

Social Work Practice in Health Sector: Challenges and Prospects in Nigeria

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Abstract

The roles of social work practice in health sector, its challenges and prospects in Nigeria. The study used narrative review from the sub-topics analysis, it shows that social work exists in Nigeria, even in health sector, and their roles are very distinct and needed by almost all patients that visit the hospital, it is evident that medical social work practice is being marginalized in Nigeria, while most countries of the world including some African countries. Medical social work practice is faced with the challenges of lack of legal recognition of medical social workers, problem of obscurity Problem of derogation and other internal leadership issues and so on. The study recommends that; to advocate for legislation and policy changes, which are tailored to respect and value for medical social workers in Nigeria and recognize professional status of medical social workers in the country. Achieving this would require engagement of policymakers and provide them with evidence-based arguments on the positive that will impact of medical social work and healthcare delivery, Promote the inclusion of medical social work in Nigeria's national healthcare policies and guidelines.

Keywords: Medical, Health, Sector, Challenges, Prospects, Nigeria

Introduction

Social work is a sub-discipline in the social sciences domain that has evolved for the past centuries, with its root traced to Britain as well as United States of America. Some other countries within the European Nations and North America also share in the development and nurturing of what has brought social work as an independent discipline. Historically, there is a glaring indication that prior to colonialism; traditional Nigerian societies had an informal system of social practice. Ekpe and Mamah (1997), boost the stance by arguing, -Traditional societies possessed certain indigenous measures of taking care of children, young people, the aged, the sick, the disabled and as many who needed psychosocial attention. Social welfare activities were mostly carried out by the extended family system in which a strong mutual feeling of obligations and dependence existed (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002).

However, the European Missionaries brought a paradigm shift by introducing and laying the foundation for a formal social work and its practice in Nigeria. Currently, social work practice has grown and developed almost in all social institutions and sub-social institutions in Nigeria and beyond. Social workers carry out a far-reaching spectrum of responsibilities and specialization ranging from providing support to those in need or faced with difficult situations like; emotional stress, stigmatization, poverty, abandonment, or significant change in their lives to clinically diagnosed emotional, behavioural or mental health disorders in individuals (Amadasun, 2019).

Social work practice is fundamentally broken into two separate classifications, which are direct social work and clinical social service. Albeit, within the dual aspects, lot of subfields of it exists to serve the psychosocial needs of a man. The paper focuses on medical social work practice in Nigeria; with special attention on challenges and prospects of the sub-unit of social work practice in Nigeria. The paper aims to review literatures that will expose the challenges confronting medical social practice as well as prospects of the subfield in Nigeria. Meanwhile, specific

objectives were reviewed as include to Social the concept of social Work Practice in Nigeria, to draw a distinction Between Medical and Non-Medical Social Work, to analyze Medical Social Workers in Nigeria, explain roles of Medical Social Workers in Hospital Setting and put forward some challenges confronting Medical Social Workers in Nigeria. At the same time, make some recommendations to improve Medical Social Services in Nigeria.

Social Work Practice in Nigeria

According to Alamu (2022), social work in Nigeria emerged relatively recently, gaining prominence in the 1970s following the devastating aftermath of the Nigerian civil war. While social work practices existed before Nigeria's independence, when societal issues were addressed through traditional methods and the understanding of community members, more structured initiatives were established during the pre-colonial era to assist the elderly, impoverished, vulnerable, mentally ill, and destitute individuals (Mbah et al., 2019). Mbah et al (2019) reinforced that the programmes at that time operated at the local level. In 1974, the implementation of Decree 12 marked a significant milestone in advancing social work in Nigeria, as it established social welfare services under the Social Development Directorate (Ajumobi, 2021). These services aimed to coordinate welfare programmes between different levels of government, conduct research focused on social welfare, and provide training for welfare agencies and social workers. The goal was to improve accessibility to welfare programs and align with the government's vision. Subsequently, in 1989, the Social Welfare Department received a mandate to promote social welfare activities, conduct research and surveys related to welfare programmes (Amadasun, 2019). Special attention was given to the training of social workers through conferences organized by the agency.

