

Challenges Faced by Social Workers Rendering Foster Care Services in the John Taolo Gaetsewe District, Northern Cape Province

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Abstract

Foster care services are in high demand in South Africa because of the significant number of children in need of care. Reasons for this include the death of biological parents, abuse, neglect, incarceration of parents, parents abandoning their children, and even disappearance of parents. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this situation. The demand for foster care is putting strain on the delivery of social work services to this vulnerable group. Social workers tasked with implementing the foster care process experience operational impediments and emotional strain, creating an implementation challenge. In examining these challenges, the ecological perspective provides a suitable theoretical framework. This qualitative research study is underpinned by an exploratory design and semi-structured interviews have been conducted to gather primary data. Eight participants have been purposively selected, and the data has been analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggest that the challenges social workers face fall into three categories: operational obstacles, emotional challenges, and non-adherence to foster care values and principles. Policies and practices are recommended to address the identified challenges to ensure that social workers are empowered to implement foster care services that are child-centred and needs-based.

Keywords: foster care; foster care services; social work; social workers

Introduction

In 2019, it was estimated that in South Africa 3.7 million to 5.7 million children were in need of care and protection (Parliament 2019) of which 386,019 children (2018–2019) received foster care grants (SASSA 2019). For many years, children in need of care and protection due to abuse or neglect, or waiting to be adopted, have been the main beneficiaries of foster care (Hall 2019). With the rise in HIV-related orphaning and a change in policy that encouraged family members caring for orphaned children to apply for foster care and the foster care grant, there has been a rapid increase in foster care since 2003. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an additional increase of children in need of care, and South Africa now has the highest number of COVID-19 orphans in Africa (Muhigana and Meulenberg 2022).

The escalating number of children in need of care is putting pressure on the already struggling foster care system (Hall 2014) and on social workers to deliver services (Breen 2015). A shortage of social workers to deliver such services is leaving those involved in the foster care process with high caseloads (Andreas 2021). The high demand for foster care services and the shortage of social workers to deliver such services is causing a backlog of cases. The Department of Social Development (DSD) (2017) indicated that 39,102 foster care backlog cases were recorded in all nine provinces. Furthermore, 49,534 foster care orders were supposed to be extended before December 2017, and another overwhelming 30,232 would lapse between January and March 2018. For the Northern Cape, a backlog of 1,558 foster cases were documented (DSD 2017). When foster care cases lapse, the children in question are left unprotected and vulnerable. Consequently, they are exposed to social ills such as child poverty, school dropout, and child labour, which results in further need of care and protection (Kivido 2019).

Literature Review

Foster Care in South Africa

Children in South Africa in need of care and protection are placed in foster care as stated in Section 150 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005) (RSA 2006). Foster care refers to the temporary placement of a child in need of care and protection in the care of a person other than a parent or guardian, following an order of the Children's Court (Bosman-Sadie and Corrie 2010; RSA 2006). The purpose of foster care is to protect and nurture children by providing them with a safe and healthy environment and promoting the goals of family reunification. It is also important to note that to qualify as a foster child, the child must be younger than 18 years and/or be abandoned or orphaned, display behaviour that is uncontrollable to the parents or caregiver, beg or live on the street, display signs of substance abuse, be exploited or exposed to exploitation, be at risk of being returned to the custody of the parent or caregiver, and/or be in a state of neglect,

maltreatment and abuse by a parent, caregiver or someone with parental responsibility over the child (RSA 2006).

