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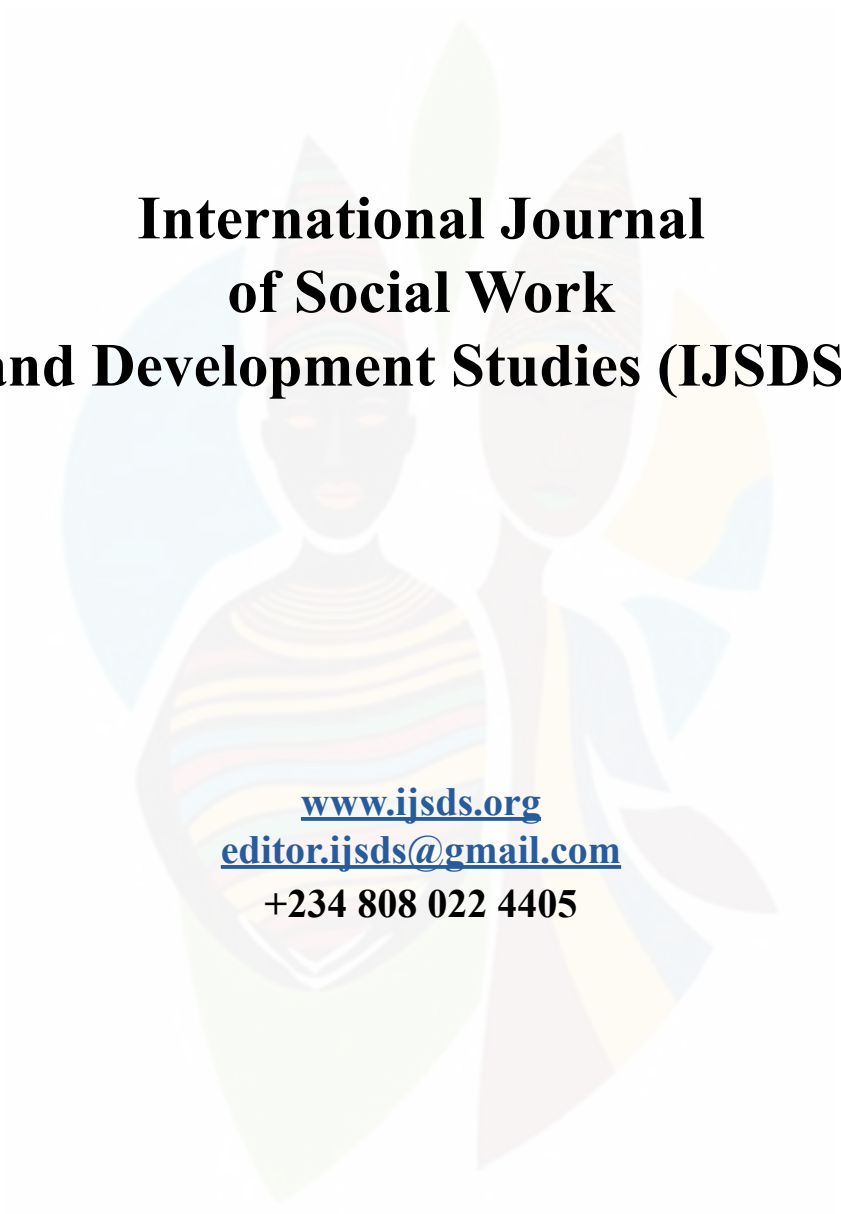


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**APPRAISAL OF SOCIAL WORKER
AND LEGAL PRACTITIONERS' ENGAGEMENT:
THE COLLABORATIVE AGGREGATE
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

This study is an appraisal of social worker and legal practitioners' engagement: The collaborative aggregate for social justice in Nigeria. Over the years there has been a strained relationship existing between and amongst that has limited the positive collaborative engagement between social workers and legal practitioners. In Nigeria these two independent professions never knew of any of their complementary roles. This has been more conspicuously conspicuous in social workers and legal practitioners' routine engagement. Arising from this standpoint, this examined the challenges and the need for effective collaborative engagement and complementary role between social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria directed towards optimal service delivery to not only their clients but the Nigerian society at large. In line with the issues under investigation, this paper adopted the social identity theory formulated by Henri Tajfel in 1970. This is one of the major theories on inter-relationship. The social identity theory is predicated on the assumption that an individual develops his/her self-concept on the basis of his/her attachment to a significant group. Data usage was from both primary and secondary sources. Correspondingly, we employed key participant interviews (KPI) as instruments for data collection for this study, using ten (10) sample respondents each of social workers from University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital and legal practitioners in Rivers State High Court respectively as our target participants for experience generalization. The study's findings informed that the legal practitioners and social workers are interwoven and has similarities in certain areas of their profession. It is on this note that the study recommended amongst others that emphasis should be placed on lack of awareness, the non-professional nature of social work in Nigeria, among others such as differences in ethics, professional training and education.

