

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on children and its implications for social work practice in Zimbabwe: a review of literature

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Abstract

As the world is seized with the precarious impact of the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, it connotes that the welfare of the historically disadvantaged groups such as children and women remain a challenge. Notwithstanding the low infection rate of the virus on children, it is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic has multifariously affected the welfare of children in countries such as Zimbabwe. The lockdown measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus in Zimbabwe from March 2020 to January 2021 were devoid of social protection modalities for children whose future stand to be annihilated by the impact of COVID-19. As such, the impact of COVID-19 amplifies the calamities of children. This study adopted the qualitative research approach guided by the descriptive design. The collection of data was mainly literature review of journal articles, national reports and evidence other forms of empirical literature. A Critical Discourse Analysis was followed to analyse the data from which the findings were derived. This study established that owing to the COVID-19 induced lockdown in Zimbabwe there has been evidence of child labour, neglect, early marriages, delinquent behaviour and school dropout. The challenges faced by children fall within the purview of the social work mandate despite social workers not taking the lead in addressing these impacts. The study recommends that the Zimbabwe should introduce vibrant social protection systems that cater for the plights of children in the wake of disasters such as COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, Children, Social Work, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic dovetails multifarious risks not limited to the scourge of deaths and infections. Rather, the pandemic has footprints of economic, social, political and mental health implications. Wittingly and unwittingly, in the wake of every disaster, the already vulnerable bear the brunt of the devastating impacts the disaster than other populations (Nyahunda et al. 2020). In this regard, women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities are more encumbered in every sphere especially in developing countries. The United Nations (2020)

reflects that, children are not the face of this pandemic but they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 at least to date, the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing. In support of the view above, Fore and Hijazi (2020) postulates that, some 99% of the world's children are living with restrictions on movement because of COVID-19, 60% live in countries under full or partial coronavirus lockdowns and 1.5 billion children are out school.

What should be highlighted is that, the contingent measures pronounced to curb the transmission of the virus through nationwide lockdown and travel restrictions in Zimbabwe and beyond have done more harm than good. Consequentially, children bear the brunt of both the immediate and long-term repercussions of the pandemic and its dynamics (Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2021). As such, literature testifies that the COVID-19 induced containment measures are impacting a myriad of spectrums that anchor the lives and wellbeing of children in the form of disrupted learning, heightened poverty levels, spike in child labour, spike in child marriages, increased delinquent behaviour and exposure to violence and abuse among other factors (Dziva 2020; Chitongo 2020). The calamities faced by children in the wake of the COVID-19 in the context of Zimbabwe are aggravated by lack of social protection systems aimed at cushioning the already poor from perennial risks caused by disasters. That being the case, the social work practice is by principle situated at the frontline of all social ills including the challenges stemming from COVID-19 on vulnerable groups (Nyahunda 2021). Towards this end, prevention, protection and promotion of human rights are central to the social work practice in pursuit of social justice and human wellbeing.

Furthermore, it should be noted that in as much as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its dynamics ambushed the generic roles of social work, there is a tendentious need for the profession to stand in the gap. In essence, the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations such as children is simply amplifying the conundrums which social workers have been dealing with at personal and practice levels. Against this backdrop, this paper is poised to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Zimbabwe juxtaposed to the role of the social work practice in addressing the impact. The paper derives from literature texts dedicated to unearthing the challenges faced by children in the wake of the pandemic in Zimbabwe. The ultimate intention is to scale up the significance of the social work practice in closing the immediate gap and in the wake of future pandemics.

Methodology

This study utilised the review of literature as the main methodology to offer arguments on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on children in Zimbabwe. The literature sources mainly journal articles, national reports and newspaper articles were purposively sampled on the criterion that they bring forth arguments about the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, the impact of the nationwide lockdown and the role of different stakeholders in addressing the impact of the pandemic with social workers being the focal point. From this, the researchers analysed the texts

from these sources using the discourse analysis. Notably, discourse analysis can be used as the data collection tool where the researchers critique available literature and come out with new interpretations (Matunhu, 2013). In support, Tirivangasi and Rankoana (2015) denote that discourse analysis is a process whereby researchers look beyond the available grammar on what is being said and look at what is not being said. Nyahunda and Tirivangasi (2020) posit that such analyses offer new insights on the subject matter under investigation.

