Indigenised approaches to addressing elder abuse in Uganda

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Abstract

Summary: The social gerontological field has long called for a culturally appropriate framework to understand, prevent, and respond to elder abuse in the Global South. This emphasis is, in part, based on the notion that elder abuse is a cultural and structural concern that cannot be effectively addressed using mainstream social work approaches. Therefore, indigenised approaches are preferred while tackling cultural and structural forms of elder abuse. However, despite several attempts, there is limited research on indigenised approaches and practices within the gerontological social work field. Therefore, we investigated how social work could promote indigenised approaches to better address elder abuse. We explored this through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 21 social workers.

Findings: Elder abuse is a cultural and structural social problem that requires family- and community-centred approaches premised on the Indigenous values of togetherness, reciprocity, solidarity, responsibility and love for humanity. These approaches must be embedded in people’s cultures and knowledge to address the social structural changes that have contributed to elder abuse in the Global South.

Applications: Social workers should strengthen family and community support to achieve social capital and inclusion for older people. This will not only enable families and communities to safeguard their older members, but also enhance community-based solutions to address elder abuse. Social work educators should engage in robust and rigorous research and curriculum change for social work education to enable the integration of post-colonial theories and approaches into social work training.

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Introduction

Elder abuse has been defined as ‘a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person’ (World Health Organization [WHO], 2008). It is associated with disabilities, and psychological, physical and biological consequences (Dong & Simon, 2013; Stockl & Penhale, 2014). The social gerontological field has long called for a culturally appropriate framework to understand, prevent and respond to elder abuse (Dong, 2012; Phelan, 2013; Wamara et al., 2021). This emphasis is, in part, based on the notion that elder abuse is a cultural and structural phenomenon that requires locally appropriate and relevant practice approaches (King, 2008). This stems from the cultural diversity that characterises elder abuse. Phelan (2013) provides a convincing observation that elder abuse is a culturally defined phenomenon that depicts differences between acceptable and unacceptable interpersonal behaviours that also vary across cultures. This argument has motivated some writers to proffer indigenised approaches, arguing that they have the potential to address elder abuse in different contexts (Dong, 2012). In this regard, King (2008) advances the need for an indigenised epistemological base to generate appropriate, sustainable and practical solutions to ageing concerns in the ever-changing cultural context of the Global South.

In gerontological social work, the quest for indigenised social work approaches to improve older people’s welfare outcomes is precipitated by inadequate resources for the provision of social welfare services in the Global South (Wamara, 2021). The ministries of social welfare mandated to improve the welfare of vulnerable groups are usually under-resourced (Dhemba, 2014), which compromises their capacity to respond effectively to their social problems. Therefore, adopting indigenised approaches would assuage the pressure put on the already scarce government resources because most indigenised practices depend on local knowledge and resources. A huge debate about the relevance of social work in tackling local problems in Africa has ensued. It is claimed that social work in Africa in its current form cannot address the root causes of social problems such as poverty, inequality, violence and human rights abuse (Hart, 2021; Wamara et al., 2022). This spawns from the incongruity of mainstream social work approaches and the local context. Therefore, social work with its mainstream approaches of psychotherapy and casework is considered incapable of addressing social problems of a cultural and structural nature like elder abuse, hence warranting the call for culturally appropriate interventions.

The increasing number of older people in the Global South culminated in limited access to basic social services for older people, calls for indigenised social work to fully understand the context of older people (Tam & Yap, 2017). In 2015, 62% of the 868 million people aged 60 years and older were living in the Global South, and this
percentage was predicted to increase to 80% by 2050 (HelpAge International, 2015). The situation is no different in Uganda, whose ageing population has been progressively increasing, from 1.1 million (>60 years) in 2002 to 1.43 million in 2014, and is projected to increase to 5.5 million in 2050 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2017). Given that life expectancies are rising amidst shrinking traditional care and support for older people, elder abuse increases as the older population grows globally (Mouton & Southerland, 2017). According to a WHO (2017) study held in 28 countries, 15.7% of people aged 60 years and over had experienced abuse. Studies in different countries report similar high and worrying figures. For instance, 64% of the institutional staff working with older people in South Africa admitted to elder abuse (Kotzé, 2018), and in Kenya, 81.1% of older people had experienced some form of abuse (Lydiah Kabole et al., 2013).

