

**AN ANALYSIS OF ZIMBABWE’S MEDIA COVERAGE OF VULNERABLE  
PERSONS’ SOCIAL FUNCTIONING AND LIFEWORLDS FROM A SOCIAL  
WORK’S PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Universally, media is grounded in the critical roles of informing, educating and entertaining. In terms of informing, not only is breaking news the mainstay of media but it is also used as a mass media platform by which helping professions like social workers and public health professionals channel critical advocacy messages and be voice of the voiceless. The aim of the study was to assess the extent to which private and public media in Zimbabwe is receptive to the vulnerable persons’ plight and for reaching out to policy makers and other duty bearers. The study analysed 80 articles from a survey of renowned Zimbabwean media outlets’ and a plethora of online sites over a period extending between January to December 2015. The aim was to investigate the coverage of vulnerable persons including women, children and older persons. The study found that there was wide coverage of vulnerable persons (social work service users) in the Zimbabwean media. The paper contends the gaps in the newspaper articles include the lack of visibility of social workers and the role of state and non-state welfare agencies in responding to the plight of vulnerable populations in Zimbabwe.

**Background and Introduction**

This study examines the Zimbabwean media’s society informative role. It analyses through 2015 vulnerable persons’ survival dynamics reportage lens and frontiers for social work and media fraternity synergies. In conception of Social Work, the International Federation of Social Workers,(IFSW, 2015) notes global definition constructing it as practice-based profession and an academic discipline promoting social change and development, social cohesion, and peoples’ empowerment and liberation. Principles of social justice, human

rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are embedded in social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”. Social work practices differ from place to place and from time to time based on the policies, legislations, social problems and financial wherewithal or resources. The spatial determinants of social work practices have a bearing on how it is understood by the local citizens.

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments (Mugumbate and Maushe 2014).The profession, for more holistic methods of interventions to different service users traditionally relies on forging of networks and communities of practice of different professions and actors. The media fraternity is one of the social work profession’s key collaborative partners. It is critical and complements the operationalising of the profession’s cardinal principles like social justice. Interesting to note is that, the dividing line between the two professions’ code of ethics is tissue thin.

Not only is the media concerned with reporting topical political, business and sports issues. The print and electronic media amplifies social pathological issues bedeviling communities so that relevant duty bearers are informed of the extent of social problems so that remedial, protective interventions are initiated. Shoemaker and Reese(1996) propose the hypothesis which posits that events of extremely high intrinsic newsworthiness will receive prominent coverage. Over the years, the major Zimbabwean media houses have been instrumental in publicising topical issues on the plight of vulnerable persons. For example, environmental protection Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Environment Africa in recent years ran a The Best Environment Issues Reporter Award competition where print and electronic media reporters who would have extensively publicised environmental degradation issues in their reporting would be selected to receive the award sponsored by Environment Africa. More so, the Regional Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility also runs the Best Corporate Social Responsibility Reporter awards.

Thus, media coverage illumines the severity of situations of vulnerable people, for duty bearers to perform their obligation of linking the vulnerable and indigent to relevant helping resources for cushioning and mitigation of their suffering. Relevant stakeholders and duty bearers proactively invoke relevant laws and policies are speedily invoked and implemented.

It is significant to note that despite recovery associated with the advent of the multi-currency regime and Inclusive Government (2009-13), Zimbabwe has undergone an extended period of socio economic turbulence. This has been the key driver of pervasive poverty and increased social pathological ills the media has extensively covered. For example in year 2014, after Chingwizi communities in Chivi district in Masvingo were displaced owing to the flooding from Tokwe Mukosi dam, the media prominently reported on their plight which in turn also aided in disseminating the state of their plight so that well-wishers and more coordinated targeting could be initiated by state and non-state humanitarian actors. Given this context, this motivated undertaking a mini survey investigation whose findings are presented in this article which is underpinned by the following objectives.

- i. To investigate the extent to which issues of vulnerable community members within the January –December 2015 timeframe received media coverage
- ii. To assess the extent to which media's founding public information principle generated Zimbabwean vulnerable persons' plight attention and corresponding social workers and welfare institutions remedial interventions
- iii. To recommend opportunities for exploring scaling up of media fraternity partnerships with the social work profession's mission of service users social functioning enhancement

### **Conceptualising Zimbabwean Media Dynamics**

Zimbabwe has a diverse, pluralistic media. Just like Social Workers regulation by the Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe, media regulation in Zimbabwe is by the Zimbabwe Media Commission. Over 10 media houses are operational in Zimbabwe's print and electronic media. Macaphulana (2015) offers an insightful discourse regarding conceptual underpinning of media operation in Zimbabwe. The publicly owned media in Zimbabwe, in alliance with the ruling elite creates such huge information gaps leading to the privately owned media specialising in contesting their lies and attempting to fill in the gaps, in the process the role of the media to monitor power, to question authority, to explode myths and to speak truth to power has been abandoned (Macaphulana 2015). As Macaphulana (ibid) further notes, the media in Zimbabwe has been constructed as agents of power rather than agents of the people and by not media questioning the official narratives, no matter how patriotic they sound, censorship, distortions, silences, erasures, and omissions become the rule rather than the exception.

## **Methodology**

This study was essentially desk survey based. The researchers used a qualitative methodology of media content analysis. The researchers collected and analysed 10 renowned state and private print and electronic media outlets plethora of online stories orientated towards vulnerable persons and social development. A total of 80 articles were empirically analysed over a period extending between January to December 2015 with the aim of investigating coverage of issues to do with vulnerable persons as women, children, older persons and social work issues. The table in the appendix section depicts the headline of the story and the source of the story.

