
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECT OF PROFESSIONALISING SOCIAL WORK IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract

This paper looks at the challenges and prospect of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria. Social Work in advanced countries of the world and some African countries, has attained professional status and seen such in practice. In Nigeria, Social Work is far from being practiced as a profession. The main objective of this paper therefore, is to ascertain the challenges inhibiting Social Work professionalism in Nigeria and to chat a way to attain professional status that it really is. In this paper, Social Work professional practice in Nigeria came under scrutiny as the profession is being practiced by all sundry without restriction. Three categories of respondents were selected and sampled for the study. First, were those working in social welfare agencies across three States; second, were the academic staff and students of post-graduate studies in the Departments of Social Work in three Universities. A sample 184 out of an estimated population of 1840 respondents was determined using Charan and Biswas sample size determination and administered questionnaire. Whereas in-depth interview was conducted on 15 officials of Nigerian Association of Social Workers bringing total sample to 199. The paper was based on four questions; One key question was on the challenges of professionalizing Social Work in Nigeria. Data collected was analysed using SPSS version 26 and contents analysis. The result revealed a significant number of practitioners of Social Work across social welfare agencies in Nigeria without the prerequisite knowledge of Social Work profession. The result also revealed high prospect for Social Work profession in Nigeria, as is seen practiced in agencies offering social welfare services across the social welfare Departments of all the 774 LGAs and some front-line ministries and parastatals. One of the major challenges of Professionalising Social Work practice in Nigeria, was lack of law backing its practice. Though this aspect has recently been resolved by passing the bill into law, much still need to be done in the area certification and licensing, an ideal permission to practice. To professionalize Social Work in Nigeria, the study recommends that the Nigeria Association of Social Workers should ensure the passage of the long-awaited bill into law be made effective. This can be done through the establishment of Institute of Social Work for certification, accreditation and licensing of Social Workers in Nigeria; as is the case with other professions in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Key words: Professionalizing Social Work, challenges and prospects

Introduction

Every profession maintains rules and regulations of operation. These regulations are values, principles or ethics of operation (Dubois & Miley, 2010). The implication of such principles and or operational ethics to a greater extent is to avoid the abuse of any profession by unqualified personnel. Social Work is one of the many recognised profession in the world. It is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). Social Work has been evaluated as a profession by Flexner (2018) who opined that, for any profession to be regarded as a profession, such must maintain standards of operations. Though the author denied the professional status of Social work in 1915, today Flexner (2018) has approved of its professional status. Values and ethics are at the core of Social Work practice. This implies that Social Work as a profession is value-based (Amos, 2015). In Nigeria, Social Work is practiced in almost every human endeavour. For instance, there are over 26 specialised areas professional Social workers can be trained and work among people (Perez 2018). The professional status of Social Work is no longer in question; in many advanced countries. In Nigeria, however, its practitioners seem to lack the prerequisite knowledge of the profession. The implication of this is that Social Work is practiced by all sundry. The practitioners of all professions are persons who received training and are skilled and licensed to practice such a profession or occupation. One of the key characteristics of a profession is ethical constraints. This is the point where this paper is centred; to determine the position of Social work among professions in Nigeria. Though Social Work is a profession elsewhere, same is not likely to apply in the case of Nigeria. One important question that could come to mind is, what could be the challenges of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria hitherto? Most importantly is the role of Nigeria Association of Social Workers in ensuring professionalization of Social Work in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Social Work has been in practice in Nigeria for over thirty (31) years and yet its professional status is daisy. Abari (2010) recognised and commended the efforts of some spirited individuals including that of the Nigeria Association of Social Workers (NASOW) towards Professionalising Social Work. However, it still remains a process expecting a result in Nigeria. The author went further to appreciate thousands graduates of Social Workers from some of our institution of higher learning in Nigeria, but wished such graduates could effectively compete with other professionals in Nigeria. Despite the practical placement at each level of training. Social Work is considered a young profession in Nigeria, that needs intensive propagation to enlighten the public to fill the hitherto existing gaps and void, which characterised the profession (Ezeh, 2015). The position by Ezeh (2015) on the status of Social Work, may partly be regarded as one reason that kept Social Work from attaining professional status in Nigeria. However, the need to actualize Social Work profession in Nigeria remains a problem. It is even speculated that anybody can practice Social Work; hence sociologist, educationist, psychologist and even historians are at liberty to practice Social Work. This continuous abuse of the profession by all sundry is a point of concern and forms the basis for this paper.