Keywords: Social Workers, Legal Practitioners, Collaborative Engagement, Social Justice

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social work literature and formal and informal discussions among social work practitioners give significant attention to social justice as the basis of social work practice. While there is significant debate within the academic and professional literature about the definition of social justice in broad terms, the three components identified by Lister (2008), namely redistribution, recognition and respect, are all reflected with varying emphases in current debates. Since the debates and commentary have given considerable attention to the ways in which social work has more or less fulfilled its expressed commitment to social justice, however, little attention has been given to how the concept is used (or not) by practitioners in discussing their social work practice and human right which is law embedded. In this context, Africa at the regional level, has responded to the universal human rights and development. It was clearly stated in the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and adopted as a major continental instrument in the field of human rights protection in Africa. Correspondingly, Nigeria ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights making her emphasis on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) on 16 December 2004. As expressed in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), which was adopted in 1981 and became operational on October 21, 1986, member states established bodies to protect and promote human and people's rights (Malemi, 2010) but undermining the collaborative of the institution of social workers and that of legal practitioner. Essentially, all these approaches of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights were embedded in the constitution and laws of the independent countries of Africa, majorly to conceptualize institutional framework for effective governance. However, the application and enforcement of these laws requires a collaborative engagement and this is where the approach of social work

and legal practitioners is required. The convergence of law and social work according to Orji (2016) has broad ramifications for social work practice in areas such as child welfare, gender inequality, and human right violation. In the perspective of Galowitz (1999) a portion of the assorted fields of training for social work deserved a holistic indicator to incorporate the accompanying: clinical administrations, emergency intercession, psycho-social appraisal support, social approach examination, local area improvement, and so forth. He further averred that in the event of its exercise operations (i.e. the social worker) consideration for contingent laws also govern many relationships of interest to social workers relationship with clients.

A kin observation to this itemized preponderance attribute of the social worker; one can see the corresponding activities of the legal practitioner portrayed. It is obvious from the foregoing that social workers can arrange with legal counselors to help in the execution of social liberties especially in cases that has to do with teenagers, marital engagement and disengagement, prisoners' recuperation, and those refer to as prostitutes, the poor and destitute and others that might require real legitimate assistance. These are expected and essential paraphernalia needed to awaken numerous social workers who likewise regularly need legitimate support or in any case are compelled to get associated with the overall set objectives of a counterpart trade of the legal practitioners. The most important obligation for each of these different institutions is to adopt legislative or other measures to protect the dignity of the people as well as their rights who belong to the entity called state. Similarly, it was on this note that the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) which was adopted in July 2001 was equally designed to address the current challenges facing the African continent in terms of the relegation of human right. It was also set out to address issues such as escalating poverty levels, underdevelopment,

and the continued marginalization of women's interest. Consequently, in a situation where there are numerous difficulties in interdisciplinary cooperation between social work and law, the first (and a particularly unavoidable) one was the distinctions in the language, customs, and standards of the teaming up callings. Each is expected to learn and value the other. Issues where social work and the law overlap have reliably tested socio-legitimate experts and the moves guarantee to proceed (Ngwu & Iwuagwu, 2022). The cover uncovered significant interdisciplinary issues, which are best tended to when certain conditions are met (Kwonyike, 2017).

