

Managing urban conflict in Africa: Insights from social work

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Abstract

The paper examined urban social conflict in Africa from the perspective of the utility of social work in mitigating such conflict. It depended on the desk review of extant literature for its information and was anchored on a structural or macro-environmental explanation of the drivers of urban social conflict. The paper is also premised on the fact that while African cities have enjoyed an ever-increasing urbanization, such urbanization has come with several social pathologies including different forms of social conflict. Such conflict is especially prevalent in inner-city areas or urban slums where squalid physical environment and socio-economic deprivation conduce to social conflict among residents. The inescapable reality is that social conflict is largely a social phenomenon generated by the sociability or otherwise of living and thus social work as a discipline and practice anchored on enabling citizens achieve optimal social functioning can be useful in the mitigation of social conflict. It concluded that given that conflict is a social phenomenon, social work given its nature can build a reliable niche in urban conflict management. It thus calls attention to not only improving urban social work practice but equally engendering a practice that tackles the peculiar nature of urban social conflict in Africa.

Keywords: Urban Conflict; Social Work; Africa; Violence; Practice

1. Introduction

The paper addresses the vexing issue of urban conflict and violence as well as how these can elicit a social work response. Therefore, while urban conflict can be conceived or approached from different perspectives, there is no doubt that it is largely a social phenomenon. Thus, the drivers and consequences of urban social conflict operate at the individual and social levels. But equally germane is that urban social conflict suggests some level of dysfunction and dissonance that can be related to both individual and structural contexts/conditions of the individual.

According to Scheper, Hughes and Bourgois (2013) violence should be comprehended as a social process. Thus, urban conflict and violence emanates from the social nature and dynamics of the typical urban area anywhere in the globe. It is crucial to appreciate that the typical urban space is not about physical infrastructure and amenities therein but the social nature or makeup of the urban space. Therefore, the urban area is characterized by social heterogeneity and complex manifold nexus between groups and individuals in the urban areas. As a result, social work as a discipline and practice that seeks improving the adaptive and coping capacity of the individual in the society may rightly claim a space in tackling urban social conflict.

Be the above as it may, there is no gainsaying the widespread nature and impact of violence in the most urbanized cities in the world. In other words, urban violence and insecurity are almost a daily and recurrent affair in major cities in the world. The nature of urban environment and lengthened interaction coupled with the quest for scarce resources and the goods of modernity may generate negative social outcomes including different forms of antisocial behaviour including crime and violence especially among the urban youth.

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Equally germane to the discourse on urban violence is to appreciate the meaning of violence. In other words, a good route to unravelling the nature and dimensions of urban insecurity which is largely produced by urban violence is to properly conceptualize violence. Violence should be understood conventionally as the intentional utilization of power directed towards a given goal and in which one or more individuals generate mental, physical or sexual injury or even death on another individual or individuals (Concha-Eastman, 2002). For some others, violence can also be understood in terms of its manifestations or types, impact, victors and even perpetrators of violence (see, Shaw 2009). However, urban insecurity and the conflict it generates should be conceived as going beyond violence to encompass all forms of anxieties, fears and socio-psychological imbalances that confront the typical urban dweller regularly.

In an ironic sense, the urban environment may be conceived as both the location of violence and the social process that constitute violence. As a result, urban violence becomes both manifested and reproduced or regenerated within the urban areas. The 'urban' as employed here goes beyond mere physical location but includes the peculiar forms of social organization and existential conditions characteristic of the typical urban area. It would be beneficial for any thoroughgoing analysis of urban violence to comprehend it beyond crime or physical processes that make other people victims but equally encompassing social, psychological, political, and affective processes and actions that generate insecurity or imbalance for other citizens in a typical urban area.

Instructively, Winston (2004: 179) posits that "the connections between the structures, levels and actors involved in violence are as important as the manifestations of violence itself." Therefore, our appreciation of urban violence should be based not only on the various forms of violence in existence but more fundamentally on how the manifold nexus between social structures, levels and personalities of city dwellers are implicated in the production and reproduction of violence.

The extant literature reveals quite an impressive array of studies on urban social conflicts, their consequences, and forms (see, Rodgers 2004; Moser 2004; Muggah 2012; Rigon 2016; Roy 2009). But these impressive studies did not address or fathom the place and role of social work both in the understanding and unravelling of urban social conflict. In view of the above the paper seeks to explore the nature of urban social conflict and more primarily the relevance of social work as both a discipline and practice in the mitigation of urban social conflict in Africa.