## **Study Limitations**

The study did not sample vernacular newspapers as *Kwayedza* and *Umthunya* whereas they may have covered topical socio economic circumstances of vulnerable person's issues. Moreover, it heavily relied on online websites of newspapers and rather than a hard copy newspaper which has comprehensive news stories, online editions may not load all news articles.

## **Discussion of Study Findings**

The following section examines various themes from the media articles analysed. The following themes will be discussed and analysed through the lenses of social work. Migrants, child welfare and child abuse, domestic violence, addiction, elderly welfare. In general, analysis of the collected newspaper articles reveals high tendencies of vulnerable person's issues reportage.

## **Victims of Xenophobia**

This study notes gaps in migrants issues reportage as illustrated by aftermath of the April 2015 South African xenophobia motivated disturbances that saw the movements of the internally displaced persons like Zimbabweans repatriation into country of origin. No reportage of their Zimbabwean society reintegration - under the reporting period under review. Processes of urbanization and globalisation must be noted that they have resulted in a dilution

of values that inform and sustain the extended family system and the weakening of these bonds has consequently eroded the extended family effectiveness as a social security institution. This may be key xenophobia victims reintegration issue media could have explored in context of weakened extended familial bonds as argued by Kaseke. In the same vein, a dearth exists on reportage on the plight of street children and adults (internally displaced persons) in these times of economic hardships. The Newsday article (Xenophobia victims arrive) dated 27 April 2015, however covered the arrival of xenophobia victims and the role of the International Organisations for Migration (IOM) at Beitbridge Border Deportation Reception Centre. The article noted that:

“So far 753 Zimbabweans have arrived by this route. The victims were later temporarily camped at an International Organisation of Migration (IOM) camp where support services such as free health checks, groceries and sanitary ware for women, medication and other basic essentials were provided”.

The above indicates clear lack of evidence of social work services like counselling rendered, despite the fact that this reception centre was managed by the Department of Social Welfare. Additionally, lack of follow up stories in the media covering of the returnees' life worlds and coping strategies is another emerging theme from analysis of findings. It can be noted that a research gap exists for social work researchers to engage in explorative studies investigating how more than 700 Zimbabwean victims of xenophobia were adjusting after experiencing this traumatic event. This nature of media reportage is synonymous to the relief type of social work intervention, where practitioners only focus on short term reactive problem solving interventions rather than long term sustainable problem solving. This shows the tendency of the media which is good at breaking news without updating on the story as it develops. The article also captured the role the government played in providing transportation to the victims. However, inaccuracies are noted in this article. The caption of the picture in the article is inaccurate. The victims were not receiving assistance at the Beitbridge Border Post but at the Beitbridge Deportation Reception Centre which was originally run by International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and was handed over to Department of Social welfare. This means social workers working at the border town of Beitbridge could have been directly involved in assisting returnees in collaboration with other stakeholders, but this is not captured in the media. When situations like this occur, social workers should be at the fore front of rendering psychosocial assistance and their professional organisations should provide the necessary advocacy role. Social workers visibility in Zimbabwe remains questionable

making the profession still little known. Social workers should be able to work in a multi-agency environment and be able to be recognised as the cog of social interventions.

### **Increased Suicidal Deaths**

From media analysis, there has been an increase in the number of suicidal deaths. In most cases, suicide was often carried out as a result of despair. In classic sociological studies like the one conducted by Robert Merton, suicide is a result of manifold complex sociocultural factors. This is when individuals fail to conform to societal expectations. From one angle, suicide is most likely to occur during periods of socioeconomic, family and individual crisis. Zimbabwe has been on a downward economic trajectory since the year 2000. From another angle, research into key suicide drivers identified psychiatric disturbance as the strongest cause of suicidal deaths. In this vein, depression is the main trigger (Maris, Berman, and Silverman 2000). Among the depression components, the cognitive component, called *pessimism* and *hopelessness* by Beck (1979), is a more powerful causal factor than the somatic components of depression (such as loss of appetite) or the mood symptoms (such as guilt). A closer look at the media articles shows that suicidal individuals are found to have experienced a high level of stress for a long period of time, and often have an increasing level in the time leading up to their suicidal action. In addition, suicidal individuals are found to have few resources or the resources may be hostile toward the suicidal person e.g. unsupportive family networks. Police statistics show that 651 people committed suicide in Zimbabwe in 2000 on the onset of the economic crisis. This figure could have tripled annually based on the worsened economic situation in Zimbabwe.

In one article, a school headmaster killed himself after a government led auditing exposed corrupt activities at his school (School head found hanging after audit, Chronicle 5, November 2015). In this case, the death could have been caused by the poverty levels in the country, where some professionals are augmenting their incomes through corruption. As it stands, more cases of this nature will be experienced. If social work services were readily available in Zimbabwe to deal with mental disorders, the deceased could have been advised to formulate strategies to defend himself rather than killing himself. In another case, a 44 years old Harvest House International Church Pastor committed suicide in Gweru over an alleged \$15 000 debt for rentals and other services. Probably, the deceased left dependent

family members who will suffer more socially and economically in his absence. In another article entitled “Fourth Zimbabwe student commits suicide in a week” (Timeslive 28 January, 2015), the article highlights suicidal deaths of students from the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), Midlands State University (MSU) and National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST). In 2014 MSU received a lion’s share in terms of the suicide statistics in tertiary institutions. In this previous year, three students and a staff member at MSU committed suicide in one semester between March and August 2014. Tertiary education in Zimbabwe is expensive and students normally find life very difficult. Food, accommodation and transport fares are hard to get. The departed could have succumbed to pressures at colleges that include high trend lifestyles.

