

Teaching and practicing social work in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects

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Abstract

Social work is not just an academic activity, it is also a profession that aids people in improving and regaining their ability for social interaction as well as in fostering social environments that support their goals. To, effectively carry out this task, social workers must be properly taught and trained to enable them professionally fit to practice. The paper aims at discussing the challenges of teaching and practicing social work in Nigeria as well as the prospect of the profession. A theoretical review of relevant scholarly literature that showed the challenges of the social work profession in Nigeria and its effects in both teaching and practice was conducted. There is a need to beef up what is taught as social work in Nigeria and proper monitoring teams set to cross-check the rudiments and practice of the profession. With proper training and the passing of the social work bill in Nigeria, one can rightly affirm that there is still light at the end of the tunnel.

Keywords: Teaching, practicing, challenges, prospect social work, Nigeria.

Introduction

Social workers are dedicated to the services of social welfare, self-fulfilment, and the achievement of social justice. To, effectively carry out this task, social workers must be properly taught and trained to enable them professionally fit to practice. Prior to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, indigenous social work practice has been in existence and modern social work practice is said to be relatively new in the country (Mbah et al., 2017). The profession at some point has been viewed as one involved in charitable work, one-to-one intervention by highly qualified professionals utilising a therapeutic approach, the welfare state, and emerging urban concerns but there is more to what the profession entails (Cox & Pawar, 2006). The social work profession when compared to other helping professions like medicine, psychiatry, and nursing, is relatively young in Nigeria and Africa at large. Notwithstanding its recent development, social work is a rapidly growing field (Apollo & Logong, 1996). The profession's growth and development throughout the world is an indication of its contribution to the alleviation of social problems. However, social workers must understand that there is a need to focus on the problems of resource systems seeming to be in dearth in Nigeria and not only on the problems of people which the profession in Nigeria has long tried to achieve (Ogundipe &

Edewor, 2012). In Nigeria for instance, the colonial period witnessed a turning point for social welfare programmes and social work. The spread of social work in Nigeria started in Lagos, though then social welfare programmes and social work activities were domiciled in the Social Development Division of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, however, the ministry was manned by quacks (untrained) social workers. During the regional government in Nigeria, social welfare programmes were under the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (Irele, 2011). Social work in Nigeria had always manifested itself in formidable institutions such as kinship, family, and marriage systems (Udeani, 2019).

Social work education in Nigeria according to Ekpe and Mamah (1997) came into the limelight in 1974 when the federal government promulgated the Social Development Decree No 12. Part of the provision of the decree was the training of professional social workers and the organization of social agencies. These trainings are the in-service type, induction courses, seminars, and workshops (Okafor, 2004). Regardless of the development and introduction of social work in Nigeria, various challenges have stood as hindrances in enabling the profession actively stand uniquely in discharging professional duties. These challenges can be tackled and when tackled, the profession can rightfully take its place in the society. Hence, this chapter focuses on teaching and practicing social work in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects.

Professionalism and Social work Practice in Nigeria

Social work is not just an academic activity, it is also a professional activity aimed at helping individuals, groups, or communities enhance and restore their capacity for social functioning and create societal conditions favourable to their goals. For some, being professional means dressing and looking smart at a place of work, for others, it might mean having advanced degrees and qualifications, framed and hung on the office wall. Professionalism encompasses all of these but entails a whole lot more. Professionalism simply means a special vocation requiring specialized knowledge, exposure, practice experience, and long intensive academic training. In other words, for a profession to exist, there must be attributes that are peculiar to it and it is those attributes that make it a profession, without those attributes, there is no profession.

There are many professions in Nigeria and each has peculiarities that distinguish it from others. Like every other profession, the social work profession has attributes that evolve as societal needs keep changing. These attributes are inherent in her definition and it changes at the same pace as societal values (Humphreys & Dinerman, 1984). For any discipline to be called a profession, it must possess some essential attributes of a profession; Greenwood (1981) outlined these attributes as cognitive, monopolistic, and normative:

Cognitive: a profession is obtained through formal education in a university, where professional knowledge is derived from a systematic body of theories in a particular area or specialization.