In view of the foregoing discussion, the paper depends on the desk review of literature and cursory observation (borne out of the researcher's practice of social work in urban settings in the last two decades). In other words, the systematic review of literature and other documents provided information for a critical expose on the role of social work in ameliorating urban social conflict. From this introduction, the rest of the paper is structured into perspectives in urban social conflict which examines poignant or key extant literature and views urban social conflict; a theoretical explanation of social conflict suited to the complexity of the urban environment; the role of social work in the mitigation of urban social conflict in Africa; and the concluding remarks.

2. Perspectives on Urban Social Conflict

Generally, urban violence has been approached from two main perspectives often coinciding with the distinction between theoretical and practical approaches, from the perspective of theory the focus may be on the nature, origin and extent of violence, while another approach may be focused on the policy-oriented strategies and clear programmes for violence prevention and reduction in the levels crime and other forms of violence (see Davis 2012).

Often violence is seen as a social and political manifestation of urban living. In this case violence may originate from social and political forces within the city. However, violence should be seen as encompassing the above and equally focusing on the role of urban planning and policy on urban violence and insecurity. In other words, urban planning may be conceived as a causal factor in urban violence, much the same way it can be seen as critical to the formalized response to urban violence and insecurity. These days, urban administrators and city governors are saddled with responding in creative manners to urban insecurity. But besides, what these administrators can or cannot do is how urban policies and programmes are structured and implemented to ameliorate urban violence and insecurity.

In effect, the urban space is assumed as the process or domain through which violence proliferates and manifests (see, Pavoni and Tulumello 2018). Therefore, the urban area may be conceived as particularly prone to violence and other forms of insecurity. Then violence goes with insecurity and insecurity generates distinct problems of adaptation to the urban area and produces challenges for the average city.

While Latin America appears like the predominant region of urban violence (see Garcia-Cervantes 2021; UNODC, 2013; Imbusch et al, 2011), there is no denying the fact that it is becoming a global phenomenon associated with urban growth.

Without doubt, there may exist differences in incidence of occurrence and degree. It is equally probable that the rate of urban conflict can be associated with the nature and effectiveness of policing as well as the nature and effectiveness of urban administration or governance.

It is important in conceptualizing conflict to recognize the distinction often made between violent conflict or manifest conflict and latent conflict. In this sense, while manifest conflict is clearly perceivable and out there for all to see, latent conflict is much more a subtle and often not clearly perceivable conflict in the urban milieu. However, despite the difference both forms of conflict impede social functioning and well-being in the urban environment. Moreover, the well-known manifest or violent conflict often has latent roots or beginnings.

In other words, most so-called latent conflict often results in or transform into manifest or violent conflict. Both forms of conflict embody the same dissonance or dispute over resources in the urban environment (see, Anugwom, 2022). According to Moser (2004) while all conflict and violence can be related to power latent conflict does not necessarily inflict harm while violence conflict does. Interestingly, there is equally the tendency to differentiate between high and low scale conflict – high scale/intensity conflict simply entails manifest and more especially violent conflict while low scale or intensity conflict simply refers to the latent or subtle form of conflict.

Despite differences in conceptualization and perspectives (see Wirth 1938; Pavoni and Tulumello 2020) urban violence can be perceived as both endogenous and exogenous in nature. Hence, it is produced both the peculiar nature of the city as a social and where competition, rivalry, and scarcity of resources create violence-conducive atmospheres. These may generate situations in which power, economic access, regulations may produce violence conducive conditions. Therefore, it is necessary from the foregoing to understand the complex and dynamic nature of the “urban area” especially with reference to violence. As a result, one can apprehend the notion of urban, “both as the background out of which violence becomes manifest as an event, as well as the process constitutive to violence itself” (Pavoni and Tulumello 2020: 51).

3. Towards a Theoretical Understanding of Urban Conflict

The paper depends on a structural explanation of urban conflict. In this case, it adopts a framework which prioritizes the structural or macro-environmental factors in the explanation of urban social conflict. In other words, theories which promote social-environmental factors as the underlying forces behind urban social conflict are usually seen or depicted as adopting a structural orientation. In this case, social behavior or behaviour in the society is perceived as generated by both macro and micro factors mainly beyond the immediate control of the individual in the society. Therefore, these viewpoints contend that the nature of society or macro-patterns of interactions in it are more culpable than individual or personal factors for violence in the city.

