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Climate change and vulnerable groups in Zimbabwe: Implications for social work practice

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Abstract

Social work is a practical profession that aims to improve problem-solving skills and social functioning, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised vulnerable groups. The ongoing climate change is worsening the global social work burden since it increases the frequency of occurrence, magnitude, and duration of disaster events such as droughts, heat waves, diseases, tropical cyclones, and floods that negatively impact human beings. Specifically, children, people with disabilities, women, and the elderly are especially vulnerable, as they are often unable to move quickly and may have existing health conditions that make escaping from disasters difficult—meanwhile, the human rights perspective advocates for the inclusivity of all people in the disaster management process. The study used qualitative literature review

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analysis to explore social work-based strategies for managing the impacts of climate change in Zimbabwe while ensuring the participation of vulnerable groups in co-creating the strategy. The research involved a scoping literature review using African Journals Online, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Central search engines. The study followed specific steps, including formulating the research problem, developing and validating the reviewing protocol, searching for relevant literature using key search terms, screening for inclusion, assessing the relevance, extracting data, analysing and synthesising data, and reporting the findings. Conclusions and recommendations were based on the gaps and inconsistencies identified in the literature review.

Keywords: climate change, social work, vulnerable groups, disasters

Introduction

Climate change impacts are projected to worsen globally, especially due to heat waves and flooding. Climate change refers to changes in normal weather patterns over seasons, years, decades, or more. These changes are characterised by extreme weather events such as intense heat waves, heavy rainfall, floods, and droughts (Chikoko & Chihiya, 2023; Mushunje & Matsika, 2023). Disasters, whether natural or human-induced, affect many countries worldwide (Desai, 2018). Climate change negatively impacts the environment, communities, and inferior and vulnerable ones (Chinokwetu & Togo, 2023). Zimbabwe has experienced numerous disasters, including droughts, cyclones, flooding, and heat waves (Chari & Ngcamu, 2019). While all people are affected by climate change impacts, certain groups face additional burdens due to their existing social, physical, and psychological challenges.

Climate action falls under Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13), closely aligned with several other sustainable development goals such as no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, peace, justice, and strong institutions. The impacts of climate change are particularly felt by vulnerable groups, including the elderly, homeless individuals, persons with disabilities, and children who are already living in poverty (Mushunje & Matsika, 2022). Additionally, women

often have primary caregiving responsibilities for these vulnerable groups, which means they are responsible for tasks such as fetching water, seeking food, and engaging in subsistence agricultural activities (Mushunje & Muchacha, 2019; Mushunje, 2013). They also ensure that the infirm are fed and their needs are met. Many vulnerable individuals require assistance with mobility, transportation, and evacuation during disasters, which can be challenging for caregivers and family members concerned for survival. The resulting confusion, distress, depression, fear, recovery fatigue, and loss of social support can lead to mental health-related disorders. The social work field assists marginalised, vulnerable, and less privileged groups to realise their full potential by developing strategies that promote inclusivity and ensure that no one is left behind in disaster management.

An emerging field known as environmental social work, green social work, or eco-social work focuses on addressing environmental issues and improving the social well-being of vulnerable and underprivileged groups. There is a strong link between climate change and ecological social work (Pedzisai et al., 2023). This literature review aims to explore the impact of climate change on marginalised groups and to propose interventions to ensure their inclusion in disaster preparedness efforts.

Theoretical Framework

The article is based on the human rights perspective derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This perspective focuses on the rights of marginalised groups, including the rights to life, shelter, health (including reproductive health), food, clothing, safe drinking water, and protection against violence (United Nations, 1948). Social rights are intended to promote inclusivity for marginalised groups and prevent human tragedies such as death and injury during disasters. According to Ife et al. (2022), social work is a profession based on human rights that aims to promote social justice. This approach challenges social workers to incorporate human rights into social work curricula and practice to develop effective interventions for the disadvantaged populace (Barney, 2020). Therefore, the human rights perspective seeks equal justice, opportunity, participation, equal distribution

of resources, and equal dignity without discrimination. To improve human well-being, the social work profession should empower disadvantaged groups, especially regarding early warning signs of disasters and preparedness, ensuring their safe evacuation to enhance their survival. Hence, social workers play a critical role during disasters by providing assistance and social services to vulnerable groups (Pedzisai et al., 2023). Inequality, exclusion, and lack of access to and control of resources by vulnerable groups are major challenges that can be addressed through social work interventions using the human rights perspective to promote inclusivity.

