Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk
An international journal rooted in South Africa
IJenali kazwelonke engcambu zayo ziseMzantsi Afrika
Vol. 62, No. 2, 2026, DOI: https://doi.org/10.15270/62-2-1836

NOTE FROM PRACTICE

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"What I knew until I didn't": When theory meets practice in the South African victim empowerment social work reality

ABSTRACT

This note from practice examines and reflects the transition from social work education to frontline practice in South Africa's victim empowerment sector, focusing on newly qualified practitioners working with survivors and perpetrators of gender-based violence. Drawing on experiential learning, client narratives and professional reflection, it explores how the implementation of theory encounters complex realities characterised by poverty, systemic fragmentation and institutional barriers. The reflection highlights tensions between policy ideals and practice conditions, particularly the need for advocacy when protective systems fail survivors. Experiences from work with women survivors and men's intervention programmes illustrate the importance of balancing empathy with accountability, while adapting interventions to culturally and structurally constrained environments. The reflection also identifies gaps in professional preparation, including limited exposure to trauma-informed practice, systemic advocacy and emotional support during early career stages. Recommendations are proposed for education, supervision and policy reform, emphasising sustained resources, practitioner wellbeing and integrated services. The reflection argues that effective intervention develops through reflexivity, contextual responsiveness and practice-informed knowledge.

Keywords: gender-based violence; social work practice; systemic advocacy; trauma-informed care; victim empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The transition from learning social work theory to frontline practice is often considered challenging, yet this view rarely captures the emotional, ethical and structural difficulties faced by newly qualified social workers in South Africa. In the victim empowerment sector, this transition is compounded by daily encounters with gender-based violence, victims of crime and violence, the normalisation of violence, severe socio-economic inequality and fragmented service systems. While academic training provides social workers with theories for ethical and evidence-based practice, it frequently overlooks the complexity of real-life experiences in under-resourced communities, where violence, trauma and systemic failure intersect.

This note from practice offers a practice-oriented reflection of the way that theory and practice converge, illustrated through the experiences of two newly qualified social workers engaged in community-based victim empowerment and men's intervention programmes. The reflection foregrounds work with women as primary survivors of gender-based violence, while also addressing men, children and queer individuals as both victims and offenders within family and community systems. Drawing on lived experience, client feedback and professional learning, this reflection explores how social work knowledge evolves when theoretical principles encounter South African realities.

The central argument is that theory alone cannot fully prepare social workers for the complexities of gender-based violence intervention. Ethical and effective practice develops through reflexivity, contextual adaptation and the integration of empathy with accountability. By examining the theory-practice gap, this reflection contributes to ongoing discussions on how social work education, policy and practice can better support new practitioners working in resource-constrained victim empowerment settings.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF VICTIM EMPOWERMENT: "WHAT I KNEW"

Social work education provides a foundational understanding of human behaviour, social systems and intervention methods. In the domain of victim empowerment, several key theories are essential for preparing practitioners. For example, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) situates individuals within interconnected systems, including family, community, institutions and society, highlighting how relational and structural factors shape experiences of violence. Empowerment theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) emphasises restoring control, voice and agency to individuals whose power has been diminished through victimisation. Anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002) encourages practitioners to examine power dynamics and systemic inequalities that sustain violence and marginalisation.

These theories align closely with South Africa's legislative and policy landscape, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Bill of Rights, the Domestic Violence Act No. 116 of 1998, and the Victim Empowerment Policy (Department of Social Development, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 1996, 1998). In principle, these Acts and policies promote dignity, safety, equality and access to justice for victims of violence, particularly women and children.

In the classroom, these theories and policies appear clear and supportive. They present a vision of comprehensive, coordinated service delivery in which social workers collaborate closely with law enforcement, courts, healthcare providers and community groups. Victims are positioned as experts in their own lives, and empowerment is conceptualised as an active process founded on respect and self-determination.

However, theory does not fully prepare newly qualified social workers for the institutional, cultural and resource-based barriers that complicate implementation. New practitioners often enter the field with strong ethical commitments, only to encounter organisational constraints, high caseloads and systemic dysfunction that challenge their professional ideals.

When theory meets practice: The reality of South African gender-based violence (GBV)

Entry into the victim empowerment sector transforms theoretical learning into a lived experience characterised by tension and contradiction. While policy frameworks advocate integrated and victim-centred services, practice is often dominated by underfunded non-governmental organisations, limited protective measures for practitioners, and the need for service delivery in high-crime, under-resourced communities.

Survivors of gender-based violence rarely present with a single need. In addition to counselling, they require safety planning, legal protection, healthcare access, economic support and advocacy within justice systems that frequently fail to respond effectively. Ecological systems theory assumes coordinated inter-sectoral collaboration; however, in practice, institutions such as the police, courts and hospitals often operate in isolation. Social workers are left to bridge these gaps, assuming roles that extend beyond therapeutic intervention.

In one instance, a police station refused to act on an arrest warrant due to a minor address discrepancy on a protection order, despite the immediate danger faced by the survivor. Escalation to the station commander by the social worker was necessary to protect the victim. In another case, a survivor was turned away from court because of an incomplete form, necessitating direct intervention and advocacy by the social worker. These incidents highlight systemic failures and reveal how victims often view social workers as their last resort. Through practice, it became evident that understanding one's role within a victim empowerment programme and the roles of other stakeholders is essential for accountability and effective service delivery.

