The Social Challenge of Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children in South Africa: Implications for Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the literature study conducted to describe and analyze the social challenge of unaccompanied and separated migrant children in South Africa and the implications for social work. South Africa is a significant destination for children who move from countries throughout Eastern and Southern Africa. The paper reveals that unaccompanied and separated migrant children (USMC) in South Africa are faced with a plethora of challenges that they begin to experience from their country of birth, during the journey to the country of destination, upon their arrival in the new country, during their stay and within the care system. It is affirmed that regardless of the setting, social workers are usually among the professionals who provide services to migrant children and their families. However, the services and support to USMC provided by social workers through their day-to-day practice are not without challenges. The challenges faced by social workers are inherently embedded in the societal dominant ideology about migrants which often influence and shape the way social workers apply the professional skills and practice when dealing with USMC. Furthermore, the environment of social work practice at USMC is multicultural and transnational by nature. The paper also reveals that social work professional knowledge and skills acquired from social work qualification are inadequate for working with migrants, particularly USMC. The paper concluded that because of migration's cultural and language diversity and complexity, cross-cultural social work is considered the most appropriate model to apply when dealing with USMC in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of forced migration prevails in various countries across the world. Children also become migrants due to multiple factors, described as push and pull factors. Children often experience psychological trauma due to devastating incidents of abuse, exploitation, and exposure to hazardous social conditions during the transit period and upon their arrival in the country of destination [1]. The social work profession plays a pivotal role in the provision of care and protection of unaccompanied and separated migrant children in the host country [2,3]. Social workers are expected to treat them as children based on the international and local childcare legislation requirements and appropriate social work practice intervention. However, there are multiple factors inherent in children who have gone through the process of migration that need to be considered by those providing care and support, primarily to unaccompanied and separated migrant children. In many instances, social workers do not have the necessary competencies, skills, and knowledge to provide appropriate interventions when dealing with unaccompanied and separated migrant children [4]. Therefore, there is a need for the improvement of social workers' skills to enable them to have appropriate and effective interventions when working with unaccompanied and separated migrant children.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Why the unaccompanied and separated migrant children in South Africa are a social challenge in South Africa and what are the implications for social work practice?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology applied was a narrative literature review. Narrative reviews attempt to summarize the literature in a manner that is not explicitly systematic, but in a broader sense that includes a specific research question and a comprehensive summary of all studies [5]. Narrative reviews present scope for heightening understanding of the topic, its interpretation, and criticism [6]. The data collection was designed by applying a strategy through an internet search of words and terms related to the research question e.g. search for words such as challenges faced by unaccompanied and separated migrant children; social work and unaccompanied and separated migrant children.

The strategy applied in data collection was reading the abstracts of journal articles identified during the search to determine their relevance to the research question [7]. The full text of the relevant articles was subsequently read before making the final decision for inclusion and exclusion in the study [7]. The data analysis technique applied was thematic or content analysis. The thematic analysis is used to identify and analyze report patterns in the form of themes within a text [8].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in this study discusses the following themes, namely: migration as an international phenomenon, challenges faced by unaccompanied and separated migrant children, the situation of unaccompanied and separated migrant children in South Africa, the social workers' role in working with unaccompanied and separated migrant children, challenges faced by social workers when dealing with issues of unaccompanied and separated migrant children, and implications for social work practice in South Africa.

Migration: An International Phenomenon

The phenomenon of migration, refugees, and citizens fleeing their countries of origin is international [3,9]. People are moving from one country to another across the world. People decide to leave their countries of origin to further studies, as highly skilled workers to join the international labour market, to seek attractive economic opportunities, to spend their retirement life, to seek refuge, and sometimes leave from one place to another for living [10]. According to Gelderbloom [11], ambitions to migrate are often informed by perceptions about social, political, and economic arrangements in the country of origin and the new country. Historically, human populations have migrated to different countries, fleeing conflicts, war, persecution, poverty, and unemployment [10]. As these factors determine the decision to move, migration patterns are often influenced by push and pull factors [3]. Push factors are negative or risk factors such as political and economic insecurity. At the same time, pull factors may refer to expecting the return of a favour, the perceived economic advantage, opportunities, better wages, good services, or social connections [3]. Some of the migrants belong within the global care system by international laws that regulate migration whereas those with unauthorized migrant status are left vulnerable to all sorts of human rights violations, including slavery. According to Williams and Graham [10], some of the migrants are asylum seekers and refugees who are often faced with e the pain and trauma of loss and separation following displacement.

