ENABLERS AND BARRIERS FACED BY SOCIAL WORKERS IN UNDERTAKING ADVOCACY IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

Wilma C. Chibonore
University of the Witwatersrand
w.chibonore@yahoo.com

Victor Chikadzi
University of the Witwatersrand
Victor.Chikadzi@wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Advocacy is one of the key roles of social workers when fighting for change in the lives of the vulnerable and marginalised groupings in society. The fight for social justice is a key feature in the mandate of social work globally, and advocacy is vital to the attainment of the social justice mission of social work. Using primary qualitative data, this article offers insights into the enablers and barriers faced by social workers in undertaking advocacy within child welfare settings in Johannesburg, South Africa. The results show that factors such as scarcity of resources and lack of partnerships and collaborative efforts hinder the practice of effective advocacy especially at macro level. Networking forums and collaborative efforts among social workers and people from other related professions are given as some of the key recommendations to strengthen advocacy efforts.

Keywords: advocacy; child welfare sector; social workers; social justice; enablers and barriers

INTRODUCTION

Social work is a helping profession with a commitment to improve the lives of people, especially the marginalised groups. The majority of the social work clientele come from

marginalised and disenfranchised segments of society. To this end, social workers have always been called upon to act as the voice of the "voiceless" as a way to fulfil the profession's social justice mission (Dominelli 2002). Consequently, advocacy is one of the foundational pillars upon which social work is predicated. According to Lynch and Mitchell (1995, 10) "advocacy is the premise on which the Social Work profession is founded and an ethical obligation for the practitioner". Similarly, Anderson and Gryzlak (2002) note that service provision and advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged groups are distinguishing features and hallmarks of the social work profession.

However, in recent times there seems to be a deviation from this mission as the practice of advocacy is fast eroding. As the world gravitates towards neo-liberal unanimity, social work has been fundamentally affected. The wave of managerialism and state control has engulfed the profession globally and this has largely led to the diminishing role and in some cases abandonment of advocacy (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013). State control is largely mirrored in the way in which governments across the globe are shaping the nature of programmes and services that receive state support. Most such services are only but a partial cue that does not deal with the root causes of marginalisation and deprivation (Chikadzi and Pretorius 2011). Similarly the new wave of managerialism has resulted in many social workers being overly burdened by administrative tasks with no time to practice social work in its authentic form (Ferguson 2008). Similar concerns are echoed by Specht and Courtney (1994) who note that the social work profession has largely drifted from its historical mission. In the same vein, Anderson and Gryzlak (2002), and Boylan and Boylan (1998) observe that advocacy is a key feature of the value and practice base of social work since the inception of the profession, but the terrain of social work practice has shifted to constrain the practice of advocacy in many social work settings given the state control over social welfare service delivery (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013).

In South Africa, a review of literature and journal articles written in the last ten years points towards a rarity of scholars within social work that have written on the subject (Chereni 2017). A systematic review of published papers on advocacy in South Africa by Chereni (2017) showed that very little has been written on advocacy efforts in the social welfare sector. Anecdotal evidence also points to the fact that the practice of advocacy by social workers has largely diminished. Notable advocacy efforts have largely been led by people who are not social workers. The role of social workers in such efforts is either missing or not pronounced (Mniki and Rosa 2007; Stadler and Hlongwa 2002). Few scholars such as Brown and Neku (2005) do, however, write about advocacy efforts by social workers, especially during the fight against apartheid. They also report on advocacy efforts to end crime in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. They, however, note that while social workers were involved their roles were not specified. The diminishing of advocacy by social workers is especially true in government settings where the agenda for social work is determined by political rather than professional considerations (Ferguson 2008). Against this backdrop, research was done to explore

social workers' experiences in undertaking advocacy in child welfare settings. To this end, this paper discusses factors which were found to be enablers in the practice of advocacy as well as the challenges that social workers face. The child welfare sector was chosen as the area of focus mainly because children are among the most vulnerable groups in society whose voices in many cases are often unheard. Advocacy in this area is therefore a necessary endeavour and social workers should be at the forefront of such efforts. This paper contributes vital insights which can be used to improve advocacy efforts by social workers. It also calls for more research on advocacy by social work given the profession's historical commitment to social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Advocacy?

