

Social Workers' Perspectives on Mitigating the Impacts of Climate Change in South Africa

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Abstract: *Climate change exacerbates social injustices, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations in South Africa. Rooted in principles of social justice and human rights, the social work profession has a responsibility to protect those most at risk, including women, children, and impoverished communities. However, there is limited empirical research on the role of social workers in addressing the impacts of climate change within the South African context. This qualitative study explores South African social workers' perspectives on how they can respond to the impact of climate change in South Africa. Interviews with 11 South African social workers and one key informant from the United Kingdom reveal a lack of proactive responses to the climate crisis. Despite their potential contributions, social workers have yet to take initiative in addressing the impacts of climate change, but they can utilize their existing professional skills and roles to mitigate these effects.*

Keywords: *Mitigating, climate change, social workers, vulnerable populations, South Africa*

In the 21st century, climate change has become an urgent global crisis, underscored by recent scientific reports highlighting the alarming rise in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Pierrehumbert, 2019). These gases trap and re-emit solar heat, intensifying the natural greenhouse effect and accelerating the warming of the Earth's surface. Consequently, global mean temperatures are increasing at an unprecedented rate, placing mounting pressure on biophysical systems that struggle to adapt naturally (Boetto et al., 2018).

Climate change is evident in a range of climatic disturbances, including rising sea levels, intensified heatwaves and cold fronts, prolonged droughts and floods, species extinctions, and increasingly unpredictable extreme weather patterns (Coates & Gray, 2012; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). Kenkel (2020) contends that severe disruptions and disasters are becoming more pronounced in the context of a changing climate. The climate crisis is gaining growing recognition within the social work profession, as practitioners are called to address its impacts through a social justice lens (Dennis & Bell, 2024). This entails responding to natural disasters that disproportionately affect the marginalised, poor, and vulnerable.

Climate change not only manifests in severe climatic events but also amplifies societal disparities, disproportionately affecting marginalised populations such as those living in rural areas, impoverished communities, and women (Boddy & Hetherington, 2013; Burke & Diffenbaugh, 2019). Furthermore, forced migration, social dislocation, food insecurity, and health problems are among the many impacts of climate change. While these complex social challenges cannot be addressed by social workers alone, the clear links between environmental degradation and social inequality – both globally and in South Africa – raise legitimate concerns for the social work profession. The prevailing frame of reference guiding social work practice must be expanded to

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incorporate approaches such as green social work (GSW), which emphasise the environmental dimensions of social vulnerability (Dominelli, 2012).

Social workers are increasingly compelled to engage with the consequences of climate change. Practitioners should therefore work collaboratively with communities to foster resilience in the face of climate-related impacts. The call to action echoes Dominelli's (2012) proposition of GSW, an integrated approach that seeks to safeguard the environment while promoting human well-being by addressing the dynamic interplay between people and their economic, socio-cultural, and physical environments. The significance of GSW lies in its holistic vision of advocating for an egalitarian framework that addresses structural inequalities and resource disparities underlying climate change.

While existing research recognizes the relevance of environmental issues in social work particularly through the lens of GSW, there remains a gap in empirical studies exploring social workers' perspectives on their role in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Prior research, largely based in international contexts such as China, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, often overlooks the voices of social workers themselves (Dominelli & Ku, 2017; Noble, 2016; Shaw, 2011). Likewise, studies that examine the nexus between climate change and social work from an African perspective remain limited (Lombard & Twikirize, 2014; Louis et al., 2020; Nel, 2019). This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the research question: What is the role of social workers in mitigating the impact of climate change in South Africa?

Literature Review

Evidence-based reports on climate change indicate that human activity, particularly industrialization and the burning of fossil fuels, plays a significant role in driving climate change (Coates & Gray, 2012). Global energy-related emissions reached a new record high in 2023, leaving the world increasingly exposed to record-breaking threats due to delayed action on climate change across multiple sectors (Romanello et al., 2024).

According to Romanello et al. (2024), extreme precipitation events are becoming more frequent, threatening food and water security. The shifting climate is also altering the environmental suitability for the transmission of dangerous infectious diseases, placing public health at greater risk. Ramdani et al. (2022) similarly argue that climate change contributes to environmental degradation and poses holistic threats to human well-being. Adaptation and mitigation efforts serve as both preventive and corrective strategies to manage these impacts.