Working with women: Survivorship, advocacy and systemic failure

Women remain the primary survivors of gender-based violence in South Africa, and their experiences are central to victim empowerment efforts. Many women seeking services present with complex trauma arising from prolonged exposure to violence, economic dependency and social isolation. Empowerment theory stresses the restoration of agency; however, agency cannot be effectively exercised when protective systems are inaccessible or ineffective.

In practice, empowerment often begins with tangible support, assisting women with protection orders, accompanying them to police stations or courts, and advocating on their behalf when systems fail. These actions are seldom emphasised in classroom training, which typically

prioritises counselling skills over systemic advocacy. For many women, safety and validation take precedence over emotional processing.

Women frequently articulate relief at being believed and supported, as illustrated by one survivor: "I have never spoken to anyone about this … it feels like a heavy weight has been lifted off my shoulders." This highlights the profound importance of being heard, especially where women's experiences of violence are often minimised or dismissed. Simultaneously, it reveals the emotional labour endured by social workers as they absorb trauma while managing their own fears, frustrations and limited resources.

Men's intervention programme: Philosophy and practice

Addressing gender-based violence requires engagement not only with survivors, but also with those who perpetrate violence. Men's intervention programmes adopt a client-centred, strengths-based approach, viewing men not as inherently problematic but as individuals shaped by their environments, histories and socialisation. This approach aligns with empowerment and anti-oppressive theories, while maintaining a firm commitment to accountability.

The programme in which we were involved integrates individual counselling, therapeutic group work, family mediation and educational workshops. Group sessions provide spaces for men to explore issues related to violence, masculinity, anger and risky behaviour. Rather than acting on behalf of clients, the programme fosters a partnership that encourages responsibility and self-empowerment.

Empathy is central to this work; however, it is insufficient on its own. Upholding the ethical standards of the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) requires balancing compassion with honesty and challenge. Empathy must not become collusion. Men are encouraged to reflect on their choices, acknowledge harm and take responsibility for change.

One male participant reflected: "I have realised that I am not too old to learn. What you share with me, every night before I sleep, I look at it, and it helps keep me in line." This narrative illustrates the potential for transformation when men are engaged without judgment yet within clear boundaries.

Reflective realisation: "What I knew until I didn't"

As newly qualified social workers, we face a lack of practical experience in working with gender-based violence, as such experience is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire during undergraduate field practice. During induction into organisations, emphasis often leaned towards knowledge of administrative systems rather than the practical application of legislation in intervention work. This highlighted a concerning prioritisation of maintaining filing systems as a form of box-ticking compliance over delivering effective, theory-informed services.

Moreover, many social work theories originate in Western contexts and prioritise individual autonomy, whereas South African communities frequently operate through collective decision-making. This divergence necessitates adaptation and cultural humility. Balancing bureaucratic

demands for statistical outputs with the qualitative depth of human engagement requires ethical resilience and creativity.

These experiences reshaped our professional identity from expert helper to collaborative facilitator. As Engelbrecht and Ncube (2021) note, many newly qualified social workers experience a profound reality shock upon entering the field, underscoring the need for stronger integration between social work education, supervision of newly qualified practitioners and frontline practice.

Implications for training, policy and practice

Insights from this reflective journey carry significant implications for social work training and policy in South Africa. Education must place greater emphasis on trauma-informed practice, gender-based violence-specific interventions and systemic advocacy. Newly appointed social workers require supervision that recognises emotional labour and ethical complexity. They need comprehensive training and induction across all aspects of victim empowerment programmes, as much learning occurs through direct client engagement and consultation with experienced colleagues. Supervision that is conducted predominantly by phone and occurs only on a quarterly basis is insufficient, as it often leaves social workers to absorb the secondary trauma they experience on their own, without opportunities for debriefing over extended periods.

CONCLUSION

Meaningful victim empowerment requires a shift from reactive, crisis-driven responses to sustained, adequately resourced and integrated interventions. Grassroots organisations must be strengthened through long-term funding, trauma-informed supervision and robust intersectoral accountability. Survivor voices should be central to intervention design rather than peripheral to institutional processes. Without addressing structural inequalities and practitioner wellbeing, victim empowerment risks remaining rhetorical rather than a lived reality for survivors of gender-based violence. Social workers must resist normalising resource-constrained environments and inadequate supervision, and advocate for healthier, supportive conditions conducive to rendering effective victim empowerment services. Policymakers and funders should prioritise sustainable support for community-based programmes engaging both women and men. Investment in training, supervision and staffing is essential to ensure ethical oversight and prevent practitioner burnout. Silence around these challenges perpetuates the impression that everything is functioning effectively.

The journey from theory to practice in the victim empowerment sector reveals a vital truth: understanding is incomplete without lived experience. Working daily with women survivors, men in intervention programmes and families affected by gender-based violence challenges assumptions about victimhood and perpetration. These roles are fluid, shaped by personal histories and social contexts.

Ultimately, theory gains relevance only when interpreted through practice to promote justice, dignity and empowerment. For newly qualified social workers in South Africa and beyond, effective gender-based violence intervention must be reflexive, contextually grounded and

ethically resilient. Walking alongside those served, listening deeply and learning continuously remains the most powerful tool for social change.

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