

Challenges and Experiences Faced by Social Workers Working with Children Exposed to Abuse and Neglect

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Abstract:

Child abuse and neglect are the most disturbing problems in the field of child welfare. It is common that social workers engaged with children are often affected while carrying out their respective duties. The child protection system is one of the frameworks of the whole child welfare domain of any country which provide social services to children exposed to abuse and neglect. Employing semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 social workers, the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach by the study sought to explore the tragic challenges and experiences social workers working with children encounter. The study provides an analysis of the social worker's challenges and dilemmas in working with abused and neglected children. Furthermore, the findings reveal mechanisms on how social workers cope with the challenges. In the future, more research on the same topic is needed to be able to support better social worker's practices when working with children exposed to abuse and neglect.

Keywords: Child protection, Social worker, Child abuse and neglect

Introduction

According to Maguire & Naughton (2016), Child abuse and neglect is not a common phenomenon but the effects are more devastating to children compared to other forms of maltreatment. Such phenomena are difficult to predict and detect because they tend to be gradual in occurrence (Dubowitz, 2013). This means that the incident of abuse and neglect may go unnoticed for a long time

which leads to negative consequences on the child's well being. Therefore social workers have to operate in all circumstances to detect it at an early stage because if it is not identified and sustained, it denies children right to access their needs (Dickerson, Lindner, Quas & Scurich, 2017).

The concern of dealing with children who are exposed to abuse and neglect has to be addressed in relation to the child protection system and the supportive practice of social workers in the child protection system. Such social workers' experiences are reflected in these children's experiences. Due to the increased media attention towards child abuse and neglect, it has led to rise in the cases of child abuse and neglect all over the world. Many social workers working in child protection service find their work with children facing abuse and neglect due to family wrangles very exhausting and frustrating (Saini et al, 2018). According to the 28th edition of the Child Maltreatment Report (2019), the Children's Bureau at HHS' Administration for Children and Families conducted a study in 2017 and it subjected 3.5 million children to an investigation. Out of the 3.5 Million children, 674,000 children were reported to be victims of maltreatment where 74.9% were victims of neglect, 18.3% were physically abused and 8.6% sexually abused. In 2018, a national violence against children survey in Uganda measured the prevalence, effects of physical, emotional and sexual abuse against children. The results indicated that one in six boys and one in three girls suffer sexual violence during childhood. In addition, seven in ten boys are physically abused (MGLSD, 2018).

The perpetrators of child abuse are mostly family members for example; parents, step parents or relatives and 14% of the abused children are between the ages 13-17 while 8% are under 13 years of age. Child abuse and neglect is common among families going through hardships especially conflicts between parents. For example, a couple going through divorce creates an environment which makes child abuse inevitable in case mediation is not sought. Gulbrandsen & Tjersland (2017) argued that addressing emotional and relationship concerns especially high level of conflict between parents is very important. This is because unsolved conflicts between parents pose negative outcomes for children (Bannon et al., 2018)

The main duty of child protection services worldwide is to ensure that children who are at risk of child abuse and neglect receive the help they need (BLD, 2013). Social workers who work in such environment face a lot of challenges. For example, social workers have always been criticized for their failure to offer adequate service and support needed for children exposed to abuse and neglect (Iversen, Rod & Underlid, 2013).

The challenges for social workers are the same worldwide, for example, the Canadian social workers requested a clearer mandate from child protection service for training to become more qualified in resolving family conflicts especially between parents (Saini et al, 2012, 2018). Daniel, Scott & Taylor, (2010) argued that detecting the signs of neglect and identifying children's needs is more challenging and complex to deal with. The professionals such as nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists conduct the whole processes from diagnosis to treatment. In the field of child protection, various studies highlight the many effects social workers experience as a result of working with children abused by their family members. These effects range from emotions to opinions and behaviors (Kruger et al, 2013).

The work carried out by social workers exposes them to various traumas. Therefore, as a result of working with trauma victims, social workers experience vicarious traumatization and this leads to changes in their thinking about the

world, sense of security, professional relations, relations with themselves and emotional reactions for example anger and anxiety (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Such emotional behaviors are as a result of loss of personal sense of control and chronic agony. This makes child welfare work so stressful.