Unlike other highly contested concepts, there are little differences in how several scholars conceptualise advocacy. Social work and social workers serve people from different walks of life, albeit largely the marginalised and disadvantaged. To this end, advocacy is one of the key ways through which social workers work for better outcomes for their clients in pursuit of social justice (Patel 2005). According to Zompetti (2006) advocacy dates back to the period of ancient Greek and Roman empires in which advocacy was popularly used. It was seen as a way of speaking on behalf of others and largely involved the art of persuasion. This was regarded as a way of not only helping people but to also advance society by identifying problems and crafting solutions based on the use of persuasive arguments and provision of convincing evidence grounded in research.

From a social work perspective, Klugman (2011) defines social justice advocacy as the act of fighting to ensure fairness and equitability in resource access and allocation. It involves fighting to end discriminatory practices and ensuring that all people are treated equally and should actively participate in the determination of policies and practices that affect them.

Similarly, Herbert and Mould (1992) note that the practice of advocacy within social welfare settings concerns itself with ensuring the availability and access to resources and services in a sustainable way. They also note that the practice of advocacy does not necessarily involve direct provision of services but rather the creation of systems and enabling environments that ensure accessibility of services by all those who need them. Herbert and Mould (1992) further posit that most advocacy efforts involve speaking on behalf of people who would ordinarily not be able to speak for themselves. To this end, the participatory dimension of advocacy becomes critical as this ensures that the people who benefit from advocacy efforts should themselves be empowered to actively participate and contribute to such efforts. This ensures that clients are not treated as

passive objects but rather as people who have agency. Such a participatory approach can be a precursor to future self-mobilisation efforts by clients to organise and advocate for themselves independent of professionals (Chikadzi 2009).

Polack (2004) also defines advocacy as the practice of fighting for social justice and the universal well-being of people in society. To this end, he notes that advocacy should be a global enterprise. Similar thinking is adopted by Hoefer (2005) who observes that the practice of advocacy mainly involves operating from an anti-oppressive framework in the promotion of human well-being and dignity. This, he argues, is the very premise on which social work is founded. Curry-Stevens (2011) concurs with the view by Hoefer (2005), highlighting that advocacy can be argued to be a manifestation of the anti-oppressive thinking that permeates the social work profession.

According to Litzelfelner and Petr (1997), in social work, advocacy has two main approaches, namely social advocacy and case advocacy. Social advocacy is also called class advocacy or cause advocacy (Hebert and Mould 1992; Litzelfelner and Petr 1997; McNutt 2011). In cause advocacy people work towards effecting "changes in policies, practices and laws that affect all people in a specific class or group" (Litzelfelner and Petr 1997, 393). This form of advocacy is largely made possible via the formation of pressure groups comprising multiple stakeholders who come together to push for change that benefits the wider society. It can be viewed as a macro-level effort which is broad in its scope. An example of this would be advocating for access to free healthcare of all children below the age of 18 in a country. Such efforts yield structural changes that result in a wider reach and impact that benefit many people.

Case advocacy involves "representing or speaking for or on behalf of an individual" (Litzelfelner and Petr 1997, 394). Case advocacy focuses on the representation of clients on a case-by-case basis as opposed to advocating for a large segment of the population. To this end, case advocacy can be classified as a micro-level effort that benefits an individual and possibly a few people or institutions directly linked to the individual. As in all advocacy efforts, case advocacy should not only involve social workers representing clients. Rather it should be a participatory and empowering process in which the client is helped and capacitated to be actively involved in the change process. This allows clients to be able to take initiative in future and fight for themselves without having to involve social workers. This may not always be possible depending on the context. It should, however, be the aim of social workers to strengthen the voices of individual clients so that they can speak for themselves. This includes children whose agency is often overlooked.

