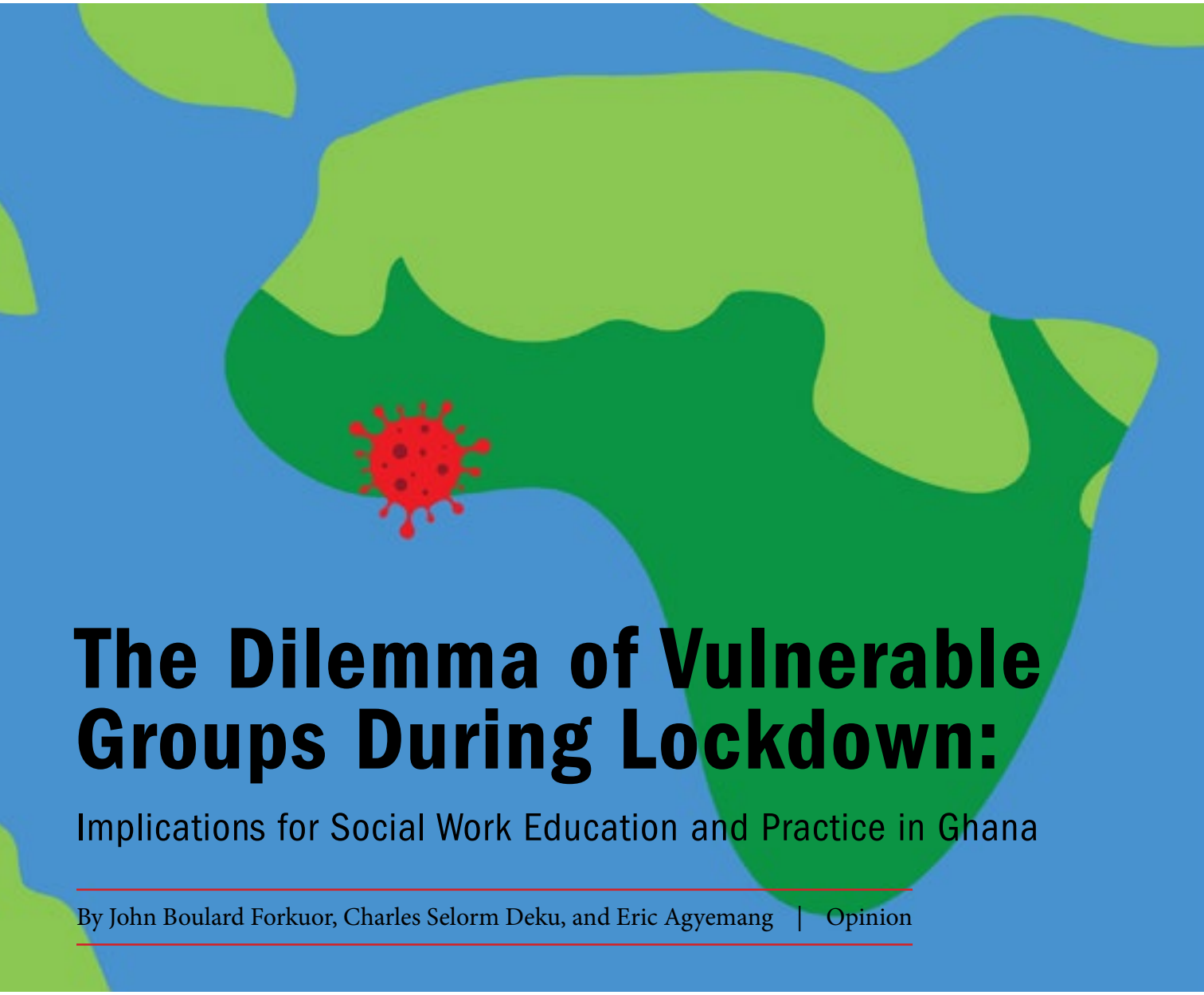

The Dilemma of Vulnerable Groups During Lockdown:

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice in Ghana

By John Boulard Forkuor, Charles Selorm Deku, and Eric Agyemang | Opinion

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has created socio-economic challenges for countries globally and has touched lives in some of the world's most remote areas. While other countries have been proactive in addressing these challenges, I fear that Ghana, and to an extent most of sub-Saharan Africa, have failed to adequately prepare for and anticipate these challenges. This reflective essay discusses the paradoxes that the pandemic and the measures used to curb it have created for two vulnerable groups: informal economy workers and women and children in abusive relationships. I introduce the essay with a reflective account of the relevance and practicality of social work education and practice in Ghana in light of the ongoing pandemic. Subsequently, I focus on the two aforementioned vulnerable groups. I present a reflective account of how the challenges that emerged from this pandemic create new opportunities for my work as a social work educator and also for practice with these groups in Ghana.