Economic hardships faced by students in trying to balance academic and social life could also be the reason for the suicides. Academic demands put a lot of pressure on students which could be a cause for depression. Psychological and recreational services in Universities are not prioritised. This paper recommends that psychosocial and recreational services to help student manage academic and social pressures in Universities, colleges and schools. Students counselling services be fully operationalised in Zimbabwe educational systems, as well as the engagement of school social workers in primary and secondary schools to help students who might not be coping.

### **Internal Displacements-A new wave of Operation Murambatsvina (OM) and Unresolved Disasters**

Zimbabweans especially Harare residents experienced increased internal displacements occurrences and loss of property in 2015, exactly ten years after the devastating Operation Murambatsvina which received international condemnation. Nhapi and Mathende (2015) note that, “to date, Zimbabwean urban dwellers are still exposed to small instalments of OM especially in Harare and Chitungwiza, where recently, people’s homes in low income residential areas were destroyed...” OM in Harare normally targets people with limited resources to survive. Low income urban dwellers join together to form housing cooperatives in order to pull resources together so that they access residential stands or housing. These housing cooperatives are characterised by corruption and lawlessness which results in the current instalments of OM. In the recent episodes of OM, the media did its best to cover the demolitions in Harare South, Budiriro, Hatfield and Chitungwiza, but failed to capture the

current circumstances of the displaced persons, just like how it is failing to give an update on the current circumstances of the families that settled at Caledonia and White cliff farms after the OM of 2005. Children and women are always at the receiving end. Efforts could have been done to highlight the social functioning of victims post displacements; focusing principally on the living conditions of children and women. Apparently, the plight of children has not been covered well in the current OM instalments as compared to the 2005 OM. Social workers should be concerned about OM displacements as a home is important for a vibrant family set up. In most cases, and basing with facts from the previous OM, families were dislocated and Harare streets received a large volume of homeless people including street children. From 2005, the number of street children in the streets of Harare has ever been increasing. Their condition is worse than it was in 2005 due to the closure of Streets Ahead Welfare Organisation which rendered social work services to street children.

Displacement has not only been occurring in urban areas. In the preceding years, the media reported about displacements in Chisumbanje to pave way for Green Fuels Plant, in Chiadzwa to pave way for diamond mining, and in Chingwizi due to flooding around the Tokwe Mukosi dam area. In February 2015, 3 000 families were moved from the Tokwe-Mukosi dam basin owing to flooding fears and settled at Chingwizi camp on Nuanetsi Ranch, in Mwenezi district. The camp is about 150km from where they had lived. The plight of the Chingwizi community is still unresolved. The problems go down to how poor the Civil Protection Unit intervenes in disasters. It also goes to poor environmental and social due diligence when it comes to the construction of capital projects. According to the Environmental Management Act, before infrastructure projects are carried out, Environmental, Social Impact Assessments and Resettlement Actions Plans should be carried out. In the case of Tokwe Mukosi, nothing of this sort was done or it was done cosmetically. If it was done diligently, the impacts of flooding could have been predicted, avoided or mitigated. Mathende and Nhapi (2016) assert that “Zimbabwe has an enabling environmental protection legislative framework principally under the Environmental Management Act Chapter (20:27), administered by the country’s statutory arm Environmental Management Agency (EMA). The Act’s Chapter six, section 97 criminalizes failure for undertaking of a mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It asserts that EIA needs to be commissioned prior to any major developmental project to guarantee the mitigation of social and ecological impacts of activities like dam construction and mining”.

Interestingly to note, there are other social issues that are emerging from the media coverage of Chingwizi disaster victims. The media has been consistent in documenting efforts of service providers as well as the plight of the special groups in the displaced community. The media reported that child prostitution and pregnancies and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) have increased in Chingwizi holding camp, children have dropped out of school, and the disabled persons were walking 8km to access clean and safe water and acute food shortages. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission expressed its concerns in a media article entitled “Disabled walk 8km for water” ([www.newzimbabwe.com](http://www.newzimbabwe.com) 17/07/2015). According to the news article, “the right to people’s health including maternal services and immunisation were found to be violated left right and centre...unavailability of safe and clean water and sanitation facilities was also noted...” However, besides this fact finding mission, the ZHRC did nothing to address the plight of people. Zimbabwe Republic Police and ‘government workers’ working as disaster relief officials were also pointed out as abusing power and having exploitative sexual relationships with clients in what they called sex-for-food. Ethically the practice is wrong in terms of humanitarian principles. This shows that there was no distribution accountability and transparency. This could hinder donors in future to fund humanitarian programmes due to lack of accountability, secondary abuse and traumatising of victims.

This could have been a point of interest by the Council of Social Workers which monitors the conduct of social care workers and safeguard the service users in Zimbabwe. The media reported that Tokwe Mukosi victims are yet to be compensated as the government is struggling to raise the \$9 million required for the programme. The media reported that more than 20000 victims could be relocated again from the transit camp to pave way for a sugar cane growing and ethanol production project by Bio Energy Company. “The company owns Nuanetsi ranch and has promised to clear 60 000 hectares of land for sugar cane and provide about 10 000 jobs” (accessed on <http://www.zimbabweelection.com/2015/03/06/chingwizi-victims-to-be-relocated-again/>). Nuanetsi ranch is partly owned by Mr Rautenbach, who has a joint-venture ethanol project with the state in Chisumbanje where the community was displaced to pave way for the Green Fuels Ethanol project. The recurrent displacements show that the GoZ is not prudent in rural planning and development.