Social Work Services in South Africa

Social work in South Africa is a scarce and critical skill, according to a study conducted by the Department of Labour (TMS Africa 2019). Although 55,000 social workers are needed to meet the demand for basic social welfare services in South Africa, only 17,500 social workers are currently providing services to communities (DSD 2023). These statistics are alarming considering the ever-increasing social challenges in the country. It poses a significant challenge for the foster care system and the overburdened social workers already in the system (Sibanda and Lombard 2015). Social workers follow a standardised process to place a child in foster care (DSD n.d.) and to provide foster care services to foster children and foster parents. Adding to the workload of social workers is the amendment of the Children's Act (Section 158) that allows the Children's Court to review the foster care order every two years unless the court specifies a shorter period. These changes add more work for social workers, which means more staff and additional resources are required (Gudula-Koyana and Khanye 2019). This has increased the burden on already overburdened social workers. De Jager (2011) as well as Sibanda and Lombard (2015) have found that the Children's Act is not adequately implemented by social workers due to a lack of resources, such as a shortage of supervisors, a shortage of canalisation officers to manage case flows, as well as a lack of tools of the trade, all of which negatively affect service delivery. The Children's Institute (2023) adds that the main implementation challenges include a lack of adequate human resources, low budget allocation for social services, and the need for social workers to understand how to apply the law when dealing with children.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective was originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and emphasises the interaction as well as the interdependence of individuals and their environment (Mbedzi 2019). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2016, 26) refer to a system as "a set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole." Teater (2014) states that when an ecological perspective is applied in social work practice, the environment around the person must be taken into consideration as it underpins the social context of the person. Mbedzi (2019) confirms that the ecological perspective primarily focuses on the dynamics between one system and the systems around it. It is important to note that social systems are composed of people and affected by people. The ecosystems perspective provides a framework to understand how social work participants are influenced by their environment, which in this study is the foster care service.

Problem Statement

The growing demand for foster care, due to the escalating number of children in need of care (Hall 2014; Muhigana and Meulenberg 2022; SASSA 2019), places a strain on social workers to deliver services (Breen 2015). A shortage of social workers to deliver such services (Andreas 2021; DSD 2023) and lack of adequate human resources (Children's Institute 2023) lead to a backlog of foster care cases (DSD 2017). The Northern Cape has not been excluded from this problem, with 11,970 children receiving foster care grants (SASSA 2019) and a backlog of 1,558 foster care cases (DSD 2017). Hence, this study sought to explore the challenges characterising the foster care process in the John Taolo Gaetsewe District Municipality in the Northern Cape.

Context of the Study

John Taolo Gaetsewe (JTG) District Municipality, the demarcated area of this study, is a district in the Northern Cape. The Northern Cape, with approximately 1.26 million people, has the smallest population of the South African provinces, of which 469,793 are children, which is 37 per cent of the population in the Northern Cape (Stats SA 2019). Of these children, 11,970 received foster care grants (SASSA 2019). The JTG district has a population of 242,264 people, with 31,9% of the population being children under the age of 15 (Municipalities of South Africa 2023).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the perceptions of certain individuals (Parahoo 2014). In this study, social workers were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences (Hennink, Hunter, and Bailey 2011). Merriam and Tisdell (2014) explain that qualitative research includes a broad range of interpretative methods that demonstrate, decode, translate, and comprehend meaning of a social phenomenon. The research design, which is seen by Sileyew (2019) as the framework for a research study, was an exploratory design. This design aims to explore a research topic in depth when the research area is new and not well researched (Akhtar 2016). In this study, it was to explore the challenges faced by social workers in the foster care system.

The population group consisted of social work practitioners involved in rendering foster care services. Participants in this study were sampled from this population through non-probability purposive sampling on the decision of the researcher, with the sample consisting of people who would fit the purpose of the study (Strydom 2021). The inclusion criteria were as follows: the social work practitioners must be working in the JTG district in the Northern Cape, they must be serving the demarcated area of the study, and they must have at least three years of professional experience working with foster

parents and foster children. As there is no specific sample size in qualitative research (Strydom 2021), data saturation was used to determine the sample size.

In this study, semi-structured interviews, using an interview schedule, were conducted with eight social workers. Semi-structured interviews are described as a set of pre-determined questions that allows the individual to speak freely about the topic of interest (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). The interviews were conducted in the social workers' offices, and each interview lasted an hour. All the interviews were recorded as raw data and were transcribed verbatim.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Kiger and Varpio 2020) and Tesch's model for data analysis, as cited in Schurink, Schurink, and Fouché (2021). The analysis was done as follows: the researcher first read through the transcripts of the interviews and used the research objectives as a guideline to identify the main themes. While reading through the transcripts, the researcher tagged the data with labels and made notes to capture the meaning of participants' experiences. The researcher analysed all transcripts and re-labelled the data, keeping in mind the research objective. The researcher then identified different categories that corresponded with the research objectives. Similar labels and data were grouped together to identify themes and categories. The findings were reported and supported by quotes from the participants. Finally, the researcher linked all significant sections with relevant literature.

