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Exploring the Role of Social Work in Correctional Setting: Jimma Zone Correctional Center, Ethiopia**Wario Wako¹ and Alemayehu Gebru^{2*}**

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Abstract

The correction is one of the components of the criminal justice system which aims to promote public safety by deterring and rehabilitating offenders, to reduce the chances of recidivism, and to help offenders to become contributing members of society. The researchers employed a qualitative case study research design with the major objective of assessing the roles of social work practitioners in Jimma Zone Correctional Center (JZCC). They applied a purposive sampling technique in selecting participants of the study and data saturation principle in determining the number of the participants. The researchers used interviews, observation, and document review for data collection and thematic analysis to code, categorize, and find the patterns of the data and the major themes of the study. They utilized triangulation, member check, and peer debriefing to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. Participants' anonymity, privacy, and the confidentiality of the information that they provided are safeguarded. The finding revealed that the role of social workers in a correctional setting brought prisoners' behavioral change and met their psycho-social needs. In doing so, social workers involved in direct practice tasks including intake of new prisoners, engagement with inmates, psychosocial assessment, and counseling. Though the needs and services are incompatible, social workers were actively engaged in the rehabilitation of the inmates through psychosocial support. Thus, the study recommends that awareness creation and promotion about the roles, values, and significances of the social workers in the correctional setting should be practiced by Jimma University School of Social Work.

Keywords: /Correctional setting/Prisoners/Role/Social work/

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Justification

According to the Council on Social Work Education Code of Ethics (1991 Preamble), social workers are dedicated to promoting the wellbeing of human beings and to the achievement of social justice and human rights for all. The correctional system is one component of the criminal justice system and is devoted to promoting public safety by deterring and rehabilitating offenders to become law-abiding citizens while exercising secure and humane control. Social workers believe that all individuals have the capacity for self-improvement and this can be facilitated within correctional systems. The person-in-environment perspective that guides social work practice, which considers external environment influences, make the profession unique and while other professions in corrections tend to focus primarily on the individual (Roy, 2018).

A social worker aims to assist the offender, and not to punish. The goal is to utilize the knowledge and skills of the profession in a correctional setting, to rehabilitate prisoners, to assist them to become productive and part of society. The social worker aims to help the offender change patterns of the behavior to become socially acceptable. This is done in two ways: (1) working with the individuals through understanding and by appreciating the person's strengths and resources, and (2) modifying the environment to create a very conducive social climate in which they live (Skidmore et. al., as cited in Shakil, 2015). And also these scholars stated professional social workers in correctional setting facilities provide two kinds of services: supportive services within the institutions and connection to resources in the community. Mizrah and Davis (as cited in Emmanuel & Ponnuswami, 2019) stated that in the correctional setting, social workers educate the prisoners about a prison life situation, adjustment, rules, policy, and regulations and prepare the inmate for prison life.

A research conducted in India asserted that social workers in correctional administration play roles of administrative and practice positions with all the law enforcement agencies. The author further explained that social workers play a significant role in reducing recidivism. Social workers in Correctional center engage in: counseling on mental health and substance abuse, finding alternatives to incarceration, like rehabilitation services for low-level offenders, helping released inmates to reunify with the community, working with clients to alter criminal behavior, advocating on behalf of clients in the correction, working in the areas of Parole and probation program, and working with the society to eradicate the root causes of law-breaking. Moreover, they take part in a wide-ranging of jobs, such as comprehensive needs assessment, individual and group counseling/group therapy, program delivery, education and awareness, discharge care planning and community capacity building (Roy, 2018).

Scholars also mentioned the skills necessary to practice social work in correctional centers to rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals who are in conflict with the law and to reduce the possibilities of reoffending. For instance, Wilson et al. (2008) stated:

Much the same skills are needed in working with young people who offend as with other social work clients, although it is important to recognize that their application is often circumscribed by the explicit context of youth justice. Skills such as listening carefully to the person and communicating with them effectively, including appropriate responses to issues of language or communication difficulties, ensuring that the clients know what the social worker's role is, and her/his powers and duties within that role, valuing the person as an individual whilst not necessarily condoning their behavior, recognizing the young person's rights, and ensuring that no one is discriminated against unfairly are all important elements of the task (p. 521).