These two categories of advocacy should not be viewed as competing, they are rather complementary. Context will determine the most suitable approach that is needed. Individual problems can and should always be dealt with at the individual level. As such, case advocacy becomes the most appropriate intervention. On the other hand, a problem affecting the masses cannot be adequately dealt with via case advocacy; it calls for an intervention that caters for the broader audience. Thus, cause advocacy

which deals with macro-level change would be deemed to be the most appropriate form of intervention. In addition, it is possible that case advocacy can actually lead to policy changes at macro level. For example, social workers help a client to sue the state on a specific case. The judgment given can be used by many other people to access similar benefits given to the initial complainant. In such cases, the state will most likely undertake policy changes in order to align with the position of the court. It is, therefore, critical that social workers should have an appreciation of case advocacy that is held in the same high regard that tends to be accorded to advocacy or change efforts happening at a macro level.

Why advocacy?

Within the South African context social work has previously been characterised as being unhelpful (Chikadzi and Pretorius 2011). In most instances, social workers have been accused of participation in service provision that creates a dependency syndrome rather than fostering empowerment and capacity building. The agenda for social work is largely politically driven. As such, social work professionals have largely been disparaged for passively working to implement policies which they never participated in formulating (Mazibuko and Gray 2004). This failure to be involved in policy formulation often leads to policies that have harmful consequences for the disadvantaged. Thus, state-driven efforts to eradicate poverty, marginalisation and deprivation of people largely result in papering over symptoms of the problem without tackling the root causes. This only serves to maintain poor people in their disenfranchised position (Chikadzi and Pretorius 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

This article discusses data based on an objective of a study in which a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative research was used because it allows the inquirer to explore participants' lived experiences and views (Creswell 2009). A multi-case study design was used, and as such the experiences of social workers from multiple organisations were sought. The research objective on which the findings of this paper are based was:

•   To establish which enablers and barriers are faced by social workers in undertaking advocacy work within the child welfare sector.

SAMPLING

Data were collected from 10 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate within the child welfare sector. Organisations in the greater Johannesburg area were used as the population from which the 10 selected organisations were drawn. Non-probability purposive sampling, which is based on the researcher's own judgement (Patton 1990), was used to select the organisations with the main consideration that they had to be NGOs which operate in the child welfare sector. Convenience and accessibility were the main determinants why NGOs in the greater Johannesburg area were selected. After purposively identifying NGOs operating in the child welfare sector in Johannesburg, initial contact with the NGOs was made by email. A participant information sheet explaining the purposes of the research was attached to the emails. The first 10 organisations that responded positively to the researcher's request were chosen to participate in the study.

In each of these organisations, one social worker was selected for interviewing. A combination of availability and purposive sampling was used to select social workers. The criteria for selection were based on the fact that the participants had to be registered as social workers with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) and should have worked for more than one year within the child welfare sector so as to be able to offer comprehensive answers that were directly relevant to the purpose of the research. The directors and managers at the NGOs forwarded the request for participation in the study to social workers, and those that showed willingness responded showing their availability. The study sample was not limited to a particular age group, sex or race as these variables were deemed to not affect the research objectives. From the sample of 10 social workers, five were female and five were male.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected via in-depth interviews that lasted approximately an hour. A semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended questions was used to guide the interviewing process (Bryman 2008). With consent from the participants, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the interviews were conducted by the researcher, and English was used as the language of communication in all the interviews. The data collected were focused on both case and cause advocacy. Thematic content analysis steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to analyse the data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

In undertaking the study several ethical considerations were taken into account. Permission to conduct the study was given by the non-medical ethics committee of the University of the Witwatersrand. The ethics clearance protocol number is H14/04/16.

