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School of Human and Community Development

Title:

Experiences of social workers regarding remote working during the National State of Disaster as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of Protea Glen Service Point, Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province.

Masters in Occupational Social Work (By Coursework & Research)

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented social workers with unparalleled challenges. This qualitative case study examines the experiences of eight social workers and two supervisors from the Gauteng Department of Social Development, Protea Glen Service Point in Soweto, focusing on their adaptation to remote work arrangements during lockdowns and social distancing measures. Semi-structured interviews revealed significant obstacles, including shortages of laptops, vehicles, cell phones, and communication challenges. However, benefits such as improved work-life balance, improved technology skills and increased adaptability were also identified. The findings highlight the resilience of these essential service providers as well as their capacity for professional growth despite adversity. The study recommends enhancing support networks for social workers, improving resource accessibility, and developing legislation to better manage remote work dynamics ensuring that these professionals remain effective in responding to crises.

Keywords: *Social Workers, COVID-19, Remote Work, Challenges, Benefits, Supervisors, Service Delivery, Occupational Social Work*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The year 2020 brought unexpected changes to how people worldwide interacted in various settings, including public places, family environments, and workplaces. Following an outbreak of coronavirus disease in late 2019, initially reported in Wuhan, China, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified it as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and urged governments to prepare for its first wave. Low-income countries experienced the highest average excess mortality in 2020, at over 34%, followed by middle-income countries at almost 14%, and high-income countries at about 10% (Sanchez, 2021). In response, many countries, including South Africa, implemented nationwide lockdowns. During these lockdowns, employees were encouraged to work remotely from home (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

According to Buglass et al. (2021, p. 462) remote working is defined as a “flexible work arrangement that allows employees to periodically, regularly, or exclusively perform work for their employers from home or another remote location equipped with the necessary computer-based technology to communicate with the central organisation.”

Historically, remote working was joint among employees with high job autonomy, such as managers and self-employed individuals. The concept of remote work has evolved significantly over the past century, with early theoretical discussions dating back to the 1920s and practical implementations emerging by the mid-1900s (Bick et al., 2024). The COVID-19 outbreak required employees with less job autonomy to adapt to remote work (Buglass et al., 2021). As a result, social workers also had to adopt remote working due to the pandemic.

South Africa's work culture is mainly focused on the office setting. The rise in the popularity of remote work can be ascribed to several factors, including the development of new technology, the changing requirements of various industries, the impact of globalization, and the advancement of both enterprises and individuals. A project team is needed to execute and commission a project properly. Businesses are being compelled to shift to a more virtual model of business. This is because people working on a single project may be spread across South Africa (Iorio & Taylor, 2014). Creasy and Carnes (2017) agree, pointing out that members of a corporation today are frequently dispersed throughout multiple countries' borders.

The South African government implemented a National State of Disaster under the Disaster Management Act, No. 57 of 2002, introducing five lockdown levels to control the spread of COVID-19 (Republic of South Africa, 2002). Five levels of lockdown were introduced as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. Level 5 had a total shutdown, and the movement of people was highly restricted, whereas at Level 1, restrictions were eased. The Gauteng Department of Social Development released Occupational Healthy Safety circulars each time the government declared changes in lockdown levels. These circulars provided guidelines and percentage figures for the number of employees expected in the workplace per day. Employees reported for duty every week using a rotation method. This strategy was employed to reduce the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020).

In March 2020, the Department of Social Development rolled out an Occupational Health and Safety circular (2020) which addressed workplace preparedness for COVID-19. Employees were provided with guidelines for reducing the risk of infection and transmission. These guidelines emphasised wearing masks, washing and sanitizing hands, monitoring body temperature using scanning devices, encouraging sick employees to stay home, and moving from face-to-face meetings to virtual, e.g., Teams, Skype, video calling, or WhatsApp. They also removed biometric access control, replacing it with touchless biometrics. Employees were encouraged to fill in manual registers before entering Departmental offices. In those registers, visitors and employees were expected to provide their identification details, including their home addresses, in case they meet an infected person in the office.

When the president stated that the country would be transitioning to adjusted level 4, the Department of Public Service and Administration (2021) issued another circular outlining workplace regulations. According to this circular, an accounting officer in each government department must ensure that no more than 30% of the building's capacity is occupied. They must incorporate shift work, rotation, and remote working tactics while ensuring staff have the equipment to operate remotely.

The DPSA (2022) circular discussed the President's termination of the National State of Disaster on April 4, 2022. However, transitional measures such as mask use and sanitization will remain in effect if COVID-19 exists. All employees were encouraged to return to full-time work while simultaneously being immunized. Dr. Joe Phaahla, South Africa's then-Health Minister, said on June 22, 2022, that mask-wearing is no longer required. He also mentioned that businesses and service providers can determine whether to require people accessing their premises to wear masks. This means that the government repealed all the regulations put in place to regulate and limit the spread of COVID-19.

1.1 Problem statement and Rationale for the study

The COVID-19 pandemic presented workplace issues due to national lockdowns and the implementation of business continuity plans. One of the tactics for changing workplace operations was to implement remote working (hybrid strategy), and the social work profession The Gauteng Department of Social Development employed this work style during the pandemic. With this arrangement, some employees worked on-site, while others worked remotely and rotated regularly. Some literature discusses the ethical implications of remote working in the social work profession and the use of technology, including breaches of confidentiality, difficulties in maintaining professional boundaries, and a lack of privacy with technology during online consultations (Reamer 2017).

In addressing the rationale for undertaking this study, the researcher feels it will contribute significantly to social work theory, practice, and policy. In South Africa the Department of Social Development in South Africa is the primary employer of social workers. Social work is a connection-based activity, and the interaction between the practitioner and the client is fundamental to this profession, whether in micro, mezzo, or macro settings (Pascoe, 2021). It is therefore crucial to explore how the social workers adapted to the introduction of remote work during the pandemic.

In terms of practice and policy, the researcher expects that the study's findings will help the Gauteng Department of Social Development enhance the measures used to manage remote working operations and implement policies to control social work services. It is also vital to conduct this study because the effect of the pandemic can still be felt today and there is a need to explore the experiences of frontline workers such as social workers on their experiences of the pandemic. In addition, there has been minimal research on social workers' personal

experiences during the epidemic and how they adjusted to distant employment. As a result, any social work study contributing to the social work agenda on natural disasters and how social workers intervene during these trying times should be supported and carried out.

1.2 Research questions

The following are the research questions that guided this study.:

- What is the remote working model and its implications for the social work profession in the South African context, considering the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the experiences of social workers in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province regarding remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the experiences of social work supervisors in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development within the Gauteng province regarding remote working and the performance of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What is the role of occupational social work in providing support to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Which guidelines or measures may be proposed on how social work interventions through remote working should be implemented and managed?

1.3 Aim and Objectives

1.3.1 Research Aim

This study aimed to explore the experiences of social workers in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in Gauteng province on remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3.2 Research objectives

The following were the objectives of this study:

- To highlight the remote working model and its implications for the social work profession in the South African context considering the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To explore the experiences of social workers in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province regarding remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To examine the experiences of social work supervisors in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province regarding remote working and the performance of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To establish the role of occupational social work in providing support to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To propose guidelines or measures on how social work interventions through remote working should be implemented and managed.

1.4 Definition of Concepts

1.4.1 Coronavirus disease

Coronaviruses are a collective of viruses that can cause respiratory illnesses in human beings. They have crown-shaped spikes on the surface and are a combination of severe acute respiratory syndrome and Middle East respiratory syndrome (Dhole & Koley, 2021).

1.4.2 Remote work

Hatch (2006) defines remote working as a process involving technology and not requiring an employee's physical presence in the workplace.

1.4.3 Social Work

According to NASW (1973, as cited in Kirst Ashman, 2010, p.5), "Social work is a professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating social conditions favourable to achieve this goal. It involves the application of social work values, principles, and techniques.

1.4.4 National state of disaster

A natural disaster is a catastrophic event caused by natural forces such as floods, droughts, wildfires, or pandemics, leading to widespread damage, loss of life, and disruption of essential services (Zibulewsky, 2001). In South Africa, when a natural disaster or similar emergency overwhelms the ability of local and provincial governments to respond effectively, the National State of Disaster may be declared under the Disaster Management Act, No. 57 of 2002.

1.5 Overview of the research report

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter explores context and background of remote working in the social work profession, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem statement highlights the challenges posed by remote work, including communication barriers, ethical concerns, and service delivery constraints in social work. The rationale underscores the relevance of understanding remote work in social services to inform future policies. The study is guided by specific research questions, aims, and objectives that seek to investigate the experiences of social workers and supervisors. Key concepts, such as remote work, occupational social work, and hybrid work models, are defined to establish conceptual clarity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical analysis of existing research on remote work, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the definitions and frameworks of remote work, its historical evolution, and its implications in the social work profession. The chapter also explores the benefits and challenges of remote working models, with a focus on occupational social work and the role of supervisors in managing remote teams. Additionally, systems theory is introduced as the guiding theoretical framework to understand how various components within the work environment interact in remote settings. The emergence of hybrid work models is also discussed as a potential future trajectory for social work.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter provides insight about the research methodology used for the study. A qualitative case study design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of social workers and supervisors during the shift to remote work. The target population consists of

social workers and supervisors from the Gauteng Department of Social Development (Protea Glen service point, Soweto). Sampling procedures, including purposive sampling, are discussed. The data collection method involves semi-structured interviews with ten participants (eight social workers and two supervisors). Thematic analysis is employed for data interpretation. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, informed consent, and adherence to ethical research principles are also addressed.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative data, highlighting key themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. The analysis reveals how remote work influenced professional responsibilities, communication, and service delivery in social work. Challenges such as technological constraints, client accessibility issues, and emotional exhaustion are discussed, along with coping mechanisms employed by social workers. The findings are interpreted within the context of existing literature and systems theory, providing insights into how social work structures adapted to remote work challenges.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter highlights key findings, emphasizing their implications for workplace preparedness, crisis management, and organisational resilience in social work. It offers recommendations on how social work organizations can improve remote work policies, enhance supervisor support, and mitigate challenges associated with digital service delivery. Additionally, it identifies future research directions to further explore long-term implications of remote work in social services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a foundational understanding of the shift to remote work within the social work profession, particularly in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By outlining the context, problem statement, and rationale for this study, it has highlighted the critical need to explore the experiences of social workers and supervisors in the Gauteng Department of Social Development as they adapted to new ways of working. The research questions, aims, and objectives set a clear path for investigating the implications of remote work on social work practice, while the definitions of key concepts provide a solid framework for analysis.

1. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The second chapter of this study provides a comprehensive literature analysis on remote work during the COVID-19 epidemic. It discusses the definition and meaning of remote work, the global COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the workplace, features of remote working models in social work, opportunities and challenges encountered in remote work, the role of supervisors in remote work environments, occupational social work; systems theory as a framework for understanding remote work dynamics; and the emergence of hybrid work models.

2.1 Concept of Remote Work

The concept of remote working, made possible by digital technology, allows employees to fulfil their jobs outside of the typical office environment. This paradigm has acquired significant traction, particularly since COVID-19, due to its flexibility and autonomy, which improve job satisfaction and work-life balance (Ferrara et al., 2022). Remote work can lead to social and professional isolation, affecting employees' feelings of community and career advancement (Charalampous et al., 2018; Nikiforova et al., 2023).

Since the 1970s, technological improvements have significantly impacted the evolution of remote working, making it more viable and efficient. Hybrid work models, which blend remote and in-office work, provide a balanced approach that retains the advantages of both environments (Charalampous et al., 2018). To effectively assist employees, remote work requires clear communication, defined expectations, and a robust digital infrastructure (Ferrara et al., 2022; Parkhomenko et al., 2019). As remote work evolves, it will likely remain a critical component of the modern workplace.

2.2 Global Impact of Covid-19 on Work Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted significant disparities in how wealthy and poor countries adapted to remote work and managed the crisis. According to Chancel and Vouturiez (2021) wealthy countries generally had the resources to transition smoothly into remote work,

leveraging existing infrastructure such as reliable internet access, digital tools, and adequate office spaces. In contrast, developing countries faced numerous challenges that made remote work difficult.

Wealthy countries implemented stringent lockdowns alongside robust economic support measures early on. This approach allowed them to manage both health risks and economic impacts more effectively than developing nations (Ferreira,2022).

According to Cojocaru et al., (2022) developing countries relied more heavily on stringent measures but lacked sufficient economic backup due to resource constraints. In countries like South Africa, issues such as lack of office spaces, insufficient equipment e.g. cellphones, and limited vehicles for official duties hindered effective remote work arrangements. This further widened the gap between those who could adapt to new working conditions and those who could not.

