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"It is part of the job": Social workers' experiences of workplace violence and its normalisation in the Western Cape Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social workers increasingly report violence during professional practice in South Africa, including violence perpetrated by clients, community members and others in work-related settings, as well as aggressive conduct within professional relationships. Yet their lived experiences remain insufficiently understood. Workplace violence refers to violence experienced by social workers while performing duties. Guided by an ecological systems perspective and social learning theory, this study explored and described workplace violence faced by social workers in selected organisations in the Western Cape Province. An exploratory and descriptive qualitative design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 registered social workers employed in public-sector and non-governmental organisations. Thematic analysis identified patterns in participants' accounts. Participants described physical aggression, intimidation, threats and verbal abuse, primarily perpetrated by clients and community members, alongside abusive conduct within professional relationships. Organisational responses, reporting mechanisms, supervisory dynamics, inter-agency relationships, institutional protection, and structural conditions shaped how violence was experienced and managed. Repeated exposure and inadequate organisational responses contributed to perceptions of violence as "part of the job". Findings highlighted interconnected individual, relational, organisational and structural contexts. The study highlights the need for strengthened reporting systems, trauma-informed support, responsive policies, and accountable leadership to enhance social workers' well-being and retention.

Keywords: ecological systems; normalisation; organisational culture; social workers; violence prevention; workplace violence

INTRODUCTION

Workplace violence is a significant yet under-recognised aspect of social workers' professional lives. Social workers frequently engage with high-risk and vulnerable populations and often operate in volatile service environments where threats, verbal abuse, intimidation and physical assaults are commonplace (Zimunya & Alpaslan, 2022). Such exposure is frequently framed as inherent to frontline practice. Internationally, workplace violence in social work has received considerable scholarly attention (cf. Jaspers et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2021; Natalier et al., 2021). In South Africa, however, research remains comparatively limited and has largely focused on violence perpetrated by clients against social workers (cf. Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Pretorius & Herbst, 2022, 2025), with less attention given to the broader organisational and systemic dimensions of violence experienced by social workers in the course of their professional duties.

Although some studies have focused specifically on violence perpetrated by clients against social workers (cf. Pretorius & Herbst, 2022), workplace violence in social work is not solely an individual or client-driven phenomenon. Rather, it is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by organisational conditions, interprofessional relationships, inter-agency dynamics and broader socio-structural realities (Malesa & Pillay, 2020). This study therefore examines workplace violence as a multi-level phenomenon shaped by organisational, inter-agency and broader socio-structural contexts. It also explores how repeated exposure and limited organisational responses may contribute to workplace violence being perceived as an expected aspect of social work practice.

This article aims to explore and describe workplace violence experienced by social workers in the course of performing their professional duties in selected public-sector and non-governmental organisations in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The study was guided by the following research question: What are social workers' experiences of workplace violence in the course of performing their professional duties in selected organisations in the Western Cape province, and how is workplace violence understood and normalised within these professional practice contexts? A subsidiary question explored how social workers describe organisational responses to workplace violence in their practice settings. The article first presents the background to the study, followed by a discussion of the ecological systems perspective and social learning theory as theoretical frameworks underpinning the research. The research methodology is then outlined, after which the findings are presented within four ecological systems levels and discussed in relation to current literature and theory. The article concludes with recommendations aimed at addressing and preventing violence against social workers within the South African social work context.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Workplace violence in social work must be understood within the broader socio-structural realities of South Africa, where high levels of interpersonal and community violence intersect with persistent socio-economic inequalities (Kheswa, 2019; Malesa & Pillay, 2020). In the Western Cape, social workers frequently operate in communities characterised by gang activity, extortion, armed robbery and territorial control. The Western Cape Department of Social Development confirmed a significant increase in attacks on social workers, child and

youth care workers, and community development workers in designated 'red zones' (high-risk areas) between 2019 and 2024 (Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG], 2024). These patterns indicate that workplace violence is not episodic or anomalous, but occurs within environments where occupational risk is heightened by broader community conditions.

For the purpose of this study, workplace violence refers to physical or non-physical acts of aggression, threats, intimidation, harassment or bullying perpetrated against social workers in the course of performing their professional duties. Such violence may be perpetrated by clients, community members, colleagues, supervisors, managers or other individuals encountered through professional practice (Pretorius & Herbst, 2022; Shier et al., 2018). Organisational neglect, inadequate supervision, excessive caseloads, resource constraints, weak safety procedures and other poor working conditions are not conceptualised as forms of workplace violence in themselves; rather, they are contextual conditions that may increase social workers' vulnerability to violence or shape how incidents are prevented, reported and managed.

Within such contexts, social welfare organisations often operate under conditions of chronic under-resourcing, high caseloads and limited institutional protection mechanisms. Some scholars note that workplace violence may be perpetrated by service users, community members, colleagues, supervisors or managers, and may include physical and non-physical forms of aggression (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Pretorius & Herbst, 2022; Radey & Wilke, 2021). In resource-constrained systems, ineffective feedback channels, administrative delays and limited enforcement of safety protocols can inadvertently signal institutional tolerance of risk. Consequently, violence may shift from being perceived as an extraordinary breach of workplace safety to being interpreted as an anticipated occupational hazard.