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee of the university, while legal permission was obtained from the Provincial and District Office of the Department of Social Development in the Northern Cape. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants. Participation was voluntary. The privacy and anonymity of the participants were ensured throughout the study and all information as well as data were kept confidential in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI Act).

Key Findings: Main Themes and Sub-themes

The two themes and 11 sub-themes that have emerged from the data analysis are discussed below, supported by verbatim quotes from the participants as supportive evidence. Participant codes were used in the study.

Theme 1: Operational Challenges Social Workers Experience in Rendering Foster Care Services

Theme 1 produced six sub-themes highlighting the operational challenges that participants' experienced in rendering foster care services and the impact on the social workers.

Sub-theme 1.1: Lack of Resources

Most of the social work participants were of the view that the lack of resources had a negative effect on their service delivery. The following direct quotes from the participants support this view:

The biggest problem I am faced with in foster care services is the issue of lack of resources such as trade tools. For example, when you have to go do foster care investigations the transport officer will tell you that there are no vehicles to go to the field. (SW1)

[T]he cause of shallow work is due to trading tools. You find that you are supposed to share vehicles with three social workers because there are no vehicles to go to home visit. We end up rushing the interview and not getting the relevant information and providing quality work. (SW2)

The main operational challenge identified by the social workers seems to be the lack of resources. This challenge is not unique to South Africa. For example, Burns and MacCarthy (2012) have found that social workers in Ireland are often trying to cope with high caseloads, burnout, and lack of resources. De Jager (2011) also explores the negative impact on service delivery of a shortage of supervisors and a lack of the tools of trade. Kheswa (2019) has found that the professional efficiency of social workers is compromised by a lack of resources. Importantly, these challenges have implications for the implementation of the Children's Act. According to De Jager (2011), the Children's Act is not adequately implemented in South Africa due to a lack of resources. These findings affirm that there is a need to improve the resources required to carry out the stipulations in the Children's Act. Mokgalapa (2020) is of the opinion that without the necessary resources, foster care backlogs will always be a challenge. Consequently, the lives of foster children remain under threat.

Sub-theme 1.2: Shortage of Social Workers and High Caseloads

Most of the participants mentioned that one of the biggest challenges is the shortage of social workers and subsequent high caseloads, which in return affect service delivery to clients. This is echoed by the following quotes from the participants:

There is a need for more social workers especially. The shortage of social workers is a problem because you end up having more than 100 cases of foster care which you have to provide services to, and this is not in line with the framework of social welfare services. When dealing with the children, the ratio is 1:60 children. (SW5)

[F]oster care beneficiaries are not serviced as they should. Foster care placement is done rushed as social workers are not only focused on foster care but they have other services they render in the community and it leads to social workers being overburden with caseloads. (SW2)

The shortage of social workers also has a negative effect on the foster care programmes for foster parents and foster children, as there is no proper monitoring to track progress. The following response confirms this:

This is where we address behavioural problems that foster children present. We teach them life skills such as good manners, hygiene, financial management, forming good interpersonal skills, but due to high volume of cases we are unable to make follow-up and evaluate skills learnt and track progress of these foster children. (SW5)

It is clear that the shortage of social workers severely impacts on service delivery to clients. Carter (2013) confirmed that caseloads are too high, which means that social workers do not have time to supervise placements. Hence, they fail to develop and implement foster care plans in an environment characterised by inadequate or rushed screening of prospective foster parents. Additionally, high staff turnover results in interrupted services. Vetfuti, Goliath, and Perumal (2019) argued that social workers' high caseloads compromised the quality of services rendered. High caseloads is a contributing factor to social workers' inability to engage and intervene with their clients' socio-emotionally challenges (Vetfuti, Goliath, and Perumal 2019). The shortage of social workers and their high caseloads furthermore impact on foster care programmes as the care of the foster children are not adequately monitored (Masha and Botha 2021; Vetfuti, Goliath, and Perumal 2019).