The effect of COVID-19 on the global work environment is deep and complex. It has touched every area of professional life, from how people work to how they collaborate and relate in business. A good example of these changes is the widespread use of remote working brought about by the pandemic. Organisations had to establish remote working structures immediately following the lockdowns and social distancing guidelines implemented by their respective governments (Giorgi et al., 2020). This hastened digital transformation efforts, necessitating increased reliance on digital tools, virtual collaboration platforms, and cloud technologies for homeworking to be successful (Kniffin et al., 2020).

In response to the disease outbreak, highly severe health and safety precautions were implemented in workplaces to protect those employees who were still working from their offices (Shaukat et al., 2020). They always included mandatory mask wearing while at work, maintaining social distance among employees on the premises, regular disinfection of common areas within the work environment such as meeting rooms, and so on; additionally, temperature checks were performed regularly, and contact tracing methods were used as needed.

Employers had to provide and maintain effective ventilation systems in enclosed locations. Furthermore, several organizations developed flexible work schedules, which included overlapping shifts or working partially remotely, among other things (Giorgi et al., 2020). This flexibility tried to achieve a balance between keeping people safe on the one hand and ensuring continuity and productivity inside an organization on the other.

Furthermore, individuals employed in frontline roles like healthcare providers, retail attendants, delivery personnel in logistics companies, and those working for essential service providers were at higher risk due to direct exposure to the virus (Mhango et al., 2020). Thus, their employers had to develop extra measures to ensure their safety, such as paying them additional allowances for hazards related to this job category, providing mental health support services, and opportunities to get tested for COVID-19, among other healthcare needs.

The epidemic significantly impacted employees' emotional well-being during this time. This resulted in a rise in cases of stress, anxiety, burnout, and other related illnesses (Giorgi et al., 2020). To assist them better, employers implement initiatives to support their mental health, such as therapy sessions timed at convenient hours based on the individual's availability.

Financially, many people lost their employment or were forced to take unpaid leave, causing significant worry about economic stability. Small-scale enterprises and industries such as tourism, hospitality, and airlines were hit the hardest by these effects, forcing organizations to cut costs by downsizing some departments while rationalizing others to create new revenue streams where possible while reviewing business models for sustainability. Despite all odds, COVID-19 has shown that firms can weather any storm provided they stay nimble and innovative (Giorgi et al., 2020).

2.3 Impact of COVID 19 in South Africa

As of October 24, 2020, South Africa had over 2.9 million infections and approximately 88,900 deaths. By April 2024, these numbers had increased to about 4.08 million cases and over 102,595 deaths (Statistic SA, 2024). The first case was reported on March 5, 2020. The vaccination campaign began on February 17, 2021. By late October that year, around 21.3 million doses had been administered (Madhi et al., 2021.)

schools were closed nationwide due to the pandemic. This affected nearly all educational levels from pre-school through secondary school. The pandemic exacerbated existing educational inequalities with disadvantaged learners facing greater barriers in accessing remote learning resources. Following school reopening, there was a sharp drop of about 48.2% in learner attendance rates due to various socioeconomic factors (Van der berg et al., 2022).

The pandemic also led to a significant economic downturn. The COVID 19 restrictions also significantly impacted informal businesses as many workers lost income without access to financial support systems during this time. According to Enwereji (2022) By November 2020,

about 42.7% of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises had closed due to the pandemic and lockdown measures. Sectors like construction (14.2%), food & beverage (9.9%), and hospitality (9.7%) were severely affected.

2.4 Characteristics of Social Worker's Remote Working Models

Remote working approaches in social work have evolved significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Social work has traditionally relied on face-to-face encounters, but it must quickly adapt to distant service delivery to retain important services and emphasize safety (Cook et al., 2020). This change has been characterized by innovative technological integration, with modern technology such as video conferencing, telemedicine platforms, and digital case management systems to give services remotely. With these tools, social workers can continue to engage their clients even when they are not physically there; they can assess and suggest interventions via such media (Shanu et al., 2023).

Additionally, there is a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration within remote working models, which has resulted in collaborations between healthcare providers and communities. This type of relationship provides comprehensive support to clients, particularly those with diverse needs that span multiple fields (Yu et al., 2020). Another key element of remote working models is flexible service delivery, which considers clients' schedules and preferences. This strategy allows persons who might otherwise be excluded owing to different barriers associated with traditional face-to-face service provision to get assistance promptly (Jain et al., 2023). According to Wang, Liu, Qian, and Parker (2020), teletherapy and remote counseling have been fully integrated into social workers' remote working models to provide mental health support services continually without the need to meet physically with the client.

Among other things within these transitional periods are virtual classrooms and online workshops, known as virtual training and education, that have come up to maintain field placements despite the challenges faced and enhance skill development when everything has been digitized. Mantulak, Arundel, & Csernik (2021). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2020) state that digital case management systems are widely utilized because they allow social workers to

preserve safe records for their clients, track progress, and coordinate with other team members to ensure compliance with statutory regulations.

Again, Cook et al. (2020) state that in this era where everything happens remotely, professional development and well-being of social work professionals have not been overlooked; for example, there are various support mechanisms such as virtual supervision sessions, peer support groups, online training modules, and others that help them grow professionally. However, despite the benefits of these advancements, remote service delivery models in social work have certain problems (Charalampous et al., 2018). These obstacles include, but are not limited to, privacy concerns, digital equity issues, and the necessity for constant training, among others.

2.4 Opportunities and Challenges Associated with Remote Work

Organizations and employees encounter various opportunities and challenges with remote work (Popovici & Popovici, 2020). One major challenge is communication, as remote work heavily relies on digital platforms, which can lead to misunderstandings, especially when team members are in different time zones (Ferreira et al., 2021). This can hinder effective collaboration and teamwork, ultimately impacting productivity. Another significant challenge is the loneliness and isolation remote workers may experience due to the lack of social interaction and team spirit commonly found in traditional office settings (Chafi et al., 2021). These feelings can negatively impact mental health and motivation, reducing job satisfaction and performance. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is also difficult remotely (Panchuk, 2023). Although remote work offers flexibility, it can lead to burnout if not well managed, as the line between work and personal life blurs, resulting in decreased productivity.

On the positive side, remote work offers several benefits to both employers and employees. A key advantage is flexibility, allowing staff to organize their schedules based on individual preferences, leading to greater job satisfaction and potentially higher retention (Delany, 2021). Furthermore, companies can achieve significant cost savings with remote work by reducing expenses on office space, utilities, and travel allowances (Popovici & Popovici, 2020). Additionally, remote work allows organizations to access a global talent pool, promoting diversity and driving innovation (Haque, 2023).

Research also indicates that working outside the traditional office can enhance individual performance and overall productivity (Wang et al., 2020). Remote workers have more control over their environment and time, allowing them to concentrate more effectively on their tasks. However, organizations must address specific challenges to fully embrace a remote work culture, including communication barriers, feelings of isolation among employees, and potential technology issues (Contreras et al., 2020). Effective communication strategies, adequate technological support, and a focus on work-life balance are essential. Additionally, management should foster a supportive environment to maintain harmony across the organization.

2.5 Role of Supervisors in Remote Work Environments

In 2003, the National Department of Social Development and the South African Council for Social Service Professions identified social work supervision as a key strategy for retaining professionals in the field. The established framework for this supervision outlines the roles of various stakeholders—including the Department of Social Development, NGOs, other government departments, local authorities, and social workers in private practice—in implementing effective supervisory practices (DSD, 2012).

The strategy highlights supervision as a critical focus area to enhance professional retention, noting decreased productivity and service quality due to inadequate supervision. These issues are linked to high caseloads, emotional trauma experienced by workers, elevated stress from personal and professional demands, and insufficient resources to fulfill their responsibilities. Three primary supervision functions are identified: administrative, supportive, and educational.

1. **Administrative Function:** This section ensures that agency policies and procedures are executed accurately and successfully. The supervisor ensures that these policies are followed (Kadushin, 2002).
2. **Educational Function:** According to Kadushin and Harkness (2002), this function fills gaps in social workers' knowledge, abilities, and attitudes required for their positions. The goal is to improve the supervisees' competencies to carry out their tasks efficiently.
3. **Supportive Function:** This function increases employee morale and job satisfaction. It aims to foster a productive workplace while also assisting employees in managing job-related stressors, which can negatively influence service delivery if not addressed (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

Supervisors play an important role in remote working environments by facilitating good team dynamics and communication (Gong et al., 2022). They ensure that team members collaborate fluidly even when separated by long distances. To do so, they must monitor performance using data insights and frequent check-ins to provide timely feedback and fix issues as they arise (Gong et al., 2022). Furthermore, these managers develop employee solidarity by planning virtual team-building events that encouraging collaboration while generating positive, trusting cultures among teams (Sjöblom et al., 2022).

Supervisors in remote locations also help employees balance their personal and professional lives, provide emotional support, particularly during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic, provide technical assistance or training as needed, handle conflicts tactfully, and promote positive working environments (Maden-Eyiusta & Alparslan, 2022; Bunger et al., 2019). Again, they should demonstrate concern for subordinates' career growth by identifying development possibilities within or outside the business, as well as giving mentorship through training—all to boost professional success (Gong et al., 2022). Keeping up with changes such as flexible hours is an ongoing challenge that necessitates good communication skills, sensitivity to others' feelings, and the ability to adjust quickly, as well as knowledge of how various systems work, so that one can oversee prosperity and welfare among his or her employees who may never meet face-to-face (Pradipta & Martdianty, 2023).

2.6 Role of Occupational Social Work

Occupational social workers provide a healthy and supportive work environment at the organization's micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Du Plessis, 1994). Occupational social work safeguards workers' safety, mental health, and overall well-being inside organizations (Forgey et al., 2023). Occupational social workers are not limited to delivering employee support services. They also take on responsibilities that emphasize the client's identity as a worker in their family, workplace, and community (Mor Barak, 1999). Occupational social workers are vital in addressing workplace stress that can contribute to burnout. As a result, they offer brief counselling sessions and other micro-level intervention measures to improve employee mental health (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2021).

Another important function of occupational social workers is to resolve organizational issues by building positive relationships between employers and employees. This can be accomplished by mediating between conflicting parties, promoting communication, and implementing mechanisms to encourage good working relationships among employees and a favorable work culture (Sen, 2021). In addition, field personnel plan and conduct training programs as part of mezzo interventions. Stress management, work-life balance, personal growth and development, skills training, diversity, equity and inclusive training, financial management, and other topics should be covered regularly to improve workers' skill knowledge levels and job satisfaction (Tétreault et al., 2020).

At the macro level, occupational social work promotes occupational health and safety as an organizational intervention. It accomplishes this by identifying workplace hazards or risks and devising strategies to mitigate them. Furthermore, companies need to develop rules promoting safe working conditions (Chen, 2021). They also advocate for rights-based legislation in the workplace by influencing governments and employer organizations to ensure fair treatment of employees while at work (Hocking, 2017). Occupational social work fosters healthy working environments, meets employee needs, promotes mental health, builds constructive labor relations, and advocates for worker rights. Furthermore, they administer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) designed to provide help or resources when individuals experience personal or job-related issues (Warren et al., 2017).

Occupational social work support systems were critical in delivering comprehensive treatment to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021). This includes but is not limited to counselling services, advice on how to fit into their new work surroundings, informing them of what is expected regarding safety measures, and exchanging mental health materials, among other things (Okafor, 2021). It is important to remember that these professionals advocated for the safety needs of specific groups who may be more affected due to their condition or being in high-risk areas while also focusing on general protection (Giorgi et al., 2020).

This has been accomplished through a variety of measures, including programs to help workers manage stress and, most significantly, fostering conducive working environments in which all employees feel comfortable (Labrague, 2020). Occupational social work has helped provide psychosocial support for employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing information about safety precautions is important, but addressing the needs of at-risk groups is also crucial (Slavković, Sretenovic & Bugarčić, 2021).

2. 7 Theoretical Frameworks

2.7.1 Systems Theory

Systems theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding systems' complex nature and behaviour. Systems theory sees systems as interconnected entities whose parts interact with and influence one another within specific constraints. These borders might be physical, intellectual, or theoretical, and they serve to divide the system from its surroundings (Adams et al. 2014).

The relationships and interactions between these components generate new system-wide features. Systems theory provides a comprehensive approach, examining systems' interactions, structures, processes, and feedback loops. Because systems frequently display dynamic and nonlinear behavior, changing just one system component can generate significant changes throughout it (Chen & Stroup, 1993). Such thinking is helpful in complicated or dynamic contexts where numerous variables interact to produce results. Furthermore, systems theory is transdisciplinary, with applications ranging from sociology to biology, engineering, management, and social work (Mansour, 2000). This method fosters collaboration and understanding across disciplines by offering a common vocabulary and set of concepts for evaluating systems of all types.