The participant information sheet clearly specified that participation was voluntary, and informed consent was sought from participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the final research report were also assured. Member checking was employed to enhance the trustworthiness of findings. The recording of the interviews using a digital recording device also contributed to the credibility and accuracy of the findings.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The number of participants utilised in the study was rather small and this limited the depth and breadth of the data. Future studies need to be done using larger samples. Social workers were largely sharing their own experiences, and given the huge turnover of social workers moving from NGOs to government departments, there is a possibility that some rich cases of advocacy efforts done within these organisations would not have been captured. Future studies should therefore focus on documenting advocacy efforts done in NGOs rather than on social workers' personal experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Enablers for effective advocacy practice

Multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaboration

Working in partnership with other professionals and likeminded organisations was raised as one of the most important factors that enable effective advocacy. In the practice of both case and cause advocacy, working in partnership with other stakeholders was argued to be a critical factor that led to successful advocacy efforts. Participants noted that when alliances are formed in tackling a particular case or cause, they allow for the inclusion of people with various specialist skills and expertise. The diversity of skills and experience of multiple organisations was regarded as a crucial support mechanism to strengthen the base for effective advocacy and change efforts.

Emphasising the importance of collaboration, one participant mentioned:

> We work closely with The Centre for Child Law at the University of Pretoria, and we also work closely with the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, so those are lawyers. They are the gurus in child protection field. So what makes it favourable to practice it here is that we have people who are actually well-versed in child legislation. (Participant 1)

Another participant said:

> … networking with other organisations that they link us with so that we can try to spread the word around. I think of late what comes to mind is our marketing manager, she has got good relationships with people from non-governmental organisations … I think also the good relationship that we have established with the different stakeholders in the community, the local councillor, and also the media house. (Participant 2)

The verbatim quotes above point to the fact that partnerships, networks and collaborations are a critical factor when undertaking advocacy activities. Most such partnerships and networks are not random, rather, they are strategic alliances which are entered into after careful evaluation of the skills set, experience and personnel that are needed when advocating on a particular issue. For example, the verbatim quote above about an NGO working with the Centre for Child Law demonstrates a deliberate partnering with an organisation that offers a key skills set of legal services which social workers would not be able to undertake. Participants noted that most such partnerships included stakeholders from diverse backgrounds apart from social workers. It is therefore, critical for social workers to realise that while they may need to take the lead in fighting for children's welfare, they cannot do it effectively while working alone. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders can help to not only bring varied expertise, but may also help to unlock resources that will enhance effective advocacy efforts. Multi-disciplinary teams can also bring impetus to advocacy efforts. Critical learning and knowledge transfer also tend to happen given that stakeholders bring with them a wealth of experiences that get to be shared in the course of working together.

The importance of forming partnerships and alliances in advocacy efforts is supported by scholars such as McNutt (2011) and Mazibuko and Gray (2004) who note that social workers who work in isolation or as individuals would lack the necessary clout needed to push for change especially in cause advocacy which aims to effect macro-level change. They note that past advocacy efforts by social workers have largely been successful owing to their united efforts. Despite the obvious benefit of partnerships and collaborations, scholars such as Chikadzi and Mafetsa (2013) note that a silo culture largely characterises service delivery within the social welfare sector in South Africa, and that getting social workers from different organisations working together is a major challenge. To this end, it is paramount that efforts be made to unite organisations and professionals when advocating for child welfare issues. Presenting a united front in advocacy would no doubt give clout to such efforts and make advocacy a more effective enterprise.

INVOLVEMENT OF CLIENTELE

The involvement of children in advocacy was also seen as a key factor that made advocacy more effective. Participants noted that when social workers speak on behalf of children without involving them, it reduced the impact of their efforts given the "faceless" nature

of their advocacy efforts. To this end, the involvement of children was argued to be an important factor that ensured effective advocacy work as the children were seen to play a key role in sending the message across to the target audience. Children's involvement was also seen as an empowering tool for them to be aware of the various negative issues that affect them, and to learn how to deal with them.

