

The Clergy and Traditional Service Providers as Associate or Auxiliary Social Workers: their Roles and Functions: An Empirical Survey in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the roles played by clergies and traditional service providers as auxiliary social workers in Obio-Akpor Local Government area in Rivers State, Nigeria. The rationale for this study was built on the logic that the clergies and traditional service providers play the roles of associate or auxiliary social workers wherever they are found. Hence, this study is designed to answer two research questions that highlight the indicators of measuring who an associate social worker is especially based on the impacts at the community levels. The system theory of Von Bertalanffy was adopted to aid the analysis. The mixed methods research design was adopted, with a mixed technique for data collection which are a self- designed questionnaire and the key person's interview (KPI). The population of the study was drawn from the city population's report of 2016, and the sample size is 400 using the Taro Yamane statistical formula and 15 key persons targeted purposively for interviews. In addition, a mixed method analytical approach comprising percentages and thematic analysis was deployed for the data analysis. The findings from the study showed among others that the clergies and the traditional service providers assist, play their role and function as associate or auxiliary social workers in the communities of study. Based on this, this study recommends that the traditional service providers and clergies should be supported and encouraged to keep helping, and also more social workers should be employed to fill in the gap that the absence of social workers create in the communities.

Keywords: Clergy, Associate, Auxiliary, Social worker and Para-social work

Introduction

In a society where the system is functional, the Social Welfare/Work Ministry provides immeasurable assistance to individuals, families and the society at large, especially in developed nation such as; the United Kingdom (UK) and United State (US) . They assist people by helping them to point and connect them to the resources that will in turn help them get better or solve their problem (Ghani, 2023). Social work practice provides understanding of human development, and

deals with the behavior, the social, economic and cultural institutions and interaction that serves as an interventionist system to individuals, groups and communities in times of need. Laying emphasis at the individual level they provide; psychosocial support, help individuals with housing issues (provide homes for the vulnerable persons in the society, care for the disabled and those with mental health issues, people with mental health problems, unemployed, and abused people and drug addict among others). On the other hand, at the group and community level, social workers deal with marital conflict, parent-child conflict, support families, support the society with advocacy and civil right concerns and so on (Ghani, 2023).

An associate or auxiliary social worker in a general term could mean several things to different persons. An auxiliary social worker provides materials and supportive services to individuals and community members or clients in cases where they are unaware of the impact or the presence of social welfare care. In other words, it is a type of social work that focuses on providing support services to social workers in a diverse way and the delivery of service to individuals, families, and communities, (Aliyu, et al 2023). To be able to serve in this capacity, an understanding of various behaviours, cultures and lifestyles is required. A social work associate or auxiliary social worker may or may not be qualified to provide services to individuals, families and community but still helps and makes interventions and performs community development work that support people. This is because their position equips them to help others, especially in social contexts where by virtue of their occupation or profession, the people consciously or unconsciously impose these responsibilities on them. According to Isahak (2019), this is a situation where associate social work learning comes from ground up and this is considered a better way to learn (experimental learning).

Clergy is a terminology associated with a man or woman who does the work of God through Christian teachings and doctrines. The clergy functions from the charity-based and faith-based organization, their impacts are so visible and glaring (Banda, et al., 2006). In Nigeria, the clergies have taken the job from the social welfare Ministry, but their functions are classified under faith-based organization, where they do a lot of humanitarian works with little or no proper training on the job. Some of them with time go into intensive formal training to provide a certified justification for their actions. But social workers are well trained to address client problem be it at the micro level, mezzo, and macro level etc, (Agwanwo, 2023). Additionally, the religious leaders assist the clients, but in a lay man understanding, this help is based on charity and humanitarian classification, but unknowingly they are assisting the social worker. They introduce their belief system, values and faith to the people, and bring in gospel of their faith. They give the people words of hope, and continuous trust in the lord to help them navigate through life problems (Agi, 2023).

