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☎ +62 (0754) 41650; Website: <http://pps.fip.unp.ac.id/>; ✉ jk@konselor.org / info@konselor.org

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Social Work Practice in Africa: A Bibliometric Analysis of Trends in Publications from 1963–2024

Yahya Muhammed Bah¹, Maybe Zengenene², Saikou Gassama³, M. Fahli Zatrachadi⁴, & Istiqomah Istiqomah⁵

¹Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences, University of The Gambia, Banjul, The Gambia, West Africa

²Department of Sociology, Living Waters Theological College, Harare, Zimbabwe

³Solvay Brussels school of economics and management, University of lebre Brussels. Belgium

⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

⁵Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga. Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to:

Yahya Muhammed Bah. Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences, University of The Gambia, Banjul. F86F+484, Serrekunda, Gambia. Email: yahya01@gmail.com

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Yahya Muhammed Bah^{1*}, Maybe Zengenene², Saikou Gassama³, M. Fahli Zatrachadi⁴, & Istiqomah Istiqomah⁵

¹Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences, University of The Gambia, Banjul, The Gambia, West Africa

²Department of Sociology, Living Waters Theological College, Harare, Zimbabwe

³Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management, University of Leuven Brussels, Belgium

⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

⁵Uninversitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga. Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract: The development of this field in a varied and ever-changing regional context can be better understood by looking at the trajectory of social work in Africa from 1963 to 2024. The purpose of this study was to find out the trend of publications on social work in Africa from 1963 to 2024. Looking at the development of publications each year, the author of the most publications, the highest affiliations, and the most publications in journals on social work in Africa. Research methods use bibliometric analysis through scopus databases. There were 1305 publication documents found, and the data were downloaded in csv form without any form of limitation. Later, CSV data was included in the Vosviewers and Rstudio software to display images of visualization analysis results. The results show that research on social work in Africa spanning 1963–2024 revealed that this field has a variety of properties that reflect social and humanitarian responsibilities. By focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention, health, and management, social workers can help improve people's socioeconomic conditions and the overall quality of life in Africa.

Key Words: Social Work; Africa; Bibliometric Analysis; HIV/AIDS Prevention; Publication Trends

INTRODUCTION

Studying the trends of social work in Africa from 1963 to 2024 provides a comprehensive insight into how this field has developed in many changing regional environments. Since 1963, social work in Africa has undergone substantial transformation due to the social, political, and economic challenges facing the continent (Gelfand, 1965; Zolberg, 1968). During the early 1960s, social work in Africa focused on post-colonial restoration after the independence of many countries (Ngugi, 2001; Sewpaul, 2006; Tamburro, 2013). The main emphasis was on improving public welfare, education, and economic development to counter the effects of colonialism. Social work has contributed to building the foundation for social growth and welfare so far (Abraham, 2020; Wa Muiiu, 2010; Woolman, 2001; Young, 2004).

During the 1980s, social work in Africa began to grow due to issues such as the economic crisis and the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Dhemba & Nhapi, 2020; Patel, 1987). Social work includes mental health care, psychosocial assistance for people with HIV/AIDS, and advocacy to improve child and family

* **Corresponding Author:** Yahya Muhammed Bah. Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences, University of The Gambia, Banjul. F86F+484, Serrekunda, Gambia. Email: yahya01@gmail.com

welfare programs (Marks, 2002; Poku, 2002; Sanders & Sambo, 1991). In the 1990s, globalization emerged, presenting new challenges for social work in Africa to adapt to global change (Kaloga & Camara, 2023; Makinda & Okumu, 2007; Pugh & Gould, 2000). A more comprehensive and human rights-oriented approach began to receive recognition, indicating changes in social work methods (Ntebe, 1994; Twikirize, 2014; van Hook, 1994).

