Social Welfare Development Policy for People with HIV/AIDS: Stigma, Support, and Its Implications for Social Work Practice

Nurul Husna[1*], **Heri Kusmanto**[2], **Hatta Ridho**[3], **Agus Suriadi**[4]

[1,2,3,4]Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Abstract- Strong social support networks are associated with lower viral loads and enhanced viral suppression, playing a crucial role in facilitating engagement in HIV care and adherence to antiretroviral therapy from the point of diagnosis onward. The presence of reliable social networks, therefore, not only bolsters individual well-being but also contributes significantly to broader public health goals by supporting consistent engagement with medical protocols. The decision to employ a narrative literature review stemmed from its capacity to synthesize heterogeneous research, moving beyond mere aggregation to construct a coherent and interpretive understanding of the nuanced social dynamics surrounding HIV/AIDS policies and interventions. This paper has systematically explored the intricate relationship between social welfare development policies, HIV/AIDS, and the pervasive impact of stigma, culminating in a comprehensive review of existing challenges and opportunities for social work practice. It has underscored the critical need for policies that are not only evidence-based but also deeply empathetic to the lived experiences of individuals and communities affected by HIV/AIDS.

Index Terms- Stigma, Support, Social Welfare, Policy, HIV, AIDS

I. INTRODUCTION

The global HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to present multifaceted challenges, extending beyond mere medical concerns to encompass profound social, economic, and psychological dimensions, thereby necessitating robust social welfare interventions. From its earliest recognition, the epidemic underscored that social action, not solely medical advancements, was critical for control and prevention (Connell, 2020). This perspective highlights the intricate interplay between biological factors of the virus, such as its transmissibility and asymptomatic period, and societal constructs that influence its spread and management (Lopata & Levy, 2003).

Consequently, the response to HIV/AIDS demands a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach that integrates public health initiatives with social welfare policies designed to mitigate stigma, enhance support systems, and address systemic inequities (Sultan & Mažeikienė, 2019). This article delves into the critical role of social welfare development policies in supporting people living with HIV/AIDS, examining how these policies address the persistent issues of stigma and discrimination while bolstering essential support mechanisms. Furthermore, it explores the direct implications of these policies for contemporary social work practice, emphasizing the necessity of culturally sensitive and ethically grounded interventions.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focusing on health and well-being, poverty eradication, and reduced inequalities, align intrinsically with the objectives of HIV/AIDS social welfare, urging professions like social work to act as moral compasses for affected individuals (Mulqueeny, 2022) (Apple et al., 2009). This global commitment necessitates a critical examination of existing social welfare frameworks to ensure they effectively respond to the evolving needs of individuals impacted by HIV/AIDS, particularly in navigating complex societal barriers (Harrikari et al., 2014). Specifically, this paper will explore the nexus between HIV/AIDS social welfare policies and the lived experiences of individuals, drawing on a narrative literature review to synthesize current understandings of stigma, support structures, and their practical implications for social workers operating within diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Since the initial identification of HIV/AIDS, the disease has profoundly reshaped public health paradigms, compelling social welfare systems to adapt and innovate in response to its pervasive impact on individuals, families, and communities (Johnson, 2019). Initially perceived as a private health crisis, the epidemic swiftly exposed systemic vulnerabilities, highlighting the urgent need for a public social orientation in welfare provision beyond mere therapeutic or counseling assistance (Harrikari et al., 2014). This evolution mandated a shift towards policies that not only addressed medical treatment but also confronted the pervasive social determinants of health, such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of education, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations living with HIV/AIDS (Zhang & Souleymanov, 2021).

The pervasive stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, often rooted in misinformation and moralistic judgments, further exacerbates these vulnerabilities, creating significant barriers to accessing healthcare, employment, and social integration (Boakye et al., 2024). This societal prejudice transforms a medical condition into a complex social problem, necessitating targeted social welfare interventions that challenge discriminatory practices and promote inclusive support systems (Boakye et al., 2024). These interventions are crucial for fostering environments where individuals living with HIV/AIDS can thrive without fear of judgment or marginalization, ultimately improving their overall well-being and facilitating engagement with treatment and prevention efforts (Boakye et al., 2024).

