Article

Interrogating the Meagre Response of Social Work to the "Social Question" Exposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (-19) pandemic in South Africa in March 2020 unleashed not only a health crisis, but also a "tsunami" that disrupted every aspect of human and social life. Social work practice and education were not spared. The aftermath of the pandemic saw various services declared essential while the conventional delivery of others, including social work, were brought to a complete halt. In response, social workers elsewhere explored innovative strategies to continue rendering services remotely. In South Africa, some social workers embarked on consultative engagements through various formations whilst, others either remained mum or lamented the exclusion of social work as an essential service. Notwithstanding the fact that the above were not the only responses, the consequences of the lack of a unified professional voice and leadership may have far-reaching and negative consequences. This article presents a critical interrogation of the South African social work response throughout the pandemic. The interrogation reveals three explanatory factors behind the ineptness of social work, namely: professional decadence; a perpetual struggle for recognition; and the need to improve the status of the profession in society. These factors explain the unsatisfactory responses of the social work profession. The author argues that this amounts to failure to engage the social question, which inadvertently leads to the erosion of the value, status and societal recognition of social work. The author proposes serious professional reorientation to a focus on the social question which translates into focusing primarily on societal rather than disciplinary issues and problematics.

Keywords: COVID-19; professional decadence; social question; social work

UNISA university of south africa PRESS
Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development
Volume 36 | Number 3 | 2024 | #15510 | 16 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/15510
ISSN 2708-9355 (Online)

Introduction

The purpose of social work is generally understood as about promoting societal well-being and improving the quality of life for all people, particularly the underprivileged and vulnerable (Weyers 2011). While acknowledging the primacy of improving societal recognition and better status of the social work profession, professional ineptness, seen through the inability of the social work profession to address purposefully societal challenges, renders it irrelevant and worthless. The term "decadence" is used in this article to denote self-indulgence in the context of the profession and academic discipline of social work in South Africa. It speaks to the tendency of social workers to focus more on disciplinary and occupational challenges rather than the societal challenges it was created to address. The disciplinary and occupational challenges relate to the profession of social work and include the lack of recognition and poor status of the social work profession, along with poor salaries and working conditions. By contrast, social problems refer to societal challenges, such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and the broader challenge of social injustice and COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented greater challenges and ample opportunities for the social work profession to shine its light on the society it purports to serve (Ramoshaba 2023; SWAN–SA 2020). A helping profession as social work in South Africa needed to be at the forefront of broader responses to the catastrophic effects of the pandemic. Sadly, as will be shown in the proceeding discussions, the most prominent outcry in social work cycles during the COVID-19 pandemic was for recognition as an essential service, rather than for greater social services to the public. The thrust of the argument advanced in the article is that most of the social work responses during the pandemic may have bordered on ineptness and disciplinary self-indulgence. The question is, when will the profession outgrow these tendencies to emerge as a formidable and grounded force, able to stand independently in advancing its scope of practice, on the one hand, and collaboratively with other professions, on the other hand? Why is the social work profession not able to respond decisively to societal challenges using its knowledge base and expertise without leaning on prescripts dictated by external forces, including nation states? Is it thus a question of capacity or willpower?

The aim of the article is to interrogate how and why social work did not adequately step up to address the many psychosocial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable individuals and groups. It is hoped that the article will challenge social work professionals to seriously rethink their role in society. The author relies on anecdotal reports of social incidences and professional engagements throughout the period of the pandemic between 2000 and 2023 and shares his views and critique of social work responses.

Through the article, the author critically questions the way social workers reacted to the disaster precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. He elected to stand with the mass of critical social work scholarship that always raises counter-narratives challenging the status quo (Mathebane 2020; SWAN-SA 2020). Based on this positionality, he argues

that the profession of social work must be ready at all times to respond to its own call to be a social justice profession and resist status quo maintenance and the oppressive hegemonic discourses (Mathebane 2020). In so doing, the profession will be on its way to addressing the inherent problem of professional decadence and effectively respond to the "social question". The social question implies "professional capacity to critically engage the socio-political and economic forces that produce societal conditions that either prohibit or facilitate growth and development of people to their full potential" (Mathebane 2020, 12).