Research Questions

Four questions underpinned the study where data is needed for documentation. The questions are: 1. What is status of Social Work and its practitioners in Nigeria?
2. What are the challenges of professionalizing Social Work in Nigeria?
3. What prospect does social work profession holds in Nigeria?
4. What roles could the Nigerian Association Social Workers (NASOW) play to ensure Social Work attains professional status like Law and medicine in Nigeria?

Conceptual Clarification

Professionalizing Social Work: This has to do with ensuring that Social Work attain its professional status in Nigeria and is treated as such; like other professions. It refers to a process of proving Social Work as a profession with cogent milestones.

Challenge: This implies to the difficulties encountered at the process of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria. The hindrances on the way of ensuring that Social Work professional status.

Prospects: Does Social Work has a future in Nigeria or what future does Social Work hold in Nigeria

Role of NASOW: Actions to be taken by the Nigerian Association of Social Workers to ensure that Social Work attains professional status in Nigeria.

Conceptual review

The concept of Profession

A profession is determined by autonomy, great responsibility, accountability based on specialised theoretical knowledge, client rather than customers direct working relationship, ethical constraints (Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union: AALEP, 2016). Aukett (2017) defined profession as an occupation, which requires some specialised study and training towards providing skilled services to humanity and guidance in lieu of a fee or remuneration. The implication of the above definition is that every profession point to humanitarian service above anything else. The Australian Council of professions (ACoP, 2003) conceptualised a profession as a disciplined group of individuals, that adheres to ethical standards and accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills. These knowledge and skills must be in widely recognised body of learning; through research, education and training at a high level, and its application in the interest of others. The acceptability by the public affirms the need for such a profession. For every recognised profession, aside ethical constraints, demands recognition from those the profession serves. Inherent in the above definition and many others, is the code of ethics that governs the activities of each profession. ACoP (2003) added that a profession must satisfy an indispensable social need and which must be based upon well established and socially accepted scientific principles among other characteristics. There are several characteristics of a profession. Librodo (2015) itemized some of these characteristics to include: A body of specialised knowledge and extended practical training; ability to render social service; continuous in-service training; clear cut code of ethics; it has to ensure members' professional career among many others. It is evidently clear, from the above definitions and characteristics that, every profession has ethical constraints in practice. Meaning, a profession is not practiced by all a sundry.

Concept of Social Work

Social Work has severally been defined by writers most especially, the social scientists who are in the field of social work and others. The International Federation of Social Worker (IFSW, 2014) in a general meeting and conference of Social Workers, resolved and defined Social Work as "a practice-based profession as well an academic discipline. The purpose of which is to promote social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of the people. Friedlander, and Apte (1980) defines social work as "a professional service, based on scientific knowledge and skills in human relations, which help individuals, groups or communities obtain social or personal satisfaction and independence" The above definitions contend that social work is the process of helping individuals groups or families, who suffer from an anomaly or social problem resulting from unmet needs. This in

other words, mean that, social work is the professional process of helping people to obtain help-from the organized system of social service and institutions designed for life, health, personal, and social relationship which permit them to develop their full capacities and promote their well-being in learning. Idyorough (2001) has explained briefly that: Social Work is an emerging profession in Nigeria that is concerned with the resolution and prevention of social problems; and helping those who are socially disadvantaged and the general break down of the individual and social order. In Nigeria, there are several social welfare agencies demanding Social Workers. For instance, in Nigeria in all the 774 Local Government Headquarters, there are social welfare offices that are man by personnel. Apart from the Local Government Headquarters, there are front-line ministries like; The Ministries of youth and sport; Women Affairs, Ministries of Humanitarian Affairs, Ministries of police Affairs among many others across the states of Nigeria offer social welfare services that demand professionals. One passionate question would be “Who are working in these agencies?”

Roles/Functions of National Association of Social Workers.