The catholic churches are the largest single charitable organization in the United State (US) and the world in general (Bob, 2022). They provide benefits and do important charitable work that otherwise, the governments are supposed to do through the social worker. They provide; job, social amenities for the communities, build orphanages, home for the elderly, home for abuse girls, drug addicts etc, (kialo.com). Come to think of it, beyond the Catholic Church, other faith-based organizations in the study area and elsewhere are involved in assisting individuals, families and communities, even before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this faith-based

approach to helping the needy, they extend their hand of faith to people who are depressed as a result of one problem or the other. This is similar to what the traditional service providers do in most communities because within their own capabilities, they try their best to help or assist the people in the communities through free will donations (Sanchez, 2023).

Similarly, the traditional service providers are people with less than 25% human development index ownership (lawisider.com 2023). The traditional service providers in the Nigerian context are located in various communities, and they provide services based on our customs and traditions of the land and the needs of community members. They include but not limited to traditional rulers/wives, herbalist/traditional healers, native doctors or spiritual mediators etc. They play very helpful roles to ensure joy, happiness, prosperity and peaceful co-existence among community members (Resource Person, 2023).

No individual intends to develop problems they can't solve or that will require someone else to assist them with. And no child plans to spend their life in poverty or does anyone choose to be mentally ill. These and many other problems arise as a result of social functioning resulting from a mix of several factors. Social workers are representatives of the broad and diverse position held by social workers throughout the world who engage individuals, families, groups, organization, and communities in seeking solutions to unmet need of the people. Social workers are found in the; police, correctional centers, school, military and major organization etc, to attend to peoples need (Ambrosine et al, 2012).

Beyond the Christian churches, it is widespread knowledge that the humanitarian life style has always been a central practice in Islamic religion. They give money and helping hands to the indigent and pray for them also. In the fasting time for Ramadan and their pilgrimage to Mecca, they make free will donations in cash and in other forms which enables them to distribute aid and relief materials to the needy. Their religion encourages an emotional and obligatory aspect of charity. There are moments the prophet calls for humanitarian donation for indigents. This act is hinged on the belief that when you give to the poor, you receive help from heaven, your sins are forgiven, you are also thanking God for his blessings and you are exempted from punishment from God (Krafess, 2005).

The traditional service providers assist individuals and their community in diverse ways even though they may be disposed to crude approaches of counseling that are considered native and or supernatural/natural to assist their clients. They also help clients to get justice and make life comfortable and peaceful for the clients. They consider and hold at high esteem the client that came first with a problem (Resource Person, 2023).

Several literature by numerous scholars have been conducted in similar research. For instance, Omokaro (2020) notes that the traditional service provides such as the native doctors are known as spiritual persons, notwithstanding the existence of fakes. The good or real ones use herbs for healing and they don't take money. And also they speak to the spirits at night time and do not have shrines, they communicate with leaves, their sole purpose is to help humanity. Their powers come when they interact with nature. While some have evil powers, which they perform rituals which

involves blood sacrifices. They make incantations and consult deity, their purpose is to help and assist their clients.

Also, Graham (2003) posits that the church has a reputation for helping the poor in the society, believing that Jesus Christ made the mark of true Christianity. The bible reference on the account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16vs19 to31, and the Good Samaritan in Luke 10vs30 to37. The church's first important ministry is to preach the gospel, but you cannot preach the gospel while ignoring the need of vulnerable population such as; food, shelter, clothing, medicine etc. Hence, this imposes a situation where the church tries to help people in need of these basic necessities of life. The church initially started by providing support to widows, but later extended their services to those with pressing needs. Furthermore, the Clergy and the traditional service providers assist the social workers with the physical, emotional, financial and spiritual needs of the client etc. They expose them to the Holy Scriptures to grow their faith and believe in the word of God by indoctrination and memorization of the scriptures. The clergy's value system, guidelines, and counseling are based on scriptures. Most time they exhibit the skills and principles of social worker, for instance; empathy, effective listening, confidentiality, and acceptance etc (socialworkdegreeguide.com).