Findings and Discussion

Access to education

This paper also established that the COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications dealt a major blow on children's right to education across the globe. In as much as other countries came up with contingent plans to salvage the situation in the education sector, the same cannot be said for Zimbabwe. The quest to curb the transmission of the virus and flattening the curve birthed the unusual online teaching and learning models in most countries including Zimbabwe. What should be noted is that this development found the country unprepared structurally and logistically hence, the prospects of children from impoverished background to getting quality, equal and inclusive education were plundered (Mbulayi et al. 2021). The 2020 ZIMSEC grade seven examination results released in January 2021 bear testimony to the raging impact of COVID-19 on children in Zimbabwe where the country recorded a national pass rate of 38 percent. This is regarded as the worst record in the history of the country since 1980. The underprivileged communities suffered the brunt of this systematic neglect of the education system that was further exposed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A combination of mass strikes by teachers over eroded wages compounded the situation for learners on top of other technical setbacks to be outlined as the discussion in this section unfolds.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic widened the inequality matrixes between the haves and the have nots in Zimbabwe and beyond. Contextually, in a country rated the highest on the global poverty vulnerability index, closure of schools and online teaching served as a form of exclusion for children from disadvantaged backgrounds both in urban and rural areas. To worsen the situation, these measures were introduced in a blanket without backup mechanisms by the government to cater for the plights of the impoverished children. In the same wavelength, the fact that the lockdown measures prescribed the closure of the informal sector where majority of Zimbabweans are predominant connotes that most parents faced enormous hurdles to meet the online learning requirements for their children (Moshiri, Gasasira and Gijzen 2020). Consequently, the online teaching and learning model served no purpose for children in rural areas saddled by a myriad of setbacks such as lack of learning gadgets (laptops and tablets), network glitches, lack of electricity, unaffordability of data tariffs among other hurdles.

The same could be said for children in urban areas who are also trapped under the doldrums of poverty. It is noteworthy mentioning that, the Zimbabwean government failed to follow best practices adopted in other countries in terms of stimulus support

packages towards education that would guarantee equal access to education for all (Gora, 2020; Taru, 2020). Furthermore, an ignoramus approach was followed in disregarding the infrastructural backwardness in most rural areas that rendered online education unattainable for many children. These include lack of electricity and network connections where in most instances lack of skills to navigate around online learning models also stood in the gap. In the urban areas, power outages are the order of the day making learning a cumbersome process. That being said, the daunting impact of COVID-19 on children is centrally based on the inequalities it created along the socio-economic lines.

This retrogressive development is in variance with the Zimbabwe's Children's Act 5:06 of 2001, the 2013 Constitution, the Education Amendment Bill of 2019 that explicitly guarantee the right to quality education to every child hinged on inclusivity and protection of children from all forms of violence and inequalities where the state is duty bound to ensure the realisation of these rights (Mukushi and Chinamora 2021). Further, Zimbabwe is part to international conventions and protocols that pay homage to the sacrosanct value of inclusive and quality education for every child. These include, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with reference to goal 4 among other treaties (Mbulayi et.al 2021). From this, what should be noted is that, the conundrums created by the COVID-19 induced lockdown created some ills to be explained in the forthcoming themes.

Child labour

This study established that the COVID-19 pandemic which resultantly led to the pronouncement of lockdown measures in Zimbabwe and beyond plundered many people's livelihoods. The closure of most businesses, schools and the informal sector where most Zimbabweans are predominant owing to the economic woes bedevilling the country plunged many households in economic insecurity and distress. As alluded earlier that, the country pronounced lockdown measures devoid of social protection systems for the poor, this bears rippling consequences on the welfare of children as child labour cases spiked up. Ringson (2019) view child labour as work that is in constant deprivation of the child's childhood potential and dignity. Further, it is regarded as work that is detrimental to the child's mental, physical, social and moral standing. What should be noted is that, the COVID-19 pandemic landed in a country that was already clutching at straws in terms of food security, economic stability and poverty eradication (Mbulayi et al. 2021). As such, Gwenzi (2020) notes that, the ability of Zimbabwean families to take care of children has been compromised by a collapsing economy and further aggravated by COVID-19. About 6.3 million people in rural communities, including children, are food insecure (Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2020). As a measure to get redemption from starvation, the closure of schools meant added labour for most families through diversification of scavenging activities. Scholars such as Dzobo et al. (2020) and Dziva (2020) noted the galloping of child labour activities in both rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe. This has been evidenced by children seen walking in the streets selling wares such as

vegetables, fruits and other groceries to earn a living and support their family needs. In a similar view, Chazovachii (2020) opines that in as much as the phenomenon of child vendors in Zimbabwe has been topical for some time, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the situation. In rural areas, Dziva (2020) reports that child labour at commercial farms in Bindura and Karoi was on the rise.