The formation of any association comes with purpose and functions to perform for the progress and achievement of set objectives. A professional association usually seeks to further a particular profession, the interests of individuals and organisations engaged in that profession and the public (James, 2014). The National Association of Social Workers cannot be an exception. NASW (1955), itemized 4 of such roles or functions to include: Promotion of association among members; Establishment of standards of training; Improve practice; and Engage in continuous study of function in order to define the relationship of Social Work. These roles may not be generic in nature, but form the basis for all professional associations. The Open University of learning (OUL, 2002) gave five (5) general functions of professional bodies. These are: Set and assess professional examinations; provide support for continuing professional development (CPD); publish professional Journals or magazines; provide networks for professionals to meet and discuss their field of expertise and issue a code of conduct to guide professional behaviour. The last point among others forms the challenge of Nigerian Association of Social Workers in Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study used inductive methods to elicit information from the respondents. Specifically, structured questionnaire and in-depth interview were used to gather firsthand information. The target audience were the practitioners of Social Work at various Social welfare agencies and ministries in the three States (Nasarawa, Plateau and Cross Rivers), lecturers and postgraduate students of Social Work in higher institutions of learning, especially those from the Department of Social Work across three universities (University of Jos, Federal University of Lafia and University of Calabar). A sample 184 out of an estimated population of 1840 respondents was determined using Charan and Biswas sample size determination and administered questionnaire. Whereas in-depth interview was conducted on 15 officials of Nigerian Association of Social Workers bringing the total respondents to 199. Data collected was analysed using SPSS version 26 and contents analysis.

Data Presentation and analysis

Table 1. The professional status of Social Work in Nigeria:

No of respondents=184

State	Respondents	Social Work is a profession in Nigeria	Social Work is not yet a profession in Nigeria
Nasarawa	62	18 or 29%	44 or 71%
Plateau	61	11 or 18%	50 or 82%
Cross Rivers	61	8 or 13%	53 or 87%
Total	184	37 or 20%	147 or 80%

Table 1 is the opinion of respondents on the professional status of Social Work in Nigeria. Majority of the respondents (n=147 or 80%) declared that, Social work is not yet a profession in Nigeria. This stand may have serious implications for Social Work and its practitioners in Nigeria; especially, when compared with practitioners in advanced countries like UK and Canada.

Table 2. Practitioners of Social Work in Nigeria

Nigeria respondents=184

State	Respondents	Social Worker	Non-Social Worker
Nasarawa	62	21 or 33%	41 or 67%
Plateau	61	27 or 44%	34 or 56%
Cross Rivers	61	24 or 39%	37 or 61%
Total	184	70 or 38%	114 or 72%

Table 2 is the summary of practitioners of Social work in social welfare agencies across three States. There is greater number of practitioners without certificate of qualification than qualified social workers in Nigeria (n=114 or 72%). This result may be pointing to an assumed position of a professional Social Worker.

Table 3. Challenges of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria

No of respondents=184 lecturers and students

S/N	CHALLENGE	YES	%	NO	%
1	No Social Work institute for certification of Social workers	179	97%	5	3%
2	Misconception at some quarters concerning the bill legitimizing Social Work profession in Nigeria	166	90%	18	10%
3	NASOW is yet to assume full control in regulating social work practice in Nigeria	171	93%	13	7%
4	Clash of interest is hampering the move to Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria.	94	51%	90	49%

Table 3 presents challenges of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria. three outstanding challenges hampering efforts of Professionalising Social Work as shown in table 3 include; lack of institute for certification of Social workers, inability of Nigeria Association of Social Workers to assume full control in regulating social work practice in Nigeria, and a Clash of interest among professional and non-professional practitioners. These challenges are major characteristics of a profession. Where these are lacking, society may be right to treat it otherwise. This table confirmed the stand of Aukett (2017) and Librodo (2015), that for every

recognised profession, aside ethical constraints, demands recognition from those the profession serves. This is because, code of ethics governs the activities of each profession; and what empowers any profession is the legal backing; which in the case of Social Work and in Nigeria is yet to be enforced.

Table 4. Prospect of social work Profession in Nigeria.