Although research shows that rising temperatures have increased the incidence of extreme drought, affecting 48% of the global population and resulting in 151 million people experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity across 124 countries (Romanello et al., 2024). Regions such as South Asia, Africa, and the Small Island Developing States are particularly vulnerable. These areas face intensified climate impacts that exacerbate existing inequalities (Boddy & Hetherington, 2013; Chepkemai, 2017). Pedzisai et al. (2023) argue that climate change constitutes the world's greatest disaster, especially for economically underdeveloped African countries marked by extreme poverty and dependence on climate-sensitive ecosystems. South Africa is particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts due to its

environmental and socio-economic conditions. The country has a limited capacity to cope with these challenges yet is paradoxically recognized as a significant contributor to GHG emissions due to coal power plants and industrial mining activities (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2012). For instance, South Africa's power grid is predominantly supplied by state-owned utility Eskom, which generates over 90% of the nation's electricity and relies heavily on large-scale coal-fired plants.

Consequently, social workers in South Africa must increase their awareness of how environmental factors intersect with the well-being of the communities they serve. With its long-standing role in empowering vulnerable populations, the social work profession is uniquely positioned to advocate for environmental consciousness and action, ensuring the protection and restoration of the natural environment for future generations (Shokane & Masoga, 2018; Kenkel, 2020).

The impact of climate change is far-reaching, with specific societal groups particularly at risk, including children, low-income communities and women (Chikoko & Chihiya, 2023; Nyahunda et al., 2021). Muchacha (2019) argues that vulnerability to climate change is closely linked to social status, poverty, gender, power dynamics, and access to resources. A study by Nyahunda et al. (2021), conducted in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic, reported that rural women faced a dual crisis, climate change and the pandemic, due to the collapse of food security systems and livelihoods. This highlights how marginalised groups such as women are likely to suffer catastrophic consequences of climate change, exacerbated by gender inequality, social exclusion, and patriarchal dominance. Similarly, Shukri et al. (2024) found that climate-induced flooding in Malaysia severely affected rural communities, prompting significant government expenditure to support flood victims amid ongoing socioeconomic challenges and disruptions to vulnerable populations.

Dominelli (2012) asserts that existing social exclusion and injustices will be intensified by climate change. Social workers, therefore, have a responsibility to intervene proactively, advocating for and supporting women and rural communities before disaster strikes. Ramdani et al. (2022) expand this view by highlighting the broader environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by rural farming communities. They argue that social workers' role extends beyond traditional support to include empowering farmers, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and facilitating access to information and resources.

Noble (2016) suggests that social workers should take the initiative to develop proactive environmental responses that support a sustainable and socially equitable society. For instance, social workers can critically examine and challenge political and social systems that exacerbate climate change through industrialization, urbanization, global capitalism, and neo-colonial structures that commodify nature for profit (Bhuyan et al., 2019). This necessitates a broader shift within the social work profession toward recognising external forces, such as climate change, as vital factors influencing individual and community well-being.

Dennis and Bell (2024) posit that the climate crisis presents an opportunity for social work to serve as a vehicle for lasting social change in a 21st century marked by uncertainty. They call upon social workers to commit their skills to mitigating the severe impacts of climate change. Key functions of social work in this context include building community resilience, advocating for policy reform, providing social protection and support, and promoting environmental justice. Drawing on a case study

by Hay et al. (2023), it is evident that social workers have played an active role in disaster response, highlighting the importance of strengthening partnerships between social workers and national emergency management organisations. Such collaboration is viewed as a critical step toward building social capital and reinforcing the profession's commitment to fostering community resilience.

Graham (2023) posits that social workers must recognize their responsibility in mitigating the effects of environmental crises on vulnerable communities, groups with whom the profession has traditionally engaged. Although some progress has been made, Graham (2023) notes that barriers to effective engagement with the climate crisis remain. The author advocates for the integration of environmental issues into social work education and practice, approached from a critical and radical perspective. Utilising established social work roles, such as case management, mediation, social activism, community mobilization, and psychosocial support, can be instrumental in helping communities adapt to climate change, enhance resilience, and reduce overall vulnerability.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the role of social workers in responding to the impacts of climate change within vulnerable communities. It presents empirical research conducted in South Africa, focusing on social workers' perspectives regarding their role in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Theoretical Framework

For social workers to meaningfully incorporate environmental concerns into their interventions, GSW offers a viable lens through which to frame practice strategies. GSW is an eco-centric framework that promotes the well-being of people and the planet by restructuring socio-political power dynamics (Dominelli, 2012). Central to GSW are the ideals of environmental justice and the right to healthy and sustainable environments. GSW advocates for community-based initiatives and macro-level practice that consider the influence of both the physical and social environment on people's well-being (Dominelli, 2012). As such, GSW has the potential to expand traditional social work roles and skills by supporting community resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change-related issues (Dominelli et al., 2019).