It is estimated that from 1990 to 2020, migration has increased from 153 million which constitutes 2.9 % of the global population to 281 million which is 3.6% of the world population [12]. The developed economies host most of the migrants while a lesser number of migrants is found in developing countries developed [10]. Williams and Graham [10] argue that one of the dominant perceptions in developed countries today is that people flow in from underdeveloped regions to take away jobs, push up housing prices, and overwhelm social services. In countries such as South Africa, migrants are often blamed for causing crime, diseases, and unemployment [13].

Challenges Faced by Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children
The unaccompanied and separated migrant children are faced with a plethora of challenges that they start to experience from their country of birth, during the journey to their country of destination, upon their arrival in the country, during their stay, and within the care system. During transit, unaccompanied and separated children may temporarily stay in one or more countries toward the destination [14]. Unaccompanied and separated migrant children in transit are also hard to reach and often isolated, thus making it challenging to meet their complex needs and problems [14]. During transit, child protection and health are also at their weakest or non-existent. As a result, unaccompanied and separated migrant children suffer due to the lack of support, protection, and substandard living conditions [14]. Consequently, USMC may become subjected to conditions such as sleep deprivation, inadequate food or water, and refused medical care [15]. These children may also become uncertain about continuing with the journey, experiencing problems in communication due to cultural and language differences [14], and prone to discrimination especially if they are recognized as gender nonconforming or other minority groups [15], thereby worsening the potential for adverse outcomes. According to Ramsay [16], many unaccompanied and separated migrant children have experienced violence or trauma before fleeing their countries of origin. Some of the children leave their countries of origin fleeing from violence, death threats, domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse, extortions, poverty, and aiming to reunify with their families [17,18,19]. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [20] reveals that in some instances children often report the reasons for fleeing their countries of origin as due to evading recruitment and exploitation by human traffickers, gangs, and drug syndicates. During transit, USMCs are also exposed to physical and sexual abuse from border enforcement authorities [21, 22] which is associated with harsh detention conditions that are direct contravention of human rights [23]. They are also prone to heightened risks for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, maladaptive grief, social withdrawal, and behavioural and academic difficulties [24]. Crawley [25] argues that the experience of the immigration system in the host country may compound the existing trauma as USMC must narrate their distressing experiences in detail.

The USMC may often experience long waiting times for securing immigration status thus resulting in the ceasing of their rights as children when they turn 18 years old, and this leaves them undocumented and in a state of legal uncertainty and marginalization [26]. Because of legal uncertainty, marginalization, and discrimination USMCs are likely to face constant deportation which may lead to the risk of returning to dangerous situations [27] that may subsequently become the cause for a high number of disappearances often landing into the hands of traffickers [28]. There is also an aspect of substance abuse among USMC which according to Strizek [29] and Patel et al. [30] is a risk that has been acknowledged as a pattern

that to a large extent, has not been studied. In many situations upon arrival in the country of destination, the USMC find themselves exposed to gender-based or sexual violence and other forms of violence inflicted in the community and reception facilities (31,32). Furthermore, due to a lack of a safe environment and persistent uncertainty about the future, USMCs often become involved in substance abuse as a coping mechanism [30]. Substance abuse may also be used as mechanism of control over USMC when the incidents of trafficking occur during the migration journey [33]. Lastly, these children must also adjust to a new cultural environment, including new customs, language, and education system [34].

The policy and legal frameworks and academic literature on unaccompanied and separated migrant children stress a 'child first, migrant second' approach, thereby fundamentally believing that children's needs are best met by seeing them as children first and migrants second [25]. Paradoxically, McLaughlin [35] expresses her criticism of this approach, arguing that it does not recognize the complexity of unaccompanied and separated migrant children's lives. According to McLaughlin [35], the noncitizen child is always subject to the border first, which is a political reality that perturbs the ethical foundations of the 'child first, migrant second' approach. Crawley [25] asserts that the immigration processes they are exposed to are often far from child-friendly. Unaccompanied and separated migrant children are constantly subjected to tension between the childcare protection system and immigration policies and legislation.