Normative: a profession must have a registered association with stipulated professional ethics and standards and an enforceable mechanism. In Nigeria, the umbrella social work body is the Nigeria Association of Social Workers (NASoW).

Monopolistic: a profession is supposed to have a license and a measure through which society can hold it accountable.

Attributes of the social work profession

Specialized knowledge: Social work is a profession because it has specialized knowledge that is distinct from others. The education of social work is geared towards the development and improvement of knowledge, skills, theories, and models generated from social work practice. At the end of the completion of social work education, degrees and certificates are awarded to students which serve as evidence of this knowledge. In Nigeria, social work institutions award diplomas, degrees, and higher degrees to students who have completed training in the field of social work, however, only those who have completed their master's degree are known as professional social workers.

Competency: The priority of every professional is to find the solution to problems, and so social work professionals are committed to finding solutions to problems. One of the uniqueness of the social work profession is her quest to the prevention of problems before they struck and not just find the solution to an already existing problem but to prevent problems from occurring. Social workers, therefore, do their best to restore social functioning. Being competent also implies developing their expertise and staying up to date.

Honesty and integrity: As professionals, social workers are mandated to exhibit honest behaviours at all times, in other words, they are trustworthy and portray integrity in their dealing with clients. They uphold the values of the profession, and never compromise it for their personal interest. Being honest and exhibiting integrity also entails that social workers are humble and willing to collaborate and learn from others in interprofessional collaboration.

Accountability: Professionals are responsible for their actions, especially when they made mistakes, they don't shift blame to their clients or others, and rather they try and fix their mistakes.

Respect: Professionally, social workers value and show regard to their clients irrespective of their problems. They try to preserve the dignity of their clients and don't

transfer their frustration or aggression toward their clients or colleagues. They also have high regard for themselves; dress appropriately looks smart, and exhibit some level of boldness and confidence.

Professionalization of social work in Nigeria

Academic discourse portrays social work as a profession akin in status to medical professionals, lawyers, and engineers (Healy, 2000). Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context, social workers are not given recognition, this is evidenced in the underemployment of professional social workers in para-professional positions where their qualification is not fully utilized (Okoye, 2014; Amadasun, 2020). According to Healy and Meagher (2004), this is one of the ways social workers have been downgraded and ‘deprofessionalized’; on the other hand, social workers have also contributed to the lack of professional recognition by accepting a lack of financial reward as an inevitable feature of the profession and this has made a caricature of the profession. As a result, the simple understanding of the people is that social work is a charity profession that is done without any financial requirement; and like Healy and Meagher (2004) noted, this perception and attitude have led to the ‘deprofessionalization’ of social work, such that the profession is more seen on paper than in practice.

Healy and Meagher, (2004) opined that for the profession to be recognized, there is a need for collective efforts among social workers in ‘reprofessionalizing’ the social work profession, while also identifying opportunities for collaboration with other social services providers as well as service users. Another way of ‘reprofessionalizing’ social work and making it to be recognized in Nigeria is by establishing social work departments in different higher institutions in the country. Currently, only a few universities in Nigeria are offering social work as a course. However, there is a need for social work as an academic discipline to spread across the various higher institutions in the country, this will add relevance to the profession and boost recognition.

In addition, the internationalization of social work will become another gateway toward the recognition of social work as a profession both in Nigeria and globally. According to Rasell, et al (2019), internationalization of social work means striking a balance between local and global content of social work education, such that social workers can fit in anywhere in the world upon graduation and still be relevant. The author suggested the need for global commonality in the practice of social work without undermining local distinctiveness in social work practice. Internationalization will enable the profession to gain more relevance and each country’s government will be influenced to ‘reprofessionalize’ it when they see that other countries have done so.

