁵ It must be understood that myths develop when basic facts of the disease are obscured by ignorance and a lack of knowledge of its aetiology and epidemiology.⁵⁶ Coronavirus information suffers from misconceptions, prompting people to concoct their fallacious belief systems.⁵⁷ Since this is not a mechanical process but a qualitative one, the result confounds and obscures the reality, hence the thriving of stigma.⁵⁸ The concomitant development of a mythical environment poignantly explains how mythical fear drives negative attitudinal reactions toward the infected or those suspected to be potential sources of virus contagion to others.⁵⁹

Since myths are misrepresentations of facts, they, in most cases, lead to the development of stigma and discrimination around a disease. It is this same route that coronavirus has taken, with stigma being felt in ubiquitous zones of the globe, but perhaps more intense among Asian countries such as India, but with the African region attracting lesser states of stigma.⁶⁰ It was then incumbent on the social workers, through the mother Department of Social Development, to ensure that communities were adequately educated about the aetiology and epidemiology of the disease. This was important to avoid or obliterate the development of myths such as the one that was peddled among some Mthatha (Eastern Cape, South Africa) rural communities that one can heal from coronavirus through drinking alcohol. The practice of this myth can be dangerous and exacerbate the situation on the ground. Perhaps the myth was developed after communities processed in their mind that sanitizers people use are made from ethanol, which is also used to make alcohol.⁶¹ Since some myths are scary, like those associating the disease with some negative spiritual forces, an environment rife with myths, misconceptions, and fallacies cannot escape the magnification of stigma.⁶²

⁵¹ Nkala-Dlamini and Moutloatse, “Social Workers Have a Critical Role to Play during the Lockdown.”

⁵² Fuqiang Zhao, Fawad Ahmed, and Naveed Ahmad Faraz, “Caring for the Caregiver during COVID-19 Outbreak: Does Inclusive Leadership Improve Psychological Safety and Curb Psychological Distress? A Cross-Sectional Study,” *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 110 (2020): 103725.

⁵³ Zhao, Ahmed, and Faraz, “Caring for the Caregiver during COVID-19 Outbreak: Does Inclusive Leadership Improve Psychological Safety and Curb Psychological Distress? A Cross-Sectional Study.”

⁵⁴ Zastrow, *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare. Empowering People*.

⁵⁵ Divya Bhanot et al., “Stigma and Discrimination During COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Frontiers in Public Health* 8 (January 12, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.577018>.

⁵⁶ Bhanot et al., “Stigma and Discrimination During COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁵⁷ I. Ullah et al., “Myths and Conspiracy Theories on Vaccines and COVID-19: Potential Effect on Global Vaccine Refusals,” *Vacunas* 22, no. 2 (May 2021): 93–97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vacun.2021.01.001>.

⁵⁸ Bhanot et al., “Stigma and Discrimination During COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁵⁹ Bhanot et al., “Stigma and Discrimination During COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁶⁰ Ullah et al., “Myths and Conspiracy Theories on Vaccines and COVID-19: Potential Effect on Global Vaccine Refusals”; Bhanot et al., “Stigma and Discrimination During COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁶¹ Tushar Saha, Prakash Khadka, and Shyamal C Das, “Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizer – Composition, Proper Use and Precautions,” *Germes* 11, no. 3 (September 2021): 408–17, <https://doi.org/10.18683/germes.2021.1278>.

⁶² Ullah et al., “Myths and Conspiracy Theories on Vaccines and COVID-19: Potential Effect on Global Vaccine Refusals.”

Therefore, social workers needed to tailor-make some education to address stigma states. Stigma confounds and makes any interventions to tackle the disease fail flat.⁶³ This is because of the fear that overwhelms people as they attempt to fight the disease. Stigma engulfs people in a dilemma, and despite having the right information, they find it difficult to advance and process the truth. It was, therefore, stifling and created ambiguity and inconsistencies on the path to assuming succinct knowledge about handling the disease.

Discussion Summary and Implications for Social Work

Unequivocally, the social work constellation of skills places it in an astute position to intervene to address various gaps during the epoch of coronavirus. This is why it is referred to as a profession of many faces. It was important to help victims of gender-based violence heal and recover, as well as link them to places of safety. Its advocacy role required it to launch community education to correct the mythical messages accompanying the disease. This played a pivotal role in de-stigmatising the disease. Further, its advocacy role was critical in offering various psychosocial support, such as advocating for various philanthropic organisations to extend their helping hand to meet various needs, with food being the most important.

Inopportunately, the impact of coronavirus had an impoverishing effect. Importantly, social workers, especially those working with NGOs, were on the frontline to help distribute food handouts to hungry citizens rendered indigents by the impact of the lockdown. As community agents, social workers urged and persuaded communities to be involved in offering community care to those who were infected by the coronavirus. Social workers needed to be involved when the government lacked administrative personnel for tasks such as caring for distressed members of society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper calls upon the government of South Africa, in cohort with the NGOs and the philanthropic bodies, to collaboratively avail adequate resources of all kinds to empower social workers in their social welfare interventions to face off pandemics such as coronavirus, as well as any other pandemic that may come in the future. Further, the government must leverage the training of social workers and fill the country's social work gaps. It would also be important that the government, through the Department of Social Development, facilitate the training of community home-based care volunteers by social workers and nurses to assist in caring for sick people at home when the health facilities are overwhelmed. Societies are implored to apply the ethos of Ubuntu to strengthen their caregiving norms and spirit.

CONCLUSION

The role of social workers in the fight against pandemics such as coronavirus through facilitating the requisite psychosocial empowerment of neediest societies cannot be overemphasized in South Africa and other countries that were hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. While the advent of coronavirus exposed the fact that South Africa does not have adequate numbers of social services professionals, such as social workers, the government, NGOs, and other pandemic-friendly philanthropic bodies should move in to fund more training for social workers. Social workers' home visits and management of various psychosocial interventions for those who caught the disease were commendable and mitigated its effects to some extent.

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