Over the past twenty years, social work in Africa has undergone a digital transition due to advances in information and communications technology (Donou-Adonsou et al., 2016; Efobi et al., 2018; Ngulube, 2004). New methods of providing social services and creating technology-based programs are emerging as a prominent trend (Chataway et al., 2009; Myovella et al., 2020; Solomon & van Klyton, 2020). In addition, modern difficulties such as climate change, conflict, and migration require attention from social work (Ndung'u & Signé, 2020; Union, 2020).

Interdisciplinary approaches and cross-sector collaboration have gained relevance in recent years, allowing social work to participate in comprehensive and lasting solutions. However, issues such as inequality and poverty continue to stand out, highlighting the vital role of African social work in promoting the welfare of the Society (Asongu & Le Roux, 2023; Fosu, 2023; Kouadio & Gakpa, 2022). The study aims to analyze the role of social work in Africa from 1963 to 2024, focusing on trends, problems, and impacts on journal society, writers, and affiliates most predominant in publications.

METHOD

We collected data from Scopus database sources, which included articles, conference papers, reviews, book chapters, notes, articles in the press, and letters from 1963 to 2024. To retrieve the desired documents, we conducted a terminology search that focused on titles, abstracts, and keywords. We downloaded all data from the Scopus database in CSV form without any restrictions. In total, the search resulted in 1305 publication documents. We then used this CSV to view the visualisation network of keywords, authors, and others found in the study's results.

Workflows in scientific bibliometric analysis are divided into: data recovery, preprocessing, network extraction, normalization, mapping analysis, and visualization (Noyons et al., 1999; Peters & Van Raan, 1993). After recovering the data, the first pre-processing analysis was conducted based on Scopus statistics in 1035 publications taken from 1963 to 2024. We analyzed temporal trends in the number of papers and journals most widely used.

A second analysis was conducted for network extraction, scientific mapping and visualization of relationships between bibliographic data. For scientific mapping, VOSviewer software is highly recommended (van Eck, 2010). First, the network is constructed based on data available to VOSviewer; then, thus, the relevance score is calculated and the group associated with the domain investigated from the analyzed publication is identified (Waltman et al., 2010). Finally, the map was created based on the network it was built on (Eck & Waltman, 2014). To measure collaboration between countries, networks between institutional studies, and keywords are most widely used and correlated in social work research in Africa. Focus on the overall data from 1963–2024.

First, we identify the countries and scientific organizations that publish the most research on social work in Africa. To analyze keywords, we conducted a joint event analysis using the minimum number of occurrence thresholds of 20, which is how many times keywords must exist in the data set to be used in the analysis.

Before mapping, to avoid repeating the terms and to ensure consistency in VOSviewer, a thesaurus file of 4962 entries was arranged. The file attributes synonyms, different terms expressing unique concepts, different spellings of the same word or abbreviation, plural or single terms, common or Latin plant names, etc. with one unique, unambiguous related term.

RESULTS

In the period analyzed from 1963 to 2024, a search of the scopus archives found 1305 scientific publications. Figure 1 shows a steady trend in the number of documents based on social work in Africa.