Once the unaccompanied and separated migrant children resettle or get admitted to the care protection system, they are faced with the challenge of navigating a new educational environment [16]. Most of them encounter academic, economic, and psychological difficulties that include separation from family, cultural dissonance, acculturation stress, gaps in schooling, distress or fear of school personnel, and limited financial resources [16]. They are also less likely to have access to the health and social services of the host country [14]. They may also lack information regarding services, language barriers, and unclear rules [36]. These children are also likely to face a high risk of becoming victims of violence, physical or sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking [36]. Unaccompanied and separated migrant children are also likely to face barriers resulting from trauma, interrupted education, and the new medium of instruction acquisition, and these barriers may thwart pathway planning [16]. Pathway planning for unaccompanied and separated migrant children may also become a challenge due to the non-existence of immigration status given the lack of documentation.

The Situation of Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children in South Africa
South Africa is a significant destination for children moving from countries throughout Eastern and Southern Africa [37]. According to UNICEF [37], it is estimated that more than 642 migrant children are living in South Africa, thereby making the country the most significant child migrant population in the African continent. The population of migrant children in South Africa includes refugees, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, smuggled migrant children, and USMC, and the reasons for migration vary. Ackermann [38] identifies the following as reasons for children to migrate, namely, conflict-related (44%), death of the primary caregiver in the country of origin (21%), socioeconomic reasons, which include the search for better education opportunities (22%), children whose caregivers could no longer care for them due to poverty or poor circumstances in the country of origin, or duties of parental care diverted to relatives following the separation of parents (4%). The USMC sometimes migrates to South Africa to join

the caregivers already residing there [38]. According to Magqibelo et al. [39], USMC from other countries had specifically fled their war-torn countries to South Africa with hopeful aspirations of achieving the dream of democracy and human rights.

Many refugee and migrant children experience continuous violence and exploitation on their journey. They may arrive in the country without parents or caregivers while others come with parents or relatives and are later separated [37]. However, the dangers and harsh experiences these children often face do not change their decision to migrate. Mahati and Palmary [40] reveal that they risk their lives by crossing rural land borders frequently (sometimes daily). At present, the care and protection of USMC are decided by the courts in South Africa and are often placed in child and youth care centres [32].

Most USMCs in South Africa do not have any form of documentation (Mathe, 2018). Mathe [2] asserts that without identity documents, it is difficult for these children to earn a productive living. The lack of documentation impedes the USMC's ability to exercise fundamental rights, and without birth registration documentation, migrant children are excluded from accessing identification documents [38]. Due to the illegal status of USMC in South Africa, access to identification documents becomes a significant difficulty [2]. Mathe [2] asserts that without a document that legalizes their stay in the country, it leaves them unrecognized. The lack of documentation among USMCs leaves them exposed to different forms of exploitation and abuse, such as sexual abuse and assault. Without any other choices for making ends meet, they can find themselves working in dangerous and unsanitary places that are not regulated by the state [2] The recent scenario was a criminal incident in July 2021 in Krugersdorp, Gauteng Province, which led to the arrest of illegal miners and amongst them were minors from Mozambique [41]. The lack of documentation also leads to further problems for USMC accessing services and active integration [42]. Warria [43] reveals that South Africa is reported to have many undocumented migrant children who are either stateless or vulnerable to becoming stateless. The lack of proof of birth or parentage is the main factor contributing to the risk of statelessness [38]. When the undocumented USMC turn 18 years old, they are unable to marry or register their children, thereby perpetuating the cycle of irregularity [38].

The USMC in South Africa is also faced with psychosocial challenges that they experience upon their arrival and stay in the country. According to Fritsch et al. [44], USMC face significant challenges such as physical safety, life without a parent or guardian, social discrimination, constant struggle to find food, shelter, health care resources, and employment, access to education, discrimination, illegal status, and trauma. Fritsch et al. [44] assert that USMC's high discrimination levels and powerlessness cause concern. The South African system is described as one of the major sites for xenophobic ostracism of foreign children [45]. The study by Crush and Tawodzera [45] reveals how the USMC is referred to with different derogatory names, such as "amakwerekwere and "amagrigambo," which are used to describe foreigners from other African countries. Teachers are also viewed as doing little or nothing to protect the USMC from such abuse within the school environment [45]. Crush & Tawodzera [45] argue that there is significant evidence that schools are not observing the children's rights guaranteed in international conventions and the South African Constitution. Discrimination against UMSC in schools is likely to have adverse effects as it might lower their self-esteem and subsequently contribute to the attainment of poor performance results [45].