In this study, systems theory is used as an analytical framework. Examining how working remotely affects communication, organizational structure, and workflow is helpful. It also helps to understand job performance indicators, patterns of collaboration among employees, and supervisory roles when managing teams working from home, resulting in appropriate measures and strategies that can be implemented in the context of social work practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.7.2 Hybrid Work Model

The term 'hybrid work model' refers to a method of combining office-based and remote settings to maximize the benefits of each. This technique is gaining popularity among organizations worldwide as people seek sustainable working methods that align with the infrastructure and foundational elements required for success (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023). Knowledge workers have quickly adopted this paradigm, which provides them with higher job satisfaction and a better work-life balance (Bloom et al., 2022). For small organizations, carefully implementing hybrid work can increase employee contentment, attractiveness, and competitiveness, yet there may be problems particular to such enterprises that necessitate specific management approaches.

Furthermore, real benefits of hybrid working arrangements include lower staff turnover rates, higher employee morale, and increased production yield. (Martinez-Olvera, 2009). It is a double-edged blade, allowing companies and employees to thrive if the former experiences increased creativity, well-being, and work-life balance (Singh & Joshi, 2022). This model allows for greater staff flexibility, increasing job satisfaction. Hence, many organizations prefer

to use it (Santillan et al., 2023). In general, hybrid work models are gaining popularity because they combine the benefits of telecommuting while retaining critical features when individuals return to physical workplaces, supporting adaptability and equilibrium at work (Monje-Amor, 2023).

The study employed a hybrid work model to investigate social workers' and supervisors' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Gauteng province. Evaluating the effects on output, job satisfaction, and professional practices in social work, which was previously done face-to-face, provided insights into the problems encountered regarding gains obtained through this new method. These findings not only assist us in understanding the dynamics involved when one stays away from the office, but they also suggest practical approaches for promoting employee wellness while assuring successful service delivery during times of crisis and change.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this section has highlighted remote work's diverse repercussions and implications, amplified by the global COVID-19 epidemic. These include benefits from flexibility, productivity gains, challenges from communication obstacles, and social isolation. Furthermore, the review emphasizes the crucial role that managers and occupational social workers can play in creating a positive remote work environment. Looking ahead, systems theory-inspired solutions will serve—and be required—in slowing down remote work for greater efficacy and dealing thoroughly with its issues. Furthermore, evolving hybrid work models present a promising path for explicit integration of the best from remote and office-based work environments to optimize organizational performance and employee well-being.

2. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the research technique used in the study, emphasizing the effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on social work practices. The chapter begins with a discussion of the research methodology and design, which used a case study approach to acquire a thorough knowledge of the issues that social workers and supervisors encountered during this unusual period. The targeted population included social workers and supervisors from the Gauteng Department of Social Development, specifically at the Protea Glen service point in Soweto. This chapter further discusses the sample procedures, data collection methods, and analytical techniques needed to interpret the findings. Ethical concerns are also addressed to ensure that the research follows established rules for conducting studies with human beings.

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative research design was selected for this study due to its capacity of being able to explore the subjective meanings individuals construct in relation to social phenomena, typically within real-world settings. This approach facilitates a rich understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher chose a qualitative approach because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by social workers and social work supervisors during the pandemic within their real-world context. By investigating these issues qualitatively, the researcher aimed to uncover nuanced insights into their perceptions of changes in work practices at the Gauteng's Department of Social Development due to COVID-19 restrictions. This technique provided useful insights based on their actual experiences. The qualitative method was judged more suitable since it allowed participants to express their opinions and thoughts without restriction. By taking this method, the study hoped to capture the multifaceted reality faced by social workers during a major global crisis, so leading to a better understanding of the problems and adaptations they faced.

3.2 Research Design

The study used a case study design method, which Avery et al. (2011) characterized as a methodology for developing a thorough grasp of a complicated subject in its real-world setting.

A case study is a detailed look at one or more situations over time, using information from many sources and focusing on a specific place and time (De Vos et al., 2014). In this study, social workers and supervisors were treated as a single case study, allowing for an in-depth examination of how they collectively adapted to the challenges of the pandemic within their shared work environment.

3.3 Population

The population for this study was made up of social workers and social work supervisors from the Gauteng Department of Social Development's Protea Glen service point in Soweto. De Vos et al. (2014) identified the study population as potential participants who shared the characteristics that the study sought to investigate.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Procedures

Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of the population. The research of this sample provided insights on the overall population. The idea was that what was revealed about the sample would hold true for the entire population (De Vos, 2014). For the purposes of this study, a purposive, non-probability sampling approach was employed to select participants. Creswell and Poth (2018), define it as a method where researchers intentionally select participants based on predefined criteria and characteristics relevant to the research objectives. This approach is particularly suitable when the research design necessitates an in-depth analysis of a relatively small sample, allowing for a focused exploration of the phenomenon under investigation.

When using a purposive sampling technique, the researcher includes participants who possess certain characteristics (De Vos et al., 2014). Because this researcher concentrated on a small sample of subjects, this sampling approach was deemed the most appropriate instrument. Participants in this study comprised eight social workers and two supervisors directly engaged in social work practice within the Gauteng Department of Social Development. Social workers were included based on their active caseload and a minimum of five years of experience in the field. Supervisors were included based on their direct oversight of social work teams and five years of experience in a supervisory role. This purposive selection ensured that participants possessed direct and relevant experience to address the research questions. All participants held a professional social work qualification.

The study did not include social workers who joined the department following the outbreak. Other employees, such as social auxiliary workers, administrative personnel, and transportation

officers, were also eliminated due to their little engagement with clients and supportive positions that mostly focused on administrative activities.

3.5 Research Instrument(s) and Pre-Testing

Data collection for this study was primarily conducted using semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection method that utilizes a pre-determined interview schedule as a guide, while allowing for flexibility in questioning and exploration of emerging themes (De Vos, 2014). This approach was deemed particularly suitable for this study as it enabled the researcher to gather in-depth information about participants' perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions regarding their experiences of rendering social work services during the COVID 19 pandemic, while also providing the opportunity to probe for richer detail and nuanced understanding. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with the interview schedule to familiarize themselves with the topics to be discussed, allowing them to thoughtfully consider their responses. To enhance the validity of the data obtained, interviews were conducted with two distinct groups of social development staff: social workers and supervisors, each of whom hold critical roles in the delivery of social work services within the community. The interview schedule was pre-tested with one social worker and one supervisor to assess clarity, relevance, and flow. Participants involved in this pilot testing phase were excluded from the final study sample.

3.6 Data Collection

The researcher employed one-on-one interviews to collect data from participants. This method was chosen for its suitability in gathering rich, qualitative insights into the participants' experiences. One-on-one interviews, in the context of this study, refer to a data collection technique involving direct, individual conversations between the researcher and each participant. Hashemnezhad (2015) highlights a key characteristic of semi-structured interviews: the interviewer guides the discussion with a pre-determined set of questions while remaining flexible to explore emerging themes based on the interviewee's responses, acknowledging the limited control over the interview's direction. The timing of these interviews, following the conclusion of the National State of Disaster, proved beneficial as individuals had largely returned to full-time work and were more at ease with in-person interactions, regardless of mask usage. To ensure participant well-being, the interview structure began with less sensitive questions, building rapport before delving into more delicate topics. Furthermore, participants were informed about and offered access to therapy and the

department's staff wellness program, Zinakekele, should the interviews evoke any distressing emotions.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of giving order, structure, and significance to the vast amount of information gathered during research (De Vos et al., 2014). According to Almeida and Ferreira (2020), thematic analysis is a frequent for analysing semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) established the term thematic analysis to describe the method used to analyse the findings. The authors proposed a six-phase structure for data analysis:

Familiarizing with data: Reading transcripts and actively observing meanings and patterns in data while putting down ideas and potential codes.

Generating initial codes: While developing a codebook, create basic codes that describe data meanings and patterns.

Searching for themes: Grouping extracts with similar codes together to create themes.

Reviewing themes: Demonstrating trends and patterns in data by combining various codes and identifying sub-themes.

Defining and naming themes: Reviewing themes to ensure sufficient information supports them while merging similar themes.

Producing the report: Formulating a narrative from these themes to justify validity using direct quotes from gathered data alongside personal interpretations.

3.7 Ensuring Research Trustworthiness

Understanding the precision and correctness of study findings is crucial to credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed tactics for increasing credibility, such as triangulation, sustained engagement with data, persistent observation, member checks, and peer debriefing. The researcher used triangulation, gathering information from social workers and supervisors at Gauteng's Department of Social Development. Member checks were also used by discussing research findings with participants and requesting clarification or adjustments.

Dependability examines the consistency of research results, ensuring that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. Explaining the research procedures used in this study extensively helps to achieve dependability. An audit trail, documenting the process of

data collection, analysis, and interpretation, can further support dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings. Transferability can be enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the research context and the assumptions central to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed description of circumstances through literature review contribute to this.

Confirmability establishes that the interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, not from the researcher's own biases or imagination. It ensures that the findings are shaped by the participants' narratives and words (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of each data analysis step. This involved summarising the substance of each interview question during data collection to look for overlapping themes. Reflexivity, where the researcher examines their background and position to understand how these influence the research process, also supports confirmability. Data reliability was addressed through triangulation of data sources and the use of audio recordings to ensure accurate transcription and analysis of the interviews.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) proposed, informed consent involves presenting pertinent information, allowing potential participants to determine whether to participate while assuring understanding. Obtaining consent is morally crucial, thus consent forms were created for individuals to examine and sign before participating in the study.

Voluntary Participation: To ensure ethical research practices, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of interviews (De Vos et al., 2014). Potential participants were provided with information sheets (see Annexure B) detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time, allowing them to make an informed decision about their involvement.

Privacy/Anonymity/Confidentiality: Privacy is defined as individuals' ability to regulate access to their ideas or behaviours (Monette et al., 2010). Participants' privacy was safeguarded by obtaining informed consent before their involvement in the study. During the consent process, they were thoroughly briefed on the study's purpose, the nature of the questions they would face, how their data would be stored and utilized, and their right to withdraw from the

study at any time without facing any consequences. The interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure that conversations could not be overheard.

Prior to the interviews, participants received detailed information sheets that explained the study's purpose, data collection methods, and the handling of their personal information. They were assured that only data pertinent to the research objectives would be collected.

Anonymity: In qualitative research, anonymity refers to keeping participants' identities secret, ensuring that a person will never be traceable from the data presented about them. Anonymity can be difficult to guarantee in qualitative research. Complete anonymity means that no one, including the researcher, can link the data to a specific individual (Tolish, 2004). While achieving complete anonymity in qualitative research is difficult, measures were implemented to protect participants' identities. They were informed that their names and other identifying details would not appear in any reports or publications. To reduce the likelihood of identification, participants were assigned pseudonyms

Confidentiality: Confidentiality refers to the researcher's obligation to protect participants' identities and prevent unauthorized access to the data collected from them. This means safeguarding the information shared by participants in a relationship of trust, with the expectation that it will not be disclosed to others without permission, except in ways consistent with the original agreement made through informed consent (De Vos, et., 2014). Confidentiality was strictly upheld throughout the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and accessible only to the researcher. All data, including interview transcripts and consent forms, were stored in a password-protected iCloud account, accessible solely to the researcher.

Debriefing Participants: Debriefing plays a crucial role in studies involving human subjects. It ensures that participants are treated respectfully and have a clear understanding of the research in which they took part. Additionally, it also fosters trust between the researcher and participants, enhancing the overall integrity of the research process (Utreja, 2024). To ensure participant well-being during the study, details of a counselling service, Zinakekele Employee Health and Wellness, were provided to help them manage any emotions that may have been evoked.

Publication of Findings: Findings were produced in report style in accordance with De Vos et al (2014), providing clear presentation while resolving inadequacies discovered during

research and according to POPIA regulations governing personal information processing for research purposes.

3.9 Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

According to Ross et al. (2019) Limitations represent weaknesses within the study that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research. The goal of presenting limitations is to provide meaningful information to the reader. The researcher may have designed the study for a particular age group, sex, race, ethnicity, geographically defined region, or some other attribute that would limit to whom the findings can be generalized.

The study's small sample size of eight social workers and two supervisors from a single service point limits the generalizability of the findings to larger populations or different contexts. Additionally, the specific traits and experiences of these participants may not be representative of all social workers in Gauteng or elsewhere.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the boundaries established by a researcher within a study, determining what will be included and what will be excluded. These intentional choices are made to narrow the scope of the research, allowing for a focused examination of specific aspects that enhance the study's manageability and relevance to its goals (Ross et al.,2019).

The study focused specifically on the experiences of social workers adapting to remote work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, excluding other potential research questions related to social work practice.