Introduction

Trained in social work and teaching social work at the tertiary level, I have always had pride in the profession's ability to promote the wellbeing of the vulnerable in society. Every September, I have the opportunity to meet first year undergraduate social work students. I relish these opportunities because I get to share with these students the successes of the profession in Ghana and to whip up their interest in social work and broader social welfare efforts. Since the onset of Covid-19, however, I have had to question my beliefs, especially how we, as social workers in Ghana, have had to observe the intervention efforts from the sidelines. I cannot help but feel that as academics and professionals, we have not made ourselves relevant to our communities and the country as a whole. We have, as a result, failed to influence national policies on social welfare delivery. We have focused on remedial practice and provided reactive services to vulnerable groups. By so doing, we have not properly engaged the public, city authorities, and other professionals in promoting and advocating for preventive public welfare approaches. In hindsight, it comes as little surprise, perhaps as a rude awakening, that in the fight against Covid-19, Ghanaian social workers have not been engaged in the national discourse. Even the Ministry in charge of all social welfare efforts in the country failed to call upon the knowledge of social workers in their attempt to identify and support vulnerable groups in the country. This demonstrates the disconnect between governance, practice and education of social work in Ghana. This pandemic has made me aware of the limitations of my teaching and research approaches; I believe I will be a better educator of future social work practitioners in Ghana and in Africa as whole. In the following paragraphs, I focus on two vulnerable groups, the insights gained during this pandemic, and the implications of these on social work education and practice in Ghana.

Urban Informal Economic Workers and Covid-19

I sat through a student's thesis presentation about a year ago; the student, a sociology major, presented on retirement planning for informal economy workers. At the time, I listened out of intellectual curiosity and never thought of its professional relevance to social work practice in Ghana. How mistaken I was! Today, looking at how this pandemic has affected the livelihoods of workers in the informal economy, I realise that there was a lot of professional relevance to this presentation.

On 19 April 2020, as the President of Ghana lifted the lockdown, there were mixed feelings. Most of the population working in the informal economy were jubilating because they could go back to work again and feed their families and dependants. For most of the formally employed, lifting the lockdown would make the virus spread rapidly and create a greater public health problem. As a social work lecturer, I felt conflicted because I could empathise with both the jubilating group and the lamenting group. For those who are informally employed, available evidence reveals that the public health measures aimed at controlling the pandemic leads to a loss of income (WIEGO, 2020a). For the informally employed, the paradox is that 'they cannot stay home without starving and they cannot work without being exposed to the virus' (WIEGO, 2020d). This paradox has real implications for the ability of nations to effectively deal with this pandemic.

The academic, political, and industrial neglect of informal economy workers is having a negative effect on society's efforts at dealing with this pandemic (Harvey, 2020). Years of neglect mean that governments currently have to focus on both a public health and economic crisis. Working from home, schooling from home, relying on savings, and social distancing (all recommended strategies for curbing the pandemic) are not realistic options for many of the workers in the informal economy (Harvey, 2020). In other words, the lack of job security, health insurance, financial investments and savings, and adequate housing for informal economic workers is negatively affecting the ability of states to deal with the pandemic. One of the realities that this pandemic has laid bare is that a resilient informal economic workforce is not only good for the economy, but may also have important implications for future public health efforts and responses. Thus, if we continue to ignore this workforce in policy development and implementation processes, their condition will have a negative impact on society's ability to fight pandemics effectively. Consequently, we cannot, as social workers and educators, afford to ignore the workers in the

informal economy any longer.

Our focus as social workers operating within the urban sphere in Ghana has been significantly on the vulnerable aged, street children, street beggars, and other urban actors. Our social intervention and empowerment programs have not paid adequate attention to workers in the informal economy. The calls for Developmental Social Work to inform social work practice in Africa (Gray and Coates, 2010; Mwansa, 2011) are becoming increasingly obvious and relevant as this pandemic unfolds and affect millions of people in Africa's informal economy. The informal economy and its workers therefore present specific challenges to social work efforts in Ghana and in Africa from here on. It is important, given the challenges that workers in this sector have faced during this pandemic (WIEGO, 2020a, 2020c, and 2020d), that we assist in creating more resilient homes and households for informal economy workers. This, I believe, should be one of the priority areas for social workers in urban Africa and the rest of the developing world. For me, as a social work lecturer, a clear path ahead is apparent. No longer will I passively listen to discussions about informal economic workers, their access to social protection, social security, and retirement plans. As a lecturer and researcher, the urban informal economy should be a necessary part of my lessons. Social work students within African and other developing contexts should graduate with a clear understanding of the challenges that informal workers face and the strategies that could be used to build the economic and social resilience of this group. It is relevant that the student who sits in my class understands how important workers in the informal economy are, and the best way of improving their wellbeing. This will help the profession make meaningful contributions towards promoting the wellbeing of informal economy workers. Through this, we not only make a relevant contribution towards the wellbeing of Ghanaians, but also enhance the practical and contextual relevance of the profession in Ghana. From my lecture halls, I will be the change that I expect to see in social work education and practice in Ghana. I will endeavour to train students in ways that will make them relevant practitioners and prepare them to contribute meaningfully to emerging public health concerns in Ghana.