The USMC often experiences xenophobic comments in the shelters in which they have been placed [39]. Magqibelo et al. [39] further reveal that when the USMC arrived in South Africa without knowing anyone, they ended up homeless. The study conducted in Limpopo by Magqibelo et al. [39] also reveals that some USMCs needed to go through the court process before admission, as they were placed without appropriate documentation or authorization. They were also found to receive marginal social work services from non-government organizations [39]. The study also reveals that the care workers did not have formal training, and they indicate that they use common knowledge to address the needs of the children [39]. South Africa has many cross-border USMCs that enter South Africa but do not speak English or any other language spoken in South Africa [47]. Hanna [46] also asserts that research has revealed that some migrant learners face stereotyping by learners and teachers due to discrimination within the school premises as they are socially excluded as they are perceived to be speaking English that is deemed as being spoken in foreign accent or having blacker skin than Black South African. This ends up a challenge for the school-going USMCs and their social integration [48, 47]. Timngum [47] argues that the lack of integration programs has deprived USMC, whose countries of origin are Francophone, of having the language skills necessary to continue furthering their education, which is essential to their integration and well-being. In South Africa, learning at least one of their local languages is necessary for integrating and accepting cross-border migrants [48,47]. In some instances, USMC hide their identity or country of origin to fit into the society and avoid discrimination and xenophobia [42].

The Department of Social Development conducted an audit of USMC during the 2019/2020 financial year, and the audit report registered a total number of 474 migrant children in the system under different placement types [49]. The Department of Social Development also developed guidelines for unaccompanied and separated migrant children in South Africa and South African children in distress in other countries. The guidelines were created due to the increasing vulnerability of USMCs in South Africa [50].

The Social Workers' Role in Working with Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children
The need for the intervention of the social work profession in the challenges facing USMC becomes essential and critical. Regardless of the setting they work in, social workers are usually the professionals who provide services to migrant children and their families [36]. Zwebathu [51] argues that social work has a triple mandate from the client, the social agency, and the profession. The third mandate, which is the profession itself, has two dimensions which are science-based intervention and the explicit orientation towards human rights and social justice, and that constitute professional ethics [51] According to Zwebathu [51] the third mandate also gives to social work the possibility to devise a self-defined mandate based on the identification of pressing, unfulfilled needs, social injustice, violence and human rights violations in general without having to wait for a mandate from society or a state which may never come. George [52] asserts that social work is one of the most dynamic professions; it is continuously changing to adapt to international, regional, and local influences.

The social work profession strives to improve the quality of life of all and promote social justice, including immigrants and refugees, without getting involved in the political or ideological struggle associated with the country's foreign policy [53]. Social workers intervene in migrated-related issues during their day-to-day practice [3]). Social workers and other

professionals respond to the diverse needs of USMC at different levels [51]. Social workers initiate support services for USMC. They need to be informed and constantly updated with the current laws to know which kind of assistance they can provide for various groups (George, 2015). George (2015) argues that the degree to which social workers can have a multicultural perspective affects their interaction with their service users. Because social workers work with the USMC's diverse individuals, they are expected to develop competencies in their roles when addressing the needs of the USMC [51,36]. The necessity of multi-disciplinary collaboration when working with USMC requires extensive knowledge and competence from social workers. Social work intervention with USMC generally requires a more sensitive and comprehensive approach due to the vulnerability of this population segment [54]. The care and protection of USMC should be treated as a delicate process considering the difficulties these children experience in their countries of origin, during the journey, and in the host country [54]. Asha and Nkuana [54] aver to the importance of diversity as an element that can be considered by social workers when designing child protection for the USMC. Ramsay [16] states that the social work practice with USMC does not happen in a vacuum. Ramsay [16] further supports the argument by asserting that the focus is less on direct social work practice and more on the structural context of the environment in which it is practiced, which he refers to as a "hostile environment. Social workers need to practice in a manner that recognizes the complexities of young people's lives [16]. Social workers and local authorities also need to understand the impact of immigration control on the young people they are looking after and ensure that it is acknowledged and addressed at both practice and strategic levels [16].