It was delimited to social workers and supervisors within the Gauteng Department of Social Development, Protea Glen Service Point in Soweto, excluding other types of social work professionals or individuals in different geographical locations. The study's timeframe was limited to the period of lockdowns and social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It employed thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, which delimited it from using other qualitative data analysis techniques. The scope of the study explored the experiences of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic but did not explore other research questions.

3.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter provides a thorough explanation of the research technique used in this study. Using a case study design and purposive sampling, the study sought to collect rich qualitative data from social workers and supervisors on their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews encouraged free discourse, allowing participants to voice their thoughts and feelings about the changes in their work processes. Ethical concerns were crucial throughout the research procedure, ensuring that participants' rights and confidentiality were upheld. The study's findings are intended to provide useful insights into how social work practices might adjust in response to crises, hence improving service delivery in future emergencies.

3. CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

One could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic posed unique problems and disruptions to organizations across all industries, including those that impacted professional and personal lives. The social work profession faced problems as it attempted to clarify the intricacies of distant work, service delivery, and client interaction during a global crisis.

This chapter delves into the experiences of social workers and managers during the COVID-19 crisis, examining how it affected their personal and professional lives. This chapter uses thematic analysis of interviews with ten participants, eight social workers, and two supervisors to show difficulties, coping methods, and broader implications for workplace readiness and service delivery in the social work profession.

Table: Participant Demographics and Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Role (Social Worker/Supervisor)	Gender	Years of Experience	SACSSP Registered
SW1	social worker	Female	6 (Y)	Yes
SW2	Social worker	Female	8 (Y)	Yes
SW3	Social worker	Female	14 (Y)	Yes
SW4	Social worker	Female	11 (Y)	Yes
SW5	Social worker	Female	7 (Y)	Yes
SW6	Social worker	Female	10 (Y)	Yes
SW7	Social worker	Female	8 (Y)	Yes
SW8	Social worker	Female	15 (Y)	Yes
Supervisor 1	Social work supervisor	Female	6 (Y)	Yes
Supervisor 2	Social work supervisor	Female	17 (Y)	yes

4.2 Workplace Readiness amidst COVID-19

Assessing workplace competency during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical to maintaining operations and worker safety. The participants agreed on the level of preparedness; seven respondents expressed serious concerns about readiness deficiency, while only one participant, SW3, had a very positive attitude. Although relatively good in comparison to others, SW3's review identified areas for development. They say:

"It was 70% ready because sanitizers and face masks were provided."

While those limited health-related initiatives were present, the SW3 analysis revealed that additional steps were required to ensure full preparation. In sharp contrast, most interviewed respondents — SW1, SW2, SW4, SW5, SW6, SW7, and SW8 — cited a variety of shortcomings and challenges within their organization. SW1's experience expressed general sentiments, saying,

"The employer was not ready... we did not have enough tools of trade."

SW8 also reflected this attitude, stressing,

"They were also not ready resource-wise... We did not have laptops but expected to write a court report."

The supervisors underlined how unprepared their departments were for the COVID-19 epidemic. The first supervisor noted:

"Covid-19 took us by surprise because it was a new pandemic."

This lack of readiness even included basic tools like laptops, as Supervisor 1 observed,

"Social Workers did not have resources such as laptops."

As Supervisor 2 stressed, the unexpected nature of the circumstances added to the difficulties

"Remember, it was a sudden unknown to us, including senior management."

This lack of preparation impacted not only the availability of tools but also contributed to the staff's initial uncertainty and concern. These insights help to explain the resource limits and tardy reactions that inhibited efficient working conditions during the pandemic. The participants' points of view emphasized the importance of comprehensive readiness plans that include appropriate equipment, resource availability, safety procedures, and speedy crisis response. Filling these gaps not only ensures employee safety, but also helps to maintain operational efficiency in tough conditions.

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the critical importance of workforce readiness, particularly in fields that require successful interaction with at-risk constituents, such as social work. The study recalls the claims made by participants who confirmed their lack of readiness and alludes to Ashcroft et al.'s (2022) research, which found that health systems were far from prepared for the rapid transition to remote service delivery.

This study demonstrates that several institutions are not only underfunded but also lack adequate infrastructure, such as technology and safety equipment, supporting SW1 and SW8's claim of a lack of laptops and other relevant resources for the proper execution of their duties. Furthermore, the supervisors' perspective points to what appears to be a broader systemic issue. Cook and colleagues (2020) suggest that organizations should design development plans that incorporate physical assets as well as training and help for employees during emergencies. Under preparedness, such as a lack of laptops and sufficient health procedures, harms personnel and organizational success rates (Bhandari, 2020).

Another area where supervisors' insights are valuable is the promotion of crisis management approaches, which, according to the International Labour Organization (2020), should require organizations to develop adaptive operational strategies to deal with unforeseen circumstances. It demonstrates the need to build a state of readiness that includes not just safety and access to resources, but also speed of action, to create capacity to resist future disruptions.

4.3 The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Workers' Lives and Careers

The unexpected commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the subsequent lockdowns, left many people, particularly social workers, feeling terrified and disturbed. On March 27, 2020, lockdown measures were abruptly disclosed, causing uncertainty and worry about the future. SW1 and other social workers vividly described the dread caused by the unknown virus and the unique lockdown:

“It was such a horrible experience because you had to sleep until you no longer want to do it... My ribs were even painful...By then, it was scary, not knowing what was going to happen.”

The frank comment from SW1 brilliantly captures the bodily effects of this anxiety. Likewise, SW2 described the general anxiousness experienced during that period:

“We feared moving around, it was a scary situation, and I never thought we would overcome it.”

This view was supported by the supervisors, as supervisor 2 said,

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not an easy process. It was a very traumatic experience for us... when it was announced on the news, it came with a BANG! And we were all terrified, and it was so overwhelming for us

than us as forefront workers... We were scared ourselves. The sacredness was due to the lack of knowledge..."

The uncertainty of the future and growing professional responsibilities added greatly to the emotional stress and workplace tensions. Many people who experienced comparable worries and uncertainty throughout the epidemic may find resonance in these feelings, underscoring the great emotional toll such unparalleled worldwide disasters cause. This widespread worry was exacerbated by worries about job security and the pandemic's wider economic effects. SW2 further summed up these concerns nicely when it said,

"We questioned ourselves whether our jobs will remain or be terminated."

In an already difficult situation, the impending uncertainty regarding the stability of their livelihoods still brought another layer of worry and anxiety. Due to the compulsory stay-at-home orders, many social workers faced difficulties adapting to their daily routines. Their occupations became repetitive and monotonous because of this shift. This battle is summed up in SW1's reflection:

"The routine was sleeping and eating, watching TV, and hearing scary news of people dying because of Covid... It was something that I was not ready for."

This schedule change caused considerable mental strain and physical discomfort, highlighting the challenges of acclimating to the "new normal." Social workers experienced a sense of anxiety and stagnation due to the constant exposure to disturbing news and the lack of variation in their everyday duties. The supervisors provided insight into how working remotely affected the staff's performance. Supervisor 1 highlighted the challenges and commented,

"Performance is affected if you are not doing what your job description describes."

This, again, indicates a shift from defined roles occasioned by the pandemic. Supervisor 2 spoke of a demotivated workforce and said:

"It was not conducive people. There was a cultural shock, and employees were demotivated and reluctant to work."

This resistance resulted from several elements, such as a lack of tools, COVID-19 anxiety, and more work, which impair general performance. This underscores the need for coping strategies and assistance during these unprecedented times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant emotional and psychological impact on social workers. According to SW1 and the supervisors, social worker's dread and exhilaration during the lockdown were not isolated incidents, but rather part of a larger framework in which many other professionals faced similar challenges. According to Giorgi et al. (2020), the ongoing pandemic has exacerbated workplace mental health issues, particularly among individuals who work in high-stress workplaces, such as front-line workers.

SW2 stated that the possible threat to job security he perceived was like that described by Shaukat et al. (2020), who found that job loss concern and job-related tyranny had the biggest negative influence on the mental health of healthcare workers. According to SW1, the monotony, raptness, and loneliness associated with working from a great distance might lead to regression and a 'losing it' attitude. Supervisor 2 used the term "cultural shock," which aligns with Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska's (2021) research on how work environment shifts might reduce employee engagement and motivation.

During this pandemic, it has been observed that social workers endure emotional distress, highlighting the necessity for active coping techniques and supporting organizational frameworks. According to Ferrara et al. (2022), these types of crises can be minimized by support systems and organizational policies targeted at increasing resilience. The insights shared by participants highlight the necessity for social work organizations to invest in mental health and other coping methods to assist their members in such situations. In these situations, such moments necessitate the recognition that, in addition to crisis preparation, other processes focusing on worker welfare are required to ensure that the social workforce continues to perform vital functions in society.

4.4 Coping Strategies

Juggling professional commitments with family life has been particularly tough in light of the epidemic's remote work arrangements. In this regard, social workers have had varying experiences and employed various approaches to successfully navigate these challenges.

4.4.1 Juggling Work and Family Life

Social services professionals' experiences juggling work and family life while working remotely vary, reflecting the unique difficulties and strategies adopted by everyone. SW1 emphasized the advantage of not having young children—that working from home is easier—and stated:

"There was not much in terms of family life, but for me, working from home was easy because I do not have small kids."

SW2, who discovered flexibility thanks to client contacts via phone, also reflected this attitude, noting,

"It was flexible to balance because I only attended clients via telephone."

On the other hand, SW3 and SW6 found it challenging to balance jobs with family obligations, particularly with children around. SW3 mentioned,

"It was difficult, especially having the kids at home,"

SW6 underlined the significance of strategy, planning, and time management, but she also said,

"With the kids around, it was challenging, but I tried time management and structured my day."

SW4 said that she first had trouble finding balance and gathering work supplies, noting,

"At first, it was difficult. Luckily, I had my laptop because when Covid hit, we were using a desktop, meaning the desktop was left in the office."

Likewise, SW5 advocated dividing the day for family time and business, using evenings for professional activities, saying,

"During the day, I will have my family time, and at night, I will have time to do my work."

SW7 discovered success in properly managing time so they could meet obligations to both their family and their business.

"It was good because I could do both by managing my time."

SW8 talked about the difficulties younger children present, but she finally struck a balance by using boundaries and open communication, saying,

"It was difficult for me because I have younger children. As time went by, I managed to find balance."

These different experiences underline the need for adaptability, time management, and personal tactics to balance family life and job obligations under remote work conditions. Every social worker's method represents their situation and shows the resiliency and flexibility needed to negotiate such obstacles properly.

Social work professionals faced various issues with remote employment due to job and home life demands, making it difficult to strike a balance between the two. For example, SW1 and SW2 indicated that it was simpler to work remotely because they did not have toddlers at home, which is consistent with Ferrara et al.'s (2022) findings on the ease of flexing job roles. SW3 and SW6, on the other hand, were dissatisfied with the conflict. They emphasised the significance of good time management - a point of view reinforced by Charalampous et al. (2018), who underlined the need to properly manage work and non-work life. The narratives of SW5 and SW8 illustrate the importance of limiting and establishing operational limits and participating in active communication to achieve work-life balance, demonstrating the flexibility and persistence required to deal with these difficulties (Haque, 2023).

4.4.2 Managing Work Tools and Resources

For social workers, significant components of remote work experiences were the availability and administration of work equipment and resources. SW1 pointed out that a laptop was originally absent, making remote work difficult. Stressing the need to give family safety a top priority throughout the epidemic, they also said:

"I did not have a gadget such as a laptop. Another thing I had to do was protect your family from the virus."

This shows the great necessity of access to basic work instruments and the difficulties resulting from their scarcity. Conversely, SW4 related a different experience of owning their laptop, which helped with remote business tasks. They did, however, also note the early difficulties obtaining the required tools, saying,

"Luckily, I had my laptop because when Covid hit, we were using a desktop, which meant the desktop was left in the office."

This emphasises the flexibility needed to guarantee effective remote employment, particularly in unanticipated events like a pandemic. These encounters highlight the need for companies to give enough tools and resources for remote work and the resilience and adaptability of social

workers in overcoming obstacles and finding answers to guarantee effectiveness and production in their positions.

The provision of sufficient working equipment has had a significant impact on social workers' distant experiences. SW1 indicates that she could not work correctly without a laptop, demonstrating the bare minimal needs for operation. This has been observed in the field during crises, as highlighted by Bhandari (2020), who analyzes the negative effects of inadequate instruments. On the other hand, SW4's possession of a laptop highlights the importance of individual resources in enabling remote working. This underlines the importance of companies providing employees with the necessary tools and processes to help them achieve their goals (Gong et al., 2022). Some of these challenges may be manageable for social workers. This highlights an even greater need for systematic adaptation in the face of unforeseen occurrences (Cook et al., 2020).

