Unregulated Social Work Practice in Botswana: A Risk to Professional Integrity and Clients’ Welfare

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Authors’ contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KJ worked on developing the paper and making it academic, searched literature and developed and submitted manuscript. Author MT conceptualized the paper and shared experience from the field to see to it that the manuscript is created out of his ideas. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Through professional regulation, the aspirational goals of the Code of Ethics is to become a legal obligation with enforceable accountability for public protection. The professional regulation does not only protect the public but also gives integrity and respect to the profession. Social workers are licensed and they always know that malpractice may lead to losing their registration and licenses. The above is a reality in many countries, while in Botswana, after 74 years since the first social welfare officer started to work in the welfare department, the country has not yet established any regulatory body. Even though the regulation might not be a guarantee for ethical practice, but it is better to have a framework that can be used to regulate in terms of monitoring and evaluating practice. The education and practice of social work is unregulated and has left a vacuum where, anybody who government deems to be eligible can be employed as social worker. The above statement is buttressed by the Children’s Act, 2009 section 2, which says, ‘a social worker is a person who holds a qualification in social work, or such other qualification as may be prescribed, and is employed as such by government or such other institution as maybe approved under this Act.
and any other law’. This has brought challenges in dealing with values, principles and standards of social work, teaching and practice in Botswana [1]. The complaint is that social workers are unprofessional and not adhering to their own code of conduct. From the complaints, the assumption is that social work has a code of conduct as a helping profession. The reality is there is no code of conduct and there is no licensure in Botswana. This paper is a narrative of examples of cases where social workers were deemed not adhering to their professional ethics and not providing service to the most vulnerable at the time of need. These stories are used as a yardstick to argue for the establishment of an ACT of parliament which will establish the council of social work. The council will be a regulatory body of social work.

Keywords: Social work; ethics; council; regulation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Social work profession’s history in the world dates to the 1800’s in Buffalo, New York in the United States of America. The serious turn in the profession was realized in 1915 at an educational conference where Abram Flexner challenged the professional status of the field of social work [2]. Syers [2] summarizes the conclusions of Flexner on declaring social work as not qualifying to be classified as a profession. The above-mentioned author has indicated that Flexner, was convinced that social work lack in individual responsibility and educationally communicable techniques, regulatory body, body of knowledge and national association. This led to social workers of the time to introspect and review the programmes, of the profession and come up with frameworks that Flexner felt were not visible in the profession. The rise of books like social diagnosis by Mary Richmond and Jane Addams in 1920 were some of the visible attempt to try and professionalize social work practice which was born out of charity work in Buffalo [3].

Social work in Botswana is a new profession dating bac to around 1946 [4]. The profession started at the Ministry of Education and then training was around 1974 at Botswana Agricultural College which offered certificate in social welfare and community development. The real growth of social work has been seen with an established department of social work at the university Botswana in 1985 [4]. The recognition of social work practice in Botswana has continually increased with many policies and programs aimed at improving quality of life for the community in Botswana, yet the quality of service provided to the social work clients remains questionable given the public criticisms, complaints and reports from clients [4]. Social work is a sensitive profession that deals with individuals, groups and communities that might be vulnerable due to different circumstances.

There are, people living with disabilities, patients at hospitals with different conditions, broken families, abused children and women. Furthermore, there are those impoverished individuals and families, children at risks, orphans and vulnerable children in an endeavor to attain equilibrium and restore social functioning. It is against this backdrop that unregulated practice may further put clients at risk of by practitioners. The sensitivity of the profession cannot be overstated since it deals with human life which requires caution to protect the inherent dignity and worth of a person as in accordance with the values and principles of social work enshrined in the code of ethics of the International Federation of Social Workers [5]. Therefore, there is need for an urgent response to the plight of social work clients in Botswana and establish a body which regulates practice which currently is not there.