Social workers in the criminal justice system utilize their professional education and the dynamic theoretical orientation for rehabilitation and prevention purposes rather than for a sentence. The quality of social work services are not only measured by preventing recidivism but also with it is the capability of preventing victimization of individuals, families, and communities (Jessica et al., 2009). In this regard, the authors described:

In prisons, correctional treatment specialists evaluate the progress of offenders using psychological tests, and they work with offenders, probation officers, and community agencies to develop parole and release plans, including educational and job training plans, life skills training on coping, anger management, substance abuse treatment, and sex offender counseling either individually or in groups (U.S. Department of Labor, cited in Jessica et al., 2009, p. 141).

The need for social workers in correctional settings increases because of the slight movement of the services toward a more rehabilitative approach. The clients' need such as terminal physical illness, mental health problems, developmental delay and severe drug abuse makes the importance of social workers in the correctional center pressing (Ivanoff, 2017).

According to Ivanoff, et al. (1997), the ethical principles and standards of social workers related to the correctional practice include that social workers must help people who need assistance and resolve social problems either in professional practice or pro bono service, obligated to challenge social injustice and challenging structures of oppression in correctional systems. Besides, respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships are crucial to correctional social work practice. Finally, the social worker must provide only interventions within the realm of their areas of competence and when necessary, cultivate expertise under specialized training. To advance their practice in the correctional setting, social workers must be competent and educationally prepared to understand crime and delinquency, eager to work with clients, the policy of the national and international organization, court procedures, and the roles of various professionals in this interdisciplinary field (DuBois & Miley, as cited in Shakil, 2015).

In Ethiopian context, Mentwab Geday (2016) researched the condition of children of incarcerated mothers. The study shows that there are inadequate services for mothers and children. Additionally, Seble Ayalew (2016) conducted a study on the role and contribution of social workers practice in the court setting and its support system at Lideta Federal first instance court in Addis Ababa. The finding shows the baseline for social work practice in courts is the best interest of the child which originates from the Child Right Convention and FDRE constitution. Abebe Yilma (2018) undertakes his thesis on causes of delinquency and means of prevention at Lideta sub-city remand home Addis Ababa. His finding shows that the cause of delinquency includes social, economic, political, and psychological dimensions. Eden Begna (2018) studied the experience of incarcerated mothers living in prison with their children in Ethiopia. Her finding shows that mothers in prison are victims of societal discrimination, abuse, and structural injustice before and after incarceration. Furthermore, Selamawit Abebe (2006) conducted a study on the situations of children of imprisoned mothers at Addis Ababa. The finding shows children have multifaceted problems so the intervention should be holistic. But, she did not give attention to the overall roles of social workers in the correctional center.

However, none of these studies directly studied the role of social work in the correctional settings in Ethiopia in general and at Jimma Zone Correctional Center (JZCC) in particular. This study is different being holistic in exploring the overall social workers' role in the correctional setting. In this regard, our study fills the gaps by investigating the roles and practices of social workers in the correctional setting to the expected level. The general objective of this study is to explore the roles of social work practitioners in the JZCC. To that end, the following specific objectives were proposed and addressed.

- To explore the roles of social work practitioners in JZCC to the expected standard level
- To find out the inmates' understanding about the social work practitioners in JZCC
- To identify the challenges for social work practitioners in the correctional Center

2. Research Methods

The study employed a qualitative case study research design with the purpose of exploring the roles of social workers in the correctional setting. The main goal of qualitative research is to understand the participants' views of the state being studied. And, it focuses on the participants' live, experience, performance in their everyday roles including their context, institutional, and social environment (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2016). Non-probability sampling technique specifically purposive sampling technique was employed for identifying research participants. There is no formula for determining the number of participants in a qualitative study. Hence, the researchers followed the principle of selecting to the point of redundancy data i.e. data saturation point (Yin, 2016). In this way, the researchers involved two social workers, three key informants from administrators of the correction, and five inmates from males and females. The main data collection techniques of this study were in-depth and key informant interview, observation, and document review. The researchers have conducted an in-depth interview with social workers and inmates and key-informant interviews with administrators. The researchers reviewed correctional center policy and records at the social work unit of the center and observed the interaction of the inmates with the social workers, administrators and the settings. In qualitative research, data analysis proceeds hand-in-hand with the data collection, transcription, coding, categorizing, searching for patterns of data and developing themes, write-up of the findings as well (Creswell, 2014). Hence, the researchers used thematic analysis as the main approach to analyze the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data method triangulation, data source triangulation, and member checking were undertaken. The values of privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, protection from harm, and the prevention of deception are among the ethical consideration in this research (National Association of Social Work, 2017). Hence, for confidentiality issues, the researchers represented the participants with codes such as for key informants (KI: I....) and for in-depth interview (IDI: I....).