4.4.3 Digital Technology Adoption

The participants discussed how they adjusted to new working conditions and used resources during the outbreak, emphasizing the difficulties and ingenuity involved in the process. SW4 discussed the rapid transition to online working, emphasizing the importance of adapting to digital platforms and the challenges that came with it.

"It forced us to move towards online working quickly. You would type a report and struggle to send it to court because no structures existed."

This highlights the importance of transitioning to digital processes and the first obstacles in the adaptation process. In response to the outbreak, SW8 considered the launch of a Business Continuity Plan (BCP), which displays organizational measures to retain operational continuity, even with potential delays and problems, thereby demonstrating:

"Our department introduced BCP (Business Continuity Plan), but it was introduced late, while Covid was already in place."

Despite the scheduling issues, this demonstrates the organization's proactive efforts to navigate the crisis and ensure service continuity. SW8 also discussed the use of cell phones and internet tools for meetings and communication, emphasizing the importance of using technology to facilitate distant work and teamwork and proclaiming,

"We also used cell phones to communicate with clients. Meetings were held online via Teams to discuss cases."

The supervisors support this view. Supervisors spoke on how consultation strategies with clients changed during the epidemic. Supervisor 1 underlined the use of cell phones for consultations and said,

"We used cell phones to consult, follow up on cases, or supervise social workers."

While distant communication was made possible by this adaption, it highlights the resilience and creativity in the field since it shows how flexible social workers use the resources and platforms at hand to keep communication and workflow effective during difficult circumstances. Social workers faced enormous challenges adapting to new digital technologies during the pandemic. SW4's observations concerning the abrupt shift to e-working are like those of the International Labour Organisation (2020), which emphasises the importance of promptly adapting to digital platforms. SW8's insights into the late implementation of the current BCP highlight the dangers of over-reliance on planning during times of crisis, as previously addressed by Ashcroft et al. (2022). The firm reliance on cell phones and virtual meetings described by SW8 and Supervisor 1 are examples of how social workers used creativity and resourcefulness to stay in touch and continue working creatively (Kniffin et al., 2020).

4.4.4 Collaborative Planning and Communication

Because of the epidemic, the emphasis on working in groups and communicating with one another was especially vital during this time. Teamwork and communication between social workers and management were critical to the preservation of service provision and client satisfaction:

"As supervisors, we are urged to plan together with our team,"

Emphasising the cooperative approach to organizational continuity and disaster preparedness. Good communication channels and well-defined strategies ensure that teams can adapt and continue to provide services even in tough conditions.

These findings illustrate the supervisors' efforts to adapt to and negotiate the challenges posed by the epidemic. Managers demonstrated resilience and a forward-thinking strategy to deal

with future uncertainties, ranging from using technology for discussions to advocating for proactive planning and support systems. These themes, taken together, demonstrate a continuous learning mentality and a commitment to improving organizational preparation for unexpected events.

The successful operation of social work organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic depended on teamwork and communication. Supervisor 2's emphasis on co-production as part of the planning process is consistent with the evidence presented by Cook et al. (2020), who indicate that teams with effective communication are capable of dynamic service delivery even in difficult circumstances.

The managers' enthusiasm for virtual meetings and planning via various forms of technology reflects their skill and preparedness to keep the organization functioning (Ashcroft et al., 2022). As a result, promoting a culture of continuous learning can help improve organizational preparedness for any future event, as emphasised by the ILO (2020) about the flexible approaches necessary in fast-changing settings.

4.4.5 Adjusting Supervision Techniques

Supervisors reported the unique techniques they used to improve their monitoring efforts despite the remote working constraints imposed by the outbreak. Stressing the significance of face-to-face interaction:

"Namely individual, wherein you must contact the social worker to discuss cases."

Focusing on information acquisition and sharing, Supervisor 2 underlined the educational and administration approach:

"The support method was used, and the second one was the educational method; with this method, we didn't have information about COVID-19, so we faced a challenge to capacitate ourselves and do research about the procedures and standard operations. We had to read up about the use of Covid-19 safety kits. We also learned about how the virus is spread, how to prevent yourself from getting it, and so on... that kind of information was crucial... And the last method is administration"

This adaption illustrates the supervisors' attempts to provide their teams with the required information and tools among the difficulties presented by the epidemic.

The shift in supervisors' monitoring ways during the epidemic highlights the significance of direct engagement and information flow. Supervisor 1's argument for individual interaction while discussing the issue is consistent with the findings of Charalampous et al. (2018), who suggest that in remote work, supervision should be highly customized to assist bring team members together. Supervisor 2's motivations for using educational methods and acquiring information highlight the importance of training and upskilling, particularly during unstable situations, as described by Bhandari (2020). Such adjustments are made in good faith, demonstrating the supervisors' desire to provide their subordinates with vital information to help them cope with challenging situations (Giorgi et al., 2020).

4.4.6 Open Channel Communication and Coordination

According to social workers' experiences, communication and coordination were critical in navigating the challenges of distant working. SW4 emphasized the importance of open communication channels and procedures for remote access to office resources. They stressed the importance of formal rights, saying:

"At some point, you needed to get a permission letter from the supervisor to come to the office and take the resources enabling you to work remotely."

This emphasises the significance of clear communication channels and processes for guaranteeing smooth operation and resource accessibility in distant work environments. SW8, on the other hand, devised efficient communication strategies to reduce work-from-home hours and disruptions. They posted a notice on their door stating that they were available for work and requesting not to be disturbed:

"I even placed a notice on my door which read 'I am working, please do not disturb'."

Despite the obstacles of working remotely, proactive boundary establishment and communication of expectations set the tone for a more productive and efficient workplace. These exchanges demonstrate how effective communication skills, such as explicit resource access protocols and proactive interruption management strategies, are used to overcome the constraints inherent in remote work, ensuring productivity and efficiency in virtual environments.

Finally, social workers' experiences shed light on the complexities of working remotely and balancing work and family life. Flexibility, time management, and personal solutions were the most important factors in balancing. Key components in successfully addressing remote work issues were also covered, such as the importance of excellent communication, the availability of basic tools, and well-defined resource management methods. Advanced knowledge of these discoveries illustrates social workers' resilience, adaptability, and ingenuity in preserving productivity and well-being in changing workplace settings.

All social workers had to use excellent communication and teamwork to overcome the problems posed by remote working settings. For example, SW4's argument on the need to keep communication channels open and limit access to resources based on permission tries to corroborate and verify assertions made by Ferrara et al. (2022), who focused on how such processes make work easier. Furthermore, proactive boundary-setting by SW8 reveals that when work practices are interrupted, the use of communication aids in the reduction of such disruptions, as indicated by Haque (2023). These tactics underline the fact that, while there are limitations to working remotely, having a clear communication strategy and reaching out to the audience is crucial for avoiding productivity and efficiency losses (Kniffin et al., 2020). These examples illustrate the importance of excellent communication while dealing with the problems of working from home.

4.5 Challenges of Rendering Services during the Pandemic

Participants emphasized their difficulties while providing services throughout the outbreak, highlighting the complexity and modifications required in their professions. The identified difficulties are outlined below.

4.5.1 Poor Service Delivery

The participants' experiences demonstrate how the epidemic influenced client involvement and service delivery. SW 1 highlighted the disruption caused by court closures, saying:

"Sometimes you will go to court and find that court is closed because of a COVID-19 positive case."

This threw off the typical procedures and work flow, influencing timely interventions and case resolutions. SW 5 noted difficulties turning in the documentation and reports to the court, saying:

"The other challenge was the physical submission of reports to the court because we do not have an online platform to submit them to court."

This logistical problem may have delayed critical decisions and activities, impeding the smooth progression of cases. SW 7 reported issues authenticating client's Identity Documents and acquiring relevant documents, stating that:

"Getting documents from clients was a challenge because you had to collect them physically, and we were not permitted to go out of the house."

SW1 and SW5's remarks emphasized that the epidemic impacted existing feedback mechanisms and services. SW4 noted that the existing limits on legal systems due to court closures hampered the timely adoption of effective actions. SW7 explained that certain case management techniques were more difficult due to delays in obtaining relevant documents, further upsetting social workers. Such interruptions necessitated the implementation of new and inventive techniques to sustain services, indicating the literature's need for flexible operational discussion (Cook et al., 2020). These findings show that designing a resilient system for future interruptions is vital while delivering services effectively.

4.5.2 Lack of Tools and Resources

An evident lack of equipment and preparedness impeded the transition to remote work, jeopardizing employees' ability to work safely and productively. SW8 emphasized these difficulties, saying:

"They were not ready resource-wise... some of us had cell phones and others did not have them... expected to write a court report without a laptop."

The workplace setting offered numerous challenges, including insufficient ventilation and space issues, which significantly impacted overall working conditions and employee comfort. SW4 noticed:

"In terms of office space, it was still the same, and there was no ventilation."

This emphasises a crucial problem as appropriate ventilation is necessary to reduce the danger of viral transmission inside indoor environments, especially in an epidemic. SW6 also pointed out lack of resources, saying:

"There was a shortage of cars, no laptops, including workspace, we had to rotate per week due to space."

This lack of simple tools reduced productivity and compounded the pressure in a strained situation. Pointing out the challenges of having greater responsibility without enough tools or support, Supervisor 2 commented,

"At the end of the day, everything came to our shoulders."

In conjunction with lean resources, this additional referred seriously impacted the ability of the supervisors to manage their teams and deliver services. As these data demonstrate, strategy planning, resource allocation, and the necessary contingency measures must be appropriately handled to navigate such crises because they provide a thorough picture of the numerous problems that managers and front-line workers faced during the pandemic. The lack of critical tools and supplies hampered social workers' functioning during the pandemic. SW8's comments regarding scarce gadgets highlight an important issue: productivity can only be achieved with the right tools (Bhandari, 2020). Furthermore, SW4 addresses this office condition regarding comfort, such as ventilation and air circulation, which raises concerns about health and safety and is consistent with the International Labour Organization's (2020) recommendations to improve working conditions. The relative stress associated with a lack of resources, as shown by Supervisor 2, demonstrates the importance of organisational resource allocation and contingency planning as a core pillar in improving operational effectiveness during crises.

There were significant operational challenges, especially in crisis situations where actual presence was necessary. SW4 effectively emphasised its limitations:

"Sometimes you had a crisis case which required your physical presence as a social worker, but you could not because of the restrictions."

These constraints made it more likely that they would not swiftly attend to their clients' urgent needs and impeded their ability to provide thorough social work interventions.

The challenges of delivering social work services during periods of limited mobility were underscored by obstacles to effective communication, assessment, and support due to the inability to be physically present in critical situations. This necessitated the development of creative solutions and unconventional methods to ensure that essential interventions could still be conducted effectively while adhering to safety protocols. SW4 highlighted that operational challenges were particularly evident during the pandemic, especially when in-person presence was essential. Mobility restrictions limit social workers' ability to respond promptly to client's urgent needs, consistent with findings by Charalampous et al. (2018), indicating that social work often requires direct client contact. This raises the need for innovative service delivery methods and the flexibility required in emergency situations (Giorgi et al., 2020). These circumstances emphasize the importance of adaptable operational plans that accommodate physical and virtual service provision, even in catastrophic conditions.

4.5.3 Supervision Challenges

The interview highlighted the problems of remotely monitoring employees. Supervisor 1 announced the challenge, saying:

"Yoo...hee, it was tough...because we have different methods of supervision..."

This implies modifying monitoring strategies to fit the remote working environment. Supervisor 2 focused on the support element, noting,

"All we could do was to provide support..."

Stressing the difficulties in offering efficient advice and support remotely, particularly in a crisis like the epidemic.

Supervisor 1 found specific challenges in supervising activities during the pandemic. For example, there were several improvements in the methods of remotely delivering supervision, as Ferrara et al. (2022) emphasized the need for encouragement in supervision to maintain team morale and focus on the goals. Supervisor 2's argument on the need for support emphasizes the necessity of communication in supervision, particularly during times of crisis. This demonstrates the need for ongoing training of social workers in remote supervision approaches to cope with job obstacles and provide more service appropriately.

4.5.4 Political Pressure and Administrative Demands

During the pandemic, both managers highlighted political pressures and administrative expectations. The second supervisor clarified:

"We received many crisis cases, and senior management expected us to provide feedback."

This shows the extra administrative load managers must carry during a crisis. Supervisor 2 also brought up political participation, saying:

"There was much political involvement during this process."

Emphasizing service delivery and community impact draws regard to the outside expectations and pressures on managers and their teams.

Both supervisors noted the increased political pressure and administrative requirements that existed during the outbreak. Supervisor 2 stressed an increase in crisis cases, indicating the need for social work managers to be more proactive and sensitive to ever-changing evidence-based practice (Haque, 2023). Higher expectations for some administrative positions may interfere with direct service delivery and, as a result, professional processes. In this approach, we argue about the importance of making suitable provisions for the manager's performance that will not impede service delivery. The existence of external and internal variables required to address them is critical in dealing with various crises (Kniffin et al., 2020).