2. ECHOES OF SOCIAL WORK MALPRACTICE IN BOTSWANA “THERE IS NO SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE”

There is a general notion that “there is no smoke without fire” meaning that even from rumors, chitchats, stories and gossips, there must be the underlying truth. Given the statements related to social workers that follow there must be reality of client suffering during service provision by social workers. Some of the experiences of clients with social workers are as follows as collected from newspapers, meetings held by the President of the country, ministers and shared in staff meetings:

a. Violation of social work principles and values in an adoption case

There have been a number of controversial adoption cases in Botswana over the years. Some of the cases include the following, case
MAHGB-000291-14\(^1\), where the father of the child was not consulted for his consent before the child was adopted. The father of the child challenged the constitutionality of Section 4 (2) (d) (i) of the Adoption of Children Act Cap 28:01, in so far as it does not require his consent for the adoption of his child, just because such child was not born in wedlock. Furthermore, there are more cases of this nature where the social worker was supposed to do the assessment and end up not fully doing assessment. The two cases in note are just an example of what is happening in the adoption field. The following cases is noted in terms of adoption in Botswana, there was a case in February 2018 the Francistown High Court Judge ordered that a 15 months old child be returned to the biological mother following a controversial adoption that was facilitated by a social worker (The Voice Newspaper, 16 February 2018). The judge ruled that the adoption process of the little girl was tainted with flaws and had been carried out in a haphazard and hasty manner, without considering the traumatic and roller coaster of emotions the mother was going through after she was raped. This client was brutally raped on her way back from shopping at one of the local malls in March 2016. Between her home and shopping centre laid a bush, she walked deep into the bush and a man sprung from the thicket, pounced on her and gagged her mouth shut to stop her from screaming for help, with a knife he hard pressed against her neck, the stranger dragged her deeper into the bushes, away from the footpath and raped her without a condom. The survivor stated, “dishevelled, ashamed I walked home and told no one of the ordeal. I didn’t report the rape to the police. I felt dirty and all I wanted was to clean myself”, she continued, “I filled up the bathtub with water; soaked in the water, praying that I had not contracted any disease or fallen pregnant.”\(^2\)

The intrusion of the rapist had however implanted seeds of a permanent reminder of her rape. She had conceived and was pregnant. When she discovered she was pregnant the first thought that occurred to her mind was to commit an abortion. Four months pregnant, the woman approached Somerset Extension clinic to request for termination of the pregnancy. She was however turned down and referred to a social worker for help. Abortion was illegal in Botswana until 1991 amendments were made under the Penal code (Amendment) Bill. Pregnancy could be legally terminated within 16 weeks of conception under the following conditions, when the woman was raped or its due to incest to safe the life of the mother or instance of impairment to the child [6]. In this case, the survivor of rape did not report the case and it could not be done hence she was turned down at the clinic. It was during her consultation with the social worker, that she was advised and asked to consider giving up the baby for adoption, an option she agreed to. In the subsequent counselling sessions, the expectant woman renounced her rights over the unborn child and applied to the Magistrate for the renunciation of the rights.

She gave birth to a baby girl. And a twist and change of heart gripped her, when she heard the first cry of the little one. The cry lingered, echoed and triggered the motherly love and affection for the little girl. Even though she was not allowed to take the child due to the legal obligation, she wanted her baby back, but she was reminded that she had given up her parental rights. Eight days later, she was discharged from hospital empty handed. Meanwhile, when her parents heard news of the birth of their grandchild, they travelled from the home village, but their expectations to see their daughter and the baby were crushed, as they were met with the sight of their daughter grieving the loss of the child. It was under this cloud of dismay that the family sought an explanation from the social services offices and demanded the baby back only to be told them she had been adopted and the process was irreversible. The family sought legal recourse and the matter landed in court.