Although scholars like Hardy (2014) and Ari (2018) have focused their research on how pastors counsel clients or individuals and by extension contributing to the broad literature on Christian social work, the study on clergy and traditional service providers as associate social workers is almost non-existent. This has made it nearly impossible to identify some key indicators that can be used to frame the operations of the clergy and traditional service providers as associate social workers in the context of what they do. Even though the clergy and traditional service providers assist individuals unprofessionally, but to some extent they still solve or relieve them of their problems. This clearly shows that there is a gap in existing literature especially on the auxiliary nature of the activities of the clergies and traditional service providers in their communities of residence and operations. To fill this gap in knowledge, this study is focused on providing an empirical evidence that clergies and traditional service providers are associate social worker in their own right. To achieve this broad aim, auxiliary or associate social work is measured using the indicators of associate social worker such as; achievement, relevance, evaluates performance. However, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

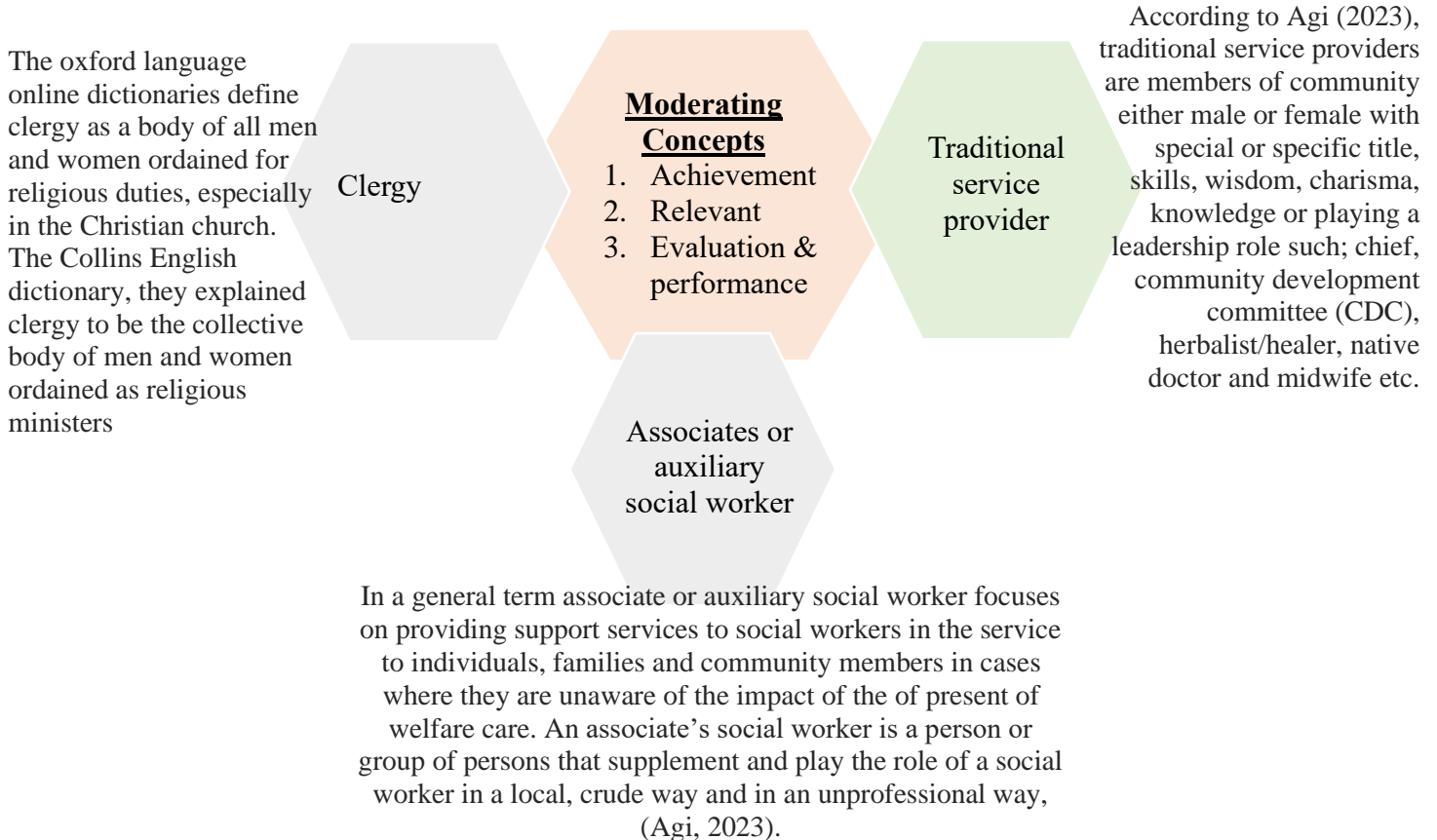
- i. To what extent have the traditional service providers and clergies assisted clients as associate social workers?
- ii. How do clergies and traditional service providers function as associate social works?