The following sections will outline the theoretical framework used in the article followed by a discussion of the South African social work and COVID-19 context. This will be followed by a critical discussion of social work responses during the pandemic. These will be juxtaposed against a critical discussion of the "social question', followed by a possible way forward and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Critical social work theory (CSWT) (Hurley and Taiwo 2019) was used as a theoretical framework to analyse social work responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory argues for a critical reflection on past and present social realities and responses to address them. It provides a theoretical basis for questioning social phenomena, creating an environment that stimulates debates and discourse on counter and alternative social scenarios at specific points in history. Furthermore, CSWT seeks to confront structural barriers to social justice (Hurley and Taiwo 2019). The theory provided a lens through which to reflect upon the social work responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through applying CSWT, the author questions the ineptness and disciplinary self-indulgence that characterised social work during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects critically on various options that could have been pursued and need to be considered to realise social justice in South Africa.

The South African Social Work and COVID-19 Context

The novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, scientifically explained as the underlying cause of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), started towards the end of 2019, in Wuhan, China (UN 2020). Consequently, the United Nations (UN 2020) declared COVID-19 the largest global health and social crisis of the 21st century. The COVID-19 pandemic, as it is commonly known, unleashed unbearable socio-economic and health challenges across the globe. It negatively affected many aspects of human life, including social welfare and human rights. Notwithstanding variable responses by different nation states, a common feature in the responses was the widespread declaration of states of disaster accompanied by national lockdowns as part of a generally accepted containment strategy to curb the spread of the coronavirus (WHO 2020).

The South African government imposed its lockdown on 23 March 2020 (Turton and Harms-Smith 2020). These authors underscored that the South African societal context is characterised by high levels of inequality, extreme levels of poverty, hunger, inadequate housing security and unemployment. This socio-economic situation made it difficult for the vast majority of South Africans to navigate life and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant stringent lockdowns, said to be guided by a "science-based" approach adopted by the government (Devermont and Makulu 2020).

To set the scene for the following discussion, it is worth noting the global definition of social work as adopted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). It states that:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to 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. (IASSW and IFSW 2014; Ng 2014,127)

This definition has serious implications for what can reasonably be expected from social workers, particularly in times of social hardship affecting humanity. The discussion on the tri-focal domain of social work as eloquently discussed by Weyers (2011) amplifies practice context for the realisation of the spirit of the global definition of social work. Weyers (2011) highlights the tri-focal domain of social work as outlined in the scope of practice of social work. It defines the kind of intervention that the profession is authorised to work on, namely, to enhance social functioning; to promote the adaptive fit between person and environment; and, finally, to facilitate social reform.

The first area of focus relates to enhancing the social functioning of people (Weyers 2011). In actualising this role, social workers help individuals, groups, families and communities to carry out effectively and efficiently their social roles and to perform life tasks as expected by the society. These include, but are not limited to personal management and development, parenting, problem-solving in relationships among social partners, in marriages, families, organisations and communities. The rise in cases of domestic and gender-based violence (GBV), as acknowledged by Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson (2020) and confirmed locally by Leburu-Masigo and Kgadima (2020), signalled a clarion call to social workers to strengthen their intervention with individuals and families to support people experiencing challenges in performing their social duties and life tasks.

The second focus area is about promoting the adaptive fit of a person in his/her social environment (Weyers 2011). This role is particularly important for the focus of the article, as it involves social work initiatives aimed at helping people deal with sudden, and often unexpected, devastating and traumatic experiences beyond their control. The

disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic left many people without an income to meet their basic needs, while others lost their significant others, some of whom were the breadwinners in their families. The traumatic effects of the pandemic meant that many people required psychosocial support and containment. Given the thousands of sudden deaths that occurred, the need for trauma debriefing and crisis intervention was at its peak.

