

Social auxiliary workers and community-based child protection: A case study of orphaned children awaiting foster care placement

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1. Introduction

The protection and well-being of children remain one of the most pressing priorities for social welfare systems across the globe. In many societies, children face complex vulnerabilities resulting from social, economic, and health-related challenges. These vulnerabilities necessitate responsive, coordinated, and community-oriented interventions to ensure that children not only survive but are given the opportunity to thrive in safe and supportive environments.

Social work as a profession plays a vital role in creating and sustaining these protective environments. However, the increasing demands on social workers and the scarcity of resources have led to the expansion of roles within the social services workforce. Among these roles is that of the Social Auxiliary Worker (SAW), who serves as a vital link between formal social work services and the communities they aim to support. Positioned within local contexts, SAWs are often the first to identify children at risk and initiate appropriate interventions (Khosa & Gutura, 2023).

Social auxiliary workers play a crucial supportive role in South Africa's social services sector by assisting professional social workers in delivering care to vulnerable communities. Although not qualified to offer independent or therapeutic interventions, they contribute significantly through basic counselling, community outreach, and administrative support, always under supervision (Earle, 2008). Their training comprises a one-year accredited programme at NQF Level 4, following which they must register with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) to practise legally (Lombard & Kleijn, 2006). By extending the reach of social work services, auxiliary workers enhance the profession's responsiveness, particularly in under-resourced and rural areas.

There is, however, limited empirical research that specifically examines how SAWs contribute to the protection and care of children who are awaiting foster care placement, particularly within community-based organisations operating outside the statutory foster care system. What remains underexplored is how SAWs navigate prolonged foster care delays, the nature of their day-to-day protective interventions

during this interim period, and the ways in which they collaborate with statutory actors to safeguard children's well-being. This study addresses this gap by providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights into the roles, contributions, and challenges of SAWs working with children awaiting foster care placement, thereby extending existing knowledge on auxiliary social service labour and strengthening evidence to inform child protection policy and practice in South Africa.

The aim of this study was to understand how social auxiliary workers employed in community-based organisations, who often operate in under-resourced settings, contributed to the care and protection of children awaiting foster care placement. The study objectives were to: (1) examine the nature of child protection services provided by social auxiliary workers; (2) explore the extent and impact of the collaborations they facilitated to strengthen service delivery; and (3) identify the challenges social auxiliary workers encountered in fulfilling their roles within the broader child protection system.

2. Background

South Africa has aligned itself with global and regional commitments to children's rights through its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. These standards are reflected in national instruments such as the Constitution, the [Children's Act 38 of 2005](#), and the [White Paper for Social Welfare \(1997\)](#), which underscore the rights of children to care, protection, and development ([Human Rights Law in Africa, 2004](#); [Jamieson et al., 2022](#)). Despite this robust legal framework, children continue to face persistent threats such as poverty, neglect, orphanhood, and inadequate access to social services ([Masha & Botha, 2021](#); [UNICEF, 2021](#)). These conditions reveal a disconnect between policy intentions and the lived realities of vulnerable children in many South African communities.

In South Africa, one of the critical gaps in the child protection system is the widespread delay in foster care placements. Due to high caseloads, limited human resources, and administrative inefficiencies, foster care applications can remain unresolved for over 18 months, placing children

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in prolonged legal and emotional limbo (Delany et al., 2016; Matsoso, 2022). During this time, children are often left in unstable caregiving arrangements where they are exposed to further harm, including school dropout, exploitation, and psychosocial distress (Children's Institute, 2023). Evidence further shows that children waiting for foster care are at heightened risk of neglect, poverty, and limited access to health, particularly in under-resourced households and communities (UNICEF, 2021). While statutory frameworks advocate for the child's best interests, such systemic delays undermine these principles and violate children's rights to safety, family care, and social services.

The urgency of delayed foster care placements necessitates interim strategies to support affected children, and in this context, SAWs, particularly those based in community-based CBOs, play an indispensable role. These workers deliver essential frontline services such as psychosocial support, nutrition and hygiene assistance, educational help, and facilitating access to health services (Khosa & Gutura, 2025). Acting as a bridge between families and the formal child protection system, SAWs identify children at risk, initiate referrals, advocate with social workers, and often provide consistent follow-up to ensure continuity of care during prolonged placement delays. Their interventions are context-sensitive, grounded in the lived realities of informal settlements and rural communities where they serve as the first line of defense, particularly for children affected by HIV, chronic illness, or poverty. As highlighted by Zibengwa and Bila (2021), SAWs in drop-in centres address not only physical needs but also the emotional and developmental well-being of vulnerable children, despite operating outside the statutory foster care system. Despite their efforts, SAWs face structural constraints such as limited formal recognition, weak inter-professional coordination, and lack of supervision and resources (De Jager & Nadesan, 2024).