Vinga (2020) observed an increasing number of children performing artisanal mining along Odzi River, Penhalonga, Mudzi, Shurugwi and Mazoe. In most instances, Mbulayi et al. (2021) noted that some of these children are being forced to accompany their parents while others are involved in unpaid work. The most daunting issue about these developments is that these children who are seen selling wares or involved in artisanal mining activities are aged approximately between 7-14 years. In the same vein, due to the water shortage conundrums in Zimbabwe's urban areas, Zaba (2020) observed children between 5-14 years stampeding at boreholes with huge water containers. In most rural areas, Musarandega and Chitongo discovered that herding cattle had increased since children were out of school. The herding of cattle further complements other unconventional labour activities practised by children such as farming, hawking, selling of firewood, brick moulding and petty trading. In wake of all this, the footprints of child labour dovetailed by COVID-19 are setting hurdles in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals premised on eliminating child labour. Also, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Convention on Child labour and the ILO Worst Forms of Child labour Convention have vehement provisions against child labour practices (Mutandwa 2017). From this, the authors argue that in as much not every form of labour is classified as child labour, the consistent exposure of children to these menial tasks are physically and emotionally draining which is detrimental to their wellbeing.

Child Marriages

Zimbabwe has is assailed by rampant child marriages despite the practice having been outlawed via the 2016 constitution landmark ruling and subsequent calls towards their abolishment through civic engagements. The practice is mainly woven in cultural and religious practices that infantilize the rights and aspirations of the girl child (Chimbera 2017). Poverty and low literacy levels are also contributing factors to the scourge of child marriages in Zimbabwe. In light of this, the economic repercussions caused by COVID-19 through loss of livelihoods plunged many families in food and economic insecurities. As has been the case before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, families that have been marrying off their daughters as a mechanism to redeem the family from starving. Inadvertently, the COVID-19 induced lockdowns plundered many rural livelihoods and marrying off the girl child is seen as the coping mechanism. So, poverty and economic ramifications have altered families that were not inclined to child marriages to consider the practice as a viable option. To substantiate this claim, Childline Zimbabwe reported that more than 5000 girls were married off by November 2020 due to the soaring poverty accelerated by the COVID-19 induced lockdowns especially in rural areas. The closure of schools also contributed to the rise of child marriages. This is because, schools are regarded

as places of refuge where girls find support and reprimand from teachers (Mbulayi et al. 2021). Also, the school workload serves as a good distraction in suspending the girl child's intentions of getting married.

The most daunting issue about this practice is that these girls normally marry people who are way older than them where their right to decision making is suffocated. Despite the common risks of early marriages on the sexual and reproductive health of the girl child, they face an unpalatable scourge of domestic violence. In addition, marrying off early annihilates the educational prospects of the girl child which further impede their chances of securing decent employment in future. The net effect of this is the vicious circle of poverty that continues to take a rage on them. Furthermore, early marriages are often trailed by health risks for the girl child where sexual related infections take them on a rampage. That being the case, it noteworthy to consider that the lockdowns have operational restrictions on non-essential services. As such, organisations that serve as watch dogs against child marriages as not as active like before thereby making child marriages take a full swing without any form of reprimand. In foregoing, Mugwara (2020) highlights that, teenage pregnancies were on the rise, as reported around August 2020. The closure of schools and limited activities provided ample time for children to indulge in sexual activities. This was further exacerbated by the unavailability of contraceptive pills and condoms mainly in rural areas. As the poverty levels deepens, child prostitution was noted by Munyama (2020) in the most urban and mining areas where girls between 11-15 years try to find means to redeem their families from starving by engaging in transactional sex (Mukwazhi 2021).

Delinquent behaviours

As a culmination of challenges for children compounded by the closure of schools owing to the COVID-19 induced lockdown, a spike in delinquent behaviours was on the rise in Zimbabwe. In light of this, Mugwara (2020) notes that argues that, the unaffordability of the means for e-learning brewed wanton school dropout among children from underprivileged backgrounds across Zimbabwe. Consequently, a combination of docility and quest to makes ends saw a spate of delinquent behaviours such as gambling, house breaking, and substance abuse mainly in the high-density suburbs galloping. This was identified to be common amongst boys while for girls the rippling effects of the COVID-19 lockdown plunged them into transactional sex. Mukushi and Chinamora (2021) also identify cases of gangsterism permeating across some suburbs such as Mbare and Epworth in Harare. On the other extreme of this impact, Musarandega (2020) opine that delinquent behaviours culminates from the gross abuse of substances, alcohol and drugs amongst most children.