According to Dominelli and Ku (2017), GSW has made a significant contribution by introducing new issues in social work discourse, including: 1) mainstreaming environmental considerations to ensure the physical environment is embedded in practice perspectives and professional concerns; 2) expanding the practical and theoretical foundation of the field to integrate both environmental and social justice; 3) highlighting innovative methods to socio-economic development that meet human needs without harming the environment; 4) and incorporating disaster interventions as a core component of the social work curriculum.

GSW further calls for a rethinking of the economy, what economic alternatives can be developed to meet the needs of present and future generations (Dominelli et al., 2019). Social workers are called to move beyond traditional frameworks and engage in transformative, sustainable social change aimed at creating a viable planet and more equitably distributed resources (Dominelli et al., 2019). GSW provides social workers with a holistic approach to reimagine the political economy of environmental

development, advocating for transformation grounded in institutional, governmental, and community support (Dominelli & Ku, 2017).

Although GSW shares features with other environmental frameworks, such as the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, it has been posited as a new frontier for environmentally informed social work practice (Muchacha, 2019). It encompasses a wide range of elements, from community mobilization to advocacy (Noble, 2016). However, the greatest challenge lies in foregrounding service delivery within this framework to respond effectively to climate change and its impacts on vulnerable communities. Therefore, the voices of social workers, and their experiences of mitigating the impact of climate change through the lens of GSW, are essential for addressing gaps in literature.

Method

This research adopted a qualitative approach to explore social workers' perspectives of how they can respond to the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities in South Africa. This approach was selected for its capacity to generate in-depth insights from human experiences and for its flexibility throughout the research process (Schurink et al., 2021). The study employed both exploratory and descriptive research designs to investigate the phenomenon of climate change affecting vulnerable communities and to address a gap in the literature concerning the perspectives of social workers.

The exploratory and descriptive designs facilitated the answering of "how" and "why" questions, examining how social workers respond to the impacts of climate change and capturing participants' perspectives based on their lived experiences in disaster management within the South African context. The population consisted of practicing social workers in South Africa who are engaged in climate change-related service delivery or disaster management interventions, either within the government or non-governmental sector.

The sample comprised 11 social workers who had either provided services to communities affected by natural disasters or witnessed the effects of environmental degradation in the communities they serve. The sample included social workers actively engaged in promoting environmental sustainability within their communities.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was used to select the sample. Recruitment took place via social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn, using targeted invitations specifically directed at social workers. Interested individuals were invited to express their interest by sending a private message to the recruiter. In response, a personal message was sent to confirm their willingness to participate and to assess their eligibility based on predefined inclusion criteria, which included: (1) Social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) practicing in South Africa; (2) Social workers who have past or present experience in dealing with issues of climate change or disaster related response; and (3) Social workers of all genders and ages.

The study focused on social workers' perspectives as professionals working in the fields of disaster management or environmental sustainability, and did not involve collecting information related to their organizations or employers. Additionally, an

international expert in GSW was consulted to provide triangulation and enhance the study's credibility.

Data collection involved online, individual semi-structured interviews with social workers, as well as an unstructured interview with the key informant. Online communication methods are widely accepted for conducting interviews due to their cost-effectiveness and time efficiency, with no evidence indicating reduced quality (Schurink et al., 2021). Virtual interviews were conducted, with the mode selected at the discretion of each participant, using one of the following platforms: Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or Microsoft Teams.