The foster care backlog in South Africa is well documented, with statutory social workers facing high caseloads and complex placement demands (Naicker & Botha, 2023). Research has largely focused on statutory social workers' challenges, particularly resource constraints and difficulties linking foster care to socio-economic programmes (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017), while giving limited attention to the role of SAWs in CBOs. Although SAWs are mandated to provide supportive services under supervision, their contribution to bridging service gaps for children awaiting foster care placement remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the roles, collaborative practices, and challenges of SAWs in under-resourced CBOs, informing community-based foster care policy and practice responses.

2.1. Theoretical framework: developmental social welfare approach

The Developmental Social Welfare Approach (DSWA) was used as a theoretical lens for this study. The DSWA is relevant to this study as it provides a guiding framework for understanding how social services should be delivered in a manner that promotes human development, social justice, and community participation. Rooted in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997), the DSWA recognises that poverty, inequality, and social exclusion are deeply interlinked with child vulnerability. It advocates for an integrated and community-based model of service delivery that combines statutory interventions with developmental programmes. This is particularly significant for the current study, which explores the role of SAWs in CBOs as frontline providers of child protection services. Their role aligns with the DSWA's emphasis on early intervention, prevention, and empowerment of communities to support vulnerable children, including those waiting for foster care placement.

Moreover, the DSWA places strong emphasis on partnerships between the state and civil society, which mirrors the operational context of this study. The DSD works collaboratively with CBOs by funding programmes and deploying SAWs to strengthen service provision in under-resourced communities. The foster care backlog in South Africa has revealed major gaps in formal child protection systems, making the DSWA an ideal framework to investigate how informal and community-

led interventions, facilitated by SAWs, can respond to these challenges. By applying the DSWA, this study critically examined how developmental principles such as accessibility, community ownership, and social inclusion were being implemented in practice, and whether the collaboration between SAWs and social workers was sufficient to uphold the rights and wellbeing of children in the interim period before foster care placement is finalised.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study adopted an applied research approach, aimed at generating practical solutions and insights relevant to social service delivery. A qualitative research methodology was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of how services provided by SAWs contribute to child protection. As Lukan et al. (2023) explain, qualitative methods are effective in capturing the perspectives and meaning-making processes of participants within their specific contexts. This approach was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of SAWs in their efforts to support children awaiting foster care placement.

The research utilised a multiple-case study design, enabling systematic comparison across several CBOs within the City of Johannesburg. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to investigate each CBO as a distinct case while also examining patterns, similarities, and differences across cases in how social auxiliary workers (SAWs) implement child protection interventions. The City of Johannesburg hosts a significant number of CBOs and child protection services (Khosa & Gutura, 2025), making it a strategic location to explore how these workers contribute to the care and protection of children awaiting foster care placement. To capture diverse perspectives, eight CBOs were purposively selected, and participants were SAWs employed full-time with at least three years of direct experience working with children. By analysing multiple cases in this way, the study was able to generate in-depth, contextually rich insights while also identifying common practices and variations across different organisational settings.

3.2. Recruitment of participants

The City of Johannesburg is divided into seven regions, with this study focusing on Regions D and C, which together hosted 15 Drop-In Centres (six in D, nine in C). Participants were social auxiliary workers (SAWs) with at least three years of direct service experience; part-time volunteers and project-only staff were excluded. Following ethics clearance, the researcher requested permission from CBO managers or directors, targeting eight to ten organisations. Ultimately, eight CBOs participated, providing a diverse sample and ensuring data saturation.

Meetings were then arranged with SAWs at each participating CBO. During these meetings, the study's purpose was explained in detail, highlighting the value of SAWs' participation. Prospective participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, which were fully addressed, and they received a copy of the participant information sheet for further review. For those expressing interest, interview dates and venues were scheduled at their convenience to minimize disruption to their daily responsibilities.

3.3. Data collection

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This method was selected for its ability to explore complex social issues and generate rich, detailed narratives. As Maher and Bedwei-Majdou (2025) note, semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in investigating "how" and "why" questions, capturing both factual information and deeper emotional or contextual insights. Interview questions focused on the participants' interventions with children

awaiting foster care placement and their working relationships with social workers involved in child protection services.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised as the primary method for analysing the qualitative data collected in this study. This approach is well-suited for uncovering patterns of meaning across participants' narratives, allowing for the identification, analysis, and reporting of recurring themes within the data set. Thematic analysis goes beyond simply summarising data; it facilitates a deep interpretation of participants' experiences within their social and institutional contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this study, emerging patterns and shared meanings were organised into overarching themes and sub-themes that reflect the core aspects of SAWs' contributions to child protection. Direct quotations from participants were used to provide authenticity and to ground the findings in the voices of those with lived experience.