Therefore, in the final deliberation of the matter, the Judge with the help of other social work experts spotted loopholes in the counselling sessions the woman was taken through as the judge indicated said,

"From the first contact with the applicant before any counselling began, the social worker suggested adoption. To a client reeling under the trauma of rape. Two things went wrong; first the suggestion to give away the child was made without prior therapy. Secondly, the principle of giving the client various alternatives to choose from was not honoured,” pointed out the Judge. “She was presented with only one option. A choice without alternatives is no choice,” emphasized the Judge who further noted...
that there were no records in the social welfare officer’s notes to indicate that the expectant woman had gone through sessions of trauma counselling. “Trauma counselling was critical to firstly rid her of feelings of self-hatred and hatred for the product of rape. Therefore, when she made the decision to relinquish her parental rights, she was not in a position to think rationally,” continued the judge. “Her status as a victim and the turmoil she was going through was not addressed. This was unfortunate.” The judge went on to state that the victim’s consent to forfeit her rights as a parent and to give the child away was not properly obtained.

He noted that an evaluation after birth should have done, to assess how the victim related to the baby before a final decision was made. Although a fairly wealthy parent, who has the ability and prospects to adequately provide had adopted the 15-month-old baby, which is in sharp contrast, to the humble one room rented apartment the biological mother lives in, Judge observed that, “child care is a wider ambit. Circumstances of her birth are matters which will one day have to be dealt with. When this happens the social safety network of parents and relatives will provide last line of defence.” “The presence of her biological mother will provide a shock absorber of the news. It is in the best interest of the child that she be returned to her biological mother. This has long term benefits for the child,” said the Judge as he concluded his judgment.3

b. “Social workers do not perform their duty efficiently. They do not help us”

Kang’ethe [7] carried out a study on critical coping challenges facing caregivers of persons living with HIV and AIDS and other terminally ill persons in Kanye. The results showed all the participants were dissatisfied with the social workers’ services. Due to poor service delivery from social workers, it took too long for the clients who are assessed for a food basket to get their assessment results and the food basket [7]. The participants shared these sentiments, “The social workers do not perform their duty efficiently. They do not help us” (Kangethe, 2009). The delay contributed to some clients dying while waiting for the outcome of the assessment. Furthermore, members of Francistown community spoken out against the Social and Community Development [S&CD] of the Francistown City Council for failing the residents of Francistown [8]. The residents mentioned that the department hardly assists destitute persons as well as orphans. The member of a Village Development Committee, Philip Matante Ward, said that the social services brag of assisting the needy, yet they do the opposite. This view is important in building the argument of this paper, but it is view not a proof.

The Department of Social and Community Development (S&CD): Botswana has been said to be among the least corrupt nations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Cases of fraud and malpractice are not as many as in other African countries. Despite that, it has been reported, that, some social workers have been defrauding Government through the local councils of Gaborone and Southern district councils after it was discovered that the social grants offices at both councils have been making payments to fictitious beneficiaries. This was carried by the [9]. The above statement bothers on professional integrity, dignity, and image of the profession. The caliber of professionals for a sensitive service provided by social workers is fundamental to promote trust for clients to seek assistance without hesitation. The statement is not appealing for anyone regardless of their vulnerability to associate themselves with such a system. If the helping system is construed as above, then social problems will persist without any intervention since clients will avoid such a system at all cost.

c. Shelving & Neglect of clients’ cases

Casework is one of the five traditionally defined social work methods. Traditionally, this approach has focused on those individuals who could not achieve a normal adjustment to life and needed outside attention [10]. There has been allegations from residents especially in the Francistown area that A resident of Francistown that some Social Welfare officers at the department of S&CD neglect cases even though they could see the need to do the case [8]. The question is, in the process of neglect of this case by the social worker, what consequences are community suffering and what shall become of them if this case do not attract the attention of a social worker? The anticipated worry and

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3 Mmegi newspaper, 2018
distress on community to reach their wellbeing and self-actualization.