3. Findings

3.1. Social Workers' Direct Tasks in a Correctional Setting

Providing orientation. The finding indicated that social workers' direct tasks in a correctional setting are informing the new prisoners about life in prison, cultural diversity, how to live with others peacefully, the prohibition of drug abuse, and other deviant behaviors in the correction. Additionally, they build hope through formal or informal dialogue with inmates about their life in general. KI: II said, *“Our first task during the inception is to let the inmates know their rights and obligation during their stay in the correctional center”*. And the informant added, *“We involve with different professionals such as police, administrators, health workers, etc. hence, giving awareness of the rules and regulations of the compound helps us to have a smooth relationship in the correctional setting”*.

IDI: III explained that social workers, health professionals, polices, and administrators provide them orientation before they are mixed with previous inmates. Similarly, our non-participant observation confirmed that intake in the context of social work practice in a correctional setting is the process of welcoming the new inmates through engagement or rapport building. During data collection, the researchers also observed the practices of social workers and supportive staffs when they were welcoming the inmates, creating awareness on life situation and diversity in the correction center, existing services, responsibility, rules and regulations, ways of surviving in the correction center, and building hope on how to be optimistic.

Psychosocial assessment. Problem and resource identification is the major role of social workers in the correctional setting. And, social workers in the center carry out problem and resource identification activities. KI: I illustrated those problems like mental health problems, drug addiction, absence of visitors, lack of clothes and sanitary materials, depression, stress, and fear are the major problems identified in the correction center. And KI: II added that they use different social work assessment tools to comprehend the needs and potentials of the clients/inmates. KI: II explained that under psychosocial assessment, social works assess inmate's psychological well-being and social situation using interviews, eco-map, and geno-gram tools of assessment. KI: I also said:

As human beings inmates have their psychosocial needs. But, prison situations hardly care about their needs and rights. As we all know, life in prison is closed from all contacts of the entire world physically and psychologically and no interaction with families and friends, recreational activities, and spiritual needs as they needed. The role of Social workers in a correctional setting is indispensable in promoting the well-being of the prisoners and meeting their needs than expected by the organization.

According to KI-II, all prisoners of the center are their clients, and their main role in the correctional setting is bringing prisoners' behavioral change and meeting their psycho-social needs. In doing this, social workers involved in direct practice tasks including intake of new prisoners, engagement, psychosocial assessment, and counseling. The finding shows a social worker helps the prisoners through maintaining their relationship with family and assists prisoners in negotiating and integrating with their families while in prison and after release. If the attachment between prisoners and families is not maintained and integrated, after release it will cause stress, suicide, illegal migration, theft, drug abuse, recidivism, and other social problems.

IDI: II also affirmed that social workers are active in identifying their problems and resources to address their challenges. Their history should be assessed, for instance, whether the inmates have criminal related exposure, politics, and military experience. These may help to group the inmates based on their exposure to avoid recidivism and other criminal behaviors because inmates who have criminal, political, and military exposure may have a wider experience to teach others how to escape and commit additional criminal activities in the correctional setting.

Counseling. The findings show that counseling is another important activity of professional social work in a correctional setting with inmates. KI: II described that they provide both group and individual counseling. Individual counseling consists of problems like depression, phobia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, gambling, and deviant behaviors to bring behavioral change. KI: I added that group counseling is provided based on inmates' age, types of crime, and health status which include drug abuse, theft, depression, and HIV/AIDS. Key informants ascertained that the counseling has different steps and consecutive sessions until the problem is addressed. While doing this, social workers play the role of assessment, planning, advocacy, broker and referring, case management, mediation, evaluation, and monitoring of prisoners' services provision.

Case management. To manage the cases of inmates, social workers' utilized service coordination, linkage, and referral strategies. KI: II stated that inmates face health problems such as disease related to sanitation, lack of health center, lack of balanced diet, poor bedrooms, and toilet-related problems. Other problems like psychological problems (due to living situation and family isolation), drug abuse, gambling, and homosexuality. Therefore, social workers must coordinate services, link, and refer clients to overcome their pressing problems. KI: I described that they coordinate services around the needs of the clients by mobilizing the professionals in the correctional center. For example, health professionals for health needs, police for legal needs, administrators for administrative needs, school personnel for educational needs, and other support systems within the compound. IDI: IV also acknowledged that social workers link and refers them to other departments where the resources are available and integrate the internal resources to overcome their problems.

