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Abstract

Social work day was instituted by social workers at the United Nations (UN) in 1983 and is celebrated in March each year to recognise social work's achievements, share its vision for a just society, and foster international solidarity. Subsequently embraced as World Social Work Day (WSWD) by the profession's international organisations and their affiliates worldwide, Zimbabwe celebrated its first WSWD in 2012 at Bindura, a small rural university near Harare, to raise social work's profile in Zimbabwe. This paper describes these events.

Key words: World Social Work Day, social justice, National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe, Bindura University, Zimbabwe

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World Social Work Day celebrations in Zimbabwe: An opportunity to promote social justice**Introduction**

Social work day is celebrated throughout the world as a platform for social workers to foster international solidarity and promote its vision for social justice. Started by social workers at the United Nations (UN) in 1983 as Social Work Day (UNSWD), it is now celebrated by the profession's premier international organisations, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and their affiliates worldwide, as World Social Work Day (WSWD) on the third Tuesday of March each year.

Historically, and in practice, UNSWD and WSWD are interrelated. UNSWD became a joint enterprise of the IFSW and IASSW in the 1990s, with speakers and representatives – educators, practitioners, and students – sharing a platform and programme to celebrate the event in the General Assembly room at the UN Headquarters in New York. Mainly supported by US schools of social work in New York, several days of activities were linked to UNSWD. Although an initiative of IFSW, WSWD is a more recent innovation attached to the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. Though at times reference is made to UNSWD in this paper, its main focus is WSWD. Where reference is made to these two interrelated initiatives, the phrase social work day is used.

WSWD was first celebrated in Bindura, a small rural town of approximately 40,000 inhabitants located about 87 kilometres from Zimbabwe's capital of Harare in 2012 to highlight social work's commitment to social justice. This is fitting for a rural university whose origins can be traced back to the Zimbabwe-Cuba Teacher Training Programme launched in the mid-1980s. A fully constituted university since 2000, social work training was introduced in Bindura in 2000. From this corner of the globe, the discovery of reports and speeches on WSWD celebrations across the world led to Bindura's first celebration of WSWD on 23 April 2012, and subsequently in 2013 and 2014. The discovery of these reports and speeches prompted the author to share the story of social work day celebrations in Zimbabwe with colleagues across the world. This paper attests social work's global reach and the power of professional organisation to highlight key social justice issues in remote areas of the globe.

Background

The IFSW (2012) traces the history of social work day to a group of social workers at the UN in 1983. In an address to the 26th UNSWD celebrations on 6 April 2009, Janice Wood Wetzel highlighted its beginnings in social work's two premier international organisations – the IFSW and IASSW – in the early 1990s (Wetzel, 2009). One of the first social work leaders at the UN, Katherine Kendall (2008) acknowledged the IFSW's Celia Weissman 'for inaugurating UN Annual Social Work Day and fostering its growth' (p. 22). Wetzel (2009) elaborated on the importance of this initiative in educating social workers about the relevance of the UN and alerting the UN leadership to the importance of the social work profession worldwide. As the event grew, it became a platform for enhancing international cooperation in social work by encouraging social work students to share information across contexts. Friesenhahn (2012)

highlighted its importance in advancing social work's social justice mission worldwide and promoting international solidarity against injustice:

many societal, economic and social problems cannot be solved by means of national approaches and strategies. Future challenges need to be faced by all of us across national boundaries requiring an international solidarity with and for individuals in specific life situations together with those who work for the benefit of others in line with social work (p. 1).

