

The role of social workers in research studies on violence: opportunities and challenges

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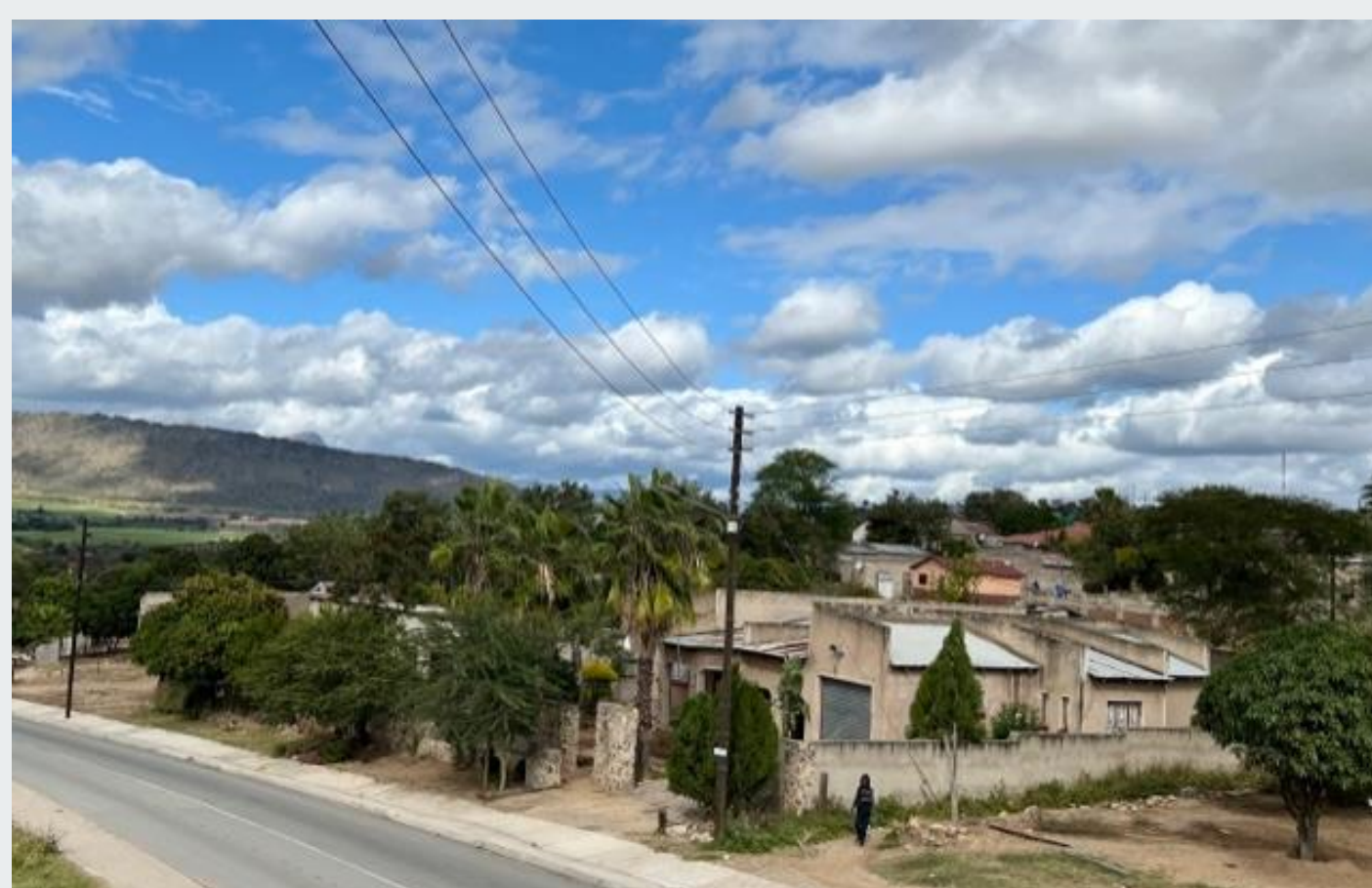
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Background

- Research with adults and children experiencing violence has ethical requirement to do no harm
- This is particularly challenging in low-resource settings where routine social work services are limited
- South Africa is characterised by high levels of violence against children, with 42% experiencing some form of abuse (Ward et al. 2016)
- Challenges with social work (SW) services in rural areas of South Africa persist:
 - Limited resources and infrastructure
 - Having to travel long distances to render SW services to clients
 - Lack of support from supervisors (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012)
- Given this context research projects have increasingly identified the need to employ social workers
- SWs on research projects conduct assessments, provide psychosocial support and managed mandated referrals

Aim:

To describe and analyse the benefits and challenges that arise from having a social worker on a research team for the team leaders, team members, social worker and participants



Methods

- A qualitative study nested within Interrupt_Violence, a three-generation, cohort study investigating the intergenerational transmission of violence was conducted in a rural and peri-urban area situated in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, from July-Sept 2022
- Two focus group discussions were held with a total of 10 fieldworkers across two study sites
- 11 in-depth interviews with participants in the rural site
- In-depth interview with the social worker
- Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed
- After reviewing transcripts, the study team developed an initial coding scheme that was shared with a research assistant (not involved directly in the study) who applied the codes to the transcripts in an iterative process



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Results

- **Social work case load**
- There were over 800 referrals
- 40% received one visit from the social worker, 26% two visits 15% received three visits and a few cases received between 4-6 visits.

Perceptions of the social worker

- Participants had mixed emotions about being referred to a SW - ranging between panic and relief
- *"The minute a fieldworker asked if she can refer me to a Social Worker I panicked *she laughs*. Then a fieldworker said to me that the Social Worker will not bother me, she's only coming to help. Then I agreed to be referred. (Participant, Transcript 9)*
- *"I was happy because I've been wishing to meet a Social Worker for so long." (Participant, Transcript 1)*
- The fieldwork team emphasised the counselling role, facilitating access to documents like birth certificates and being an advocate for the community
- *"So once the social worker is there at least she's helping them. Just giving them counselling [...] I don't know anything about counselling, but I'm sure like for [SW], she's more qualified." (Fieldworker 3, peri-urban)*

Perceived benefits

- Participants described feelings of relief, greater acceptance of their situation, less shame
 - *"She has also gave me hope and I am now able to accept any situation. Back then before she gave me counselling, if one of my child disrespects me I would need to take sleeping pills to be able to sleep. But now I no longer take sleeping pills anymore." (Participant)*
- Managing distress
 - *"In my experience, I feel like, personally, you feel trapped where you are supposed to help, but you can't" (Fieldworker 1, rural site)*
- Relief for fieldworkers to be able to handover participants so that they could get the support they needed
 - *"To come to a person [they disclose something] and then you leave them like that is not cool, not fine at all, but at least we know that, OK, we're not just going there and then to take information then we go. So it's something that we are proud of, that we know, OK, we can try to help" (Fieldworker 2, rural)*
- Perception that SW could enhance engagement with future research

Limitations

- Did not interview participants who were waiting to see the SW
- Did not talk to caregivers where there were ongoing child protection issues
- Potential social desirability bias – as teams and SWs are still actively involved in the study

Key takeaways

SW employed on research studies can contribute to linking participants to appropriate services and providing immediate support

Manage mandatory referrals

Reassures fieldwork teams struggling with moral and ethical dilemmas about experiencing participant distress and feeling unable to provide adequate support

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