One participant underscored the importance of children's involvement by noting the following:

> In fact the policy governs that child participation should be at the core and centre of child protection so by protecting children or advocating for the children we have to include them, we have to incorporate them … and also when these decisions have to be made for these children, children have the right to say what they feel should be the best way to handle the particular case and also it depends with their maturity and with their ability to process some of the information the decisions, so they will be guided by the social worker but they do participate in advocacy work and in decision-making. (Participant 3)

Another participant argued:

> When children participate in advocacy efforts the message is put across in a much more effective way, it appeals better than when adults represent children who cannot be seen. So if you want success you must involve the children. (Participant 7)

It is clear from the participants' views above that the involvement of children in advocacy efforts is regarded as central. Despite children being regarded as a vulnerable group that cannot effectively represent itself, there is the realisation that children can be capacitated to allow for them to be involved in advocating for their own rights. When children are involved in fighting for their own rights, it can give more clout and make the efforts more effective. Sosin and Caulum (1983) argue that it is necessary to have an advocate who is the victim or the one experiencing the problem. They note that having intervention which involves a third party may affect the outcome of an intervention given that a third party can be seen as an outsider. If children are involved, it is palpable that it results in better emotional appeal and makes the issue more realistic thereby improving the prospects of successful advocacy efforts. The involvement of children is not only necessary in giving better appeal to advocacy efforts, enlisting children's participation also helps to empower them to have agency and the ability to actively speak for themselves and self-mobilise in future change initiatives. Scholars such as Boylan and Ing (2005) note that in some past advocacy efforts social workers have been accused of sabotaging and undermining children by failing to involve them in the process. This not only robs impetus from advocacy efforts, it also treats children as passive "objects" who cannot participate in issues affecting their own situation.

ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Organisational support was also argued to be a crucial factor that enabled effective advocacy efforts. Participants noted that in many instances their own organisations were not necessarily involved in advocacy efforts especially cause advocacy. As such, their participation in advocacy efforts is only made possible if they join efforts by other organisations that are involved in advocacy. However, this is only possible if the organisations that employ social workers are supportive of their involvement given that such initiatives are not part of their primary responsibility. Organisational support also involves access to time, transport and other resources. If social workers work in constrained environments where resources are not accessible, it precludes their ability to effectively advocate for their clients in both case and cause advocacy. To this end, organisational support is a critical factor that allows social workers to engage in effective advocacy efforts.

One participant noted the following:

> Whenever there is a workshop my organisation always make sure that I hear about it, and that I don't only hear about it, they make efforts that I attend those workshops which are mostly on topical advocacy issues. And whenever there is change in terms of policy and whenever there is a complaint, the organisation, whoever gets hold of the information distributes it to everybody so that we all know about the current trends. And our organisation actually has an advocacy officer, she is very [knowledgeable] on current child protection issues and she attends numerous events, and she sits in numerous child protection committees so whatever meeting or workshop she goes to she gives us feedback. That on its own I think is support enough for us. (Participant 5)

The above verbatim quote demonstrates an effort by the management in an organisation to be supportive in creating an enabling environment for social workers to undertake advocacy work. In the absence of an enabling environment, social workers cannot advocate effectively for their clients. McNutt (2011) observes that it is critical for organisations to be more supportive of the needs of social workers if they are to carry out effective advocacy work. As the social work profession drifts towards the mode of managerialism in South Africa, many social workers find themselves constrained to do advocacy work. Brown and Neku (2005) note that social workers in various sectors in South Africa face resource constraints that impede their efforts to help clients. In this study it was clear that organisational support was regarded by participants as a precondition for allowing them to engage in effective advocacy efforts.

Barriers or challenges to social work advocacy

While the factors above were found to be enablers in the undertaking of advocacy work within the South African child welfare sector, various barriers which currently hinder the effective practice of advocacy by social workers were also highlighted by participants. These challenges are discussed below.

SCARCITY OF RESOURCES

Social work has been branded as a poverty profession (Dominelli 2002). The social work clientele base is largely characterised by people who survive at the margins of the mainstream economy and who are excluded from meaningful participation. To this end, access to adequate resources becomes critical in order for social workers to render effective advocacy services. Participants highlighted that the organisations which they work for are faced with severe resource shortages which hinder the nature and quality of services they render to clients be it in case or cause advocacy. As such they end up failing to get material and financial support which is a prerequisite to effective service provision. Organisational support that fails to go beyond words is unhelpful. Participants highlighted that the lack of adequate funding did not only constrain the capacity to render services within their organisational domain, it also precluded their ability to be involved in supporting advocacy efforts by other organisations. Thus, while partnerships and coalitions are an enabling factor in the effective practice of the advocacy enterprise, resource constraints largely impede such formations. One participant remarked:

> Without the availability of resources everything becomes a pipe dream because the resources are the foundation of the superstructure. So the organisation might want to support us but how will they do so? They don't have the resources. We are an NGO, we get subsidies from the government so the best they can do is to cry with us. (Participant 1)

One participant mentioned:

> … the organisation that you'll be working in sometimes ... the parameters ... you're limited because of resources so I think you know when you're in an organisation you need to just stick to what the organisation is doing. Maybe you also feel that you know this problem of children, and … it needs to be addressed at the root in the community but you know that's not the core business of the organisation then you just end up you know leaving those things but you see where the source of the problem is. It's lack of resources you'll be told our focus is children not the whole community. (Participant 6)

Working in a resource-constrained environment is one of the most demotivating and challenging circumstances for social workers. It is clear from the selected accounts by the participants above that, despite their best intentions, they are constrained to do effective advocacy work owing to inadequate resources. The lack of resources has many negative implications for the social work profession at large. Clients who receive inadequate services will view social workers in a bad light. Consequently, this tarnishes the image of the profession and may lead to lower levels of cooperation by community members in future initiatives that are led by social workers.

In South Africa, most NGOs that work within the child welfare sector are largely funded by government subsidies. Such funding is not only inadequate but comes with strings attached. As such, a politically driven agenda would not usually give scope for advocacy especially given that a lot of advocacy efforts are targeted at "fighting" the

government when social workers push for structural reforms. This overreliance on government funding also means that social workers' hands are tied and their efforts compromised given the threat of reduced funding if NGOs are seen to be challenging the government. Advocacy requires that social workers should challenge institutions and structures within society that contribute to the perpetuation of discriminatory practices. But, if organisations in which social workers work and they themselves rely on those very institutions and structures for their survival, how can they challenge them and effectively push for change without endangering future funding prospects? To this end, social workers may find themselves serving in and contributing to a system that harms the interests of their very clients. Boylan and Ing (2005) posit that resource challenges experienced by social workers are a global phenomenon that confronts social workers to the extent that some children do not consider social workers to be "real" advocates. Similarly, Brown and Neku (2005) note that social workers are confronted with frustrations and feelings of helplessness in the face of resource constraints which impede their work. Given the primacy of advocacy within the social work profession, this points to a crisis which needs a collective response by social workers nationally and around the globe. Scarcity of resources leads to another major challenge of high caseloads which is discussed below.

HIGH CASELOADS

Participants also noted that in NGOs there is a crippling shortage of social workers owing to poor remuneration and inadequate government support. This results in social workers being asked to handle abnormally high caseloads. Consequently, many social workers end up doing the bare minimum possible, and advocacy is thus not a priority under such circumstances. Advocacy takes time, effort and resources. This results in social workers abandoning advocacy work in favour of basic frontline service provision which has minimal impact. Participants noted that in most instances they have to rely on public transport to do school, home and court visits. This is burdensome and degrading for them and it results in low levels of commitment. Social workers working under these conditions would view practices such as cause advocacy to be a luxury. Even in case advocacy, they end up doing the bare minimum effort.

One participant had the following to say:

> Social workers are very demotivated and demoralised by the not so conducive, not so good working conditions, right? … you come from a home visit, you were using public transport, you are tired, the work in itself is too much, the caseloads are extraordinarily high, so one would therefore find himself or herself faced with the dilemma of okay must I really pursue this advocacy issue or I must do my work? I must do what I am paid for. Right, at the end we end up just implementing programmes and projects at the surface level at the expense of a comprehensive and holistic developmental approach. (Participant 1)

Another participant added:

> I am the only social worker in this organisation and I have to handle a lot of cases beyond my capacity. If I struggle to handle providing basic services, do you think it will be possible for me to do advocacy work? That is a luxury. (Participant 4)