Sub-theme 1.3: Lack of Presiding Officers

The responses of the participants indicate that the foster care backlog is often caused by a shortage of presiding officers, who have to declare whether the child is in need of care and protection by means of a court order. As the presiding officers are mostly tied down with criminal cases, they have a high volume of cases in court. This means that it takes time for the social workers to get a court date. The participants have voiced this issue as follows:

The problem also lies at the Children's Court where magistrates delay to place the children merely because there are few presiding officers and they are also not dealing with Children's Court but instead they also have criminal cases, domestic cases to attend to. You will wait for more than three months in order to get your case placed. (SW6)

The Department of Justice is unable to deal with high demand of foster care placement as they lack presiding officers. These same presiding officers also do criminal law. (SW7)

Sibanda and Lombard (2015) also single out the lack of presiding officers as a hurdle in the foster care process. Mokgalapa (2020) adds that sometimes presiding officers' understanding of children in need of care and protection, and unfair recommendations contribute to foster care backlogs.

Sub-theme 1.4: Lack of Knowledge and Application of the Children's Act and the Foster Care Process

It is essential for social workers involved with the foster care process to have knowledge of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Of the eight social workers interviewed, five indicated that they were not well informed about the Act:

I have never had an intensive training on the Children's Act beside[s] the basics. I know I should be an expert, but I can tell you that I consult the Children's Act when I am faced with a difficult case. (SW1)

I have little knowledge on the Children's Act as I have never been trained by the department. I normally consult with my colleagues or supervisor in case I have a foster care related problem in order to assist clients effectively. If I do not know, I consult. Therefore, my knowledge is limited. What I know is what I have been taught from varsity. We need training on the Act. (SW4)

Social workers play an essential role in the implementation of the Children's Act and use the Act as their guiding document in the foster care process. The findings of this study show that social workers are not adequately equipped to carry out the stipulations of the Act, which is a serious concern. This finding corresponds with a study conducted by Mokgalapa (2020), who has found that there is a need to train social workers on the Children's Act as some of the social workers struggle to perform their duties. This finding also then points to possible gaps in the training of social work students.

Sub-theme 1.5: Cumbersome and Time-consuming Foster Care Process and Assessment

The participants believe that the foster care process is so cumbersome and time-consuming that some foster parents give up on taking children into their care via the route of a court order.

Normally, placement must be within 90 days of advert but due to lack of human resources, the process is prolonged, and some children reach the age of 18 without being placed in foster care. These children are left vulnerable and in need of care and protection. The assessment is lengthy, and the questions are repetitive. (SW4)

Department's process in placing the child in foster care, it is too long. For example, there are a lot of reports that one needs to write before actual placement. These forms are time-consuming. Hence, social workers have burnout and end up leaving the profession. (SW6)

Social workers seem burdened by the administrative process involved in applying the Best Interests of the Child Standard. Social workers need to follow a specific and standardised process when placing children in foster care. The findings indicate that these processes are viewed as cumbersome and time-consuming. Firstly, social workers need to follow the stipulated (nine) stages of the foster care process (Carter 2013).

Secondly, they also need to follow an administrative process in accordance with Regulations 44 and 55 of the specified Children's Act.

Sub-theme 1.6: Negative Impact on the Well-being of Social Workers

The challenges that social workers experience have a pronounced effect on their well-being, as explained by the following participants:

It breaks my heart when children cannot return to their biological parents due to them being unfit. Removing children from their birth family is painful but we do it to protect the child. (SW1)

Sometimes you place a child due to child neglect or abandonment. And in most cases, such cases are emotionally draining and we as social workers we do not get debriefing. The department is only after quantity and not about the well-being of social workers and this can lead to burnout. (SW2)

The well-being of social workers is negatively affected by unfair treatment of foster children, emotional distress caused by removing the children, and the foster care process. The ecological perspective also echoes that the one system (social workers) is affected by the other systems (Mbedzi 2019). Literature supports the findings that social workers experience emotional distress. A 2019 article by Tradewind Recruitment (Social Care) Ltd confirms that social workers work with vulnerable groups. They are often exposed to highly emotional situations that can wear them down and cause compassion fatigue, depersonalisation, and emotional exhaustion. Louie (2021) states that working with children is physically and emotionally distressing.

Theme 2: Inherent Challenges within Foster Care Placements

From the participants' views, it is evident that several placement challenges are being experienced by social workers. Four sub-themes emerged discussing the concerns within placements.

