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Title: Unfolding Social Work research to address the COVID-19 impact: a text mining literature analysis

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to understanding the main social impacts of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 by highlighting the present and future challenges of social intervention and proposing a research agenda for social workers. Based on main indicators collected from international reports, we categorise the terms associated and analyse 284 Scopus articles that address social work issues in face of the COVID-19 through a text mining literature analysis. By applying topic modelling, we are able to identify relations within the body of knowledge between the main indicators. The results enable to highlight the current trends of research, contributing to leverage knowledge in Social Work in face of a complex and uncertain society. We find that most articles are focused on professional practice, as well as areas such as health, education, and employment. In contrast, we argue that issues related to women or migrants have been less explored. These aspects could bring new perspectives in future research within the pandemic context.

Keywords: COVID-19; Crisis; Literature analysis; Pandemic; Social impacts; Social Work.

Teaser Text

The consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought new perspectives to Social Work intervention and research. International reports from key organisations, such

as United Nations, point to a range of effects and socioeconomic challenges in this context, which specifically affected vulnerable groups. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to understanding the main social impacts of the pandemic, the present and future challenges of social intervention, as well as a research agenda for social workers. Based on main indicators collected from international reports, we categorise the terms associated and analyse 284 Scopus articles that address Social Work issues in facing COVID-19 through a text mining literature analysis. The results highlight the most addressed dimensions of research are health, education, and employment. These also focus on how Social Work practice dealt with the social impact from COVID-19. In contrast, we realise that issues related to specific groups like women or migrants, are less explored. In this framework, Social Work research must contribute to public policies, to prevent, minimise, and respond to the social urgent needs of groups particularly affected by COVID-19.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has changed people's lives, impacting health, employment, income, social relationships, along with social and individual well-being, while increasing and causing new situations of vulnerability. The increase and amplification of social problems such as unemployment and poverty entail social risks in societies, especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly, and women (ILO, 2020a; OECD, 2020a; UN, 2020a; WHO, 2020).

The emergence of postmodern societies, risks and uncertainties are revealed in a complex context, marked by social, economic, cultural, and technological transformations (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). In contemporary societies, these fast changes placed the social

balance at risk with the intensification of social problems, affecting the quality of life, for families, groups, or communities and social work practices (Dominelli, 2010; Lyons, 2006), as verified in the financial crisis of 2008 (Ioakimidis *et al.*, 2014).

According to the international definition, social work aims to promote social development, attending to human rights and social justice, supported by ethical principles, theoretical frameworks, specific practice environments and indigenous knowledge (IFSW, 2014). Critical reflection on social problems allows social work to contribute to the empowerment of people and communities (Colby, 2013). Social intervention is based on the multifaceted nature of social problems and considering the ethical principles of social work and its purposes (Banks, 2008; Rocha, 2011), there is an intrinsic link to the safeguard of human rights. Thus, it is relevant that research in social work seeks to extend this complex social reality, with the current pandemic context as a fundamental matter of study.

A literature analysis of the empirical evidence-base in social work, of over one year since the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic, enables to highlight the current trends of research, contributing to leverage knowledge in social work and perspectives of future development in this disruptive context. The International Association of Schools of Social Work presented a list based on a literature review on social work and social policy related to COVID-19 encompassing 10 dimensions: domestic violence and violence against women; social work and COVID-19; mental health; child protection; housing; social work education; elderly people and nursing homes; suicide; triage and disability; social policy (IASSW, 2021). Such a comprehensive list provides a baseline to contextualise the major themes within social work. However, it does not attempt to relate how those themes interconnect with each other, nor the role of technology, institutions, and policies in current practices within the pandemic context. We developed a text mining-based model

that links coherent topics that have been computed based on the recurrence of these related themes within a large set of articles. Such approach has already proved useful to analyse large sets of articles within social sciences (e.g., Santos *et al.*, 2020). Thus, we provide a summary of our analysis of a large body of knowledge to identify related dimensions from social impacts after one year since the pandemic was declared.

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the main empirical research within social work on COVID-19 related topics and to assess how social work can help to mitigate the social impacts of the pandemic. We formulate the following research questions that guide our analysis:

1 - What are the trends in empirical research about social work and COVID-19?

2 - What themes can be aggregated from the social work research literature on the COVID-19 pandemic context?

