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**'SOCIAL WORK IS AN
INDISPENSABLE ASSET TO
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT':
APPRAISAL OF THE SOCIAL WORK
PROFESSION AMONG UNIVERSITY
ACADEMICS IN NIGERIA**

ABSTRACT. Since its inception, the social work profession has always been concerned regarding how it is viewed by the public. The outcomes of such perceptions are fundamental in not only building the confidence levels of social work professionals but also influencing their effectiveness in service delivery. This is especially the case if such views are from highly respected and accomplished members of society. The focus of this study is to share the reflections of Nigerian university academics about the social work profession. Semi-structured interview schedule based on one-on-one interviews was conducted among senior academics in one major university in southern Nigeria. Findings, following the qualitative data analysis, reveal that, although the social work profession is considered as peculiar with promising prospects, social workers have two major challenges to grapple with if they are to attain any significant degree of relevance in the country. Suggestions necessary for surmounting these challenges are offered to social work professionals, as well as to the Nigerian political leadership.

Keywords: social work, university academics, Nigeria, professionalization, social protection.

Introduction

The focus of this study is to share the reflections of Nigerian university academics regarding the social work profession in Nigeria. Although a growing body of literature exists in relation to how social work is perceived by the generality of the public (Weinberger, 1967; Condie *et al.*, 1978; Davidson and King, 2005; Lecroy and Stinson, 2004; Turner, 2011; Staniforth *et al.*, 2011; Kagan, 2016), including among students (Dennison *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2006), studies exploring the views of university lecturers have, however, been conspicuously missing. Furthermore, these investigations have been conducted in majorly Western or developed countries, with no such existing study in Nigeria in specific and Africa as a whole. As persuasive and pivotal members of society whose opinions matter in shaping not just the attitudinal disposition of current or prospective social work students but also those of the broader society (in terms of influencing their proclivity towards utilizing the services of social workers), it is imperative therefore to explore how university academics appraise the social work profession. This is particularly integral in a context where social work services are desperately needed, yet criticized for its overwhelming reliance on curative or casework theories and models (Midgley, 1981; Mupedziswa, 2005; Mwansa, 1992; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2011).

Significantly, this study will be making an important contribution to the field by adding an African perspective (a marginal voice) to the western-dominated literature regarding the profession's perception. The outcome of this study may prove vital in spurring social workers, more than ever before, to action in the continent at large. As Kaufman and Raymond (1996) poignantly declared, 'the more that social work is perceived positively, the more likely it is to gain support for its programs, to have its services utilized, to maintain morale, to attract recruits, and to have its voice heard' (cited in Reid and Misener, 2001, p.194). Concurring with the preceding assertion, Kagan (2016) adds that the ability of social workers to defend their collective interests and promote social policies for the benefits of vulnerable populations or groups rests on the wide public support they can garner from where they could achieve sufficient social and political power. She concludes that such public support is often shaped by influential societal members such as university academics.

The following section provides a brief review of the literature, followed by an explanation of the research methodology and a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes by offering suggestions necessary for the advancement of the social work profession in Nigeria.

Review of the literature

The Nature of Social Work in Nigeria: A Synopsis

Social work services are not new in Nigeria, in the sense that it has long been an integral part of the fabric of pre-colonial Nigerian society. Organized under informal or

voluntary auspices in which the kinship system assumed caregiving roles, social work services were a formidable instrument of social organization and order in that era (Atolagbe, 1989). However, formalized social work began during the colonial administration following the Second World War (Onokerhoraye, 2011). Owing to the growing social ills in urban centers across major cities in the country, the colonial administrators, in their wisdom, deemed it necessary to facilitate the process in which social workers could be drafted to salvage the situation. As would be expected, social workers who were trained in the West such as Britain and the United States were assigned administrative roles in the newly established social welfare departments and units across various public ministries in the country. Implicit in the foregoing is that social work, as it is known today, was not established (or more aptly, imported) to address structural social problems or to promote social change but was rather a veritable instrument by the colonial authorities to ensure social control and order. As would be expected, these blend of foreign and local expatriates were charged with the task of administering a curative response to social problems through psychoanalytic and therapeutic procedures (implemented at a micro or individual level) as a precondition for restoring these “social misfits” to mainstream society.

Following the collapse of imperialism and the emergence of a new political sovereign state, the new leadership were mindful of the burgeoning social problems and therefore devoted their attention on promoting social development, resulting in the series of both ad-hoc and long-term development plans in Nigeria, beginning in the early 1960s (Falola, 1999). Instructively, it was this quest for social development that led to the establishment of social work education and training in Nigeria in 1976 at the University of Nigeria. However, this was initiated by Nigeria’s Federal Government through Decree No. 12 of 1974 in conjunction with the United Nations who were, at the time, embarking on a series of international surveys that would lead to the establishment of social work and its allied training in many newly independent countries across developing regions in the world.