In Uganda, older people are grossly abused through witchcraft accusations, asset stripping, rape, discrimination, assault, theft and coercion to sign agreements to legalise land sales (Wamara & Carvalho, 2019; Wamara, 2021). Despite various calls to adopt culturally relevant practices to end these abuses, social work in Uganda still implements therapeutic, remedial and curative approaches that merely reduce trauma and factors related to poverty and vulnerability. While this could be attributed to Uganda’s colonial past, it is also because there is little empirical evidence on how social work can indigenise its interventions against elder abuse. Hence, the fundamental purpose of this study is to explore how social work can adopt indigenised approaches to address elder abuse.

**Indigenised social work: The quest for locally appropriate and relevant practice**

Indigenised social work challenges that Western social work is less relevant in the Global South because of its incompatibility with local realities (Mupedziswa, 2001; Wamara et al., 2022). It also contends that mainstream social work models are usually applied to individuals and families, yet most social problems in the Global South tend to be structural and affect the whole society. Given such shortcomings, indigenised social work advances that social theories, values and practices must radiate from local cultures, observe local customs and traditions, be understood from local philosophies, cultural perspectives, and remain locally appropriate (Gray et al., 2008; Hart, 2021). Further, social work knowledge should reflect local behaviours and practices, be interpreted within a local frame of reference and thus, be locally relevant; it should address culturally relevant and context-specific problems (Gray et al., 2008; Hart, 2021). More importantly, indigenised social work argues that social work is a contingent activity, dependent upon the context from which it emerges and engages (Harris, 2008). This implies that maintaining social work’s current form in the Global South defeats this understanding. Hence, social work should be a product of the local culture, history, values and developmental aspects such as urbanisation and industrialisation. Indigenised social work typically addresses culturally relevant and context-specific problems.

Moreover, indigenised social work regards social work as a western intervention that silences marginal voices and imports western thinking from industrialised and powerful nations like the UK and the USA to the Global South (Gray et al., 2008). It is spread
through colonisation, regionalisation, economic blocks and international agencies that aim to promote professional imperialism (Gray & Webb, 2008). Therefore, indigenised social work challenges this professional imperialism, construing it as being insensitive to the cultural value as it disregards social work’s natural duty of maintaining local cultural diversity. It also argues that universalising social work practices suffocate the local people and their collective cultures, and determines the nature and direction of their social work (Gray & Webb, 2008). More significantly, a core aim of indigenised social work is to challenge marginalisation of Indigenous People’s philosophies, values, theories and practices resulting from the colonial oppression (Hart, 2021).

Therefore, indigenised approaches are practices, strategies and processes that arise from the traditions, values, philosophies and local problem-solving practices of Indigenous people. There is a tendency to understand Indigenous people from the colonial perspective which associates them with the First Nations as the Aboriginals of Australia or the Indigenous groups of Canada or the Sámi people in the Nordic countries (Twikirize et al., 2019). Such understanding excludes the indigenous culture and values of the Indigenous people of Africa and Asia who have undergone colonisation. The term ‘indigenous’ predates colonialism (Mapara, 2017). Therefore, from the African perspective, all problem-solving approaches and processes based on philosophies that concentrate on life in natural environment, relationships, and are guided by values of reciprocity, communalism and interdependence are indigenised approaches (Hart, 2021).