For effective data analysis, the interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed. Thematic content analysis was employed to identify patterns and categories within the data. This process involved systematically organising and coding the data by identifying and labelling emerging themes, sub-themes, patterns, and categories (Latendresse et al., 2020). The process included interpreting the transcripts to extract meaning, guided and supported by relevant literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Results

The objective of this article is to report on the perspectives of social workers regarding their role in mitigating the impacts of climate change on affected communities in South Africa. Eleven social workers with prior or current experience in addressing climate change-related issues, disaster response, or sustainability-focused work within South Africa were interviewed. No identifying information was disclosed; instead, participants were assigned pseudonyms. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participants	Gender	Years of experience	Geographical Base
Anthia	Female	18	Western Cape
Bridget	Female	7	Western Cape
Connie	Female	7	All provinces of South Africa
Desree	Female	8	Western Cape
Emma	Female	14	North West
Fiona	Female	40	North West
Goitse	Female	10	Western Cape
Hlomu	Female	5	All provinces of South Africa
Itu	Female	24	Western Cape
Jacob	Male	12	Western Cape
Kevin	Male	15	Western Cape
*Lena	Female	Unknown	United Kingdom

*This is a key informant who has published on green social work.

Although the invitation to participate was open to all social workers in South Africa, most participants were based in the Western Cape, arguably due to the interviewer's location in the province and snowballing sampling employed. In terms of gender, most participants were female, with two males included in the study. While this did not affect the content of the data, it highlighted a gender disparity among

participants, reflective of the broader social work profession, which is predominantly female (Hicks, 2015). All participants had five or more years of experience, indicating that each possessed substantial practical knowledge of their professional roles and could meaningfully reflect on mitigating the impacts of climate change in South Africa. The key informant is an expert in GSW and was thus able to provide specialised knowledge on the GSW framework, having contributed to its development.

Data analysis revealed the following themes: 1) The impact of climate change on communities; 2) vulnerable populations affected by climate change; 3) roles of social workers in mitigating the impact of climate change in South Africa; and 4) GSW as a framework to mitigate the impact of climate change.

The Impact of Climate Change on Communities

Participants were asked to describe the impact of climate change within the communities they serve. Their responses made specific reference to the drought in the Western Cape in 2016, the floods in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in 2022, and the drought in the Eastern Cape in 2023. Several participants described the impact of climate change in terms of extreme weather conditions, namely, drought in some provinces due to a lack of rainfall and flooding in KZN because of excessive rainfall.

Itu (female) observed that:

The effects of climate change are varied. The most obvious one is the one that affects South Africa most, is an increase in temperature. We are double the international average of how much our temperature has increased in the last few decades because of climate change...We are experiencing, very often the same amount of rainfall, but in a shorter period. We are seeing longer cycles of drought ...We are seeing more further spread impacts of extreme weather events like hurricanes...we are seeing a lot more flooding happening and more regularly than we had before ... but the kind of secondary effects with increased temperature, there is opportunity for certain bacteria to flourish and so as a result, it has an impact on water resources.

Connie (female) concurred, stating:

...we are starting to experience like a lot of extremes...I mean, waters are rising. Polar bears losing their homes....some in our country are experiencing drought and water comes at a cost and that injustice is just actually unacceptable...in the Eastern Cape is like such a bad drought...And if you look at the drought in Cape Town five or six years ago when they were close to day zero...

Hlomu (female) specifically referred to the increase in natural disasters, such as the floods in KZN. Participants' responses reflected that droughts, rising sea levels, and floods are recurring across South Africa in an unpredictable manner. In addition, one participant identified the spread of diseases as a secondary effect of climate change, highlighting associated health concerns. Disruptions in weather patterns, manifesting in droughts, floods, and disease outbreaks, are severely impacting some communities in South Africa, prompting the need for social work intervention.

Among the disaster management initiatives undertaken by social workers were the provision of meals and temporary shelter for families displaced by flooding. Hlomu

(female) further remarked: “...in terms of the floods in KZN...we provided eight million meals in six months trying to get to young children who were specifically displaced and without food.”

Vulnerable Populations Affected by Climate Change in South Africa

Participants revealed that those who are already marginalised are more likely to be severely affected by climate change than those with access to resources, leaving many disadvantaged communities destitute, in poverty, and exposed to the health impacts of climate change. The poor, children, and farm workers were consistently identified as the most vulnerable groups. All participants unanimously cited the poor as the leading marginalised group, primarily due to their limited access to resources and capital. Emma (female) noted:

Unfortunately, they [the poor] have the least resources. So, if climate change is affecting our water supply and our electricity and the prices go up, they are affected because they do not have the resources...they don't have the luxury to say I'm moving to another town or I'm moving to somewhere else.

