

# EDITORIAL

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## COVID-19: Challenges, Opportunities & Innovations

There is an enduring amount of individual and collective grief bound up with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we engage with the post-pandemic world, many of us have a felt sense that although we survived the unimaginable, we continue to live in dystopian times. A prevailing theme of social science research for the past three years has been unravelling the implications of survival. We have been rumbling with meaning making across personal, social, political, economic, and cultural domains. This has translated into a flood of scholarship that probes the multiple ways in which the pandemic has unsettled all manner of “normal” for people across the world. With that said, the lived experience of people in the Caribbean, its diaspora and other global south contexts, is a normal that falls outside of the global north perspective. We have an extensive history of subjugation and marginalisation across temporal, social, and geographic locations. How have we understood the adversity of the past 3 years? How has our individual and collective grief shaped our experience of surviving the pandemic? Traditionally, our grief has been complex, ambiguous, and often times disenfranchised.

As people living in the Caribbean and its diaspora, our meaning-making around grief has always been entangled with powerlessness. In “Passages and Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspectives on Death in the Caribbean,” Richman (2018), reflecting on mourning rituals and practices in Léogâne, Haiti, offers that “understanding misfortune empowers agents” (p. 148). Richman contends that in the Haitian consciousness, and I will argue the diasporic cognisance which is tied to African and Asian indigenous ways of knowing, understanding why a calamity occurred is not a priority or even an expectation. It is “not knowing the meaning of their suffering—the dead’s and their own pain [that is] intolerable” (p. 149). In the cultural knowing of the people of Léogâne, powerlessness is tantamount to an inability to make meaning of misfortune. This analysis resonates with my felt sense around grief and loss imprinted in my psyche growing up in Trinidad and Tobago. My reflection on weathering the pandemic triggers patent questions - How do we (with our complicated relationship with loss, death, and dying) make sense of this calamity? How have we met with challenges and opportunities as they arose? How did we innovate in these unprecedented times?

As social work practitioners, educators, and academics, our focus does not exclusively pivot around understanding psychosocial realities. We are moreover committed to direct practice, policy making, and social action geared toward improving the lived experience of the disenfranchised. Rooted in an appreciation of the historicity of our lived experience, it is important to unpack how we have assimilated to the post pandemic world. Moreover, how are we going to ensure that our ways of knowing and being are prioritised in constructing appropriate social work interventions? Volume 15 of the CJSW rumbles with grief, loss, and meaning-making. It also grounds our work as a practice-based profession obligated to pragmatic, evidence-based, and people-centred approaches to service provision for vulnerable communities.

In “This Won’t be the Last Time...” Conceptualizing the Need for Natural Disaster and Pandemic Preparedness” Yvonne Asamoah and Senanu Y. Asamoah point out that social workers cannot afford the luxury of “getting ready.” They urge us to accept that “being ready” is an imperative for service provision in a region where vulnerability to natural disasters is an inescapable reality. The social worker’s preparedness for intervening on individual and community-based levels are core skillsets for risk mitigation. For us in the Caribbean, climate change is an empirical not theoretical matter; we have experienced first-hand the increased frequency of natural disasters. Asamoah and Asamoah frame the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the region in our macro realities - our vulnerabilities are inextricably connected to inadequate educational, economic, health, and welfare systems. They urge that social workers must be prepared and positioned for “search and rescue” and not wait to be called upon for “retrieve and salvage.”

The notion that the COVID pandemic created unprecedented conditions of risk and vulnerability for ageing populations is a myopic analysis of long-standing endemic neglect. This continuing neglect is evident in family and community settings, as well as health care systems across the globe. There are three articles in this volume which highlight the experiences of older people during the pandemic. Casting our attention to the experience of older Caribbean people displaced during the pandemic, Cheryl-Ann Boodram examines the experiences of Trinidad and Tobago nationals in the United States. Boodram’s phenomenological study highlights the need for both social work practice and public policy models geared toward creating and strengthening social protection mechanisms. Carmelle Peisah et al. point out that the “longstanding unaddressed gaps in the actualization of older persons” must be prioritised as a human rights issue. The pandemic only unmasked an atrocious reality that many have long ignored. Using a human rights frame of reference, these authors urge our attention to the “missed opportunities for advocacy for the human rights of older people in everyday clinical work.” Their work is especially pertinent to social workers, as advocacy is the cornerstone of our profession. The third article that focuses on the experience of older people is “Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on People With Dementia From the Perspective of Family and Friends: Thematic Analysis of Tweets.” Juanita-Dawne R. Bacsu et al., using Twitter data, employ a methodology that engages 11 coders in the analysis of 6,243 relevant tweets over 15 months. Using thematic analysis, they examined how COVID-19 affected people with dementia through the lens of family care partners. Their discussion of core emergent themes as structural inequities, despair due to loss, resiliency, survival, and hope for the future, stretches our awareness and urges engagement in intervention formulation for people with dementia and caregivers alike.