Although saddled with the responsibility of producing competent social development-oriented practitioners who should ‘ensure continuous improvement and transformation in the quality of life of the people throughout the nation’ (Federal Ministry of Social Development, 1977, p.8), social work education in Nigeria fell short of achieving this mandate given the overwhelming reliance on the remedial or casework model of instruction (Anucha, 2008). Dominating the scene for more than three decades, this training method finally gave way for a generalist training model in 2008 following the revision of the social work curriculum in the country. Undeniably, such a paradigm shift in professional training and education would not have been actualized without the resolute efforts of the Social Work in Nigeria Project (SWIN-P). A joint project involving three Canadian universities (University of Windsor, York University, and the University of British Columbia) and one major Nigerian university (the

University of Benin, Benin-City), today, owing to this reciprocal exchanges, social work education and training in Nigeria now operates a generalist model at the baccalaureate level (with a 300-hour field practicum training as part of requirements for graduation), and a specialized training offered at the advanced or graduate level.

Challenges of Social Work in Nigeria

Despite the positive trend in social work in Nigeria concerning improvements and innovations in educational standards, social work, as have been articulated by some observers, have continued to undergo some challenges in the country (Jaja, 2013; Onokerhoraye, 2011; Idyorough, 2013). Without the luxury of space, these issues, in no particular order, would be briefly highlighted. They include; (1) lack of professionalization, in that social work, has not yet been assigned a legal status with the implication that the title "social work" is unprotected, thereby elevating the risk of infiltration by untrained practitioners; (2) lack of harmonization, in that social workers, at the moment, do not have a unifying voice in so much a scale that practitioners (e.g. community developers and/or organizers) whose activities fall within the purview of social work, for some reasons, choose to refrain, by way of association, from the social work profession; (3) lack of social welfare/development services, in that Nigeria does not yet has in place a durable social welfare/development package aimed at, either through in-kind or cash services or in investment in human capital, alleviating the plight of at-risk populations; and (4) dearth of social workers in the country, in that the manpower of professionally trained social workers is abysmally low comparably with other helping professions, thereby creating warrantless loopholes for infiltration by impostors disguised as social workers since there is no effective and efficient social work regulatory body empowered by law.

Research Pertaining to Social Work Perceptions

Corvol et al. (2003) explain that issues on how the social work profession is perceived should begin with a precise articulation of the definition and mission of social work. Bartlett (2003), in her essay titled "Working Definition of Social Work", describes social work as a constellation of values, purpose, sanction, knowledge, and method put to action. While several definitions abound, the International Federation of Social Workers, in its General Assembly in 2014, sanctioned the following definition of social work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline committed to social change and development, social cohesion, and the liberation and empowerment of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are fundamental 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 (IFSW, 2014).

As Specht and Courtney (1994) highlights, social work's mission is connected with helping people perform their normal life task while making use of and developing community and social resources to build connections with others.

Over the years, several studies have explored the public perceptions of the social work profession with the majority of these studies reporting mixed findings (Condie *et al.*, 1978; LeCroy and Stinson, 2004), with notable themes emerging. These themes include general knowledge of social work, confusion of roles and areas of practice, gender likelihood, and confidence rating. To reduce the imprecision associated with such findings, I present these findings following the aforementioned themes.

General knowledge of social work

How the public perceive social work in terms of their general knowledge about the profession could best be described as transforming from oblivion and lack of awareness, as documented in earlier studies (Weinberger, 1967), to increase in knowledge and familiarity regarding what the social work entails, as shown in later studies (Condie *et al.*, 1978; Davidson and King, 2005; LeCroy and Stinson, 2004; Turner, 2011). This situation underscores that the knowledge about the profession has improved commensurately with time.

Confusion of roles and areas of practice

An ongoing source of concern in the professional scholarship reflects in the apparent confusion by the public regarding the roles or functions of social workers, as well as their areas of practice. For instance, in their study for the Scottish Executive, Davidson and King (2005) found that, although the public was familiar with the term "social work", but that 'detailed knowledge about social workers and specifically about the different services they provided and the means by which these can be accessed was fairly low among significant proportions of research participants' (p.7). Such role confusion extends to university students, including student social workers (Dennison *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2006).

