

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk

An international journal rooted in South Africa

Vol. 62, No. 1, 2026, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15270/62-1-1790>

Lambert K. Engelbrecht¹ and Sandra Bredell²

¹ Stellenbosch University, Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6549-7183>  lke@sun.ac.za

² Sandra Bredell, Hugenote Kollege and extraordinary researcher at North-West University, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0948-3411>  sandra.bredell@hugenote.ac.za

EDITORIAL

Social work associations: Towards unified professional voices

Professional social work associations represent the collective conscience and strategic voice of the profession. In diverse contexts, they provide platforms through which practitioners advance professional standards, advocate for social justice, influence policy and consolidate professional identity. Engagement in such associations is therefore not a peripheral activity but a fundamental aspect of ethical and accountable social work practice. Through collective organisation, social workers enhance the credibility, visibility and influence of the profession within broader socio-political systems. This central theme underpins the current issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, which features ten research articles and one book review; nine of the articles are collaborative.

The recent launch of the South African Social Workers Association (SASWA) represents a significant development within the South African professional landscape. For many years fragmentation, resource constraints and competing institutional pressures have limited the profession's unified representation in the country. A national association offers an opportunity to consolidate professional energy and strengthen advocacy capacity, and to create a coherent voice capable of engaging government, civil society and international bodies. However, the success of any professional association depends fundamentally on the commitment of its members. Without active participation, membership uptake and professional ownership, even the most promising structures cannot achieve their intended impact.

South African social workers who are eligible to join this association are therefore encouraged to view membership not merely as a subscription, but as an investment in the future of the profession. Collective organisation enhances bargaining power and provides professional support networks that are particularly important in contexts characterised by high caseloads, exposure to trauma and systemic inequality. Furthermore, association membership strengthens international connectivity through collaboration with global social work structures, thereby situating national practice within broader professional discourses.

A crucial, yet sometimes overlooked, function of professional associations is their relationship with knowledge production and dissemination. Journals such as *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* provide the scholarly foundation upon which evidence-informed practice is built. Associations and journals operate symbiotically: associations create professional communities, independent from public and private work environments, that can generate shared practice questions and innovations, while journals can publish these collaborative research findings as accessible knowledge that strengthens interventions, supervision, management and policy engagement. When practitioners engage with both structures, the profession benefits from a continuous cycle of reflection, learning and improvement.

This issue, 62(1) of 2026, illustrates the importance of grounding practice in research. Contributions in this volume demonstrate how empirical inquiry, practice reflection and theoretical development inform interventions across diverse service contexts. Evidence-informed social work practice is not an abstract ideal; it is a professional responsibility that enhances service effectiveness, accountability and service user outcomes. Professional associations can play a pivotal role in promoting such engagement by encouraging continuing professional development, facilitating knowledge exchange and supporting practitioner research initiatives.

Within this context, **Shirley Hugo, Neil Henderson and Catherina Schenck** explore and describe the cultural challenges faced by young black widows in Mangaung, Free State, South Africa, while identifying strategies for their empowerment in communities. Utilising a qualitative approach, sixteen widows were sampled through purposive and snowball sampling. Data collection entailed focus groups, individual in-depth interviews and workshops within a participatory action research design. The study highlights the marginalisation and isolation experienced by young widows, including being blamed for their husbands' deaths, stigmatisation by the community and financial vulnerability.

Advancing research within the context of indigenous culture, **Sandile Gumbi and colleagues** argue that Western theories have historically dominated South African social work, often neglecting indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. In response, they collaboratively explore the integration of Afrocentric perspectives into social work education and groupwork practice. Their collaborative autoethnographic study, co-authored by three social work lecturers and four second- and third-year students, advocates for the decolonisation of the curriculum to foster culturally relevant pedagogy, promote Afrocentric research and establish partnerships with African indigenous knowledge centres. Similarly, **Goitseone Leburu** contends that most gender-based violence interventions rely on Eurocentric models, which disregard indigenous African knowledge systems, communal worldviews and the historical contexts of colonisation, apartheid and patriarchy. Through a conceptual literature review, the author emphasises the role of social work within a Pan-African agenda, calling for the integration of Afrocentric philosophies, community-led interventions, and culturally grounded models to address gender-based violence.