Social work education and practice in today's Nigeria

Social work education plays the role of unsettling and challenging the problems faced by social workers in practice. Nigeria's social work education should adapt and incorporate 'new knowledge and attitudes to prepare practitioners to be able to work in international settings (Healy, 2008). Professionally, social work practice evolved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was part of society's response to the growing social needs of the people. Social workers provided considerable assistance to the needy, destitute, and mentally ill. Contextualizing the African perspectives and particularly the Nigerian social setting, social work practice in Nigeria began in the 21st century, which was rare to come by even when Nigerian citizens needed attention care, and the kindness that social work practices tend to offer (Onyekwere, 2016). In another development, social workers in Nigeria faced conflicts with other professionals, who claimed to do what social workers are trained to do (Amadasun, 2020). This owes largely to ignorance, and the lack of professionalization sanctioned by law (Okoye, 2014). Sadly, most of the ministries, agencies, and parastatals in the three tiers of government where trained and qualified social workers are supposedly prepared to occupy, are managed by non-practitioners.

This is why social work education in contemporary Nigeria has adopted various levels of training institutions to produce indigenous social work practitioners, this was in an attempt to align the social work practice in Nigeria with the international criteria on the professional recognition of schools of social work that has already been set by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). Therefore, in line with the international standard, any school of social work in Nigeria according to Midgley (1981) is obligated to fulfil some criteria set up by this international body; the objective of such school should be training for professional practice in accordance with the country's social and cultural differences, also there is an emphasis on the combination of theoretical work and field practices. Recognizing the importance of social work education in Nigeria, the federal government encouraged tertiary institutions to provide professional training for social workers. Presently, Nigerian tertiary institutions in response to the above, provide professional training for social workers (Onyekwere, 2016).

Perspective of social work education in Nigeria

Nigeria is a West African country, made up of more than 250 ethnic groups, the most populous black nation, and the tenth largest in the world by population (Collier, 2007). The profession of social work was formally brought to Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s through the influence of colonialism, at a time when Nigeria was practicing an informal way of helping the less privileged in the society (Adepoju, 1974). After colonialism, Nigeria continued to recognize the relevance of the social work profession given the myriads of problems confronting the society, and social work education was considered, hence,

Nigerians travelled to the West to acquire social work education. However, Western-based social work education and training were somewhat not in line with what Nigerian culture and social work students needed to know in order to practice at home. Social work education and practice in any country should be related to the social, economic, and political climate of the country (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2022).

Consequently, the West was accused of imposing Eurocentric theories and practice models on Africa thereby undermining indigenous knowledge required in addressing culturally sensitive issues in Africa (Nnama-Okechukwu & MacLaughlin, 2022; Onalu & Ingram, 2022). Due to the Western-influenced social work legacy, social work education in Nigeria encountered so many challenges and so focus was drawn on the limited relevance of Western social work education (Midgley, 1990; Anucha, 2008a). This also stemmed from the fact that towards the beginning of the 21st century, the social work profession in the Western world had a major challenge; it was argued the profession could not address the myriad of challenges that confronted Western society at that time. As a result, the social work profession in developing countries like Nigeria faced lots of criticism because of its continued reliance on Western social work knowledge given that such imported knowledge has not been able to achieve much in the West, the same environments for which they were developed. Anucha (2008a) identified issues in the development of social work education in Nigeria and they are grouped under the following perspectives:

- Remedial perspective
- Indigenization and developmental perspective
- Internationalization

Remedial perspective

According to Anucha (2008b), early social workers in Nigeria were trained in the tradition of casework which is limited in scope and informed by models of practice that are not compatible with the cultural realities, however, the Nigerian social work was remedial in nature, urban-focused, revolves around charity and casework that locates the problem within the individual and their families, coupled with lack of resources to effectively address clients' needs. This amongst others stands out as the reason why social work educators started questioning the relevance of such borrowed knowledge to African culture. Shawky (1972) observed that Africa is faced with major social problems, and for that reason, the social work profession should go beyond solving minor problems to addressing major problems. Burke and Ngonyani (2004) rightly pointed out that, though social problems in Africa may be similar to that of the developed countries, yet are more complex and worsened by factors of poverty and economic system. The authors also noted that some social problems are unique and peculiar to Africans (e.g. poverty, lack of education, and good health).