It is evident from the participants' views above that they are forced by circumstances to handle high caseloads. This not only compromises the quality of services they render, but it also makes it virtually impossible to pursue authentic advocacy efforts. Impactful advocacy requires time and effort, and high caseloads would preclude social workers from undertaking advocacy. The irony is that the frontline services they offer only give a temporary reprieve as they only focus on the symptoms rather than the root cause of the problem. Cause advocacy would more likely be the most suitable method to challenge institutions and structural imbalances that cause problems for clients. To this end, a failure to undertake advocacy becomes a disservice to clients and the profession at large. McNutt (2011) observes that similar concerns beset social workers in the United States of America. He notes that social workers are often burdened with high caseloads, which impedes their capacity to engage in meaningful advocacy work. Boylan and Ing (2005) highlight the same concerns for social workers in England. It is clear that South African social workers are increasingly faced with a mission drift as they are condemned to "firefighting roles" rather than actual nation building via the influencing of structural and policy reforms.

INADEQUATE SUPPORT FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONS

Participants also raised concerns about the inadequate or lack of support from the SACSSP, which is the body responsible for setting standards and for regulating the social work profession. Several participants noted that the SACSSP as a professional statutory body is a custodian of the profession. As such, there is a need for its active involvement in dealing with challenges that social workers face in practice. Among other challenges confronting the profession, the practice of authentic advocacy is fast eroding. Yet, advocacy is a key pillar upon which the profession is founded. To this end, participants felt that the SACSSP cannot remain mum when the profession is in such a crisis. Participants felt that the SACSSP was more interested in collecting their subscription fees than in safeguarding the interests of the profession and social work practitioners.

One participant said the following:

> We have the South African Council for Social Service Professions, it is the one that guides us. But can we actually say that they give us enough support, they are not doing that. So there is this

lack of coordination [in the social work profession], and this should come from the council, they are the ones who have the database of everyone. (Participant 4)

When explaining some of the difficulties that they face in seeking government funding, another participant expressed his disappointment with the SACSSP as he felt that it is not doing enough to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of social workers. He mentioned the following:

But I can't change how people feel. It's our council. Other people that are letting us down. Other social workers should be mobilised by our council [SACSSP] which is the umbrella body. Because as an individual like this now I can't mobilise social workers. How will I do that? Phone calls alone will cost me R500 000, money that I don't earn, but council has got resources, they've got email addresses of every social worker, they've got contact details, they send the practicing cards each and every year. Why not slip something to do with advocacy in there? So that we can form a united front. (Participant 8)

It is clear from the selected verbatim quotes of participants that there is an expectation for the SACSSP to be taking an active role beyond merely regulating the practice of social work in South Africa. Being an umbrella body for social workers, the SACSSP is seen as possessing clout to be able to speak on behalf of social workers and actively seeking to safeguard the best interests of the profession. While this would seem to be a reasonable expectation it is rather impractical given that the SACSSP in a statutory body and is therefore, not best placed to challenge poor government policies and practices that normally call for aggressive advocacy initiatives by social workers. Such a role would rather be best taken on by institutions such as the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) and the National Association of Social Workers – South Africa (NASWSA). These are independent institutions and are better placed to coordinate collective efforts by social workers to implement advocacy initiatives at macro level.

LACK OF IMPLEMENTATION OF CHANGES TO LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Lastly, participants highlighted that in some instances social workers had collectively contributed to changes in legislation and policies at macro level. Yet, such efforts had not yielded much owing to a failure to put in place institutional and structural reforms that allow for an enabling environment at implementation level. In the absence of proper implementation of legislative and policy changes advocated for, there will be minimal benefits for clients at grassroots level. One participant noted:

... the children's act is revered everywhere world over as one of the best child protection legislation in the world, but it is best on paper, let's go to implementation. Totally different story. So that is a huge challenge. At times I find myself saying okay why bother? What is the

> use if, like we can change things on paper but we can't change them in terms of implementation. (Participant 3)

Another participant noted:

> We have a lot of good policies that we fought for but people fail to translate these policies into meaningful programmes that will improve people's lives. It is really frustrating. (Participant 9)