The ongoing challenge of HIV/AIDS-related stigma profoundly impacts individuals, extending beyond personal suffering to significant public health implications, hindering prevention, testing, and treatment initiatives (Beltrão et al., 2020). This pervasive stigma often results in social isolation, psychological distress, and reluctance to disclose one's status, thereby creating substantial barriers to effective disease management and community integration (Qatrannada et al., 2024). The persistent fear of rejection or mistreatment due to an HIV diagnosis discourages individuals from seeking necessary care and adhering to treatment, ultimately impacting their mental, sexual, and physical well-being (Nyman, 2024) (Boakye et al., 2024).

Indeed, the pervasive stigma can be more challenging to cope with than the medical aspects of HIV itself, often leading to a reluctance to engage with healthcare services (Smit et al., 2016). This reluctance is further exacerbated by the "spoiled identity" that individuals with stigmatized conditions often experience, aligning with Goffman's conceptualization of stigma as a discrediting attribute that fundamentally alters social interactions and acceptance (Dennis et al., 2013). Such discrimination is not confined to personal interactions but extends into institutional settings, impacting access to employment, housing, and even equitable healthcare, thereby limiting opportunities for individuals to lead fulfilling lives (Oliver et al., 2022).

Conversely, robust social support systems are critical in mitigating the adverse effects of stigma, fostering resilience, and promoting adherence to treatment regimens among people living with HIV/AIDS (Ferrante et al., 2015). These systems, encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational support, empower individuals to navigate the complexities of their condition and challenge stigmatizing narratives (Quinn et al., 2018). They serve as vital buffers against the psychological distress associated with HIV/AIDS, improving mental health outcomes and fostering a greater sense of belonging and acceptance within their communities (Boakye et al., 2024).

Moreover, strong social support networks are associated with lower viral loads and enhanced viral suppression, playing a crucial role in facilitating engagement in HIV care and adherence to antiretroviral therapy from the point of diagnosis onward (Quinn et al., 2018). The presence of reliable social networks, therefore, not only bolsters individual well-being but also contributes significantly to broader public health goals by supporting consistent engagement with medical protocols (Campbell & Chafetz, 2000) (Lopata & Levy, 2003). This interconnectedness underscores the necessity of integrated support mechanisms that address both the psychosocial and medical needs of individuals affected by HIV/AIDS.

II. METHODS

The decision to employ a narrative literature review stemmed from its capacity to synthesize heterogeneous research, moving beyond mere aggregation to construct a coherent and interpretive understanding of the nuanced social dynamics surrounding HIV/AIDS policies and interventions (Koenig et al., 2020). This methodology was chosen to provide a comprehensive, qualitative overview that emphasizes the interpretive and contextual dimensions of stigma, support, and policy implications in social work practice, diverging from the more quantitative focus of systematic reviews by allowing for a broader exploration of themes and theoretical perspectives (Pichon et al., 2022). This approach facilitates a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences of individuals living with HIV/AIDS, reflecting the complex interplay between societal constructs and personal well-being (Ferrante et al., 2015).

Furthermore, by embracing a narrative lens, this review aims to critically evaluate how existing social welfare policies either ameliorate or inadvertently perpetuate stigma, offering insights into the necessary evolution of social work practice to better serve this vulnerable population. This qualitative synthesis highlights the importance of understanding complex social problems and developing multi-level interventions that go beyond individual-level responses, as advocated within human behavior theory for social work practice (Koenig et al., 2020). This theoretical grounding, particularly the empowerment theory and strengths perspective, further guided the interpretive process, emphasizing a holistic approach that acknowledges individual resilience within their environments (Koenig et al., 2020).

A comprehensive search strategy was meticulously developed to identify relevant academic literature, integrating keywords and controlled vocabulary to ensure broad coverage of the specified themes across multiple scholarly databases. Databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO were systematically queried using combinations of terms like "HIV/AIDS," "stigma," "social support," "social welfare policy," and "social work practice" to capture a wide array of relevant studies (Marani et al., 2019). This extensive search aimed to gather diverse perspectives and empirical evidence from various geographical and socio-economic contexts, ensuring a robust and nuanced understanding of the policy landscape and its practical implications (Nyman, 2024).