According to a report by the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) published in the media, the militant union noted that “as a result of the poverty afflicting most of the camp's residents who were displaced by the Tokwe-Mukosi Dam floods, most parents are marrying off their juvenile daughters to "well-to-do" workers from the nearby sugarcane farming community”. PTUZ also found out that there were pathetic learning conditions at the camp owing to tent shortages, inadequate infrastructure and inhuman set-ups had resulted in most young girls being married off to well-to-do men. "Children as young as 10, 11 and 12 years have fallen pregnant at Chingwizi while hundreds of other students have simply dropped out of school because of the pathetic nature of the schools. The school environment is simply not enticing to pupils, many of whom have decided to move to seek for an alternative way of life," (PTUZ report cited in Daily News,27/07/2015). Even the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans’ Association (ZNLWVA), a powerful arm of Zanu PF with a contested human rights history, also conceded that Nuanetsi Range in Mwenezi, where about 18 000 Tokwe-Mukosi flood victims were forcibly resettled from Chingwizi camp last year, is not fit for human habitation.

Situations like this also call for activist social workers concerned about human rights, child protection and social action to play a significant advocacy role. The NASWZ which champions both the rights of social workers and their clients in pursuit of social justice was silent when all these injustices were happening. Social workers in Zimbabwe are normally blamed for working with people who already have problems and not playing preventative roles through championing human rights. In 2015, it was widely reported that cases of early marriages and trafficking were on the rise in Zimbabwe. A social work educator Vincent Mabvurira, carried out a study and presented at the 2015 2<sup>nd</sup> International Child Sensitive Social Policies conference hosted by the Women’s University in Africa, titled “child trafficking and child smuggling in Zimbabwe: some legislation and policy gaps”. This was a positive response by social workers towards research focused on influencing social policies.

### **Retrenchments, Rising Unemployment and Associated Problems**

Many companies downsized and some closed resulting in mass retrenchments. About 700 state and non-state entities stampeded in retrenching workers with the UZ being the latest, retrenching about 700 workers in the last quarter of 2015. Zimbabwe’s telecommunications giant, Econet retrenched 100. The first quarter of 2015 saw more companies applied to

retrench, with Champions Insurance retrenching 22, Letombo Spar and Blue star logistics laying off 67. In total, the first quarter saw 600 workers being retrenched adding to the 7000 of 2014. Hunyani Holdings Limited and Innscor Africa Limited retrenched 170 workers in the first quarter of 2015. Carswell meets and Montana meets also retrenched 24. These may seem to be small numbers but in a country grappled with about 90 percent unemployment rate, these are huge figures and the impact is substantial. The statistics of the following quarters were not well consolidated, but in the third quarter, Zimpapers retrenched about 150 workers and 400 were on the ZBC retrenchment waiting in August 2015. In the previous year 2014, at least 52 companies retrenched, these include Grain Marketing Board, Zimbabwe Fertilizer Company, Nissan Zimbabwe, PG Industries, First Mutual, Tristar Insurance, Cargill, Beta Bricks, Tetrad Investment Bank, Stewart Bank, CFI Holdings and Metbank. By the end of second quarter of 2015, other companies which had recently “right-sized” include Croco Motors, Econet Wireless, Moonlight Funeral Services, Sino Zimbabwe, Steward Bank, Unifreight Africa, Unilever Zimbabwe, Choppies, TN Holdings, Medtech, National Railways of Zimbabwe, Air Zimbabwe, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Zimbabwe.

For social workers and welfare agencies, whose interventions are evidence based practice premised; high retrenchments statistics in a comatose economy mean an increased number of potential social welfare service users. In an economy like Zimbabwe, a retrenched person is normally rendered poor with limited options to escape poverty. Many of them do not have savings as it is a hand to mouth economy (consumptive). In terms of social security, there is nothing or meagre to fall back on, especially the contributory social security schemes pay outs run by the state administered National Social Security Authority (NSSA). This scenario resembles the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) induced retrenchments of the late 1980s. The only difference is that during the ESAP era, the government was more compassionate, as it introduced the social dimension fund to cushion the victims of ESAP and to mitigate its unintended effects. Furthermore, during the ESAP induced retrenchments era, government still ran vibrant and proactive Department of Social Services administered means tested social safety nets like Public Assistance. This time the government actually introduced an amendment to the Labour Act that further inflicts on the workers. From a social work perspective, it is an international best practice and prudent to offer counselling services to retrenched employees; however companies in Zimbabwe are not good at this. The majority of the companies especially those owned by indigenous entrepreneurs do not have services

like Employee Assistance and Wellness programmes. In South Africa for example, these services are rendered by social workers in private practice or those working for Occupational Health companies like Workforce Health Care, Kaelo Consulting and ICAS Employee and Organisation Enhancement Services Southern Africa Private Limited.

In South Africa, these social workers have become specialists in industrial social work, occupational social work and notably the University of Pretoria has a specialised Masters in Social work in Employee Assistance programme as well as a short course. Zimbabwe's social workers can learn something from their South African counterparts on how they can partner with the private sector or industries to render services that improve the emotional wellbeing of workers and productivity. Retrenchments have a bearing on the government's tax base, which results in dwindling revenue. One of the symptoms is the failure of the government to pay civil servants on time. The other one is its failure to carry out capital projects. For the first time, civil servants in 2015 experienced a sad festive season as they had not been paid their basic salaries and bonus. From a social worker's perspective, the failure of the government to meet its remunerative obligations causes social strain on families and it should be the *raison d'être* for the development of occupational social work in Zimbabwe.