Chang-Muy and Congress [55] assert that children and their families have a vast diversity and myriads of needs, and it is essential for social workers to understand the legal, political as well as psychological, and social issues surrounding their immigration. Social workers must provide services to migrant children in all or any of the areas: appropriate accommodation, education, medical care, legal representation, recreation, counselling, and mental health services [56,57]. During the social integration of USMC through the multi-disciplinary system, social workers have an essential role in ensuring the participation of all stakeholders for effective and successful integration.

Challenges Faced by Social Workers when Dealing with Issues of Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children
The challenges facing social workers must be examined within the context of the dominant ideology that influences perceptions, policies, and practices about migration at large. How migration is perceived and construed affects social workers' professional behaviour and interventions when working with USMC. The dominant perceptions about migration may also influence the authorities' responses to the developed policies and the nature of services provided. Castles and Miller [13] illustrate the existence of these dominant perceptions by giving an example of one of the poor South and turbulent East, stealing away jobs from the locals, responsible for the increase in housing prices, and overburdening social services. Similarly, in the South, in countries such as Malaysia and South Africa, immigrants are blamed for crime, disease, and unemployment or for taking away jobs for local citizens [13].

According to Williams and Graham [10], migrants and their descendants are a concern for social workers because they are often overrepresented among those in need of welfare support and benefits and are usually subject to discrimination, marginalization, and human rights abuse

while social workers also form the significant core of the workforce of social service   The emphasis of social work on vulnerabilities and responding to immediate needs has neglected to consider the global contexts of issues impacting on the migrants such as colonialism, slavery, wars, and exploitation and discrimination that are ingrained in institutional practices and within the institutions that employ social workers [10, 58]. During the transitions of individuals and families following displacement, social workers fail to accommodate not only the facts of global development (dominated by global neoliberal economic doctrine), but also the more comprehensive and coordinated exclusionary strategies towards immigration, refugees, and asylum [10]. Social workers are also confronted by the disaggregation of the migrant experience by category whereby needs are disaggregated, labelled, and categorized in a variety of ways and accorded status [59, 10] argue that migrant needs are disaggregated, labelled, and categorized with conferred status of refugee, international student, undocumented or "illegal" migrants, unaccompanied, separated children, and those who are trafficked. According to Williams and Graham [10], the assertion against disaggregation, labelling, and categorization does not advance the homogenization of migrant needs. This categorization of migrants leads to the labelling of undocumented migrants as illegal which consequently leads to them being denied access to rights and subjected to high levels of abuse and violations [60]

Williams and Graham [10] affirm that the individualization of the migrant and disaggregation of needs is incongruent with the intricacies of the migrant experience. Williams and Graham [10] further argue that how groups are culturally objectified, stereotyped, and homogenized in national contexts in which it is often meant to justify their spatial segregation in communities, towns, and cities, contributes to xenophobia and racism and, subsequently, fundamentally underpins services and social work response. This leads to the situation whereby, in practice, migrants are being over-cultural as opposed to rights-bearing. The overemphasis on culture negatively impacts individual and community responses due to the predominant orientation on language and cultural attributes as barriers to integration. This problematization of language and culture propels working from the negative assumptions, thereby neglecting strengths, skills, resilience, and agency, and contributes toward the attachment of problems, labels, and negativity framing interpretations of policy that pathologies migrants [10].

The objective of integrating migrants also put social workers in a conflicting position resulting in what Williams and Graham [10] refer to as the assimilation of social work practice. Williams and Graham (2014) argue that the integration mandate is manifested by the language of them and us, insiders and outsiders, in which migrants are permanently treated as migrants regardless of transitions that they may undergo such as acquiring permanent citizenship. The focus remains on visibilities and differences instead of likeness and merging with most of society [10]. Williams and Graham [10] assert that the integration mandate seeks to apply inclusion without taking cognizance of who is included and included into what and by whom, who should be integrated, who is not to be integrated, and how, and whether require little or no adjustment to the dominant society. As asserted earlier, the effect of the ambivalent assimilation in which social workers conspire, intentionally or without intention, is trying to fulfill organizational policies and objectives and compromise their professional values [10]. Williams and Grant [10] further contend that through ambivalent assimilation social workers find themselves caught in the disjuncture between the professional proclamations and commitment to an ethical social justice practice and the realities of what they do during practice. The ambivalent assimilation makes way for the invisible comforts and vantage of a