At the professional level, social workers' service-oriented ethos and commitment to vulnerable populations may further complicate their responses to violence experienced in the course of their professional duties. The profession's normative emphasis on resilience, empathy and perseverance may discourage social workers from formally reporting or disclosing experiences of harm, particularly when they perceive their own safety and well-being as secondary to the needs of clients and communities. Underreporting has been widely documented (Malesa & Pillay, 2020), making it difficult to establish definitive statistics and reinforcing the invisibility of the problem. Interprofessional dynamics, including collaboration with entities such as the South African Police Service (SAPS) and courts, may also shape how incidents are addressed, delayed or minimised. Through repeated exposure to violence and organisational messaging, social workers may come to perceive violence as "part of the job" rather than recognising it as an unacceptable risk to their safety and well-being in the course of their professional duties.

Internationally, workplace violence in social work has been widely documented, with research emphasising prevalence, typologies and psychological consequences (Sicora et al., 2022). Within South Africa, researchers acknowledge rising incidents and sectoral vulnerability (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Pretorius & Herbst, 2022). However, existing studies largely foreground the incidents and impacts of workplace violence, with comparatively limited attention to how social workers experience, interpret and respond to workplace violence within their organisational and community contexts. Furthermore, limited scholarship has examined how organisational conditions, interpersonal relationships and broader socio-structural realities

influence the normalisation of workplace violence without conflating these contextual factors with violence itself.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective (1979) and Bandura's social learning theory (1977), the study examines participants' experiences within interacting individual, organisational, institutional and socio-cultural contexts. By foregrounding social workers' lived experiences in the Western Cape, the study seeks to illuminate how workplace violence is experienced and understood within selected social work settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The integration of the ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a theoretical framework for understanding social workers' experiences of workplace violence as a multi-level and socially constructed phenomenon. Together, these frameworks enable an examination of how workplace violence is shaped, experienced and sustained through interactions between individuals, organisations and broader social systems.

Building on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective, social workers are conceptualised as operating within a set of interrelated systems. These include the microsystem, which encompasses individual interactions; the mesosystem, which refers to organisational and professional contexts; the exosystem, which involves institutional and policy environments; and the macrosystem, which reflects broader socio-cultural norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). From this perspective, workplace violence is conceptualised not as an isolated incident but as an outcome of dynamic interactions among individual vulnerabilities, organisational cultures, managerial practices, resource constraints and broader systemic conditions. Such a perspective enables the study to situate social workers' experiences of workplace violence within the structural realities of South African social welfare organisations, including high caseloads, inadequate supervision, power imbalances and chronic under-resourcing (cf. Engelbrecht, 2015; Joseph, 2026). The exosystem is particularly relevant for understanding how institutional arrangements, intersectoral partnerships, policy frameworks, funding structures and statutory systems, such as the South African Police Service (SAPS), courts and government departments, indirectly influence social workers' exposure to and management of workplace violence.

Social learning theory complements the ecological systems perspective by elucidating how workplace violence may become normalised within organisational environments. Rather than assuming that violence is normalised through social learning processes, the theory provides a lens for exploring how participants may come to interpret and respond to repeated exposure to violence within their work environments. According to the seminal work of Bandura (1977, 1986), behaviours are acquired through processes of observation, modelling and reinforcement. Within social work contexts, repeated exposure to aggression from service users, colleagues, supervisors or managers, particularly in the absence of effective organisational responses, may contribute to the perception that workplace violence is an expected aspect of professional practice. This theory thus provides a valuable lens for understanding how organisational silence, inadequate leadership responses and peer practices may shape attitudes towards the

reporting, acceptance or minimisation of workplace violence (Khalid et al., 2024). A key contribution of social learning theory is the notion of reciprocal determinism, which posits that individuals, their behaviour and their environment influence one another bidirectionally, such that changes in one can alter the others (Bandura, 1986). Organisational cultures shape behaviour, while social workers' responses may reinforce organisational norms. Over time, repeated exposure to workplace violence within unsupportive organisational environments may contribute to its normalisation within professional practice.

The ecological systems perspective and social learning theory informed the interpretation of the findings rather than serving as predetermined coding categories. While the thematic analysis was primarily inductive and grounded in participants' accounts, the theoretical framework provided a sensitising lens through which emerging themes were interpreted and contextualised across multiple ecological levels.

Together, the ecological systems perspective and social learning theory provided a framework for interpreting how workplace violence was experienced across individual, organisational, institutional and socio-cultural contexts, and how repeated exposure and organisational responses may influence participants' understandings of such violence.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach and design, sampling procedures, data collection and analysis methods, and the strategies adopted to ensure trustworthiness are discussed below.

Approach and design

A qualitative research approach was employed to develop a rich, detailed and comprehensive description of social workers' experiences of violence encountered in the course of performing their professional duties within selected social work organisations in the Western Cape Province (Hennink et al., 2020; Schurink et al., 2021). This approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' experiences through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule (Hennink et al., 2020). The qualitative research approach aligns with the study's objective of exploring and describing how social workers experienced and understood workplace violence within their professional practice contexts (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

The research design was both exploratory and descriptive. An exploratory design was employed to allow participants to share, in broad terms, their knowledge, experiences, views and perceptions regarding workplace violence. The need for an exploratory approach arose from a limited body of knowledge and information on this emerging area of interest, as the researcher observed that this phenomenon remains under-researched, particularly within the South African social work context. Exploratory designs aim to generate insights into a phenomenon (Kumar, 2019) and, in this study, the design enabled the researcher to address the question of what social workers' experiences of workplace violence entail.