The third focus area of social reform or change covers macro-level social work interventions in the form of programmes and projects aimed at helping individuals, groups and communities to transform established and entrenched social practices, systems, institutions and structures that inhibit optimal social functioning and stall their ability to realise full potential and self-actualise (Weyers 2011). This area of focus seems critically important if the profession was (and is) to make serious strides in addressing systemic and structural injustice that breeds socio-economic inequalities and other forms of injustice. Perhaps this is the one vital role that the profession neglects, despite the fact that society is crying out for it.

The inattention to social reform and change is, in the author's view, a crucial area in which the social work scope of practice has been often found wanting. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed gross inequalities and injustices, presenting an opportunity for the profession to intervene decisively to challenge the injustices. Unfortunately, there was no real, meaningful intervention, except for lone voices of a few concerned social workers (SWAN–SA). This is a serious travesty and an indictment on the profession for failing to fulfil its mandate.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic included multiple deaths, and loss of income and livelihoods for many. These COVID-19-related challenges created a real social crisis and a disaster of global proportions (Ramoshaba 2023). Given the nature of the problems encountered (SWAN–SA 2020), one would have expected social service professionals to be on the frontline of the state's response to the pandemic. The provision of psychosocial support services normally forms an integral part of any disaster response. By its nature, the crisis created by the pandemic sounded a stern call to the helping professions, including social workers, to step up their efforts to assist individuals, families and communities come to terms with various losses experienced and to rebuild their lives (SWAN–SA 2020). Social work interventions during the pandemic would have to be specifically tailored to respond effectively, efficiently and, most importantly, safely given the contagious nature of the coronavirus.

It was incumbent upon social workers to find innovative ways of intervening with the impact of COVID-19. At the heart of this unprecedented plague (COVID-19), triggering anxiety and panic, were vulnerable populations: children, women, people with disabilities, the poor, and the aged (Muchanyerei 2020). All these vulnerable groups bore the brunt of the pandemic and required psychosocial support from social workers (Leburu-Masigo and Kgadima 2020; Manomano 2021; Muchanyerei 2020). The rise in

GBV cases during the COVID-19 lockdowns illustrate the manner in which the pandemic disproportionately affected women as they were subjected to GBV. Furthermore, those from the working class and historically disadvantaged communities were also negatively affected by the pandemic (Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson 2020; Leburu-Masigo and Kgadima 2020). Globally, the scourge seemed to have exacerbated socio-economic inequalities (Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson 2020). Understandably, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath reignited old South African debates about social exclusion, racism and inequality in society (Devermont and Makulu 2020; SWAN–SA 2020; Turton and Harms-Smith 2020).

A Critical Review of the Meagre Response of Social Work to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent national lockdowns saw a number of services being declared essential, including the health, emergency and police services. Although the social work profession operates in all of the identified essential services, it was not included as one. This resulted in an outcry among some social workers, who argued that the profession needed to be included, while others pondered the implications for the practice of social work in the field.

The role of the helping professions, such as social work, came into sharp focus, as the world navigated the losses resulting from the pandemic (SWAN–SA 2020). However, in South Africa, the social work profession was not vocal in these debates (SWAN–SA 2020). Also, like many health and behavioural health professionals, social workers should have been as concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their own families, communities, personal well-being as well as their clientele. Despite these genuine concerns, various professions, such as doctors, nurses, emergency service personnel and the police, were still able to take decisive actions in line with their scope of practice. These professionals work with social workers in their various work settings. The social workers in health care, the military, the police and emergency services had no excuse not to continue with rendering services in a blended fashion (i.e., a combination of face-to-face and virtual services). Some social workers elsewhere formed part of their national response strategy and explored innovative strategies including the use of digital and electronic media to reach out and assist vulnerable clients (BASW 2020). Unfortunately, the situation in South Africa demonstrated that social workers were more concerned about their well-being than that of their clients which equated to professional decadence. The fact that social workers in secondary settings that were declared essential services opted to stay at home and not go to work was worrying. Instead of exploring safer strategies to continue servicing their clientele, they elected to stay away. This attested to the existence of professional decadence.