The broad aim is to identify the role played by the above-mentioned associate or auxiliary social workers; the specific objectives of this study.

- I. To investigate the extent to which traditional service providers and clergies have assisted clients as associate or auxiliary social worker.

II. To identify how the clergy and traditional service providers function as associate social workers.

Literature Review *Conceptual Schema*



In a study by Ari (2018) who conducted a research on social work and pastoral counseling and empowering each other in New York. This work addresses divergent outcomes in counseling services offered by pastors and clinicians (social workers). It argues that a faith-based leader often has direct access to the client than the social workers. The study pointed to the intersection between the religious leader's support and social worker. The religious leader presents each scenario first through orthodox Rabbi, followed by clinical insights of a social worker or other mental health professionals. The outcome is radically different. This contrast demonstrates the distinction between the goals, value and training of each profession. The scope of the two professionals should be broadened in term of cultural competence for social worker and therapist who may engage with tight-knit religious populations.

Also, Hardy (2014) researched on the unique social and religious context of the Africa-America community. The study adopted survey design to assess the preferred source of help, the finding

suggested a possible help seeking of non-religious mental health professional, but with clinician or social workers. The research has shown that the black churches have become a de facto social work agency, meeting the financial needs, social justice and mental health needs of its congregation. The Africa-America churches have turned the church to the primary source of psychological support for members. However, Hardy (2014) notes that these individuals require reeducation on their religious help seeking among them.

Furthermore, Aliyu, et al (2023) conducted a research that focused on an appraisal of the implementation of auxiliary social work certificate programme in Kano state polytechnic in Nigeria. They focused on auxiliary social work certificate and its effects on social work practice in Kano state to provide an additional support for social workers. This may include people with no formal training of social work, the study sought to evaluate the implementation of certificate programme in auxiliary social work. The study used two self-data constructive instrument. The result of the findings reveal that the implementation of auxiliary social workers was a successful programme, the students output in dealing with vulnerable clients, has improved with skills and knowledge of social work principles. They recommend that the school should elevate the certificate to beyond certificate program to national or higher national diploma.

Theoretical Framework

In social work like other social science disciplines, theories explain, enable the predicting events and guide our actions based on scientific evidence. It therefore helps us to understand complex human behaviour. This study adopted the systems theory by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, and J.G Miller. These scholars established the foundation of the general systems theory in 1960s and 1970s. Bertalanffy (1968) in Ambrosine, (2012) defined a system as “a set of units with relationships among them”. A system is also defined as a whole, an entity composed of separated by interacting and interdependent part. The synergy with biology is when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts that is to say that, the smaller system or sub-system of the organism function in term to harness, they produce a larger system, working interdependently. Rahat (2016), defines system to be a number of interdependent parts functioning as a whole for some purpose.

According Perkins (2007), the basic idea behind system theory is that one thing affects another. Events and existence do not occur in a vacuum, but in relation to changing circumstance. The basic tenets associated with Bertalanffy’s idea is also that if a system is to be well understood, it has to be an open system. That is to say that there has to be an input, process of transformation and then output (feedback), as long as the system is in equilibrium (Adam, ND).