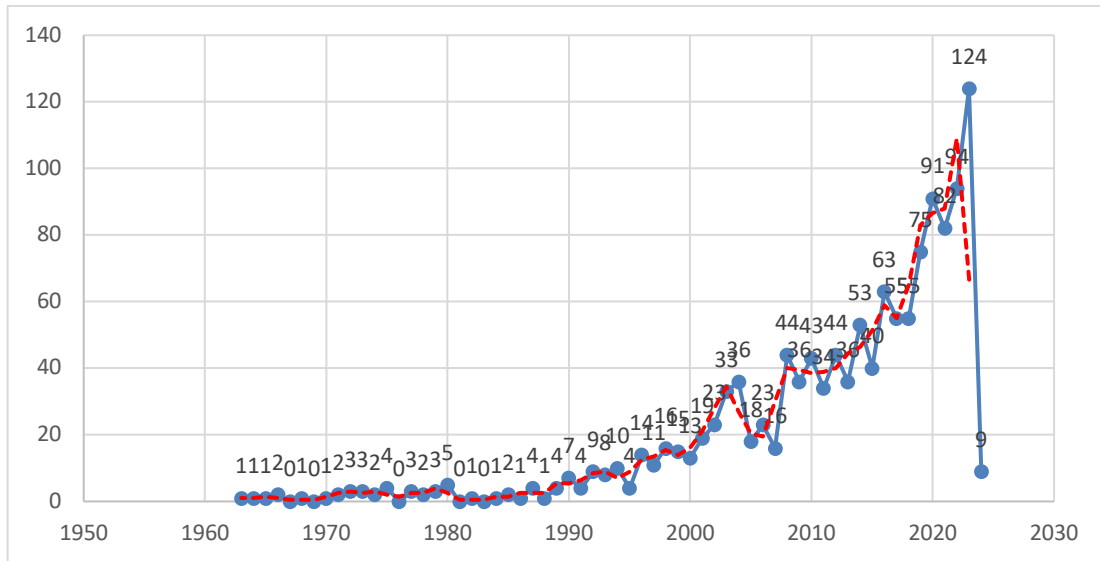


Figure 1 Trends in the number of annual scientific publications related to social work in Africa (1963-2024)

The first increase came in 2002 with 23 documents and a more sustained increase in 2008 with 44 documents of scientific publication.

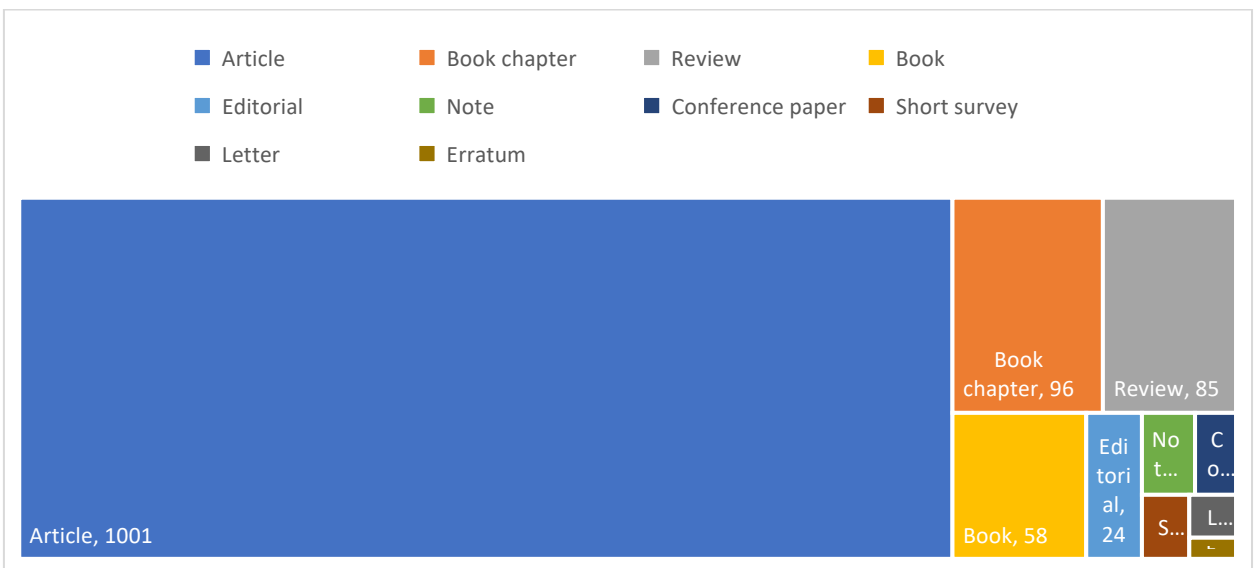


Figure 2 Treemap type of Document

A scientific article on social work published in 1963–2024 were published as follows: article (1001), book chapter (96), review (85), book (58), editorial (24) note (13), conference paper (10), short survey (9), letter (6), erratum (3).