Itu (female) agreed, indicating that:

...vulnerable communities are more greatly impacted by climate change and are less able to cover themselves, so their resilience is limited as compared to someone who is middle class and has insurance and lives in a brick structure as opposed to a mud structure or shack.

Kevin (male) identified children, women, and people with disabilities as the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Similarly, P4 emphasised the effects on children as the next generation that will inherit the planet, stating, “Probably our kids...just cause the younger generation will outlive us”.

South Africa relies heavily on the agricultural sector for socio-economic development. Hence, some participants viewed farm workers as another vulnerable group impacted by climatic events such as droughts and floods, which affect food production. As Goitse (female) explained, “If the farmers are not able to produce, then they don't have work. Farm workers were suffering as well.”

Roles of Social Workers on Mitigating the Impacts of Climate Change in South Africa

In response to the question of how participants perceived the role of social workers in mitigating the impact of climate change in South Africa, the findings are organised according to the following sub-themes which are presented in the order of prominence as reported by the participating social workers: 1) Utilising existing social work skills; 2) promoting social activism and policy advocacy; 3) collaborating in multidisciplinary teams; and 4) building awareness through education.

Utilising Existing Social Work Skills

This sub-theme highlights the importance of social workers leveraging the core skills inherent in the profession to address climate-related challenges. The findings emphasised social workers' capacity to build on their established rapport with

communities, positioning them as catalysts for social change in response to climate impacts. As part of the study, participants were asked to identify the skills social workers could utilise to counter the negative effects of climate change. They cited a range of competencies already embedded in social work practice that could be effectively applied to climate change mitigation. This view is illustrated in the following statements:

I think that we work with people that are marginalized, people that are poor that is who we work with...we have problem solving skills you know, we know how to enter communities. We know because we do community development and so we have all those skills...the basic skills of social work, the listening skills, the group work skills... (Fiona, female)

I think we have a unique opportunity because of our relationship with communities. That is just another resource that we offer...We've got the skill to make boring information fun and engaging and interactive and empowering...the social workers are the ones that do that. We come up with the plan and we lead the plan; we implement the plan. (Hlomu, female)

Some participants emphasised the theoretical knowledge base that social workers possess, such as the ecological systems perspective, which centres on the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment, as noted by Emma (female): “*If we think of the systems theory, we must protect our environment as we are in constant interaction with our environment.*”

Overall, the participants acknowledged that the social work profession in South Africa plays a significant role in mitigating the impacts of climate change. This recognition was particularly evident in their accounts of the current effects of climate change on the country, highlighting the urgency for action. Drawing on existing theories, such as ecological systems theory, and utilising key social work skills including problem-solving, community development, active listening, and effective communication, all of which are inherent to social work, can be instrumental in addressing climate change challenges.

Promoting Social Activism and Policy Advocacy

Participants emphasised the importance of both social activism and policy advocacy. They clearly distinguished between the two concepts: *advocacy*, central to all social movements, involves arguing in favor of a particular policy, cause, set of values, or idea, whereas *activism* refers to direct and visible actions undertaken to achieve a specific goal (Johnston & Gulliver, 2022). There was unanimous agreement among the participants that social workers must engage in both advocacy and activism to advance the well-being of the communities they serve. This consensus is exemplified below:

Social workers are so amazingly positioned to be advocates and are trained to understand policy and to like leverage policy...social workers have this amazing lens to link practice to policy. (Connie, female)

As advocates we can raise awareness about what's happening...how we can mitigate the severities of all this that is happening...social workers really have

to take that advocacy role to work on all levels, to educate and advocate together. (Emma, female)

Participants posited that advocacy alone is insufficient for social workers; they must also adopt an activist stance to bring about meaningful change. By embracing this activist role, social workers not only advocate for environmental rights but also raise public awareness about environmental violations and the broader implications of climate change. For instance, a key informant specifically highlighted the concept that the planet Earth also possesses rights, drawing from feminist ethics:

I took that to mean that we had a responsibility or a duty of care towards Mother Earth and all that it contains within it. But be that also the Earth itself had rights – the right to be cared for – just like we have the right to be cared for and to care for others. So, I tried to apply feminist ethics to the environmental scene, and some people have taken that very, very far forward. (Lena, female)

Based on Lena's point of view, social workers can strengthen their commitment to climate change mitigation by expanding the ecological systems perspective to include the natural environment as an essential part of community interrelations. Participants' views highlight the importance of social workers actively advocating for policy change and promoting sustainability-focused policies to safeguard community well-being. Such advocacy and activism by social workers can strengthen the Sustainable Development Goal 13 that focuses on climate action.