However, although many policies and programs have been set up to prevent and detect child abuse and neglect, prevention measures have lacked focus on what to center on, but foundations have been made to address the key factors influencing child abuse and neglect. For example, in the USA, The Duke Endowment set up yearly grants for community level child maltreatment prevention (Kimbrough & Melton, 2015). This enhanced support for many families with young children by strengthening neighborhood to neighborhood relationship and assistance. This setting ensured that every family accessed support in terms of health care, education and child care. In addition, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation shifted its focus from supporting parent education in order to be able to support their families to supporting communities in promoting the well being of children and prevention of maltreatment (Basset, 2013).

Methodology

The challenges and dilemmas of social workers working with abused and neglected children are given less concern in the field of child protection. This present study took place during June 2019 to September 2019 and employed qualitative research technique; it involved 16 qualified social workers from the department of family and child welfare in Uganda. According to the Children Act 2016, the law mandates social workers to ensure the well being of children in connection with the child welfare services. In line with the study's objective of identifying the challenges and dilemmas of social workers dealing with abused and neglected children face, the study identified such frontline child social work practitioners to seek experiences, views and challenges. The study participants were selected purposively based on the following criteria; social workers with 1 year experience and more were selected. 1 year experience was a prerequisite because social workers were in position to have encountered child abuse and neglect cases hence being able to share their views and experiences. Table 1 below shows demographic data concerning the social workers and it indicates that some of them had more than 2 years of experience.

Table 1 Social worker's demographics

Item	Classification	Number
Sex	Female	8
	Male	8
Age	21-26	3
	27-31	7
	32-36	6
Social work experience	1-6	8
	7-11	4
	12-15	4
Education	Bachelor's degree	12
	Diploma	4

Design and procedure

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach in order to allow social workers to express their views and experiences of their personal lives in their own understanding and how they feel. This method was employed to create equal probability for each sample to have equal chance of being chosen to participate in the study and to understand the challenges and experiences of working with abused and neglected children from social worker as participants themselves (Patton, 2014). The qualitative phenomenological method would allow participants to describe their experiences, emotions and how they feel about certain incidents they encountered in their line of work (Patton, 2014, Padgett, 2008). Hence the phenomenological design allowed social workers' experiences and personal views to be explored creating room for the identifications of common themes and sub themes to guide the study.

Interviews were scheduled after the selected participants agreed to take part in the study. The study used a semi-structured interview method which allowed all the participants to take part in in-depth interviews. The adoption of semi structured interviews enabled researchers to investigate participants' stories with follow up questioning methods (Marvasti, 2004). The major questions which guided the interviews included the following:

1. What do you do when you face a person alleged to be a child abuser?
2. How do the experiences encountered while working with abused and neglected children affect your personal life?
3. How do you react emotionally when your children take part in social life?

All the interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded with consent from the participants (Silverman, 2013).

Data Analysis

From the data collected, the experiences of these social workers were analyzed into themes and sub themes; the first theme is the dynamic challenges and experiences which influence social worker's opinions, behavior and feelings and the second theme is the coping mechanisms. The theme on dynamic challenges and experiences include thoughts of social workers on opinions, behaviors and feelings. It leads to sub themes of rage towards child abuser, reason for child abuse and sense of insecurity, sexual affection in social life, protection, and thoughts on communication with parents and thoughts on communication with the child. The second theme of coping mechanism is divided into sub themes of seeking professional support, mind recollection and social activity, fostering team work and job satisfaction. The social worker's ideas, views and experiences were analyzed in regard to the audio recordings of each interview. The recordings were transcribed and the transcribed data was checked by the researchers and compared with the audios for correctness. The final transcribed data was coded according to the thematic analysis procedure presented by Braun & Clark (2006). By following the thematic analysis procedure, researchers conducted readings of transcriptions to understand the meanings and patterns in stories told by the participants. Open coding was done where researchers identified a line by line reading of the data collected to organize expressions which reflected the study questions (Charmaz, 2014)

The findings were organized into themes and sub themes to provide answers to the questions. Themes that reflected similar narratives or views in meaning were merged and reported as one theme or sub theme.