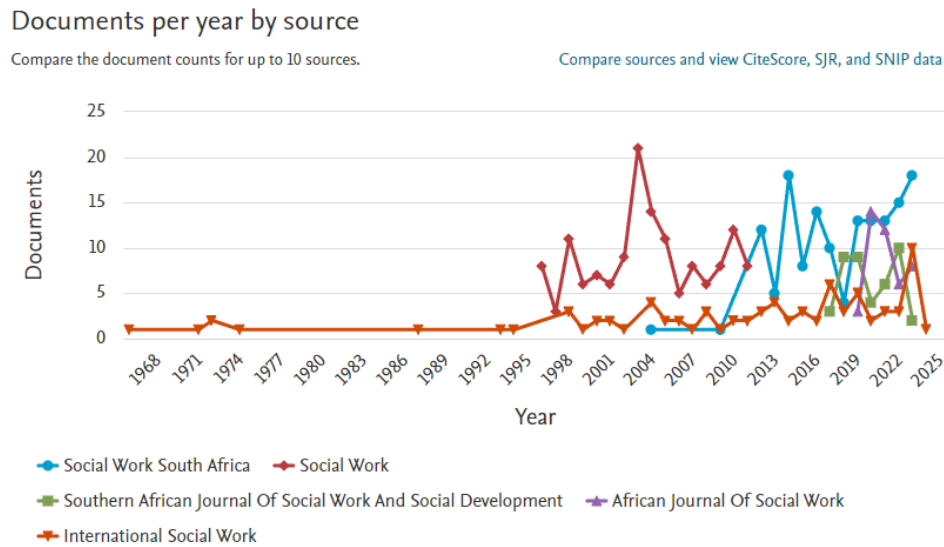


Figure 3 Document per year by source

Comprehensively 1867 journals have been used to publish research on social work in Africa. Figure 3 shows a journal that published at least two documents from 1963 to 2024. The most active journal in publications on African social work is the 145th most dominant publication document. Then in second place was the journal Social Work, with 143 publications. The journal International Social Work followed it with 81 publication documents. Other journals include the African Journal of Social Work, the Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development, with 43 publication documents, and others. This reflects the high interest in and contribution to research on social work in Africa from various sources of publication.