Sub-theme 2.1: Lack of Cooperation from Foster Parents

A kingpin of the foster care process is foster parents. Participants indicated that the foster parents do not cooperate in the established intervention plan:

[W]e do a sectional report based on section 186 of the Children's Act but not all foster parents adhere to supervision and [the] sad part is that there [are] no sanctions to deal with unruly foster parents. (SW8)

[O]nce placement is done, foster parents do not adhere to the rules and regulations of placement. That is, they need to come for supervision as envisaged in section 186 of the Children's Act. But, however, they do not come. (SW3)

The findings, therefore, reveal that foster parents often fail to cooperate fully with the foster care process and that this is seldom addressed. Ngwenya (2011) also found that social workers usually encounter reluctant clients who do not comply with instructions given to them, with some of the clients also being dishonest and providing inaccurate information. This then has a significant impact on foster care services and ensuring that children are adequately cared for.

Sub-theme 2.2: Misuse of Foster Care Grants and Not Saving

The participants believe that foster care grants are misused and not applied in the best interest of the child.

Foster parents do not use the grant in the best interest of the children and as a result there is a high dropout rate of foster children. When you investigate as a social worker you get that the foster child drops out because she has no school uniform or there is no food at home. (SW8)

[Y]ou tell them that they should save a portion from the foster grant, so it becomes useful for the child once the foster child falls out of the system or once the child goes for tertiary education. Then the savings assist where possible. They do not save the grant and it's a problem. (SW3)

The participants indicated that the grants were being misused by the foster parents and that the foster parents did not save some of the grant money, as advised by the social workers. The concern was that children dropped out of school because of financial reasons, which is counter to the reasons for foster care. However, according to Ngwenya (2011) and Hendricks (2021), the foster parents were of the view that the foster grants were not sufficient to provide for the children's basic needs.

Sub-theme 2.3: Unsuitability of The Foster Parents

The participants indicated that most foster parents are not suitable to care for and protect the foster children in their care and are typically unable to maintain the permanency plan. This is how the participants describe the foster parents in this context:

We create a permanency plan but foster parents do not adhere to the plan due to family politics. Sometimes [it] is due to external factors, such foster children growing up and starting to be rebellious. They end up being evicted by the foster parent. (SW2)

Find a person who is fit and proper. Do they have a relationship? Because we are trying to find a home for this child and this home is up until the child is 18 years unless the child is still attending school up until the age of 21. However, this principle gets compromised when the child gets terminated from foster care due to dropping out of school due to age. And [when] the grant is terminated, foster parents evict these children and [they] have nowhere to go. (SW3)

The findings indicate that the foster parents are often unsuitable to foster children and are not able to create permanency for foster children due to factors such as incompatibility between the foster child and foster parent. Foster care placement calls for the proper screening of foster parents to ensure that foster care children are placed with suitable foster parents. Zeijlmans et al. (2018) contended that though research on matching foster children with parents offer guidelines, they have found that, in practice, matching is far from standardised. According to Zeijlmans et al. (2018), matching a foster child is often adjusted to meet the specific needs of the child and can be compromised by time, shortage of families, or incomplete information. Therefore, matching takes place pragmatically rather than systematically. The high demand for alternative care in South Africa presents a significant challenge to organisations providing foster care services with reference to recruiting, screening, and training foster parents (Thiele 2005). Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar (2018) emphasise the importance of training, adequate support, funds to assist with placement expenses, and a good match with the child. These factors contribute to foster care satisfaction.

Sub-theme 2.4: Mistreating Foster Children

The participants point out that foster children sometimes feel labelled because foster parents can be insensitive to them, and how they are treated at school:

Foster parent tends to label the foster child as ‘orphans.’ When anything happens at home, foster parents fail to reprimand the children. They then resort to the social worker and they tell you that you as social worker deal with these children as they are ‘government children.’ See what to do ... it affects the foster children to the point that they see themselves labelled and they grow up that way. And they become rebellious towards the family and the foster parents. They do no longer want to listen to them because it is in their minds that they are orphans and they don’t belong within the family. This thing does not give them a sense of belonging. (SW1)

The other challenge is that of foster children dropping out of school due to how they [are] being treated in their foster homes. (SW2)

Often, foster parents label, criticise, and/or name-call their foster children and treat them unfairly. This abuse is damaging and creates a sense that foster children do not belong. According to the Scottish Government (2010), foster care is often associated with emotional abuse and neglect as some foster parents do not provide adequate support to their children. Seale (2021) explains that labelling foster children is a major problem as they are seen as being vulnerable. Social workers need to deal with the emotional impact this has on foster children.