Johnson and Huggins [11] indicated that, social casework method in social work has a rich history with various iterations to work with individuals, families, and people suffering from mental illness or working in schools. The above point was previous shared by Popple and Leighninger [12] who went further to describe what social case work does to the above-mentioned interaction. The above authors note that social casework involves working with the client to 1). Assess and identify individual and family strengths and needs; 2). Develop a case plan to provide appropriate supports and services; 3). Implement the case plan using community resources; 4). Coordinate and monitor the provision of services, and 5). Evaluate client progress and the case plan to determine continued need for services. In the above scenario, a competent social worker would have built rapport with the client, made an intervention plan, scheduled sessions with the client, provided feedback and such a complaint would have not surfaced.

d. Unfriendly practitioners

An empirical research in Botswana that sought caregivers’ opinion on the services of the social workers indicated that social workers were not keen, were not friendly and did not appear to enjoy their work. This was attributed to higher caseloads besides other administrative and logistical challenges [13]. This cannot only be attributed to social workers but to a system that does not favour or create a conducive environment for social workers to perform at their highest potential. Social work by nature must create a conducive environment for client’s freedom to express themselves in a welcoming atmosphere. The attitude and appearance of a social worker play an important role in determining an effective working relationship with the client. Social workers who are not keen and who do not enjoy work are susceptible to provision of low-quality service, neglect clients and harm them in the process. This is against the value of competence in social work which promotes proficiency in practice.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

a) Establishment of Social Work ACT

The above scenarios are few that this paper has picked, and they are so many similar complaints. Others are genuine while others are fabrications. The challenge in validating the above scenarios is that there are no reporting mechanisms to measure the extent to how the service beneficiaries are at the mercy of practitioners. These might remain as anecdotal because research on social work is at the lowest, no reporting system, no ministry concerned with social work but different departments in different ministries dealing with social welfare. Despite all that, the scenarios picked above depicts client suffering at the mercy of the helping system of social workers. The issues of the clientele of social worker maybe they can be addressed by establishing a regulatory body in terms of a social workers professional’s council. A social workers council should be established by an Act of Social Work which currently is not available in Botswana. After establishing the council, its core mandate will be to regulate practice, service to clients, caliber of professionals and enforce the ethics, principles and values of social work and deal with the violations thereof. The Council of Social Work Education formed in 1952 played a pivotal role in social work development in the United States of America [14]. So, Botswana also needs an active Council of Social Work to play the same role. The roles and activities of the council will be different based on different environments, but the principle will be the same, to achieve a fully regulated profession of social work in Botswana. The council of social work is needed to standardize the profession, establish requirements/qualifications, practice, values, principles, and education. It furthers its mandate through research, negotiations and consultation of relevant systems to establish a contextual relevant social work in the country.

The council would provide the standards of practice by which would include ethics. The word “ethics” means a custom or a habit, it emphasizes on what is morally right and how things ought to be [15]. Dolgoff et al. [15] notes that professional ethics are intended to help social workers recognize morally correct practice. This definition suggests that ethics are there to facilitate good professional conduct towards the improvement of the quality of life of the client. Ethical standards clarify the level of performance, expertise and expectations; they are an operationally oriented reiteration of ethics [16]. The standards expand on ethics by showing the responsibilities or how work ought to be done.
Importance of ethical standards:

i. Attainment of a professional status

The question of whether social work is a profession or not should now go to rest. It has been asked over the years and it has been answered by the progress in the profession by developing on the mechanisms that answers what is a profession and what is not. Moving forward, there has been a consensus the world over and the agreement is that social work is a profession. International Federation of Social Workers [17], define social work as, a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. Moreover, [18], indicate that social work must critically review what it means by, along with the implications of, the profession’s commitments. The profession needs to consider how theory, its academic discipline and social work interventions support these commitments [18].

Social work is a professional activity which calls for ethically professional conduct. An array of values and ethical principles inform social work profession. The IFSW Ethical code was recognized in 2014 by the International Federation of Social Workers and The International Association of Schools of Social Work in the global definition of social work, which is layered and encourages regional and national amplifications [19]. When social work loses the most important trait of a profession, it simple ceases to exist as a profession and its rejection and criticism by the society will take preeminence.