This study provides insights into the main themes developed on social work and COVID-19 research and their relationship with social impacts. Additionally, it contributes with an analysis and identification of the issues that have been most explored in produced literature and of those less developed.

In the next section, we identify the COVID-19 social impacts and review social work concepts, enabling us to define our dimensions of analysis, as well as positioning our study. The method section presents the methodological approach. The main topics and findings are discussed then. Finally, we highlight some conclusions, limitations, and promising directions for future research on social work in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

Background

The impacts of COVID-19 have been a focal point of major international organisations, notably the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO), among others, that enables a more comprehensive view of the consequences of pandemic across the world. From these, we can highlight the profound implications with health. Beside the direct effects and symptoms of COVID-19, the population routines during lockdown brought unhealthy life habits, such as lesser physical activity, longer computer screen time, more irregular sleep patterns and less healthy diets (OECD, 2020a; WHO, 2020). The OECD and UN reports also revealed the increase in mental health issues and the risk of an exacerbation of substance abuse and addictions. Another social impact on a meso and macro levels was the pressure on health care systems and resources all around the world (UN, 2020a; OECD, 2020a; OECD, 2020b).

In education, schools' closure had a severe impact on the well-being of children and young people with the interruption of face-to-face classes and the adoption of remote learning models during lockdowns (UN, 2020b; OECD, 2020c). Furthermore, the loss of social interactions between young people has brought negative consequences to their social development and can lead to greater sedentary behaviours (WHO, 2020). Another identified problem was that not all home environments had the capacity to live and learn in the same space, with some households lacking digital equipment and competencies. In some countries, schools remained open to provide support services and to ensure access to hot meals for the most vulnerable children and young people of families with lower incomes (OECD, 2020c; OECD, 2020d).

The COVID-19 context has affected labour markets worldwide, causing a wave of unemployment and with many companies going insolvent (OECD, 2020a; UN, 2020c).

In developing countries, these issues increased the socioeconomic challenges for the labour market and workers, namely low-paid and insecure work, without adequate social protection (ILO, 2020b; OECD2020e; OECD, 2020f). The loss of incomes in family's budgets pressured households under financial difficulties (ILO, 2020b; OECD, 2020a). Additionally, new forms of work emerged during the pandemic, like teleworking, creating new difficulties to families working from home (OECD, 2020a; OECD, 2020f).

Specific vulnerable population groups which included children and young people, migrants, women, and the elderly, were more exposed to COVID-19 social impact (OECD, 2020a; OECD, 2020e; UN, 2020a) needing more support than the general population (UN, 2020d). Gender and social inequalities were exacerbated, exposing girls and women to gender-based violence, domestic violence, and sexual harassment (OECD, 2020e; UN, 2020e; WHO, 2020). Vulnerable children were more exposed to risk, including migrants and children with disabilities, due to the restrictive contact measures by child protection services (OECD2020a; UN, 2020b).

By scrutinizing international reports, we could identify different dimensions which described the most significant long-term social impacts in the COVID-19 context and need to be at the core of Social Work (IFSW, 2020). Thus, we selected a set of dimensions on social impact fields that are strongly mentioned in international reports, that were used as a base to analyse the themes in social work articles through a text mining approach. This procedure enabled to cross these subjects with the literature in articles about social work and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

There are several scientific databases that index peer-reviewed articles reporting research findings. Arguably, two of the most widely known and adopted worldwide are Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus (Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018). From these, Scopus covers a wider range of publications when compared to WoS (Abrizah *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it has been consistently chosen for literature analysis studies in many domains and applications (e.g., Parlina *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, we also adopted Scopus for querying it for relevant articles as the source of literature for this analysis, using the following field code: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social work" AND ("COVID-19" OR "coronavirus" OR "pandemic")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2020)).

Such query resulted in a total of 435 articles which titles, abstracts and keywords were retrieved from the Scopus database. However, by randomly reading a few of them, we detected several non-peer-reviewed editorial notes and letters. Thus, we used Scopus document type filter to remove editorial notes. Additionally, we removed errata and short surveys in which an abstract was missing. As a result of such pre-processing procedure, a total of 284 articles were retained for further analysis. From these, most are co-authored by United States researchers (189) and United Kingdom researchers (55), followed by researchers affiliated in Australia (34), Canada (32), Spain (20) and China (17). Also identified were researchers from other territories such as Hong Kong, Niger and Nigeria, Italy, India, among others.