The pandemic presented an opportunity for the social work profession to rise to the occasion and respond to a societal call for action, by making its contribution to efforts to ease the suffering COVID-19 caused. As informed by the core values of service to

humanity, social justice, and the dignity and worth of every person, social work professionals, both in practice and academia, are duty-bound by their sworn oath to participate actively in exploring problem-solving options in response to emerging public health crises and other disasters. Thus, unique and bespoke responses should emerge naturally as they navigate periods of great social suffering, if the profession is, as presumed, dynamic, vigilant and responsive to societal problems. This does not in any way depend on recognition of or approval by any authority outside the profession and academic discipline of social work.

Sadly, the social work profession's conduct during the course of the COVID-19 disaster was unsurprising. A historical review of the profession would attest to the fact that social work has often been complicit in presenting societal problems, despite the fact that its overall mission is to address social problems and enhance societal well-being (Mathebane 2020). This confirms the existence of the problem of professional decadence within social work as a discipline and profession. There is consensus among role players in social work, as confirmed by the global definition of social work (IASSW and IFSW 2014), that the focus should be on social justice and societal well-being. However, the situation in practice suggests otherwise, as attested to by the profession's recent dealings with the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not to say that nothing was done. Several initiatives and interventions were made across the spectra. However, the argument in the article about the meagre nature of social work responses during the pandemic posits that they were insufficient. Most concerning is the fact that there was no coordination or collaboration between the different structures or formations within social work, as well between as fields of social work services and other cognate professions and disciplines, such as health and natural sciences. Such collaboration is crucial during periods of disaster.

Notwithstanding this critique of social work's lack of engagement with the social question, there were some meaningful social work responses to the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions. The responses form the basis of the arguments the author advances in the article. Social workers in various contexts have been rendering a variety of services in dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. These range from promotive, preventive and treatment services to ensure the health and well-being of the people they serve (IFSW 2020). The initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic, at a global level, occurred at the beginning of 2020, when a meeting was convened between the Social Work Action Network (International) (SWAN–I) and the IFSW, resolving that there was a need to trace and document social work's responses to the COVID-19 crisis across the globe (Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson 2020). Consequently, a series of international webinars took place that drew together thousands of academics and practitioners to discuss what social work could – and should – have done during the pandemic (Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson 2020; Ramoshaba 2023). Around the same time, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Global Survey (2020) found that violence prevention and response services had been severely disrupted in more than 104 countries during the COVID-19 lockdown. They

also noted high levels of GBV and violence against children (VAC) during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UNICEF Global Survey emphasised the need for social workers to be on the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the British Association of Social Workers' (BASW 2020) survey on social workers found that they were concerned about their health and safety and highlighted that more support was required in this area.

The responses noted by the IFSW (2020) included distributing information to dispel myths and unwarranted fears of the pandemic; reaching out to agencies; assisting with preparedness; ensuring inclusive planning efforts; and advocating governments for increased support.

It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged social workers to explore creative ways to conduct their work as they could no longer do assessments and interventions as usual. Muchanyerei (2020) has noted several innovative and creative strategies that social workers explored and experimented with under the circumstances dictated by the pandemic, including: the popularisation of e-Social work; the provision of remote counselling services; telehealth remote supervision; virtual workforce support; remote case management; and advocacy. Furthermore, it was imperative to organise ways of overcoming isolation and ensuring access to needed services during lockdown (Muchanyerei 2020). Thus, the profession needed to accelerate its efforts and focus its attention on relevant issues during the pandemic. However, in South Africa, there was no follow through on some of the issues and responses coordinated globally within the social work fraternity. Where some responses were made, they were often commendable but inadequate. In South Africa, there was no coordination or leadership as confirmed by SWAN–SA (2020).