**Theoretical consideration**

While there is no single theory that can cogently explain the occurrences of elder abuse, this study capitalises on modernisation to explain the growing cases of elder abuse in Uganda. The theory is premised on the awareness that Uganda is experiencing significant social structural changes like industrialisation, urbanisation, family disintegration, migration and population growth, which makes elder abuse an unavoidable consequence (UBOS, 2017). Moreover, one study in Uganda confirmed that elder abuse never existed in pre-modern Uganda, and further indicates that there is no local term for elder abuse throughout the country (Wamara et al., 2021). This stems from the traditional governance of communities in Uganda, where the oldest age grade was at the helm of affairs. The more one aged, the more authority and power would acquire in the community. Their mature age was associated with knowledge and wisdom, and being in communion with the ancestors and Gods, for which they were respected and revered (Harlacher et al., 2006).

Modernisation, as a theory, argues that as societies transform into modern and industrial societies, they encounter changes in social functions and processes that affect older people’s social status and power, leading to elder abuse (Bengtson & DeLiema, 2016). Studies have linked modernisation to the weakening of the informal social support systems, such as the extended family, kinship network and mutual aid communities through which the older people were cared for and protected (Aboderin, 2004; Wamara et al., 2021). This is because modernisation through its characteristics of individualism, materialism and commercialism views collective ethics, such as reciprocity,
togetherness and interdependence as inimical to economic development. Additionally, migration has separated families, leaving older people in villages without care and support, resulting in their isolation and abuse (Wamara, 2021). In pre-modern Uganda, family was a form of social insurance provided through the extended family and kinship system. It supported and cared for older people, and guaranteed them daily interactions because of the large number of familial and social relations (Mouton & Southerland, 2017). However, with individuals adopting modern values, family members are no longer obligated to care for the older generation and are instead concerned about their own needs and those of their immediate families (Aboderin, 2004; Bengtson & DeLiema, 2016).

While we cannot underestimate the role of modernisation in enhancing longevity through education and technological advancement, it is important to note that modernisation has eroded the collective values, power and status of older people. With modernisation, traditional care and social support structures are under increasing strain. To that end, elder abuse is a modern social problem, and it is unfortunate that older people are paying a heavy price. This study’s central argument is that gerontological social work in Uganda should be underwritten by indigenised approaches of intervention to address elder abuse.

Methods

This study answers how social work practice can develop indigenised social work strategies to address elder abuse. This question is driven by the conceptual thinking that gerontological social work in Uganda needs to develop context-specific practices consistent with the local realities if it is to address elder abuse. This is yet to be achieved despite the various appeals for this perspective in the international social work literature. Considering the broad, multi-directional nature of this study’s research question, a qualitative research tradition was adopted to provide an in-depth account of social workers’ opinions and experiences about the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore social workers’ perspectives from the five districts of Hoima, Gulu, Luwero, Wakiso and Jinja on how social work can promote Indigenous approaches. These districts were considered for the study due to the development activities and urbanisation, which were presumed to accelerate marginalisation and vulnerability among older people.

Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The principal researcher recruited the participants through district community development officers (DCDOs) and directors of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The DCDOs and directors contacted the potential respondents on the principal investigator’s behalf to participate in the study. The principal investigator was provided with the prospective participants’ names and contact information. To ensure that interviews were productive, individuals with training and at least a bachelor’s degree in social work were considered. Experience in
working directly with older people, while perhaps of interest, was not ground for inclusion since Indigenous perspectives are recent in most social work education programmes in Uganda (Twikirize et al., 2019). Twenty-one social workers were interviewed between March and September of 2020. The study subscribed to this threshold because responses significantly turned repetitive from the 21st participant. Over half \((n = 11)\) of the respondents were women \((52.4\%)\), and \(38\% \,(n = 8)\) were employed by the government. Seven social workers had more than 12 years of experience working with older people. Nine of the social workers had between 5 and 10 years of experience, and five of them had less than 5 years of experience.

