



APATHY OR FEAR? THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN ZIMBABWE'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The silence by the majority of Zimbabwean social work practitioners in particular, in the wake of the socio-political challenges currently bedeviling the country is worrying. Social work practitioners should be seen as torchbearers of peace and ensuring people's wellbeing, and condemn oppression and social injustice. They have to be at the forefront rather than periphery of social change, social justice and human rights advocacy. This commentary therefore interrogates the commitment, preparedness and readiness of Zimbabwean social workers to actively participate in the country's political discourse. It further challenges them to intervene in the socio-political crises engulfing the nation rather than remain as armchair critics. The argument is that Zimbabwean social workers seem to hibernate from commenting on the array of anguishes afflicting the general citizenry. The monograph proposes a number of strategies to increase political efficacy and engagement among social workers.

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe, a Southern African country, attained political independence from Britain in 1980 after a protracted struggle for liberation that claimed many human lives. The land between Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers had been invaded by the British in 1890. They established minority rule characterized by ‘divide and rule’ tactics as well as brutality against the African natives. Using their military prowess that included superior weaponry, the British managed to subdue the local inhabitants for almost a century, albeit with some resistance through interval uprisings. However, political independence ushered immense optimism for a better life among the citizens.

Zimbabwe brags of a high literacy rate, not only in Africa but the world over. Of late, the country has witnessed an unprecedented scramble, among its citizens, to acquire qualifications of higher education and training. Social workers have been among the citizens pursuing their education in various higher learning institutions across the globe. The relationship between level of education and level of political participation among social workers, for example, has been examined in some studies. Social workers with higher levels of education have been found to be more active (Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010; Wolk; 1981). However, the argument arises as to whether the acquired academic knowledge, by Zimbabwean social workers, has literally translated into changing the status quo, socio-politically and economically. Accordingly, this exposition critiques the laxity and noninvolvement by the majority of Zimbabwean social workers in the political processes of the country. Instead, it proposes a social action trajectory by social workers in order to resurrect the country from its current political quagmire characterized by suspicion and mistrust and among political rivals.

BACKGROUND

Society has witnessed a number of socio-political challenges in recent years. For instance, there have been numerous government actions around the world that violate human rights and constitute social injustices (Mapp & Gabel, 2017). There seems to be an erosion of benefits and services for citizens, particularly populations at risk (Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010). Countries such as the USA, Hungary and the Philippines (Mapp & Gabel, 2017), serve as good examples. The USA and Hungary, for example, have come up with populist policies against immigrants. In Zimbabwe, there have been several reports, albeit unofficial, of extrajudicial killings, tortures and disappearances of suspected opposition political activists. The country remains clouded by the infamous ‘Gukurahundi Massacre’ which allegedly claimed tens of thousands of people mainly on political and tribal grounds. The beginning of the new millennium has also seen government ham-fistedness and unorthodox descend on those believed to be supporters and sympathizers of opposition political parties. All this has been happening under the watch of social workers. Importantly, nonetheless, is that human rights and social justice can never be taken for granted in any nation.

With a population of just above 13 million people (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2012), Zimbabwe continues to be a polarized nation largely on political and tribal grounds (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). For instance, there has been historical distrust and cynicism especially between Shona and Ndebele-speaking people. It appears the root cause of the rift has not been adequately addressed. One may therefore pose the question: Are Zimbabwean social workers ready to intervene in this current political polarization? The subsequent paragraphs dwell on this question.

Social workers and politics

The Joint International Definition of Social Work defines social work as follows:

Social work is 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 social challenges and enhance well-being. (International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2014, para. 1)

Thus, social work as a profession and discipline “...moves beyond positivist approaches to knowledge and seeks to understand a phenomenon more in depth” (Henrickson & Chipanta, 2017, p. 9). Central to this definition is that social workers value social justice and human rights. As such, they have “...an ethical responsibility to participate in civic life by advocating for compassionate leaders and constructive social policies” (Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010, p. 108). The National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe (NASWZ) unequivocally underscores this obligation in its Code of Ethics:

Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice. (1999, Sec. 6.04)

A number of studies examining the political participation of social workers have found social workers to be more politically active than the general population (Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1991; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Wolk, 1981). This submission, however, questions that notion in respect of Zimbabwean social workers' involvement in the politics of the country. In the 1950s, Musodzi Chibhaga-Ayema (better known as Mai Musodzi), a feminist social worker, advocated for the rights of impoverished women in then Rhodesia (Newsday, 2017). Another social worker, Joshua Nkomo (nicknamed Father Zimbabwe), was one of the faces of Zimbabwe's struggle against colonialism and one of the national leaders of Zimbabwe after independence from Britain in 1981 (Guardian, 1999). After that, there has been very little participation of social workers in advocacy, politics or radical social work. Although a few have been contributing through writings, advocacy on the ground or running for political office, the impact remains inconsequential given the number of social work graduates from several universities in the country and beyond.