The descriptive design sought to provide a detailed account of social workers' experiences of violence encountered in the course of performing their professional duties, including the forms of violence experienced and the contexts in which these experiences occurred (Kumar, 2019). The combined use of exploratory and descriptive designs enabled the researcher to explore the

nature of these experiences and provide a context-specific account of how social workers experienced and understood workplace violence in selected organisations in the Western Cape Province.

Sampling

The research population consisted of registered social workers employed in public sector and non-governmental social welfare organisations in the Western Cape province, South Africa. The sample consisted of 17 registered social workers who met the inclusion criteria and voluntarily agreed to participate. A purposive snowball sampling strategy was employed. The initial participants were identified through the researcher's professional networks and contacts within the social welfare sector and were approached in their individual capacities. No organisational gatekeepers were involved in the recruitment process. Eligible participants were subsequently invited to refer other social workers who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were drawn from public-sector and non-governmental organisational settings, although the exact number of organisations represented was not formally recorded. All prospective participants were screened against the inclusion criteria, and participation remained voluntary.

Inclusion criteria

- The participant had to be a registered social worker with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP).
- The participant had to be employed in a public sector or non-governmental organisation in the Western Cape province.
- Participants had to have directly experienced workplace violence, witnessed workplace violence directed at social workers, or acquired professional knowledge of workplace violence through their practice experience. These categories were not mutually exclusive. However, the number of participants falling within each category was not systematically recorded.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January 2021 and March 2021. All interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English, in accordance with participants' stated preferences. The interview schedule was reviewed by the research supervisor prior to data collection. The interview schedule consisted of two brief biographical questions and eleven substantive open-ended questions addressing participants' work environments, experiences and understandings of workplace violence, contributing factors, implications for practice and organisations, existing support measures and recommendations. Additional prompts and probing questions were used to elicit further details.

Participants were informed that interviews would be conducted telephonically and audio-recorded with their consent. To ensure privacy, participants selected a time and location where they could speak freely and confidentially. Prior to commencing each interview, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the interview without penalty.

Given the sensitive nature of workplace violence, participant distress was monitored throughout the interviews. Where signs of emotional discomfort emerged, interviews were paused and participants were offered the opportunity to discontinue participation. Information regarding counselling and support services was made available should participants require further assistance following the interview.

The telephonic interviews were transcribed verbatim. Field notes were maintained throughout the data-collection process to document contextual observations and emerging reflections. This approach generated rich and detailed qualitative data.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach**.** Following transcription, the researcher familiarised himself with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. Initial codes were generated manually from the dataset and organised into broader categories. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed, refined and defined through an iterative analytical process.

The analysis was primarily inductive, with themes emerging from participants' accounts. However, the ecological systems perspective and social learning theory served as sensitising frameworks during the interpretation of findings.

No qualitative data analysis software was utilised. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process, including coding notes, theme development records and analytical memos. An independent coder reviewed selected interview transcripts and the preliminary themes. The researcher and independent coder compared their interpretations and discussed differences until consensus was reached regarding the development and refinement of the themes. The number of transcripts reviewed, and the procedure used to select them were not formally recorded.

Saturation was assessed iteratively by comparing successive interviews for new codes and interpretive insights. The later interviews produced repetition of previously identified patterns and no substantial new themes. However, the precise interview at which saturation occurred was not formally documented.

Ensuring trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through strategies relating to credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Schurink et al., 2021). Credibility was supported through verbatim transcription, repeated engagement with the interview data, the maintenance of field notes and consultation with an independent coder. Efforts were also made to establish a respectful interview environment in which participants could describe their experiences openly.

Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting the data-collection and analytical processes, including coding notes, analytic memos and records of theme development. An independent coder reviewed selected interview transcripts and the

preliminary themes, and differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached.

Transferability was supported through a description of the Western Cape research context, the participating organisational settings and the characteristics of the sample, enabling readers to assess the potential relevance of the findings to comparable contexts. Confirmability was strengthened through the audit trail, reflective notes, documentation of analytical decisions and the verbatim presentation of participant comments to demonstrate the grounding of interpretations in the data. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing consideration of the researcher's professional background, assumptions and potential influence on data collection and interpretation. Particular attention was devoted to how the researcher's professional familiarity with the social welfare sector and recruitment through professional networks might influence participant engagement and interpretation of the data.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Stellenbosch University (REC-050411-032; project number 18800). The Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research complies with the provisions of the South African National Health Act 61 of 2003 governing health research (Republic of South Africa, 2003). The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation and the protection of participants' anonymity and confidentiality. These principles were explained to participants prior to data collection and their written informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Provision was made for debriefing should participation evoke discomfort or distress. Throughout the research process, participants' rights to privacy were respected and all identifying information was securely safeguarded. Given the sensitive nature of discussing workplace violence, participant well-being was prioritised throughout the study. The researcher monitored participants for signs of emotional distress and reminded them that they could pause or terminate the interview at any stage. Information about available counselling and support services was provided if participation evoked emotional discomfort or distress.