predominantly "white" or "Westocentric" and colonial social work profession over vulnerable, marginalized, and visible migrants [10]. Ambivalent assimilation also leads to re-socialisation which has disruptive effects on the lives of migrants as they must suffer from dysfunctions such as loss of reference, psychological, and marginality [61]. The failure to address these critical dimensions of a flawed integration process may continue to compromise the social work profession despite every small act of disloyalty and sabotage [10].

Similarly, to the above challenge of ambivalent assimilation besetting the social work profession about ideology and practice, there is a pyramid of other challenges experienced by social workers during their day-to-day practice in support of USMC. Within the field of migration, social workers are confronting social problems and social needs that are multicultural and transnational by nature [62]. Consequently, it becomes impossible to understand or solve issues in national and local contexts [63]. Bo [64] identifies five main topics that are found to be the biggest challenge to multicultural social work, namely, communication problems caused by the lack of a common language as well as different codes of behaviour in interactions with professional services, cultural differences in the parent-child relationship, health problems without adequate medical or psychological help available and structural barriers which make it challenging to adapt the social service system to the needs of the minority clients [64] including USMC.

In addition to the ambivalent assimilation, the other multicultural dimension confronting social work practice in migration is what Buzungu and Ruykasa [65]) refer to as culturalization. Culturalization is a process whereby problems or differences are interpreted and explained informed by generalized cultural interpretations, rather than structural and institutional considerations that are intrinsic to individual and social position [66]. Ruykasa and Ylvisaker [66] contend that there is a need to move away from a culturalized approach of the "other" towards a position where underlying classifications and unequal power relations are recognized and dealt with. In a culturalized environment where social problems are linked to cultural values and practices, social workers lose sight of other contributing factors and the complexities in the lives and struggles of their clients [65] Through culturalization, social workers may lose sight of individuality and bring stereotyping and stigmatization perceptions of people [65]. Within a culturalized practice environment, social workers often connect social problems faced by minorities to cultural diversity, instead of seeing them within the context of unequal power relations or the inferior position of the minorities [67, 66]. The study conducted by Bo [64] also indicated a need for certain kinds of knowledge in social work practice. The knowledge lacking in social work practice includes awareness of the embedded "Western ideology" in social work and an understanding of the national immigration rules and policies [64]. The study by Bo [64] also revealed that the agencies to which social workers belong lacked a shared ideology or even discussion for their work with ethnic minority clients. Another finding by Herz and Lalander [68] reveals that young people found their social workers to be distant bystanders with power, appearing irregularly to offer bad news and disappearing again. Based on their findings, Herz and Lalander [68] suggest that social workers need more time to develop therapeutic relationships with young people. As a result, relationships were seen by migrant children as part of an oppressive immigration system.

In the South African context, the challenge of accessing documentation for USMC limits the social workers' ability to help them access social services [2]. The difficulty in accessing

documentation leads to increased frustrations among social workers who are rendering services to USMC as they receive little or no support from the government. Social workers often become caught up in the sweltering tensions of the socio-political issues, feeling that their capacity to influence most of the problems related to USMC needs to be taken seriously or addressed [2]. In addition, more resources are required to deal with the volumes of USMC and there is a high volume of South African children requiring the same social work services. Many USMCs may, due to fear of arrest and mistrust caused by not having legal documents, tend to avoid contact with authorities or not try to access existing services, thereby complicating the service provision to them and their care and protection [69].

South Africa has a critical shortage of social workers, making social work a scarce skill [70] (Department of Social Development, 2009). Many social workers leave the country to find jobs in developed countries or get absorbed in the corporate world in the country due to poor working conditions [2]. The shortage of social workers negatively affects the rendering of services to USMC and other vulnerable groups in South Africa [2]. UNICEF [69] also contends that the capacity of social workers' ability to do statutory work is already overstretched as the burden of dealing with the consequences of HIV and AIDS and the high demand for foster care among South African children have already created enormous strains on system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The challenges discussed above, particularly regarding the inadequacy of social work interventions due to cultural and language barriers, require serious consideration in modifying social work theory and practice in migration. Therefore, it implies that social work professional knowledge and skills acquired as part of the social work qualification are not adequate for interventions for migrants, especially for USMCs. Because of migration's cultural and language diversity and complexity, cross-cultural social work is the most appropriate approach for dealing with USMC in South Africa. Intercultural social work could strengthen interventions by acquiring knowledge and skills that could result in cultural competence.