Data collection methods

Data were mainly collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, because it was considered flexible as the researcher could pose questions in no set order, and omit or change some questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It also provided room for the researcher to reformulate the questions where necessary, and decreased the risk of missing important topics related to the study. The interviews, conducted in English by a principal researcher, were supported by a semi-structured interview guide containing the questions. Nineteen participants favoured face-to-face interviews, while three preferred telephonic interviews because of the lockdown that was imposed by the Ugandan government to prevent the further spread of coronavirus disease 2019. The key questions included the approaches they considered indigenised, how such approaches could address elder abuse, and how social work can mainstream Indigenous approaches to end elder abuse. All participants were interviewed once, and each interview lasted between one to one-and-a-half hours.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the collected data and obtain clear and specific answers to the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, and then translated and transcribed. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps. In Step 1 \((data\,familiarisation)\), the researcher read transcripts and field notes repeatedly for data familiarisation. Step 2 \((generation\,of\,initial\,codes)\) involved the investigator following an inductive approach to develop the initial codes using a line-by-line approach. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to organize raw data into first-order categories, relevant to the study aim. In Step 3 \((search\,for\,themes)\), the researcher proceeded to map, group and sort the first-order categories to develop second-order themes (higher-order patterns). At this stage, it became clear that participants had highlighted the central role of the family and social networks in addressing elder abuse; thus, these were used as a framework for structuring the findings. In Step 4 \((review\,of\,themes)\), the authors noticed additional aspects like the need for research and social work education curriculum change. Step 5 \((defining\,and\,naming\,of\,themes)\) included placing themes into different
taxonomies, naming and illustrating them with detailed extracts from the dataset leading to three themes: (1) strengthening family and community support, (2) establishment of social networks and (3) research and curriculum change for social work education were included in the findings. All authors reflected on the findings to understand and facilitate discussion. Step 6 (report writing) involved the authors reading and reflecting on the findings to facilitate the writing of the discussion section.

Ethical considerations

The study provided an information sheet to all the participants stating the objectives of the study, research procedures, participant selection procedures, duration of the interviews, and possible risks and benefits. Participants were requested to provide their signatures if they agreed to participate in the study. The researcher also emphasised the right to refuse or withdraw from the study, and that the withdrawal would not result in loss of benefits for the participants. Furthermore, the researcher emphasised the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Finally, all data were securely stored in line with the Ugandan and Swedish data protection laws.

Results

Study participants reported several strategies that social work could undertake to promote Indigenous approaches to address the rising cases of elder abuse in the Global South. Participants quotations, provided to illustrate the voices of social workers on indigenised approaches to addressing elder abuse, are identified by role and interview number.

Strengthening family and community support

Most study participants \((n = 17)\) discussed the family’s importance in providing care and oversight to older people. They revealed that, for social work to adopt Indigenous approaches, they needed to first appreciate the family’s role. Reflecting on the current social work in Uganda, participants highlighted that the social workers relied on person-centred approaches with older people, without working with the family. One social worker remarked:

Social work needs to discard casework approaches and work more with the family. In Africa, the family has a responsibility to look after older people. The more social work strengthens the family, the more older people will be cared for. (Social Worker 2)

The majority of the participants \((n = 13)\) castigated the criminal justice system, highlighting that it weakened family solidarity as family members did not forgive each other so easily. A participant stated that ‘the criminal justice system sent perpetrators to prison which culminated in other social problems such as neglect of older people and family divisions’ (Social Worker 6). Eleven participants preferred family-based mediation
approaches to settle elder abuse cases without compromising the safety and rights of older people.

Social workers perceived family and community-based indigenised approaches as a better alternative to person-centred approaches: ‘I feel indigenised practices that bring all members of the family together are essential in addressing elder abuse’ (Social Worker 7 [male]). A model they mentioned was establishing a collective family fund to cater to the welfare of older people. One social worker noted:

Uganda has a weak social protection system; social workers can work with families to start a small family collective fund that can be used to cater to the needs of older people. (Social Worker 15)

Participants agreed that it was possible to establish small family funds in the Global South due to the collective values that most indigenised communities upheld. They explained that family members would willingly contribute to such funds as long as they were assured of proper financial management because of the belief that such support is reciprocal and a future social security, expressed as: ‘everyone is under the obligation to provide for family members. If you do not help your family members, then you will never be helped in times of need’ (Social Worker 8). Participants believed that older people were being neglected because most families lacked individuals or professionals to coordinate family members to address it, a role they advised social workers to perform by working as brokers of families. One participant indicated:

My experience as a Probation and Social Welfare Officer shows that families lack people within themselves to coordinate taking care of older people. Few families in this district have clan leaders, so social workers need to mobilise family members to take care of older people. (Social Worker 2)

There was consensus among participants that while families were disintegrating, the collective values were still intact, which they believed social workers could use to develop indigenised models to free older people from abuse and neglect.