Findings

The findings in this study have been presented based on the study's objective to conduct the research. In order to know how social workers feel and conduct themselves when dealing with abused and neglected children, major themes and sub themes which emerged and data analyzed by the researchers are presented with supporting social workers' narratives.

Theme one. Dynamic challenges and experiences

The social workers who work with children exposed to abuse and neglect are regarded as concerned parents. However, the nature of their work exposes them to survival threats (Menashe et al. 2014; Shevade et al. 2011; Cunningham, 2003)

Social worker's emotional reactions

In one focus group interview, social workers narrated that they were going crazy while trying to help parents to settle their conflicts which could cause harm to children, social workers narrated that they were exhausted and felt angry with the parents. Therefore social workers experience negative emotional reactions when working with conflicting parents.

“I was at a counseling meeting and the family social worker got very angry, so I felt that it is not only me who can get furious at such parents. (Female, aged 28, Social worker)”

Social workers described that working with parents in intense conflict is very difficult. Some social workers expressed that they have a feeling of pessimism and low self motivation after a short period of time. Others confessed that being child focused by promoting their needs is hectic and demanding. This is because it requires courage to side with the children when things are tough especially between parents. Therefore, a social worker experienced frustration and exhaustion due to parent’s actions to look better than the other.

“At first, I have individual conversations, but I invite both parents later together at once because I cannot bear to listen to only one person who is talking shit about the other. It is time wasting. (Male, aged 21, Social worker)”

Rage towards child abuser

In this study, social workers revealed that they feel rage towards the child abuser. However, they try their level best to remain calm and professional during their counter with the child abuser. In general, social workers feel rage and lack of trust towards child abuser, but they always put the blame on parents for children who are neglected and abused especially those parents who abuse their own children. In cases where abusers tend to be parents particularly mothers, social workers asserted that they feel a lot of anger towards the mother.

“I listen without judging, but if I have rage or anger inside me, I get negative feeling about the abuser. (Male, aged 29, Social worker)”

On the same subject of facing a child abuser, one of the social workers who took part in the study revealed that when the child abuser is also a child, she tries to consider both the abuser and the abused as children of victimization.

“The abused child astonishes me about the cruelty of the abuser and when I begun social work job, I thought there could not be anything as worse as this, but there was. I have come across worse scenarios and this made me aware of the fact that abusers have the capacity to outperform their actions of abuse. (Female, aged 24, Social worker)”

Furthermore, it was observed that child abuse is common among children themselves and this helped in the identification of age inconsistencies made by victim’s parents.

“If the abuser is a child, I deem the person as a victim of abuse too. This is because abuse is something common among children themselves. With the abuser being a child, he or she is also a child to me. It is considered as an event that took place between children or peers. I came across people who disclosed and traumatized sexual fantasy among children (Female, aged 32, Social worker)”

In the modern era, economic powerlessness can compromise many people into hiding incestuous actions. It is advised by many experts that family members especially mothers do not reveal the incestuous act if the abuser becomes

aggressive and violent, hence, it is believed that mothers do not truly believe their children and this conflicting mind of the mother plays a bigger role in their disbelief. The interviewed social worker in the study asserted that he makes efforts to understand the passive mothers who keep ignoring the sexual abuse acts even when they really know that the act of abuse occurred on their children. They tend to be passive and ignore the circumstances under which the abuse happened.

“I get very angry towards mothers. How can they allow this to happen with their eyes open? In one of the cases of sexual abuse, the mother was desperate for money and ended up ignoring the case because of money. The woman's son was abused by his father and just decided to take away the abused son with her for protection. This is because the woman had nowhere to go; she could not file a child abuse case. (Male, aged 35, Social worker)”

Those who work in the area of mental health encounter similar effects just like professionals who work with abused and neglected children (Collins & Long, 2003; Vrkljesvi & Franklin, 2008). Therefore, as a result of showing empathetic measures towards the victims, it leads to more serious effects. Social workers asserted that each child abuse case creates different social and mental effects especially to the children who suffered incestuous experiences.