Limitations of the study

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The study employed a small, non-probability sample of 17 social workers drawn from selected organisations in the Western Cape province, with 15 participants employed in non-governmental organisations. The findings therefore cannot be regarded as representative of all social workers in the Western Cape or South Africa. Recruitment through the researcher's professional networks and participant referrals may also have introduced selection and referral bias, as social workers with particular experiences of, or interest in, workplace violence may have been more likely to participate.

The findings were based on participants' retrospective self-reported accounts and were not triangulated with organisational records, policy documents, observations or accounts from managers and other institutional stakeholders. Telephonic interviews facilitated participation and privacy, but limited the researcher's ability to observe non-verbal communication. The inclusion criteria included direct experience, witnessed experience and professional knowledge

of workplace violence; however, the number of participants in each category was not systematically recorded, and the categories may have overlapped. The exact number of organisations represented was also not formally documented. Finally, although an independent coder contributed to the review and refinement of themes, the number of transcripts independently reviewed and the procedure used to select them were not recorded. These limitations restrict the transferability of the findings and the transparency with which some aspects of the research process can be reported.

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1: **Biographical information of participants**

Participants	Type of organisation	Gender	Position at the organisation	Years of social work experience
Participant 1 (P1)	NGO	Male	Social Worker	1 year
Participant 2 (P2)	NGO	Male	Social Worker	1 year
Participant 3 (P3)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	15 years
Participant 4 (P4)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	3 years
Participant 5 (P5)	NGO	Male	Social Worker	2 years and 6 months
Participant 6 (P6)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	8 years
Participant 7 (P7)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	1 year and 6 months
Participant 8 (P8)	DSD	Female	Social Worker	8 years
Participant 9 (P9)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	2 years
Participant 10 (P10)	DSD	Female	Social Worker	1 year and 3 months
Participant 11 (P11)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	1 year
Participant 12 (P12)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	10 months
Participant 13 (P13)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	1 year and 4 months
Participant 14 (P14)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	4 years
Participant 15 (P15)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	6 years
Participant 16 (P16)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	6 years
Participant 17 (P17)	NGO	Female	Social Worker	36 years

The 17 participants were drawn from non-governmental organisations (NGOs; n = 15) and the Department of Social Development (DSD; n = 2) in the Western Cape. The majority of participants were female (n = 14; 82.4%), with three male participants (n = 3; 17.6%). All participants were employed as social workers in various service settings.

Participants were involved in diverse practice areas, including child protection, school social work, therapeutic services, child and youth care, community development, statutory social work and adoption services. All participants worked within organisations providing services to individuals, families and communities.

The participants' years of professional experience ranged from less than one year to 36 years, indicating a heterogeneous sample in terms of professional tenure. Presenting this variation is

important for contextualising the data, as prior research suggests that levels of experience may shape practitioners' responses to workplace stressors, including workplace violence (Olsson et al., 2024; Sicora et al., 2022). Newly qualified social workers may experience heightened adjustment challenges, sometimes described as a 'reality shock' upon entry into practice (Engelbrecht & Ncube, 2021). This biographical profile provides contextual grounding for the analysis of participants' experiences of workplace violence presented in the following section.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings were generated inductively from participants' accounts and subsequently organised within the four ecological systems levels as an interpretive framework. Direct incidents of violence perpetrated by clients and community members against social workers are presented at the microsystem level; organisational and professional relationships at the mesosystem level; external agencies and institutional protection mechanisms at the exosystem level; and broader socio-economic and structural conditions at the macrosystem level. Where issues operated across more than one level, they were located according to the aspect most directly reflected in participants' accounts to minimise overlap and repetition.

The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem therefore represent theoretical organising categories rather than themes derived from the data. Within these levels, the analysis identified recurring analytic categories relating to direct violence from clients and community members, supervisory and collegial relationships, institutional protection and safety systems, and broader structural and socio-economic conditions. The ecological framework was used to interpret and organise these data-derived categories rather than to predetermine the coding process.

Table 2: **Ecological systems levels and data-derived analytic categories**

Ecological systems level	Analytic categories
1. **Microsystem level**	Direct workplace violence perpetrated by clients and community members against social workers
2. **Mesosystem level**	Supervision and managerial practices Collegial interactions
3. **Exosystem level**	Inter-agency collaboration Institutional protection Workplace safety systems
4. **Macrosystem level**	Structural constraints Socio-economic context Professional marginalisation

The following sections present these data-derived analytic categories within each ecological level, supported by participant narratives and interpreted in relation to the relevant literature and theoretical framework.

Microsystem level

At the microsystem level, participants described direct interactions with clients and community members involving verbal threats, intimidation, obstruction of professional duties and physical aggression.

