

Social Work and COVID-19 Pandemic: An Action Call

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Unless we expedite action to respond to the world's major challenges, our profession could continue to be called to question, first, by critics, citizens, and then our client-systems and ultimately ourselves- Solomon Amadasun

Abstract

The social work profession, more than any other, is most hurt by the rampaging corona virus (aka, COVID-19) pandemic given the scourge's pernicious impact on society's underserved and undervalued populations. More so, the pandemic has undermined the profession's historical value commitment to social justice and human rights while overturning our insistence on the importance of human relationships. The purpose of this essay is to explicate the nexus between social work and COVID-19 pandemic. While noting the deafening silence of the profession in the global discourse of the pandemic, it advocates for the urgency of our response if our profession is to attain significant public value amid the current loss of lives and threats to human rights. Strategies for our professional action, in curtailing the effect of the contagion, are laid out.

Keywords : public health challenge, COVID-19, professional action, global pandemic, human relationship, social work

Introduction

Although some are in denial (regrettably so, arising from misinformation), the vast majority of humanity are imbued in utter shock and fear as to how a singular event could trigger a complete halt in human affairs. Today, the coronavirus (aka, COVID-19) pandemic- which was first reported in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province of China- has successfully plummeted global economy, disrupted global social events, as well as caused the death of tens of thousands of people while leaving millions infected and vulnerable. Among those disproportionately affected are society's often marginalized and excluded populations (i.e., older adults, people with developmental impairments, including those with weak immune systems as well as the poor). With promulgation of social distancing and self-isolation among many governments around the world, concerns have been raised about the prospects of increased human rights violations especially among States which, prior to the pandemic, had a proclivity for gross rights infringements (Sandhu, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Since such restrictions, as has been purported, are meant to contain the spread of the virus, caution should be exercised in its enforcement if social disruptions or anarchy is to be avoided. For instance, the oil-rich city of Warri in Nigeria's Niger-Delta region was on the verge of turmoil following reports of the killing of a citizen by security officials (Agence France-Presse, 2020). These events, taken together, poses legitimate concerns to the social work profession. Alternatively, as a practice-

based profession, social work has a crucial role to play given its stated goal of (1) advancing social cohesion and stability, (2) promoting social change and development through the liberation and empowerment of people, and (3) restoring social functioning while enforcing respect for the sanctity of life, drawing on ideals of social justice and human dignity (Amadasun, 2020). Although the international professional body have drawn connections between the profession and the global pandemic (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020), there are minute evidence to suggest how professionals (researchers, educators, and practitioners) have grasped such interplay given the scant discourses and research in the professional literature. To bolster interrogations, this paper aims to expand on the IFSW's statements by highlighting the interlock between COVID-19 and social work in hope that such description will goad professionals' to research action in the coming weeks.

Social Work and COVID -19: The Nexus

Recounting our professional values (service, human rights and social justice, dignity and worth of people, privacy and confidentiality, and importance of human relationships, and integrity) which COVID-19 has undermined and in some instances overturned, it has become increasingly notable that if any profession is most hurt by the pandemic, it is the social work profession. To this end, professionals must be at the frontline of not only responding to the pandemic but also amplifying our action if we are to be taken seriously by critics and citizens alike. Starkly, social work is under threat today because the value of social justice is challenged by the deleterious impact of the pandemic on powerless groups. More so, the value of human dignity tanks in the face of resource and economic deprivation among many citizens who are unable to gain access to medical care. Our creed to ensure human rights tenets appears to teeter on the brink of defect in the high of flagrant human rights violations. As for privacy, my imagination is how do we interface with and support people whose new state is not of their own making, in which case, their access to services and programmes have been undeniably constricted? Pertaining to service, this reflects an ethical obligation to protect the general well-being of society (National Association of Social Workers, 2008), yet society is currently under threat of hysteria and social service denial, especially for those undergoing traumatic situations. Pointedly, responding to social problems emanating from public social and healthcare challenges is the *raison d'être* of the social work profession, and addressing COVID-19 in terms of its grievous fallout on social conditions as a whole and in the lives of individuals, families and households, groups, and communities in specific is a professional imperative.

Our Ideal Response

Given the rampaging onslaught of the pandemic on individuals and families, it is most probable that our response would be within healthcare institutions in urban, suburban, and rural locations,

but also within economically-deprived households with no or inadequate medical insurance or knowledge of how to secure care. In this regard, social workers could assume the role of educator, counsellor, and referral, linking care-users to care-givers. Our counselling intervention should draw on resiliency- and relationship-building strategies, as well as strengths-based practice combined with a blend of spirituality since many families and individuals- especially older adults- find comforts from these dimensions.

Since organizations provide platforms for response and since communities are at the receiving end of the pandemic's effects, social workers response are badly needed in the social policy practice. One way practitioners can get their voices heard and impact felt in the policy arena is through advocacy. By engaging in social policy advocacy and demanding for social protection for society's marginal populations, we will be well able to make significant contribution to cushioning the fallout of the global pandemic. Returning to social protection, social workers could advocate for ad-hoc policy response, as well as long-term policy option. Ad-hoc policy action would connote advocating for the provision of cash transfers or in-kind services (e.g. food aid, medical supplies etc.) to the most economically deprived households or groups. However, since social workers recognized that social welfare services are not substitute for sustainable economic development (Amadasun, 2020; Midgley & Conley, 2010), it is suggested that long-term policy goal be set in motion. This could be concretized through canvassing for the provision of durable safety nets in the form of investments in pivotal infrastructure such as health and social care facilities, housing, including afforestation or the preservation of the natural environment among others.

At the general societal level, social workers are duty-bound to prevent social disruptions arising from outlandish conspiratorial claims, rumour and fear mongering, and/or outright neglect by the authorities. Again, drawing on our educator role could prove instrumental in keeping the masses informed about the true state of affairs regarding coronavirus and such statement or information should be framed around hope, resilience, and the resolve of the human spirit to surmount any impediments.

Finally, social work educators- as conveyors of professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (Council on Social Work Education, 2008)- are professionally bound to expedite action to conducting and disseminating research about (1) social workers response to protecting their clients-systems or service-users from the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) the coping strategies of service-users (for instance of older adults, women, resource-deprived households) amid the inaccessibility to medical care in most developing regions around the world, and (3) our interventions to families undergoing loss- which could be of relatives, parents or any other loved ones or of socioeconomic or material loss- due to the pandemic, by engaging in research, the profession would be creating a vast reservoir of literature that could be fundamental (directly or suggestively) in dealing with future challenges.

Concluding Remarks

Still dominating the headlines given its extensive import, it is no longer news that COVID-19 global pandemic has sent many into frenzy, excruciating pains, hardships, and death. Although equipped with historical legacies and top-notch values, the social work profession as a whole, and our professional literature has been engulfed with unusual grave-like quiet amid the grievous pandemic. Unless we draw connections about our profession and the raging global pandemic, as well as amplify our professional action in the face of the current public health challenges, our profession may continue to be accorded a second fiddle status, or brusquely have its relevance called to question. Consequently, in order to prevent this from happening, it is imperative that we act swiftly. This essay has delineate our potential responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to set the stage for further interrogation and to restates the fact that social work professionals are in a unique position to address the phenomenon. Lastly, I will conclude on a reassuring note by reminding us all that throughout recorded history, the tenacity of the human spirit in our collective resolve for solidarity and survival has and will always overcome and outlast any plagues or pandemics or viruses (which ever name they go by) and COVID-19 cannot be an exception.

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