The outermost consideration of the present study is to analyze the collaborative effectiveness engagement noted as a necessity for social workers and legal practitioners in crisis ridden situations for a country such as Nigeria to help service their clients. The absolute success of this needed engagement may help to promote professional exposure that could subsequently increase their understanding of the other disciplines and guarantee ease of process and effective service delivery. Forgey and Colarossi (2003) writing on: Interdisciplinary social work and law posited that since the overall interest display of the social worker is mostly to engage people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing; therefore, combined engagement strategies of the social workers and legal practitioners is seen to be outstandingly noteworthy to schools of social work because of the expanding recurrence with which social workers intercede with customers associated with the overall set of laws. The reality herein is that there are obvious factors mitigating against effective collaboration that should have brought social workers with legal practitioners together towards shared vision in Nigeria including the lack of awareness of their roles. For instance, social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria are limited to adequate knowledge and absence of the law and justice system in terms of their collabor-

ative essentials of engagement and to some extent common issues such as professional ethics, education and training background, style and practice methods as potentially conflicting with such collaboration. Social work happens where people work together to create social development. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018) social work is a training based calling and a scholarly discipline that works with social change and improvement, social cohesion, and empowerment and freedom of individuals. In another dimension, Carolyn and Carrie (2004) advocates the use of a social work generalist approach which will add to a more viable lawyer- client relationship, that will thus further improve the general adequacy of criminal equity activities.

Correspondingly, in contemporary social work talk and practice, researchers and experts have progressed the grand challenges to advance exchange and strategy change about a scope of civil rights issues (Uehara et al., 2013). Therefore, social workers are relied upon to have abilities in between proficient coordinated effort and in working with the strengthening of those frequently avoided from choices that influence their lives (Schoeneman, 2017). These scholarly dispositions has variant dispositions clearly enunciated to explain the complementary and collaborative engagement of the social workers and legal practitioners that is reasonably accepted by all, yet still remain ambiguous particularly as it concerns the services beloved of clients. Consequent upon this identified ambiguity of a reasonable collaborative engagement to expand the fruitful relationship of the two professions, this study therefore emerged to articulate the thought process of a collaborative engagement and effectiveness that should bring together the social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria. To articulate this position for a reliable conclusion; the present study was guided by this question: What are the indicators that are limiting the collaborative engagement of the social workers

and legal practitioners in Nigeria?

1.1 Conceptualizing Social Justice

Social justice framework has its concern with political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity in accordance with law operational within a particular domain, and informed by values concerned with: achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment; recognizing the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all; the meeting of basic needs; maximizing the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged (Craig, 2002). In setting out this perspective of social justice, the practitioners highlighted two important dimensions, namely fairness and equality, dimensions which are well articulated in the extensive international literature on the subject. (Craig, 2002). Looking at the dimensions of these discussions, equality was talked about more frequently than fairness, with a number of practitioners linking the two together: 'Social justice is the unifying term given to the pursuit of equality and fairness in all human situations and in relation to the use and distribution of resources'. 'Equality' that primarily relied on law has, of course, many levels of meaning and these were reflected in the ways in which the practitioners defined the terms and described what relationships they meant (Lister, 2008). Some used 'equality' to refer to equal opportunities, arguing that these opportunities should ensure that everybody has 'the ability to participate in everyday life'. Others took a stronger view, with a more structural approach to issues of equal opportunities, arguing, for example, that equal opportunities requires that 'factors such as ethnicity, gender, income, culture, geographical location are taken into account in a way that still allows equal opportunity'. Others were more explicit that equality requires equity and a more active approach to the pursuit of equality than relying on what might

be described as a 'liberal' approach to equal opportunity (Galowitz, 1999). For one of the participants, for example, social justice requires 'redistributing resources and power in society to overcome disadvantage. It's about equity rather than just equal distribution'. Equality (and social justice) would, it was argued, be achieved through some form of redistribution (a word that was used by four of the participants), not through relying simply on equal opportunities to achieve social justice. For some, equality and access were closely linked, most commonly with 'access' being crucial to obtaining what is needed to achieve equal outcomes, not just equal opportunities (Kwonyike, 2017). One of the participants captured this well when she defined justice as being about access, going on to note that this is not a simple equality, because 'striving for equality does not always result in things being equal'. In a similar vein, a number of the participants defined access as a core component of 'fairness', the second dominant definitional dimension. Here, too, access was described and understood not simply as an entry point to services, but, more commonly as having broader characteristics: 'if there was social justice, there would be equity of access that didn't rely on influences such as wealth, power, gender, culture' (Craig, 2002).