While there were numerous pitfalls and missed opportunities, the pandemic period was also marked by innovative adaptations that produced new blueprints to improve the ways in which we function as service providers. In “Reflections On Social Work Field Education During The Covid-19 Pandemic - A Shift From Dyadic To Experiential and Self Directed Learning,” Thérèse Odle-James reflects on how the pandemic impacted teaching and learning in social work field education, specifically at The UWI, Cave Hill Campus in Barbados. Odle-James offers thoughtful reflections on the use of virtual learning to facilitate field work education. These reflections invite us into an exploration of responsive, imaginative educational programming designed for and driven by regional realities. This article is followed by Warren A. Thompson’s reflection on Jamaica’s Child Protection and Family Services Agency (CPFSA) response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thompson discusses a response approach for social service agencies that includes a tripartite focus on (1) disaster/risk management and mitigation, (2) business continuity focusing on accessibility and the provision of quality services, and (3) the provision of support for mental health and general wellbeing to staff and clients. Odle-James’ and Thompson’s work underscores the power of learning how to pivot in response unprecedented experiences as indispensable to charting the way forward.

This volume concludes with two articles emanating from work done in Africa with a focus on the experiences of children during the pandemic. Mary O. Hearstid et al. present the findings of a rapid health impact assessment of COVID-19 on families with children with disabilities living in Zambia. This qualitative assessment draws data from families, community health workers, and government officials to produce descriptive data that creates a snapshot of how children with disabilities and their families fared during the pandemic. Their findings support the need for disability-inclusive responses that can safeguard uninterrupted access to adequate food, inclusive education, and rehabilitation therapy, to name a few. These authors argue for the prioritisation of children on the practice agenda of community workers. South African social work researcher and educator Maud Mthembu’s reflections on the co-creation of a storybook to help children make sense of their grief and loss, as well as manage the uncertainties of COVID-19 is the final article in this collection. Mthembu’s award winning *Uhambo Lwami* is a model of social work intervention that bridges the gaps between the academy, practitioners, and service users to co-create a meaningful, egalitarian, and collaborative responsive approach to meet the needs of children. It embodies the essence of social work’s mandate as an academic discipline and practice based profession, that is to create pragmatic work at the intersection of knowledge generation, community partnership, social action with interconnections across micro and macro settings.

I invite you to engage the work of this Volume, produced about uncertain and perilous times by people living through the same. This Volume is dedicated to the memory of two exemplary social work educators/academics. In Section A, Harold Daniel, Arna Elliot-Rattray, and I share reflections on the life and work of Drs John Maxwell and Wendy McLean Cook - we do so in prose, poetry and art. We are grateful for Maxwell’s and McLean Cook’s commitment to unpacking some of the misfortunes we have experienced in the region. Daniel’s reflection on 50 years of traversing professional and personal terrain with Maxwell, was an impetus for me (and I hope it will be for you also) to reread the first academic paper of the inaugural issue of the CJSW published in 2002. Maxwell’s (2002) “Evolution of Social Welfare Services and Social Work in the English - Speaking Caribbean”, required reading for all social work academics and practitioners trained in the region, is

a ubiquitous reminder that for us the emergence of social work was wrapped up with struggle, grief, and the hardship of the post-emancipation era. Maxwell's tireless efforts and commitment to the professionalisation of social work and the establishment of solid academic programming built the foundation on which many of us working in the region stand. McLean Cook, no stranger to Maxwell, was also fiercely committed to teaching and did so for more than 15 years at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her most recent academic work was a ground-breaking and provocative contribution to the body of scholarly work on Caribbean fatherhood that debunks one-dimensional, stereotypical notions about Jamaican fathering of non-biological children. Elliot Rattray's reflection beckons us to hold our memories of her character with as much reverence as we hold the memories of her as an educator and academic. McLean Cook was also a poet and her passion for the arts found its way into her work as evident in her contribution to CJSW's Volume 10 – "Rewriting the Script: The Drama of Her-story and the Women of Sistren." My reflection takes the form of poetry and an original painting through which I ponder the experience of being an artist in the academy. Beyond the work produced by Drs. Maxwell and McLean Cook, we are grateful for their presence as powerful, passionate human beings who lived purposeful lives, with intention and grit.

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*Editor*

### References

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