In relating the theory to our present study, the government of Nigeria has failed in the practice of social work, because a significant number of individuals are not supposed to rely on an associate social worker in the first place if social work profession is working effectively. This is because of the gap or a breakdown in one system that led to the beginning of another. If the system of the family, school, church, government and social welfare Ministries etc, are not working effectively the individuals will like to consult a presumed associate or auxiliary social worker. Because the breakdown in one system leads to the beginning of another, the traditional service providers and the clergy are looking for converts and they accept and assist those that are vulnerable.

Social workers indeed possess exceptional skills in intervening in individuals' lives and addressing issues within communities. They bring dynamic approaches to assisting people, devising strategies tailored to their specific needs and the challenges facing their communities. The pitfall of this theory includes that it has multiple systems to address individual problems. This will lead to delay in taking action when the individual has visited the wrong places that must have given a general idea on the client or individual problem. When one system has failed it will lead to the breakdown of another (Origi, 2023).

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed method approach. That is to say it combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Hence, social survey design was deployed. Bogardus in Shankar (2008) has defined social survey as a collection of data concerning the living and working conditions, broadly speaking, of people, in a given community. This will allow the researcher to get first-hand information from the respondents concerning the traditional service providers, associate or auxiliary social worker, social workers and the clergy. The data for the research were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were sourced using questionnaire administration and key persons interview (KPI). While the secondary sources include journal articles, textbooks and other information gathered from online publications. Obio/Akpor local Government (LGA) is the study area. The LGA is the 8th LGA in Rivers state, and it is located at the River East Senatorial district. The city report of (2016) population census gave the LGA a total population of 649,600. The Taro Yamane statistical formula was deployed to determine the sample size.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

N = total population
n = sample size
e = level of significance

$$\begin{aligned} \text{find } n &= \frac{649,600}{1+649,600(0.05)^2} \\ &= \frac{649,600}{1+649,600 * 0.0025} \\ &= \frac{649,600}{1+1624} \\ &= \frac{649,600}{1625} \\ &= 399.7538 (400) \end{aligned}$$

The sample size of 400 and 15 key persons were utilized for this study. The KPIs were purposively selected comprising of clergies, traditional service providers and social workers. Putting it together we have a total sample of 415. Simple random technique was adopted to select four (4) wards from the 17 wards we have in Obio-Akpor LGA. Same technique was applied to select 4 communities in each of the 4 wards, thereafter we deployed accidental/availability sampling to select the respondents. Additionally, thematic approach was adopted to analyze the qualitative nature of the work. However, the questionnaire data were analyzed using percentage.

Results and Discussion

Table 4.0: Distribution of respondents according to communities

S/N	WARDS	SELECTED COMMUNITIES	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE %
1	Ward 14	RUKPOKWU	100	100%
2	Ward 17	RUMUOLEMINI	100	100%
3	Ward 1	ELIOZU	100	100%
4	Ward 4	RUMUODUMAYA	100	100%
TOTAL			400	

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, (2023).

Table 4.1: Analysis of questionnaire distribution and retrieval

S/N	NO. SENT OUT	NO. RETRIEVED	PERCENTAGE
QUESTIONNAIRE	400	390	97.5%

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, (2023).

The above table indicates that four (4) wards and four (4) communities were selected and four hundred (400) persons were administered questionnaires to respond, however three hundred and ninety (390) copies were retrieved for analysis which is about 97.5%. 10 of the copies were not retrieved amounting to just 2.5%.

Table 4.2: Respondent Personal Information

S/N	VARIABLES	ANSWER ALTERNATIVES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	SEX	male	210	52.5%
		female	180	45%
2	RELIGION	Christian	228	57%
		Muslim	22	5.5%
		Others faith	50	12.5%
3	AGE	Below 20years	48	12%
		Above 20 years	152	38%
		Above 40year	190	47.5%
4	LEVEL OF LITERACY	Above primary	62	15.5%
		Undergraduate	120	30%
		graduate	208	52%
5	MARITAL STATUS	Married	230	57.5%
		unmarried	170	42.5%
6	OCCUPATION	Students	42	10.5%
		Employed	230	57.5%
		unemployed	118	29.5%

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, (2023).