'Fair treatment' was the commonest use of the idea of 'fairness, both in the sense that services should not discriminate at an individual level and in the sense that 'fair treatment' also requires that 'everyone no matter what their socioeconomic circumstances can be sure of fair and just treatment by the authorities'. Significantly, this social worker went on to say that this 'includes redress for past wrongs and speedy resolution of present injustices'. Two participants referred to the Treaty of Waitangi and the rights of indigenous peoples as part of their approach to fairness and social justice, but without linking these explicitly with issues of redress. Similarly, reflecting the emphasis on recognition which has developed as an integral aspect

of social justice in recent times (Lister, 2008), a small number of participants explicitly referred to cultural diversity and difference as integral parts of their thinking about the nature of fairness, while others talked more generally about issues of discrimination. In addition to these broader discussions, a number of other participants referred to social justice in more specific terms. On occasions, they used terms such as 'access', 'opportunity' and 'discrimination' as integral to their thinking about social justice, but without actively associating these words with either equality or fairness. They may have made that link for themselves, but did not articulate that in their written statements. Two other specific terms require brief comment. A number of the social workers talked about advocacy as a fundamental part of their definition of social justice. Advocacy for some was focused at the level of their practice with individual users, while for others, the purpose of advocacy was to press for more substantive and structural social change, with one of the participants neatly linking these two uses together in describing social justice as 'a commitment to both enabling users to find solutions to their problems and changing the structures of society'. The other definitional term that warrants brief mention is respect, a word which Lister (2008) uses in her recent discussion about social justice and poverty. Its use is significant, not because it is a term which was widely used, but because it captures some of the recent debates in the academic and professional literature. Respect, said one of the participants, means 'a society where resources are shared according to need, all people are respected and everyone has the common rights of citizenship no matter'.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the social identity theory. This is one of the major theories on inter-relationship. The theory was originally formulated by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s. The other great exponents of this theory are; Flament (1971) and John Turner (1982). The Social

identity theory is predicated on the assumption that an individual develops his/her self-concept on the basis of his/her attachment to a significant group (Hogg, 2006). In other words, a self-awareness of an individual is dependent on the individual's membership to a significant group. By the individual's membership to the significant group, the individual's self-concept is developed and actualized. This implies then that an individual is just but a reflection of his group membership. Buttressing this, Moss (2008) posits: When individuals are cognizant of their social identity --aware of the groups to which they belong --their perceptions, inclinations, and behaviour can change dramatically. First, they become more inclined to embrace the beliefs and demonstrate the values that epitomize their group. Second, they become more likely to perceive individuals who belong to other groups as demonstrating qualities that typify members of this collective collaboration. If they perceive a collective collaboration as thrifty, for example, they become inclined to interpret the behaviour of a specific member as miserly rather than generous (Hogg, 2006; Terry, 2000; Ellemers & Spears, 2002). Being a group member, his actions are but also, a reflection of his group membership action(s). Therefore an understanding of the individual's actions/behaviours demands a commensurate understanding of his group membership actions, values and behaviours.

From the social identity theory view point, the perceived individual's behaviour is patterned by the group's behaviour acting on the individual as a significant other (Frisch et al. 2014). More so, this patterned behaviour emanates as a result of the social bond between and among members of the group. This goes further in reinforcing the social bond and solidarity amongst the members of the group. This reinforcement consequentially creates a 'we-feeling' for the in-group and a 'they-feeling' for the out-group members arising from self-categorization. This view has been corroborated by Brewer (1986), who in his study of