Methodology

The article is based on a scoping literature review utilising the following search engines: African Journals OnLine (AJOL), Google Scholar, and ProQuest Central. The aim was to systematically search for studies and provide a transparent report of study identification, clarifying what was done to identify studies and how the findings are situated in the relevant evidence (Cooper et al., 2018). The process began by searching for literature using key terms related to the topic. The literature from 2020-2024 was searched, and titles and abstracts were reviewed. Full papers were then downloaded and evaluated to determine if they should be included in the study (Pollock et al., 2021). In the next stage, articles were screened based on relevance using specific criteria. Articles addressing thematic issues on climate change, vulnerability, and disadvantaged groups were included, while others were excluded. The third stage involved analysing the selected articles. The authors thoroughly read the articles to avoid repetition and evaluate their quality. They used qualitative methods to combine the studies. Then, they wrote a detailed review. The scoping literature review aimed to identify research gaps and provide suggestions for future studies, particularly regarding the critical topic of climate change and its potential impact on vulnerable groups.

Results

After completing the scoping literature review, the authors categorised the results into several themes: climate change and children, climate change and

the elderly, climate change and women, climate change and persons with disabilities, climate change and persons with chronic illnesses, and climate change and social work interventions. Detailed information on these categories is provided below:

Climate change and children's vulnerability

In the context of the reviewed literature, it is clear that children are significantly impacted during climate change-induced disasters in the disaster management cycle. During evacuations, children need assistance with mobility, strong support networks, and awareness of early warning signs. Sithole et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study in Zimbabwe, highlighting malnutrition as a major challenge for children due to climate change-induced droughts. Rapid assessments were carried out to implement nutritional feeding programs to prevent stunted growth among children during droughts. Moreover, Dembeza et al. (2023) observed in their qualitative study that Cyclone Idai led to food insecurity in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe. The cyclone destroyed food reserves, restricted access to basic needs, and caused unaffordable prices for many. The impact of Tropical Cyclone Idai was devastating, affecting nearly 3 million people and resulting in over 1,000 casualties, with around half of the victims being children. This cyclone was one of the deadliest storms in the southern hemisphere, leaving hundreds of thousands in dire situations, seeking refuge on rooftops, in trees, and other elevated areas. Displaced families fortunate enough to receive assistance found themselves sheltering in transit centres, having lost everything (UNICEF, 2020).

Children were significantly affected because they relied on food from their caregivers and guardians, which worsened their nutritional status. This issue was exacerbated by the limited social protection programs for food, especially for supplementing the nutrition of children and young individuals. Studies by Chanza & Gundu-Jakarasi (2020), Dembeza et al. (2022), and Nyati et al. (2022) in Zimbabwe also support the fact that children's nutrition is compromised due to harsh climatic conditions. The effects of climate change in Uzumba Maramba Pfungwe in Zimbabwe have led to decreased

food production, resulting in fewer meals per day and causing malnutrition in households, particularly among children (Gwenzi et al., 2022). A qualitative study conducted by Chikoko & Chihiya (2023) in Bikita rural area showed that children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, hunger, food insecurity, school dropout, climate change-related diseases, child prostitution, and early marriages. Ngcamu (2023) highlights the lack of privacy, protection, and mental trauma for children based on a literature review of Global South countries due to environmental challenges.