Not to be left behind, unconfirmed reports suggest the GoZ is contemplating to retrench civil servants as a strategy to reduce the ever increasing national employment costs which threatens national development agenda as recommended by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as part of rationalisation programme. In pursuit of this, the GoZ fast tracked the amendment of the Labour Act, to include detrimental closures aimed at protecting the retrenchers not the retrenchees. About 81 percent of the government's budget goes towards salaries, which is unsustainable. Zimbabwe has a civil servants establishment of about 554 000. Despite this large number of civil servants, there are still a lot of unoccupied positions which undermine services delivery. For example, in a Newsday article (<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2015/07/03/1-social-worker-for-14-000-children-in-zim/>), clearly portrays how vulnerable individuals in society are undermined by the shortage of social workers in civil service. The shortage is artificial as the majority of social work graduates are unemployed. In a related article, the then Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe chairperson, Philip Bohwasi highlighted that many children were in need of social protection but shortage of social workers is a challenge. He said "there are numerous cases of children

in need of protection who remain helpless in the community...It is estimated that Zimbabwe is working on a child/client ratio of one social worker to 49 000 clients...” The article however tried to give an unrealistic picture of social workers by saying “...Many social workers left the country at the height of Zimbabwe’s economic crisis — going to Europe where most of them got jobs looking after the aged and infirm in those countries”. The last part of the statement is based on unfounded facts. Many social workers who migrated to Europe, United Kingdom in particular are employed by local authorities in Children’s social care and are not looking after the older persons. Birmingham City in the UK alone at one point employed 47 Zimbabwe-trained social workers (Chogugudza, 2009).

Chogugudza (2009) also notes that in 2009, General Social Care Council GSSC (now Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) country statistics indicate 300 Zimbabwe trained registered social workers in the UK. The article shows how ordinary people and the media lack the understanding of social work; many confuse with geriatric nursing and carers, a role which many unskilled Zimbabweans play in the UK. Social work is well recognised as a profession in the western countries and there is clarity on what they ought to do based on legislations and policies. The NASWZ and CSW have a great task to educate citizens about what social work is all about, to avoid misreporting in the media as well as making citizens appreciate social work services. There are many other government departments that are affected by shortage of staff and budget, e.g. health, many qualified nurses are unemployed yet the country greatly needs them, but cannot hire due to budgetary constraints. The Government is planning to export them to other countries like South Sudan.

### **The Welfare of Older Persons /Safety Nets for Vulnerable Persons’ Funding**

Senior citizens welfare issues were well covered in the media in year 2015. Some articles covered issues of pensions, while others highlighted the efforts being made by the state, private individuals and organisations to improve the wellbeing of senior citizens. One of the articles acknowledges the role played by Prophet Walter Magaya in his efforts to reach out to the senior citizens. The news article shows picture of Prophet Magaya leading members of his Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance ministries in distributing relief food packets to the senior citizens. Besides this, the First Lady Grace Mugabe was reported in the Herald of 24 November 2015 under the title “first lady donates to Mbare elderly folk”. These are small

efforts by individuals that make a big difference in a country without a comprehensive social security system for the aged.

Senior citizens are struggling to make ends as most of them had their savings eroded by the devastating hyperinflation, some of them also lost their money when the GoZ adopted the multicurrency regime or dollarization. Some were retrenched lately in their careers when the economic situation worsened. Some received few dollars in pension claims from NSSA after contributing for the rest of their employment history. The government itself is struggling to give monthly pension pay outs to pensioners. At the same time, the government does not have a comprehensive social assistance programme to assist the aged. A paltry US\$10, 7 million was availed for support of vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly in the 2014 budget. This money goes towards expenses like Basic Education assistance Module (BEAM), Assisted Medical Treatment Orders (AMTOs) and per capita grants for social welfare institutions. A parliamentary report on social welfare covered in the Standard Newspaper notes that “the 2014 national budget has failed to provide adequately for systems that are critical in assisting vulnerable citizens...2 923 children at orphanages had no support and many homes may be forced to downsize owing to lack of funds. The report also highlighted that “the pro-poor budget initiative enshrined in several government blueprints, including the current economic blueprint, Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET), ZIMASSET policy document, will not be realized if some of the critical social budget items remain underfunded”. The state’s underfunding for social welfare comes at a time when UNICEF- Zimbabwe Country Office bemoaned social sectors’ over reliance on donor funding. Donors in Zimbabwe have primarily been involved in child welfare, HIV/AIDS and human rights funding, with a few doing food relief. This clearly shows that the senior citizens’ future, who are also caregivers of orphans, is not bright with reduced international donor agencies funding opportunities for government and NGOs.

This also shows that geriatric welfare organisations may close due to funding problems. In analysis of this media reported bilateral support anomaly, Zimbabwe as a frontier economy where proponents of political and economic thought strongly advocate against hobnobbing with western inspired economic blueprints and economic support, this is a paradox to Zimbabwe’s development trajectory. As Dhemba (1999) notes in unpacking socio economic development schools of thought, the dependency school in which the Zimbabwean

government ideologically subscribes to attribute the chronic poverty existing in developing countries to the dominance of international capital through the control of world markets. The same international capital is the one that funds UNICEF's and other UN family units like Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) funding for humanitarian interventions like its annual consolidated Appeal.