No of respondents=184 lecturers, students and practitioners of Social Work

S/N	University	High	%	Low	%	UD	%
1	Nasarawa	42	67%	13	21%	7	12%
2	Plateau	48	79%	12	20%	1	1%
3	Cross Rivers	45	74%	16	26%	-	-
	Total	<u>135</u>	<u>73%</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>22%</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>5%</u>

Table 4 is a summary response of respondents on prospect of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria. From the table, majority of respondents across the three States (n=135 or 73%) rated high prospect if Social Work is professionalized. This may account for the existing of several social services being rendered across the country.

Table 5. Expected roles of the Nigerian Association Social Workers (NASOW) to ensure Social Work attains professional status like Law and medicine in Nigeria?

No of respondents=184

S/N	Expected Roles of NASOW	YES	%	NO	%	UD	%
1	Establish Social Work institute for certification of Social Workers	151	82%	12	7%	21	11%
2	Lobby and educate the Government enforce the law governing Social Work profession	163	89%	9	4%	12	7%
3	License practitioners of Social Work in Nigeria.	87	47%	68	37%	29	16%
4	Organize press release periodically to clarify public on social work activities at State level	129	70%	45	25%	10	5%

The above table 5 presents the opinions of 184 respondents on the expected roles of NASOW toward professionalizing Social Work in Nigeria. Lobby, establishment of Social Work institute and periodic press release at State level top the needed roles of NASOW.

Discussion of findings

Status of Social Work in Nigeria.

Majority of the respondents (n=147 or 80%) declared that, Social work is not yet a profession in Nigeria. This stand may have serious implications for Social Work and its practitioners in Nigeria; especially, when compared with practitioners in advanced countries like UK and Canada. Responses from in-depth interview across the three sampled States (Nasarawa, Plateau and Cross Rivers), confirmed that, Social work cannot attain professional status without a law backing it. A respondent gave his stand on the professional status of Social Work in Nigeria thus:

Social Work will assume professional status just like nursing, medicine, lawyers and others in Nigeria only when NASOW assumes the regulating body. This will prevent non social workers working in social work-related agencies or areas to stop doing so.

Another respondent opined that, social work in Nigeria can assume its professional status only by establishing Social Work institute for certification of Social Workers. This was her statement:

Social Work can assume professional status in Nigeria only if NASOW establishes an institute that regulates the profession; where practitioners will be issued and renew licenses periodically. This is what makes a discipline a profession. Without law and license to practice, Social Work remains a mere academic discipline.

These sayings agree with the characteristics of a professional occupation as put forward by Librodo (2015), where he stated some 10 characteristics of a profession, including clearly defined practitioners of such a profession. This expression has gone to observe the practitioners of Social Work in Nigeria, where a greater percentage of Social Workers only assumed the position. Where there is no law, order is abrogated.

Practitioners of Social Work in Nigeria

Most practitioners of Social Work (n=114 or 72%) in Nigeria are not qualified Social Workers. This was affirmed by majority (n=11 or 73%) of respondents during interview. Though a good number of these non-professionals have tried to update their knowledge in Social Work practice, there is still the problem of quackery in practice without any remorse. For instance, one of the respondents at the cause of interview said: “I consider myself a Social Worker because I have been long in practice of the profession”. Practice makes perfect isn’t it? He added. Nigeria no doubt has trained a good number of Social Workers yet, a good number of Social welfare agencies are being manage by unqualified Social Workers (Abari, 2010). One fact to be considered in this regard is absent of any legal backing. A respondent ironically opined that; people were at liberty to practice Social Work hence there seems to be no restriction. His statement:

Without any restriction, we are at liberty to practice a so-called profession that is not guarded. In medical profession for instance, a theater nurse, no matter his or her experience in the theater, is not licensed to carry out a surgery; though no surgery should be done without a theater nurse. There are standards and ethics guiding each profession. These standards are lacking in the case of Social Work profession.