The data in Table 4.2 highlights the distribution of respondents according to various demographics. Among the respondents, 52.5% are male, and 45% are female. In terms of religious affiliation, 57% identify as Christian (228 individuals), 5.5% as Muslims (22 individuals), and 12.5% follow other faiths (50 individuals). Regarding age groups, 12% are below 20 years old (48 individuals), 38% are between 20 and 40 years old (152 individuals), and 47.5% are above 40 years old (190 individuals). In marital status, 57.5% are married (230 individuals), and 42.5% are unmarried (170 individuals). Lastly, in terms of occupation, 10.5% are students (42 individuals), 57.5% are employed (230 individuals), and 29.5% are unemployed (118 individuals).

Evaluation of Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent do traditional service providers and the clergy assist social workers?

Table 4.3 show the extent to which traditional service providers and the clergy assist social works in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State.

S/N	ITEM	SA	%	A	%	SD	%	D	%	TOTAL	REMARK
1	Understand people needs	107	27.4	203	52.0	43	11	37	9.2	100%	Agreed
2	Assist community	202	51.7	108	27.6	52	13.3	28	7.1	100%	Strongly agreed
3	Help the vulnerable	110	28.2	210	53.8	50	12.8	20	5.1	100%	Agreed
4	Solve people problems	90	23	220	56.4	38	9.7	42	10.7	100%	Strongly agreed
5	Their works are visible	210	53.8	120	30.7	28	7.1	32	8.2	100%	Strongly agreed
6	Play social work role	111	28.4	219	56.1	33	8.4	27	6.9	100%	Strongly agreed
7	Provider services to all	61	15.6	59	15.1	150	38.4	120	30.7	100%	Strongly disagreed
8	Respect cultures	120	30.7	210	53.8	31	7.9	29	5.1	100%	Agreed
9	Promote well being	110	28.2	211	54.1	49	12.5	20	5.1	100%	Agreed
10	Render essential service	99	25.3	201	51.5	59	15.1	40	10.2	100%	Agreed

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, (2023).

RQ2: How does the clergy and the traditional service providers function as associate social workers?

Table 4.4: How the clergy and the traditional service providers function as associate social workers.

S/N	item	SA	%	A	%	SD	%	D	%	TOTAL	REMARK
1	Provide welfare services	210	53.8	120	30.7	29	7.4	31	7.9	100%	Strongly agreed

2	Exhibit social welfare principles and skills	111	28.4	209	53.5	51	13	19	4.8	100%	Strongly agreed
3	Provide traditional services	59	15.1	71	18.2	110	28.2	150	38.4	100%	Strongly disagreed
4	Provides counseling service	119	30.5	201	51.5	51	13	19	4.8	100%	Agreed
5	Settling disputes	101	25.8	208	53.3	67	17.1	14	3.5	100%	Agreed
6	Point resource to people	98	25.1	222	56.9	57	14.6	13	3.3	100%	Agreed
7	Intervene in individual and family conflicts	110	28.2	219	56.1	31	7.9	30	7.6	100%	Agreed
8	Encourage harmonious living	250	64.1	101	25.1	29	7.4	10	2.5	100%	Strongly agreed
9	Do rehabilitation and reformation	220	56.4	110	28.2	31	7.9	29	7.4	100%	Strongly agreed
10	Play other vital roles	130	33.3	150	38.4	51	13	59	15.1	100%	Agreed

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, (2023).

Interview Analysis

Theme 1: Clergy and the traditional service providers as assistance to social workers

Evidence from the interviews suggest that the traditional service providers and the clergies do help out a lot in a manner that provides support to communities and by extension, perform some kind of an affiliate, associate or auxiliary social work to individuals, groups and communities. According to one of the KPI participants,

Actually the clergy and the traditional service providers are generally helping out in our community and in our neighboring communities. They play whole lots of role and perform different functions, because there is no presence of social workers. They attend to individuals and families, but not that they are solving all our problems, but to some extent they are really helping; some clergies build rehabilitation centers, orphanage home, centers for abuse women, girls and youth

etc. the traditional service provider ensure the community is safe and comfortable for living.(KPI participant a chief age 73 years).