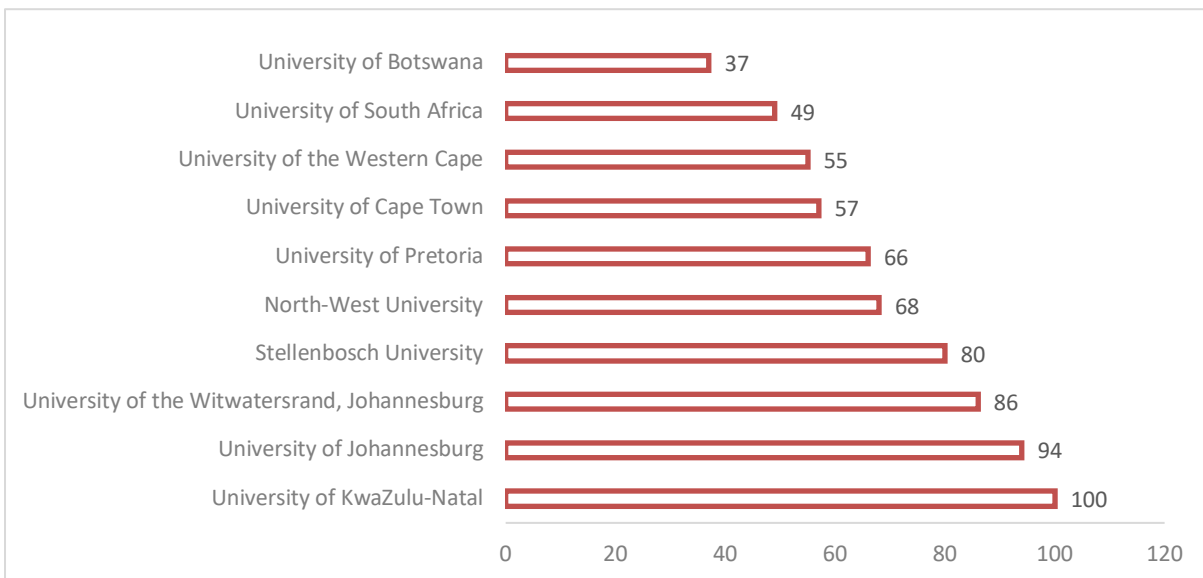


Figure 4 Tren document by affiliation

Figure 4 visualizes the top 10 affiliations in publications on social work in Africa since 1963–2024. The University of Kwazulu-Christmas is the highest organization with 100 publication documents. Then came the University of Johannesburg, with a total publication of 94 documents. Followed by the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, as many as 86 publication documents and other affiliates have been presented in Figure 4. Like Stellenbosch University (80), North-West

University (68), the University of Pretoria (66), the University of Cape Town (57), the University of the Western Cape (55), the University of South Africa (49), and the University of Botswana (37).

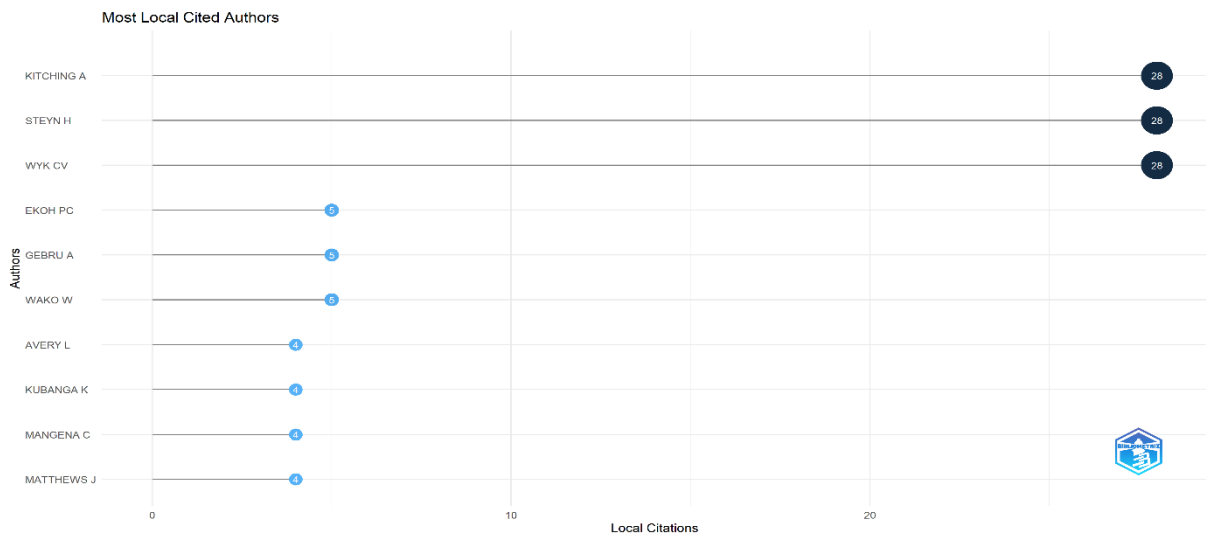


Figure 5 Most local cited authors

Furthermore, the most widely cited authors are important subjects in the literature analysis of social work-related publications. In this context, identifying and studying the works most frequently cited by local authors can provide valuable insight into the trends, themes, and significant intellectual contributions to the field of social work at the local level. It can be seen from Figure 5 that Kitchen A, Sten H, and Wyx Cv were quoted as many as 28. This is followed by Ekoh PC, Gebru A, and Wako W with a total of 5 citations. The next four other prestigious stages were occupied by Avery L., Kubanga K., Mangena C., and Matthews.