Direct violence perpetrated by clients and community members against social workers

Participants described direct violence from clients during emotionally charged interactions, particularly child removals and discussions about service eligibility. These incidents included verbal threats, intimidation and physical aggression (Malesa & Pillay, 2020). One participant recounted:

> *For instance, when it comes to the removal of a child, parents become aggressive, swear at you and become physically violent towards the social worker. That is why we ask the police to escort us during child removals.* (P5)

Another participant described intimidation linked to procedural expectations:

> *Yes, definitely I have experienced it myself, so a form of intimidation when a client come to my office and said he wants to adopt, when I give the client the criteria and what is expected from him, the client threatened me to report me to the Council.* (P11)

Physical aggression in the community context was also reported:

> *We had an incident were one of our clients was demolishing our office because he was angry at one of the social workers.* (P13)

Client violence can be defined as "any incident in which a social worker is harassed, threatened or physically assaulted by a client during the worker's performance of his or her job" (Field, 2011, p. 8). These narratives align with literature indicating that social workers are regularly exposed to violence and aggression perpetrated by clients against social workers, which constitutes a significant occupational hazard and a source of psychological stress (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Pretorius & Herbst, 2022). These accounts illustrate how client-initiated aggression formed part of participants' frontline practice experiences and created significant occupational safety risks.

Participants reported experiencing violence that extended beyond individual clients to the broader community, reflecting the risks inherent in service delivery within high-risk environments. These incidents included threats, obstruction of professional duties and destruction of property, often arising during child protection interventions or when communities were frustrated with service delivery (Pretorius & Herbst, 2022; Truter et al., 2017). One participant described a direct encounter:

> *I went to assist a colleague with the removal of a child that was neglected; when we approached that specific community, the biological mother was under the influence of substances and the community prevented us from doing the removal…* (P6)

The same participant recounted a wider-scale incident of community aggression:

> *The community started vandalising the building through throwing stones and we were caught up in that situation as the community aimed to destroy municipal offices for poor service delivery.* (P6)

These narratives illustrate how community-level risks increased participants' exposure to physical and psychological harm during service delivery. Participants described working in areas regarded as dangerous and reported incidents involving attacks on organisational vehicles and buildings. Similar concerns have been reported in other South African settings, where social workers have withdrawn from high-crime areas following attacks (Herald, The, 2020). A recent incident on 26 August 2026 further illustrates these risks, when a DSD official was reportedly shot at during an attempted hijacking while travelling in a government vehicle. She escaped, but the bullet reportedly struck the vehicle's gear lever (Arrive Alive, 2026). These accounts suggest that comparable occupational risks may occur beyond the Western Cape, although the present study cannot establish their national extent.

Mesosystem level

At the mesosystem level, participants described supervisory and collegial conditions that shaped their experiences of workplace violence and the organisational responses available to them.

Supervision and managerial practices

Participants described inadequate supervision, perceived favouritism and harsh managerial conduct as organisational conditions affecting their working environment and responses to workplace violence. These experiences were analytically distinguished from direct workplace violence from clients, unless the management conduct involved verbal aggression, intimidation, harassment or other abusive behaviour. One participant described perceived unequal and harsh treatment by management:

> *I know someone in my previous organisation … it was between the management and the worker. You could see that the management (supervisor/manager) does not treat the person (social worker) the same as others and was extremely harsh.* (P1)

Another participant emphasised the structural implications of inadequate supervision:

> *Organisations with lack of supervision and support for its employees can definitely imply organisational-related workplace violence.* (P10)

This account indicates that inadequate supervision may weaken organisational support and increase workers' vulnerability to occupational stress; inadequate supervision is not treated as workplace violence in itself.

Another participant linked interpersonal difficulties within the organisation to inadequate supervision and support:

> *Personal issues between colleagues … Organisation with lack of supervision and support.* (P10)

In social work settings supervision is intended to be a protective and developmental mechanism; when it is absent, vulnerability to occupational stress, burnout and secondary trauma may increase (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2015).

Participants also highlighted perceived favouritism and inequitable managerial decision-making:

> *Favours from supervisors, especially from management, whereby you go and ask for something to be approved and that is not approved, but there is someone who is always slacking who never produces as much as you do, but the person gets away with it.* (P3)

> *You get the managers, [who] are sometimes treating employees in a way that they should not be treated and literally shouting at workers.* (P8)

Unfair or inequitable treatment by supervisors may contribute to unhealthy working conditions, workplace division and reduced employee engagement (Howard, 2011; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Suárez-Acosta, 2014). However, the two accounts reflect different organisational experiences. P3 described perceived favouritism and organisational injustice, whereas P8 described managers shouting at employees, which may constitute verbal aggression. At the mesosystem level, these experiences illustrate how supervisory relationships and power asymmetries shape the workplace environment. Distinguishing between inequitable management practices and direct abusive conduct perpetrated against social workers avoids treating all forms of poor management as workplace violence, while recognising that both may undermine worker well-being and organisational trust (Murugas & Maharaj, 2024).

Collegial interactions

Participants described poor communication, lack of respect, unhealthy relationships and interpersonal conflict among colleagues. These accounts indicate relational strain within the workplace, but do not necessarily constitute workplace violence unless they involve aggression, harassment, threats or bullying.

> *Poor communication, no sense of integrity …. Some social workers don't take constructive criticism.* (P6)

> *Lack of respect among colleagues, unhealthy relationships, lack of open communication.* (P8)

> *I'm the youngest … she said you are so unprofessional … I had to call my supervisor … it created animosity.* (P11)

These accounts illustrate communication difficulties, interpersonal tension and strained collegial relationships. Organisational environments characterised by poor communication and low trust may increase workplace conflict and relational aggression (Einarsen et al., 2011). However, the accounts presented here primarily indicate collegial strain rather than workplace violence in itself. Such conditions may nevertheless undermine organisational trust, increase psychological strain and limit the capacity of colleagues to support one another following incidents of workplace violence (Natalier et al., 2021; Tsantefski et al., 2024; Zimunya & Alpaslan, 2022).

