

# WORK STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS: A CASE OF NORTHERN UGANDA

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## **Abstract**

*Social workers are exposed to potent stressors due to the nature of their work. The study examined work stress and coping strategies among social workers in Northern Uganda. The target population consisted of 353 social workers in Northern Uganda. Simple random sampling was employed to select 188 respondents. Descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was used to assess the level of stress while researcher developed questionnaires captured both the contributing and mitigating factors. The findings established that majority of the respondents (91%) had high stress levels. Significant factors contributing to stress included finances, work demand, safety concerns, family and violence from the rebels. The most effective mitigating strategies for job stress included spirituality, planning, goal setting, time-management and positive thinking. It was recommended that stress reduction programs and strategies be implemented to mitigate work stress.*

**Key words:** Coping strategies, Northern Uganda, social workers, work stress.

## **1.1 Introduction**

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebellion against the Ugandan Government (1986-2006) was the most reported and destructive protracted conflict in the country's history, devastating lives, livelihoods and property in Northern Uganda. Up to 90% of the people in the region were forced to live in internally displaced camps, and some were abducted as fighters or wives to the rebels. When a ceasefire was brokered in 2006, the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were asked to return to their villages (Ager et al., 2012).

To consolidate the peace and reconciliation in the region, the government initiated the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) with a component of social service provision. Social services provision has supported confidence building, generated a feeling of security, defused conflicts among clans, united

conflicting groups and provided counseling services to returnees. Such responsibilities make the social worker perfect targets of job stress. For example, Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health studied the mental health of 376 Ugandan workers at 21 humanitarian aid agencies and revealed that a significant number of the staff at these organizations experienced high levels of symptoms for depression (68%), anxiety disorders (53%), and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (26%) respectively (Ager at al., 2012). All these are symptoms of stress (Child & Mentes, 2010). In fact, it has been suggested that by the year 2020, depression alone will constitute one of the largest health problems worldwide (Murray and Lopez, 1996).

The issue of work stress has attracted the attention of employers and employees in equal measures. According to World Health Organization (2005), by 2020 stress will be a major cause of workplace ill health. It has psychological, emotional, biological, behavioural and physical health side effects (Schwartberg & Dytell, 1996; Willis, 2005). Chronic stress has serious consequences to both the individual (Khurshid, Butt & Malik, 2011) and organizations including absenteeism, increased turnover rates, low productivity and poor performance (Brown & Uehara, 2008; Bhaga, 2010; Salami, 2010; Carr, Kelley, Keaton & Albrecht, 2011). Felton and Cole (2008) reported that in the United Kingdom, the sum of incapacity for men suffering from personality and psychoneurotic disorders, nervousness, constant headaches and smoking accounted for 22.8 million work day's loss alone. Similar problems cost the U.S. a whopping \$200 billion per year (Maxon, 1999). Also, studies show that jobs that required vigilance and responsibility for others were related to increased risk for cardiovascular disability (Murphy, 1991; Shapiro, 1996).

Carr, Kelley, Keaton & Albrecht (2011) and The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999) defined job stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the demands of the job do not match the capabilities, resources and needs of the employee. Olagunju (2010) describes stress as a prolonged complex emotional state characterized by anxiety and various nervous and mental disorders. There are two major types of stress, namely acute and chronic. The first one is short-lived and is due to unexpected stressors and the second one is an ongoing physiological agitation that results from unresolved issues or conditions (Carr, Kelley, Keaton & Albrecht, 2011). Individuals experiencing chronic stress may not be able to meet job demands or may have decreased quality of work life (Leka, Griffiths & Cox, 2004; Millward, 2005). Stress in the workplace can eventually rob people of their passion for the job, resulting in impaired individual functioning, low motivation and decreased morale (Fako, 2010).

The United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive acknowledges that the top seven stressed professionals are teachers, nurses, managers, social workers, road transport drivers, police officers and prison officers (Willis, 2005). The Guardian Financial Services of UK ranks professions according to stress levels and professional service providers are ranked third (Willis, 2005). As with many demanding professions, social workers in northern Uganda are at considerable risk of work stress. However there is hardly any study to determine the most appropriate coping strategies to deal with the problem.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To determine the levels of stress among social workers in Northern Uganda
- ii. To establish the factors contributing to stress among social workers in Northern Uganda
- iii. To establish the coping strategies that are effective in mitigating occupational stress among social workers in Northern Uganda

## 2.1 Research Method

This study was conducted using descriptive, cross sectional design. The population consisted of 353 social workers from Northern Uganda. A sample of 188 was selected by simple random sampling. A questionnaire about job stress was used to collect the data. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and was used to assess the level of Job stress, the second section was a researcher developed questionnaire to capture the main factors contributing to stress while the third section of the questionnaire had seventeen items to generate information on effective coping strategies to mitigate job stress.

Data analysis was done using STATA version 12 Special Edition (SE). The normality of the variables was assessed using the empirical methods called the Shapiro-Wilk and Shapiro-Francia normality tests as well as using the graphical approach. A variable was declared as normally distributed if the test was not statistically significant. Optionally if the standardized normal probability plot was straight from bottom left to the top right corner then the distribution was said to be normally distributed.