Figure 1 shows the full sequence of the undertaken approach, including article filtering. It is based on the methodology adopted by Santos *et al.* (2020), and Cortez *et al.* (2018).

The approach consists of two parallel phases. On the right side of Figure 1, the article selection procedure and steps for removing the editorial notes are identified. On the left side, we started by identifying the main Social Work dimensions (label "identify" of

Figure 1), setting the base for building a dictionary (label "build" of Figure 1). Such procedure consists in carefully analysing the literature summarised in the previous section to identify the words denoting each of the identified dimensions. This is necessary to ensure that any word associated to a dimension is properly matched and accounted for as belonging to that dimension. Thus, the text mining procedure works by creating a frequency table that, for each article, counts the number of times each dimension is mentioned. This table is then the input to the topic modelling algorithm.

We considered the reports analysis from international organisations (i.e., OECD, UN, WHO) to identify the main dimensions about the COVID-19 social consequences and the most vulnerable groups (left column of Table 1). By further scrutinising the documents identified in the previous section, we identified a range of words related to each dimension, thus helping to characterise each. Nevertheless, because of the diversity and heterogeneity of the literature found, we additionally extracted all nouns (to identify concepts) and verbs (to identify actions) from the 284 selected articles, removing all the remaining words that have little to non-semantic value to our analysis, such as pronouns, adverbs, and adjectives. From the selected words, all which occurred at least 20 times in the dataset of articles (i.e., considering only the used sections, title, abstract, and keywords) were scrutinised by two social work senior researchers who identified if a word was related to any of the previous dimensions: if so, the word was included in the lexicon as equivalent to that dimension. Such procedure enabled to assure that all relevant words characterising each dimension were accounted for. The resulting dictionary is exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1 - Social work lexicon for text mining analysis.

Dimension	Examples of related terms
children	childcare, youth, adolescents
education	classroom, schools, learning
elderly	geriatric, older adults, gerontology
employment	lay-off, unemployed, labour
health	medical, hospital, patients
migrants	refugees, xenophobia, racism
poverty	insolvency, poor, hunger
women	gender-based, feminism, woman
violence	victims, terrorism, crime
technology	internet, computers, videoconferences
policies	policymakers, social security, social protection
practice	social work profession, crisis intervention, social development
institutions	NGO, third sector, care centres

Finally, both the filtered articles and the dictionary were used as inputs to obtain the frequency table, which then is the input of topic modelling. While there are several topic modelling algorithms, we adopted the popular latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) which was first developed by Blei *et al.* (2003) and has recently been used to analyse literature in a wide variety of scientific domains, including within the social sciences (e.g., Santos *et al.*, 2020). The LDA algorithm computes the relation between each article and each topic (θ distribution), also between each topic and each dimension (β distribution). Following Santos *et al.* (2020) approach, we considered each article was attributed to the topic it was most closely related. Therefore, we focused on characterising each topic through the dimensions that best matched it. All experiments were conducted using the R statistical tool, which is an open-source scripting language especially suited for data analysis tasks (Cortez, 2014). Specifically, the "tm" package was used for initial text

mining tasks such as parsing the articles, and "topicmodel" to compute the topics. Since the number of topics is a given input for LDA, we used the R "ldatuning" package to set the optimal number to eight (i.e., similar to Santos *et al.*, 2020).

Results and discussion

In this section, we start by showing the results of applying topic modelling. We chose to present them in the form of horizontal bar plots (Figure 2). Thus, each plot represents one of eight computed topics. Within each plot the five most relevant words that best characterise the theme are presented, ordered by their relevance. In the sub-sections, we discuss the main findings stemming from Figure 2 by highlighting the most important dimensions identified from existing literature. For each topic, we discuss the link between the main social work themes within the context of COVID-19, including the major implications evidenced.

Practice and poverty (Topic 1)

In Topic 1, practice and poverty issues are connected, showing that one of the impacts of COVID-19 is the significant increase in poverty as international reports had alerted (e.g., OECD, 2020a). In the beginning of the pandemic crisis, practices and intervention strategies were focused on the most urgent social needs of vulnerable groups (Redondo-Sama *et al.*, 2020).