Gender likelihood

The prevailing notion likening social work as a female profession (Earle, 2008) has been corroborated in the literature (Davidson and King, 2005; Gerritsen-McKane, 2013; Hunter and Ofori-Dua, 2013; Staniforth *et al.*, 2014). These findings may have been influenced by the disproportionate representation of women in professional social work organizations and the workforce in many countries from where these studies were conducted. Pease (2011), in quoting several sources (e.g. Sakamoto *et al.*, General Social Care Council, 2010; Healy and Lonne, 2008), for instance, identified surveys

reporting the gender composition of social workers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Her study reports that women comprised 79 percent membership of the National Association of Social Workers in the U.S., 87 percent of the workforce in England, and 83 percent of all professional social workers in Australia. While this predominant view seems established, McPhail (2004) disagrees, asserting that the gender makeup of social workers is contingent on context.

Confidence rating

Research findings regarding whether or not the social work profession is held in high esteem by the public have gone both ways, with some reporting high public confidence (Davidson and King, 2005; Sharpley, 1986) while others affirm that the public display lack of confidence in the profession (SWRB, 2011; Zigazaga et al., 2006). To elaborate, a survey comparing the helping professions in New Zealand by the Social Work Registration Board found that people had more confidence in counselors and psychologists than social workers. In contrast, Sharpley (1986) compared four helping professions (counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers) in Australia to determine how they are ranked by the public concerning their contributions to society. The author found that, among these helping professionals, social workers were perceived by the public as being the most valuable and most needed by the community. The author concludes that such astounding confidence rating arose because social workers were not only concerned with 'studying the mind and thoughts [of service users] but also helping with social problems/disorders over five times as much as psychologists [including] helping the community in practical ways' (p.60 and 63).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore and describe the perceptions of Nigerian university academics about the social work profession in Nigeria, as well as offer suggestions that would be pivotal in repositioning the social work profession as a crucial player which deserves not just to be seen but heard, particularly in the context of making meaningful contribution to pressing social issues in the country.

Results

The result is presented on the basis of the three themes (see table 1) that emerged from the qualitative data: peculiarities of social work, challenge for social workers in Nigeria, and prospects of social work in Nigeria; and they are illustrated with verbatim responses of the participants in order to allow their voices to be heard.

Table 1

Thematic Framework for the Results

Theme	Subtheme
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Peculiarities of social work	Social work as a dual-focused profession
	Social work as a liberation and empowerment mechanism
	Social work as committed to poverty eradication and social justice
Challenges for social workers in Nigeria	Lack of social welfare policies and programmes
Prospects of social work in Nigeria	Addressing poverty from the foundation
	Engaging in policy practice and advocacy

THEME 1: Peculiarities of Social Work

For the participants, the social work profession carries with it a certain degree of distinctiveness in terms of its dual mandate which concentrates on poverty alleviation and the restoration of social functioning at both micro and macro levels, as well as its emphasis on ridding societies of social injustice often situated in age-long institutions. Phrased pointedly, they discussed how social work's commitment to the advancement of social justice and social well-being ascends the profession to the realm of indispensability for any nation desirous of national development. One academic comment, *'historically, social work has been committed to social justice and the eradication, or at the minimum, alleviation of distress occasioned by poverty and other structure-bound problems... for me, therefore, it is a welcome development that social work has come to stay in Nigeria especially given the myriad of social decadence that has ravaged the country...it is hoped that the profession can make a meaningful contribution to minimizing the far too many social ills plaguing the country'*. Another academic adds, *'in a strict sense, social work is an indispensable asset to national development and this fact cannot be denied... the profession's impact has been and is being felt in many countries of the world and particularly in developing countries, and since Nigeria is a developing country, it will bode well for the inhabitants especially the vulnerable that social work assumes center stage as social work focuses on both individuals and communities. It is this concern that makes social work a top-notch or gold-standard profession among other helping professions'*.

THEME 2: Challenge for Social Workers in Nigeria

The participants identified two critical issues that they believed could cause potential problems for social workers in the country: lack of social welfare services for vulnerable groups, and the non-professionalization of social work. The participants highlighted that these issues present a major challenge for social workers and that unless effort is made in this regard, social workers may continue to struggle to make meaningful impact which is a prerequisite for their relevance in the country. One of the

participants elaborates, *'in a country whose political leadership is subservient to the global neoliberal capitalist agenda which aid and abet official corruption, social welfare policies have, for the most part, been eroded and this represents a major challenge for social workers who are expected to take the lead in reversing or minimizing the impact of this trend. In other words, canvassing for the restoration of social welfare policies and succeeding in this quest will not only shoot the profession to limelight but would equally enhance the prestige of social workers in the country'*. Another academic note, *'the issue of legalization of social work is a thorny one for many stakeholders and it represents one grand challenge for social workers in the country...if social work remains non-professionalized, practitioners would be less able to make a meaningful impact which may create a lot of problems for them as people may become agitated and begin to question their relevance. For me, professionalizing social work will put social workers in a vantage position to advocate on behalf of their service-users'*.