Some participants further suggested that social workers should support communities to develop community charters with clear roles and responsibilities in maintaining the welfare of the older people in the community. One social worker suggested that the ‘majority of our older people live in rural areas, and I think the most appropriate indigenised approaches social workers can adopt is supporting communities to develop community charters that spell out individual roles and responsibilities’ (Social Worker 16). Another participant highlighted the following:

Social work needs to support communities to build their own charters to make communities more responsive to the needs and plight of disadvantaged groups. With a large number of older people living in rural communities, community charters can be a good tool for making communities active. (Social Worker 5)
Participants revealed that, although there were laws that guided the roles of local community leaders, the same laws did not allot any responsibilities to the community. They felt that community charters would contain some commitments produced by the people and for the people, and would provide space to the community to reflect on their roles and determine how best to improve the well-being of older people in the community using local resources. They emphasised that community charters would not only build supportive communities that are readily available to safeguard the rights of older people, but also create inclusive communities where everybody’s worth is acknowledged. It was also emphasised that community charters would define the role of communities in protecting older people, as expressed by a participant:

People are talking about demographic ageing, [and] we have seen government introduce many interventions to deal with old age poverty, but no one is asking how prepared communities are in dealing with ageing challenges. I suggest that social workers introduce community charters to define community roles in solving elder abuse. (Social Worker 11)

Participants revealed that community charters were in line with traditional values of solidarity, compassion and brotherly and sisterly concern, which guided how vulnerable and weak people were cared for and protected. There was a strong belief among participants that, if communities were organised on such Indigenous values, communities would not only voice out their issues, but would also organise themselves and deal with the problem of elder abuse.

Moreover, the study participants mentioned the concept of neighbourhood watch groups. They suggested that social workers create community-based structures that can monitor and report abuse. Participants felt that abuse was an underreported social problem because there was no one to do so, as expressed by one social worker:

Elder abuse is not reported frequently, yet it is happening every day. Social workers can form and empower community-based structures, like community elder abuse monitors, to report elder abuse and sensitise communities about the rights of older people. (Social Worker 4)

Closely related, participants emphasised the importance of building an active neighbourhood. A participant remarked that:

Social workers need to recognise the need for an active and watchful neighbourhood to provide oversight for the older people in the community. Older people are being abused today because communities are complacent about the welfare of older people. (Social Worker 8)

Participants mentioned that social workers can rely on the local cultural values that emphasise brotherly and sisterly concern for everybody, to promote active and watchful neighbourhoods.
Establishment of social networks

Throughout the interviews, most participants \((n = 16)\) suggested the need to establish social networks that they perceived to be important to promote indigenised social work. According to the participants, social networks would enhance social capital and inclusion, which they believed was important to address elder abuse. Mutual aid groups for older people were the most frequently mentioned. Emphasising the role of mutual aid groups, participants indicated that supporting older people to form mutual aid groups would provide platforms for older people to meet regularly and discuss how best to address their own problems. Mutual aid groups were also perceived as a means of self-help and attaining self-reliance, as group members would engage in productive activities such as tailoring, rearing animals, and craftwork, such as making beads, mats, local musical instruments, bowls, and arrows. Some participants associated mutual aid groups with numerical strength that could give older people voices to speak against their abuse. While reflecting on mutual aid groups, participants elaborated on how mutual aid groups intersected with the traditional values of solidarity and collectivity; mutual aid groups support the African value of living together and working together, and making them indigenous.