Presently, scholars are advocating for the establishment of a professional body to accredit social work professionals and seek legal recognition for the profession. What this means is that social work practice at this time did not have a self-sufficient or recognizable value or status. In Nigeria, according to Alamu (2019), social workers looked forward to an organization known as the Institute of Social Work of Nigeria (ISOWN), which was to be establish to provide certification and training for social workers in the country and dedicated to safeguarding the interests of the social work profession. This institute would be committed to five fundamental principles, which included upholding human dignity and worth, serving humanity, promoting competence, advocating for social justice, and maintaining integrity (Alamu, 2019). The establishment of ISOWN only materialized in 2022 by Act No. 25 of 2022 (Chartered Institute of Social Worker Practitioners of Nigeria). Nevertheless, in the late colonial periods; the National Association of Social Workers/Educators (NASW) was established in Nigeria by the colonial masters and it recognized the complex nature of social work and to contribute to strengthening the profession (Mahwah and Erlbaum, 2016). According to the scholars, the organization did this by addressing challenges related to social work training and education.

However, despite the determined efforts made by these associations to accomplish their objectives, they have encountered significant challenges that have hindered their aspirations. Some scholars have wondered if the stunted growth of social work, especially medical social work, in the country will have something to do with its origin and history (Idyorough, 2008; Okafor, 2004; Mbah et al., 2017). According to the account of Mbah et al. (2017), veterans of social work history, social work in Nigeria came into existence formally in the colonial era, at the end of World War II in 1945 (Mbah et al., 2017). Mbah et al. (2017) explained how the Director of Medical Services wrote a letter to the administration of the Lagos Colony in 1950 demanding that ex-nurses be recruited as distributors of palliatives to help in providing social welfare services for patients and the needy who are handicapped. The result of this, according to the source, was the appointment of Mallam Abba Namtari as the first distributor of palliatives at

Government Hospital, Yola, in 1952. This initiated medical social change, a formative mode of social work. Nevertheless, social work has grown in recent times around the world as well as in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, due to social work education (Okafor, 2004). However, the said growth has not insulated the profession from its barrage of challenges and setbacks. Some of these challenges and setbacks will be discussed under the heading –challenges of medical social workers in Nigeria’s health sector|. It has been revealed that social work grew out of necessity, but social workers now seek legal recognition to fully professionalize it. It can be argued that they have their recognition in modern times; but such argument pales into insignificance when social workers and social work are compared with other professionals and professions. The latter still wallows in obscurity as we will discover when we discuss –challenges|. The next segment will focus on a logical definition of medical social work by distinguishing between it and non-medical social work.

Distinction Between Medical and Non-Medical Social Work

At some point in social analysis, there would be the need to differentiate between medical social work and non-medical social work (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002). Medical social work and non-medical social work are two distinct but interconnected concepts within the field of social work. It is important to do this distinction, or even definition of the concepts, because this will help to straighten purpose, and direct operations of this literature review effort and any other research on medical social workers in Nigeria’s healthcare sector which will come after this work but may use this work as a substrate. Having become a fully-fledged profession, medical social work has its peculiar ideals and challenges which need specifying. The profession, like Goldsmith (2018) proffered, primarily focuses on addressing the psycho-social and emotional needs of patients within the healthcare system. This suggests that medical social workers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between healthcare needs and social needs (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002; Okoye, 2019).

On the other hand, non-medical social work would encompass a broader range of practice settings and populations, such as schools, welfare agencies, and community organizations (Whitaker, 2019). Non-medical social workers address social issues such as poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, and substance abuse while advocating for social justice (Adams, 2021). What medical social workers do is on the same lines as these ones listed of non-medical social workers, but medical social workers are involved with in-patients specifically and only within medical facilities.

The above distinction and definitions are important in that they provide the leadership and management with clear and purposeful guidelines of what they are dealing with and how important this work is to human existence. Leaders and managers must understand that just as the works of the doctors and nurses add up to provide –healing| to the patient, so that of the medical social workers do the same albeit psycho-socially. Some patients cannot even begin or continue doctor’s prescriptions which the nurse needs to administer, either due to economic, social, or psychological reasons, if the medical social worker does not intervene. Therefore, there is the need to fully recognize the input of the medical social worker in Nigeria’s healthcare sector, her laws and other social landscapes.

Medical Social Workers in Nigeria

Right from primitive times, the idea or act of humans caring for fellow humans -- especially the healthy and strong ones for the vulnerable ones -- has been part of human existence (Okoye, 2019). Such acts would have been done either out of the virtue of kindness; out of necessity or out of responsibility. Besides, the passing of time has since seen that act evolve into a professional endeavor. Though an incorporated part of the medical field now, and just recently in Nigeria, Midgley (2013) believes that the social work profession is a disparate sacred endeavour. He further demonstrated "developmental social work", a phenomenon, which he says steers the

direction of the profession of social work to ensure justice both in the social and economic sphere; re-create dignity of human life by suppressing poverty and attempting to close the gap between the rich and the poor as well as empower people and communities in various capacities. Consolidating the view, the social work is all about, both medical and non-medical social work. Social work is a diverse field that encompasses various specializations, including along the divide of medical social work and non-medical social work (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002). Iwarimie-Jaja (2002) gives a list of the duties of medical social workers in Nigeria (Table 1).