### **Women, Youth, Drugs and Substance Abuse and Related Social ills**

Youth, women and associated social ills issues were recorded in the media. Individual and social pathological challenges like drug and substance abuse, unemployment, prostitution and well as sexual abuse came out in the content analysis of the media articles under review. From media coverage in 2015, youth and teenager parties known as 'Vuzu' are now a common place especially in Bulawayo and Harare amongst high school teenage learners. These parties are associated with drug and alcohol abuse as well as sexual misbehaviour. This is a cause for concern for social workers as in most cases; the effects are teenage pregnancies, contraction of STIs as well as addiction. Furthermore, these are potential breeding grounds for adolescents to be in conflict with the law. Teenage pregnancies perpetuate poverty amongst the young people as they find themselves unemployed or unemployable and in a situation where they have to maintain themselves and the child but with limited economic wherewithal. Also once pregnant, teenagers normally drop out of school, and in Zimbabwe it is normally stigmatised to return to secondary school as a young mother or adult. The youth have been widely reported to be abusing an over-the-counter banned medicine for coughing called Broncleer, known in street lingo as "Bronco". The high alcohol rich drug is normally sold on the streets in the high density residential areas. Though the drug is banned by the Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe, social work professional representatives should engage the government to lobby for stricter medicine control. Medicines control help to reduce the supply and distribution of illicit drugs. Zimbabwe has few criminals who manufacture illegal drugs, most of them are imported (Broncleer is smuggled from Botswana), with the commonly used being dagga which is grown locally. Zimbabwe normally treats drug addicts as criminals, but sometimes they are not as such but victims who need help. Therefore, it is time for social workers to consider addiction as a welfare issue. Addicts need care, counselling, support and skills development. Some come from broken families and need reunification, rehabilitation and integration services. Based on the extent

of addiction problem in Zimbabwe, social workers should form or lobby the government to establish drug and alcohol treatment centres to assist addicts who want to recover. The various media outlets with Health and Lifestyles sections are viable platforms by which social workers can partner with the media fraternity to advocate on prevalence of abuse and possible remedial approaches. Rehabilitation centres will go a long way in reducing the harm of drugs on young people. Social workers can also implement after care or positive lifestyle programmes to provide recreational activities for the unemployed youth and school childfree. After care services will go a long way in reducing demand for drugs. It is argued that poverty coincides with crime and substance abuse. Poor people especially the out of school youth have little to do and they may resort to drug abuse crime, prostitution and other criminal activities. So positive life style programmes will assist as preventative measures by involving the youth in beneficial use of recreation e.g. sporting, arts and drama.

Related to this, one of the drug abuse key drivers amongst the youth is unemployment which non-state commentators contend is now pegged around 90 percent, affecting mostly the youth. Unemployment is closely linked to the increase in poverty and inequality. If high unemployment amongst the youth is not checked in Zimbabwe, the next generation of older persons will be worse as they won't be having any pension or savings because they would have never worked. This is a future crisis that needs social policy makers to consider for urgent action.

Prostitution is on the rise, principally due to unemployment among the female youths. This has also heightened the fears of the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst young people. Sometimes sexual misbehaviour is caused by drug and substance abuse. Women are the ones mainly engaged in commercial sex work. The year 2015 marked a turn point in the history of prostitution in Zimbabwe. Sex workers had been on the receiving end of police brutality and arbitrary arrests, but the Constitutional Court in May 2015 banned the arrest of women on charges of soliciting for intimacy in the absence of male customers. However one should not lose sight to the fact that the availability of a ruling by the court on prostitution should never be seen as direct legalization of prostitution in Zimbabwe. The Constitutional Court ruling only outlawed the Zimbabwe Republic Police's dragnet operations targeting alleged prostitutes and arresting them for standing in streets looking for clients, saying this does not amount to solicitation as required by the law. However, the ruling must be welcomed to a

great extent as it now makes police to be more careful when trying to identify suspected prostitutes as their historical habit of arresting women indiscriminately was against the principles of human rights. The ruling has come in handy to protect the rights of women, particularly against wantonly, indiscriminately and malicious arrest of suspected prostitutes. The constitutional ruling has made prostitution a lifestyle and not an offence in Zimbabwe. In an article in the Newsday, (<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2015/07/10/sex-work-flourishes-at-mverechena/>), there is evidence that prostitution is no longer predominantly urban, but has extended its tentacles in to the rural hinterlands. Social workers involved in community health should be concerned about this trend as it raises the need for behavioral change programmes in the rural areas.

Child sexual abuses were also reported, affecting both the girl and boy child. Interesting to note is that there had been contradictions when it comes to issues of child sexual abuse, and principally paedophiles. Involved in the arguments were the First Lady Grace Mugabe and the Prosecuting Authority Head, Mr Johannes Tomana. The First lady castigated paedophiles and told them to go for prostitutes which had been sort of legalised by the Constitutional Court ruling. Social workers should also welcome the child sexual abuse case involving Mr Kereke, a Member of Parliament. The media should be applauded for follow up reports around the case which allegedly happened in 2012. The media professionals again should be applauded for the ethical reportage they did. The aspects of confidentiality were upheld in the reporting. A date for the case was now set for the case to be heard in 2016.

Women are also experiencing high levels of domestic violence. Several cases of domestic violence were reported in the media. Domestic violence is happening in Zimbabwe, yet the government boast of comprehensive domestic violence -prevention and protection legislation.