Consequently, the alarm was raised by Nigerian social work educators on the professional imperialism and the inability to reconcile social work knowledge and the local realities in the developing countries due to cultural differences, despite that not much curriculum change has been affected to address these issues. Odiah (1991) pointed out that an argument was also raised on how social work in the developing country will eventually be developed to meet up to the western standard. So, the focus shifted to reorganizing the social work curriculum to be able to address the local realities. Despite efforts made, more than four decades after Nigeria's independence, social work education in Nigeria is still influenced by the legacies of Western social work

Indigenization and developmental perspective

Social work educators in Nigeria having realized the implication of the legacy of imperialism, started thinking of indigenization of social work in Nigeria. This indigenization perspective is focused on how to inculcate local content in social work education curriculum and practice to tackle modern and cultural realities. Questions were raised on how to transform the Western-influenced theories, and practice into developmental social work and what the curriculum will contain. Although training facilities were set up to address this inequality by way of gradually shifting toward local content and knowledge in the teaching and practice of social work in Nigeria, this shift however is yet to change the reliance on Western social work knowledge. According to Odiah (1991), the local content inculcated in the social work education curriculum in Nigeria is barely 10% compared with the British content. A situation he described as widening the gap and enforcing the condition of imperialism (e.g. course materials on social welfare policies focused on the British social policy and administration while courses on the history of social work focused on the history of social work in Europe and North America). Odiah (1991) pointed out that the curriculum content is inappropriate for training practices.

According to Mupedziswa (2001), for social work to move from remedial practice to preventative and rehabilitative intervention, it must re-organize its programmes within a social developmental approach starting from social work education and training. Mupedziswa (2001) proposed some curriculum-related and non-curriculum activities as a blueprint through which schools of social work can evaluate their programmes and ensure the promotion of a social work developmental perspective. Curriculum-related activities include: field practice and workshops, rural placement, seminars, guest lecturers, awareness of indigenization concept, self-directed learning, role plays, giving assignments for students, use of indigenous teaching materials, local research, local staff, participation in national social policy development, and monitoring. According to Nnama et al (2022), the key idea in indigenization is the decolonization of

the curricula which will help put social work education in Nigeria on the path of developing home-grown theories and models in the teaching and practice of social work. Canavera, et al. (2020) also noted the importance of ensuring appropriateness to the expectation of social work professionally and academically in a particular environment. It was also suggested by Amadasun (2019) that through in-depth research involving local people, indigenous knowledge will be discovered, harnessed, and integrated into the social work education curriculum. Okoye and Ebimgbo (2022) noted student fieldwork practicum should be assigned to an effective field work officer who would ensure that students carry out agency assignments, obey agency rules and regulations, keep records, write reports, and also display confidential commitments, students practice and learning at the same time. It was proposed that fieldwork practice will help student social workers integrate the theories learned in the classroom into their practice and this will serve as a bridge between reality and theory.

Internationalization perspective

'Internationalization' of social work is a concept that emerged in a quest to achieve a global curriculum of social work such that social work students upon graduation can fit in any part of the world and still be relevant in delivering social work services (Dominelli, 2010; Healy, 2008; Lyons, Hokenstad et al., 2012; Rasell et al., 2019; Onalu & Ingram, 2022). This has helped to create academic relationships and promote interaction and exchange between and among social work students, educators, practitioners, and researchers in different parts of the world. The twenty-first-century social work understands the need to incorporate international and global themes in individual countries' curricula to achieve a unified social work education with an international focus. According to Rasell, et al (2019), Internationalization considers a balance between local and global curriculum content of social work education. Even though there is local distinctiveness, there is a need for international commonality that was why Rasell, et al (2019) suggested a local-global synthesis in social work education; the essence is to achieve a holistic social work curriculum that could be both locally and internationally relevant without fear of professional imperialism. However, Dominelli (2014) suggested that social work instructors and practitioners must be cautious in embracing internationalism to ensure that they do not further endanger the people they seek to help. Nevertheless, some scholars argued that the dominance of the West in social work education is still very clear which needed more research to balance the North-south knowledge integration where mutual influence, reciprocity, and international collaboration are important ways forward in social work education (Zuchowski et al., 2017). Furthermore, Rasell, et al (2019), emphasized that the goal of cross-national interactions with social work students, lecturers and

practitioners, and students is to foster the ability of acting and reacting in unknown situations in ways that sensitively adapt and apply global social work values and standards to particular contexts.