Table 1: Duties of Medical Social Workers in Nigeria

Duties of Medical Social Workers in Nigeria	
1.	Medical social workers play a vital role in bridging the gap between healthcare and social needs, ensuring a holistic care for patients and their families.
2.	Medical social workers advocate for patients' rights, helping them navigate complex healthcare systems and access appropriate services.
3.	Through psychosocial support and counseling, medical social workers address the emotional, mental, and social aspects of health, enhancing overall well-being.
4.	Medical social workers are instrumental to facilitating effective communication and collaboration among healthcare teams, ensuring coordinated and patient-centered care.
5.	By addressing social determinants of health, medical and social workers contribute to reducing health disparities and promoting health equity in communities.

Source: Iwarimie-Jaja, 2002.

In addition to Iwarimie-Jaja's listing above, Okoye (2019) presented a much more detailed explanation to the various functions performed by social workers in Nigeria. They are as follows:

Counselling Services of Psychological Depressed Patients

To experience bouts of psychological depression is normal for patients. Such psychological disturbances, as explained by some scholars, are consequences of psychosomatic disorders (Barber, Brown, & Martin, 2016). Okoye (2019) points that financial difficulty as the major issue in Nigeria responsible for patients' descent into depression. This is because the social security initiatives put in place to assist patients' economic needs are inadequate. Okoye (2019) mentions other common issues, like relationship issues, academic challenges, religious conflicts, communal crisis, and its concomitant displacement issues as well as loss of property, unexpected diagnoses like that of HIV/AIDS, etc. It becomes, therefore, pertinent for social workers to counsel these patients to help them absorb the shock and return to normal mental and emotional state.

Palliative Care

A cushioning care, what Okoye (2019) called -palliative carell, are usually given by the social workers in Nigerian hospitals to patients who have terminal illnesses. The social workers try to give psychological help to such patients to accept their lethal fate. Death, in Nigeria, is one phenomenon that is held in some grave awe. It is discussed mildly as the belief is that it will happen if overly talked about. He further submits that social workers would employ the services of religious ministers. Religious ministers are brought into it because of the high Nigerians' mainstream cultural belief in miracle. Most Nigerians believe that no matter how critical the case is, HIV/AIDS or not, that God can cure it. Social workers will therefore, take advantage of this reality to consolidate their work.

Soliciting Financial Assistance for Indigent Patients

Despite being an oil-rich nation, Nigeria, according to World Bank (2016), still boasts an enormous number of poor people. The fact that health insurance programmes are not

comprehensive in coverage makes medical care expensive. The biting challenge of out-of-pocket medical bill payment abounds. This being the case, medical social workers in Nigeria would grapple with the headache of assisting many indigent patients who cannot pay their bills. The client would have to collaborate with the social workers to identify possible financial sources, and the amount the client should contribute to offset the medical bills. Such financial sources could be relatives of the concerned patients or some highly placed persons in society, faith-based organizations, philanthropists, NGO's, and so on. Even in unsuccessful cases, the social workers, as a last resort, can help the concerned patient apply for a bill waiver, which can be granted possibly.

Repatriating Abandoned Patients

Social workers in healthcare settings in Nigeria often encounter one problem that is recurring. This is the problem of patients being brought to medical facilities by some relative or spouse, then left behind and abandoned. Okoye (2019) reports the abandonment of up to 157 patients in different hospitals in Nigeria. She further attributed that the abandonment is due to various factors, such as poverty, cultural biases (like banishment or being considered an outcast, or the belief that the patient's illness brings bad luck). In addition, spiritual matters (such as the belief that a higher power has instructed the patient's family to abandon them), terminal illness, and old age (when the person is seen as unproductive and challenging to care for) are included. It then becomes the duty of the social workers to conduct thorough investigations to determine the reasons behind the patients' abandonment. One significant challenge the practitioners almost always face is the difficulty of locating the family members of the said patient due to the absence of a comprehensive citizen identification system in Nigeria. After investigations reveal the addresses of the abandoned individuals, some of them are returned to their homes or communities, while others are placed in institutional care facilities such as orphanages, elderly homes, or rehabilitation centers. All the same, the responsibility still falls back on the social worker to complete the necessary paperwork and formalities for the transfer to these facilities. This segment has demonstrated fully the duties medical social workers perform in Nigeria, their complications and the challenges associated with the performance of such duties. These associated challenges speak of the undeveloped level of Nigeria's medical social work and open up the range of work leadership and management have to fix. Such challenges also demonstrate lack of understanding in Nigeria of the sacredness with which the medical social work is shrouded. The next segment briefly examines the context of other African countries to see if the case becomes different.