### **Problems and Milestones for Social Work Visibility in the Media in 2015**

The profession itself did not get wide coverage, either at individual social worker or collective level. The social work profession lacked visibility on commentary regarding social issues. Comparative to people oriented professions like health and law, social work still needs to do much in terms of publicity, if the profession is to grow and appreciated in Zimbabwe. The solitary voice of social workers in 2015 was mainly the CSW through Mr Philip Bohwasi

who appeared in a few articles talking about social work related issues. Quantitatively, Mr Bohwasi, the former CSW Chairperson appeared 15 times in the media in 2014, and only 3 times in 2015. Statistically, social work issues received wide coverage in the state and private media between 2011 and 2013. During this period, most of the articles were in the state media (ZBC and The Herald), while in 2015 Newsday had its fair share of social work or welfare related articles and commentary. It could be because the NASWZ and CSW had more funding for programmes that exposed them to the media. The Minister of Social Welfare, Mrs Prisca Mupfumira appeared in a ZBC article entitled “Social work critical to social challenges” where she was speaking at a stakeholders meeting organised by the CSW which drew social workers, religious organisations, donors and other concerned parties. She highlighted the following in respect of the profession: lack of recognition, high case load, and importance of social work in maintaining the nation’s social fabric through social protection. She also indicated that Zimbabwe has only 800 registered social workers, 100 of them are working for the government’s department of social services. Mupfumira also implored that social workers update registration ensuring the profession’s service users get quality services. The Minister of Social Welfare’s appearance in only two articles commending about the social work profession in 2015, could be because of other pressing matters like retrenchments, unpaid civil servants salaries and pensions that are under her Labour portfolio. However, this also points out that the social welfare portfolio despite serving a critical constituency is less important to her, as also evidenced by the successive meagre budgetary commitment. The next time the minister will be heard talking about the issues of social work will be during CSW 2016’s annual conference and summer school.

NASWZ’s silence is reflected by a systematic review of news articles showing no 2015 news article linked to it. Its leadership in particular the spokesperson was not robust in representing a critical constituency of social workers and their clients amidst social injustices. Both its Website and newsletter did not disseminate any new information. Its Website has stale news and not interactive at all. However, its Facebook page which boasts of 730 *likes* carried few posts relating to updates of developments happening within the profession but draw a few comments from concerned social workers. The NASWZ could have taken advantage of the annual March 15 World Social Work Day and other social welfare related international commemorative days or events to position itself in the media.

Sadly, in the Newsday news article, the Manicaland Provincial Minister Mandiitewepi Chimene was quoted at the CSW Winter School held in Mutare warning social workers to join Zanu PF to avoid hindrances in their work as the ruling party controlled all state apparatus in the country. While addressing conference delegates predominantly social workers, the Manicaland provincial minister said:

“Some of you frown upon me a politician. Never underestimate a politician because we are the people who influence policymaking. The moment you make life difficult to us, then it will also be tough for you. The moment we say we don’t want social workers, it would be over for you...Therefore, I am encouraging you to get into politics and promote your profession from a political ground. The moment I invite you into politics you should know what to do. You can never be a good social worker without a good political background. “But let me advise you on positive politics: If you are against Zanu PF, then there is nothing you will be doing and then where do you report to? Zanu PF is controlling everything — the government, Parliament, chiefs and councillors and many other departments. So if you want to do it the other way round you will suffer...You can try it, but you will face the difficulties and you will face resistance from those people you will be against.”(News Day, 24 April 2015)

Social work and its programmes’ politicization is unfortunate for social workers and their clients. Social workers strive to be independent and impartial professionals. However, the CSW and NASWZ can learn few things from the minister’s sentiments as people of her stature do not mince their words in Zimbabwe. The leadership of NASWZ and CSW should not overtly engage in opposition politics and destructive behaviour as they engage the ruling ZANU PF government in future, in trying to position the profession and create opportunities for their members. ZANU PF is known for being viciously against organisations that stand in its way to exercise power or mobilise support. CSW should not forget that it is a statutory body enacted through an Act of Parliament. Zanu PF has parliamentary two thirds majority to implement any changes to any Act of parliament or statutory body without any hurdle. So, the CSW should remain professional in their dealings with the government of the day. However, NASWZ can do any lobbying and advocacy role for social workers in a trade union type of activism without any expected correctness from ZANU PF. NASWZ could have made some comments in response to the Minister’s unfortunate sentiments, but it decided to protect its accommodation; as it is being incubated at the Makombe Government Complex. They seem to be feeling very warm in their current government care.

If media coverage is difficult to get, social workers should consider increasing knowledge output on social work issues through opinion articles in leading online and print, journal articles and contributions in books. Some social workers, who are gifted in writing articles, have neglected the profession and related issues to focus on narrow politics. Notably, Cris Chogugudza and Msekiwa Makwanya (based in the UK), some Social Work thought leaders have done their best in sharing Zimbabwean social work issues with the world. The University of Zimbabwe School of Social Work and Bindura University of Science Education Department of Social work academics have in the recent past tried to increase the output of publications. If this trend is maintained, social work literature will increase and be readily available to influence policies and development in Zimbabwe.

### **Pathways for Fostering Greater Media Social Issues Coverage in Coming Years**

From analysis of the various socio economic issues the Zimbabwean print and electronic media covered in 2015, the study identifies key recommendations making the symbiotic social worker and media fraternity more sustainable for enhancement of dignity and social functioning of vulnerable service users.