Several articles emphasised the challenges faced by social workers, which led to a major focus in social work practice in this dimension. Among these difficulties, ethical dilemmas were identified, related to the worsening of living conditions and with feelings

of powerlessness in the face of a new uncertain reality (Dominelli, 2021; Lau *et al.,* 2021; Harrikari *et al.,* 2021). For example, the lack of resources due to inadequate policies, limited the role of social work to fight against poverty and social exclusion (Garcia *et al.*, 2021). According to Arnfjord (2021) homelessness was left out of the political priorities, with NGOs taking the initiative to support and protect these citizens.

Beyond the limitations, this topic highlights the development of an active practice towards poverty, despite a lack of response from public services and insufficient conditions to enforce fundamental rights. Cox (2020) identified different levels of social work practice against poverty in older adults stressing the importance of direct support, developing programmes and services, and demanding policy changes to address social inequalities. Isangha *et al.* (2021) note that there have also been opportunities for Nigerian social workers to take a more active role in supporting vulnerable populations and supporting the government in more suitable policy making. Also, cross-sectoral collaboration experiences were mentioned, such as in Hong Kong, where a group of social workers worked with engineers to implement a project addressing the needs of low-income families during the pandemic (Chui and Ko, 2021).

Health and violence (Topic2)

In topic 2, the dimension health gains prominence in literature and is connected to the increase of violence during the pandemic. The employment dimension has low representation in this topic, being associated with socio-economic characterisation.

As reports emphasised, the negative social impacts on health have had a direct effect on social work responses, particularly for the most vulnerable groups such as women, children and migrants (Cross and Gonzalez Benson, 2021; Gonzales *et al.*, 2021). Girls

and women were more exposed to violence, as some studies confirm (e.g., Wannamakok *et al.,* 2020; McLay, 2021) and risk factors were aggravated by lockdowns, being more visible through digital networks (Xue *et al.*, 2020).

The analysis between dimensions in this topic indicates that the lockdown measures sought to protect the health of citizens but compromised the safety and well-being of women and migrants. Hence, we understand that the pandemic has enhanced discriminatory behaviours and exacerbated racial and gender inequalities. Class hatred became more pronounced, mainly towards social groups historically excluded from access to goods, public services and rights such as black people, and especially black poor women (Walton *et al.,* 2021) or LGBTI+ (Perone, 2021). The pandemic also triggered the prejudice against Chinese people, associating the responsibility of the new coronavirus to Asian citizens (Choi, 2021).

Related to this topic, we find xenophobia and hate speech, showing inequalities in access to services and fundamental rights. Migrants, refugees, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, especially with lower socio-economic status, have been more exposed to discrimination during the pandemic (Cross and Gonzalez Benson, 2021). According to the articles on this topic, social work has an added challenge in promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive societies.

Education (Topic 3)

Topic 3 presents a very explicit analysis of the pandemic impacts on education. International organisations highlighted the effects of the absence of traditional schooling in children and youth across different levels of education.

Most of the studies in this topic refer to social work education (e.g., Azman *et al.*, 2020; Pentaris *et al.*, 2020) and not to the restrictions on education that were widely signalled in the reports. Nevertheless, these are relevant to prepare upcoming social workers to intervene in a future marked by uncertainty.

Social workers need to deal with different scenarios and borderline situations (Harrikari *et al.*, 2021), therefore social work students should have opportunities to integrate fieldwork training and develop skills for an effective practice (Amadasun, 2021). During the lockdown, creative, digital, and online methods were used to simulate practical cases and reduce the impact of non-face-to-face teaching on students' field experiences (Buchanan and Bailey-Belafonte, 2021). Additionally, increased feelings of anxiety indicated needs of greater support for students (Lawrence *et al*., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced that social work training requires new generations to be prepared to respond in these contexts and the need for new pedagogical approaches to be developed (e.g., Afrouz 2021; Cabiati and Gómez-Ciriano, 2021) adjusted to complex societies.

Practice and children (Topic 4)

In topic 4, the focus is on professional practice and children. International reports mentioned the pandemic effects on child well-being, particularly with schools' closure and the interruption of childhood care facilities, leading to more unprotected children and youth.

Within this framework, social workers have mobilised efforts and child welfare has been of particular concern (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020; Domineli, 2021). The breakdown of bonds and relationships with peers and social isolation are factors that influence the

development of children and young people (Danese and Smith, 2020; Paceley *et al.,* 2021). Other risks, such as sexual violence (Bennett *et al.,* 2021) and child labour (Larmar *et al.,* 2021), led social work intervention to focus on the protection of children's rights.