The analytical process followed Kumar (2019) five-step framework, which includes data familiarisation, theme identification, data coding, theme development, and final interpretation. The first step involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts to immerse the researcher in the data and gain a holistic understanding. This was followed by systematically coding data to highlight significant features related to the research questions. Codes were then grouped to form preliminary themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. The final stage involved naming and defining the themes, drawing connections between them, and interpreting their broader significance in relation to the developmental social welfare approach and the study's objectives. This rigorous and reflective process ensured a credible, transparent, and meaningful interpretation of the qualitative data.

3.5. Ethics

To ensure the integrity of the study and protect participants' rights and well-being, several ethical principles were upheld. Informed consent was obtained after participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, with consent forms signed only once it was confirmed that they understood the information provided. Participant privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained by anonymising responses and using random identifiers instead of names, i.e. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. Furthermore, participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any penalties or negative consequences. The study received ethics approval from [omitted for blind review].

3.6. Researcher positionality

The researcher is a social work professional with experience in child protection and community-based service delivery in South Africa. This background facilitated access to participants and an informed understanding of CBO contexts and the roles of social auxiliary workers. However, this proximity posed a risk of bias through assumptions or prior knowledge influencing interpretation. To mitigate this, the researcher maintained reflexive field notes, prioritised participants' perspectives, and engaged in ongoing supervisory reflection.

4. Findings

The study findings are presented according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis, starting with the demographic characteristics of the participants as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the participants comprised ten social auxiliary workers, six females and four males, aged between 32 and 40 years. They had between three and twelve years of direct experience in DICs, and all were currently employed as SAWs providing services to OVC.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Current Position
Participant 1	39 years	Female	4 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 2	40 years	Female	6 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 3	33 years	Male	10 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 4	38 years	Male	10 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 5	33 years	Female	7 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 6	34 years	Male	10 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 7	40 years	Female	3 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 8	32 years	Female	12 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 9	32 years	Female	6 years	Social auxiliary worker
Participant 10	36 years	Female	7 years	Social auxiliary worker

Three themes and six sub-themes emerged from the analysis of data. These are summarised in Table 2 and discussed thereafter, supported by verbatim quotes from the participants.

4.1. Theme 1: early intervention and transitional support by social auxiliary workers in foster care cases

Typically, SAWs provide services that support the work of social workers. However, those based in CBOs often operate more independently, with minimal supervision. Despite the limitation of their services being supportive in nature, and in context of CBOs they receive limited supervision, they make significant contributions to child protection. The findings of this study reveal that SAWs are often among the first to engage with families being considered for foster care. These roles and responsibilities are discussed further in the sub-themes below.

4.1.1. Sub-theme 1.1: immediate psychosocial response following parental loss

This sub-theme highlights the critical role of social auxiliary workers as immediate responders during times of family bereavement, particularly when children are affected. Their early involvement in the aftermath of a parent's death positions them as the first line of emotional and practical support. SAWs step in to stabilise the situation, assess the needs of the household, and activate a range of interventions that protect and support the children involved:

Table 2
Main themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Early intervention and transitional support by social auxiliary workers in foster care cases	Sub-theme 1.1: Immediate psychosocial response following parental loss Sub-theme 1.2: Bridging the gap between parental loss and formal foster care placement
Theme 2: Strengthening collaborative partnerships to enhance care for orphaned children	Sub-theme 2.1: Collaborating with local businesses and USAID funded organisations Sub-theme 2.2: Preparing and partnering with foster parents
Theme 3: Challenges encountered by social auxiliary workers in delivering child protection services to orphaned children	Sub-theme 3.1: Challenges of follow-up after foster care placement finalisation Sub-theme 3.2: Unstructured partnership with social workers managing foster care

We are often the first to respond when a death occurs in a family, especially where children are involved. In such cases, we immediately engage with the household and enrol the affected children in our programmes. These include psychosocial support, daily meals, homework assistance, and age-appropriate programmes, such as tailored programmes for teenage girls and children living with HIV. (Participant 2)

The immediacy of SAWs' engagement enables them to respond holistically to children's developmental, emotional, and educational needs. Their role goes beyond crisis response; they take on proactive tasks such as linking families to essential services and guiding them through the foster care process:

Children in these situations typically face numerous challenges that, if not addressed, could severely affect their well-being. We conduct home visits to assess the living conditions, offer basic counselling, assist with school enrolment, refer them to health services, and help families gather the necessary documents for foster care applications. (Participant 8)

This frontline presence also means SAWs are often the first to identify child-headed households or other high-risk situations requiring statutory intervention. Their referral and monitoring practices ensure that vulnerable children are not lost in the system while formal processes are underway:

Sometimes we identify these cases through home visits, while other times families or concerned community members approach us. In cases where children have lost their parents and there are no adults present, we refer the matter to DSD social workers to initiate alternative placement, either in foster care or residential facilities. We monitor the case until it is finalised. In most instances, we serve as the first point of contact. (Participant 5)