Follow-up. Giving appointments and visiting inmates at their rooms are the main follow-up strategies of social workers in the correctional center. KI: II said that the main approaches to follow-up the inmates' cases are an appointment to clients for counseling, advice, and service coordination and home visit or visiting their bedrooms to inspect their situations, and to recommend or report to top officials. IDI: I also confirmed that the social work unit practitioners have been using appointments and undertaking home visits as major follow-up strategies based on their needs.

3.2. Positive View of the Profession

Inmates stated that the role of social workers in a correctional setting is paramount to promote prisoners' wellbeing, to bring behavioral change, and to facilitate their reintegration with the community. One of the in-depth interview participants (IDI: IV), while explaining the significance of the social worker and service, said:

I became inmate at JZCC in 2009 E.C. Before I came to the center, I thought correctional center is a place where human beings are torched and killed. But, it is not as I perceived; rather it is a place where you can hold degrees through vocational training, education, and interact with different cultural groups. After I joined the center, I heard when people talking about the social workers, and I sought services for the unit. Then, the social work unit workers taught me about life situations in the prison, the impacts of crime, how to survive and live peacefully with other inmates and the correctional center staff. So, they are very significant to inmates' behavioral change.

These show the inmates have positive regard for the social workers' service. And findings from non-participant observation confirmed that social work practitioners help inmates to familiarize them with prison life, patterns of crime, and to be culturally competent while living with different groups. The other inmate IDI: III stated:

I joined this center in 2005 E.C. I was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. During [from] 2005-2008, I did not see anyone who counsels me and shares my burden. I came from a very far region and I did not get a chance to be visited by my family. After the coming of social workers starting from 2009, I relieved. I contacted them to share my problem and get immediate support. They advised me how to start a new business and change my life. I started learning and working tailor on cultural clothes. Though I was not supported and visited by my family, my life is improved due to the vocational training I acquired. This developed hope in me to help myself after released and reintegrated into society. I feel social workers are my best friends and families; I share my personal life with them and come to their unit when I feel lonely to recreate myself. I'm happy for the existence of the social work unit!

3.3. Challenges for Social Work Practitioners in the Correctional Setting

Lack of awareness about the social work profession. Inmates and other supportive professionals lack awareness about the social work profession and its nature towards the clients. IDI: II stated that inmates have aggressive behavior towards social workers because they did not understand the authority and mandates of social workers in the correctional setting. KI: I also explained that inmates and supporting staff in the correctional setting have a lack of awareness about social work values. Human rights and social justice are highly challenged by the correctional system that values punishment, control, and order. So, the correction center is rigid to welcome the profession and interested body who are willing to work with inmates. The researchers also observed that even to access social workers and inmates was very challenging and it needs the will of officials whatever social workers need to do. However, KI: II believed that social work is a rewarding and challenging profession.

Shortage of social work practitioners. The incompatibility of social work practitioners and the needs are observed in the correctional setting. And they are also incompetent to provide to the level of clients' needs

because their background is from sociology and psychology, and not from social work. Hence, all social work services and roles are tried to be covered by non-social work professionals, which is not sufficient. Also, KI: II said, “*The number of inmates fluctuates from 1500 to 2000 and we tried to handle their situation with two social workers which is unfair and imbalance with the needs*”.

Budget constraint and limited decision making power. According to KI: II, lack of adequate resources such as human power, materials, financial, and offices are the least to mention, that social workers encountered to execute their responsibilities concerning inmates' needs. KI: I also illustrated, “*we can do a lot according to the needs of the clients as well as the profession, but, budget constraint hinders us from doing so*”.

Lack of decision making power is the other challenge that social workers encountered in the correctional setting. KI: I said that there are dilemmas and challenges in ethical decision making due to differences in philosophies, values, principles between the social work profession and correctional system. Social workers also encountered conflict of interest between advocating for clients'/inmates' right and meeting the correctional center's need. KI: IV further explained that the social work unit workers are challenged to practice their work properly because of unpunctuality of supportive staff, influenced by rigid correctional system, lack of appropriate plan to intervene in the challenges from the correctional system, lack of having strong social capital to advance correctional services, the support system, and the number of stakeholders. Likewise, the social work unit has only two stakeholders such as Jimma University (Sociology and Psychology departments, School of Social Work, Jimma Medical Center) and SOS.