Collaborating in Multidisciplinary Teams

Another role that was mentioned is working collaboratively in multidisciplinary teams to tackle climate change issues. The results revealed that social workers can play a role by being part of multidisciplinary teams. This is demonstrated below:

We need to create networks with other professions and with other institutions...we have got our part to play...working like in a team with others. (Fiona, female)

We need to work together now. We can't just be social workers and engineers, and we have got to all come together. So, you get your engineers, you get your economists...I think one of them [role] is like a sort of coordinate, we are bringing together different people and different functions. (Gontse, female)

Participants expressed concern that social workers are not adequately representing their profession or the communities they serve in discussions related to climate change. This neglects the potential role of social workers, who can act as key coordinators of stakeholders, mediators in translating scientific knowledge for the benefit of communities, and mobilisers in the implementation and evaluation of climate action plans (Dominelli & Ku, 2017).

Building Awareness Through Education

Participants identified education as a key avenue for raising awareness about climate change within communities. They suggested that social workers can contribute meaningfully to community education through various initiatives, such as promoting

sustainable practices like recycling and establishing community gardens. For example, Gontse (female) noted: *“I think as social workers...our mandate is not to do the work ourselves at all but to empower communities to cope with what is coming and what is going to happen.”* Similarly, Bridget (female) emphasised the importance of self-education and extending that knowledge to local communities: *“I think if we can educate our community or maybe just one family how to self-sustain like have two chickens that lay eggs, a small garden, and rather to thrift, than to go and buy.”* Desree (female) concurred, adding, *“If you can grow and have a patch of ground at your house and start something, why not? Just the thought of even the recycling project that could generate money into the community.”*

There was unanimous agreement among the participants that knowledge is instrumental in driving change, with the understanding that communities cannot be held accountable for actions they are unaware of. The findings further emphasise the importance of educating communities about climate change to empower them and strengthen their resilience. The concept of building community resilience is central to raising awareness about environmental issues and promoting sustainable living practices, as suggested by Dominelli and Ku (2017). Social workers already play a vital role in education and should therefore be equipped with knowledge about climate change to effectively educate and support the communities they serve. Practical examples include promoting community gardens, encouraging sustainable gardening practices, and facilitating educational programmes for children, all of which can contribute to resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change in South Africa.

GSW as a Framework to Mitigate the Impact of Climate Change

The participants were asked whether GSW is a viable framework to guide social workers in mitigating the impact of climate change. They viewed disaster management as a means by which GSW helps mitigate the effects of climate change within communities. Some roles of social workers in disaster management include providing food relief and psychosocial support services to affected communities.

Kevin (male) said that *“green social work is basically caring for the environment, being aware of the impact of climate change, working with communities to try to mitigate these things [impact] or to help communities to survive.”* While the key informant expressed that GSW could assist in building the resilience of communities in South Africa:

There are a whole range of other things that are green. Social workers do, some of them are to help people plant vegetables and grow their own food so that they can be self-sufficient in basic foods, particularly so that might be something that would be worth doing in the Western Cape...so green social workers always try to find out what exactly is going on here, both from the physical science side and the social science side, and then work with communities. (Lena, female)

Although the participants recognized the importance of GSW as an ideal framework to understand the impact of climate change and how to mitigate its effects within vulnerable communities, there was limited understanding and practical steps on how GSW could be implemented in climate change interventions in South Africa. This is particularly because social workers are not necessarily frontline workers in disaster

management; rather, they are a supportive resource tasked with aiding in the aftermath of climate-related events such as floods. Consequently, disaster management emerges as a critical area for exploration within social work practice in South Africa, highlighting the significance of this framework in mitigating the impact of change. As Itu (female) explained, *“I will see a strong link between floods and trauma counselling...also the roll around mobilising communities after a flood or ahead of a flood in terms of preparedness.”*