The changing organization and practice of social work:

i. Fragmentation

Fragmentation regularly spoils professional identities and generates uncertainty amidst attempts to provide effective or reliable services [20]. The author continued to indicate that, indeed fragmented, disorganized, or reductive provisions often generate new risks for the recipients of services. Social work’s plurality according to Thomas, [21] emerges from differences in how social workers conceive of and act on social issues. Furthermore, [22] indicate that, such pluralism imbues social work with contrasting forms of action, thereby reducing the integration of social work through what Knorr-Centina (1999) considers epistemic culture in which knowledge emerges from science and its practice.

It is a well-known fact that in Botswana, several social science graduates such as sociologists, psychologists, adult education, and theology graduates are employed as social workers in the public service [4]. This is a serious distortion of professional identity since their adherence to ethical practice is doubtful and their education is irrelevant. In order to maintain identity, ethics are needed to define social work practice. Given these fragmentations, it is difficult to exist without ethics lest social workers be confused for every other profession that arises around human care.

ii. The changing role of the social worker

Social workers do tasks like resource management, assessment and monitoring and evaluation of poverty eradication projects than the traditional casework and this constitutes a threat to traditional conceptions of professional education [23]. The statement of ethical principles enables social workers to ensure the professional integrity of their practice. In addition, it is also the basis for all social work codes of ethics for members of International Federation of Social Work [23]. Members of IFSW are required to support their social work members in upholding these ethical principles, their own code of ethics and the integrity of the profession.

iii. Contact with the client

In a profession where the contact is distinct, direct and personal, then it is open to possible abuse, owing to its intimacy, a code of ethics therefore protects both professionals and service users [24]. Social workers work with various clients with a possibility of engaging in unprofessional relationships by having sexual relationships with these clients. The NASW code of ethics states that sexual activity or sexual contact with clients’ relatives or other individuals with whom clients maintain a personal relationship has the potential to be harmful to the client and may make it difficult for the social
worker and client to maintain appropriate professional boundaries [25].

If there is no such regulation that instructs social workers not to get in intimate relationships with their clients, the clients will suffer sexual exploitation from workers. For instance, sexual favors will be given to some social workers in exchange of the client’s required service. The social work clients who are already disadvantaged would be victims of exploitation under the loose helping system if ethics are not in place. The primary objective of the Code of Ethics is to make these implicit principles explicit for the protection of clients and other members of society [22]. The clients need to be able to trust the professionals both to have enough expertise to do what they claim to be able to do, and not to deceive or abuse the service user.

iv. Duty towards the client

This means the obligations of the worker towards the client. The ethical standards indicate the responsibility of the social worker towards the client. The duty needs to be clearly defined by ethics when there is a single user than when there are multiple users [24]. This assertion is very limited because the writer thinks that ethics are obvious where professionals are accountable to a large population but that is very dangerous because professionals would make countless errors in practice because such a system will be open to subjective practice. Therefore, explicit and well defined ethics and ethical standards will help to define the common standard of practice. For a client to hold the social worker accountable, explicit ethics and ethical standards are needed because the code provides ethical standards to which the general public can hold the social work profession accountable [23]. The ethics will be contextualized to the Botswana context so that social workers and the general public can understand them better.

Professional values versus Personal values:
Social workers face tension between professional values and personal values [26]. Social workers and their clients hold different values, beliefs and philosophies. If there is no common guide in such a situation, a social worker might take advantage of his professional role and impose their values on the client. A Christian social worker may persuade a Muslim client to convert to Christianity. A social worker who does not believe in legal abortion might simply tell the client who comes for counseling on abortion to refrain from abortion if there are no ethics to guide the working relationship. NASW [25] in its ethical standards discourages a social worker from taking an unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal or religious interests and it emphasizes the right of a client to self-determination. So, in this case, a code helps to protect the client. The ethics and ethical standards help professionals to reserve personal values and assume neutrality to help clients.