4. Discussion

The findings indicated that social workers at the correctional setting of Jimma Zone play the roles of providing orientation to the new comers about the nature of correctional center's life and the rules and regulations of the center as well as their rights. Consistently, Mizrah and Davis (as cited in Emmanuel & Ponnuswami, 2019) stated that in the correctional setting, social workers educate the prisoners about a prison life situation, adjustment, rules, policy and regulations and prepares the inmate for prison life. Also, social workers conduct psychosocial assessment, case management, counseling, follow-up linkage and referral services. The finding shows that the social work unit in the correctional center has a counseling session plan of the day, week, month, and year for individual and group counseling. Similarly, Roy stated that social workers in correctional center engage in: mental health and substance abuse counseling, finding alternatives to incarceration, like rehabilitation services for low-level offenders, helping released inmates to reunify with the community, working with clients to alter criminal behavior, advocating on behalf of clients in the correction, working in the areas of Parole and probation program, and working with the society to eradicate the root causes of law-breaking. Moreover, they are taking part in a wide-ranging of jobs such as comprehensive needs assessment, individual and group counseling/group therapy, program delivery, education and awareness, discharge care planning, and community capacity building (2018). The major roles of social workers in the correction as the findings revealed are counseling individual and group as well as assisting inmates in their day-to-day life. Consistently, department of social work service confirmed that social workers provide assessment and intervention services for prisoners and conduct individual counseling, and facilitate group programs which are designed to enhance and support rehabilitation (n. d, Para, 2). Moreover, social workers deal with factors associated with misbehaviors and assist inmates in their daily life.

Also, the unit has good communication and professional relationship with the inmates and among themselves. Besides, the unit has the performance evaluation techniques such as taking feedback through the interview, evaluation form, and suggestion of writing documents. In addition, inmates have positive regard to social work services in the correctional center and they seek the professional support or services of the practitioner as needs arise. Nevertheless, the finding revealed that social workers are challenged by a lack of awareness of inmates and personnel in the correction about social work profession, shortage of human power,

budget constraint, and limited decision-making power of social workers in the correctional center, and these are the newly emerged themes in this study.

5. Conclusion

The findings show all prisoners of the correctional center are clients of social work and the main role of social workers in the correctional setting is bringing prisoners' behavioral change and meeting their psychosocial needs. Consequently, social workers involve in major practice tasks including intake of new prisoners, engagement, psychosocial assessment, counseling, negotiating and reintegrating after released. Social workers involve in direct tasks such as orienting new prisoners about life in prison, cultural diversity, how to live with others peacefully, prohibition of drug addictions, and other deviant behaviors. Social work values such as human right and social justice are highly challenged by the correctional system that values punishment, control, and order. So, the correction is rigid to welcome the profession and interested body who are willing to work with prisons. Lack of adequate resources (e.g., human power, materials, financial resources, offices), the existence of aggressive behaviors of the prisoners are hindrances to provide adequate services to the inmates. Although social work unit has good communication and professional relationship with the prisoners, the unit is challenged with unpunctuality of the administrative staff and lack of having strong social capital to advance correctional services.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are forwarded.

- The social work unit should practice raising awareness and promoting the values and significances of the social work profession. This will encourage their decision making and solve the ethical dilemma between meeting clients' needs and the needs of the organization.
- The social work unit should build networks with different stakeholders to advance prisoners' service provision and to meet prisoners' needs.
- Social workers should increase their professional competence through learning advanced education, reading, and taking training on different issues to provide holistic services and assessment.
- The Jimma Zone Correctional Center should employ new skillful and competent social workers, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, nurses, and psychiatrists to help prisoners and provide comprehensive services.
- The correctional system should focus on giving value to the issues of human right and social justice rather than focusing on punishment, control and order.
- Stakeholders, researchers, and the social work unit are better to conduct research and play the role of lobbying and advocacy for the improvement of inmates' lives.
- The correctional center should focus on the rehabilitation services to reduce recidivism and to make inmates productive citizen.
- The social work unit should use holistic approach to identify problems and to coordinate services for inmates.

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Authors' contributions: Authors conducted fieldwork, analyzed data, produced terminal report, and agreed to publish the finding. Corresponding author submitted manuscript for publication, incorporated reviewers' comments.

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