Social workers’ perspectives on barriers to substance abuse treatment for women in Limpopo province

Baloyi D.E          27March 2024 (Mpumalanga)
Aim of the study

- The aim was to gain an understanding of social workers’ perspectives on the barriers to accessing treatment for women abusing substances in Limpopo province.
Background of the study

• There is an increased number of women abusing substances, however it is alarming that limited research has been conducted on this topic, especially from the perspective of social workers referring service users for treatment.

• In South Africa there are no studies that have focused on this research area, including in Limpopo province.

• The research seek to close the gap identified.
Objectives

• Discuss the prevalence and effects of substance abuse among women, and to explore the relevant policies and legislation regarding SUD.
• Examine the barriers to accessing substance abuse treatment for women from within a feminist theory.
• Empirically investigate social workers’ perspectives on barriers to accessing substance abuse treatment for women.
• Recommend strategies that can be employed to facilitate substance abuse treatment for women abusing substances.
Methodology

• A qualitative approach and descriptive research design was used.
• The study was exploratory, since little was known about the topic.
• 20 social workers from different municipalities across Limpopo province participated.
• Non-probability purposive sampling was used to recruit participants.
• Semi-structured telephone interviews were used and thematic analysis was applied.
• Telephonic interviews due to COVID restrictions
Empirical Research Findings

- All 20 participants had six or more years’ working experience as social workers and coordinated substance abuse programme for more than five years.
- This study also covered many municipalities in Limpopo province.
• The findings of the study show that, although there has been an escalation in the number of women abusing substances, some of the participants had not worked directly with women who abuse substances within the communities they serve.

• This is because women rarely reach out to access substance abuse treatment services due to shame and fear of being labelled by society, as their abuse of substances is not acknowledged to the same extent as that of men.
**Prevalence cont...**

- **Alcohol** is the most abused substance among women because it is easily accessible at social gatherings and easy to brew in the form of “Umqomboti”.
- The study shows that **women abuse substances for different reasons, such as failure to cope with the effects of domestic violence experienced in intimate relationships.**
- **Peer pressure, boredom, and frequent social gatherings** were identified as some of the contributory factors why women use substances.
- It was also **found that women who were unable to deal effectively with stress and depression were found to be self-medicating with over the counter and prescription medication.**
- **Unresolved childhood trauma** experienced by the women was also identified as a contributory factor to abusing substances to hide their vulnerabilities.
Effects of substance abuse on women

• It was found that the effects go beyond just the women, but also affects their loved Children suffer from child neglect and abuse or end up dropping out of school due to the unavailability of their mothers in their lives.

• Families of women who abuse substances end up being dysfunctional and disorganised lot of problems, which leads to interpersonal relationships breaking down.

• This is because women are burdened with a lot of responsibilities in the family compared to men and, when things go wrong, women are blamed.

• Women who use substances lose custody of their children and their family support.
Effects cont..

• Based on the feminist perspective, it is argued that **societal norms and beliefs** that women should be the pillar of strength of their families and advocates for responsibilities to be shared equally between men and women to sustain their families.

• The study also reveals that women who abuse substances are **vulnerable to health conditions such as STIs and HIV and AIDS**.

• **Pregnant women are found to be exposing the foetus to substance abuse**, which may lead to foetal alcohol syndrome and miscarriage.
Nature of treatment services available for women with substance abuse problems

• The findings reveal that there is no standardised treatment programme that is followed by social workers, although the participants said that they implemented services such as prevention, early intervention, referral for inpatient, outpatient and aftercare for both men and women.

• The findings also show that there are only a few outpatient treatment sites in Limpopo managed by SANCA, which makes it difficult for women to access help within the community.

• Each district has one outpatient social worker who works twice a month and participants assert that they are not easily accessible to most district beneficiaries due to the geographic location that they work from, since they can only service nearby villages.
Nature of tx cont..

• The findings also show that social workers employed by the Department of Social Development are not trained to render outpatient services; as a result, women suffer due to a lack of easy access to services.

• It was also found that social workers who refer women for treatment services are expected to render aftercare and reintegration services, but they lack insight into these services as there are no guidelines in place to assist in rendering services. This has a negative effect on the retention of women with substance abuse problems.
Accessibility of treatment services

• The study reveals that prevention, early intervention and aftercare and reintegration services are accessible, as these are offered by local social workers.

• Inpatient and outpatient treatment services are not easily accessible, since there are limited facilities rendering these services in Limpopo province. The outpatient sites are limited to one social worker in each district office and is only open twice a month.

• Department of Social Development does not have enough transportation for women to be taken to outpatient sites, and the women cannot afford to use public transport for all the sessions scheduled.

• It was also found that the treatment centre that is operating in the province has low capacity to cater for people with substance abuse problems. As a result, there is a long waiting list for admission. Other treatment centres found in other provinces strictly prioritise women from their own provinces, which leaves women from Limpopo more vulnerable and with no hope.
The findings also reveal that processes and procedures need to be followed to access treatment services. The length of the process seems to be worsened by the admission requirements set by treatment centres, such as mandatory medical reports, blood tests and bio-psycho-social information.