4.5.5 Lack of Resources Effect on Employees and Productivity

The lack of resources and preparedness had a direct impact on both staff members and quality of work. SW8 emphasized the clear reality by saying:

"We even lost some of our colleagues during COVID, because of having to travel to the office during hard lockdown to type work reports."

This troubling outcome highlights the severity of challenges faced, including the risks to employee health and safety when essential job tasks cannot be performed remotely due to inadequate resources or preparation. This issue became even more pronounced during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, where the loss of colleagues under such conditions serves as a stark reminder of the need for substantial investments in tools and infrastructure to enable effective remote work. Such instances underscore the critical importance of proactive planning and support systems to protect employees and ensure business continuity under challenging conditions.

The loss of human resources during the pandemic was best described by SW8, who highlighted the resource constraints and their impact on workers' productivity and health. This underscores the serious risks social workers face when performing on-site duties, as required during the pandemic (Bhandari, 2020). Additionally, the International Labour Organization (2020) has acknowledged the lack of resources and infrastructure, emphasizing the need for increased investment to protect employee health and safety. This calls on organizations to improve resource allocation and strengthen support systems to safeguard employee well-being and productivity, even during crises.

4.5.6 Inadequate Support for the Community

The challenges that social workers faced during the COVID-19 epidemic had an impact not just on their own employment, but also on the support provided to members of the community. SW8 addressed this issue by stating:

"Our department will supply food for only two months per family, and in the third month, the food bank did not have food."

This observation underscores the importance of comprehensive planning and response strategies that address both internal and external issues, illustrating the link between workplace readiness and community support. The detailed analysis of each theme provides a nuanced understanding of the various challenges social workers faced during the pandemic. These challenges encompass workplace preparedness, resource limitations, employee well-being, and the ripple effects on support and services provided to the broader community. Such insights highlight the need for integrated strategies and collaboration to effectively navigate crises and uphold the welfare of both workers and their environments. According to SW8's observations, the support provided to communities during the pandemic, including measures like food aid, was insufficient. This underscores the connection between workplace readiness and

community support, like the contextual challenges in social work highlighted by Ashcroft et al. (2022). Forward-thinking and adaptable strategies are essential to address internal and external factors that can empower social work practitioners to better assist high-risk groups. These perspectives collectively emphasize the value of integrative approaches that combine community resources with social work crisis interventions (Cook et al., 2020).

4.5.7 Staff Shortages and Rotating Attendance

Supervisors also discussed how personnel shortages and rotational schedules affect process flow. Supervisor 1 discussed the ramifications of this, noting:

"Workflow was affected because employees were absent despite being off work for a week."

Absentee workers disrupt workflow in essential professions such as social work, which has cascade effects on clients and service delivery. Supervisor 2 described the problems of switching schedules and stated:

"Remember our social work interventions follow-through processes."

This highlights the complexity of social work obligations and how changing attendance disrupted continuity in client interventions and follow-up procedures. According to Supervisor 1, periodic personnel shortages and the usage of rotational schedules have a significant impact on workflow. Such inconsistency may impair social work interventions and service delivery, particularly for social work professions that require continuing practice (Haque, 2023). Supervisor 2's follow-up methods demonstrate that social work interventions can be difficult and dependent on case worker's availability. These characteristics underline the importance of good human resource planning and management in such services to continue service delivery, particularly during times of crisis when agility and readiness are critical (Ferrara et al., 2022).

4.5.8 Client Engagement Challenge

With social workers emphasizing the difficulties of maintaining excellent relationships with clients in remote work arrangements, communication, and client engagement dominated our discussion. SW3 emphasized the importance of in-person contact—a fundamental social work tool that is degraded in distant work environments—stating:

"Not having face-to-face communication with our clients."

This lack of direct interaction might hamper the depth and quality of client involvement, therefore influencing the efficacy of social work interventions. SW6 clarifies issues about the home setting, where distractions like noise from children could disturb virtual sessions with clients. SW6 noted:

"Since I was home, I would say the environment was not conducive,"

Stressing how outside events could influence the professional contact between clients and social workers. SW7 underlined the lack of physical contact, especially in terms of evaluating clients' body language, which is important in social work treatments, especially with vulnerable groups. SW7 uttered:

"Since we work with children, vulnerable members of society, like the elderly, we could not get that physical connection to observe their body language; that was the biggest challenge."

Remote work environments present significant challenges since the restriction in monitoring nonverbal signs and physical presence may impair the overall assessment and knowledge of clients' demands. These realizations underscore the challenges of maintaining excellent client connection and communication in remote work environments, particularly in disciplines such as social work that rely heavily on nonverbal cues and interpersonal interactions. Deliverable, detailed, and effective social work interventions rely on innovative approaches to bridge these gaps and ensure meaningful client involvement.

As SW3 and SW6 pointed out, maintaining client's attention proved challenging when working from home. Face-to-face contact improves the quality of contact with clients for assessment, which can otherwise be brief (Charalampous et al., 2018). About SW7, her ideas about reading body language demonstrate that it is preferable to be physically present when understanding what clients want, especially when assisting the needy. Such difficulties necessitate the development of innovative engagement tactics to keep clients involved despite the distance imposed by working remotely (Giorgi et al., 2020).

4.5.9 Logistic Difficulties and Inaccuracy

Supervisor 1 noted logistical difficulties, including intermittent attendance and disrupted workflow, and additionally addressed:

"Workflow was affected because employees were absent despite being off work for a week."

The fluctuating staff availability presents logistical challenges in work distribution and completion, particularly with rotating shifts. Supervisor 2 elaborated on how irregular attendance affects the delivery of social work procedures, stating:

"There was no consistency. That also compromised our social work ethics."

So this inconsistency bruised not only the quality of service delivered to clients but also raised ethical considerations of regular social work services.

Supervisor 1 stated that logistical issues such as erratic attendance impeded productivity and service delivery significantly. Staff irregularity can impact the provision of social work services, generating ethical concerns about continuity and care (Bhandari, 2020). Supervisor 2's comments on social work ethics highlight the importance of maintaining consistent service standards regardless of the crisis. This information emphasizes the need for effective logistical support and managerial techniques in minimizing service delivery issues while adhering to professional ethics.

4.5.10 Ethical Dilemmas and Confidentiality

These participants emphasized the moral quandaries that social workers faced while working remotely, specifically privacy and confidentiality concerns. SW8 emphasized the problems of maintaining anonymity while working from home, as client talks may occur in front of family members, saying:

"Another challenge was ethical dilemmas. Sometimes, you will receive a call at home in the presence of your family. Clients will discuss sensitive information, which compromises "confidentiality," which is our core ethical obligation in therapy. Calling a supervisor to discuss cases was a challenge regarding confidentiality..."

The difficulties of holding private conversations without potential breaches of privacy jeopardized the integrity and trust of professional contacts, raising substantial ethical concerns in remote work contexts. These moral quandaries underline the importance of robust laws and regulations to address privacy and confidentiality concerns in remote work environments. Social workers must navigate these challenges while adhering to ethical standards and ensuring that client information and privacy rights are maintained. These ethical quandaries can be mitigated, and professional integrity can be maintained in remote work contexts, by employing strategies such as secure communication platforms, specified rules for handling sensitive material, and ongoing ethical practice training.

According to SW8, social workers face major ethical problems regarding confidentiality while working remotely. Client privacy during engagement becomes an important consideration, especially on the client's own premises (Haque, 2023). As a result, rules and actions aimed at improving client data security are required. Continuous ethical education and sensitization are critical in resolving these challenges, reconciling the social worker's professional obligation with changes in work styles, such as those associated with remote employment (Ferrara et al., 2022).

4.5.11 Isolation and Decreased Self-Care

The participants' responses to isolation and decreased self-care illustrate the impact of distant employment on social workers' well-being. SW8 observed a drop in self-care practices, such as dietary patterns and lifestyle modifications, as well as issues acquiring access to fitness facilities during lockdown. SW8 talks about:

"The last challenge was a decrease in self-care. I am not a person who likes food, but since I was home, I ate a lot (laughs). Our eating habits changed; we could not go to the gym."

Restrictions on social events, as well as isolation caused by distant work arrangements, exacerbated the separation and reduced opportunities for self-care activities. The participants' declaration of isolation and poor self-care behaviours reflects the significant impact of distant work on social workers' well-being.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, social workers at the Protea Glen Service Point encountered significant challenges and adaptations. Despite operational obstacles, limited resources, and initial fear, social workers learned new skills and coping methods throughout this time. Future practices and legislation enabling remote working in social work are dependent on these realizations, which also serve to ensure that social workers are better prepared for similar scenarios in the future.

SW8 indicated that the consequences of social isolation and a decline in self-care habits while remote employment were disastrous. The provision of structure and the availability of gym facilities have been lost, leading to dangerous behaviours following Kniffin et al.'s (2020) findings on why sustaining self-care is critical for effectiveness in one's professional obligations. Reduced social interactions call for the deployment of measures to improve the health and well-being of workers, particularly social workers, during extended teleworking periods. To improve the health and general productivity of an organization's workforce, supportive interventions in employee self-care must be incorporated within the organizational structure (Giorgi et al., 2020).

4.6 Benefits of Working Remotely during Covid 19

Several important benefits of working remotely during the COVID-19 situation can be gleaned from the comments of participants. Their feedback demonstrates how remote work provided them with flexible schedules, more family time, cost savings, increased health awareness, skill development, and higher resilience—all of which are benefits of being able to adjust and keep up with remote work. This strand of benefits outlines how remote work not only addressed acute issues now but also contributed value to both professional and personal life.

4.6.1 Adjustable Working Schedules

Remote employment provided a clear benefit to social workers: it allowed them to choose their own timetables. SW1 expressed this perspective by stating:

"I can say the benefit was working according to my schedule."

SW3 likewise expressed a similar opinion, saying:

"We also worked at our own pace."

This improved adaptability allows social workers to handle their workload more efficiently, which may contribute to higher job satisfaction and productivity. However, as SW2's response demonstrates, not all participants believed this flexibility would be beneficial. Working from home allowed social work professionals to plan their work more efficiently, which increased satisfaction and effectiveness in today's work climate. SW1 and SW3 also reported attentively on how Ferrara et al. (2022) explained that using such a workplace can improve efficiency and effectiveness. However, as SW2 pointed out, not every participant favoured this flexible working arrangement, implying that opinions of remote working are likely to vary depending on the context or manner of work. This underscores that there are no universal solutions to the issues of the work-life balance issue, as Gong et al. (2022) raised while making the case for flexible environments that suit all elements of people, their requirements, and preferences.

4.6.2 Improved Family Time

Five of eight social workers have mentioned how remote work has improved their family life during the pandemic. SW1 shared:

"I also had time to bond with my family..."

Highlighting how remote work's flexibility allows for more time spent with loved ones. Likewise, SW5 observed:

"The benefits of working from home allowed me time to spend with my 2-year-old toddler..."

Stressing the need to be present for family members, even in difficult circumstances like the epidemic. This highlights the critical need for a decent work-life balance, particularly during a global crisis. The opportunity to strengthen ties with family members encourages unity and support and improves overall well-being and resilience on a personal and professional level. For example, social workers SW1 and SW5 stated that remote work increased their family time. This supports the findings of Kniffin et al. (2020), who emphasize the need to preserve work-life balance, particularly during times of crisis. Haque (2023) believes that bonding with family helps develop emotional strength and resilience, even during difficult circumstances. Such evidence reinforces the notion that businesses should value the element of flexible working for employee and organizational wellness during times of instability.

4.6.3 Cost Savings

For several social workers, remote working during the pandemic brought major financial advantages and a glimpse of a more affordable way of life. SW4 considered this and shared:

"We were able to save on petrol..."

Demonstrating a large reduction in commuting expenses due to the transition to remote work. Given the changing fuel prices during the epidemic, this feature helped save money. Likewise, SW5 emphasised still another financial benefit, saying:

"I was not paying crèche school fees...I had much money, and I saved up a lot."

This comment highlights the huge savings achieved by not having to pay for childcare, which may frequently be a major financial burden for working parents. For these social workers, the combination of decreased childcare costs, transportation expenses, and maybe fewer expenses for work attire, meals, and other incidental charges associated with in-office work resulted in significant financial benefits. These reserves are especially helpful for those on tight budgets or experiencing financial challenges since they provide stability and relief during challenging times. As seen in SW4 and SW5, social workers benefitted considerably from working remotely. The findings support Bhandari's (2020) observation that cost savings can alleviate stress during times of crisis, including commuting and childcare. For many, these were sufficient stabilizers, particularly in the case of political other clamours, as presented by Ashcroft et al. (2022). This emphasizes the importance of addressing the policy's financial components, particularly its possible effects on staff motivation and retention.