The then Minister of Social Development in South Africa, Lindiwe Zulu, presented the Social Development Response to COVID-19 on 11 May 2020. She noted that social service professionals should be on the frontline of the national pandemic response and reported that 1 809 social workers would be recruited to reinforce the current workforce to provide a range of social work services. This included timely psychosocial interventions to assist individuals and families during the course of the pandemic. This was clearly an indication of the Minister's high regard for and recognition of social work services. The Minister's statement was made within the context of the lockdowns imposed as the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It may have sounded like a contradiction, but it was rather confirmation that the government too expected more from social workers. The Minister's statement was a clarion call for social workers to be actively engaged in exploring effective responses. Social workers were expected to continue rendering services. However, as usual, social workers underestimated their role and continued to cry for recognition. This demonstrated, in no uncertain terms, the profession's perpetual struggle for recognition, and the need to improve its status in society by social workers during the course of the pandemic. As Muchanyerei (2020) argues, social work practitioners remained essential service

providers during the pandemic and needed to adapt their techniques to be able to continue rendering services.

The editorial team of the *African Journal of Social Work* released a Special Issue on COVID-19 addressing some of the pressing issues in social work (Mundau and Nyoni 2020). They pointed out clearly that the delivery of social work assessments and interventions could not remain normal and indicated a need for innovation in pursuit of alternative remote options in the face of the pandemic (Mundau and Nyoni 2020). Furthermore, a book chapter by Turton and Harms-Smith (2020) noted the inadequate response of the social work profession and discipline during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors reported that the non-governmental social work sector was completely silent throughout, while statutory social workers were put on stand-by as essential service providers. They also noted the guidelines provided by the South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP) on "technology supported services". Most important to note was their observation that the voice of social work was largely absent despite the many initiatives by social movements in South Africa. This led to the initiation of the Social Work Action Network–South Africa (SWAN–SA) in response to the lack of social work leadership and voice.

Leburu-Masigo and Kgadima (2020) explored GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and provided guidelines for social work practice while Tanga, Ndhlovu and Tanga (2020) explored the use of emergency remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as a recipe for disaster for social work education in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The rise in cases of GBV was a clarion call to the profession to rise and assist the nation in dealing with the scourge. Similarly, issues raised around the use of emergency remote teaching and learning presented an opportunity for the profession to play an advocacy role in profiling challenges and advocating for those adversely affected by the digital divide. Most importantly, the profession did not require a formal invitation to intervene in instances where the well-being of people and society was threatened. The profession was created to deal with such issues and should have been seen to address them unapologetically.

On popular media platforms, an article by Turton et al. (2020) appeared in the *Daily Maverick*. In the article, SWAN–SA questioned the sector's silence in the face of the COVID-19 crisis in South Africa: "It was felt that there was a need for leadership and for a voice, both of which have largely been absent." They also made a call for a Basic Income Grant

Another article on popular media opinion authored by Rasool (2020) appeared in the *Mail and Guardian*. Rasool (2020) decried the government's response and argued that social workers are an untapped resource ignored by the government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rasool seemed to confirm Olson's (2007) earlier assertions, that the focus of social work from its inception has always been on gaining its status as profession rather than a project for social justice. The social work profession should not

for any reason allow itself to become a handmaiden of a nation state. As a social justice profession, social work must be at the forefront of making sense of any presenting social challenge and advancing best possible interventions to alleviate human suffering. It is therefore immaterial whether governments tap on social work as a resource or not, the profession must continue to discharge its duties to society as expected.

Indeed, the calls made by SWAN–SA (2020) for a stronger voice and leadership were relevant and timely. It is sad that what should have been coordinated nationally by the SACSSP and all relevant formations within the profession of social work had to be organised by a few individuals. Muchanyerei (2020) raised some crucial issues around the need for the profession to be dynamic and adapt quickly to changes in its response to societal challenges.