The failure to properly translate gains from successful advocacy efforts that bring legislative and policy changes, is highlighted by Usdin et al. (2000) as one of the major challenges that confront many practitioners. They note that "policy wins" that come from advocacy efforts are in and of themselves not enough. Practitioners must remain vigilant and aggressively push for the actual implementation of these policy gains and translate them into tangible benefits. Thus far, it would seem that the actual implementation of policy gains remains one of the key barriers to impactful advocacy efforts within the South African child welfare sector.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, there are several emerging issues that both practitioners and social work academics need to grapple with and find ways to deal with if advocacy in its authentic form is to remain on the social work agenda.

In a country like South Africa the majority of actions that affect social workers are likely to be traced to government policies that are either unresponsive to people's needs or prescriptive in a manner that fails to deal with people's concerns. As such most advocacy efforts as evidenced in the past (Mniki and Rosa 2007; Stadler and Hlongwa 2002) are likely to be challenging government policies and practices. At the same time, the majority of NGOs that employ social workers and that are supposed to be leading advocacy efforts against poor government policies and practices are largely funded by the government itself. To this end, their ability to advocate on behalf of clients is compromised. Social workers in such organisations may not speak out given the possibility of losing funding. Most NGOs in South Africa are struggling for survival (Takaindisa 2009) and funding is a major challenge. Funding also tends to come with prescriptions on how to use it, which also limits access to resources that are needed to support advocacy efforts (Takaindisa 2009). Several measures can be taken to overcome this conundrum.

To begin with, social workers may need to collectively form new institutions whose mandate is to become specialised agencies that handle key matters emerging from the field of practice that may need advocacy at macro level. Innovative ways can be found to fund such agencies; the collective pooling of resources from various organisations will be a viable starting point. Associations such as the ASASWEI and the NASWSA can either coordinate such efforts or take up such initiatives themselves. This would,

however, need a clear vision and solid leadership given the other competing mandates they have.

Secondly, more organised efforts by social workers at a regional, continental and global level are needed. Social workers in a region like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) can collectively organise themselves and lobby member countries in these regional and continental bodies on issues of common interest that they need their governments to resolve.

Social work academics have a lot to do in terms of ensuring that advocacy is emphasised in the different social work curricula at universities. More research and documenting of advocacy efforts are needed given the paucity of such data at present. A literature search clearly shows that this is not an area that social work academics in South Africa have been writing about in the past decade (Chereni 2017).

Lastly, regional networking forums of organisations that work in the child welfare sector need to be established and in cases where they exist they must be strengthened. This will create a platform for the cross pollination of ideas and pooling of resources and effort when advocacy initiatives are carried out. It is also critical for social workers to work with other professionals from varied backgrounds who can enrich their advocacy efforts. Such professionals will include, among others, medical practitioners, lawyers, lobby groups and people from various political formations.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the enablers and barriers that affect the practice of advocacy within the child welfare sector in South Africa. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that social workers increasingly find themselves having to work in institutional contexts that impede the practice of advocacy. The pursuit of social justice via advocacy has always been at the core of social work's historical mission. Social workers largely represent and render services to disenfranchised peoples, often victims of unjust institutional and structural arrangements that need to be challenged via advocacy. Yet it would seem that authentic advocacy is a dying practice among social workers. More and more social workers find themselves failing to practice advocacy owing to large caseloads, underfunding, resource-poor organisations and a lack of institutional support mechanisms to realise policy prescriptions that come as a result of advocacy efforts. While factors such as partnerships, children's involvement in advocacy initiatives and organisational support were found to be enablers in effective practice, the findings point toward a need to reinvigorate the practice of advocacy among social workers. Front-line service provision that creates dependence and fails to deal with the root causes of clients' problems needs to be challenged. To this end, advocacy is a necessary endeavour that should permeate the entire social welfare terrain; social workers have to be at the forefront of such efforts. Given the primacy of advocacy in social work

practice, it is critical that social workers unite to push for organisational systems and support mechanisms that are enabling and supportive of the practice of advocacy.

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