Medical Social Workers in Other Parts of Africa

Patel (2005) presents a promising medical social work context in Africa leading from the menace of Ebola outbreak as well as the Coronavirus pandemic. He writes that during the menace of Covid-19, medical social workers remind the communities in Sierra Leone of how they (the communities) had fared during the Ebola outbreak; that they only need to carry over the pattern. This goes to reveal that social work also involves education; and that education is what Africa cannot boast much of (Oyenini, 2010). Medical Social workers would, according to Patel (2005), remind the people of Sierra Leone about things like social distancing and hygiene improvement, which these people already were acquainted with from the Ebola period. The foregoing Sierra Leonean situation shows that internal leadership and management of medical social work can yield good result and impact positively on the output of medical social workers. Many other countries in Africa would have their different narratives and histories on medical social work, its inception, growth, and exploits. For instance, we briefly consider the situations in Egypt, South Africa and Zambia.

In Egypt, medical social workers were majorly and deeply involved in addressing the psychological impact of COVID-19 during the national lockdown (khalaf, 2022). However, as Grinell et al. (1976) submits there is limited data available on the involvement of social workers in medical education in the country. Fast-forward to the present, this is what Megahead (2019) submitted still; –Despite having a century-long history of professional social work in Egypt, there is a scarcity of English resources discussing social work in Egypt and other non-Western nations|| (p. 2). What that could mean is that much research coming from the Egyptian context may have been rendered in languages other than English. In South Africa, according to Riaz (2015), the role of medical social workers is becoming increasingly complex. Certain challenges faced by medical social workers in hospitals in the country have been given some special importance over others (Pandit et al., 2018). Just as it is in many other African countries, there is a lack of political/regulatory levers to encourage the required changes in the traditional curricula for social work in South Africa (Banda, 2008). What this means is that there is an intentional effort made towards the recognition of social work practice and the associated challenges in the country. This segment accomplishes an international comparison within the African context. There really seem not to be any much difference in the African situations as they all require more leadership and management input to improve the lot of medical social work and medical social workers in the continent. The next segment will shift the international comparison to the western world.

Challenges of Social Workers in Nigeria's Health Sector

Ajumobi (2021) highlights the following as some of the problems undoing medical social workers in Nigeria's healthcare setting. They are non-existence of medical social workers protection law, inadequate knowledge of the Nigerian public on the existence and duties of the medical social work as a unit of medical centres, a derogatory regard accorded medical social workers by other medical practitioners; general leadership problems (which will include poor remuneration and poor working manpower) as well as internal leadership problems. The literature associated with these issues shall be discuss fully under challenges of social workers in Nigeria. In what follows, the problems shall be considered one after the other.

Lack of Legal Recognition of Medical Social Workers

Many Nigerian scholars, Ajumobi (2021) chief of them all, comment on the issue of the federal government's unwillingness to create a law protecting social workers. Ajayi (2018) argues that the absence of specific legislation protecting the rights and professional status of medical social workers in Nigeria hampers their ability to deliver high-quality services. Such lack of favorable bills or laws prevents the establishment of clear standards, ethical guidelines, and professional development opportunities for medical social workers. Consequently, this would inhibit their capacity to effectively contribute to patient care as well as collaborate with other healthcare professionals. Okorie (2019), also opines that the absence of legislation recognizing and regulating medical social workers in Nigeria adversely affected their professional identity and hindered their ability to attract, let alone secure, appropriate remuneration or benefits. Okorie (2019) further stressed that without such legal recognition and protection, medical social workers would remain undervalued and underpaid, leading to dissatisfaction and potential attrition from the profession. Idyorough (2013) in his earlier work had also observed that medical social workers leave the country in their numbers in their search for better working condition. This situation can have dire consequences for the healthcare sector, as the loss of experienced and skilled medical social workers can compromise patient outcomes. A good leadership and management would rise and stem this tide, but nothing has been heard of those of Nigeria's healthcare sector.