“At first, it was more traumatic. The incestuous child abuse cases affect me most. This is because it is very traumatic and I try not to reflect such experiences on my family, but it becomes hard because I live it every day. For example, I do not believe or trust anyone when it comes to my family. (Female, aged 35, Social worker)”

Another social worker expressed that she was so much influenced by the devastating effects of incest that happen in families. This shows that social workers are humans and they are sometimes emotionally attached by the actions they investigate.

“It is particularly the incestuous child abuse cases that influence me the most and I cannot tell why but it is so. I cannot explain the emotions it creates in me, but the devastating effects make me so angry. (Female, aged 33, Social worker)”

Reason for child abuse and sense of insecurity

In the field of child protection, working with children exposed to abuse and neglect expose social workers to many possible threats from the abusers, such social workers experience negativity in their basic concerns for security due to the possible threats (Menashe et al, 2014; Pistorius et al, 2008). The evaluation of attitudes and behaviors of social workers tend to be different before and after they start to engage in child abuse and neglect cases. The biggest change that was discovered in their behaviors is the sense of insecurity due to external threats. Abusers tend to ambush social workers themselves dealing with abuse cases or their relatives such as nephews, nieces whenever they are out of sight with the intention of causing harm.

According to the findings of this study, the interviewed social worker asserted that as human beings, they also get concerned and worried about the safety of

their children to encounter abuse. It is true that they experience this feeling of risk whenever their children go into social gatherings which are hard to monitor.

“We were on a vacation and my son wanted to go and buy something. The site attendant and male escorted him so that he would help him buy or give him whatever he wanted to get. My son followed the man and waited for 10 minutes but was nowhere to be seen. A lot of things went through my mind, like may be the man closed him into some place and abused him. (Male, aged 27, Social worker)”

In the field of child protection, each time social workers encounter a sexual abuse case, their approaches towards their children change and the surrounding environment becomes paranoid. This is because the external environment and strangers surrounding their children force social workers to be on standby all the time, the sense of insecurity within them towards strangers or other people force them to label external environments as areas of threats (Menashe et al, 2014). This study discovered that social workers take concerns and necessary precautions against their children spending nights at relative or friend's homes because of the possibility of abuse; hence social workers tend to not trust people around their children.

“I have a close friend who drinks alcohol all the time. So I told my daughter to keep away from him even though she is old enough and she should never let him get familiar with her. It is the same thing with my son, when my son wants to spend a night at my place, I choose nights when my relative is on night shift because he affects me so much. When my son sleeps over, I am always worried and a lot of things running through my mind. Like what if he abuses him with the influence of alcohol? I am always unsettled. (Male, aged 30, social worker)”

Protection

Female social workers working with abused and neglected children become so careful, protective and always taking precautions in the way children's lives are governed. Due to their intervention and interference within the children's lives, they end up developing anxiety and panic (Pistorius et al, 2008). The coping circumstances and beliefs of social workers working with abused children in connection to the consequences of their experiences and how these consequences affect their relationship with the children was put to test. The social worker explained that they had mostly two issues regarding their personal identity and these included; professional and maternal identities. She showed over protective and controlling behaviors. This happened mostly because her children got involved in social gatherings and this created anxiety among them

“I think I am so obsessive as a mother and I try to do everything for the education of my children. But being a mother, have nothing to do because sometimes I think I emotionally abuse them when I intervene so much in their lives. However, children's characteristics play a great role for a mother's interference. For example, my daughter's persona was well grown so I did not have to take part in shaping her personality. But for my boy/son, I have to intervene after noticing certain strange behaviors. All this makes me a pathological mother. (Female, aged 29, Social worker)”

In this study, it was discovered that social workers encounter changes in their personal lives and they get more consumed by taking into account the dangers of sexual abuse. Therefore, there is a significant increase in social worker's need to control, monitor, and pay close attention and advice children in connection to their social lives and relationships.