Understanding the role of social workers within the Zimbabwean context

There is a close link between the development of social work in Zimbabwe and the country's colonial history, "...its orientation reflecting a wholesale transfer from the British experience" (Kaseke, 1991, p. 33). This takes place in a number of settings, both government institutions and non-governmental sectors with casework dominating social work practice in the country. Muchacha (2016) observes that because casework is the prominent social work method in Zimbabwe, the profession is not strategically positioned to address structural injustices such as politically motivated violence. This argument is supported by Mmatli (2008) who states that the social work profession is not actively fighting against human rights violations and other social injustices in Africa due to lack of voice and power to influence the political space.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of Zimbabwean social workers practicing both in the country and abroad. This may be due to the fact that a number of social workers graduating within and outside Zimbabwe do not register with the Council of Social Workers (Zimbabwe) as they seek employment elsewhere. The Council of Social Workers of Zimbabwe (CSWZ) (2016) estimates that there are about 800 registered social workers in the country, with less than 100 social workers in the employ of the Department of Social Services. This has contributed to the acute shortage of social workers in the country with the social worker to children ratio at about 1:14 000 (Makaripe, 2016; Mbanje, 2015). The CSWZ in its 2010 situational analysis even put the social worker to children ratio at a staggering 1:42 000. This is in sharp contrast with other countries in the region. For instance, South Africa has about 32 000 registered social workers with a ratio of social worker to children of about 1:1 800. Namibia has a ratio of about 1 social worker for every 2 000 children, whilst in Botswana the social worker to children ratio is at 1: 1 400 (CSWZ, 2016). The reality, however, is that there are thousands of Zimbabwean social work graduates across the globe.

Many Zimbabweans still do not know what social workers do. This has resulted in many potential service users being deprived of key social work services that the profession offers (Makwanya, 2015). Social work is believed to be synonymous with charity work mainly food handouts. This has resulted in the profession being undermined in the country even by some senior government officials who ignorantly believe that a social worker's work can be done by anybody. It is critical, therefore, that social workers themselves take the initiative to make people aware of the services they provide. Otherwise, they will never be taken seriously.

WAY FORWARD

The role of social workers remains critical as they continue to work under demanding and rigorous situations sometimes characterized by hostility and intimidation. Nevertheless, tough decisions in these often-complex circumstances have to be made "...with a vast array of legislation, law and social policy to understand" (Muchanyerei & Bila, 2017, p. 170). It is against this backdrop that this paper proposes a number of strategies, viz:

1. Providing an intensive political social work curriculum on political efficacy and planned political engagement. This model has proved to increase internal, external, and overall political efficacy and political engagement among social work students and practitioners (Ostrander et al., 2017). Political involvement is an integral component of social work profession. Consequently, social work education

may offer an opportune time to shape crucial patterns of, for example, future electoral participation among social workers (Glass, 2012; Hylton, 2015; Pritzker & Burnwell, 2016).

2. Advocating for a voice in the political space through political activism to attain political power and influence political processes (Matli, 2008). There is no evidence which suggest that the social work profession is actively involved in Zimbabwe's political discourse. Social workers continue to be outshined by other professionals such as lawyers and medical doctors regarding political activism in general, and issues such as rebuking human rights violations in particular (Makwanya, 2015; Muchacha, 2016). Social workers therefore need to be visible by vehemently and publicly denouncing and condemning social injustices with neither fear nor favour, no matter who might be the perpetrators.
3. Mobilizing the masses to defend their rights and fight against all forms of repression and social injustices. Rather than applying casework as a dominant method of social work, social workers need to explore other techniques such as advocacy and lobbying in order to influence political processes.
4. Conducting research on the impediments to social workers' involvement in political activism in Zimbabwe. Such research should involve as many practicing and student social workers as possible. Findings will be used to address social workers' concerns and challenges. It is suggested that such research need to be conducted by social workers themselves, as it is only them who can bring real change and genuine solutions to their challenges.

CONCLUSION

Social workers are key players in the maintenance of any nation's social fabric as well as protection of vulnerable members of society. This commentary has examined the commitment of Zimbabwean social workers to participate in the country's political discourse. It was observed that there is laxity among most social workers in the country to actively debate on a plethora of socio-political issues affecting the country. A number of strategies were proposed, among them, the provision of an intensive political social work curriculum on political efficacy and planned political engagement; more involvement by social workers in political activism; conscientizing the masses about their rights; and conducting more research.

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