4.1.2. Sub-theme 2: bridging the gap between parental loss and formal foster care placement

This sub-theme highlights the pivotal role played by social auxiliary workers in facilitating and sustaining child protection during the often-prolonged foster care application process. Their efforts ensure that families are not left to navigate the complex statutory system alone and that children receive consistent care, even before formal placements are finalised. SAWs act as liaisons between families and social workers, ensuring that necessary referrals, documentation, and follow-ups are conducted efficiently and empathetically:

We conduct home visits, and when there's a need for foster care, we link the family with social workers from the Department of Social Development. We remain involved from the initial application stage and continue following up until the process is finalised. Given that foster care applications can take a long time, I often assign a community caregiver to make regular home visits and monitor the child's well-being. In most cases, we encounter issues such as food insecurity, so we step in to provide food parcels and daily meals for the children. (Participant 1)

The extended waiting periods between foster care application and approval require sustained intervention to avoid further hardship for children. During this limbo, SAWs ensure that affected children remain integrated into support programmes at drop-in centres, offering not only material aid but psychosocial continuity:

Once we identify that a child needs foster care, we immediately refer the case to social workers and stay involved throughout the process. However, the foster care application can take a year or more to finalise. In fact, we currently have a case that's been pending for over two years. During these waiting periods, our drop-in centre continues to provide ongoing support to the affected children. (Participant 4)

SAWs also help families cope with the financial gaps that often arise following the death of a caregiver. Their knowledge of social relief

mechanisms and collaboration with government departments enables families to access temporary support and maintain some degree of financial stability while awaiting formal foster placements:

When a family experiences the loss of a loved one, we visit the home to assess whether they need support beyond funeral arrangements. If necessary, we assist with foster care applications. Since the process can be lengthy, we help families apply for SRD [Social Relief of Distress] through SASSA in the meantime. In many cases, child support grants are discontinued when the deceased was the grant recipient. We also assist the family with changing the grant beneficiary through the help of social workers so that support continues while they await foster care placement. (Participant 6)

Across the eight CBO cases, early intervention and transitional support were central functions of SAWs, though their implementation varied. SAWs in better-resourced CBOs offered structured psychosocial programmes, including for children living with HIV, while those in smaller CBOs focused on crisis response and basic support. Despite these differences, all SAWs acted as first responders after parental loss and bridged gaps during foster care processes. This demonstrates both the consistency of their roles and the influence of organisational resources on service delivery.

4.2. Theme 2: strengthening collaborative partnerships to enhance care for orphaned children

Child protection cannot be achieved in isolation; it requires a collective effort. The findings demonstrate that social auxiliary workers collaborated with key stakeholders to promote child protection services for orphans. The following sub-themes emerged from the data.

4.2.1. Sub-themes 2.1: collaborating with local businesses and USAID funded organisations

This sub-theme reveals how social auxiliary workers actively build and rely on intersectoral collaborations to improve services for orphaned children awaiting foster care. These partnerships serve as a vital resource in overcoming institutional and resource limitations, enabling SAWs to deliver comprehensive and timely interventions. Participants described working with both governmental and non-governmental actors to address diverse child protection needs, from basic care to legal compliance and psychosocial support:

We primarily collaborate with DSD [Department of Social Development], the South SAPS [South African Police Service] in cases of abuse, local clinics, and NGOs such as Childline and USAID-funded organisations. With DSD, for instance, we assist in collecting necessary documents, conducting initial home visits, and referring the child or family to a social worker responsible for foster care placements. We have also partnered with local businesses that donate school uniforms and clothing, which we distribute to children in need to preserve their dignity and prevent stigmatisation. These partnerships provide essential support to children who are awaiting foster care placement. (Participant 3)

Given the funding model in which CBOs are often resourced on a per-child basis, participants emphasized the burden of caring for children beyond official allocations. In response, SAWs have cultivated supplementary partnerships to meet this demand, particularly for food, clothing, and specialised support for children affected by HIV and AIDS:

In our organisation, funding from DSD is provided on a per-child basis, meaning if we are allocated for 200 children, we receive funds for only those 200. However, we often serve more children than we are funded for. For instance, we currently have 250 children, which requires us to find alternative ways to provide daily meals, food parcels, and snacks for the additional 50 children. To meet these needs, we collaborate with local businesses. Additionally, USAID-funded organisations play a significant role by equipping us with child-focused programmes, particularly those

addressing HIV-related needs. One such example is the KidzAlive programme, which is especially valuable given the high number of children living with HIV in our care. (Participant 9)

The value of these partnerships also lies in capacity building. Training and workshops offered by international NGOs help strengthen the legal and practical knowledge of SAWs, thereby improving service quality and ensuring that interventions align with legislative frameworks and child rights protocols:

Through our partnership with a USAID-funded organisation, we attended a workshop focused on child protection, particularly on the Children's Act. The training was highly informative and helped us better understand how to uphold and protect children's rights. As a result, we are now better equipped to guide children through the appropriate processes in line with the law. (Participant 8)

4.2.2. Sub-theme 2.2: preparing and partnering with foster parents

This sub-theme highlights the crucial role played by social auxiliary workers in bridging the gap between children in need of care and the identification and preparation of suitable foster parents. A persistent challenge within the foster care system is the scarcity of non-kinship caregivers who are adequately equipped and willing to take in vulnerable children, especially those with complex needs such as HIV. Social auxiliary workers are instrumental in addressing this challenge by facilitating both recruitment and readiness of prospective foster families:

We facilitate support groups with parents, including some who are experienced foster carers and are willing to foster additional children. In addition, we offer training for prospective foster parents to prepare them for the responsibilities involved. We often invite social workers to these sessions to help empower and educate foster parents. When there are children in need particularly those without families or living with HIV, we collaborate with social workers by identifying trained and willing foster parents who can provide appropriate care. (Participant 2)

Their involvement goes beyond basic recruitment. Participants explained that SAWs actively work to educate, support, and demystify the fostering process for caregivers—particularly for those taking on children with medical conditions. Through continuous engagement and collaboration with social workers, SAWs ensure that both the children's rights and the capacities of foster parents are adequately supported:

Fostering children, especially those with special needs such as those living with HIV, can be very challenging. Foster parents require adequate support, so we provide the necessary guidance and education to ensure they are prepared and understand the children's health conditions. We work closely with social workers in such cases to make sure that children's rights and well-being are fully protected. (Participant 7)

Moreover, SAWs play a vital role in identifying potential caregivers in situations where extended family care is unavailable or unsuitable. Their local knowledge and trusted community presence make them well-positioned to connect social workers with alternative caregivers who may not otherwise be reached through formal channels:

While many families prefer to care for orphaned children within the extended family structure, this is not always feasible. In such cases, when social workers reach out to us, we assist by identifying and linking them with suitable foster parents who are capable and ready to provide a safe and stable home under formal foster care placement. (Participant 10)

Collaboration with external stakeholders occurred across all CBO cases, though the scope and formality of partnerships varied. Larger CBOs had formal collaborations with USAID-funded organisations and access to structured training, while smaller CBOs relied on informal partnerships with local businesses and community donors. Differences also appeared in foster parent preparation, with some offering ongoing

support and training, and others providing ad hoc assistance tied to immediate placement needs. These variations show how organisational capacity shapes the effectiveness of collaborative child protection practices.

4.3. Theme 3: challenges encountered by SAWs in delivering child protection services to orphaned children

Delivering services to underprivileged communities presents unique challenges. The findings show that social auxiliary workers encountered various difficulties while supporting children awaiting foster care placement. The following sub-themes were identified.

4.3.1. Sub-theme 3.1 challenges of follow-up after foster care placement finalisation

This sub-theme highlights the challenges social auxiliary workers encounter in maintaining consistent support for children once formal foster care placements are finalised. A recurring concern is the discontinuation of children's engagement with community-based organisations (CBOs) after placement, despite the continued need for supplementary psychosocial and developmental services:

We once had a child who regularly attended our centre (CBO) while awaiting foster care placement. However, after the foster care was finalised, she stopped coming. It seems there may be a perception that receiving both the foster care grant and our daily meals constitutes a duplication of services. Unfortunately, this prevents children especially those living with HIV, from benefiting from our ongoing support programmes. (Participant 4)

This observation underscores the misconception that once a child enters foster care, their need for additional services diminishes. In reality, foster care is often just the beginning of a broader support journey, especially for children with ongoing vulnerabilities such as chronic illness or psychosocial distress. However, due to limited awareness or administrative barriers, children may become disconnected from services that are critical for their holistic development.

Another challenge pertains to delayed reporting and a lack of coordination following the death of parents, particularly in migrant or transient families. These delays hinder timely interventions and compromise the early initiation of foster care processes:

One of the challenges we face is not being informed when parents pass away, particularly in cases where families are not originally from Johannesburg. Many people return to their rural homes for burial, and we are sometimes unaware that children have been orphaned. This delay in reporting affects the timely application for foster care and other forms of support. (Participant 1)

Additionally, SAWs noted that some children in foster care disengage from CBO programmes due to a misunderstanding of the scope and value of continued support. The perception that CBO services are only for those in dire poverty creates a barrier to participation, even though these programmes are designed to complement, not duplicate, state interventions:

Some children in foster care assume they no longer need our services, perhaps believing our programmes are only for those experiencing poverty or food insecurity. However, children in foster care can gain a lot from continued participation, like school support and psychosocial programmes. The broader challenge lies in changing the perception that foster care is the final step in service provision. In reality, we offer ongoing support that complements foster care arrangements. (Participant 10)

These insights reflect the need for improved communication, awareness, and integration between foster care systems and community-based services to ensure that children continue receiving holistic support beyond their placement.