With the restriction of home visits during lockdown, new experiences of digital and virtual platforms led to creative and alternative strategies to promote family and children engagement (e.g., Cook and Zschomler, 2020; Pink *et al.*, 2020; Singer and Brodzinsky, 2020). Additionally, online social work groups were created to maintain services available for children and young people (Hung *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, social work practices related to maternal health and paediatric care have prompted a reconfiguration and greater flexibility in direct intervention, while reinforcing the awareness of policy constraints (Goswami *et al.*, 2021; Ross *et al.,* 2021).

Regarding this topic's findings, protecting children's rights must be a social work priority to ensure their safety, and full development. The articles focus on the advantages of the online approaches but stated that communication barriers and limitations existed, acknowledging that it was not a substitute for direct contact. Therefore, is important to act proactively and improve methodologies to prevent the potential risk which may arise from the closure of schools and public services, thus protecting children from abuse and violence.

Health and elderly (Topic 5)

In Topic 5 we can see a strong relationship between the dimension of health and elderly. Although with a low expression, this topic also revealed a relationship between the dimensions of violence, policies, and technologies. International reports showed that older people are directly and indirectly more vulnerable to COVID-19 consequences,

such as greater risk of serious health outcomes and death, and lessened social support. The reports also confirmed that social services closures prompted less home visits and a rise in social isolation and loneliness, factors that social work research also mentioned. (e.g., Cox, 2020).

The pandemic crisis has created greater demand for services in supporting patients and caregivers (Dhavale *et al.*, 2020) to deal with the temporary closure measure of elderly care institutions (Lin and Yin, 2020) and to ensure assistance to elderly people without health insurance (Tung, 2021). We should emphasise that many elderly people were not able to access social support services, particularly those living with dementia (Wilson, 2020). Physical distancing measures affected institutionalised elderly people to prevent COVID-19 contagious (Green and Moran, 2021), leading to isolation without close contact. To reduce social distancing, older people used digital technologies as an alternative to communicate but faced difficulties adapting to them (Wang *et al.*, 2021). This topic analysis has shown that without urgent measures the consequences on elderly and vulnerable people may be irreversible.

Policies, technology, and institutions (Topic 6)

The terms in the dimensions policies, technology and institutions appear with a significant connection in topic 6. This reinforces social work's active engagement in social policy in contemporaneity (Jaswal and Kshetrimayum, 2020).

Since the pandemic crisis worsened, researchers have drawn especial attention to the COVID-19 impact on the society (Larmar *et al.,* 2021; Simsa and Brandsen, 2021). The institutions where social workers had many of their services and activities reduced or work interrupted, led to support people remotely, which challenged professionals to find

new approaches (Dominelli, 2021). Most of the aspects implicated were linked to political decision makers, who did not respond quickly enough to current events and problems (Arnfjord, 2021).

Expecting these situations would worsen, there was an effort to involve and facilitate the best suitable way to respond to human needs, offering the possibility to do it online. Technologies had an important role in this process. Digital platforms and technologies have been utilised in the COVID-19 context developing new ways of possible intervention (Singer and Brodzinsky, 2020; Buchanan and Bailey-Belafonte, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

As discussed in other topics, the use of digital tools includes facilitating professionals' communication with service users and families, communicating between teams, and strengthening the role of solidarity networks to provide social protection. However, not everyone was prepared or had access to the necessary technology for this digital transition, which limited social intervention (Nisanci *et al.*, 2020). Thus, regarding the situations in which social workers must engage with social policies, institutional roles, and the digital transition, this topic becomes relevant.

Employment and institutions (Topic 7)

Employment-related issues appear in topic 7 connected to institutions. The dimensions elderly, education, and children appear in this topic with less relevance. We can notice that social vulnerabilities in the COVID-19 context and its mitigation measures relate to social problems, such as unemployment. Social workers were confronted with a different reality, finding a new target group that had never been in the situation of having to ask for support (Redondo-Sama, 2020). Additionally, unemployment is associated with the increase in suicide risk and prevention during COVID-19 (Kawohl and Nordt, 2020).

Changes in the labour context also affected Social Work practice and social workers' emotional well-being (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2021). Psychological support aiming to prevent problems such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder in particularly vulnerable groups, was a challenge for social workers. Since this profession is based on proximity, the suspension and closure of institutions brought serious constraints such as remote work (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020).