THEME 3: Prospects of Social Work in Nigeria

While acknowledging that the social work profession has, undeniably, a promising future in Nigeria given the rampant social ills requiring the attention of social workers in both statutory and voluntary social service organizations, the participants however averred that such prospects could be hampered based on the problem-focus of social workers and their practice methods. Pointedly, they noted that the profession's prospect would become more secure and enviable if practitioners focus their attention on addressing pressing social problems like poverty, inequality, human trafficking, gender-based violence, and child labor among others; and if they become involved in policy practice and advocacy. As one of the academics uttered, *'I envision a very bright prospect for social workers in Nigeria for obvious reasons. However, to take this to the next level of higher heights, social workers must upscale their efforts in the sense that poverty, social exclusion, inequality, etc. issues are resolved from the foundations'*. Another asserts, *'in today's world, involving in policy practice and advocacy is imperative in any field but this is particularly trenchant for a profession like social work where you are obligated to tend to many vulnerable groups but with little available resources. To make an impact, in this sense, social workers must register their presence in the policy arena and from there advocate on behalf of their target audience so that resources would be evenly distributed to them'*.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of this study is relative to the small sample size of the research participants. Although consistent with the norms in a qualitative research, the sample size limits the prospects of generalizability of the research findings. This notwithstanding, this study has made an indelible contribution to the limited body of

literature on the public perceptions of the social work profession in Nigeria and indeed in Africa. As an exploratory study, this study may become a reference point for future research on how the social work profession is perceived in developing societies.

Discussion

The findings from the interviews about the peculiarity or uniqueness of the social work profession reflect a well-documented observation in the professional literature (Weiss-Gal, 2006, 2008; Thompson, 2005). Weiss-Gal (2006) considers the distinguishing feature of the social work profession as its dual commitment to the wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole, achieved majorly through the lens of social service delivery and social justice. As emphasized in the international definition of the profession, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing through the instrument of social development, social cohesion, and empowerment for the purpose of attaining social change and liberation (IFSW, 2014).

The finding pointing out the potential challenges for social workers has long been acknowledged by social work scholars in the country (Idyorough, 2013; Jaja, 2013; Onokerhoraye, 2011). Idyorough (2013) pointedly mentions the lack of professionalization of social work as a major bane to the advancement of the profession in Nigeria. Also, he notes that the dearth of social welfare policies and programs especially for the vulnerable members of society represent a formidable challenge for social workers who are aiming to improve their living conditions. Jaja (2013) agrees and adds that unless these issues are addressed, the profession would continue to be at the sidelines in a country so eager for social work services and expertise.

The findings pertaining to the prospects of social work correlates with previous observations made by several scholars concerned with social work in Africa that the relevance of the profession is tied to the involvement of social workers in addressing social problems with broader implications such as poverty, social exclusion, and inequality (Anucha, 2008; Midgley, 1981, 1996b; Mupedziswa, 2001, 2005; Mwansa, 1992; Jaja, 2013). These commentators maintain the imperative of involving social workers in policy practice and advocacy, and in economic development as a precondition for making maximum impact in the country.

Recommendations to social work practitioners

Returning to the earlier quote by Kaufman and Raymond (1996) (cited in Reid and Misener, 2001), social work practitioners, with their profession being perceived as uniquely positioned to advance social development in the country, should get their acts together for the purpose of fostering harmony that would bring an end to the lingering fragmentations within the profession. The Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASoW), albeit a wobbly organization in all standards, should put its house in order as

it has a crucial role to play in this regard. By organizing and regrouping under an umbrella term and professional designation of “Social Work”, practitioners would be well effective in having their services utilized, and having their voices heard. This way, they would be able to achieve the profession’s historical value commitment of social change, justice, and development at both micro and macro levels (Tan, 2009).

Social workers, as the last hope of disadvantaged and disempowered populations, should, as a matter of urgency, expedite action towards advocating for the institutionalization of social welfare and/or social development services and programs for all members of society that have been disproportionately affected by strategically formulated exclusionary policies. Doing this effectively would imply that social workers brace up for collaborations with other key stakeholders and be prepared to engage in policy practice and advocacy since it is from the policy dimension that effective action could be undertaken.