Climate change and vulnerability among the elderly

The literature review shows that elderly individuals are more vulnerable during natural disasters like floods and tropical cyclones due to mobility issues. A qualitative study carried out in Mbire District, Zimbabwe, by Mavhura and Mucherera (2020) emphasises that the elderly face particular risks in flood-prone areas as they are less mobile, often unable to swim, and have a higher susceptibility to drowning compared to non-disabled adults. During Cyclone Idai, the elderly experienced acute respiratory infections, malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea, and injuries (Sunanda et al., 2022). These authors express concerns about the lack of health data connecting regular health information with environmental conditions. Elderly individuals, especially those over 65, encounter difficulties using digital tools due to illiteracy and lack of access. This limits their ability to receive early warning signs through the internet or social media (Ngcamu, 2023). A study in Chiredzi by Zvobgo et al. (2023) suggests that old age makes small-scale farmers susceptible to climate change impacts, affecting their productivity compared to non-disabled individuals. Moreover, older people are excluded from decision-making in disaster management, as Nyahunda and Tirivangasi (2021) highlighted. HelpAge International (2009) argues that older women in Zimbabwe and similar Global South contexts are particularly at risk due to underlying challenges such as higher levels of poverty, discrimination, ageism, abuse, and limited access to social services.

Climate change and women's vulnerability

Research suggests that women in patriarchal societies are particularly vulnerable due to the societal expectations placed upon them. A study

conducted in the Mbire District of Zimbabwe by Nyoni et al. (2021) revealed that women experience amplified challenges during and after floods, as they are often left to assume the responsibilities traditionally carried out by men who have migrated or abandoned their families. These responsibilities include making essential decisions, taking care of children and the sick, and managing other household tasks, resulting in significant stress, psychological issues, and depression among these women. The study also emphasised the lack of effective psycho-social support available to these rural women. Ruparaganda and Nyoni (2022) found that female-headed households in rural Buhera are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. However, they also observed that these women have developed resilience mechanisms to adapt and enhance food security in the face of these challenges.

In a qualitative study conducted by Chidakwa et al. (2020) in rural Zvishavane, it was found that women have to travel long distances to fetch water due to depleted water sources. Additionally, they assume more responsibility in agro-based activities as men migrate for better opportunities. Another mixed methods study in Manicaland aimed to determine the relationship between climate change and nutritional status. This study revealed that women, especially pregnant women and lactating mothers, suffer from malnutrition because food preference is given to men and children (Dembeza et al., 2023). Consequently, access to the required and expected food is diminished due to the washing away food reserves.

According to a literature review-based study conducted in Africa by Chersich et al. (2023), it is apparent that maternal and fetal well-being is significantly compromised by thermal or heat distress, especially during droughts. This can result in detrimental outcomes such as preterm births, stillbirths, and hypertensive disorders, consequently contributing to post-partum depression. Furthermore, Choudhari (2022) stresses in a book chapter the critical health impacts of climate change, particularly on women's reproductive health, such as altered growth and mortality rates due to waterborne diseases. Tanyanyiwa and Muhwati (2021) emphasise that flood-prone areas witness a disturbing prevalence of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, diarrhoea, malnutrition, and water-borne and insect-transmitted diseases.

A qualitative study by Nyahunda et al. (2020) in Chimanimani, using an environmental social work lens, suggests that women in the region bear the burden of assisting vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and the sick to escape environmental disasters, putting themselves at risk of injury or death. This is due to their role as primary caregivers. Additionally, illiteracy among women results in them missing crucial early warning signs compared to men. Muto (2020) asserts that intimate partner violence, as observed in her study in rural Bikita in Zimbabwe, can manifest as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and threats, leading to anxiety-related disorders. Chiponda (2022) points out that women also face challenges related to gender blindness and language barriers, which hinder their ability to understand and respond to early warning signs, creating social injustice. In a study conducted in Save Valley, Sithole et al. (2023) found that women are particularly vulnerable to water and sanitation issues, which impact their menstrual hygiene and compromise their nutritional status, especially as they prioritise feeding children and men.