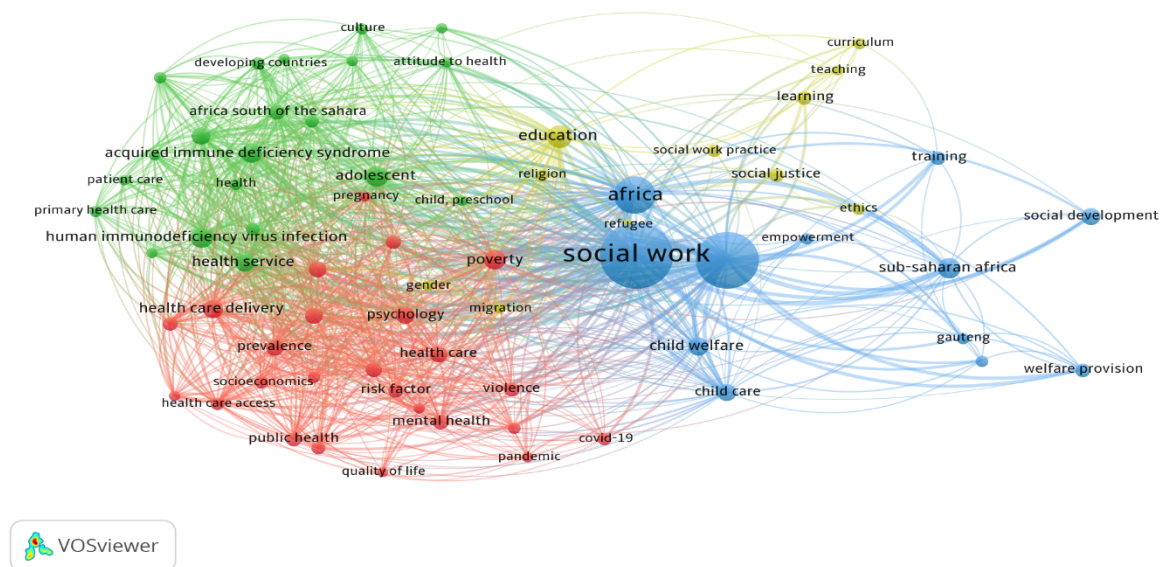


Figure 6 Keyword network visualization

To ensure an in-depth understanding of research on social work in Africa, another important step is to filter and extract crucial keywords. As can be seen in Figure 6, there are key issues that are relevant and allow a more in-depth analysis of social dynamics, challenges, and innovation in the context

of Africa. The data is then analyzed to explain development patterns and determine areas of interest for development and innovation in this study. The keyword analysis found resulted in 4962. A total of 116 data points were found to have reached the minimum requirement of 20 simultaneous events.

DISCUSSION

There are four clusters found in the social work keyword. The first cluster of social work focused on Africa, childcare, child welfare, social development, service provision, and sub-Saharan Africa. Then the second cluster of education focuses on curriculum, ethics, gender, learning, migration, religion, social work practice, and teaching. The third cluster of human immunodeficiency virus infections focuses on health education, HIV infections, psychological aspects, sexual behavior, family, and culture. Then finally, the fourth cluster of health care delivery focuses on COVID-19, depression, mental health, quality of life, risk factors, social support, and pregnancy.

The search for keywords of social work is on specific topics about the continent of Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa. This area of social work focuses on child care, child welfare, social development, and service delivery (Loffell, 2008; Patel, 2012; Roelen et al., 2017). Social work in the regions is directly related to improving children's quality of life and promoting social development at the local level (Molepo & Delpont, 2015; Patel, 2017).