Mbulayi et al. (2021) underlie that substance and drug abuse amongst the youth is a thorny issue and the unbearable repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation. In the light of this, children between 7-14 years were reported to be smoking dagga, sniffing glue, and drinking broccoli cough syrup commonly known as *bronco* using the street jargon. Mukushi and Chinamora (2021) further identify the highest abuse of counterfeit spirit whiskeys known as *kirango* reported to be imported from Mozambique. These drugs or substances are cheap that as most children embark

on menial tasks, they can channel the little proceeds to buying drugs. Some were reported to be abusing drugs as a coping mechanism to withstand the disruptions posed by the COVID-19 in their family ecosystems. To add on, the abuse of home-made breweries commonly known as *musombodhiya* or *mutoriro* was observed by Dhliwayo (2020) to be rampant in Zimbabwe's most cities. The *musombodhiya* and *mutoriro* concoctions are a product of mixed harmful substances such as cleaning detergents, bicarbonate of soda, thinners, methylated spirit and sugar to make its impact strong and last long. The alcohol content of such concoctions is not measured and poses serious health hazards to the addicts (Makuyana et al. 2020). Consequentially, the intoxication caused by abuse of substances push children to committing crimes such as house breaking and register them as convicts that will impede their chances of securing employment in public and private sectors with a criminal record (Mukushi and Chinamora 2021; Zimonte 2020). What should be underscored is that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are ravaging the wellbeing of children with little interventions being proffered to minimise their impact. The challenges explored under this section fall in the purview of the social work mandate.

Implications for Social work Practice

Since time immemorial, the social work profession has been immersed in disaster intervention and management with the profession's services premised on protecting the rights of vulnerable populations. In as much as the role of the social work practice is not mainstreamed in most government's contingent response measures to the pandemic, social workers are prominent figures in providing disaster management services to individuals, families and communities (Nyahunda et al. 2020b). This gives credence to Makuyana et al. (2020) who opines that social workers constitute the highest percentage of disaster managers with vast skills in fostering healing, wholeness and recovery. As for Mukushi and Chinamora (2021), the social work practice is situated at the frontlines for the protection of vulnerable groups in the wake of traumatic events. These include children, the elderly, women and the disabled. What this means is that, the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children fall within the purview of the social work mandate. Towards this end, the researchers argue that despite the marginal perceptive role of social work in Zimbabwe, challenges evolving from the COVID-19 pandemic is a prime for social work intervention. In this view, Mbulayi et al. (2021) denote that the best interests of children are central to the social work profession where social workers thrive to protect and safeguard the rights of children whenever they are threatened. In light of this, the researchers documented the role of social work in protecting the rights of children that are being overshadowed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy formulation and implementation

As an academic discipline and a practice-based profession that is premised on enhancing social change and liberation of people through concerted interventions and approaches, social workers should be at the frontlines of policy formulation and

implementation in the wake of disasters (Nyahunda 2021). The centrality of advocacy, broker, mediation, lobbying in the catalogue of social work roles denote that social workers should participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and projects dedicated to stimulating social change (Chiwara and Lombard 2017). Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that in Zimbabwe, the contingent measures that were developed to manage the COVID-19 pandemic side lined the contribution of social workers in the design and implementation aspirations. The Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Shutdown) Order, 2020 which proceeded from the Disaster Management Act disregarded the social impacts of the pandemic which require social work intervention. As such, the burgeoning of abuse of children and soaring impoverishment caused by the pandemic are not captured in disaster response mechanisms such as the SI 83 of 2020. Constitutional guarantees such as the right to social protection, education, safe environment, health and food are not being fully enjoyed during the lockdown (Nyahunda, 2021).

From the viewpoint of Nyahunda (2021), policies determines how services can be rendered to humanity and in this regard social workers resort to utilising the generic tool kit of interventions they use in normal times. In order to make interventions that respond to the calamities faced by children in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers should lobby for review of the disaster response modalities such as the SI 83 of 2020 to capture their roles in the management of the pandemic. This would ultimately pay homage to the calamities faced by vulnerable groups such as children which social workers are more orientated to by definition of the profession. What should be noted is that in as much as the COVID-19 pandemic dovetailed unique challenges, in most cases it amplified the challenges that were there before such as child marriages, child labour, school dropout, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse among others. As such, there should be a broad-based improvement in terms of policy development that addresses these catastrophes both in disaster and normal times. Considerably, the policies and programs sought to address the challenges faced by children and other vulnerable groups in the wake of disasters should be within the province of the social work practice in terms of its ontological and epistemological orientations (Makuyana et al. 2020; Tirivangasi 2018; Nyahunda et al. 2019).