4.6.4 Health Consciousness

The COVID-19 epidemic heightened social workers' awareness of health and wellness. SW4 reports:

"It encouraged us to live healthy lives,"

Demonstrating a positive shift toward prioritizing health and well-being despite the challenges posed by the epidemic. Similarly, SW8 emphasized the benefits of mental health, stating:

"Covid also improved my mental health...I was able to spend more time with my children,"

Spending time with loved ones is important for mental wellness. Remote working significantly improved social workers' ability to prioritize their health. Avoiding crowded commutes and providing more schedule flexibility will enable individuals to engage in self-care activities and adopt healthier lives. This renewed emphasis on health and wellness might be seen in physical health practices and the mental health benefits of spending time with family and participating in activities that promote emotional well-being. According to SW4 and SW8, the pandemic has made social workers more health-conscious. This rise in health consciousness is consistent with the findings of Giorgi et al. (2020), who emphasize the role of self-care in the productivity of a social worker. Avoiding congested commuting and spending more time with children may have benefited workers' mental health and well-being. This requires introducing health policy

measures within firms that target employees, particularly where remote work is prevalent, to encourage using wellness methods.

4.6.5 Skill Development and Confidence

During the pandemic, remote working not only transformed the nature of work but also helped social workers grow their abilities and gain confidence. SW6 revealed:

"I also learned to use technology apps such as Teams,"

Emphasizing acquiring new skills in leveraging digital channels for collaboration and communication. In the same line, SW8 stated:

"Remote working built my confidence...I had time to read and integrate it into my reports,"

Demonstrating professional progress and empowerment through individual effort and skill integration. The requirement for social workers to work independently and use technology for task management, communication, and teamwork greatly increased their skills. This included mastery of digital technology, adaption to distant work environments, and developing effective time management skills. Such skill development increased output and boosted social workers' confidence and empowerment, allowing them to navigate changing work dynamics more naturally.

According to SW6 and SW8, the trend toward remote employment enabled social workers to improve their abilities and self-assurance. This is also congruent with the argument made by Charalampous et al. (2018), who emphasize the importance of learning and relearning in jobs. The requirement to operate new technology-enhanced social workers' capacities and self-assurance highlights the importance of skill development and performance. As a result, organizations should take advantage of these emerging training and development possibilities to better equip their workers and increase adaptability to changing work situations.

4.6.6 Increased Resilience and Adaptation

During the shift to remote work, SW8 shared that social worker showed tremendous flexibility and resilience:

"I became more resilient...as time went by, we adapted to it,"

Emphasizing the evolution of resilience and the ability to adapt to new situations. Social workers' resilience has grown significantly in response to adversity, technological challenges, changes in work processes, and overall changes in the work dynamic associated with remote employment. Their capacity to traverse the unclear, negotiate novel ways of working, and overcome unexpected hurdles demonstrated their resilience in adversity.

SW8 reported that social workers had considerable resilience in adjusting to distant employment. This adaptability is consistent with the results presented by Ferrara et al. (2022) about the role of resilience when faced with adversity. Recognizing an organization's ability to adapt to new procedures and technological advancements highlights the importance of embracing an adaptable culture.

4.6.7 Increased Learning

Despite the challenges posed by the epidemic, numerous social workers demonstrated remarkable resilience by developing effective stress-management practices. For example, SW8 discovered a silver lining in the change to remote employment, which allowed for individual learning and personal development:

“The positive side about it was working from home because I learned so much, especially working independently.”

This ability to adapt and identify positively in a challenging context exemplifies many social workers' resilience and resourcefulness. It also emphasizes the importance of creating a motivating workplace that encourages continual education and personal progress, even in the face of adversity, to foster personal development.

The pandemic led social workers to devise new coping strategies. This validates the findings of Gong et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of ongoing adjustment and learning to overcome the difficulties encountered, as SW8 highlighted. The ability to learn and grow in practice, even in the most demanding situations, exemplifies the social work profession's strength. As a result, management should foster a culture of lifelong learning and continual growth so that all employees feel supported in their professional development, even during difficult times.

4.7 Recommendations for Improved Crisis Management

Participants reiterated that learning from experience and planning for the future would improve an organization's ability to respond to and recover from a crisis. Participants' replies emphasize the need for improved resource procurement and planning, proactive preparedness tactics, technological integration, and skill development investments. Learning from the past and implementing detailed planning for unpredictable events can significantly improve an organization's ability to respond more effectively to crises.

Members of the focus group emphasized the need to learn from the past to better organizational performance during times of crisis. SW8 noted that to meet future issues, one must, among other things, plan and procure resources consistent with the recommendations provided by Cook et al., 2020. Organizations must employ effective technology and enhance people's skills to prepare for the unexpected. This method improves the organization's resilience and increases employee well-being and productivity, resulting in better service delivery.

4.7.1 Resource Procurement and Planning

Participants emphasized the importance of learning from previous occurrences in various areas, using improved planning strategies, and allocating monies effectively to address future crises properly. SW8 expressed the necessity by saying:

"They should have learned from other countries... should have provided us with resources... did not have a laptop but expected to write a court report."

This mindset highlights the need for proactive efforts, such as benchmarking against global best practices and ensuring the availability of adequate tools to support employees in performing their jobs. SW8's disclosures underline the importance of organizational agility, readiness, and smart resource allocation in successfully navigating difficult and unpredictable circumstances. Organizations can strengthen their resilience and ability to respond decisively to future crises by leveraging knowledge learned from global events.

Participants expressed a strong desire to improve resource acquisition and planning, with SW8 emphasizing the need to learn from global best practices. This viewpoint is also shared by Haque (2023), who contends that resource allocation should be done in a way that ensures improved service delivery to clients. Organizations should take a proactive approach to management techniques so that employees are appropriately staffed and resourced during a crisis to execute their responsibilities. This will increase the organization's agility and resilience to future emergencies. Resource provision will thus be accorded a high priority.

4.7.2 Preparedness and Planning for Future Events

The conversation covered how the Department of Social Development may prepare for future incidents like COVID-19. Emphasising the need for technology development and planning, Supervisor 1 said:

"I think the Department of Social Development must move with times."

Supervisor 2 listed the Business Continuity Plan as a tool for readiness, saying:

"There is a tool in place now called Business Continuity Plan."

This emphasises the need for pre-emptive planning to guarantee seamless operations amid crises, including technology readiness and backup actions. A critical point emphasized during the discussions is the importance of planning ahead of time and anticipating the unexpected. Supervisors 1 and 2 have advocated for the use of technology in conjunction with the creation of a Business Continuity Plan, which aligns with the International Labour Organisation's (2020) standards for contingency planning. In this sense, firms must be strategic in terms of technology and backup plans to ensure that the organization can continue to operate even during a crisis. Active measures planning will guarantee that social workers are prepared to address future issues.

4.7.3 Integrating Technology and Developing Skills

Emphasising the need for technology integration and talent development, Supervisor 1 pointed out:

"I think they need to do proper research...and devise a plan."

This emphasizes the importance of ongoing technology upskilling and training to boost remote employment opportunities. Supervisor 2 also emphasized the benefits of owning gadgets such as computers and mobile phones, which enable remote monitoring and job continuity. Supervisor 1 emphasized the need to incorporate technology into skill development. According to Ferrara and others (2022), technological and digital tools and approaches must be trained on a regular basis since they improve employees' remote working capabilities. Supervisor 2's statement about concerns about the provision of required devices emphasizes the need to provide these devices so that employees can work remotely without difficulty. Investing in technology and skill development will assist social workers in adapting to changes in the current work environment, hence boosting operations.

4.8 Conclusion

Chapter four thoroughly examined how the COVID-19 epidemic affected social workers' personal and professional lives, including working from home. The epidemic presented many new obstacles, requiring social workers to swiftly learn new, collaborative ways of working. This chapter explored the experiences of social workers and supervisors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings revealed a significant lack of preparedness within the Gauteng Department of Social Development, Protea Glen service point, at the onset of the pandemic. Many participants, including both social workers (SW1, SW2, SW4, SW5, SW6, SW7, SW8) and supervisors, reported inadequate resources, such as laptops and safety equipment. This unpreparedness hindered their ability to effectively perform their duties and maintain worker safety. While SW3 was the only one with the opposite view.

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had a profound emotional and psychological impact on social workers. Participants (e.g., SW1, SW2, Supervisor 2) described feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty regarding their job security and the future. The abrupt shift to remote

work also disrupted their routines and led to feelings of monotony and demotivation (Supervisor 2).

Social workers employed various strategies to cope with the challenges of remote work and the demands of balancing work and family life. These strategies included time management, setting boundaries, and adapting to digital technologies. Experiences varied depending on individual circumstances, such as the presence of young children at home.

5: MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reported on the study's findings regarding the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on social workers and their organisations. The current chapter will conclude the collected data and make valuable suggestions. The study's findings will be synthesized, the implications for workforce preparation will be explored, and strategies to improve crisis management and company resilience will be proposed due to remote work. It will also identify future study areas that aim to increase and broaden field understanding.

5.2 Main Findings

This study provides key insights into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social workers and supervisors, highlighting challenges and opportunities that arose during this period.

Objective 1: To highlight the remote working model and its implications for the social work profession in the South African context considering the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study revealed significant gaps in workforce readiness for remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most social workers and supervisors reported that their organisation was unprepared for the sudden shift to remote work, citing issues such as inadequate supplies and insufficient security measures. These findings align with other research highlighting similar weaknesses in organisational preparedness during crises, indicating a general lack of readiness for sudden disruptions (Giorgi et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). The results underscore the importance of proactively allocating resources and preparing to support staff during emergencies. Although some improvements were made, such as providing hand sanitizers and masks, the prevailing sense of unpreparedness reflects broader issues in crisis management within South Africa. Another key finding is that extensive preparation and resource availability are essential to cope with unexpected events (Kniffin et al., 2020). This research emphasizes the need for organisations to develop robust strategies to support employees effectively in future emergencies.

Objective 2: To explore the experiences of social workers in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province regarding remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted social workers, leading to considerable mental and physical stress that affected their job performance and motivation. Many reported high levels of anxiety and job insecurity, consistent with prior research identifying mental health challenges and stress as primary concerns for this profession during the pandemic (Giorgi et al., 2020; Charalampous et al., 2018). Increased stress and time away from work underscore the need for support systems to help individuals manage stress and maintain well-being during crises. Additionally, studies suggest that decreased productivity among social workers highlights the toll remote work can take on job satisfaction and motivation if not managed effectively (Chafi et al., 2021; Panchuk, 2023). With the added strain of job insecurity and the monotony of lockdown routines, organisations must develop strategies to support employees' mental health and adapt to changing work conditions.

Objective 3: To examine the experiences of social work supervisors in the Protea Glen Service Point of the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province regarding remote working and the performance of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research found that social workers working from home faced numerous challenges, including issues with work-life balance, limited resources, and the transition to digital technology. These difficulties are not unique to this study; other research has also highlighted challenges like juggling family responsibilities and dealing with inadequate technological infrastructure as barriers to effective remote work (Delany, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021). In other words, disparities in available resources and initial frustrations with digital tools reflect broader issues associated with the shift to an online workforce (Haque, 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Social workers manage these stressors through strategies such as flexible scheduling and time management; supporting literature suggests that successful remote work requires flexibility and maintaining work-life boundaries (Delany, 2021). This research highlights the importance of providing workers with adequate support and adaptable methods to overcome challenges while remaining productive.

Objective 4: To establish the role of occupational social work in providing support to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to Van Breda (2009), the main objective of occupational social work (OSW) is to improve the social welfare and functionality of the workplace as a community, thereby contributing to organisational goals and overall effectiveness. Dorkin (2009) highlights the necessity for occupational social workers to remain updated on workplace trends to effectively

tackle new challenges that arise in the work environment. This necessitates that the employee health and wellness unit within the Gauteng Department of Social Development stay attuned to changes in order to address potential future crises effectively.

The research revealed several advantages of remote working, which align with the Employee Health and Wellness Strategic Framework for The Public Service (EH &WSF) in South Africa (2019), particularly its pillars of health and productivity management and wellness management. Key benefits include flexible hours, more time with family, savings on commuting costs, opportunities for physical fitness, and personal development through mastering new technological tools. These advantages resonate with the work-life balance objectives emphasized in the EH &WSF, which aim to enhance employee well-being and productivity.

Similarly, Terblanche et al., (2021) highlights how flexible work arrangements can empower employees by fostering autonomy and reducing workplace stressors, which are critical for enhancing employee well-being, they also highlight the importance of achieving a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life, suggesting that remote work can facilitate this equilibrium. These perspectives align with international research indicating that remote work improves well-being by enabling employees to structure their daily routines around both personal and professional priorities (Popovici & Popovici, 2020; Delany, 2021).