Problem of Obscurity

Medical social work unit as well as the workers in it yet remains one of the most uncommon knowledge areas of the Nigerian public. Oyeniyi (2010) observes that some medical centres in the country still leave the unit as social health unit. Nevertheless, some scholars have demonstrated their outrage against the trend. Adejumo (2017) emphasizes that the lack of public awareness about the presence and role of medical social workers in Nigeria's healthcare system results in under-utilization of their services. Inadequate knowledge among the public hampers the potential benefits of medical social work interventions, such as psychosocial support, counseling, and discharge planning. The lack of public understanding also restricts referrals to medical social workers, limiting their ability to intervene at critical points in patient care.

Problem of Derogation and other Internal Leadership Issues

Medical social workers in Nigeria face various challenges that can hinder their effectiveness and well-being. One such challenge, indeed about the most painful (Osiki, 2022), is the derogatory regard accorded to them by other medical practitioners (Adeniran et al., 2021). Social workers are almost always regarded in Nigeria as the group lesser in importance and not recognized as integral members of the healthcare team (Ajibo, 2020). This situation leads naturally to a lack of respect and regard for them in the collaborative operation and opportunities in the medical setting. This can limit their ability to contribute fully to patient care as well as hinder interdisciplinary or interdepartmental teamwork. On the other hand, general leadership problems also pose challenges for medical social workers (Agwu & Okoye, 2021). Poor remuneration and inadequate working manpower contribute to job dissatisfaction and low morale (Adeniran et al., 2021). Insufficient working resources and staffing shortages can also make it difficult for medical social workers to effectively address the complex social and emotional needs of patients and their families (Okoroafor et al., 2021). Okoroafor and his scholarly team can be quoted correctly in their submission because it naturally adds up that someone who must give another emotional support would have to be emotionally stable and supported, as it were, themselves. But the truth is that all those challenges listed will certainly drain the good medical social worker emotionally.

Prospects of Medical Social Workers Nigeria

Social work in the health sector would continue to stand the test of time irrespective of the enduring challenges identified. The profession, without controversy, is an organized one set to respond to divers' social problems confronting the people. With regards to current social work practice and adequate training in Nigeria, one can vehemently argued that there is still light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore, Okoye (2019) posits that the future for social work in health sector is bright in Nigeria ...however, he maintained that there is a still lot 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. Consequently, social workers being the conscience of indigent Nigerans due to their roles in society are expect in future, they would be carried along in decision-making at national, State and Local Government levels. Especially in the health sector, knowing the position they occupy in society. Increasing demand for healthcare services: Nigeria's growing population and increasing healthcare needs create opportunities for medical social workers to contribute to healthcare delivery (World Health Organization, 2020). Besides, expansion of health insurance and access to healthcare, the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) in Nigeria aims to increase access to healthcare, creating opportunities for medical social workers to provide services (NHIS, 2020). Opportunities for specialization and sub-specialization: Medical social workers in Nigeria can specialize in areas like mental health, pediatrics, or gerontology, enhancing their skills and career prospects (American Association of Medical Social Workers, 2020). In addition, medical Social practice targets to more awareness of mental health and psychosocial support. As There is increasing awareness of the importance of

mental health and psychosocial support in Nigeria, creating opportunities for medical social workers to provide these services (World Health Organization, 2019).

Conclusion

The study focuses on social work practice in health sector: challenges and prospects in Nigeria. The challenges faced by medical social workers in Nigeria, including lack of support from appropriate bodies, problem of obscurity, derogatory regard, and more, have shown what lapses the leadership and management of medical social workers in Nigeria needs to fix. Addressing those challenges requires improved leadership and management practices that can yield a positive impact. In what follows, proven methods leaderships and managements have used to curb challenges are evaluated.

Recommendations

The paper recommends the following:

1. Advocate for legislation and policy changes to ensure respect and value for medical social workers in Nigeria and recognize professional status of medical social workers in the country. Achieving this would require engagement of policymakers and provide them with evidence-based arguments on the positive that will impact of medical social work and healthcare delivery.
2. Promote the inclusion of medical social work in Nigeria's national healthcare policies and guidelines. To achieve this, work closely with healthcare policy-making bodies and stakeholders to ensure that national healthcare policies favour medical social workers.
3. To establish dedicated leadership positions for medical social workers within healthcare institutions. This seeks collaboration with hospital administrators and human resources departments to develop designated leadership roles specifically for medical social workers. These positions should have clear responsibilities and authority to advocate for the needs and interests of medical social workers.
4. There is need to organize workshops, seminars, or training programmes focused on leadership and management skills tilted towards the needs of medical social workers.
5. To seek for collaboration with hospital administrators, finance departments, and relevant stakeholders to re-emphasize the importance of medical social work services and their impact on patient care. Advocate for the allocation of a specific budget to support the operations and activities of medical social work departments.

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