In the views of Moser (2004) violent behaviour may be produced by a combination of structural factors and trigger factors in the social environment or a combination of macro and micro level factors operating in the society and the individual. The orientation suggests that the main causes or drivers are structural in nature while the individual or citizen in the city merely responds or reacts to these structural forces. Hence, in the apprehension of the above perspective, the personality or personal make-up of the individual is triggered by structural factors. Prominent among these social environmental theories include the theory of relative deprivation; the theory of differential association (Sutherland et al 1992; Cressey, 1960; Matsueda 2010); anomie or strain theory (Merton 1938) etc.

However, from a developing world perspective, one sees the relative deprivation theory as very apt. This theory which is popular in classical sociological literature conceives of crime and other social pathologies including violence as resulting from the disparity in socio-structural opportunities for individuals. Therefore, those who see themselves as socially short-changed in terms of significant others and relationship between their contributions and rewards from the system as disproportionate easily resort to social pathologies either to address the disadvantages or achieve some satisfaction or get back at the system for their relative disadvantage. It is like people having a chip on their shoulders because they believe the society has either not treated them well or given their fair dues in relation to significant others. Such people are usually prone to actions and behaviours that imperil the social ethos and values of the society.

Equally germane here is the ecology model. This model derives its main relevance through combining both the natural and social systems. Despite a much earlier debut in social sciences literature, it was only in the late 1970s and 1980s that the ecological model began to receive the full attention of scholars and emerged as a theoretical framework (see Lutters and Ackerman, 1996). The main thrust of the theory or model is that violence cannot be explained through a single theoretical thread but rather through a combination or interaction of factors existing at the individual, community, and societal levels.

Incidentally, the ecological model can be related to the works of the Chicago School of Sociology and its insistence on the value of quantitative methods in the examination of urban phenomena. Be the above as it may, the theoretical and perhaps practical relevance of the ecology model has been furthered by Bronfenbrenner (1977). It was this author who employed the model as a necessary tool for apprehending human development and orientation within the society especially with regards to the understanding of urban violence and insecurity.

Interestingly, in utilizing the model Bronfenbrenner (1977) put forward five categories or elements of this ecological system which one may perceive as rather instructive. These elements include the individual; the micro-system (interpersonal relationships); meso-system (connections and processes integrating the different categories); the exo-system (made up of neighbours, family, friends, and others that may be considered as representing close level of interaction); the macro-system (i.e., the attitudes and ideologies borne out of culture).

Probably contributing to the above earlier positions of Bronfenbrenner paradigm, the WHO (2016) came out with three levels of comprehension that can help in violence prevention. These levels are individual, interpersonal and community (or societal). Apparently, the WHO conceives these different levels as interactions which may produce or generate violence. But more critically, it sees the analysis of these different levels as fundamental to any attempt to develop an ecological framework that would facilitate the prevention of violence. Despite its strengths, the model put forward by the WHO has been modified or extended by Garcia (2018) who added a fourth level or the urban level. This simply suggests that the urban environment operates as the social context of a community in which personality factors are triggered to generate violence, crime and other forms of social insecurity and imbalance in the city.

4. The Social Work Perspective and Role in Urban Conflict Management

One of the incontrovertible truisms about conflict is that it is pervasive or common in human society. As a matter of fact, the so-called conflict scholars would go further to argue that conflict is not only ubiquitous in the society but remains a critical framework for understanding the human society (see, Okeibunor and Anugwom, 2002). Thus, even where they disagree on the consequences or outcomes of conflict (ranging from 'revolution' as put forward by Karl Marx and other Marxian scholars to the 'dissociation of conflict' as argued by Ralf Dahrendorf), they all agree on the fact that human society is defined largely by conflict. Be the above as it may, conflict attracts attention simply because it has the capacity to undermine social progress and development if not well-managed. And this is especially the situation in urban areas where the usual social heterogeneity may breed differences that conduce conflict. This may explain why scholars from many disciplinary persuasions have invested energy in the study of social conflict in the urban society. Incidentally, social work seems to be conspicuously absent from this enterprise especially in Africa.