Community education

The community education model is central to the social work practice as social workers thrive to enhance social change through a diverse of interventions they make in their areas of operation (Matlakala et al. 2019). Through the community education model, social workers conscientize the public about their roles, dispel certain conspiracies, propagate information about change and development, support best practices in communities and introduce new programmes as well as regulatory frameworks (Nyahunda 2021). In light of this, the proliferation of the challenges evolving from the COVID-19 induced lockdown on children and other populations connotes that social workers should ramp their role of educating communities. Towards this end, social workers should scale up the dissemination of information that castigates the harmful

practices perpetrated against children such as early marriages and child labour. This should also be accompanied by information that outlines the risks associated with delinquent behaviours such as substance abuse. With correct information, people can make right and informed decisions (Nyahunda 2021). This can be achieved through awareness campaigns on radio and television stations. Also, the use of social media platforms can be utilised to disperse information since contact-based activities are restricted under the lockdown measures. Social workers have tool kits of enhancing social change among groups, families and communities (Mbulayi et al 2021). As such, the utilisation of the community education model connotes that social workers can be useful in disseminating information about the COVID-19 pandemic in communities and adherence to the health precautionary measures.

Supporting vulnerable groups

In the wake of every disaster either natural or human made, the already vulnerable groups are the worst impacted and they lack means to leap back from the ravaging impacts of the disasters (Bhatasara 2018; Nyahunda et al. 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 widened the inequalities between the haves and have nots. In this regard, the already impoverished were pushed towards the peripheries of lack, depression and socio-economic disfigures (Dziva 2020). Children, women and the elderly constitute the vulnerable populations in the wake of disasters such as COVID-19. In light of this, social workers are duty bound to support the already vulnerable and marginalized groups by ensuring that their voices are heard and that COVID-19 related decisions consider their needs. In their interventions premised on supporting the vulnerable groups impacted by the repercussions of COVID-19, social workers must consider the plights of rural women using the social justice lenses to thwart the inequalities and all forms of discrimination which subject women to perennial vulnerability to climate change. Furthermore, social workers shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that the basic needs of individuals particularly children are met through linking them to resources, capitalizing on their strengths to find solutions to their problems (Dominelli 2018).

Psychosocial support

Social workers are prominent figures in providing psycho-educational teaching about clinical stress response and effective coping mechanisms to families, individuals and communities when confronted by traumatic events (Nyahunda, 2021). In the same wavelength, social workers constitute the highest percentage of trained disaster volunteers and they are well equipped with ideas and plans of healing, mutual aid and self-care. Despite growing evidence that drug and substance abuse is galloping, among young people, there is scant evidence of interventions to curtail the situation (Musarandega 2020). The mental health repercussions of the pandemic are not due given due consideration despite them posing a threat to the psychosocial wellbeing of children. Brown (2020) indicates that, as COVID-19 continues to impact more individuals and communities, social service workers are on the frontlines of

preventative and treatment services to ensure the health and well-being particularly of children of the people.

In countries where many individuals are infected, workers are ensuring they have access to needed services, providing remote counselling. Furthermore, disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic are causing a significant psychological and social suffering to the already impoverished populations such as children and women (Chingono 2020). The psychological and social impacts of emergencies may be acute in the short term, but they can also undermine the long-term mental health and psychosocial well-being of the affected populations (Nyahunda, 2021). One of the priorities in emergencies is to protect and improve people's mental health and psychosocial well-being (Makuyana et al. 2020). Achieving this priority requires coordinated action between government and non-government humanitarian actors where social workers should not be marginalised in the processes (Mbulayi et al. 2021). In essence, social workers should within available means offer psychosocial support through mobilising and assisting disadvantaged families with food parcels, mobilising of resources to cater for sexual and reproductive needs of women, counselling services, dissemination of COVID-19 information and risks associated with delinquent behaviours for children. The rendering of psychosocial support should transcend to offering of rehabilitation and recourse to drug and substance abusers in pursuit of enhancing human wellbeing.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a myriad of risks in the lives of the already vulnerable groups such as children. In as much the calamities dovetailed by the COVID-19 pandemic are not new, their proliferation pose devastating impacts on the wellbeing of children in Zimbabwe. This is further aggravated by non-existent social protection systems and emergency stimulus packages that could moderate the extent of the rippling impacts of disasters in Zimbabwe. The daunting impact of COVID-19 induced lockdown on children simply amplified the catastrophes faced by children prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which social workers have been dealing with in response to their professional mandate. That being said, this study established that COVID-19 impacted the rights of children in the realm of education and further exposed them to harmful practices such as early marriages and child labour. The role of the social work practice in the management of the pandemic hasn't been fully mainstreamed at policy level in Zimbabwe and this is setting a wrong precedent in the wake of future pandemics. Despite social workers having an array of competences in disaster management, they remain marginalised while the calamities of children are burgeoning.

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