Discussion

The findings revealed that communities' livelihoods are affected by extreme climatic events that deplete food sources due to droughts, halt food production because of floods, or reduce access to healthy food, resulting in food insecurity. A study by Arkert and Jacobs (2023) also identified climate risks for South Africa, including water insecurity, poor progress towards a low-carbon economy, heat stress, disrupted ecosystems, and decreased viability within the agricultural sector. Boetto et al. (2018) assert that climatic events could impact economic and social outcomes for communities. For example, droughts, floods, and extreme heatwaves could disrupt local industries, damage infrastructure, reduce agricultural productivity, and increase healthcare costs, exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly among vulnerable populations with limited resources to adapt and recover.

The findings show that women, children, and the poor, primarily residing in rural communities, are the most vulnerable groups in society, as noted by several scholars (see Chikoko & Chihiya, 2023; Nyahunda et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that children are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including increased health risks, hunger and food insecurity, and reduced school attendance (Chikoko & Chihiya, 2023). This finding correlates with a study conducted in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, which revealed that a 5-degree Celsius increase in global temperature could lead to a rise in diarrhea cases among children aged 1–5 years (Chersich et al., 2018).

The poor were also identified as a vulnerable group. Most people live below the poverty line in South Africa (Chersich et al., 2018). It is therefore not surprising that rural communities and those residing in informal settlements are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to limited access to resources. This highlights the wider issue of structural inequality in South Africa, as the poor are often excluded from accessing resources compared to wealthier communities (Lombard & Twikirize, 2014). Vulnerable groups include farm workers who primarily perform hard labor, receive minimum wage, and work in a sector affected by the unpredictable and severe weather patterns exacerbated by climate change.

Based on participants' insights, social workers possess existing skills, competencies, and theoretical knowledge, such as the ecological systems perspective, that can be effectively applied in climate intervention efforts. The findings support existing literature suggesting that the ecological systems perspective is a valuable framework for social work practice, as it provides a comprehensive approach to understanding human interactions within their environment (Närhi & Matthies, 2016). Although the ecological systems perspective is essential for understanding human behavior and is widely used in intervention strategies, Powers and Rinkel (2018) argue

that it should be expanded to address not only social systems but also individuals' relationships with the natural environment.

The findings echo Dominelli's (2011) argument that social workers' expertise, including networking, mobilization, and community engagement, can be harnessed to promote a healthier natural environment. However, the challenge lies in reshaping these skills to foster community adaptation and resilience in the face of climate change (Dominelli et al., 2019). Dennis and Bell (2024) reported on a case study of an indigenous community in the United States that employed mutual aid, whereby local communities and organizations developed culturally informed food sovereignty practices. In response to the impact of climate change on food security, individuals and groups were supported in acquiring hands-on skills for growing and preparing food. The study also demonstrates the central role of social workers, drawing on their established skills in community engagement and networking.

Furthermore, Mulvale (2017) emphasises the need for social workers to engage politically and advocate for environmental awareness, recognising that environmental disasters often exacerbate social inequalities and undermine global sustainability. Dominelli (2014) contends that social work practitioners play a crucial role in advancing and upholding human rights, particularly as climate change exacerbates existing socio-economic and cultural disparities. However, social workers have not yet fully embraced roles in activism and policy advocacy, with these responsibilities often remaining conceptual rather than being translated into concrete practice within the context of climate change engagement.

The findings highlighted the importance of social workers working within multidisciplinary teams and actively engaging communities in intervention strategies. Employing participatory action methods can effectively address climate change issues while accommodating the community's specific needs (Hayward et al., 2018). This approach is valuable as it enables social workers to operate within a community development framework that ensures community voices are heard within multidisciplinary teams. This aligns closely with the skills previously mentioned, as social workers often have established relationships within communities and a deep understanding of their needs.