Challenges of teaching and practicing social work in Nigeria

Udeani (2019) points out that the mode of teaching and practice of social work in Nigeria has made it very difficult for social workers to meet up with the ideals of and expectations of the profession. As there is still the need to develop new approaches to intervention that mirror the realities and challenges facing social workers in developing countries. To date, social work in Nigeria has no accrediting body to license social work practitioners and there is no accreditation body to properly cross-check how social work is taught in most institutions of learning (Udeani, 2019; Okoye, 2013). However, some challenges shall be discussed briefly in this work:

One of these problems has been identified as a shortage of qualified staff and a lack of teaching materials. Owing that there are very few institutions where social work is taught in Nigeria, and some of these institutions rarely have qualified personnel to teach the courses thereby resulting in a shortage of teaching staff. This has led to many core courses not being taught because there is no one to teach them (Okoye, 2013). Again, these few staff are overloaded with responsibilities and this has a consequent repercussion, risking compromising the quality of training. There are also cases where non-professionals who lack social work skills, knowledge, and practical experiences teach core social work courses in some of the tertiary institutions (Ngwu, 2014). Similarly, there is a lack of teaching materials, especially textbooks. Many libraries stock sociology textbooks thinking that this is the same as social work. Not only this, but most of our textbooks come from the USA and UK (Onalu & Ingram, 2022). Okoye (2014) stated thus:

Nearly all the case examples in some of these books are not what Nigerians can readily appreciate or understand and one of the challenges facing us as teachers are how to use local examples to portray some of the social work issues. This means that staff and students have to operate under very difficult conditions.

There is a lack of harmony in the courses taught and credits required to qualify for any of the programmes due to the non-existence of set standards for social work education in Nigeria. In the same vein, lack of professionalization is another cog in the wheel for effective social work practice in Nigeria as President Muhammadu Buhari recently declined assent to the “Social Work Professionalization Bill,” and this has left the profession without licensing and an ethical board to regulate and ensure standards, professionalism and accountability of social workers to the public (Onalu & Okoye, 2021).

Another key area that threatens social work education in Nigeria today is the aspect of poor input in fieldwork practice. Here, many of the agency staff members are not trained thus making for little or no knowledge of social work in the agency, and this mars proper supervision of students in the field. These agency members tend to feel unnecessarily intimidated and insulted by students who had to teach the staff their job (Okoye & Ebimgbo, 2022; Okoye, 2014).

Many social workers and professional caregivers in Nigeria have lost their identity and have equally lost their direction and control. Many Nigerian social workers and caregivers tend to deviate from their ethics, values, and cultural norms on daily bases (Onyekwere, 2016). Nigerian government's attitudes toward social work over the years have been discouraging (Omolewa & Kazeem, 1991). This is because the powers that be in authority hardly support social welfare services with particular reference to planned financial intermediation. Presently, the federal, state, and local government councils in Nigeria exceptionally underfund social welfare services. Government at all levels spends less than 5% of their annual budget on social welfare services (Idyorough, 2013). The unimpressive attitude of the government on issues of social welfare calls for concern.

Prospects/future of social work education and practice in Nigeria

Professionally, social work will stand the test of time despite the persisting challenges experienced. The profession is without doubt an organized response to the various social problems confronting the people (Mbah et al., 2017). With respect to effective social work practice and proper training in Nigeria, one can rightly affirm that there is still light at the end of the tunnel and it is in the light of this that Okoye (2013) affirmed thus:

I believe that the future for social work is bright in Nigeria ...but there is a lot still to be done if social work is to occupy its rightful place in a country like Nigeria which is riddled with problems that are begging for professional solutions.

Federal government agencies and NGOs are emerging and are taking over gradually the duties of the social welfare agencies. Many of these agencies are currently run by trained social workers, and it is hoped that the trend will continue (Okoye and Ebimgbo, 2022). In Nigeria today, the federal government as a matter of compulsion has mandated every health institution owned by the federal government to operate a social welfare department that will deploy the services of only trained social workers (Okoye, 2019). This order by the federal government has to a great extent assisted patients in the hospital to enjoy certain benefits from social work services and it has also created more job opportunities for social work graduates. It is hoped that professionalization will extend this welcomed development in healthcare facilities of the federal government, to other sectors and areas of social work practice (Ogbonna, 2017).