the minimal and maximal group revealed that the only thing necessary to create prejudice and discrimination between groups is a relevant and salient self-categorization or social identity. To him therefore, it is the individual's identification with his in-group that significantly shapes his self-image towards result oriented goal and the associated behaviour pattern which invariably determines his interaction/relationship with other members of the out-group. Again, it is crucial to remember in-groups are groups you identify with, and out-groups are the ones that we don't identify with, and may discriminate against (McLeod 2008). His self-categorization with the attendant status question however is, can social interaction ever be devoid of social identification and affinity? Can there ever be a social interaction between and among socially distinct multi-cultural groups that is devoid of any feeling of 'we' and 'they'? Conferment and legitimation as earlier stated further reinforce the "we" and the "they" feeling. In affirmation to this, Brewer (1986) posits that, just the awareness of belonging to a group that is different than another group is enough to create prejudice in favour of the in-group against the out-group. It may sound strange as revealed from the above assertion that just the mere membership of one in an in-group is just but an enough justification for one to exhibit prejudice and discrimination against a member of an out-group. The fact however remains that in the Nigeria context and in relation to the collaborative engagement of the social worker and legal practitioner, the question of an individual's group membership, affiliation and sentiment to a reasonable extent will influence if not determine the nature of the group relations in the country for an enduring goal. It is truism that where this line of social identification and its attendant social affinity is eliminated, social interaction is bound to be peaceful and harmonious. This completely answers the question of relevance of social interaction theory with the subject matter under investigation.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted phenomenological (descriptive) and exploratory (contextual) research design. Phenomenological method aims to describe, understand and interpret the meanings of experience of human life while the goal of exploratory research is to formulate problems, clarify concepts and form hypotheses. The study employed purely qualitative approach for its findings by engaging ten (10) legal practitioners in Rivers State High Court and ten (10) social workers from University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital to make up twenty (20) respondents for key participant interview (KPI) in its investigation since the study's interest is on in depth views on secondary data that has to do with the subject under investigation and not necessarily to raise generalization on social worker's engagement and legal practitioners.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various complex clarifications behind inadequate facilitated exertion between social work and law in most of the underdeveloped countries which might incorporate, the hardships in realizing when and how to team up, moral worries about varying norms of classification, impression of the job of experts in the other field and perspectives on the idea of the callings (Galowitz, 1999). A portion of the conventional social work standards appear to be alien in African settings. The social work rule of individualization, for instance, is un-African as it advances independence but then life in Africa is common (Mabvurira, 2020). African morals are philanthropic morals, the sort of morals that puts a lot of accentuation on human government assistance. The worry for human government assistance might be said to establish the centre point of the African axiological wheel. This direction of African morals takes its motivation, without a doubt, from the humanistic viewpoint that describes customary African life and thought (Gyekye,

2011). The coordinated effort among legal counsellors and social workers keeps on being a region in which there is a strain between the legal framework and the social work profession (Lorie et al., 2002). Notwithstanding, lawyers and social workers should expect difficulty and strain in teaming up to address a normal customer. The two professions have secrecy as their basic belief however the legal counsellors have various norms for classification which can cause strife between the two professions, sets that in certain occurrences social workers accept that activities the law grants requires would abuse moral norms of social work or activities that would disregard law are important to consent must regard their clients' security and keep up the secrecy. In any case, social workers in some cases experience conditions in which lawful principles conflict with the profession's moral norms and their convictions about good obligation to moral guidelines in the calling. Studies have demonstrated that some social work practitioners grasp the feeling that each law ought to be followed, paying little attention to a social worker's closely-held conviction about their sensibility. Those in contradicting camps accept that social workers should oppose dazed compliance to the law due to their conviction or acknowledgment that a few laws are unreasonable and destructive to our clients and society. The social work professionals have not yet disguised the unambiguous job of social work in relating with lawyers and safeguarding the freedoms of the under privileged in the public arena (Mtetwa, 2013). In Africa, these moral disarrays exist as difficulties to proficient practice because of the presence of social and communalistic values of social consideration. These values put the law and the practice into professional collision (Casimir & Samuel, 2015). Social workers and lawyers interface with individuals from grouped establishments reliably, yet social aptitudes are a central point of convergence of social work guidance, these capacities are not tended to in genuine practice. Interdisciplinary practice in which social workers and lawyers learn relational

aptitudes together and have an occasion to rehearse them through help learning openings are an approach to solve problems. (Stephanie et al., 2015). Despite the benefits of integrated practice, there are also challenges that must be addressed for a successful practice, including conflicts in professional ideology and ethics between lawyers and social workers, and differing responsibilities surrounding legal privilege and social workers' responsibilities to report risk or harm to authorities (Maylea, 2019). The professions should take an active role in overcoming these impediments and in laying the groundwork for individual lawyers and social workers to work together effective.