The selection of articles for inclusion was rigorously guided by predefined criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the synthesized evidence, focusing on studies that directly addressed the interplay between HIV/AIDS, stigma, social support, and social welfare policy within the context of social work practice (Fauk et al., 2019). Specifically, eligible studies included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research published in peer-reviewed journals, governmental reports, and reputable organizational publications between 1990 and 2023, reflecting a critical period of HIV/AIDS policy development and evolving social responses (Tang et al., 2025). Conversely, studies were excluded if they did not primarily focus on human populations, were opinion pieces without empirical backing, or lacked direct relevance to the social welfare aspects of HIV/AIDS, ensuring the review maintained a strong evidentiary foundation (Okunade et al., 2023).

The identified articles underwent a systematic data extraction process, where key information such as study design, population, interventions, outcomes, and theoretical frameworks were meticulously cataloged to facilitate subsequent thematic analysis. This process involved careful documentation of methodologies, findings, and discussions to ensure a comprehensive capture of each study’s contribution to understanding social welfare development policies for people with HIV/AIDS (Okunade et al., 2023). Subsequently, a thematic synthesis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns, divergent findings, and overarching themes related to stigma, support, and their implications for social work practice, allowing for an integrated interpretation of the collective evidence.

This meticulous synthesis allowed for the construction of a robust narrative that elucidates the complex interplay of social, psychological, and policy factors influencing the well-being of individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Galvão, 2016) (Sommer & Barroso, 2023). This qualitative synthesis, therefore, moved beyond simple aggregation of findings to construct an interpretive understanding of how various social welfare development policies have impacted the experiences of those affected by HIV/AIDS (Mkuyamba et al., 2025) (Thapa et al., 2017). The process of thematic synthesis, including line-by-line coding and the formation of descriptive and analytic themes, was carried out inductively to allow higher-order themes to emerge directly from the data (Robinson et al., 2023). This inductive approach ensured that the resulting conceptual framework was grounded in the empirical evidence rather than pre-existing assumptions, thereby enhancing the rigor and validity of the review’s conclusions (Kimera et al., 2019).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Stigma as a Barrier to Social Welfare Development

Stigma, deeply embedded in societal attitudes and institutional practices, profoundly impedes the effectiveness of social welfare initiatives aimed at improving the lives of people with HIV/AIDS. This pervasive negative attribution significantly curtails access to essential services, undermines social support networks, and exacerbates existing health disparities (Chambers et al., 2015). The fear of discrimination often leads to self-isolation and reluctance to seek help, thus creating a vicious cycle that further marginalizes individuals already vulnerable due to their health status (Sommer & Barroso, 2023).

This societal condemnation, rooted in historical misconceptions and moral judgments, manifests in various forms, from overt discrimination in employment and housing to subtle, internalized shame that impacts mental health and overall well-being (Tang et al., 2025) (Sommer & Barroso, 2023). For instance, patients with comorbid conditions frequently experience depression and hopelessness, intensified by HIV-related stigma and insufficient support, which deter them from seeking necessary care or adhering to treatment regimens (Karbasi et al., 2025). Such experiences often lead to a “loss of self” for chronically ill individuals, where their former self-images crumble without the development of equally valued new ones (Dennis et al., 2013).

Consequently, this internalized stigma, a profound psychosocial burden, often leads to individuals experiencing a double victimization, characterized by both external societal discrimination and self-stigmatization (Tang et al., 2025). This phenomenon compels individuals living with HIV/AIDS to manage their identities carefully, often concealing their serostatus to avoid social rejection and maintain a semblance of normalcy within their communities (Bergman et al., 2023) (Marsh, 2013). This strategic concealment, while offering temporary respite from overt discrimination, paradoxically perpetuates feelings of isolation and contributes to diminished well-being by fostering an environment of distrust and hindering open communication about their health status (Koenig et al., 2020) (Barr, 2016).

The profound impact of stigma extends beyond emotional distress, significantly deterring individuals from utilizing critical health and social services and leading to detrimental health and psychosocial consequences (Dessie & Zewotir, 2024). This can manifest as avoidance of HIV testing, non-disclosure of status, and reluctance to engage in prevention, care, and treatment programs due to fear of judgment or discrimination (Boakye et al., 2024). This reluctance often translates into delayed diagnoses, poorer health outcomes, and a reduced quality of life for individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Boakye et al., 2024).