Exosystem level

The exosystem refers to external institutional, inter-agency and policy systems that indirectly influenced participants' experiences of workplace violence. Although social workers had limited control over these systems, participants described how interactions with external agencies, institutional protection mechanisms and broader safety arrangements shaped both their exposure to workplace violence and their capacity to respond effectively when incidents occurred.

Inter-agency collaboration

Participants described difficulties obtaining external support during high-risk statutory interventions. One participant reported that a SAPS escort was sometimes unavailable during child removals because of resource constraints or safety concerns:

> *Sometimes the police refuse to escort social workers due to fear of that community or because no police van is available.* (P5)

Research indicates that social workers face workplace violence and safety threats during field-based interventions, particularly in high-risk environments regarded as "red zones", and that their safety depends partly on appropriate protective measures and effective inter-agency support (Daniels, 2025; Johnson, 2024; Zimunya & Alpaslan, 2022). This account suggests that resource constraints and safety concerns within law-enforcement services may limit the protection available to social workers during high-risk statutory interventions. Such inter-agency limitations may increase social workers' vulnerability within frontline service delivery contexts.

Institutional protection

Participants expressed concerns regarding the adequacy of institutional responses following incidents of violence perpetrated against social workers in the course of their professional duties. Although some organisations had procedures for reporting such incidents, participants perceived these mechanisms as inconsistently implemented or insufficiently enforced. Several participants reported uncertainty regarding organisational accountability, indicating that incidents were not always formally documented or followed by meaningful organisational action. Consequently, participants perceived institutional protection mechanisms as limited, contributing to feelings of vulnerability and reinforcing the perception that violence against social workers was not consistently prioritised within organisational practice.

> *The organisation is not doing anything about rising issues that concerns the well-being of the social workers.* (P3)

> *Continuously shifting staff members and, for example, staff not staying in one place long enough because security are not in place to prevent violence.* (P10)

> *There is an open-door policy to address related issues but there is no policy that protects a social worker from any form of workplace violence…* (P5)

> *The council has let us down for all these years I was a social worker, the only thing they cared about is our fee … DSD have but they did not consult social workers in the forefront, there was not visitation of the policy after 3 years and they both let us down as social workers operating in NGOs.* (P3)

These accounts indicate that limited organisational follow-through, weak policy protection and inadequate security affected participants' sense of safety, willingness to attend work and ability to manage work demands. They also suggest that inconsistent institutional responses may have implications for practitioner well-being and organisational functioning.

Workplace safety systems

Participants also described gaps in post-incident support, particularly access to counselling, debriefing and assistance with recovery following incidents of violence experienced in the course of their professional duties. One participant explained:

> *I would say there was no support available for me when I needed support like counselling, debriefing and measures to heal from such traumatic events.* (P4)

This account indicates that participants' concerns extended beyond management of incidents involving violence against social workers to the availability of counselling, debriefing and recovery support following traumatic events. The absence or inadequacy of such measures may leave social workers without appropriate organisational support to recover from the psychological effects of violence experienced during professional practice.

Collectively, these accounts show that inter-agency arrangements, institutional protection mechanisms and workplace safety systems shaped how social workers were supported in preventing, responding to and recovering from incidents of workplace violence. Limited organisational follow-through inconsistently implemented policies, inadequate safety measures and restricted post-incident support may have increased social workers' vulnerability and influenced how violence experienced in the course of their professional duties was understood and managed. In contexts where such incidents recur and organisational responses remain inadequate, violence may come to be perceived as an accepted occupational risk or "part of the job."

Macrosystem level

At the macrosystem level, participants' accounts were interpreted within broader conditions of community violence, socio-economic inequality and resource-constrained social welfare provision.

Structural constraints

Participants described structural and environmental conditions that increased their vulnerability to violence experienced in the course of performing their professional duties. These conditions included inadequate physical security, insufficient resources, vandalism, threats from clients and exposure to high-risk crime areas. Rather than constituting workplace violence in themselves, these structural constraints were described as conditions that could

increase social workers' exposure to violence and limit their ability to protect themselves when performing their professional duties. One participant explained:

> *Lack of physical resources, for example, lack of security to protect us from being stoned by angry clients.* (P13)

Participants' accounts indicate that limited support, unequal workloads, inadequate budgets and poor organisational communication contributed to stressful working environments. Research confirms that social workers are expected to render critical services in communities that are regarded as hotspots for crime, gang-related activities, community protests and high levels of unemployment (Herald, The, 2020; Kennedy & Julie, 2013; Pollack, 2010). The seriousness of these risks is reflected in the Western Cape Provincial Government's call for attacks on social workers to be classified as 'offences against the state' in order to warrant harsher legal consequences (Daniels, 2025).

Socio-economic context

Participants' experiences were embedded within broader community instability and service delivery tensions. A participant described how frontline workers became targets while travelling to communities:

> *We used to drive that car with our organisation's name on it; sometimes our cars would get stoned.* (P11)

This account illustrates how community instability and service-delivery tensions could place social workers at risk while travelling in organisation vehicles. Macro-level socio-economic grievances and structural inequalities may spill into service environments, positioning social workers within volatile public spaces. This interpretation is consistent with South African research linking community violence and systemic inequality to occupational risks in the helping professions (Pretorius & Herbst, 2022).