Climate change and vulnerability amongst persons with disability

The scoping literature review revealed that individuals with disabilities experience diverse challenges based on the type and severity of their disability. This includes people with visual, physical, hearing, and cognitive impairments. Among those with hearing impairments, the lack of access to essential information on disaster preparedness presents a major barrier, as they are typically the last to receive information translated into sign language. In a qualitative study by Tome (2023) focusing on the participation of deaf farmers in nutrition and health sustainability in Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe, it was highlighted that they face disadvantages due to limited inclusivity of climate-related information and knowledge, which ultimately affects their productivity and preparedness.

Chari and Novukela (2023) argue that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially for persons with visual impairments, are limited, leaving them out of disaster preparedness efforts. In a literature review-based paper on climate displacements in South Africa, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, Jegede et al. (2022) demonstrate that persons with disabilities are

significantly affected by displacements exacerbated by disasters. When evacuating, the able-bodied prioritise their welfare, often neglecting this vulnerable population. It appears that there is no specific law addressing climate change displacement. Furthermore, Mudavanhu et al. (2020), in a quantitative study in the Mbire district of Zimbabwe, discovered that various socio-economic factors, such as physical and mental disabilities, influence vulnerability to hazards. Persons with disabilities tend to be slow in processing early warning information and signals, leaving them more vulnerable to disasters.

Climate change and vulnerability amongst persons with chronic illness

The literature discusses how climate change, especially extreme weather conditions, can adversely affect chronic illnesses known as non-communicable diseases. Cardiovascular diseases, stroke, mental health issues, type 2 diabetes mellitus, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and chronic kidney disease are among the leading NCDs that can be further exacerbated by unanticipated climate change shocks (Kandawasvika et al., 2022). Moreover, stress, trauma, and displacement can also increase anxiety and depression levels, amplifying the magnitude of mental health-related disorders during floods and tropical cyclones. Medications may be washed away, and the supply of medicines can become challenging when infrastructure is damaged and people are relocated from high-risk areas to places with no nearby clinics for safety. Furthermore, traditional small grains are affected by floods and tropical cyclones, leading to reduced consumption of conventional health foods, thus increasing post-disaster NCDs as people consume whatever is readily available, as Chopera et al. (2022) noted in their online survey-based paper. Additionally, Orievulu et al. (2022), in a literature-based review paper, found that the intake of HIV/AIDS medication is affected by drought due to a lack of nutritional food for patients to take their medication properly.

Climate change and social work interventions

In a qualitative study conducted by Nyahunda et al. (2020) in rural Bikita, it was found that no social work services were provided to address the effects

of climate change in the area. However, other professionals expressed the need to bring to light the roles of social workers to increase their visibility. A book chapter by Nyahunda (2021) mentions that social workers have the duty and responsibility to support the oppressed and marginalised by advocating for social justice. Despite increased literature written by social workers, their involvement at the grassroots level is still in its early stages. Social workers are tasked with promoting social justice and bringing about social change, particularly for the underprivileged, to safeguard their well-being and ecological justice (Nyahunda, 2021). Nyahunda (2021) also presents an empowerment model as a guide for social workers to assist groups affected by the impacts of climate change.

Discussion

The impact of climate change is not universal, as it varies depending on individual circumstances. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2013:1), the extent to which people are affected by climate change is influenced by social status, gender, poverty, power, and access to resources. Therefore, social work interventions should consider these individual factors and be grounded in professional principles and values, such as respect for human dignity and human rights. It is important to note that children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, impacting their physical, social, and care needs. Issues such as child abuse, sexual exploitation, hunger, food insecurity, school dropouts, climate change-related diseases, child prostitution, and early marriages require a developmental approach guided by disaster risk reduction principles. The Sendai Framework underscores the importance of stakeholder participation in sustainable interventions. In this regard, children must be recipients of interventions and actively engage in efforts to reduce risks and take action on climate change.