Based on the findings, participants' approach to disaster management was predominantly reactive rather than proactive, often focusing on providing psychosocial support post-disaster. Pedzisai et al. (2023) concur that despite the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities, social work has not been at the forefront of addressing climate change; instead, social workers are mainly preoccupied with the outcomes of disasters, identifying beneficiaries to provide food relief, social safety nets, safe shelters, and psychosocial support to victims and survivors. However, it is important to recognize that disaster management involves more than just reactive measures. Social workers need to clarify their roles across all stages of disaster response, including planning and recovery (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017). This aligns with Dominelli's (2012) assertion that social workers play a crucial role in supporting communities during disaster recovery. Participants suggested that social workers possess valuable expertise to address social challenges and contribute positively to disaster management tasks such as assessments, professional interventions, and fostering social cohesion within communities.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

This study has implications for both social work practice and education. It highlights food insecurity, gender inequality, and the vulnerability of communities as key concerns for social work in the context of climate change. As such, the profession must clearly define and actively engage in its role within disaster management to respond effectively to climate change-induced disasters and to actualise the principles of GSW, as advocated by several scholars (Dominelli, 2012; Kenkel, 2020; Ramdani et al., 2022). This imperative aligns with the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW, 2014) call for social workers to be informed and educated about natural disasters and the impacts of climate change, with the broader aim of building sustainable communities.

This emphasis was reflected in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2010–2020), particularly in its third pillar: Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability. In their report on this third pillar, Powers and Rinkel (2018) observed that social work has always been concerned with the well-being of people in communities, and with the environments in which they live. They stressed the importance of protecting and enhancing the physical environment to improve the conditions and well-being of communities, especially those living on the margins.

However, for social workers to effectively mitigate the impact of climate change, a relevant foundation in social work training is crucial. Recognising the importance of environmental issues in social work practice, and the extent to which communities are negatively affected by environment-related challenges, existing research has strongly advocated for the integration of climate change into social work education (Arkert & Jacobs, 2023; Nöjd et al., 2023). Drawing on collaborative autoethnographic accounts, Motloung and Mzinyane (2023) stressed the need to incorporate disaster-specific approaches into South Africa's social work curriculum. This call for curriculum reform was prompted by the floods in KZN in 2022, which highlighted the urgent need to introduce topics such as GSW and disaster-related trauma interventions at the undergraduate level. Therefore, to effectively support communities facing climate-related challenges, social workers require a solid knowledge base and skillset, grounded in a strong foundation of social work higher education.

Higher education institutions worldwide are therefore called upon to integrate climate-related content into the social work curriculum to address contemporary challenges. This includes interdisciplinary collaboration for a more comprehensive understanding of climate-related issues, and the provision of practical experience through field education modules. Furthermore, international learning – through student and staff exchanges – can enrich curriculum development in social work education. Training in climate-related interventions and disaster management is essential, alongside proactive engagement with climate policy and the inclusion of community voices.

Social workers with expertise in GSW are also encouraged to develop training programmes to enhance practitioners' knowledge and skills. In the broader social development sector, across both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), standard operating procedures for disaster relief should prioritise proactive disaster management strategies. Incorporating GSW principles into NGO operations

can strengthen the alignment of interventions with both climate change mitigation goals and community needs.

Overall, the social work profession must recognize the urgency of addressing climate change and the value of GSW principles in guiding practice. While some individual social workers are already engaging with climate-related issues, broader institutional support from universities and government structures is needed to effectively assist communities facing the realities of climate change.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the social work profession has a remit to address climate change, as vulnerable populations will be disproportionately affected by its impacts, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Social workers have yet to be proactive in tackling this climate crisis, but they can use their existing skills and roles to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

We conclude that the social work profession should focus on activist roles and policy changes to ensure the sustainable protection of human rights, as well as on building resilience and adaptive capabilities in communities likely to be affected by climate change. Based on the findings, GSW offers the best guidelines to follow, and it is imperative that social workers are adequately informed to implement holistic intervention strategies that address climate change. Although GSW is one of the main advocated frameworks for guiding social work interventions, the findings suggest that social workers are not overly concerned with a particular framework.

Nevertheless, the ideals specific to GSW were identified, particularly that social work intervention should encompass protecting the physical environment to enhance people's well-being while addressing existing structural inequalities. GSW emphasises sustainability, social justice, and community development, and these should be incorporated into daily social work practices so that they are seen as part of the profession's functions rather than separate from them. These ideals align with existing social work roles such as community mobilization, social activism, and advocacy for promoting environmental justice and policy changes. Moreover, social workers' involvement is essential not only in immediate disaster response but also in long-term adaptation and resilience-building efforts, particularly in environmentally vulnerable communities. By integrating environmental considerations into their practice, social workers contribute significantly to sustainable development and holistic community well-being.

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