Cross-cultural social work works across national and cultural boundaries [71]. Cross-cultural social work reinforces cultural competency in social work practice. It is necessary to provide services for service users with diverse beliefs, values, ethnicities, cultures, and languages [51]. The level of multicultural perspective the social workers possess can affect their interaction with the service users, especially in migration [52]. The application of cross-cultural social work practice is examined within three elements essential for cultural competence: knowledge, skills, and self-awareness.

Cultural Knowledge

The dimension of cultural knowledge emphasizes the importance of understanding concepts and processes related to culture and how these interact with the concerns of the social work profession [72]. Cultural knowledge is viewed as a fundamental aspect of cross-cultural social work practice in almost every source that defines it [73]. According to Carpenter [73], this has been evident in the early conceptualization of incorporating diverse content in education, whereby knowledge about diverse contexts and populations is cited as essential to developing a culturally competent social worker, organization, or educational institution. Cultural knowledge is defined as having relevant information about group history, world views, communication styles, commonly held beliefs, social structure values, and behavioral cultural

characteristics of diverse cultural groups [74], which in earlier years would refer to race, ethnicity, and a certain extent, religion [73]. In recent years, cultural knowledge has evolved to include understanding other diversities that may include but are not limited to gender, sexuality, religion, age, nationality, language ability, socioeconomic status, etc. [75].

Cultural knowledge is based on the understanding that all human beings operate in cultural contexts, and culture informs how people construct both the material world and the social world [76]. Its intrinsic focus is the discovery of knowledge about the construct of culture and processes for locating understanding about issues and concerns that may immensely impact different cultural groups; therefore, this dimension embraces both knowledge and the process of inquiry [72]. Practice grounded in cultural knowledge recognizes variations among individuals, acknowledges the importance of understanding cultural context in social work practice, and emphasizes strong generalist social work skills and competence [77].

Skills

Culturally competent skills in social work practice involve using appropriate techniques and methodologies that reflect the social worker's awareness and understanding of the role and importance of culture in their practice [74]. Social workers can demonstrate the application of cross-cultural techniques and methodologies by utilizing appropriate assessment tools, therapeutic interventions, or connections to the proper resources. The concept of social justice is essential to implementing culturally competent skills. The culturally competent skills ingrained with social justice require implementation at mezzo and macro levels of social work practice and inherently recognize power differentials in the social work-client relationship [72]. The social justice commitment within the culturally competent skills framework is premised on the argument that because social workers are responsible for serving vulnerable populations, they must actively participate in dismantling oppressive systems [72].

Culturally competent skills may also include a wide array of essential elements such as active listening, empathy, and applying strength-based interventions [72]. NASW [75] identifies critical thinking and the ability to tolerate ambiguity when not knowing about something as essential elements of cross-cultural skills. Culturally competent skills can also be complemented using a cultural humility approach to engage the client or community in shared decision-making [72]. The cultural humility approach advances the notion that all human cultural experiences are unique and should be harmonized instead of emphasizing shared group characteristics [72]. Drabbler et al. [72] further assert that according to the cultural humility approach, the overemphasis on shared group characteristics gives privilege to the social worker's expertise about a client's culture and blends the power imbalances between the social worker and the client. Through this approach, social workers are encouraged to be inclusive of their client's or communities' cultural differences and be liberated from the expectations of cultural experts [74]. Lastly, culturally competent skills can be of great use for examining the work of the social work profession as they provide the ability to comprehensively assess clients about differentiating culturally normative behaviours from symptomatic behaviours [72].

Self-awareness

Self-awareness in cultural competence in social work practice is described as an awareness of the social workers' own culture and identity to appreciate the clients' culture and identity [75].