This has led to flow-on initiatives, such as the Global Social Work Student Conference (GSWSC) at Fordham University in New York in 2008 as part of the 25th anniversary celebration of UNSWD (Wetzel, 2009). Due to its success as a forum for student social workers to share information on social work issues, this has become an annual celebration, which precedes the main event at the UN in New York. However, WSWD is celebrated in all the regions of the IFSW and IASSW through their regional organisations (Clark, 2012; Gray & Rennie, 2007). In Africa, it is being promoted by country representatives linked to these international social work organisations through the Ghana Association of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012), the Eastern Cape Department of Social Development and Special Programmes in East London, South Africa (Government of South Africa, 2012), the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, and the National Association of Social Workers South Africa (NASWSA) (IASSW, 2013; NASWSA, 2013). WSWD in Egypt in 2014 brought together social workers from Palestine, Yemen, Sudan, and Germany, who met at Helwan University in Cairo and in Morocco it highlighted the plight of women in difficult situations.

Each year a different theme or issue is highlighted. For example, in 2012, inspired by the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, WSWD committed social workers 'to work

together with others to create a more socially-just and fair world that we will be proud to leave for future generations’ (IFSW, 2012). This commitment was carried forward by the IASSW, IFSW, and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), joint sponsors of the World Conference on Social Work and Social Development in Stockholm in 2012 (Clark, 2012). WSWD in 2013 committed social workers to ‘promoting social and economic equalities’ and in 2014 it highlighted ‘social work crises-social work solutions’ (IFSW, 2014). Most WSWD celebrations involve national professional social work associations, universities, and students through meetings, conferences, exhibitions, lectures, marches, seminars, free social work services to the community, and public media campaigns to raise the profile of social workers; provide a platform for social workers and students to share information about social work problems, strategies, and institutions in diverse contexts; increase international cooperation in social work; and promote social justice.

WSWD celebrations in Zimbabwe

Bindura University’s Department of Social Work introduced WSWD to improve the profile of social work in Zimbabwe, which has been compromised by poor salaries and working conditions; lack of government recognition; high student intake despite a depressed labour market; lack of professional solidarity; and weak professional regulation (Chogugudza, 2009). This has resulted in the mass exodus of Zimbabwean social workers to ‘greener pastures’ in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, New Zealand, and Australia, where many Zimbabweans occupy key academic and practice positions (Chitereka, 2003; Chogugudza, 2009). In 2003, then NASWZ President, the late Christopher Chitereka, was quoted in the *Guardian* newspaper as saying Zimbabwe had lost 1500 social workers to various countries, while the then Director of the School of Social Work in Harare, Professor Rodreck Mupedziswa, told the same paper that 35% of the 260 Zimbabwean social workers who

graduated between 1996 and 2001 were working in the United Kingdom (Batty, 2003). This situation left vacant social work positions in Zimbabwe filled by unqualified personnel as social workers were not only labelled unpatriotic, but also seen as dispensable. This led to mistrust between the social work profession and the Zimbabwe government.

Nevertheless, Zimbabwe's three universities – the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, Bindura University, and the Women's University in Africa (WUA) – continued to admit large numbers of social work students, despite poor training standards (Mupedziswa, 2013). The combined social work student intake rose from 80 in 2009 to 350 in 2010. Relatedly, the unregulated introduction of social work training by the private Christ Centre College hearkened back to the introduction of social work in colonial times. Reason prevailed when the Council of Social Work (CSW), working with the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), put a stop to the unregulated social work bachelors and masters programmes at the college.

The lack of solidarity among social workers has weakened its position, not only in Zimbabwe, but also across Africa, where relatively few African social workers have the opportunity to engage with the international social work community. Social workers have not been active in their professional associations and few schools of social work could afford the membership costs attached to international affiliation. As a consequence, the voices of social workers in Zimbabwe are seldom heard in a country faced with overwhelming social, economic and political problems, not least injustice and inequality affecting women and children, people with disabilities, government and informal sector workers, and many other social groups. Resources are concentrated in the hands of a few powerful politicians with human rights abuses rife in Zimbabwean society.

Against this backdrop, WSWD offered an opportunity to highlight these injustices and social work's role in advocating for poor and oppressed groups. Organising the event meant convincing key stakeholders of its importance, marshalling resources, preparing promotional material, mobilising social workers and students, securing a venue, arranging transport, and obtaining official clearance.