This is critical in designing holistic interventions. Social work occupies a privileged position through its legal mandate of child protection- Children's Act Chapter 5:06. It should utilise this for child-centred policy development in the climate change discourse. There should be a deliberate commitment to have specific interventions in tandem with climate change and in parallel with

conventional methods. Practice with children within emergency or disaster settings should be carefully planned to ensure mitigation from the shocks posed by climate change, preparedness in the event of disasters, and recovery from post-climate-induced disasters in Zimbabwe.

While children primarily face physiological and social risks, older people are more affected by physical and communication challenges, particularly regarding mobility and access to digital technology for information. Individuals with disabilities also encounter communication barriers. Communication is crucial at all stages of disaster management. Failure to address these issues may perpetuate inequalities and discrimination. Technical segregation could disempower individuals, so it is important to ensure that accurate, relevant, effective, and timely information is accessible to everyone in the appropriate format. Upholding the principle of individuality is essential for relevance. These findings are crucial for disaster preparedness planning, especially in prioritising evacuations and developing early warning systems. Community mapping of demographic composition is vital to cater to the needs of the elderly during disasters and to encourage people with chronic illnesses to stock medical supplies adequately.

The research also discussed the impact of gender dynamics on climate change, especially within existing gender inequalities. Disasters often disrupt the ordinary course of life, leading to significant changes in social structure and functioning. This shift also affects gender roles and expectations, often emphasising the need for survival. For instance, women commonly take on additional responsibilities, such as those traditionally held by men who have migrated, in addition to their existing roles. Women in agricultural communities shoulder heavy caregiving responsibilities and are usually the primary producers.

Consequently, climate change-induced shocks like droughts affect their livelihoods and food and water supply, placing them in disempowering situations. By employing a strengths-based approach, social workers can empower women in various settings by developing climate change adaptation and resilience strategies. Indigenous knowledge systems can inform these

strategies, including skills enhancement in water harvesting and preservation techniques, smart agriculture, and redistribution of caregiving responsibilities.

The findings also highlighted a deficiency in social work services offered in disaster risk reduction. The role of professional climate change action is well explained in the defining characteristics of the professional, which aims to help individuals, groups, and communities in distress to improve their conditions through their inherent coping abilities. Climate change continues to evolve, impacting humanity in various ways and bringing about different stressors. Therefore, the profession clearly mandates mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery of climate change-induced shocks. It can be argued that the profession needs to clearly define its role and raise awareness to make communities aware of their available services. There is a need for the social work community to actively engage in climate change issues at all levels -meso and macro - to ensure a well-coordinated professional response.

Implications for social work practice

In the current discourse on climate change in academic and practice settings, the field of social work is presented with abundant opportunities. As global challenges continue to evolve, the profession must evolve in tandem. Notably, the emergence of green social work as a specialised field within the discipline highlights the need to expand the knowledge base of qualified social workers and those in training to include these critical issues in the curriculum. Continuous professional development courses focusing on these subjects should be available to qualified social workers to ensure they are well-prepared to address these complex challenges. It is also essential to reinforce this initiative and ensure that all social workers are sufficiently equipped to integrate climate change considerations into their work, enabling them to provide practical assistance. Social workers should also assume the role of advocates for environmental justice and take the lead in discussing climate change, leveraging their expertise gained from working with diverse people and communities. Seamlessly aligning practice at both micro and

macro levels to influence climate change-related policies in ways that benefit people is crucial. Meaningful and active engagement with stakeholders is essential in devising sustainable intervention plans.

Conclusion

Everyone is impacted by climate change, but some groups face additional burdens due to their existing social, physical, and psychological challenges. Therefore, social work initiatives should prioritise individuality and equity by directing resources to where they are most needed. Social workers, as advocates for social justice, should also shine a light on the diverse challenges faced by marginalised groups in the community due to climate change. Climate action falls under SDG 13, and in line with the United Nations Agenda 2030, it is crucial to ensure that no one is left behind and that all climate action initiatives are inclusive.

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