Manomano (2021) explored preparedness and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for social work in South Africa. Like some of the issues raised by Muchanyerei (2020), Manomano (2021) raised vitally important issues around the need for the profession to be prepared to respond meaningfully to the needs of society during the pandemic. However, despite the necessity of a united voice, there were only few lone voices raised by social workers in their individual capacity. It would have been expected that such voices would challenge the profession to rise and consolidate, but alas, nothing was forthcoming from various formations within the social work sector, including the Professional Board for Social Work within the SACSSP. Furthermore, Ramoshaba (2023) analysed challenges faced in practice by social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Although the article looked inward, it also raised crucial issues about the need for professional adaptation while dealing with issues that may have hindered the effective functioning of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All the issues raised are important and necessary to ensure that social workers can respond appropriately to the needs of individuals and society. They also beg for some perspectives on the social question that is being raised by many role players who have an interest in the profession.

The Social Question

The social question refers to the professional objective of safeguarding societal well-being as central to social work. The social question is firmly espoused in the global definition of social work (IFSW 2014) and within the tri-focal domain defining the scope of practice of social work (Weyers 2011). It is the author's contention that historically the profession and academic discipline of social work may have lacked capacity to fully engage the social question, particularly in the Global South, as evidenced by the magnitude of social ills that continue unabated.

In a similar vein, Smith and Nathane (2018) decry the failure of social work to engage with issues of ideology, power relations, oppression and the need for decoloniality in Africa, despite the fact that the global definition of social work embodies all those aspects. As revealed by Smith (2014) and echoed by Mathebane (2020), social work in South Africa has been and continues to be entangled with the colonial project. Consequently, the coloniality of social work becomes a barrier to any attempt to meaningfully embrace the call for transformation and decoloniality. Borrowing from Gramsci (1935/1992), the situation necessitates "counter-history" as a substitution of the so-called "given thought". The notion of the "given thought" is advanced by Smith (2014) as Western-centric "hegemonic discourses" that sustain Western social work and aid its internalisation and acceptance in the Global South.

Despite the above, Olson (2007) maintains that social work is, by its nature, a project of social justice. This is affirmed by Dominelli (2010) and Harlington (2013), whose shared admission intimates that social work has, unfortunately, taken on the role of mediating between the state and the oppressed using its practice models to help clients cope or adjust to unjust circumstances. This position, in the author's view, institutionalises and normalises the subjection of clients to the conditions of the present. The social question thus relates directly to the conditions of the present or prevailing material conditions and circumstances. As argued by Augé (2008), the conditions of the present are characterised by a general improvement in absolute poverty, while destitution and inequality persist.

As a case in point, the South African context offers a window on this phenomenon. The social work profession in South Africa, as historicised by Smith (2014), constantly changed its nature and form in line with the dictates of the political system of the time. On its arrival during the colonial era, social work advanced the modern capitalist colonial project. When apartheid was institutionalised, social workers as handmaidens of the state were used to drive racialised programmes aimed at assisting and supporting vulnerable white individuals and families (Smith 2014). There is no credible historical evidence of any resistance or challenge mounted by social work professional bodies, nor any social work formation against the oppressive systems of colonisation and apartheid (Mathebane 2020).

In contemporary democratic South Africa, the social work profession continues with its complicity, allowing the profession to be used as the handmaiden of the nation state. As the democratic dispensation draws closer to the end of its third decade, social work has been marching along, appropriating every welfare policy position adopted by government without critical questioning. This has been so from the early years of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA), and now the National Development Plan (NDP). The social work profession has always played its part, offering social support without considering macro socio-economic determinants of social challenges faced by South African. As

eloquently conceptualised by Schmid (2015), the social work profession has conveniently avoided raising the contextual structural issues like poverty and lack of support systems (Schmid 2015).

Thus, Smith's (2014) historicisation is helpful in its critical reflections on the historical position of social work within varying political contexts. Its significance lies in helping us appreciate socio-economic and political forces that influenced what happened at each historical point, therefore promoting a renewed critical examination of the profession's political and ideological role. The critical examination of the profession's political role is necessitated by the apparent detachment from fundamental political and ethical questions of justice and equality (Lorenz 2016). As Lorenz (2016) argues, the hegemonic discourse in social work around professional methods that are absorbed in a functional or even defeatist mentality of "there is no alternative" to the privatisation of social responsibilities demonstrates the detachment of the profession from its political role. The reflexivity methods of problem-solving adopted by social work, centred on rationality and agency, highlight the extent to which they are caught up in the ambiguity of the project of modernity. Surprisingly, even the vanguard of critical social work remains tied to modern concepts of liberalism (Lorenz 2016).