Participants further mentioned the need to establish community centres for older people, which they perceived to be indigenised and in line with their traditional values of open sharing, peer learning and mutual dependence. They underlined the community centres as contextually appropriate, because the local cultures support community living and ageing. Community centres would bring older people together and give them a supportive social environment. Through this indigenised approach, participants also believed that community centres would not only provide older people with a sense of belonging, but also address the problem of isolation and loneliness. Participants justified the need for community centres by explaining that, as people get older, they lose contact with their friends. ‘Older people have many friends, but due to life changes that reduce their physical mobility, they lose contact. Thus, social workers could advocate for community centres to bring them closer’ (Social Worker 12). Community centres were further presented as learning centres for older people that could help them become aware of their rights and other available services. One social worker stressed that ‘older people in community centres can learn about government programmes and their rights and how to protect and prevent abuse’ (Social Worker 9). It was also revealed that community centres would enhance empowerment and mutual decision among older people to challenge institutions and policies that undermine their rights. Participants further mentioned older people’s associations and networks. Social workers revealed that older people in their areas lacked political constituency to get their issues to the national stage because they lacked a collective voice. They felt that organising older people in associations would provide them with the numerical strength to demand better protection from the government.

Research and curriculum change for social work education

Many participants indicated the urgent need for social workers to undertake rigorous and robust research to develop concepts, theories, methods and models appropriate to the
local conditions and in line with people’s traditions. It was believed that social workers had not yet embraced indigenised approaches, methods and models, because of the lack of clarity on what indigenised social work entailed. One participant remarked:

We need to first do research and document Indigenous concepts and approaches that social work can apply in working with older people. It is not clear even to me what indigenised approaches encompass. We need research for better knowledge. (Social Worker 7)

Research into Indigenous theories and approaches was presented as the first step in indigenising social work with older people. One participant highlighted that social workers find it difficult to convince the government and donors to fund indigenised interventions without concrete information on Indigenous practices. According to the participants, research would influence and facilitate the process of indigenising service delivery policies for older people.

The majority of the participants (n = 11) hinted at a curriculum change to include Indigenous and postcolonial theories in social work education. Social workers stressed that indigenised social work was not being emphasised in the way psychological and casework methods were being emphasised in social work education. A participant suggested:

Universities and social work institutes in this country need to amend the social work training curriculum to decolonise social work, and through that social work with older people will equally be indigenised. Current social work education emphasises a lot of Western theories, methods, and skills. (Social Worker 12 [male])

By decolonizing social work education, participants believed that social workers would appreciate post-colonial theories, methods and models, and put them in practice after their social work education.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to explore how social work could adopt indigenised approaches to better address elder abuse in Uganda. The results are underpinned by the awareness that modernisation influenced changes in family support that resulted in elder abuse. Social workers in the study recognised and underlined the importance of family and social networks in the care and protection of older people. They perceived family centred approaches as a critical practice that social work can adopt to tackle elder abuse. This is not new in social work research, as several articles have highlighted the importance of family centred approaches in facilitating better welfare outcomes for vulnerable groups (Scharlach & Lehning, 2013; van Dijk et al., 2014). As suggested by the American Association of Retired Persons (2012), family centred approaches are not only indigenised interventions, but also meaningfully involve older people, their families, communities and professionals in the provision of locally appropriate services.
When comparing these findings with the results of other studies in sub-Saharan Africa, elder abuse is regarded as a cultural and structural social problem (Wamara et al., 2021). In this study, the indigenised approaches proposed to tackle elder abuse are cultural and structure-based solutions. Participants were concerned with revamping the role of the family and social network systems that they believed had been weakened by modernisation. The need for cultural and structural solutions to ageing challenges is well-articulated in the writings of Kotzé (2018) and Wamara (2021), who identify elder abuse as a structural and cultural issue that necessitates culturally appropriate interventions.