b) Association of Social workers

The now Botswana National Association of Social Worker (BONASW) originally formed as Botswana Social Workers Association (BOSWA) exists as a unified association to enhance the image and standards of social work locally and globally [27]. The association was formed to bring back together social work practitioners in different organization to lobby together for the establishment of a regulatory body and to be gatekeepers of the profession. It also intends to serve as a united voice for the social work profession to advance the interests and contributions of social work in its broader pursuit for human dignity and social justice. The Botswana National Association of Social Workers was established in 2001 and remained dormant until 2010 when over 100 social workers converged to resuscitate it but the numbers of social workers continued to decline in their top agenda meetings to date, hence its equivocal impact on issues of professional interest inclusive of the council [28].

Generally, associations are meant to bring social workers together to share experiences and contribute to the shape of the profession. First, the social workers must take responsibility of the destiny of their profession, demonstrate their passion for their noble profession and see the need to be organized under one roof to shape and defend the image of social work in Botswana. The association achieves the policy dimension of developmental social work practice where social workers implement, analyze, comment on, influence, and generally work towards making policies just and meaningful [29]. For instance, the issue of homosexuality, transgender and bisexuals which remains a bone of contention in African countries inclusive of Botswana should see social workers in
the forefront, but such minority groups continue to fight their inclusion battle without social workers.

c) The Department of Social Protection

The department of social protection under the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development is a policy making body which also oversees implementation of programs and policies by social workers and plays an advisory role on social work practice in Botswana. It also prides in itself in optimal functioning for all. Therefore, the atrocities suffered by clients at the hands of some social workers should be matter of urgent concern to the department and ignite its pursuit for a deliberate move to establish social workers council in order to safeguard the dignity and worth of clients in provision of social services. In order to further assist the organization of social workers, the department should encourage social work practitioners to be part of the association by supporting the association in terms of continues professional development programmes which will attract social workers to attend. Lobby government for the recognition of social work profession and giving social work profession a stake at the table of policy crafting to be part of the process not only be implementers.

4. CONCLUSION

In modern societies where traditional norms and values have either broken, or are fast breaking down, situations, of what [29] refers to as “anomie” have become quite common. Though individual means of livelihood in many countries have generally improved, many people still face difficult existential conditions, for example in situations characterized by war, famine, poverty, crime, disease, and associated personal and familial traumas and maladjustments. Social workers (caseworkers) are required to mitigate the effects of these problems. Their role in providing support and a sense of belonging to maladjusted persons cannot be overestimated.

Using their professional skills and knowledge, social case workers help in assessing the clients’ needs and applying agency, community, and public welfare resources and programmes to address relevant social, health or economic problems. They help clients who become eligible for a variety services designed to improve their economic, social and/or health functioning, thereby working toward improving the clients’ quality of life or standard of living [10]. The ethical standard on competence emphasizes that social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients from harm [25]. Delay of services to clients on palliative care indicate diminished professional judgment and incompetence of the social workers which ultimately contribute to clients dying while awaiting assistance.

The above account of social service delivery in Botswana tried to depict the role of ethics and values of social work in Botswana. It has captured few cases of ‘malpractice’ in Botswana and how they have pulled the good name of social work into disrepute. Moreover, the paper tried to look at the ethics of social work and its importance. The paper has argued that there is a need for a regulatory body that will help to establish the council of social work which will be concerned with regulating how social workers will deliver their services to the client. As it was indicated throughout the paper, there is need for urgent establishment of the social workers professionals’ council to protect clients and achieve customer satisfaction. The government should engage social workers, social work educators and experts to drive this endeavor lest the profession loses its integrity, relevancy and remains untrusted by its clientele. Nevertheless, these should not be construed as a demonstration of miserable social work in Botswana but an edge to calibrate, invigorate and standardize the noble profession.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents’ written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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