The limitation of work conditions left professionals often without the support of the institutions and the given guidelines were often contradictory (Dominelli, 2021; Garcia *et al.,* 2021; Harrikari *et al.*, 2021). Social workers' expertise should have been better recognised by public bodies to respond to the impacts of COVID-19 (Isangha *et al.*, 2021). This requires a different way of intervening, which enables sharing experiences that could serve as a basis to theorise new and alternative forms of intervention.

Health (Topic 8)

Health was the most present dimension in the publications, represented in three topics. This frequency is related to the pandemic impact on health and, thus, this dimension appears linked and mentioned in previous topics (topics 2 and 5), with its importance highlighted in topic 8.

Social workers in health teams had to adopt procedures in intervention in raising awareness of health care and in multidisciplinary teamwork through the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Pastrana *et al.,* 2020).

An analysis of social work literature has revealed new ways of providing access to health services during the lockdown. One of the most significant examples was the implementation of telehealth (Craig *et al.*, 2021; Cristofalo, 2021; Gergerich *et al.*, 2021)

as a mechanism to bring patients and families closer to health care services during the restrictions. This novel approach of adapting traditional practice to telehealth, has also been included in the training of social work students (Washburn *et al.,* 2021).

Some articles are particularly related to mental health impacts (e.g., Ravalier *et al.*, 2020; Lawrence *et al.*, 2021) pointed out in international reports. The intensification of mental health diseases, anxiety and stress caused by mandatory lockdown was mentioned as a devastating effect of COVID-19 (Khng, 2021).

Health issues have become increasingly evident, and yet, the situation seems to have no immediate solution. Therefore, the frequency in which health and related services show up in research papers comes as a normal and predictable outcome.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted social and political structures, exposing the vulnerable and marginalized communities. Based on literature review, we were able to aggregate results into different topics that allowed us to analyse the thematic trends of research in empirical articles about social work and COVID-19. The identified topics led us to confirm that most of the impacts mentioned in the international reports are being explored by researchers.

Health-related issues were the most highlighted dimension in this set of empirical articles and the most significant theme, which was expected considering we are facing a worldwide health crisis. The restrictive measures carried out to control the pandemic complicated the access to health care services and intensified the difficulties for users and social workers.

Social workers' practice appears as an analysis dimension in two topics, linked to poverty and protection of children's rights. The necessary adaptation of measures led to innovative strategies to provide social support, despite the inadequacy of public policies that were not suited for a pandemic context.

Additionally, education and employment revealed themselves as trends in the themes explored, focusing on social work training and practice. The importance of the technological dimension marks a period of digital transition, with this analysis showing innovation strategies and limitations to these approaches. Digital tools were present in training and practice, but it cannot replace face-to-face contact and the establishment of social relationships.

Among the dimensions less explored in the articles are violence against women and migratory issues, appearing with low representation and only in one topic. Considering the large number of international reports regarding these themes, a greater scientific production would be expected. Thus, these are issues that should be further developed in future research work or in the sharing of professional experiences. Research on intersecting inequalities is necessary to mediate disparities in gender relations, ethno-racial characteristics, spatial mobility, regional formations, and environmental disputes.

Some important methodological limitations should be mentioned. First, by adopting a topic modelling approach which is based on word frequency, the semantic context is not considered. Nevertheless, by focusing on specific dimensions (Table 1), we partially address this limitation. Also, given the recency of the current pandemic context, many new articles are published daily, with many first appearing in archives or repositories that are not indexed in the Scopus database. Although articles indexed by Scopus have the advantage of being peer-reviewed, the process usually takes time (at least a few months), which implies that our analysis can quickly became outdated.

Even with the increase in empirical research on this subject, the COVID-19 pandemic is still an unknown phenomenon with globally significant impacts, and so, the analysis of the literature on social work must continue. Given the rapid development of science and technology, the changes witnessed in the world of labour market, and in State-Society relation, have resulted in a new configuration of social issues. To ensure social justice and people empowerment, social work needs to work with governments and strengthen the policy decision-making in contexts of crisis, being essential to promote policies and interventions that prioritise human rights. Simultaneously, there is a strong concern with the preparation of professionals who can be resilient to face the challenges of a digital era. Therefore, the multidimensionality of situations provides the responsibility to identify the fields and sectors of these issues, to formulate effective solutions.

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Figure legend

Figure 1 - Undertaken approach.

Figure 2 - Significant topics.