In view of the above, it is only normal to expect that given the preoccupation of social work with challenges or problems confronted by human beings in the society, social conflict should occupy a high position in its concerns. As a matter of fact, it may not be out of place to envision social work as a discipline with urban bias especially from the perspective of Africa. In this sense, the core concerns of the profession in Africa easily falls into categories of human problems that are squarely addressed through primordial and affinal networks in Africa's villages or rural enclaves. cursory observation thus indicates that almost all social work practice in Africa occurs in the urban settings. Therefore, urban social conflict demands social work intervention especially in inner city residential areas and slums where conflict may be brewed by the socio-structural factors in the environment. Particularly apparent here is the case of young people who may suffer not only limited windows of opportunity but also frustration and desperation accruing from the usual gloom and deprivation that often characterize life in such areas.

Young people and even adults who are cast adrift in the dearth of social and economic opportunities in these urban areas may perceive conflict and aggressive behaviour as buffers against society. In other words, the usual aggressiveness and boisterous behaviour or attitudes often seen in such people may be nothing than protective shields against privation and low-quality social life (see, Anugwom, 2022). Conflict thus, emerges as a psychological weapon against perceived unjustness in the society. In view of the above, the role of social workers becomes to mediate between these frustrated young people and urban residents and social services usually beyond their reach in the urban environment. The social worker is also expected to function as advocates of a better life and improved social opportunities for these young people.

While social work traditionally focused on what may be termed traditional personal and social problems ranging from child abuse to marital problems, it has not sought to carve a niche in social conflict especially conflict that is peculiar to the spatial zones of the urban areas usually inhabited by the socially vulnerable and economically marginal. However, there is no denying the seeming ubiquity of social conflict in urban areas. But while these conflicts can be tackled through the usual structural routes, there is no contesting the fact that these conflicts have persisted and even

proliferated. In view of the above, there is need to address these conflicts through targeted social work interventions which would address both the micro and macro locations of such conflict tendencies. For instance, while social workers may seek to improve group functioning, advocate for improved social provisioning in inner city areas, it has the added ability to isolate and offer counselling and support on individual or case-by-case basis.

5. Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that, “urban violence (and the fear thereof) can be said to emerge out of the interactions between structures, processes, narratives, practices and bodies that constitute the urban”. The above sentiments call attention to the need to appreciate the complex nature of the urban environment and how counteracting forces ranging from the micro to the macro produce sustain urban violence and different forms of insecurity.

There is need to appreciate that urban areas are centers of high population agglomeration entails that antisocial behaviours including violence and conflict may be more heightened in the urban areas than other areas occupied by people. According to extant literature, since people constitute or make-up the urban space, such space (urban) shapes behaviour to some extent. In effect, the urban environment embodies not only the physical space but includes the social context and realities of life in that space. But the physical space constitutes and reinforces the social context and vice-versa.

The urban space becomes a socio-spatial phenomenon where interactions between individuals, their social groups and institutions are situated within spatial space. It is in view of the above that social work portends credible credentials to help mitigate urban conflict especially in inner-city areas or parts of the city inhabited by the less privileged. While urban social work practice is common especially in Euro-American cities, the scenario differs in the case of Africa and other developing parts of the world.

Familiarity with the urban situation in Africa especially with the social and physical squalor that confronts one in the slums and inner-city areas would undoubtedly suggest that conflicts in these areas are produced by structural and macro-environmental factors as rightly apprehended by our theoretical orientation. In this case, there is a certain bias in development and planning in urban areas that predispose these areas to social and health pathologies. In fact, these urban enclaves have been perceived as nodes for the hatching and spreading of infectious diseases and epidemics in Africa. In other words, these urban areas become blighted either through deliberate government policy or neglect. A situation that can only be related to the social and economic incapacity of the citizens who occupy such urban areas. Given the above, conflict results both from the struggle for scarce urban resources (land, housing, space for economic activity, social amenities etc.) and the predictable discomfiture resulting from inhabiting such an area.

Therefore, we advocate for a sustained urban social work practice and more crucially the evolvement of social work practice and orientation focused on social conflict in urban areas. Practicing in the slum or among slum dwellers is even not very popular or high in the priorities of social workers in the continent, hence framing a social work practice that targets not only the slums or inner-city areas but specifically the social conflicts that occur in these areas of the city would no doubt challenge the capacity of social workers. However, such practice can build on the noted resilience and dynamism of the discipline.

Even beyond the social work imperative in urban social conflict is the need to appreciate what can be termed structural social conflict and violence. The above points our attention towards peculiar forms of urban conflict generated or engendered by what is termed “structural violence”. In this sense, violence or conflict is produced systematically through economic, political, legal, and even physical components of the urban area or city.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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