“In social life, you try your best not to leave the children alone because something can happen. Everyone is considered capable of sexually abusing children. Therefore, you need to monitor the children always. (Female, aged 29, Social worker)”

“There is always protectionism extended towards people especially in my social environment. I am always concerned when they want to do something. For example, I tell them be careful and make sure not to stay alone. Sometime back, I was a different person, but I now interfere in my cousin's and siblings' social life. (Male, aged 31, Social worker)”

Thoughts on communication with children

The social workers working in the field of child protection display strict attention regarding the safety of their own children (O'Reilly et al, 2014). According to Pistorius et al (2008), the female social workers who work with abused children became more eager and open minded while communicating with children because the nature of their jobs made positive contributions to them, this makes them better parents at the end. Reflective motherhood refers to mothers who struggle with their own personal conflicts and stress (Menashe et al, 2014). These mothers make efforts to seek positive motherhood experiences based on their client's statements. Therefore, in this study, the social workers expressed that the experiences of their jobs are important in establishing open communication with their children. This helps to raise them properly.

“I always tell my children about my dates and issues with people whether younger or older than them. I also talk to them about chatting with strangers and I encourage them to tell me any behavior that disturbs them, I also keep records of their sexual behavior development at home, and we freely discuss sexual issues. (Female, aged 35, Social worker)”

Shevade et al (2011), argued that by working in the field of child protection particularly in the area of child abuse helps social workers to gain competence and self awareness. The social worker tends to lose trust towards the world and they possess increasing awareness on child abuse and neglect. They also become aware of people's reaction in connection to child sexuality. Social workers revealed that their theoretical knowledge and practical experiences increased their awareness of child sexual abuse; hence they evaluate their relationship with abused children in such a direction.

“You become lucky to a certain level because you have knowledge of everything about what child abuse is, what determines an abuse and the practices in the world? After acquiring this knowledge, you assess and compare them by being more critical and objective. The most important aspect is being more aware. (Male, aged 31, Social worker)”

Thoughts on communication with parents

The social workers who participated in this study sought to make a neutral role in trying to contribute to conflict resolution to curb its negative effects on the children. However, most of the social workers admitted that it was very difficult to help the parents. Most of them described their interactions with parents as intense which could even turn into shouting at them by the parents and this hurt their feelings. Therefore it was hard to break off the parents' emotional escalation and that it is hard to take sides between parents:

“We are driven close to insanity at times because of the cruelty of parents. For example, one parent can say come on Sunday at five or twelve or what? That is how it is at times. (Female, aged 25, Social worker)”

One major challenge faced by the social worker was how to determine if the conflict between parents was affecting children by applying the therapeutic space through empathy by supporting and moving in a therapeutic manner with the parents (Ferguson, 2016). Despite the conflict, some parents appeared to be good caregivers to their children and this challenged the social worker's decision or judgment of the parents' behavior and parenting ability.

“It is hard to tell which of the parents is better or worse than the other, in such situations, you don't want to take sides, but if there is substance case of abuse that is harmful to the child, you can give recommendations. (Female, aged 34, Social worker)”

Theme two. Coping Mechanisms

According to the study conducted by Shauben & Frazier (1995) on the coping strategies of the consultants dealing with sexually abused children, in the study, ensuring physical health and well being through physical exercise was considered as the most effective coping strategy. Physical health was accompanied by getting enough sleep and eating healthily, watching movies, reading books and engaging in gatherings with friends. Seeking emotional support from friends and family members is frequently encouraged. In line with Shauben & Frazier's study findings, the current study took the same path and asked the social workers their methods of coping with the tragic experiences they encounter while working with abused children. Social workers revealed that discussing with friends or family members, mind recollection and engaging in social activities, seeking professional support, fostering team work and ensuring job satisfaction were the main coping strategies. Social workers continued to say that such methods helped to control their emotions and burnouts.

Seeking professional support

In general, as discussed in this study, the social lives of social workers dealing with abused children in the field of child protection involve several aspects of experiences for example, emotional and behavioral reflections. Seeking professional support by sharing their tragic experiences with friends and families provides relief from the burdens on their shoulders and helps them to cope with their experiences better. If social workers are supported emotionally, such support

can help them to reflect on the negative emotions thereby transforming them into a resource of practice (Ferguson, 2017; Ruch, 2007). In addition, seeking empathy also acts a coping factor for a social worker dealing with stress and burnout caused by the traumatic experiences of his or her client. Empathy allows a person to understand the thoughts, emotional stress and feeling of others (Geiger, J.M, Shockley, C, 2015 & Segal E.A, 2015). People who are empathic have the ability to identify their client's subjectivity and it influences their behavioral interactions with others. Therefore, empathy can help social workers to maintain work ethics boundaries by being mindful and use emotion regulators which help them to reduce on the burnout.

