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Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
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HumanITIES 100.  
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Department of Social Work and Criminology

The Impact of Disasters on the Mental Well-being of Social Workers: Developing Resilience Informed Social Work Guidelines towards navigating mental well-being during disasters.

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# OUTLINE

- Disasters
- South Africa as a disaster-prone country
- Role of social work
- Social workers as a vulnerable group
- Impact of disasters on the mental wellbeing of social workers
- Long-term impact of disasters on the mental wellbeing of social workers
- Factors affecting the mental well-being of social workers
- Literature gap (Resilience of social workers)
- Going forward
- Conclusion
- References



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# DISASTERS

- Disasters - serious disruptions to the functioning of a community that exceeds its capacity to cope using its own resources.
- A type of collective stress situation whereby there is a failure to meet individual needs through societal processes (Zakour, 2008:3).
- They can be caused by natural, human-made and technological hazards, as well as various factors that influence the exposure and vulnerability of a community (IFRC, 2021).
- Disasters result in events that often cause human loss, suffering and social disruption.
- individually and collectively affect many individuals, professionals and communities (Van der Berg, 2020).



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# SOUTH AFRICA AS A DISASTER-PRONE COUNTRY

- South Africa has become disaster-prone – highly susceptible to disasters
- Identified among the six spaces of vulnerability and areas prone to natural disasters and crises (Pourazar, 2017:3).
- South Africa – only African country affected by five out of six types of weather events including floods, landslide events, droughts, extreme temperatures, storms and wildfires (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022:20).
- These disasters - wreaked havoc on infrastructure and communities causing devastating economic and social losses leaving millions exposed and vulnerable (Leroux, 2021).



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# ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

- social work - long history in responding to the needs of vulnerable populations including those experiencing natural as well as human-made disasters (Nikku, 2015:601)
- Social work has a unique contribution to make to disaster discourses - typically engages with hard-to-reach communities; and works through strengths-based approaches to build adaptive capacity (Okafor, 2021:4; Zakour & Harell, 2003).
- Social workers play fundamental roles in disaster response, recovery, preparedness and planning for future occurrences (Okafor, 2021:3).
- Provide social services and give professional help to affected individuals, families and communities - targeted at restoring their independence and full functionality (City of Tshwane, 2022).
- Their interventions - include addressing social stresses such as food and income insecurities, social isolation, mental health problems and resources shortages (Country Reports: 2020).



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# SOCIAL WORKERS AS A VULNERABLE GROUP

- Working in the frontline setting – an independent risk factor for poorer mental health among frontline service providers (Froessler & Abdeen, 2021:1).
- Disasters –pose as an acute shared trauma between professionals and the service users that they serve – exposed to similar mental stressors as the public (Cerone, 2020:21).
- Research on previous disasters including (COVID-19, SARS Epidemic and Influenza) - Practitioners too are not immune to the impact of disasters (Koley & Dhole, 2020) .
- social workers often lack the mental and physical capacity to focus on their own health – and experience increased rates of mental health issues and mental illness
- Despite this, the mental well-being of frontline workers, especially social workers, is often overlooked- This is the case against the urgent need to ensure that social workers are well-supported to respond to the overwhelming needs of service users emerging during disasters.



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# IMPACT OF DISASTERS ON THE MENTAL WELL-BEING OF SOCIAL WORKERS

- Social work – stress-laden helping profession under normal circumstances
- facing a crisis - inevitable for social workers as frontline service providers to experience challenges to their psychological/mental well-being Seng et al. (2021:1)
- Social workers – face significant stressors, burdens and mental health challenges during disasters -experience a decline in mental health and worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions
- Mental health problems - adverse mental health consequences, psychological distress and symptoms of mental illness associated with disaster outbreaks (Rajkumar, 2020:1).



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# LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF DISASTERS ON MENTAL HEALTH

- The detrimental mental outcomes including burnout, traumatic stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms have been reported post-disaster, suggesting long-term implications (Cabarkapa, et al., 2020:2).
- Survivors - heightened risk of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Ripple effect - decline in the mental well-being of social workers additionally compromises their ability to provide good quality services to the service users (De Kock, et al., 2021:2).



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# FACTORS AFFECTING MENTAL WELL-BEING OF SOCIAL WORKERS

- Work-related factors - prolonged shifts, lack of physical or psychological safety, work-related bullying and lack of support - contribute to elevated stress (Søvold et al., 2021:2).
- Lack of needed resources
- High mortality rates alongside grief and bereavement (Cerone, 2020:22).
- Secondary trauma (Cerone, 2020:22).
- The ratio between frontline service providers and the overall population - adds to the work burden, stress and burnout among frontliners (Søvold et al., 2021:2).
- Lack of training in disaster management.
- fear of own demise - the deaths of social workers among other frontline workers (Carbarkapa et al., 2020:2).
- Psychological distress resulting from the highlighted factors can lead to burnout, depression, anxiety disorders, sleeping disorders and other mental health problems (Søvold et al., 2021:2).



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# LITERATURE GAP (RESILIENCE)

- Despite having complex needs and experiencing mental health challenges - some of the social workers are able to develop adaptive capacities
- Identify and access resources which - enable them to navigate mental well-being and be resilient in the face of adversities thus leading to survival and resilience.
- However, their experiences and narratives of strategies used to navigate mental well-being during the disasters resulting in either success or failure have been inadequately documented
- Dearth of knowledge - pertaining to the experiences of social workers in navigating mental well-being during disasters



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# LITERATURE GAP (RESILLIENCE) CONTINUED...

- In the arena of disaster management, research has been focused on other professionals, and less is known about social workers on the frontline (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020:1).
- Physical health risks of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic have been well documented whilst the effects on mental health/well-being have been neglected (Byrne et al., 2021:27).
- Available research on the mental well-being of social workers during disasters has mainly emerged from only a few affected countries and does not reflect the experiences of those within the African and South African context.



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# GOING FORWARD

- Imperative to manage the emerging and presenting mental health issues amongst frontline service providers, including social workers.
- Potential psychological consequences faced by frontline service providers as a highly vulnerable group during disasters tend to have profound and long-term implications for their mental well-being (Carbarkapa et al., 2020:4
- Maintaining the mental well-being of social workers as frontline service providers is also crucial for an effective response to disasters.
- Preventative measures should therefore be developed and implemented for the future.
- critical to understand and identify - mechanisms (actions, strategies and interventions) through which successful professional and individual-level adaptive capacities towards mental well-being are developed - expediting national and international post-disaster renewal and recovery and providing lessons for the future (FEMA, 2011).



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# CONCLUSION

- Recognising social workers as a vulnerable group, raising awareness on their vulnerabilities – prioritisation of their mental well-being similarly to that of their service users and their counterparts within the disaster management fraternity during disasters in the years to come (Varma, Junge, Meaklim & Jackson, 2021:3).
- These can be useful in enhancing the mental well-being of social workers during disasters or significant exposure to risk factors and adversity to mitigate declines and the worsening of pre-existing conditions
- Highlight existing strengths and skills held by social workers to mitigate the impact of adversities on their mental well-being and their efforts in building resilience to be more prepared for future disasters.
- The development of resilience-informed social work practice guidelines towards navigating mental well-being during disasters - critical for equipping social workers with the necessary strategies and resources to endure risks and various challenges posing a threat to their mental well-being during future disasters.



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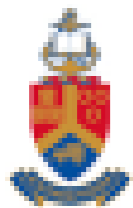


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**END OF PRESENTATION....**



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