On 23 April 2012, WSWD celebrations were held at the Bindura Municipality Grounds under the catchcry of 'promoting social work for Zimbabwe's development'. One hundred students and social workers from Bindura University's Department of Social Work marched to the municipality grounds one kilometre away. They sang and danced to music from the Salvation Army Church band. Fliers were distributed to onlookers and banners were raised. On arrival, the marchers were greeted by the Assistant District Administrator who represented the Provincial Governor as Guest of Honour. The master of ceremony welcomed everyone present, including the President of NASWZ, Chairperson of CSW, and representatives of government departments, journalists, 16 social workers, and 70 social work students, some of whom delivered speeches. Representatives of the School Psychological Services Department, Bindura Municipality, Bindura District Council, SOS Children's Village, NASWZ, CSW, Bindura University, and the Guest of Honour spoke at the event. The speakers stressed the importance of strengthening solidarity among social workers in Zimbabwe and having programmes to integrate with the global social work movement. They praised the University for initiating the event to raise the profile of social work in Zimbabwe and to strengthen social workers' voice against social injustice.

In support of local and international cooperation, the Chairperson of CSW called upon social workers in Zimbabwe to work together to promote the profession noting the Council's role in

improving its ties with the IFSW, NASWZ, and local training institutions. Similar sentiments were echoed by the President of the NASWZ, who noted the historic event celebrating WSWD: ‘Today is our day as we celebrate the enhancement of individual, group and community social functioning in the many faces that we assume as social workers’. He emphasised social work’s importance and, the author, an academic from Bindura University, noted the role of social workers in promoting social work, claiming: ‘If they don’t, they risk becoming irrelevant in Zimbabwe where incompetent social work employers have the audacity to employ local villagers as “social workers” and where greedy politicians can employ their grandmothers as probation officers’.

There was consensus that WSWD celebrations in Zimbabwe must continue annually. It was proposed that the NASWZ should spearhead activities for 2013. It was further agreed that all schools of social work, their students, and members of the CSW be involved to increase activities advocating for the recognition of social workers and to use WSWD as a vehicle to educate social workers about social injustice not only in Zimbabwe but also globally.

The 2013 celebrations were led by the NASWZ and the CSW and involved the three schools of social work under the theme of ‘promoting social and economic equalities’. The three-day celebrations began with a guest lecture to students and staff at Bindura University delivered by US-based Zimbabwean social work academic, Professor Lovemore Mbigi. The lecture was repeated to students and staff at the University of Zimbabwe, School of Social Work in Harare later in the day. On March 27, the CSW arranged a dinner at the prestigious Crowne Plaza Hotel, where Professor Mbigi delivered a speech to 70 social workers on ‘The challenge of thought leadership and research in Zimbabwe’. The following day, an official event attended by the Minister of Information and Publicity was held at Africa Unity Square in Harare.

Professor Mbigi talked about ‘building social protection systems through arts and culture’, summarising the various speeches he had delivered during the week. He emphasised the use of local resources and community support systems to address social and economic inequalities and to improve social protection. His inspirational speech left social workers, students, and academics reflecting on the issues raised, among them the importance of culture, African management, power, and knowledge. The Minister lamented the shortage of social workers in the Department of Social Services owing to a government freeze on posts noting the 1:49,000 ratio of social workers to children who needed their services was far too high.

Solidarity messages received from the IFSW and the Ghana Association of Social Workers stressed the need for social workers to work together globally to fight the challenges of poverty and injustice. They praised Zimbabwean social workers for working under very difficult circumstances and urged them to keep working to improve the well-being of vulnerable members of the community.

The 2013 events were widely reported in the local media. During the celebrations, the NASWZ announced the revival of the *African Journal of Social Work* (AJSW), while Bindura University announced its affiliation to the IASSW, becoming the only member school of social work in Zimbabwe. Bindura also announced that it would compile a book based on social work day themes, speeches, and events for 2012 and 2013 SWSD and was considering a social work conference as part of WSWD 2014 celebrations. Most agreed the WSWD events for 2013 had proved a great success despite some hiccups.