While approaches such as mutual aid, community information centres, and community elder abuse monitors can be contained in the conventional approaches of social work, they are also culturally appropriate and relevant because they reflect Indigenous values and principles that characterise the helping philosophy in Uganda. However, what makes these approaches different from the conventional and modernist approaches is that they define the helping philosophy as being community-based, collective, mutual, and rendered to uphold humanity. Additionally, in the quest for Indigenous or indigenised approaches, it is not easy to discard conventional approaches given that almost all social workers in Uganda are employed by formal organizations. Critically, 70% of the social workers in Uganda are employed by NGOs whose funding is external which influences the social work practices (Twikirize et al., 2019).

The present findings reveal that the formation of mutual aid groups for older people not only accelerates indigenised social work practice, but also addresses elder abuse. Examples of mutual aid groups as an indigenised practice abound in the gerontological literature (Webkamigad et al., 2020). Moreover, mutual aid groups and self-help groups empower disadvantaged groups to fight for their justice and provide material and emotional support (Lee & Swenson, 2005). From the present results, participants highlighted that mutual aid and self-help groups are underpinned by Indigenous values such as social solidarity and reciprocity. In terms of culture, social solidarity and reciprocity are the lenses through which people acknowledge each other’s common humanity (Twikirize et al., 2019). Another study posits that the values that underpin mutual aid assist older people in meeting and pooling resources to enhance self-reliance and self-sufficiency (Gottlieb, 2010).

According to the study participants, building resilient ageing-friendly communities through community charters and community information centres would promote indigenised social work and tackle elder abuse. The role of active and able communities in the fight against elder abuse is well-expounded in the gerontological social work literature (Webkamigad et al., 2020). There is agreement between the present study findings and the existing literature on the need for resilient communities to address ageing challenges caused by the changing world (Tam & Yap, 2017). Studies have shown that, due to the rapidly globalising world coupled with dwindling state resources, communities have become a viable option for older people. Other studies have also reported the creation of ageing-friendly communities. For instance, Scharlach and Lehning (2013) have shown that building communities through indigenised models, such as the formation of community ambassadors, creation of village models, and communities for all ages, can foster social inclusion and capital that can result in local networks of cooperation.
and synergy among older people. The emphasis on creating ageing-friendly communities might have resulted from the local cultures in all parts of Uganda that emphasise communal solidarity to achieve human welfare for all.

Literature has highlighted curriculum change, theory development, change in methods of teaching social work, and redefining the focus, knowledge and value bases of social work practice as a critical step in the indigenisation process (Okoye, 2014). In this study, the participants felt that post-colonial theories in social work education would motivate students to adopt indigenised approaches to respond to local challenges. The results coincide with Cheung and Liu’s (2004) five-step approach of promoting indigenised social work in the Global South, which includes (i) developing an Indigenous foundation with a philosophical basis, theories, working principles, and approaches in social work training; (ii) developing strategies that take into consideration the social structures and local development; (iii) redefining social work knowledge and value bases of social work practice, including developing Indigenous concepts and methods; (iv) addressing the historical and cultural experiences and realities of Indigenous people and (v) emphasising community voice and resources in the provision of social services. In this study, participants conceded that modern and Western curricula that ignored collective ethics and principles would not effectively address elder abuse.

From the findings, the study participants were optimistic that indigenised approaches would address elder abuse in the country. Many expressed that it was long overdue for social work to employ indigenised approaches. This predisposition is not new in gerontological research. Lindeman et al. (2017) proposed the integration of cultural values, concepts and processes in ageing programmes and interventions. A similar study among Indigenous older people also found that preservation of cultural values in health and wellness-based approaches was a critical element in the well-being of older people (Webkamigad et al., 2020). This study stressed the importance of local Indigenous perspectives in enhancing culturally relevant ageing social services. This is also in agreement with the present study findings which emphasise that social work approaches with older people should be based on people’s values and beliefs. The values highlighted included togetherness, reciprocity, solidarity and love for humanity as critical in the care of older people.