4.3.2. Sub-theme 3.2 unstructured partnership with social workers managing foster care

This sub-theme explores the working relationship between SAWs and social workers, particularly in the context of children awaiting foster care placement. Although both roles are critical within the child protection system, the findings reveal that collaboration is often fragmented, with limited communication and coordination hampering the continuity and quality of care:

The relationship between us and social workers is not always effective. It is often difficult to reach them by phone or find them in the office. When we follow up on the progress of foster care applications, we are frequently told there is a backlog and that the case has moved beyond their office. They typically say they will inform us once everything is finalised, but in reality, this process can take over a year. This reflects a lack of structured collaboration in child protection services. There is a real need for a co-ordinated approach grounded in mutual respect and accountability. (Participant 2)

This comment underscores the absence of a formalised framework for joint case management and communication. The lack of responsiveness and transparency in follow-ups not only delays service delivery but also undermines the trust and morale of SAWs who remain actively engaged with affected families during prolonged waiting periods.

The limited communication is particularly concerning in high-risk cases involving children with complex health and psychosocial needs. Despite being well-positioned to offer targeted interventions, SAWs often remain uninformed about these cases, thereby diminishing their potential impact:

One of the key challenges is that social workers rarely initiate communication with us. This limits the impact we could have, especially in cases involving children living with HIV. We have numerous services tailored to support these children, but if we're not informed about their needs, they risk falling through the cracks. A more structured and consistent relationship between us and social workers is essential to ensure that both children awaiting placement and those already in foster care receive comprehensive support. (Participant 7)

The findings further reveal that this lack of coordination is not due to ill intent but rather reflects systemic inefficiencies, resource constraints, and a lack of institutionalised collaboration protocols. Nonetheless, the consequences are significant, particularly for children requiring urgent or specialised support:

While I don't wish to be overly critical, the relationship with DSD social workers is fragile. There is a pressing need for a more effective and co-ordinated way of working together in the best interests of children. At present, it is extremely difficult to get in touch with the social workers responsible for foster care, which is especially concerning for vulnerable children, such as those living with HIV or other chronic conditions who require timely intervention and consistent care. (Participant 5)

Challenges were reported across all CBO cases, though their intensity and impact varied by organisational context. Loss of follow-up after foster care placement was common, especially in CBOs without structured post-placement engagement. Fragmented collaboration with statutory social workers was also evident, though CBOs with established DSD relationships experienced slightly better communication. These differences highlight how systemic constraints and uneven inter-professional coordination affect SAWs' ability to provide sustained support for children across diverse organisational settings.

These narratives collectively highlight the urgent need for integrated communication channels, shared responsibilities, and mutual recognition between SAWs and social workers. Such collaboration is vital to creating a responsive and child-centred foster care system that ensures no child is left unsupported during critical periods of vulnerability.

5. Discussions of the findings

Across the eight CBO cases, several patterns emerged regarding the roles, practices, and challenges of SAWs. SAWs consistently acted as first responders after parental loss, provided transitional support during foster care processes, and linked families with statutory services and community resources. However, differences arose in the depth of services, strength of partnerships, and post-placement follow-up. These variations were largely influenced by organisational resources, funding structures, and the quality of interprofessional relationships.

This study reveals the pivotal role that SAWs play in the child protection continuum, particularly in supporting children awaiting foster care placement. Operating often with minimal supervision within CBOs, SAWs embody key principles of the DSWA, which emphasizes community participation, integration of services, and empowerment as critical to social welfare development (Midgley & Conley, 2010; White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997). Yet, while SAWs operationalise these ideals at the grassroots level, the persistent fragmentation between SAWs and statutory social workers raises questions about the institutionalisation of DSWA principles within formal child protection structures. Their early intervention efforts, such as providing immediate psychosocial support following parental loss, assisting with school enrolment, and facilitating access to health services, demonstrate a responsive, grassroots approach to mitigating the risks faced by orphaned children. Additionally, these cross-case findings indicate that early intervention was a shared practice across all CBOs, the uneven scope and sustainability of these interventions reflect a contradiction between the DSWA's commitment to holistic support and the realities of resource-dependent service delivery. This aligns with recent evidence that community-level interventions are essential in contexts of high vulnerability, as they foster resilience and reduce dependency on formal state mechanisms (Moyo et al., 2025), this study extends the literature by illustrating how such interventions are sustained primarily through SAWs' informal labour rather than through formal system support. Moreover, the transitional support SAWs provide during often prolonged foster care application processes ensures continuity of care and reduces developmental disruptions, underscoring their unique position in bridging formal child protection services and community-based care (Mutambara & Naidu, 2021).