It is also an awareness of the social workers' privilege and power and an acknowledgment of how this impacts their work with clients [72]. According to Sue [78], the practitioner's self-awareness also includes knowledge of their cultural heritage and the potential effects of their background on the work with the client. Bender et al. [79] assert that self-awareness encompasses gaining insight into one's identity and how it places oneself in society. The insight to be gained includes exploring features such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical abilities, socioeconomic status, and cultural background [79]. Bender et al. [79] further affirm that the critical aspect of self-awareness and culturally responsive social work practice includes exploring and understanding ethnic and racial identity. Developing racial identity requires building self-consciousness, a sense of collective identity based on the perception that one shares a common heritage with a specific racial group [80]. Alvarez and Helms [81] describe ethnic identity as the attainment of cultural characteristics and a sense of and awareness of shared cultural variables such as history, language, and tradition. According to Phinney [82], racial and identity development are personalized processes over time as a person explores and makes decisions about ethnicity and race's role. Ethnic and racial identities are particularly vital for practitioners working with diverse client populations [79]. Therefore, a better understanding of one's own ethnic and racial identity helps to build self-awareness, which may enable culturally competent practice [83].

The increased awareness among practitioners also involves understanding one's ethnic and racial background within a socio-political and historical context [79]. One's ethnic and racial background includes critically exploring personal ancestral history within geographic, cultural, relational, and societal contexts [79]. This examination of ethnic and racial background facilitates self-awareness by bringing out the foundations of one's own beliefs, biases, and differences [84]. Sue and Sue [85] assert that awareness of personal biases can enhance social workers' consciousness of issues that may impede practical work with ethnically and racially dissimilar clients. When working with clients, social workers must demonstrate cultural humility and sensitivity to the dynamics of power and privilege in all areas of social work practice [73]. They should also reflect on their cultural identity and backgrounds and apply insights into their work with individual clients and communities [73]. Using these insights and awareness of power and privilege, they should utilize cultural humility and empowerment frameworks to develop client-practitioner relationships [73]. They can achieve culturally competent self-awareness by creating and applying strategies that challenge and adjust detrimental beliefs, attitudes, and feelings [73].

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of forced migration will continue to prevail among child migrants due to pull and push factors that subsequently lead to the prevalence of USMC. South Africa has the highest prevalence of USMC due to push factors from the neighbouring countries and some other countries from Southern Africa. Children also leave their countries due to pull factors in South Africa, such as the hope of attaining better education and work opportunities that could improve their social and economic circumstances. During transit and upon arrival in South Africa, these children face challenges such as hunger, ill-health, separation from caregivers, arrest, and become subjected to various forms of abuse and consequently, fall into the South African child care system, which under its care determines their fate utilizing various options stipulated in the National Guidelines for Dealing with Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children in South Africa and South African Children in Distress in Other Countries.

Intrinsic to the care and protection of migrant children within the childcare system, is the social work profession. USMCs are regarded as children in need of care and protection; hence, they are also placed in alternative care such as child and youth care centres. Social workers and other social service practitioners rendering services to USMC within the childcare system are expected to provide childcare services by the provisions of the Children's Act of 2008. However, social workers face language and cultural barriers that compromise the quality and effectiveness of the childcare services rendered to USMC. The social workers dealing with USMC must gain cultural competency skills when working with service users from multicultural backgrounds. Social workers must gain cultural competency skills because they are not acquired through professional qualifications. However, cultural competency is one of the skills that social workers may have developed from social work qualification and be able to demonstrate their understanding of human diversity in practice.

To improve the social work interventions at USMC, social workers working within the field of migration must be equipped with cultural competency skills. Cultural competency skills may be integrated into the social work curriculum, especially in higher learning institutions in regions with a high concentration of USMC. The aspects of cultural competency to be included may include the basic knowledge of the languages spoken in the neighbouring countries with a high prevalence of USMC in South Africa. The social workers dealing with migrants may also receive capacitation on cultural competence through in-service training. Another option could be to recruit social workers from these countries to work in the childcare system to assist South African social workers in dealing with constraints related to the inability to render services due to language and cultural barriers. The current use of language interpreters is not an appropriate option for therapeutic interventions as it does not transcend communication expressed through body language and feelings, which are essential communication features, especially for children. The presence of USMC in South Africa will be one of the country's social challenges. Therefore, there is a need to seek various innovations to improve USMC's social work interventions.

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