Then there is the function of social work in the educational environment. Curriculum, ethics, gender, learning, migration, religion, social work practices, and teaching are key focal points in Africa (Bozalek, 2004; Kreitzer, 2012; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023). Practitioners of social work can address complex educational issues, including practical and ethical issues, and be cautious about gender-related problems that can arise in the Education environment (Abraham, 2020; Tamburro, 2013; van Hook, 1994; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023; Woolman, 2001).

In the same cases, social work in education focuses on creating a supportive environment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Mugumbate et al., 2024; Zimba et al., 2021). This often includes efforts to reduce the impact of poverty, violence, and gender discrimination, all of which can affect children's ability to go to school and succeed academically (Kajiita et al., 2020; Ross, 2010). Additionally, social workers provide emotional support and appropriate intervention programmes to address mental health issues often overlooked in African schools (van Hook, 1994; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023).

Social work in education must also be adaptive and innovative, given the ever-changing social dynamics (Fafunwa, 2022; Godwin et al., 2022). This includes the use of technology as a tool to reach more students, especially in remote rural areas, as well as the development of curricula that are not only academic but also instill relevant cultural and ethical values for African society (Lwoga, 2012; Ngesi et al., 2018). In conclusion, social work in education in Africa is a complex and multidimensional effort. He focused not only on individual interventions but also on the broader structural changes needed to create a fair and inclusive education system.

Aspects of social work related to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The group focuses on health education, psychological factors, sexual behavior, family dynamics, and cultural influences (Marks, 2002; Poku, 2002). Tasks may involve offering psychological assistance to individuals with HIV, analyzing cultural influences on disease transmission, and developing health education initiatives to curb the spread of HIV (Anyanwu, 2018; Bhagwan & Heeralal, 2024; Defo & Dimbuene, 2012).

Social work plays a crucial role in offering psychosocial support to individuals affected by HIV (Giguère et al., 2021; Strug et al., 2002). This includes individual and family counseling, as well as support groups that allow them to share coping experiences and strategies. Social workers strive to strengthen individual and family resilience by providing skills to overcome the challenges they face, as well as helping them access the resources they need to live a healthy and productive life (Moss, 2017).

In addition, the social work in HIV care in Africa also involves economic empowerment efforts (Baylies & Bujra, 1995). Many people living with HIV face economic difficulties that worsen their condition, such as job losses or limited access to economic opportunities (Amoateng et al., 2015; De Bruyn, 2004). Social workers here often play a role in connecting them with skill training programs, micro-credit initiatives, or small businesses that can provide income and improve their quality of life

(Couper et al., 2018; Orando & Isabirye, 2018). Overall, social work plays a crucial role in reducing the social burden associated with HIV by providing support that not only concerns medical needs but also the social, economic, and psychological aspects of the lives of affected individuals.

Health problems such as COVID-19, depression, mental health, quality of life, risk factors, social support, and pregnancy (Defo & Dimbuene, 2012; Dule et al., 2021; Zweigenthal et al., 2023). Social work in this cluster can provide support to individuals affected by the pandemic, address mental health problems, and develop health care strategies tailored to the needs of the community, especially in handling crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Anyanwu, 2018; Bhagwan & Heeralal, 2024; Dule et al., 2021; Zweigenthal et al., 2023).

Social work in the African environment, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, is primarily focused on improving children's welfare and advancing local social development (Patel, 2017; Roelen et al., 2017; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023). Social work within educational groups includes the transfer of practical knowledge along with ethical and gender dimensions to address complex problems in the world of education (Tamburro, 2013; van Hook, 1994; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023; Woolman, 2001).

Children are often victims of complex social dynamics, including poverty, conflict, and family crises (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Evers et al., 2011). Social workers play a role in identifying high-risk situations and providing timely intervention to protect children from harm (Bray, 2003). In addition to protection, social work in Africa also focuses on meeting children's basic needs, such as access to adequate education, health, and nutrition. However, in this context, challenges often extend beyond physical and material problems (Martin et al., 2018; Perumal & Kasiram, 2008; Tootla, 2021).