## 3.1 Results

**Table 1: Levels of Work Stress among study respondents**

Work level	n (%)	Level
12-15	16(8.6%)	Average
16-20	86(45.5%)	High
>20	83(44.9%)	Very high

The work stress levels obtained were as shown in Table 1. The scientifically acceptable cut off limits were used to categorize the work stress scores, that is; 0-7, 8-11, 12-15, 16-20, and >20 for very low, low, average, high, and very high, respectively. There were no participants who scored 0-11 from the scores obtained. Hence, the two lower levels of work stress, "Very low" and "Low" never featured. The minimum and maximum work stress scores were 13 and 29 respectively. The median work stress score was 20 belonging to class (8-12).

**Table 2: Precipitators of work stress**

Variables	Sample size	Yes	No
Work demands	179	141(79%)	38(21%)
Employee control	178	109(61%)	69(39%)
Employee support	177	91(51%)	86(49%)
Organizational Change	175	88(50%)	87(50%)
Safety Concerns	177	127(72%)	50(28%)
Family and Career Issues	176	125(71%)	51(29%)
Financial Issues	180	149(83%)	31(17%)
Conflict	179	101(56%)	78(44%)
Violence from rebels	177	121(64%)	56(32%)
Accidents like	180	105(58%)	75(42%)

The results in table 2 indicate that the major factors contributing to stress are: financial issues (149) (83%); work demands (141) (79%); safety concerns (127) (72%); family and career issues (125) (71%) and violence from rebels (121) (64%). For variables on Employee support (91) (51%), and Organizational change (88) (50%), participants were balanced in their thoughts.

**Table 3: Coping Strategies**

Variables	Sample size	Never	Not often	Often
A	173	23(13%)	75(43%)	75(43%)
B	177	5(3%)	53(30%)	119(67%)
C	174	15(9%)	41(24%)	118(68%)
D	171	37(22%)	78(46%)	56(33%)
E	175	25(14%)	78(45%)	72(41%)
F	177	18(10%)	63(36%)	96(54%)
G	170	46(27%)	59(35%)	65(38%)
H	174	114(66%)	29(17%)	31(18%)
I	173	24(14%)	55(32%)	94(54%)
J	176	42(24%)	60(34%)	74(42%)
K	171	18(11%)	46(27%)	107(63%)
L	169	16(9%)	42(25%)	111(66%)
M	168	25(15%)	37(22%)	106(63%)
N	172	34(20%)	53(31%)	85(49%)
O	168	16(10%)	48(29%)	104(62%)
P	169	40(24%)	67(40%)	62(37%)
Q	7	3(43%)	1(14%)	3(43%)

**Note.** A=Active coping; B=Planning; C=Religion; D=Emotional support; E=Support help; F=Self destruction; G=Venting; H=Substance abuse; I=Problem focused; J=Information gathering; K=Time management; L=Goal setting; M=Way of thinking; N=Play down the extent of seriousness of issues; O=Being positive; P=Humor; Q=Others

As revealed in table 3, the most common coping strategies to mitigate work stress were; Spirituality/C (68%), planning/B (67%), goal-setting/L (66%), time-management/K (63%) and positive thinking/M (63%).

#### 4.0 Discussion

The first objective was to determine the levels of stress among social workers in Northern Uganda. Based on the findings, majority of the participants had high stress levels. It is therefore possible that the performance of social workers in Northern Uganda is greatly affected. This supports a study by Bennett et al. (1993) on three groups of social workers, including those working in the areas of child health, adult mental health and adult physical dysfunction, to examine sources of stress, coping strategies, and stress outcomes whose findings revealed that the measure of mental distress was substantially higher than the norms for any other occupational group. The study findings also agree with the studies conducted by Ting, Jodi & Sanders, (2011) in China and Bradley and Sutherland (1995) in north-west England.

The second objective of the study was to establish the factors contributing to stress among social workers in Northern Uganda. The findings revealed that financial issues, work demands, safety concerns, family and career issues and violence from rebels were the most common sources of stress among social workers in Northern Uganda. The findings almost concur with Tao (2014) study on causes of stress among community health workers in China. Results indicated that the wages and benefits subscale of stress ranked highest, followed by the work task and role subscale. The findings support Storey and Billingham's (2001) study on occupational stress and social work which found out that stressors included the threat of physical violence and heavy workload.

The final objective addressed the most common coping strategies. According to the findings, these were spirituality, planning, goal-setting, time-management and positive thinking. The findings further revealed that the least frequently employed coping strategy was substance abuse.

Litman and Lunsford (2009) studied a variety of coping strategies among 450 workers and found out that acceptance and planning led to greater general health while Sun, Kosberg, Kaufman, and Leeper (2010) in agreement with the above, observed that the most commonly used task-focused strategies among dementia caregivers included planning and active coping.

### 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Stress is a serious issue among social workers and needs to be addressed without delay. Therefore, as a recommendation, the organizations employing social workers should introduce a program to reduce job stress, based on spirituality, time management, goal setting and positive thinking. Organizations should also offer a stress management courses for their employees.

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