Moreover, stigma and discrimination can significantly influence the attitudes of people with HIV/AIDS towards medical care and healthy behavior, leading to feelings of hopelessness and mental disorders that manifest as reluctance to seek medical attention and neglect preventive measures essential for maintaining health (Asrina et al., 2023). The psychological burden of internalized stigma, exacerbated by societal prejudice, contributes to decreased self-esteem and self-confidence, often observed immediately after an HIV-positive diagnosis (Asrina et al., 2023). This internalization of negative societal perceptions not only affects their mental health but also creates a “self-fulfilling stigma prophecy,” where fear of discrimination leads to social isolation, inadvertently reinforcing societal stereotypes about people with HIV/AIDS (Tang et al., 2025) (Nobre et al., 2017).

This pervasive fear of judgment and the subsequent withdrawal from social interaction not only limit access to vital healthcare but also contribute to a cycle of marginalization that profoundly diminishes the overall quality of life for individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Asrina et al., 2023) (Dave, 2024). This creates a substantial barrier to social integration and participation, exacerbating the challenges faced in achieving holistic well-being and equitable access to social welfare provisions (Obeagu, 2024). The complex interplay of enacted and perceived stigma further compounds these challenges, as individuals with HIV/AIDS navigate actual discriminatory experiences alongside the anticipated negative judgments from society (Yendewa et al., 2023).

Consequently, understanding the multi-faceted nature of stigma, encompassing both structural and individual manifestations, is paramount for developing effective social welfare policies that genuinely address the needs of this vulnerable population (Gruszczyńska & Rzeszutek, 2023). This necessitates a comprehensive approach that moves beyond mere awareness campaigns to implement robust anti-discrimination measures and foster environments of acceptance and support (Bouabida et al., 2023). Such an integrated approach would not only mitigate the detrimental effects of stigma on individual well-being but also enhance adherence to treatment protocols and improve public health outcomes by encouraging greater engagement with healthcare services.

The Crucial Role of Social Support in HIV/AIDS Management

Effective social protection systems are vital in mitigating the socioeconomic disparities experienced by people living with HIV/AIDS, ensuring comprehensive coverage and support across various stages of the epidemic (Jocelyn et al., 2024). However, the mere existence of these systems does not guarantee equitable access or impact, as legal and policy frameworks can inadvertently harm the material well-being of people living with HIV by failing to adequately support those with HIV-related disabilities or comorbidities (Lazarus et al., 2021). Moreover, insufficient understanding of the distinct challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals living with HIV/AIDS within these frameworks often leads to their further marginalization and exacerbates existing health disparities (Chambers, 2012).

For instance, legislation that criminalizes homosexuality directly contributes to heightened stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, deterring them from seeking essential HIV testing, prevention, and treatment services (Boakye et al., 2024). This punitive approach not only undermines public health efforts but also entrenches social inequalities, making it imperative to advocate for rights-grounded reforms that safeguard vulnerable populations (Boakye et al., 2024). This emphasizes the critical need for social policies to be inclusive and non-discriminatory, thereby fostering an environment where all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, feel safe and empowered to access vital health services without fear of legal repercussions or social ostracization.

Such reforms must also actively combat misinformation and promote accurate scientific understanding of HIV transmission, moving beyond outdated moralistic frameworks to embrace evidence-based public health strategies (Lopata & Levy, 2003). Moreover, policies must acknowledge the intersectionality of various social determinants of health, recognizing that factors such as poverty, race, and gender identity significantly amplify the vulnerability of certain populations to HIV infection and its associated stigma. Therefore, social welfare development policies must adopt a holistic framework that addresses these interconnected vulnerabilities, integrating social protection measures with human rights advocacy to create truly equitable and supportive environments for people living with HIV/AIDS (Sued & Grosso, 2022) (Chipanta et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a critical examination of policy implementation reveals that even well-intentioned programs can fall short if they do not account for the nuanced lived experiences of marginalized groups, including rural populations or those infected through specific circumstances (Zhang & Souleymanov, 2021). For example, studies have indicated that individuals in rural areas often face compounded challenges in accessing HIV/AIDS services due to geographical barriers, limited infrastructure, and a heightened prevalence of stigma (Zhang & Souleymanov, 2021). This is further complicated by the fact that policy action often fails to extend beyond health and law enforcement institutions, thereby neglecting to engage community leaders who are crucial in mediating social processes that perpetuate stigma (Aantjes et al., 2021).