Findings on the need to form associations and social support networks for older people corroborate with those of existing literature (Emlet & Moceri, 2012). For instance, forming older people’s associations and social support networks was reported to be a significant step in improving the well-being of older people and indigenizing activities for older people (Webkamigad et al., 2020). The WHO (2007) correlated social participation and social support networks with better well-being and respect for older people. This implies that older people are a socially active group. While participants emphasised community participation, political participation for older people was not mentioned. This is somewhat conflicting with the assertions of Vincent et al. (2001), who depict older people as a political group. This could have resulted from the tendency to alienate social work from politics.

In a previous study, the concept of a neighbour watch as an indigenised strategy was established and considered important in reducing crime against older people (van Dijk et al., 2014). Creating a supportive neighbourhood provides oversight for older people in the community. In a mixed research study, it was established that supportive
neighbourhoods enable older people to age in place successfully (van Dijk et al., 2014). In this study, building neighbourhood structures were associated with empowerment, whereby neighbourhood watch groups would inform older people and the public about the rights of older people. As suggested by several studies (Scharlach & Lehning, 2013), as the population of older people increases and different governments emphasise ageing in place, building supportive neighbourhoods for older people is increasingly significant.

The suggestion by participants about social workers working with families to establish a collective family fund is consistent with the findings of Meir and Ben-David (1993), who found that older people in Israel preferred the traditional collective family fund (traditional Bedouin support system) over formal social support systems. In the present study, the collective family fund was presented as a model through which older people left behind by family members would be supported. This finding conforms to the concept of direct reciprocal exchange, where family members are obliged to repay the support they received from their ageing parents (Akinrolie et al., 2020). Another familiar finding in the literature was the critique that criminal justice-based interventions undermined family ties and subsequently deprived older people of family and community support. The same critique is provided by Wamara and Carvalho (2019) who highlight that criminal justice-based interventions irritate family members who wish family matters to be managed in private to protect their image. The same authors suggest that when perpetrators are arrested and prosecuted, it affects family solidarity and deprives the victims of family and community support.

The findings depict an ethical dilemma in dealing with abuse cases. In the present study, participants preferred family-based mediation approaches to settle elder abuse. However, sometimes the same family members are the abusers. This implies that supporting family-based solutions would hinder older people from reporting abuse, which could be a reason why WHO (2017) reported that only one in 24 cases of elder abuse is reported. Therefore, the present findings suggest that social workers should engage in dialogue, negotiation, and debate with the families to recognise and promote just solutions that are based on the balanced views of both families and social workers.

**Limitations**

The study interviewed only 21 social workers, which makes it hard to generalise the conclusions of this study. Additionally, while it would have been important to capture some of the existing indigenised approaches with older people, this study focused only on the approaches that social work can adopt to indigenise social work against elder abuse because it was based on the notion that indigenisation is yet to be achieved in Uganda.

**Conclusion and implications**

As the world population increases amidst dwindling state resources for older people, indigenising social work services for older people has become the path forward. Social workers concerned with improving the social functioning of older people should take
centre stage in promoting indigenised approaches to serve the increasing number of older people. The findings of this study serve as a catalyst in the quest for indigenising social work for older people, not only in Uganda, but also in other countries. The study results suggest the need for social work to integrate culturally appropriate family and communal practices within mainstream social work practice. From the study findings, social workers need to work with families to establish collective family funds, facilitate communities to develop community charters and build supportive neighbourhoods. Moreover, social workers need to work with communities to establish community centres to inculcate the culture of living together and for each other. Finally, as a way of understanding indigenised social work and its approaches, and to hasten its applicability, social workers should engage in robust and rigorous research and curriculum change for social work education to enable the integration of post-colonial theories and approaches into social work training. The study further recommends that social work programmes for older people should be based on local cultural values for culturally relevant interventions to be realised. Most approaches stated in this study aimed to revitalise the traditional role of the family and community in the care of older people. This can be attained through interventions such as family group conferences, collective family funds, dialogue and negotiation with family and clan leaders on the welfare of older people.

**Ethics**

The study sought and received ethical approval from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology, reference number SS 5049 and Uppsala Regional Ethics Board in Sweden, reference number 2019–02916.

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