“When I am totally fed up, I become emotional and angry. But if I have overwhelming experience, I share it with someone without disclosing the issue and this cools me down. (Male, aged 36, Social worker)”

Mind recollection and social activity

Sparing time to clear the mind and engaging in certain social activities helps to cope with ill emotions. For example, the social workers stated that after meeting children suffering from sexual abuse, they spare time for themselves especially to make up with their own lives. In addition, emotional regulation is a part of mind recollection because it is a cognitive component of empathy that helps the social worker to regulate their state of mind regardless of how many times they are exposed to trauma (Wagaman et al 2015). Therefore mind recollection helps social workers to be aware of their emotions and be able to regulate their emotions. The ability to experience the distress of a client by the social worker and not internalize it enables the social worker to fully understand the state of the clients hence maintains their own emotional state positively (Wagaman et al, 2015). When mind recollection and emotion regulation are employed, enables the social worker to understand their client and be able to cope with their trauma and it serves as a protective factor for burnout.

“We were on a night shift and two cases happened in one night and each case consumed four hours. Both cases were victims and I took over their psychology both of them and at the end, I walked around the ocean alone close to two hours just to recollect my mind and get away from it. (Male, aged 27, Social worker)”

It is very vital for social workers to work on their own self-awareness to be able to address the challenges they face after work (Wagaman et al., 2015). By doing this, it helps social workers to have time for mind refreshment and relaxation and they will be better equipped to cope with the demand of their clients the next day. Other coping mechanism to help reduce burnout and stress include working out, sleep and work support.

“Sincerely speaking, when I get home, I just watch movies to clear my mind because I do not want to talk to anyone for some time. If it does not work, I meet friends and we go somewhere to exercise. (Male, aged 36, social worker)”

Fostering team work

In the child protection system, the goal to achieving incredible results is by encouraging team support. Carrying out various assessments through team work such as, physical examination and psychiatric evaluation while conducting cases of child abuse require good working methods, most of the interviewed social workers revealed that team work is really essential for treatment and coping since others rely on them during decision making process. They share the traumatic effects of the abused children left on their lives with their colleagues.

“It is always good to work with friends because you share the burden together. Working as a team and discussing cases together in a meeting helps to divide the burden amongst friends. This reduces the weight of some things on my shoulders. (Female, aged 32, Social worker)”

“The team gives me confidence because I am not afraid of making mistakes. I look for a partner in crime as a place of reliance. These are people you trust and decide everything together. Deciding together is a guarantee of accepting responsibility in terms of legal process and conscience. (Male, aged 28, Social worker)”

Ensuring satisfaction

Compassion and job satisfaction are very important in boosting workers morale. Compassion satisfaction is a product of job satisfaction. Although both of them might not be direct factors for preventing stress and burnout among social workers, but they improve working environment for social workers which is a strong factor for burnout (Craig & Sprang 2010, Wagaman et al., 2015). Bennett et al, (2005) conducted a study of 126 professionals who worked with suffering child victims of sexual abuse and 34.1% of the professionals exhibited emotional stress and physical tiredness due to the nature of their jobs, 13.5% displayed psychological problems and 68% of the professionals who participated in the study stated that their job was satisfactory. The professionals asserted that job satisfaction ensures sustainability and helps them to reduce emotional stress.

“In cases where we conduct long communication with children and their families, we become aware that children and their parents recognize our efforts and they become aware too of our determination to do our best. Therefore, even if the whole process does not go according to their expectations, they are always pleased and hear them say ' we are glad we met you', this makes us feel useful and good. (Female, aged 28, Social worker)”

Discussion

According to present study, personal experiences of trauma in the nature of child abuse and neglect increase the social worker's risk of emotional stress. The findings seem to show that the burden of social workers listening to traumatic experiences of children suffering from abuse and neglect presents the greatest risk for vulnerability. The current study also provides an understanding about the relevant coping mechanisms for social workers to adapt while working with

abused and neglected children with an objective to overcome the tragic challenges they face.