The collaborative partnerships SAWs establish with multiple stakeholders, including DSD social workers, local businesses, USAID-funded organisations, and NGOs, further highlight their role as facilitators and resource brokers within the developmental welfare framework. Across cases, collaboration emerged as a common strategy; however, notable differences were observed in the formality, stability, and reach of these partnerships. Such partnerships enhance the capacity of CBOs to deliver comprehensive child-focused services that go beyond the scope of statutory provision, reflecting the DSWA's call for leveraging community resources and promoting multi-sectoral cooperation (Tauté, 2020). Importantly, SAWs' involvement in preparing and supporting foster parents, particularly for children with complex health needs like HIV, points to their contribution to sustainable care arrangements and empowerment of caregivers, which are central to developmental social welfare (Carter & Van Breda, 2016). This community-engaged model is supported by literature emphasizing the importance of non-kinship foster care preparation and continuous support to foster families in resource-constrained settings (Goemans et al., 2021).

The challenges identified in this study, such as loss to follow-up once foster care placement is finalised and the lack of structured collaboration with social workers, reflect systemic gaps that undermine the full potential of the DSWA. These challenges were evident across all cases, although their severity varied depending on organisational context and the strength of existing interprofessional relationships. The discontinuation of engagement by children and caregivers with CBO services post-placement suggests a narrow understanding of foster care as an endpoint rather than part of a continuum of care. This issue aligns with South African research emphasizing the importance of sustained psychosocial

and educational support to promote positive developmental outcomes for children transitioning from care (Pinkerton & Van Breda, 2019). Additionally, the reported poor communication and coordination between SAWs and statutory social workers echoes broader critiques of fragmented child protection systems in low-resource settings, where limited inter-professional collaboration hampers effective case management (Seddighi et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Strengthening these partnerships through formalised protocols, regular communication, and shared accountability is crucial for operationalising the DSWA's integrative vision and improving service efficiency (UNICEF, 2022).

This study highlights that SAWs are essential actors within South Africa's child protection landscape, providing critical early intervention and bridging functions that align with the developmental social welfare ethos. Synthesising evidence across cases underscores that while SAWs' roles are consistently central, systemic and organisational factors significantly shape the extent to which these roles can be effectively sustained. Findings further highlighted SAWs' capacity to mobilise community resources and foster collaborative networks enhances protection for vulnerable children, yet systemic barriers, especially in partnership with social workers, limit service continuity and effectiveness. Addressing these challenges through structured collaboration and recognition of SAWs' developmental role can advance a more holistic and inclusive child protection system that reflects contemporary social welfare paradigms and promotes sustainable child well-being (Department of Social Development, 2024; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2024).

To advance theoretical understanding, the relationships identified in this study could be visually and conceptually mapped. A framework could show how early intervention, transitional support, collaborative partnerships, and systemic constraints interact, positioning SAWs at the intersection of community and statutory child protection systems. This model would clarify how the DSWA is operationalised and limited in low-resource contexts, providing both practical and theoretical insights. Fig. 1 presents a conceptual framework of SAWs' roles within these systems.

In conclusion, SAWs are indispensable in South Africa's child protection system, delivering early intervention, transitional support, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. However, systemic, organisational, and hierarchical factors limit the full realisation of their roles. Formal recognition of SAWs and strengthened partnerships with statutory social workers could enhance service integration. This would help realise the community-centred vision of the DSWA and promote sustainable child well-being in resource-constrained contexts.

6. Implications for social work practice and policy

The findings of this study offer critical insights for both social work practice and policy development in South Africa's child protection sector. First, the demonstrated capacity of SAWs to provide frontline, community-based support during the vulnerable pre-placement phase underscores the urgent need to formally integrate SAWs into the broader statutory child protection framework. Their work complements that of social workers and fills significant service gaps in under-resourced settings. As such, social work practice must evolve to embrace a collaborative, team-based approach, where SAWs are seen not merely as administrative assistants but as developmental actors with distinct and essential roles, particularly in early intervention, psychosocial support, and caregiver empowerment. Provincial and district social work managers should work with monitoring teams to update reporting tools to track CBOs' SAWs' involvement in foster care cases, while social work supervisors should ensure active collaboration between CBOs' SAWs and social workers.

In terms of policy, the DSWA provides a strong normative foundation for recognising and institutionalising the role of SAWs within the national child protection strategy. Policy reform should therefore focus on formalising structured collaboration protocols between SAWs and social workers, with clear communication channels, joint case planning, and accountability mechanisms. DSD should take the lead in drafting these protocols, in consultation with CBO representatives and regulatory bodies such as the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). This would operationalise the DSWA's vision of integrated, people-centred service delivery and mitigate the fragmentation currently undermining effective care for children.