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Abuse and Violence During Covid-19

Since the start of the pandemic, I have read of several instances of increase in abuse (physical, emotional, financial, and psychological) during this period as countries implement lockdown measures. In some cases, the abuse has led to the death of spouses, mostly women (Addadzi-Koom, 2020; Higgins, 2020; Kelly and Morgan, 2020). Lockdown measures instituted globally have created a conducive avenue for abusers (by isolating their victims from family and friends), while limiting escape options for the abused (Kelly and Morgan, 2020). Children confined to their homes are exposed to violence and the psychological distress that comes with it. As Higgins puts it, for the victim of abuse, there is the 'fear of the aggressor indoors and the virus outside' (2020: 1). This is much like the paradox faced by informal economy workers: the choice between starvation indoors and the virus outdoors.

Prior to this pandemic, I – as a researcher and academic – did not critically examine the existing measures we have in Ghana for dealing with domestic violence. However, the emergence of this pandemic and the strategies put in place by other countries have made me question our own commitment and the effectiveness of our approach towards protecting victims of domestic violence. Like some welfare officers and practitioners in Ghana, I have often assumed that the Department of Social Welfare and the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service are an adequate avenue for addressing abuse. However, what I have learnt from the actions of other global actors is that the mere existence of these institutions is of little comfort to women and children trapped in abusive relationships. In addition, most of

our focus in Ghana has been on women walking in or calling to report abuse. While these strategies may work under certain circumstances, they are highly inadequate during this pandemic, considering the close control that abusers exert on the abused. Such strategies also do not consider the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence who have hearing impairments.

During this period of global suffering, I have read with optimism about the innovative strategies that other countries have adopted to assist persons living with abusive partners. Collaborations with community pharmacies in establishing codenames (such as 'Mask-19') where women can safely indicate the existence of abuse and the need for assistance is just one of the approaches (Higgins, 2020). As a Ghanaian social work academic, this pandemic and the emerging stories and strategies has lit a bulb of awareness in my head. I feel that I have been dormant and too comfortable in my role as an academic, without critically analysing and trying to improve existing strategies in Ghana for the vulnerable. While I do not suggest an adoption of the strategies that are being used elsewhere, I do believe that it is high time for the profession in Ghana to find context-relevant strategies that will enhance the safety and protection of women and children in abusive relationships, measures that go beyond walk-in reports and phone calls. The pandemic and lockdown measures have taught us that this approach is not sufficient in addressing the challenges that victims of abuse face. Furthermore, the potential increase in domestic violence cases has implications for our teaching and practice. Perhaps anger management and stress management techniques should be taught not only in classrooms, but also to the public. As a matter of urgency, we must promote the public education of such approaches, in addition to non-violent conflict resolution techniques. We, as a profession, must go beyond setting up helplines and help agencies, most of which are reactive institutions. Rather, we must put in place preventive measures that can help reduce aggression, especially among people who must, of necessity, share a limited space with other abusers.

Concluding Comments

As Africa urbanises, the informal economy will play a significant role in enhancing the socio-economic wellbeing of urban residents. In addition, the breakdown of the extended family as a social control and safety mechanism, and increasing anonymity and individuality in urban areas, will have serious implications for abused persons. Social workers, with the aim of promoting the wellbeing of people within sustainable environments, can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines. The ongoing pandemic and the challenges that informally employed actors and persons in abusive relationships have faced must make us take an active interest in promoting the wellbeing of these urban actors. As social work academics and practitioners in Ghana, we must strive to develop preventive measures rather than react to emerging social problems. We must anticipate and train our students to contribute meaningfully to society's efforts at improving the quality of life for vulnerable populations in all times and under all circumstances. We have to remember our public advocacy roots and play a leading role in preventive healthcare provision for vulnerable groups in urban areas. We have to go beyond writing about developmental social work to actually implementing developmental social work approaches in our country. For me, this is an important time for self-assessment and insight, and the need for a different and more context-relevant approach to social work education and practice in Ghana has never been clearer.

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