The next two articles focus on young people and children. **Jan Masombuka and Elizabeth Smit** examine the process of social work intervention in the provision of services to young people dealing with the effects of substance use. Their qualitative study identifies seven

essential components of intervention: intake, one-on-one therapy, family therapy, home visits, group sessions, referral to inpatient treatment centres, and aftercare and reintegration services. These findings offer new insights for policy development and intervention strategies. Similarly, **Jerry Tshivhase and Tumelo Sekgobela** investigate factors affecting the effectiveness of diversion programmes for children in conflict with the law. Their qualitative study identifies peer pressure and substance abuse, lack of family support, poor parenting, insufficient aftercare, poverty and school dropout as critical factors. Recommendations emphasise the necessity of aftercare and social reintegration for all children completing diversion programmes.

Victim empowerment programmes remain central to social work intervention. Within this context, **Mary Kgole, Joyce Mohapi and Dipela Percy** explore the experiences of social workers supporting women victimised by intimate partners. All six participants of this study reported symptoms of vicarious trauma, including compassion fatigue. The authors conclude that psychological support, in the form of structured debriefing, is imperative to sustain social workers within these programmes.

A study with international relevance by **Sheron Mpofu, Antoinette Lombard and Dorothee Hölscher** examines the integration experiences of Zimbabwean migrant families, particularly second-generation migrants in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Findings indicate that both first- and second-generation migrants face challenges in early migration stages, including documentation, access barriers, poverty and invisibility, which place families at risk of separation. The authors argue that initiatives to support these families must adopt structural, anti-oppressive approaches to service delivery.

Access to social and economic opportunities, such as housing and property rights, remains gendered in many developing countries, including South Africa. Focusing on rural female-headed households in Tyutyu Village, Bhisho, Eastern Cape, **Athenkosi Ndima, Mziwandile Sobantu, Noel Muridzo and Tatenda Sukulao** explore the interconnectedness between housing challenges and rural contexts. Their descriptive, qualitative study finds that female-headed households experience persistent unemployment, unsafe housing, insecure neighbourhoods and the impact of the absence of a father figure. The authors recommend integrated, inclusive and gender-aware housing policies to address these challenges.

Despite increasing interest in equine-based therapy, research on the therapeutic role of horses remains limited. **Lyrise Naidu and Raisuyah Bhagwan** explore equine-based therapy as a therapeutic tool. Using a qualitative exploratory design guided by an instrumental case study approach, they identify three themes: understanding equine-based therapy in a therapeutic context, horses as therapeutic partners, and equine-based therapy as a healing tool. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of equine-based interventions in social work.

Finally, **Nadia von Wielligh and Lizane Wilson** examine social work supervisors' training needs. Their qualitative study, guided by four of the six phases of the Design and Development model, confirms the scarcity of formal training for supervisors and the resultant lack of preparedness in their roles. Recommendations include training in supervisory roles and

responsibilities, contextual and practical supervision, functions of supervision, systemic challenges and leadership skills.

In the book review section of this issue, **Marquin Smith** observes that *Community Development in the 21st Century: Empowerment for Breaking the Cycle of Poverty* (7th ed.), edited by F. de Beer and A. de Beer (2024), offers a comprehensive overview of practitioner competencies and situates community development within the frameworks of local government and policy. The text makes a significant contribution to community development education and practice in South Africa. Beyond its value to the field of community development, it also serves as a useful resource for students and practitioners in social work, development studies and sociology.

This issue, in which the majority of articles are collaborative, demonstrates that unified professional voices strengthen both the profession and the communities it serves. The emergence of a national association in South Africa thus offers a timely opportunity for social workers to demonstrate collective leadership and professional solidarity. By supporting professional associations and engaging with scholarly publications, social workers contribute to a profession that is not only compassionate, but also intellectually rigorous, socially responsive and strategically influential.

Lambert K. Engelbrecht
Editor-in-Chief

Sandra Bredell
President of the South African Social Workers Association
(SASWA)