Theme 2: Functional Readiness for the Task

Although clergies and traditional service providers tend to provide support for social workers given the numerous helps they provide to people in the absence of a formal social work delivery system, there is the widespread belief amongst participants that they are not functionally qualified or ready for the tasks. One of the participants note that:

The clergy and the traditional service providers are not well equipped with skills and knowledge to serve humanity, but the nature of their job may aid them, but they are not professionally qualified to render service to service to humanity. More also, the government will need deploy social workers to reach the community where the presence is lacking. (KPI participant a social worker/ age 45 years).

Another of the interviewee noted that;

Even when we don't have the degree as social workers, the nature of our job is all about service to humanity, we believe by serving humanity we are serving God. (KPI participant Reverend father/ age 56years).

Theme 3: The continuous relevance of the social worker

This theme was designed to understand whether the social worker is still relevant in the context of the robust support coming from the clergies and the traditional service providers in the study area. In this regard, one of the KPI participants note that:

Yes, we still need the presence of social workers, because is not everything we can do for the people; the social workers are highly trained and equipped to serve humanity. As a clergy we work by emotion and presumption, the social workers are trained to control their emotion. (KPI participant: a female clergy age 52 years)

Additionally, another interviewee had this to say:

Although I have not heard of or seen a social worker in my area before, but I think we still need them to help in some ways. Because we assist individuals locally or in a crude way; if there is anybody trained to carry out the job of helping individuals and families I think we need them. (KPI participant / a herbalist/native doctors age 71 years).

Findings

The finding is a result from the tables and themes. So primarily, the result from Table 4.3 shows that the traditional service providers and the clergy's assist social workers. It was discovered that 52% agreed to the statement. On the other hand, 27.4% strongly agreed to the statement. However there is a need for people to understand that their works are glaring to all. Invariably they play the role of social welfare officers or social workers. This clearly shows that they should be given the

power to act as auxiliary social workers. This is because they play the roles of social workers and perform other humanitarian functions. Furthermore, from the analysis in Table 4.4 there is a clear indication that the clergy and traditional service providers function as social workers in the communities. On this note, about 53.0% strongly agreed, and 30.7% agreed that they function as social workers. But the services they provide are not as professional as those of the social worker, so they only play a role that fills the gap created by the absence of social workers in their communities. Social workers may be preventive, developmental, remedial or transformative in nature depending on the organizational purpose, setting and needs. The clergy and traditional service providers are referred to as doing para-social work (Andrews, (2017) in Aliyu el ta (2023). Invariably, the clergy and traditional service providers are just performing the roles of social workers and functioning as them. Connolly & Harm (2015) has attested that the system theory assumes that the level of effect in a system has controls how others function. So the system should be amended as a whole, and social worker should be employed more.

Conclusion/ Recommendation

Following the result of the analysis, the study has identified how the clergy and traditional service providers assist individuals and their communities as associates or auxiliary social workers. In the end, the study has proven that the clergy and traditional service providers assist and play the roles of associate or auxiliary social workers by acting as Para-social workers in Obio-Akpor local government area in Rivers state. On the other hand, the presence of social workers is still very much needed in the communities. This is because, the clergies and the traditional service providers work with emotions and presumption, with the intention to have new converts or to make name for themselves and to be recognize and highly placed in the community or society at large. The intervention of social workers is determined by the types of issues and felt needs of individuals and communities. The roles played by the clergy and the traditional service providers have a way to prevent the social workers from intervening in individual's lives and communities in general.

Drawing from the findings and conclusion reached in the study, the following recommendations have been proffered;

- The clergy and the traditional service providers should be supported and encourage to keep helping and supporting individuals and their host communities, because the role they play fills a critical gap.
- Being that they may function as associate or auxiliary social workers, but they play the role of para-social workers, they should be empowered and equipped to perform the function, by recognizing them as associate, auxiliary and para-social workers. And the government should employ more social workers to fill in the obvious gap of the absence of social workers in the communities.

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