Moreover, Bogo et al., (2020) discuss the value of skill development in adapting to changing work environments. This aligns with the study's findings that social workers reported increased self-confidence and professional growth through remote working. Such growth is integral to the organizational wellness pillar of the EH &WSF, which focuses on capacity building and continuous learning to improve employee performance.

While cybersecurity risks remain a concern, the adaptability demonstrated by social workers during remote work reflects their ability to thrive under challenging circumstances. This aligns with the safety management pillar of the EH &WSF, which advocates for creating secure environments that support employee well-being. The integration of these findings into occupational social work practice underscores the need for organizations to adopt holistic wellness strategies that prioritize flexibility, skill development, and mental health support (Singh & Joshi, 2022; Monje-Amor, 2023).

Objective 5: To propose guidelines or measures on how social work interventions through remote working should be implemented and managed

According to this study, three key components of a competent crisis manager are securing resources, planning, and using technology. These recommendations are consistent with previous work advocating for more integrated methods of crisis management, including greater resource use and preparedness (Giorgi et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). This argues that organisations must have systems and capabilities to deal with such disasters (Jain et al., 2021). Giorgi et al. (2020) and Kniffin et al. (2020) discuss additional training and robust backup preparations. This is consistent with implications for continuous learning and technological absorption for working from home and organisational resilience. Organisations must have contingency plans that may be changed in a crisis and be available to employees. Overall, findings emphasize more detailed use of training resources alongside flexibility and adaptation in emergency management. They also discuss benefits of remote working, work-life balance, and learning new skills. These lessons learned are critical for future disasters regarding structural soundness and capacity.

Conclusion

This study provides vital insights into the effects of COVID-19 on social workers and supervisors, highlighting obstacles and possibilities that arose throughout the pandemic. The findings highlight a broader lack of preparedness among organisations regarding their readiness for a shift to remote work. The issues above were aggravated by higher levels of psychological strain, job insecurity, and harsher working conditions among social workers consistent with a larger phenomenon observed in crisis management research. However, the pandemic also brought certain benefits to working from home, such as increased flexibility and some social workers adapted creatively to remote work by developing new coping mechanisms and acquiring essential skills. The recommended guidelines emphasize continual resource planning, disaster preparedness, and continuous training and development. The study underscores the importance of drawing lessons from these findings to boost system resilience during future crises while enhancing social workers' well-being and service performance.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section, the researcher provides recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

5.3.1 Recommendations for Social Workers

Resource Accessibility:

- Ensure access to essential resources such as laptops, secure internet connections, and necessary software to facilitate remote work and communication.
- Provide clear guidelines on how to access and utilize these resources effectively during emergencies.

Trainings:

- Offer continuous training on technology tools and platforms used for remote communication, case management, and client interaction.
- Conduct workshops on stress management, self-care techniques, and maintaining work-life balance to support mental well-being during crises.

Communication Protocols:

- Establish clear communication channels and protocols for reporting updates, seeking guidance, and collaborating with team members during remote work.
- Encourage regular virtual check-ins with supervisors to discuss challenges, share insights, and receive support.

Client Confidentiality:

- Provide comprehensive training on maintaining client confidentiality while using digital communication tools and platforms.
- Adhere to strict privacy standards and guidelines to safeguard client information during remote interactions.

5.3.2 Recommendations for Supervisors

Crisis Management Planning:

- Develop and regularly update comprehensive crisis management plans that outline strategies for transitioning to remote supervision, ensuring staff safety, and addressing unforeseen events.
- Find ways to prepare staff for responding efficiently to crises.

Remote Supervision Strategies:

- Implement effective remote supervision strategies, including virtual team meetings, individual check-ins, and performance monitoring, to maintain team cohesion and productivity.
- Provide guidance and support to social workers on navigating the challenges of remote work, managing caseloads, and addressing client needs.

Resource Allocation:

- Ensure that social workers have access to necessary resources and support systems to effectively perform their duties during crises.
- Advocate for additional resources and tools to enhance the capacity of social workers to provide quality services remotely.

Health Support:

- Prioritize the mental health and well-being of social workers by offering mandatory counselling services, promoting work-life balance, and fostering a supportive work environment e.g. Referrals to EAP department.
- Encourage open communication about stress and burnout and provide resources for self-care and emotional support.

Privacy Compliance:

- Enforce strict adherence to privacy standards and guidelines to protect client confidentiality and maintain professional integrity during remote supervision.

- Utilize encrypted communication methods and secure platforms for sharing sensitive information and conducting virtual meetings.

By implementing these tailored recommendations, organizations can empower social workers and supervisors to effectively navigate crises while upholding professional standards and ensuring client well-being.

5.3.3 Access to Resources

Organisations must ensure that social workers and supervisors have the necessary resources to execute their jobs effectively, particularly in crisis situations. Providing essential tools, such as laptop computers and robust communication infrastructure, significantly enhances productivity and flexibility during emergencies. By preplanning and acquiring supplies, organisations can prevent shortages and ensure that employees are trained in using the resources they will need. This proactive approach is vital for maintaining operational efficiency when unexpected challenges arise.

5.3.4 Standard Operating Procedures

Developing and regularly updating comprehensive crisis management plans is crucial for organizations. These plans should outline strategies for transitioning to remote work, ensuring staff safety, and addressing unforeseen events. Conducting drills and simulated exercises will keep personnel prepared and enable them to respond more efficiently when a crisis occurs. By practicing these procedures, organisations can facilitate a smoother transition during emergencies, ultimately enhancing their overall response capabilities.

5.3.5 Continuous Professional Development

Continuing education in technology and skills is essential for keeping staff well-versed in remote work practices. Organisations should prioritize ongoing training on new tools and resources to enhance employee effectiveness and productivity. By investing in continuous professional development, companies empower their employees to adapt to remote work challenges more effectively. Additionally, protecting the mental health of social workers and field supervisors is critical; organisations should offer mandatory counselling services, promote work-life balance, and foster a supportive environment to help staff manage stress and maintain overall well-being.

5.4 Future research

Future studies should look at the long-term effects of remote working on social workers' productivity and job satisfaction. It will be interesting to see how working remotely for an extended period affects their performance and engagement and just their general well-being; it will give us much information on how to make the whole working remotely thing work and keep it effective over time.

Other research may also focus on what type of crisis management techniques are most helpful and how they contribute to organizational robustness. Examining different readiness plans and uses of resources among social service agencies will shed light on how this affects their ability to respond in an emergency. Hopefully, it will lead to better definitions of best practices and overall improvement in how these organisations respond to crises.

Also, the study of the psychological impacts of long-term telecommuting and seclusion on social workers would surely shed some light on coping with mental issues under those conditions. Knowing the psychological and emotional effects in the long run will help create more effective support programs and interventions.

Another topic of interest is how technology can improve the efficiency of remote working and how it can become a part of everyday business. By studying the various technologies and tools and their impacts on workflow, communication, and the job, one can decide the best solutions for the remote workplace.

Lastly, it will examine the experiences of other kinds of social service organisations, whether in different fields or geographical locations, to get a fuller picture of the problems and remedies of remote working. Comparative analysis can help to show distinct requirements and approaches that may be universal to other situations.

5.5 Overall Conclusion

This research explored the social workers and supervisors working at Protea Glen Service Point in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic and their experiences of working off-site. The data was obtained from eight social workers and two social work supervisors through intensive semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, revealing several key findings.

The research highlighted significant gaps in workforce readiness for remote work, with many participants reporting inadequate preparation and resource shortages. This conforms to larger patterns of organisational lack of preparation in times of crisis and underscores the necessity for better crisis management planning and use of resources.

The pandemic significantly affected many social workers' mental and physical health, job performance, and motivation. There was more stress and job insecurity, as expected and in line with other research regarding the psychological impact of the pandemic. Some of the problems of working from home include work-life balance and technology adaptation. However, flexible scheduling is the way to overcome these challenges.

However, the research revealed some advantages to remote working, such as added flexibility, more time spent with the family, and the development of new skills. All these advantages imply that remote working can provide some very rewarding personal and professional experiences.

The study's findings suggest improving the crisis management field by acquiring better resources, more preparations, and technology. Constant training and strong business contingency plans are crucial in backing the workforce in times of crisis.

All in all, the research emphasises the urgent need for better organisational readiness and use of resources. This also underscores the necessity for flexibility and adaptive techniques in remote working and offers some interesting implications for improving organisational hardiness and efficiency during future crises.

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5. APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Experiences of social workers regarding remote working during the National State of Disaster as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of Protea Glen Service Point, Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province.

Researcher: Bongiwe Mthembu

I,, agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.	YES	NO
---	-----	----

I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report.	YES	NO
---	-----	----

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal will be kept anonymous.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of researcher/person seeking consent)

..... (date)



6. APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Bongiwe Mthembu I am a Masters student in the faculty of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Prof Thobeka Sweetness Nkomo and Dr Daniel Tuelo Masilo (co-supervisor). I am conducting a research study about remote working during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The study title is “Experiences of social workers regarding remote working during the National State of Disaster as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of Protea Glen Service Point, Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province”.

I am inviting you to take part in face-to-face interview. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 15 minutes. The interview will take place at the Department of Social Development, Protea Glen Service Point, during lunch time.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored on iCloud which is password protected for 6 months and will be deleted once the study is completed. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the interview, I will need to ask personal information about you, including personal experiences about Covid-19.

The interview will be confidential and when I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other

researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to take part if you don't feel like participating. You do not have to answer questions that makes you feel uncomfortable. Taking part in the research study will not have any costs implications. There are no financial benefits for participating in this study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life. Some of the questions asked may make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, I will pause the interview for 2 minutes and you take time to relax. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge at Employee Health Solutions (Careways). Their contact details are as following 0800 444 360.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Bongiwe Nomshado Mthembu

Researcher:

Bongiwe Nomshado Mthembu, 548662@students.wits.ac.za, 084 701 1279

Supervisor :

Prof Thobeka Sweetness Nkomo, Thobeka.Nkomo@wits.ac.za, 011 717 4583

Co-Supervisor:

Dr Daniel Tuelo Masilo, Dmasilo@wsu.ac.za, 073 474 6114

7. APPENDIX C: SEMI-INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview schedule for supervisors

1. Please share your experience about remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How was staff attendance during rotation?
3. How was employee performance during remote working?
4. Which supervision methods did you apply during remote working?
5. Which role did the employee health and wellness play during remote working?
6. In the future, how can the department of social development prepare itself for unexpected events such as Covid-19?

Interview schedule for Social Workers

1. Please share your experiences about remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What were the benefits of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What were the challenges of remote working?
4. How did you render statutory services to clients during the pandemic?
5. How did you balance work and family life during remote working?
6. How was the workplace readiness to deal with the covid-19 pandemic?
7. What were the effects of moving between 5 levels of lockdown personally and professionally?

8. APPENDIX D: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT APPROVAL LETTER



GAUTENG PROVINCE
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Enquiries: Dr. Sello Mokoena
Tel: 082 331 0786
File no.: 11/08/2023

Dear BN Mthembu

RE: APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE GAUTENG DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Thank you for your application to conduct research within the Gauteng Department of Social Development.

Your application on the research on ***“Experiences of social workers regarding remote working during the National State of Disaster as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of Protea Glen Service Point, Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province”*** as approved by *University of Witwatersrand* been considered and approved for support by the Department as it was found to be beneficial to the Department’s vision and mission. The approval is subject to the Department’s terms and conditions as endorsed on the 13th November 2019.

You have permission to interview departmental officials and beneficiaries, conduct observations and access relevant documents where necessary.

May I take this opportunity to wish you well on the journey you are about to embark on.

We look forward to a value adding research and a fruitful co-operation.

With thanks

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sello Mokoena'.

Dr Sello Mokoena
Director: Research and Policy Coordination
Date: 11 - 08 - 2023

9. APPENDIX E: ETHICS CLEARANCE



SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: SW23/02/04

PROJECT TITLE

Experiences of social workers regarding remote working during the National State of Disaster as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of Protea Glen Service Point, Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province

INVESTIGATOR

MTHEMBU BN

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

SOCIAL WORK

DATE CONSIDERED

20 OCTOBER 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL

LOW RISK

EXPIRY DATE

20 OCTOBER 2026

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

24 OCTOBER 2023

CHAIRPERSON

(DR L PETERSEN)

cc: Supervisor: DR D MASILO

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

BN MTHEMBU
Signature

Date

24 / 10 / 2023

10. APPENDIX F: ETHICS CERTIFICATE

	Zertifikat Certificat	Certificado Certificate
Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants		
Certificat de formation - Training Certificate		
Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that		
	Bongiwe Mthembu	
	a complété avec succès - has successfully completed	
	Introduction to Research Ethics	
	du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation	
		
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