In a context marked by extreme inequality and high levels of violent crime, social workers operate at the intersection of interpersonal harm and broader socio-economic deprivation, reflecting how broader socio-economic deprivation and community violence shape the contexts in which social workers practise (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

Professional marginalisation

Professional marginalisation was evident in participants' accounts of excessive workloads, weak organisational governance and limited organisational capacity to support social workers in managing the demands and risks associated with professional practice. These conditions were not conceptualised as workplace violence in themselves, but as broader structural and organisational factors that may increase social workers' vulnerability to violence and affect their capacity to respond to incidents experienced in the course of their professional duties. One participant stated:

> *Poorly governed organisations are capable of contributing to experiences of workplace violence.* (P4)

Another participant described unsustainable caseloads:

> *We have about 500 files…you must still do group work, community work … everything on top of child protection.* (P3)

P3's account illustrates the scale of the workload expected of some frontline social workers and the pressure created by combining statutory child-protection responsibilities with individual, group and community work.

These accounts demonstrate how chronic under-resourcing, weak organisational governance and role overload may create harmful working conditions and increase social workers' vulnerability when performing their professional duties. High caseloads and inadequate staffing have been widely associated with burnout, emotional exhaustion and diminished worker well-being (Engelbrecht, 2015; Kheswa, 2019). The findings therefore support scholarship that conceptualises professional marginalisation as a structural condition that may shape social workers' vulnerability to workplace violence and their capacity to respond to and recover from such incidents, rather than as workplace violence itself (Koritsas et al., 2010).

DISCUSSION

This study explored social workers' experiences of workplace violence in selected public-sector and non-governmental organisations in the Western Cape province. Participants described physical aggression, threats, intimidation and verbal abuse perpetrated primarily by clients and community members, alongside some accounts of verbal aggression or abusive conduct within professional relationships. Limited managerial support, weak reporting mechanisms, inadequate institutional protection and resource constraints were treated as contextual conditions rather than forms of workplace violence in themselves. These conditions shaped social workers' exposure to violence, their ability to report and respond to incidents, and the support available following such experiences. Repeated exposure to violence in contexts where organisational responses were perceived as inadequate may have contributed to violence being understood as an anticipated occupational risk or as "part of the job."

From an ecological systems perspective, participants' accounts illustrate how experiences of workplace violence were influenced by multiple interacting contexts**.** At the microsystem level, participants described direct exposure to client aggression and threats. At the mesosystem level, organisational relationships, supervisory practices and workplace communication influenced how incidents were managed and experienced. At the exosystem level, participants highlighted challenges relating to collaboration with external agencies, institutional support and organisational safety systems, while at the macrosystem level broader socio-economic conditions, community violence and resource constraints provided the context within which workplace violence occurred. These findings suggest that workplace violence cannot be understood solely as a consequence of individual interactions, but should be interpreted within the broader organisational and structural environments in which social workers practise.

Social learning theory provided a sensitising lens for interpreting how repeated exposure to violence experienced by social workers in the course of their professional duties, together with limited organisational responses, may contribute to perceptions that such violence is an

anticipated aspect of social work practice. Participants described multiple forms and incidents of violence against social workers, alongside organisational conditions such as weak reporting and follow-through mechanisms, inadequate institutional protection and limited post-incident support. These organisational conditions were not conceptualised as forms of workplace violence, but as contextual factors that may shape social workers' exposure to, responses to and perceptions of violence. The findings may be interpreted as consistent with processes of reinforcement or habituation; however, the study did not directly examine peer modelling, learned silence or other specific social learning mechanisms. Social learning theory is therefore applied interpretively as a sensitising framework rather than as evidence of established causal processes.

Consistent with international research (Kim & Hopkins, 2017; Lynch, 2017), participants described experiences of verbal abuse, threats, intimidation and physical violence perpetrated primarily by clients and community members, alongside some accounts of verbal aggression or abusive conduct within professional relationships. While these findings resonate with international literature, the Western Cape context is characterised by high levels of community violence, gang activity, socio-economic inequality and resource-constrained welfare services, which participants perceived as increasing their vulnerability to workplace violence. Rather than suggesting that these findings are representative of the experience of all South African social workers, the study provides context-specific insights into workplace violence experienced by participants employed in selected organisations in the Western Cape province.

The contribution of this study lies not in establishing the occurrence or prevalence of workplace violence, but in showing how social workers in selected Western Cape settings experienced violence perpetrated primarily by clients and community members, alongside some aggressive or abusive conduct within professional relationships, within a broader context of limited organisational follow-through, inconsistent institutional protection, high-risk community environments and resource constraints. By distinguishing these contextual conditions from violence experienced by social workers, the study illustrates how such conditions may shape responses to violent incidents and contribute to violence being perceived as an anticipated occupational risk. This context-specific, multi-level account extends research that has primarily focused on client-perpetrated violence and individual coping responses.