The study reveals that it is unlikely for women to seek treatment voluntarily and, if they do, they are subjected to a long waiting list that can turn out to be positive or negative, depending on the capacity of the treatment facility.

The findings show that women and men have an equal opportunity to access substance abuse treatment, although women do not take the initiative to look for treatment. The treatment facilities available do not have enough beds for women, which could be due to the low number of applications for admission by women.

Women are found to be reluctant to step out and seek treatment, and this can be misinterpreted as men being prioritised because they are often found in large numbers at the treatment facilities. The role social workers play in assisting women to access substance abuse treatment
Role of Social Workers

• The findings show that social workers are the custodians of the Prevention of and Treatment for Substance Abuse Act, No. 70 of 2008, as they take control of the helping process.

• Their role involves the intake, assessment, problem identification and development of individualised treatment plans based on the needs of the client.

• In executing their roles, social workers use assessment which is the most important tool used for their day-to-day services to their clients. It is also helpful in determining suitable interventions for the identified problem in order to meet the client’s needs holistically.

• The findings also show that social workers are at an advantage in identifying women with substance abuse problems through the assessments they do in relation to the cases and referrals they work with daily (including child abuse, domestic violence and family problems).
Roles cont...

• The participants pointed out that it was difficult to identify women with substance abuse problems, since most do not seek help and hide their problems.

• However, a good working relationship between social workers and other stakeholders is promoted for easy identification by different offices and to foster referral processes.

• Despite different challenges encountered by social workers when working with women, it can be concluded that social workers are the pillars of substance abuse treatment services and they need to be strengthened in order to provide effective and efficient services.
Barriers women face in accessing substance abuse treatment services

• The study show that participants found it difficult to identify barriers women face in accessing substance abuse treatment services, since they hardly have any cases of women seeking these services.

• The poor experiences of social workers working with women with substance abuse problems have a negative effect on their willingness and eagerness to advocate for the improvement of treatment services for women.

• Women are found to be in denial of their substance abuse problem, which makes it difficult for social workers to provide substance abuse treatment services.

• The stigma and stereotypes that surround women play a huge role in preventing them from accessing treatment services. Society also is not informed about substance abuse treatment services for women, which result in lack of support for women.
• The findings show that women do not easily access treatment services because of the waiting list due to limited bed capacity and the need to wait for more female applications to be admitted together.

• It was also found that a lot of women withdrew during the waiting period because they were impatient and had lost hope.

• The admission criteria were found to be one reason women were not accessing treatment services, as there are many requirements, and several service providers must be consulted to gather the required documents.

• The findings show that the limited treatment facilities are also part of the barriers for women to access treatment.
Barriers cont..

- **Most women are mothers**, so it is a big decision when they must choose between treatment and their children.
- As a result, they do not initiate treatment and deny substance abuse when identified due to fear of losing custody of their children, the social support grant and support from their families.
- They fear resentment from their intimate partners and their children, as society will label them unfit to raise their children and look after their families.
- The findings also suggest that social workers working with limited resources are unable to render effective services to women with substance abuse problems. Women who must attend outpatient treatment services rendered by SANCA require transport, which is already a challenge among social workers.
- Therefore, lack of treatment services designed for women does not encourage women to initiate help, since they believe help is designed for men.
External barriers

• Lack of collaboration between stakeholders
• Strict admission criteria
• Insufficient treatment centres (only 1 and out pt sites limited to 1 or 2 per district)
• Lack of resources (cars, internet and promotional material)
• Limited substance abuse training for service providers
• Financial constraints (travelling to site to see SW)
Internal barriers

• Lack of motivation for change and to seek treatment
• Fear of being stereotyped by society
• Fear of loosing custody of their children
• Poor support from family and significant others
Conclusion

• There is an increased rate of women with SUD
• Women are not likely to admit their SUD problem due to fear of judgement
• Treatment programmes doesn’t cater for the needs of women with younger children
• There is limited support for women with SUD
Recommendations

- Social workers and other stakeholders should address issues of stigma in society through awareness campaigns and psycho-education.
- Psycho-educating to the families of women with SUD to improve support and family preservation.
- Implement involuntary treatment services in terms of section 33 of Act 70.
- Removal and placement of children in need of care and protection due to SUD of parents.
- Treatment centres should make provision for children to visit their mothers often.
- Interdepartmental collaboration to fight SUD (tx to be inclusive of pregnant women and those with chronic health conditions and unresolved traumas)
Recommendation for future researchers

- it is recommended that future studies look at the development and improvement of treatment services that address all the barriers that hinder women from accessing substance abuse treatment.
- Future studies should explore women’s needs in a treatment setting, whether inpatient or outpatient.
- The effectiveness of placing women in treatment as involuntary service users and the effect it has on their families and children is another research area worth investigating.
- Thank you
- Inkomu
- Baai dankie
- Kea leboga
- Siyabonga
- Inkosi