Challenges of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria

Three major challenges confronting our drive to Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria as stated in table 3. The profession has long been practiced without any legal backing. This has created a gap that gave many the opportunity to violate the professional ethics of operation. Today however, the long-awaited bill has been signed into law. This law must be enforced to make it achieve its purpose. This is yet to be achieved. The absence of Social Work professional institute for certification and accreditation of Social Workers in Nigeria is a challenge to be dealt with, if the law will be of any effect. Almost all the respondents (n=13 or 87%) during interview session, were of the opinion that, the greatest challenge of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria is ensuring that the bill that was passed into law should be enforced and this is to be followed with certification and licensing. One of the respondents was convinced that, if only there would be law backing Social Work as a profession, other challenges would naturally fall in place. These challenges are major characteristics of a profession. Where they are lacking, society may be right to treat it otherwise. Responses from the study affirmed the stand of Aukett (2017) and Librodo (2015), that for every recognised profession, aside ethical constraints, demands recognition from those the profession serves. This is because, code of ethics governs the activities of each

profession; and what empowers any profession is the legal backing; which in the case of Social Work in Nigeria; is ironically lacking.

Prospect of Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria

From the table, majority of respondents across the three States (n=135 or 73%) rated Social Work with high prospect, if is professionalised. There was also an overwhelming support of high prospect of Social Work if professionalized. Out of the 15 respondents interviewed, (n=12 or 80%) rated Social Work to have high prospect in Nigeria. When respondents were asked to state reasons for high rating, most of them itemized the activities and services render by welfare agencies across all the states of Nigeria. A respondent gave the following analyses:

We are living today in a complex society, where complex social problems are in the increase. As long as society exists and social interactions are unavoidable, the need for Social Workers will ever stare us on the face. Take a look at our society today, the need for social and welfare services abound. These services to me are better carried out by those trained (Social Workers) to handle them.

Another respondent, in response to the prospect of Social Work in Nigeria, emphasises government recognition of Social Work. In his statement, he said:

The problem of social work attaining professional status in Nigeria, may not necessarily entails, lack of recognition of the great services, Social Workers provide in Nigeria. For me, Social Work by all indications, proofs government recognition. This is seen in social welfare agencies and some ministries, including medical centres; where welfare services are provided. If not so, why will the government established and employed personnel that man such places? There is no doubt, Social Work has very high prospect in Nigeria like in other nations of the world.

Expected roles of NASOW toward Professionalising Social Work in Nigeria

Table 5 presents the opinions of 184 respondents on the expected roles of NASOW toward professionalising Social Work in Nigeria. Lobby, establishment of Social Work institute and periodic press release at State level. These roles are a confirmation of the purpose of 4 roles of association put forward by National Association of Social Worker (NASW, 1955). These roles among others are to: Promote association among members; Establish standards of training; Improve practice; and Engage in continuous study of function in order to define the relationship of Social Work. From these cardinal roles of Association of Social Workers, the respondents in this study have identified the issue of standardizing training by establishing an institute of Social Work to certify and accredit Social Workers in Nigeria. This is lacking and many others, like: legal backing.

From the interview, most respondents (n=11 or 73%) were of the opinion that, NASOW as a body should carryout working visits to the relevant authorities for the purpose of passing social work bill to law. Some of the respondents appreciated the efforts put so far to see the bill passed 1st, 2nd and 3rd readings at the lower and upper chambers; and wished such efforts could be sustained for the passing of the bill to be signed into law by the president.

Conclusion

This paper discoursed the professional status of Social Work in Nigeria and established that, it has not yet attained the professional status it claimed. Despite its significant contributions in enhancing the social functioning of Nigerians, it is not recognised and appreciated. The bill backing its professional status though passed by the House of Representatives and Senate

some years ago, and signed into law recently needed action by Nigeria Association of Social Workers to ensure its implementation. The study, however, revealed high prospect of Social Work profession in Nigeria. Unlike other professions in Nigeria that have been accorded professional status, Social Work practice, which is known globally as a profession is still in the process of becoming a profession. The implication of which is a field of practice by all a sundry. The efforts of the Nigerian Association of Social Workers in respect to the Social Work bill passed by the National Assembly and others are commendable though; the association needs to put in place some structures to ensure Social Work attains its professional status in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) in collaboration with Nigerian Association of Social Work Educators (NASWE) should consider establishing Social Work institute to accredit and license Social Workers in Nigeria.
2. Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) in conjunction with front-line Ministries and/or agencies offering Social Welfare services should embark on courtesy visits to lobby the appropriate authorities to ensure implementation of Social Work bill.

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