Working with abused and neglected children who have parents engaged in conflicts is time consuming and stressful to social workers. This is because if social workers are not aware of their own feelings and emotion regulation, they might protect themselves from stressful emotions by physically ignoring or detaching from those whom they are seeking to help (Ferguson, 2017). Such complex circumstance can strip off social workers' cognitive behavior and thought process (Ruch, 2007). Hence, it is vital that social workers attain proper training and get emotional support before and after work to help them better understand and be able to control their emotions by promoting a clear thinking (Ferguson, 2017; Ruch 2007). As argued out by Ruch and Ferguson, emotional support can help social workers to reflect on negative emotions and turn them into a resource for practice, by doing this; they can avoid unethical social work and emotional exhaustion (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010; Saini et al., 2018).

As discussed earlier that child abuse and neglect causes harmful consequences for the child, in most cases by the time child neglect causes physical and mental problems to children, it means that it has occurred for a long period of time without being detected (Dickerson et al., 2017).

The first theme included in findings or literature focused on the feelings, emotions and behaviors of social workers. This included how social workers react to the traumatic experiences they face while working with abused children. Coping mechanisms by social workers was the second theme area identified. Within the second theme, coping strategies and support for social workers were discussed. The support to social workers should include their physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. The issue of working with abused children and their families expose social workers to emotional trauma. Social workers who experience tragic moments that led to secondary traumatic stress sometimes leave the profession at younger ages. Social worker's experiences about their emotions and behaviors while working with abused and neglected children and how they cope with the challenges increases the vulnerability to emotional stress. Arvay & Uhlemann (1996) argued that burnout and secondary traumatic stress share similar symptoms and the effects of such symptoms are cumulative. Social workers who suffer from secondary traumatic stress also experience physical, emotional and behavioral work related and interpersonal symptoms. Workers with secondary traumatic stress experience increased fatigue, social withdraw and reduced productivity, feeling of hopelessness and emotional numbing (Saakvitne, 2000).

Addressing the occupational hazards of working with children suffering from abuse and neglect seems to be in the best interests of all social workers and children inclusive. The burnout experienced by social workers while working with abused and neglected children is related to the high turnover of child abuse cases in the child protection system (Anderson 2000). The most important resources in the effort to care for abused and neglected children are the people who do the work and in this case the social workers. These social workers who try to make a difference in the lives of children suffering from abuse and neglect sustain blows to their long term emotional and physical well-being. The tragic trauma that abused children experience enhances social worker's empathy to try to help them thus placing them at greater risk of psychological harm. Many studies related to social workers in the field of child abuse and neglect highlight the lack of emphasis on how different fields are affected as far as working with abused children is concerned and what their coping strategies are. Therefore,

administrators must include emotional stress and burnout in their thinking when developing and training staff, they need to be aware of the research in the field of child abuse and neglect and how to minimize the harm to social workers.

This current study informs social worker educators not only to train social workers to be able to make informed decisions. Instead, educators need to teach and inform them of how their personal traits may increase the risk of physical, emotional and social stress. A history of child abuse and neglect has the ability to enhance the risks of physical and emotional stress. Social workers in training must become aware of emotional and physical stress triggers, how their personal traits can influence their risks, what they can do to avoid the occurrence of stress factors and how they can overcome the effects. All this awareness is an ethical imperative for the social workers, their clients, their friends and families.

Conclusion

This present study exhibited that the experiences of social workers dealing with abused and neglected children have several effects on their emotions and thinking. Therefore, most social workers are worried that such effects can lead to the increase in behavioral disorders associated with the risks. Future studies should look at addressing the risk factors that affect social workers across all sectors in the field of social work. Assessment of such factors should be the first step, and then define the risks associated with such factors. This allows a clear understanding of the challenges faced by social workers and how to tackle them. This will help employers, individuals and educators to be able to take a stance in helping to prevent emotional stress, burnout, psychological trauma and distress among social workers.

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