Another pointer to the fact that the future of social work education in Nigeria is bright bothers on the significant improvement in the number of tertiary institutions offering social work in Nigeria. Apart from the University of Nigeria Nsukka that first started a 2-year social work diploma in 1976, other institutions joined in their own attempt to ensure the provision of professional training in social work. Following was the inauguration of the Nigerian Association of Social Work Educators in Lagos on the 5th of May 2010 whose goal was to advance the standards, effectiveness, and relevance of social work education in Nigeria to the training of professional social workers in the country (Chukwu, Levy & Agbawodikeizu, 2022). In the same vein, the number of students applying to study social work in universities as their first choice of course, has skyrocketed drastically, this is indeed remarkable if compared to the number in the 1980s and 1990s, and during that time those who applied tended to be rejects from other social science courses and law (Okoye, 2013). Partnership with different international bodies has given social work education and practice a future. This is no doubt of immense benefit to social work in Nigeria and will go ahead to secure the future of the profession, therefore, Okoye (2013) asserts thus:

Together, partners will work to strengthen the capacity of both Nigerian institutions to provide in-service and pre-service training in social work, case management, leadership, and other skills necessary to ensure that comprehensive services are available to children and families affected by HIV/AIDS in Enugu State.

An example of such a partnership is the Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City is partnering with the Federal School of Social Work, Enugu and the Department of Social Work at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, both in South East Nigeria. The American International Health Alliance (AIHA) established a partnership through its HIV/AIDS Twinning Center Programme that supported the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and trained social work professionals and para-professionals to provide the needed care and support to Nigerian children orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in the West African nations. Of recent, there are more international partnerships and collaborations with schools and agencies that point to the attention being given to social work education and practice in Nigeria. The University of Nigeria has in recent times partnered and is collaborating with the University of Dundee, Scotland, University of Applied Sciences, Wurzburg-Schweinfurt, and Germany among others (Chukwu, Levy & Agbawodikeizu, 2022).

Conclusion

Social work practice and social work education are two sides of the same coin; such that each influences the other. No social worker can practice professionally

if they are not taught rightly. Hence, there is a need to beef up what is taught as social work in Nigeria and proper monitoring teams set to cross-check the rudiments and practice of the profession. Curriculum development is also important. The development of a curriculum for social work education relies on the outcome of social work practice, through practice experiences, social workers can draw research questions, conduct research, and get results that can be used to develop social work academic curriculum. Schools of social work need the research findings and practice experience in the field of social work to effect changes in the education of social work students, hence, there is a need to integrate education with practice in order to achieve the professional goals of social work. Social workers need to positively respond to the changes experienced, mainly to realize basic principles of nation-building, information, and views, which have undergone huge reorganization for sustainable development (Onyekwere et al., 2016).

Social work in developing countries like Nigeria demands openness and commitment to authentic African life. It was therefore recognized that one way to seek legitimacy and raise the status of social work as a profession in Nigeria is through establishing a regulatory mechanism to ensure licensure, certification, and registration (Fatunmole, 2018). Without licensing and an ethical board to regulate and ensure standards, professionalism, and accountability of social workers to the public including children will remain a challenge.

Nigerian governments should therefore rethink their attitude toward social work. This is so important because the social, economic, and political happenings in the country gravely beg for the professional interventions of social workers to address the myriad of social problems emanating from all regions of the country. It is not uncommon to hear of problems bothering on natural disasters, internal displacements, communal clashes, homelessness, and hosts of social problems. The Nigerian government needs a more proactive approach in addressing these problems by adequately funding social welfare services, and promoting of social work education, training, and practice in Nigeria. Expectedly, if a premium is given to social welfare services and the social work industry, it will pave way for sustainable national development in the country (Onyekwere, 2016). Also, more emphasis should be laid on the “social work professionalization bill” as signing the bill into law would help in standardizing and regulating the profession for effective service delivery in Nigeria.

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