The Role of Digital Technology in the EndSars Protest in Nigeria During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dear Editors:

The sharing of a video of the Special Anti-Robbery Squared (known as SARS) officials killing a man on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, has led to widespread protests across Nigeria. According to a tweet, SARS officials shot a young man, left him by the roadside and took his Lexus SUV in Ughelli Delta state, Nigeria, on October 3, 2020. This started an online protest which proceeded to widespread live protests all over the streets of Nigeria (End Sars, 2020). These actions violate numerous articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, most especially Article 3, which provides the right to life, liberty, and security of a person. The Code of Ethics of the Nigeria Association of Social Workers (n.d.) states that social workers are required to “uphold(ing) and promote(ing) the rights, dignity and worth of persons in all our professional endeavours.”

Young people in Nigeria are now protesting both on social media and in the streets of Nigeria against police brutality and for further reform of Nigeria as a whole. This has led to the loss of more young people who are part of the protests. Social workers in Nigeria have a responsibility to join in the fight against oppression and injustice using online and offline platforms while also ensuring people are protected at a time when the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic is still prevalent. These protests are similar to the death of George Floyd in the USA on May 26, 2020, which was captured on video, and sparked widespread protests all over the world with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Eligon, 2020).

The SARS was set up in 1992 during the military rule to fight against widespread robbery in Nigeria; they have been accused of scores of extra-judicial killings and extortion of young people. They can be seen on roads and streets of Nigeria looking for young persons who they profile as criminals or yahoo boys (internet fraudsters) simply by observing certain features such as wearing of dreadlocks, tattoos, having an iPhone, having a laptop computer, driving a car (especially a Mercedes Benz), or generally looking wealthy. They harass them, beat them, and in many cases kill them, branding them criminals.

There have been several calls on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for an end to SARS and their unjust activities, but the Nigerian government has paid little attention to these online agitations. This continued until the recent killing of the young man in Delta state cited above which has resulted in the current nationwide protests which at the time of writing, this have resulted in about 12 more deaths across Nigeria (#EndSARS, 2020) with the potential for serious civil unrest in the country.

Facebook, Instagram, and chief amongst them, Twitter have been pivotal in the ongoing protests which started with the demand by young Nigerians for the government to dissolve SARS, end police brutality, and reform the Nigerian police force. It has metamorphosed into a demand to reform Nigeria at a time when the entire world is fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many Nigerians now share stories of their experiences and that of their family and friends on social media which keep fuelling the protests. The protest is on two fronts: online, via social network sites, and on the ground in the streets of Nigeria. Although the Inspector General of Police as well as the president have stated that SARS will be dissolved immediately and the Nigerian police subsequently reformed, it has not quelled the protest. The internet is flooded with posts about other injustices and corruption that have plagued Nigeria for years and the demand for immediate change with new hashtags such as #NassSalaryCut, #EndSWAT, and #EndBadGovernanceInNigeriaNow (#EndSARS, 2020).

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Digital technology has made it possible for people to get information in real-time and in many cases with digital video evidence. Thus, protests as we know them are changing in line with digital technological advancements, and many protests will be influenced by digital technology. As young Nigerians and social workers, what is our position and role in the face of the protest? Social workers have always been part of social movements, both conservatively and progressively, starting from the Settlement Movement in the UK. In recent times social workers have also been frontline practitioners and social policy activists, standing in solidarity with protesters to fight against all forms of oppression and injustice (Noble, 2007).

Anti-oppressive practice is under the purview of social work practice (Dominelli, 2012; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Mullaly, 2010). Thus, this is a time for social workers in Nigeria to become politically conscious and fight for political and social justice in Nigeria both online and offline. Social workers who are participating in the protest should continue educating people on reasons for the protest while ensuring it remains peaceful as much as they can as hoodlums can easily take advantage of protests to destroy properties and cause harm to people. They should also try to ensure people remain safe in light of the COVID-19 pandemic through continuous sensitization of protesters on anti-infection practices such as

use of nose masks and as much spatial distance as possible. We call for Nigerian social workers, and social workers around the world, to continue to protest these actions, and to do so in line with public health measures.

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