In this context, social problems are viewed from an individualistic dimension, where individuals are generally blamed for the problems presenting in their lives (Ferguson 2001). It is against this backdrop that the inadequate social work responses during the COVID-19 pandemic should be understood, and the continued obsession with disciplinary problems appreciated and addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic presented ample opportunities for the social work profession to take decisive steps and intervene in support of individuals, families and communities. As characterised by the Minister of Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu, the devastating effects of the pandemic made it a social services crisis. Such a crisis should have unleashed appropriate responses from social workers in practice and academia, instead of their obsessing about the status of the profession and its lack of recognition.

In hindsight, but also looking forward, the social work profession may not have been decisive in taking its rightful place historically to respond to societal challenges. It may have allowed itself to be trapped in disciplinary issues, while blindly aligning itself with systems created by the nation state. Such a past cannot be sustained and risks driving the profession to harm or even extinction. As such, the situation calls for a radical shift in the orientation and focus of the profession.

The Way Forward

From a critical-historical perspective, the future for the profession seems to reside in the objective of striving towards affirming the social citizenship of its clientele; protecting human rights; and promoting social justice and equality. Such objectives cannot be advanced within the current neo-liberal and capitalist dominated society, and the

situation calls for an ideological rethink and shift in macro-(socio)economic policies. There is a need to move away from a neo-liberal view of society. The indiscriminate use of the notion of "agency and rationality" – linked to the ideals of personal autonomy, freedom and equality – are fallacies of modern neo-liberal capitalism. Such fallacies should be confronted head-on by social workers in practice and academia. This requires that social workers accept their political roles and responsibilities as social change agents in the broader sense of the word. Real and meaningful social justice will not be realised if social workers neglect their roles in the struggle for structural, institutional and systemic transformation towards social justice. People's lived experiences in the Global South effectively unmasked the modern myth that conveys the rational ideal that all members of society, irrespective of their status, have equal access to the important criterion of truth and authority. People know, especially from a critical-historical perspective, that this is not entirely true.

Therefore, in positioning social work methodology critically in the face of COVID-19-related global economic, social and cultural changes, it seems crucial to reaffirm the unique mandate of social work, which can be summarised as the necessity to raise the social question anew in changing circumstances. It is the question of how to relate the right to individual freedom to the necessities of a social order and coherence, based on the principles of justice and equality (Houston 2010). Additionally, social work needs to collaborate with other societal professions and sectors with their various knowledge systems in order to fully embrace the decolonial argument, processes and movement. The focus of the article is not on socio-economic justice per se, but rather on COVID-19 (which illuminated some of those injustices), and specifically on social work responses. Though relevant, these socio-economic injustices are not core, but peripheral issues in relation to the purpose of the article.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented extraordinary challenges that required decisive professional responses. The article has shown that social work, as a profession, may be well positioned to respond effectively to "extreme" and "normal" societal challenges; however its self-obsession rendered it ineffective in the face of prevailing social challenges linked to the effects and implications of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The author's critical interrogation of the South African social work response throughout the period of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns revealed that professional decadence, a perpetual struggle for recognition, and the need to improve the status of the profession in society were amongst the main reasons why social workers could not focus primarily on societal challenges (engaging the social question). The inadequate social work responses to the social question may inadvertently lead to the erosion of its value, status and recognition in society.

Thus, there is an urgent need to strengthen decolonial, critical and transformative social work scholarship to take these issues forward. The issues raised around the inadequate

response of social work to societal challenges requires thorough empirical research that would lead to the development of evidence-based contextual and decolonial theories, models and techniques that social workers can use. As changes, and even crises, occur in society, such instruments and actions should be reviewed regularly in order to ensure their relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness.

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