WSWD 2014 on the theme ‘social work crises-social work solutions’ spanned a whole week, with guest lectures ‘celebrating a history of diverse social work interventions in times of socio-

economic challenges' by Professor Edwell Kaseke, formerly professor and director of social work at the University of Zimbabwe for many years, now based at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. On March 25, a media conference highlighted the week's events. As with prior events, speeches were delivered at the three universities and a dinner at the Jameson Hotel. However, the event extended to Bulawayo, Masvingo, and Mutare, where Professor Kaseke delivered lectures to social workers unable to attend the Harare events. On the last day, the official opening of WSWD was attended by the Deputy Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Services. In his speech, Professor Kaseke highlighted the need for developmental social work approaches, beyond casework, given most people in Zimbabwe live in poverty; he called on social workers to advocate social justice. The Deputy Minister endorsed the sentiment that Zimbabwean social workers should aim to take people out of poverty by promoting socio-economic development. This official opening event included a march by students from the country's three schools of social work from Town House to Harare Gardens, a distance of about 900 metres that followed a brief clean-up-campaign in the Central Business District.

The celebrations included the launch of the book based on prior WSWD contributions titled *Promoting Social Work for Zimbabwe's Development*; it focused on disability, human rights, ethics, and child protection, among other issues (Mugumbate, 2014). Edited by Professor Andrew Nyanguru and Dr Chamunogwa Nyoni, the book was made available online as an open access resource with hard copies printed for libraries. Also launched was a child mentorship programme, named Step in Step, which teamed social work students and their lecturers with primary school pupils and their teachers to provide psychosocial and material support to disadvantaged pupils.

Attempts were made to involve more students in the planning and execution of activities. Consequently, students were well represented in the WSWD planning meetings and gave speeches in Bindura and Harare. However, most students were unable to attend the dinner attended by about 100 social workers due to the costs involved. The cumulative success of the WSWD celebrations highlighted the importance of a conference to fully explore the issues the chosen theme raised.

WSWD in Zimbabwe viewed from a social justice lens

Zimbabwe's WSWD brought together social workers, students, and institutions of social work to connect Zimbabwean social work to global issues and, by working with politicians and other partners, strengthened solidarity and promoted the profession as a voice against social injustice in the country. It committed Zimbabwean social workers to go beyond welfare paradigms and focus on wealth creation for its clients through the promotion of social *and* economic development as economic development alone perpetuates injustice: 'In reality, in most of the developed world, economic development receives more attention than social development and social planning rarely pays equal attention to both' (Gray, 2002, p. 5). As Mupedziswa argued, only developmental social work can bring equality, fight injustice and oppression, and liberate the masses of poor Africans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WSWD in Zimbabwe raised the profile of social workers, promoted international cooperation, and provided a platform for students and social workers to share information and promote social justice. Though it provided a forum for social workers to tell government and stakeholders about the importance of the profession, like many other international social work initiatives, local social work issues and concerns, such as the need for

sustainable development, can still all-too-easily be overlooked. Chogugudza (2009) had lamented the loss of social work positions in adoption, fostering, casework, and routine social work areas to untrained paraprofessionals but WSWD affirmed that social workers had an important role to play in the Zimbabwean society to foster equality, fight oppression, and build sustainable environments. This important message for politicians, government administrators, and the media would otherwise have gone unheard as would the needs of women, children, and people with disabilities highlighted on successive WSWDs. As Clark (2012) noted, to achieve social justice, ‘we need approaches which foster the fullest participation of people, along with “bottom up” advocacy which bring the needs of the poor and marginalised to the attention of governments’ (p. 2). WSWD in Zimbabwe highlighted the importance of self-determination and grassroots participatory development and social workers’ role in including women, children, the landless, disabled, and minorities. The challenge is to see these commitments sustained to put social work in Zimbabwe at the forefront of the fight for social justice.

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