Sub-theme 2.5: Disinterest in the Care of the Foster Child

The participants in the study are of the opinion that some foster parents only want to foster the child for their own personal gain and not the best interest of the child. This is how the following participants have explained the problem:

You will find out that the basic needs of the child is not put first but as a family it is their need that is put first. You will find out that some foster children go to school with torn shoes or school uniform and when you enquire from the foster parent why the foster child is going to school in that situation, they will say that the foster care grant is the only money that is used to sustain the family. So, the basic needs are not put first, enhance, we need to take into consideration the best interest of the child. (SW8)

[T]he challenge comes when the foster parent has no real intention of caring for the child. Some foster parents are only interested in the foster care grant and end up using the grant for their personal gain and not for the child. Once this happens, the care is compromised as some of the foster children start looking for illegal ways to fend for themselves such as stealing food. (SW6)

The best interest of the child is not always upheld as some foster parents only want to foster children for their own personal gain. The findings of this study are supported by literature showing that, often, foster parents lose interest in providing and caring for foster children when their grant is suspended or lapses. Furthermore, Dhludhlu and Lombard (2017) have found that foster children are often neglected in the family because foster parents typically focus more strongly on their biological children. When the foster care child is not related, this is even more evident.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges social workers in foster care services face, with specific reference to the JTG district in the Northern Cape province. A number of challenges emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the social workers. The social workers identified several operational challenges that they experience in rendering foster care services, with the biggest challenge being the lack of resources followed by the shortage of social workers, which causes high caseloads. Importantly, these challenges have implications for the implementation of the Children's Act. The shortage of presiding officers dealing with child-related cases in South Africa was also identified as a challenge, causing foster care backlogs. Social workers play an essential role in the implementation of the Children's Act and use the Act as their guiding document in the foster care process. The findings of this study show that there is a gap in social work skills in carrying out the stipulations of the Act, which is a serious concern. Furthermore, it was evident that the standardised process which the social workers need to follow when placing children in foster care is cumbersome and time-consuming.

The findings also indicate that there are inherent challenges within foster care placements such as the lack of cooperation from the foster parents, foster parents misusing the foster grants and not saving, foster parents being unsuitable to foster children, foster children being mistreated, and disinterest of foster parents in the care of the foster child. It was evident that these challenges affect not only service delivery but

also the foster care process and the well-being of social workers. To improve service delivery and provide support to social workers, these challenges need to be addressed.

Recommendations

It is of paramount importance that social workers in JTG district receive training on and are equipped with knowledge of the Children's Act. This will bring about uniformity and standardised report writing and application of the Children's Act. This should be mandatory through their in-service training, as well as in their social work degree.

The introduction of a kinship grant may help avoid backlogs and lessen the burden on the foster care system. A policy and procedure should be produced on ensuring the monitoring and sustainability of the grant which can be spearheaded at a national level and thereafter adopted by provinces and districts to ensure consistency.

It is recommended that foster care services become decentralised. Foster care services in the JTG district are currently only rendered by social workers from the DSD and non-governmental organisations. In order to lessen the burden on current service providers, it is recommended that services be decentralised to social workers in private practice and school social workers to support the foster care supervision mandate.

It is recommended that a specialised unit be established within the JTG district to deliver only foster care services, from investigation to placement and supervision, this can also be adopted across all provinces in South Africa. Although foster care accounts for the biggest part of their day-to-day practice, social workers are also responsible for an array of statutory and non-statutory functions, which are overwhelming and demanding.

It is recommended that the norms (ratio of one social worker to 60 children) and standards on social welfare when rendering services to children, as outlined by DSD, be implemented to address the operational challenges that social workers experience.

It is further recommended that interdepartmental and multidisciplinary approaches be mandated so that foster care services do not operate in isolation. Implementation and finalisation of foster care placements require an integrated process for efficient services.

The implementation of these recommendations will assist in supporting social workers, improving foster care services, and ultimately ensuring the safeguarding of vulnerable children.

Limitations

An identified gap was that the participation of social work supervisors, social auxiliary workers, and presiding officers had not been the focus of this study. These role players

also form part of the team of professionals involved in foster care services. Further studies should focus on including these significant role players.

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