4.0 INTERVIEW RESPONSES AND FINDINGS

As earlier stated, our approach was targeted at twenty (20) respondents for the interview, however, a few striking responses are presented here. In our effort to find out the indicators that are limiting the collaborative engagement of the social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria, interviewed participants were of the view that the main reason for poor collaboration between the social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria is as a result of lack of awareness and express defined professional role of the two professions especially from the part of the justice system in Nigeria. To complement this positions one of the interviewed participant maintained said that;

One thing is very clear in trying to find out the reasons behind this strained relationship between the two professions in Nigeria. First and foremost, most legal practitioners have no knowledge of the existence of the social work profession in Nigeria. Although in contemporary times the activities of social workers and legal practitioners are fast growing compared to the past; it is still far from what should be regarded as reasonable engagement. These indicators have carefully limited whatever approach of their collaborative

engagement they are found in Nigeria. He went further to say that: to me I considered the lack of recognized professional status of social work in Nigeria as a major factor for this lack of awareness. This is very obvious because the government of Nigeria is yet to professionalize social work practice and as such legal professionals are not in a hurry to seek their collaborative services. For instance, in Nigeria instead of the ministry of justice and the court system employing the services of a social worker they will rather engage the psychologist in the place of a social worker. The instance given has explained low awareness of the social work profession (Amadi, a legal practitioner in Rivers State High Court, Port Harcourt).

In a similar response, one Madam Esther, a social worker attached to the Port Harcourt Correctional Centre stated that: we observed and have come to the conclusion that many factors are limiting the collaborative engagement of the social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria. In that regard we are trying our best through collaboration with some NGOs and some legislators to raise awareness of the relevance and importance of the social work profession in our present situation we find ourselves in Nigeria. My conviction here is that if every one of us, especially the legal practitioners and even their entire system is adequately informed about the essence of social work practice it will go a long way to create better collaborative efforts to manage most crisis ridden situations presently in Nigeria.

Going forward another interview participant presented a more emphasis on education and training background as an indicator and a means or an avenue for lack of compromised agreement or collaboration between legal practitioners and social workers in Nigeria. The respondent Mr. Fred, a social worker working at University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital is of the view that:

Although the imaginativeness of these professions

(referring to social workers and legal practitioners) agrees in certain areas, however, but are different in terms of training. For example, whereas the social workers are trained to specialize on how to manage deviance and its causative agents in order to relatively put a stop to it; then the legal practitioners on the other hand are trained to prosecute deviance attitudes and behaviours. In that case, legal practitioners are not seeing any necessary reason for collaboration with social workers. Although the legal practitioners work mostly with evidences; they however, forgot that their collaborative engagement with social workers would help exhumed evidences especially in most complicated investigation.

During our field investigation we discovered that all the social workers we have encountered are always interested to justify why a crime happened and often makes it difficult to unravel the criminals. They argued that society is the real cause of most crimes, particularly its rampant manifestation in Nigeria without the collaborative engagement of the social workers. In thinking, society is really wired in different ways of consideration. But the truth is that if we continue to blame the society and other indicators for deviant behaviours, then criminalities will remain in perpetuity.

The different responses of our respondents is in line with Taylor (2006) in his position that it may seem very different for a social worker versus a lawyer; however, for either to be successful, similar interpersonal skills are required. According to him, this is because lawyers, like social workers, are constantly working with people and many of whom are under serious stress, which requires focused and skilful management of their respective relationships and a capacity for empathy. Similarly, Ngwu and Iwuagwu (2022) maintained that beyond similar professional expectations and roles, social workers and lawyers, especially those providing legal aid assistance often work with the same types of clients.

5.0 CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues discussed in this paper which was initiated to appraise social worker and legal practitioners' engagement with emphasis on the collaborative aggregate for social justice in Nigeria is phenomenal basically on the need for effective collaboration between social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria. This collaboration as keenly observed in this paper through other scholarly positions and field investigation have implications on how these professions could be developed into implementing complementing and reasonable services, policies and programmes to alleviate not only their client's burden but also for an improved society. Responses from the field investigation have shown or exposed the aggregate salient limitations to this collaborative engagement in Nigeria and further authenticate the importance and far-reaching benefits this collaboration between social workers and legal practitioners would have to greatly enhance the Nigerian justice system towards a better social justice. The present study dwelling on this revelation recommended that: a) Emphasis should be placed on lack of awareness, the non-professional nature of social work in Nigeria, among others such as differences in ethics, professional training and education; b) It should be of utmost importance that active roles be taken to overcome the impediments existing between the social workers and legal practitioners in Nigeria; c) The state should lay a foundation for effective collaboration between the two professionals such that will be visible in terms of services delivery.

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