Social work plays an important role in offering psychological assistance to people with HIV and recognizing the cultural impact on the transmission of disease (Marks, 2002; Poku, 2002). Health education initiatives developed by social work can play an important role in reducing transmission (Anyanwu, 2018; Bhagwan & Heeralal, 2024; Defo & Dimbuene, 2012). Social work plays an important role in health clusters, especially in relation to COVID-19, by supporting those affected by the pandemic, addressing mental health problems, and creating health care plans that meet the needs of the community (Dule et al., 2021; Sanders & Sambo, 1991; Zweigenthal et al., 2023).

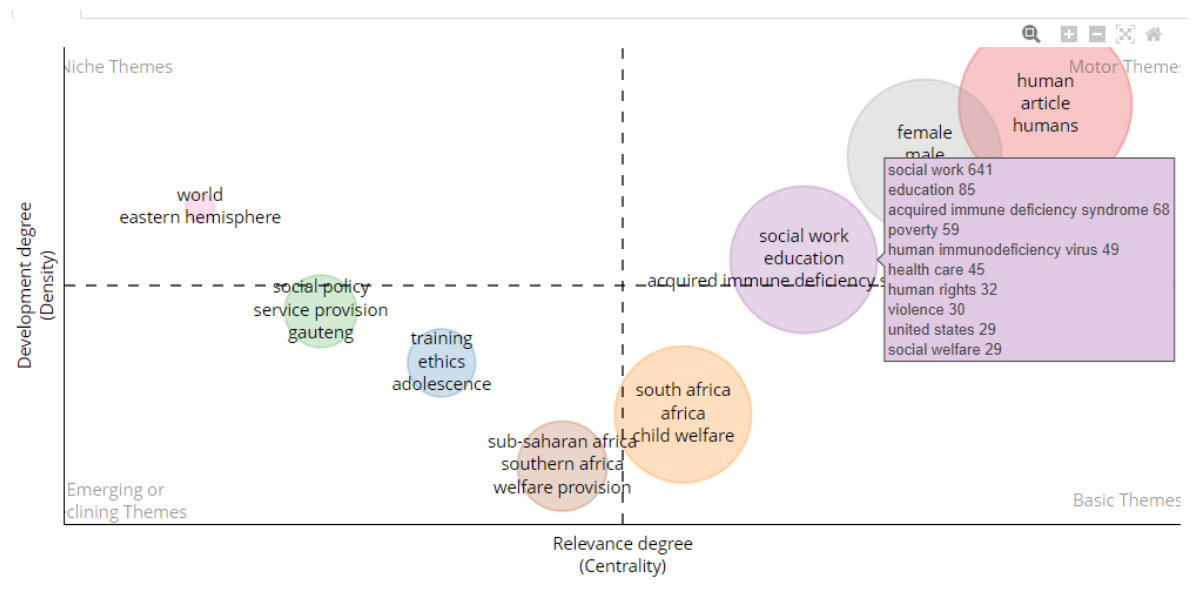


Figure 7 Keyword networks predictive of future research

Based on Figure 7 there are some keywords that are still interesting to study in the context of social work in Africa. These keywords include social work, education, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, poverty, human immunodeficiency virus, health care, human rights, violations, and social welfare. Thus, this demonstrates the potential for extensive research within the domain to better understand the challenges, needs, and solutions associated with social work in Africa.

CONCLUSION

This whole study resulted in the findings that emanated from 1963–2024, publication in relation to social work in Africa revealed that social work encompasses a wide range of characteristics that reflect social and humanitarian tasks. Social work can have some critical impacts on improving the social conditions and well-being of individuals in Africa through HIV education, health, and management. In this regard, the most widely cited authors in social work in Africa include Kitchen A, Sten H, and Wyx Cv. The journal *International Social Work* is the second-most-publicized journal, after *Social Work South Africa*. Later, the highest affiliation in publication was occupied by the University of Kwazulu-Natal, then the University of Johannesburg, and the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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