Challenges and Opportunities in Providing Social Support

Overcoming these hurdles necessitates a multi-pronged approach that includes bolstering infrastructure in underserved regions and actively engaging local community leaders and traditional healers, who often serve as crucial conduits for information and support within their communities, to develop culturally sensitive interventions (Haviland et al., 2008). These collaborations can bridge the gap between formal healthcare systems and community-based support networks, thereby enhancing the reach and effectiveness of social welfare programs for individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Boakye et al., 2024). Moreover, leveraging the insights from empowerment theory and the strengths perspective can further enrich these interventions by focusing on the inherent capabilities of individuals and communities to navigate and overcome adversity, rather than solely on their deficits (Koenig et al., 2020).

This approach not only fosters resilience among people living with HIV/AIDS but also empowers them to actively participate in shaping policies and programs that directly affect their lives (Koenig et al., 2020). Furthermore, policies should explicitly recognize HIV and AIDS not merely as health conditions but as social phenomena requiring comprehensive family-centered support, acknowledging the crucial role of familial unity and integrity in mitigating stigma and improving overall quality of life (Chinyama et al., 2017). Such an integrated approach necessitates a re-evaluation of existing social assistance policies to ensure they adequately address the multifaceted needs of individuals and families affected by HIV/AIDS, extending beyond medical interventions to encompass financial, psychological, and social dimensions of care (Zhang & Souleymanov, 2021).

This includes developing targeted programs that address the unique challenges faced by women aging with HIV, who often experience different forms of stigma and whose life course trajectories can be significantly shaped by their serostatus (Moore et al., 2024). Additionally, future research should delve into the diverse experiences of individuals across different age groups, recognizing that varying life stages present distinct challenges and support needs for those living with HIV (Quinn et al., 2018). Therefore, a nuanced understanding of age-specific challenges is paramount for crafting interventions that resonate with the diverse experiences of this population, ensuring that support mechanisms are both relevant and effective across the lifespan (Sangaramoorthy et al., 2017).

This inclusive perspective should also extend to examining how intersections of identity, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, further complicate the lived experiences of older women with HIV, necessitating policy guidelines that address these power differentials in health care and social systems (Durvasula, 2014). Furthermore, existing strategies aimed at alleviating poverty among older women have often proven inadequate, highlighting the necessity for future interventions to consider robust economic support mechanisms, such as enhanced case management services, food and nutrition programs, and direct financial assistance (Quinn et al., 2017) (Lopata & Levy, 2003). These programs are critical given that HIV can lead to significant economic hardship for women and their families, often resulting in job loss, increased healthcare expenditures, food insecurity, and the sale of family assets, ultimately exacerbating poverty (Fauk et al., 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has systematically explored the intricate relationship between social welfare development policies, HIV/AIDS, and the pervasive impact of stigma, culminating in a comprehensive review of existing challenges and opportunities for social work practice. It has underscored the critical need for policies that are not only evidence-based but also deeply empathetic to the lived experiences of individuals and communities affected by HIV/AIDS. Ultimately, effective social work practice in this domain demands a dynamic, responsive approach that integrates micro-level interventions with macro-level advocacy, challenging discriminatory structures while fostering individual and community resilience. Moreover, this review has highlighted the imperative for culturally tailored programs that address the specific needs of diverse populations, such as older adults and specific cultural groups, moving beyond generalized support services.

Future research should therefore focus on the longitudinal impacts of intersectional stigma on health outcomes and quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly considering how gender, race, and socioeconomic status interact to produce unique vulnerabilities and resiliencies. This deeper understanding is crucial for designing targeted interventions that effectively mitigate the compounding effects of multiple stigmatized identities, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of social welfare policies. Furthermore, a rigorous analysis of policy implementation within diverse geopolitical contexts is warranted to ascertain best practices and identify systemic barriers that impede equitable access to care and support services.

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AUTHORS

Nurul Husna – Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.
Heri Kusmanto – Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.
Hatta Ridho – Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.

Agus Suriadi – Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.