Moreover, the study's findings highlight the need for policy frameworks that ensure continued support post-foster placement, rather than viewing foster care as an endpoint. Programmes must be designed to maintain the engagement of children and foster parents with CBOs, ensuring sustained access to psychosocial, educational, and health-related support. Policy can achieve this by embedding after-care provisions and follow-up mandates into foster care. DSD programme developers should collaborate with NGOs and foster care agencies to embed after-care provisions and follow-up mandates into foster care models.

Additionally, the resource mobilisation and multi-sectoral partnerships established by SAWs, particularly with NGOs, international donors, and local businesses, demonstrate the feasibility and value of community-based service delivery models. Policies that institutionalise

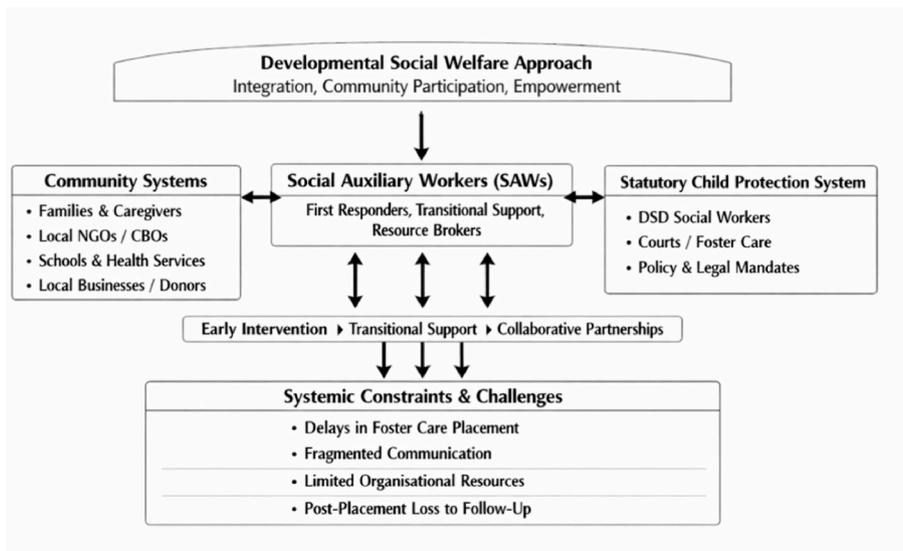


Fig. 1. Social auxiliary social workers as connectors in community and statutory child protection system.

such partnerships, including through public-private cooperation frameworks, can enhance the sustainability of child welfare services. Policymakers, local leaders, and training institutions should work together to build strong local partnerships, improve oversight, and support the training and development of SAWs to strengthen child protection.

Finally, the systemic issues identified, particularly the lack of coordination and mutual recognition between SAWs and statutory social workers, call for a rethinking of professional boundaries and hierarchical structures within social services. Both social work education and professional development should promote a shared vision of developmental, team-based practice that leverages the strengths of all actors, including SAWs, to advance holistic child well-being. Universities and colleges offering social work qualifications should ensure that their curricula include inter-professional collaboration modules.

7. Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the contributions of SAWs in child protection and foster care processes, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was geographically confined to the City of Johannesburg and focused only on SAWs employed by CBOs funded by the DSD. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to SAWs working in other regions or within different institutional frameworks. Secondly, the study relied exclusively on qualitative data from SAWs, without triangulating perspectives from other stakeholders such as statutory social workers, foster parents, or the children themselves. This presents a limited view of the broader child protection ecosystem and may omit important contextual dynamics. Additionally, because the data was collected through self-reported interviews, there is a potential for response bias, where participants may have emphasized positive contributions while downplaying systemic limitations or personal challenges.

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical yet often under-recognised role of SAWs in the child protection continuum, particularly in supporting orphaned children awaiting foster care placement. Operating at the intersection of community-based care and formal child protection systems, SAWs exemplify the principles of the Developmental Social Welfare Approach through their early interventions, holistic support strategies, and facilitation of collaborative networks. Their work in stabilising children during crisis periods, guiding families through the foster care process, and engaging with a broad spectrum of community stakeholders reflects grassroots, developmental response to complex child welfare needs.

However, the study also reveals significant systemic constraints, most notably the lack of structured collaboration with statutory social workers and the discontinuity of support post-foster care placement, that hinder the full potential of the developmental approach. Addressing these limitations through better inter-professional coordination, formalised partnership frameworks, and ongoing community engagement is essential for building a more responsive, sustainable, and child-centred protection system.

Overall, the findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge advocating for the expanded recognition and professionalisation of SAWs within South Africa's child welfare sector. Their integration into a coherent and collaborative child protection framework is not only aligned with national developmental policy goals but is also critical for advancing the well-being and rights of vulnerable children across the country.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the findings or interpretation of the work presented in this paper.

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