- A strengthened Zimbabwean media and social workers professional relationship nurtures platforms for social workers and journalists collaboration for greater common social good. One of the fledging media house in Zimbabwe has set an example on how media professionals can engage social workers to change society. The Alpha Media Holdings, in 2012 once advertised to recruit a social worker to work in their charity arm. This is a noble cause, with the desired outcomes of collaborative multi stakeholder responses which can go a long way in human suffering alleviation. Journalists like social workers normally come face to face with poverty and human suffering. Unlike social workers, journalists find the situation very emotional as they are not trained to deal with psychosocial issues. So the step taken by Alpha Media Holdings is good as it makes it easy for journalists to refer potential social welfare clients to their internal social workers for assistance. Hoping that it won't remain a 'charity or philanthropic arm' or CSR arm for public relations purposes.
- NASWZ and CSW should foster institutional linkages with the media fraternity to guarantee even wider social workers lobbying and advocacy activities, resource constraints challenges and milestones in enhanced social functioning of Zimbabwean

society. Going forward into 2016, NASWZ and CSW could sign Memorandum of Understanding with institutions as Media Institute of Southern Africa, Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe National Editors Forum and Zimbabwe Union of Journalism. This could see even social workers making presentations at journalists press clubs across Zimbabwe. Also, if such partnerships are harnessed, journalists can build capacity to be more vibrant in tackling socio economic, pathological and community issues in their reporting. NASWZ and CSW being previous beneficiaries of technical partners as UNICEF can draw on such support for media training in aspects as Child Sensitive News reporting.

- World Social Work Day and other United Nations or national days related to social welfare commemoration are important for social workers and their client's media coverage. Hosting or actively participating in such programmes exposes social work and its clients to the media, thereby influencing policy makers.
- Vigorous journal articles publication, as well as media opinion articles on social work and social welfare issues- Dissemination of information about the social functioning of social work clients should not be left to journalists and their respective media houses, but it should be a task for social workers themselves. Social workers can do this through frequent academic and professional contributions in Journals and other publications. In coming times it is also worthwhile for Zimbabwean journalists to report on successes of social capital like burial societies and extended family networks as platforms for resilience and cushioning from economic hardships for vulnerable indigent populations.
- Continuing on a depoliticized, impartial, proactive social work thought leadership- This path has been taken by the CSW leadership under Philip Bohwasi that saw the CSW progressing well in terms of increased number of registered social workers, attracting funding for programmes like the conferences, research, winter schools and human resources. If the current leadership both in NASWZ and CSW follow this type of prudent leadership, social work will not need to put any effort to be covered in the media. At individual level, social workers should be professional and hard workers. They should be where they are supposed to be at the right time. Social workers in government operating as social services officers are generally demoralized just like any other civil servants due to poor salaries and working conditions. However, this should not be a stumbling block for those who want to pursue social good in society. NASWZ, Department of Social Welfare and CSW or donors can host annual events to recognize social work achievers.

- Print and electronic media should continue to be at the forefront of scrutiny of Zimbabwe's preparedness and potential social workers roles in roll out of the 2015 UN Heads of States Summit accented Sustainable Development Goals. This would act as a knowledge management platform steered by media and social work fraternity for collective contributions to Zimbabwe social development agenda.
- If conducted within the rigid media regulation laws as Access to Information and Publicity Act, investigative journalism collaboration between media and social workers should be fostered. Both professions are bold advocates of social justice and human rights defenders should collaborate in availing of information sources by social workers on social injustices occurring within the context of the turbulent economic and political environment. This could be in aspects as forced migration, child prostitution, child labour, gender based violence and cross cutting themes as climate change. In the context of climate change, some economic forces have been wantonly exploiting natural resources leaving communities more prone to the adverse impacts of climate change through depleted natural resources as rivers, forests and wetlands. For instance South Africa's Mail and Guardian newspapers have an Investigative Journalism centre that seeks to expose various topical socio economic issues affecting ordinary citizens. Finally, from a neo-Marxist perspective, in this context, social workers can design programmes and policies that be used for regenerating natural resources on which the livelihoods of the majority of the population depends.

## **Conclusion**

The study unpacked social work practice and media's symbiotic relationship since the media space publicises social issues. Some of these issues become social work cases. In places where media coverage was hindered, the welfare of people who live in such areas is normally undermined. Lack of information affects both social workers and their clients. The media provides information (educative), entertainment and edutainment. Social workers employed by the Government and those in NGOs operate within all the districts in Zimbabwe, but potential social welfare clients are not aware of such services. The Media can be used to spread information about social work services.

Although findings of essential studies like the World Bank and Unicef Zimbabwe Poverty Atlas of 2015 received close media attention, arguably preparedness for the impending El

Nino induced 2016 drought was not widely captured in the media. The drought has already threatened the livelihoods of the rural poor whose wealth and income is agrarian. Cattle have already succumbed to water and food shortages in arid Manicaland regions and Matebeleland provinces.

Lastly, the Newsday and The Herald should be commended for providing much of the stories regarding the social functioning of people and the profession of social work. The two media houses covered extensively child abuse, Chingwizi victims, prostitution and the welfare of older person issues. The Standard and Financial Gazette did well on covering issues of retrenchments and closure of companies. Other online media covered well issues of suicide, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse and general issues affecting the youth and women. The coverage is commendable since wide internet coverage targets most youths who are now very active on the cyber space. Problems and the circumstances of the people exposed in the media should dictate policy action by social workers if the profession will have to make any meaningful contribution in society. Social workers should seek to be proactive not reactive. They should advocate for proper social policies that change the lives of people they were trained to serve. Social workers should also position themselves in the media for good reasons.

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