Participants described feeling unsafe and reluctant to attend work, experiencing pressure to meet deadlines, and having limited access to counselling or debriefing following incidents of violence experienced in the course of their professional duties. These accounts suggest potential adverse effects on practitioner well-being, work functioning and service provision. The findings therefore highlight the importance of organisational and policy responses that strengthen worker safety, reporting mechanisms, supportive supervision and access to psychosocial support. Addressing workplace violence requires coordinated interventions across organisational, institutional and broader structural contexts rather than relying solely on individual resilience strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisational interventions to strengthen supervision and managerial accountability

The findings highlighted limited supervision and inadequate managerial support following incidents of violence experienced by social workers in the course of their professional duties. It is recommended that organisations strengthen supervisory structures by ensuring access to regular, trauma-informed supervision that explicitly addresses violence against social workers and its impact on their well-being and professional functioning. Supervisors and managers should be trained to respond appropriately to disclosures of violence by providing emotional support, facilitating access to debriefing and counselling services, and ensuring that incidents are formally documented and addressed. Strengthening supervisory accountability may improve organisational responses to workplace violence and reduce perceptions among social workers that such incidents are routinely accepted or minimised.

Professional development and practitioner well-being

Given the emotional and professional consequences associated with violence experienced by social workers in the course of their professional duties, organisations should prioritise interventions aimed at supporting social workers' mental health, well-being and physical safety. Access to employee wellness programmes, counselling services and structured debriefing following incidents of violence should be strengthened. Organisations should also implement practical measures to prevent and respond to violence perpetrated by clients and community members, including training in risk assessment, de-escalation, personal safety, managing potentially violent encounters and procedures for obtaining assistance during high-risk interactions. Clear protocols should guide social workers on how to report threats, physical assaults and other incidents of violence and should ensure appropriate organisational follow-through. Additionally, organisational investment in staff well-being may reduce burnout, improve morale and enhance service delivery. Supporting social workers who have experienced or witnessed violence is essential for sustaining an effective and ethical workforce. It is further recommended that undergraduate social work programmes and continuing professional development initiatives include training on violence against social workers, client-perpetrated violence, trauma-informed practice, vicarious trauma, personal safety, risk assessment, de-escalation and reporting procedures.

Strengthening organisational policies and workplace safety systems

The findings indicate that participants perceived inconsistent implementation of workplace safety policies and reporting procedures. Organisations should therefore develop, implement and consistently enforce policies addressing violence against social workers, clearly defining unacceptable behaviours, reporting pathways and organisational responsibilities following violent incidents. Such policies should address violence perpetrated by service users, colleagues, supervisors and external stakeholders against social workers in the course of their professional duties. Furthermore, structured risk assessments, safety planning for fieldwork and standardised procedures for preventing and responding to incidents of violence should be incorporated into organisational practice.

Given participants' reliance on SAPS during high-risk statutory interventions, social welfare organisations and the Department of Social Development should establish formal local coordination protocols with SAPS. These should include designated contact persons, clear procedures for requesting escorts and contingency arrangements where police assistance is unavailable. Fieldwork protocols should specify when visits should be postponed, escalated or conducted with additional support where minimum safety requirements cannot be met, particularly when social workers anticipate a risk of violence from clients or community members.

Organisations and funders should also review caseloads, staffing levels and service expectations regularly. Where excessive caseloads compromise safe professional practice, including social workers' capacity to prevent, respond to and recover from incidents of violence, management should consider redistributing cases, increasing staffing support and establishing more realistic workload expectations.

Promoting organisational cultures that encourage reporting

Participants described limited organisational follow-through and perceptions that violence experienced by social workers in the course of their professional duties was insufficiently prioritised, while the literature also identifies underreporting as a concern. Organisations should therefore foster reporting cultures in which social workers can report incidents of violence perpetrated by clients, community members, colleagues, supervisors and other relevant parties without fear of stigma, retaliation or negative consequences. Training initiatives should raise awareness of violence against social workers, reinforce practitioners' rights to safe working environments and encourage organisational learning from reported incidents. Reporting systems should provide clear, accessible and confidential pathways, with defined responsibilities for documenting incidents, initiating appropriate responses and providing feedback to affected social workers. Creating supportive reporting cultures may contribute to reducing the normalisation of violence experienced by social workers and strengthen organisational accountability for preventing and responding to such incidents.

CONCLUSION

Workplace violence emerged as a significant occupational concern among the social workers who participated in this study. Participants described physical aggression, threats, intimidation and verbal abuse perpetrated primarily by clients and community members, alongside some accounts of verbal aggression or abusive conduct within professional relationships. Organisational and institutional conditions were not treated as violence in themselves, but as contextual factors that shaped participants' exposure to and responses to violent incidents. Their accounts suggest that exposure to violence, combined with limited organisational responses, may contribute to violence being perceived as "part of the job."

The ecological systems perspective situated these experiences across interacting individual, organisational, institutional and socio-cultural contexts, while social learning theory provided an interpretive lens for considering how violence may become understood as an anticipated occupational risk. The study does not establish causal relationships or national

representativeness, but offers context-specific insights from selected Western Cape social work settings.

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening organisational support, regular supervision, workplace safety systems, reporting mechanisms and institutional accountability to promote safer working environments for social workers. Although the findings are specific to the study context, they may offer valuable insights for organisations operating in comparable high-risk and resource-constrained settings elsewhere in South Africa and beyond. Recognising workplace violence as a significant occupational concern is essential for promoting social workers' well-being, strengthening organisational responses and supporting the delivery of safe and ethical social work services.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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