Recommendations to social work educators

Enhancing the image and solidifying the reputation of the social work profession is a responsibility for all professionals, including social work educators and researchers. Educators in Nigeria should, in this vein, draw on the vibrant and rich tradition of social work by equipping students with the requisite knowledge, values, and skills necessary for making a meaningful contribution to national development. Broadening the knowledge base of student social workers and stoking their capacity to function effectively would mean exposing them to a vast array of models and perspectives within the profession, such as the developmental model (see Midgley, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2010; Gray, 1998; Mupedziswa, 2001), anti-oppressive perspective (see Dominelli, 2002; 2012; Baines, 2011), rights-based model (see Ife, 2008, 2010; Dominelli, 2007; Healy, 2008; Hokenstad *et al.*, 2013; Lundy, 2011; Reichert, 2011), strengths-based practice (see Saleebey, 1996, 2006), and structural practice (see Moreau, 1979, 1990; Mullaly, 1993, 2007; Carniol, 1992; Lundy, 2011) to mention but a few. These practice orientations offer a perfect fit for the Nigerian context given the systemic dysfunction or institutional deficit, exacerbating social ills, in the country. Researchers, on the other hand, could make a significant impact by engaging in research endeavors that includes the perspective or voice of social workers in pertinent social problems like poverty, human trafficking, and child labour etc. in the country with a view to mainstreaming the profession in terms of addressing social problems in the country. This way, practitioners would have a body of literature to rely on when faced with similar challenges.

Recommendations to the nigerian government

The Nigerian political leadership should, as a matter of social responsibility, moral courage, and political sagacity, expedite action towards ensuring that social welfare

services and/or social development programs are perennially rolled-out so that those at the periphery or margins of society could regain footing in the scheme of things of the country. The political leadership must realize that there is no surer way to national development than through investments in human capital and social infrastructure, in that by empowering marginalized populations and investing in social amenities, beneficiaries would not only become self-reliant but also would be better able to make meaningful contributions to economic and indeed national development.

Fundamentally, to ensure that social workers live up to their professional expectations, the political authorities should demonstrate profound foresight by setting machinery in motion that would ensure the professionalization of social work in Nigeria. Professionalization in this respect entails the establishment and empowerment of a social work regulatory body that would promote and protect the interest and reputation of the profession, including facilitating induction and granting of licensure. That way, only professionally trained social workers would be granted access to the title “social work” and allowed to practice in the country.

Given the shortage of social work professionals, the Nigerian government should, as a matter of expediency, make adequate support channels available to schools or departments of social work across the country to enhance their coping capacity to embark on the training and retraining of social workers. Providing sufficient support channels, in this sense, entails setting aside a special intervention fund as a precondition to offsetting the deficit in social work personnel across the country. Through this action, the political actors and decision makers in the country would be demonstrating a staunch commitment to the future security of the citizens and also signaling their degree of seriousness and sincerity towards the pursuit of national development.

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«СОЦІАЛЬНА РОБОТА – БЕЗЦІННИЙ АКТИВ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОГО РОЗВИТКУ»: ОЦІНКА ПРОФЕСІЇ СЕРЕД НАУКОВИХ СПІВРОБІТНИКІВ НІГЕРІЙСЬКИХ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІВ

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АНОТАЦІЯ. З моменту свого зародження важливим питанням для соціальної роботи було її сприйняття і ставлення до неї з боку громадскості. Те, як сприймає професію населення, відображає не лише рівень довіри до фахівців із соціальної роботи, але й є важливим для підвищення ефективності надання ними послуг. Особливо це актуально, коли мова йде про сприйняття професії впливовими та досвіченими членами суспільства. Мета даного дослідження полягла в тому, щоб дослідити бачення професії соціальна робота ученими Нігерійських університетів – лідерами громадських думок, чия візія соціальної роботи формує ставлення до неї не лише студентського співтовариства, але й більш широкого суспільства. Індивідуальні напів-структуровані інтерв'ю були проведені із старшими науковими співробітниками одного великого університету на півдні Нігерії. Результати, отримані шляхом аналізу якісних даних на основі обговорення трьох основних тем, таких як особливості соціальної роботи, виклики для соціальних працівників у Нігерії та перспективи соціальної роботи у національному масштабі, засвідчили, що професія соціального працівника розглядається ними як особлива з точки зору її місії – досягнення соціальної справедливості та соціального благополуччя і така, що має значні перспективи для розвитку. Найважливішими проблемами, що перешкоджають її визнанню серед населення країни, є відсутність послуг із соціального забезпечення для вразливих категорій населення та незахищеність правого статусу соціальних працівників. Сформульовано пропозиції як для фахівців із соціальної роботи, так і для політичного керівництва країни щодо подолання цих проблем.

Ключові слова: соціальна робота; наукові співробітники; професіоналізація; соціальний захист; Нігерія.