

## Social Workers: From Education to Working Life

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### Abstract:

*The starting point of this paper is the view that social work practice is highly skill activity. However, students face difficulties in assuming the characteristics of the profession. Social work is a practice-based profession based on principles of human rights and social justice, aiming to empower and liberate people. In this regard, social work candidates are required to possess certain characteristic and to receive a qualified undergraduate education both theoretically and practically. Accordingly, while choosing a career, people focus on several aspects of the profession such as a good salary. However, social work is not a kind of a job to do for profit, on the contrary, it is more than that. The central aim of this article is to provide information about social work profession, and to make this subject accessible to students of social work in order to encourage them and enlighten the transition period of social work from education to working life.*

**Key words:** Social Workers, social work profession, education, working life

### 1. Introduction

In order to define a member of profession, the profession itself is to be defined properly. Notably International Federation of

Social Workers (IFSW), many scholars, institutions and organizations attempt to define social work profession. For the sake of this study, internationally recognized definition by IFSW is provided. According to this definition, social work *“is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”* As clear in the definition that social work is a practice-based profession grounded on principles of human rights and social justice, aiming to empower and liberate people, making use of every means to achieve this end. A practice-based profession, social work puts great responsibility on social workers. Thus, capacity and functionality of social workers is of utmost importance.

On the one hand, as a career, social work will be a “life companion” (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2002) for an individual, who should be satisfied with the profession. On the other hand, social workers are required to be endowed with certain characteristic and to receive a qualified undergraduate education both theoretically and practically. Thus, a person who decides to be a social worker is expected to have such characteristic features as friendly, sincere, reliable, humanist, and able to struggle against difficulties, optimistic, unbiased towards issues and people. Since, such an education is quite important for social worker’s integration with her profession and professional life, however, undergraduate education means more than acquiring professional skills. Future social workers have the opportunity to get closely acquainted with themselves, other systems around and different academic disciplines. Main feature of undergraduate education is not just limited to transfer of information. This is also a period of acquiring various skills and internalizing values of the profession. Thus,

based on social workers, the aim of this study is to evaluate their transition from education to working life in terms of different perspectives.

## **2. Social Work Education for Social Workers**

The beginning of social work education dates back to the end of nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century. Though the first social work school, Institute for Social Work Training, was founded in the Netherlands in 1899, advances took place in the USA are relatively important for the origin of both social work profession and education, and its development. Following the foundation of The Charity Organization Society in London, philanthropic activities had spread to the USA. For many academics today, the Charity Organization Society movement is regarded as the first formation and institutionalization of Social Work. In 1898, the first systematic social work education was begun in America through organization of 6-week-long summer courses in New York School of Philanthropy with the support of the Baltimore Charity Organization Society. Later, one-year full-time social work education started. For the first time in social work history, specific standards of social work education have been set in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. This paved a way for full-time education in the USA (Artan, 2012: 22). The school changed its name as New York School of Social Work, and serves under the name of Columbia University School of Social Work today. On the other hand, the first scientific publication in the field of social work education is Mary Ellen Richmond's Social Diagnosis in 1917. It is the first scientific methodology book for social work profession, as well.

There were 19 social work schools providing training across America in 1919. Such schools spread other counties in the following years. For instance, social work schools were established in Chile in 1920, in South Africa in 1924, in India

and Egypt in 1936. Particularly, after Second World War, serious studies were carried out by United Nations.

However, in Turkey, first social work school started education under the name of Social Work Academy in 1961 with the support of United Nations (Cilga, 2001: 78). First social work department at the level of undergraduate was founded within Hacettepe University.

Beginning from twentieth century, social work education has been provided in different forms in terms of countries, regions and schools. Though international organizations such as IFSW, IAASSW and EASSW share common social work definition or social work code of ethics, there is no common curriculum for social work education. However, three different studies related to social work education were published by United Nations in 1958: research of human, research of community, theory and practice of social work (Yolcuoğlu, 2014: 124). Besides, IASSW and IFSW adopted the general standards for the Education and training of the social work profession in the General Assembly in 2004 in Australia. Based on these standards, education in all social work schools is provided on knowledge, skill and value basis. Main aim of the education is to provide social workers with required knowledge, skills and values during practice. Since social work profession inherently has eclectic knowledge, social work education comprises knowledge from various scientific fields. In this case, a social worker is required to have knowledge in different fields such as sociology, law, economics, social policy, medicine, politics and anthropology. Social worker is not a psychologist for sure, however, expected to have knowledge about psycho-sociologic problems of the individual. Social worker is not a lawyer, however, expected to have knowledge about legislation. Social worker is not an economist, however, expected to have knowledge about poverty, domestic economy and distribution of income; nor a health worker, however, expected to have knowledge about human development and public health; nor a

sociologist, however, expected to have knowledge about social problems and possible solutions (Yolcuoğlu, 2014a, 196-170).

Future social worker is expected to possess such knowledge from different fields; since undergraduate education generally comprises these fields. However, studies carried out in many countries on social workers show that multidisciplinary education provided in the schools are insufficient on different terms. For example, according to a study in Turkey points out that only 37,1% of social workers find undergraduate education sufficient (Karataş, Demiröz, İçağasıoğlu Çoban, 2002: 74; quoting Yolcuoğlu, 2012: 173).

Arising from the problems they are facing in practice, Social workers expressed that they need much more scientific activities in order to support their professional development. Social workers don't often have enough knowledge about the limitations they are facing and the professional hardships until they graduate and start practising. In essence, this situation has two reasons: firstly they don't practice adequately or they cannot during the undergraduate education; secondly they cannot receive effective and supportive supervision. Relatedly, a newly graduated social worker reveals, "*I simply had no idea that my client would be so trouble, my job so difficult and frustrating, and my agency setting would be so overwhelmingly complex*" (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2002: 18). As can be understood from this expression, some social workers have complex feelings such as sorrow, astonishment and disappointment. Thus, an undergraduate education focused on practice and supervision makes it possible to educate future social workers who are self-confident, sophisticated, capable and effective. However, social workers are required to update their knowledge, skills and values according to today's ever changing and developing systems, and they need to transform this into social work field after they transfer to professional life.

### **3. Social Worker's Professional Life**

In general, a person either makes or has to make decisions throughout her life, which affects rest of her life. Choosing a career is among those critical and compulsory decisions. There are various factors affecting a person's choice such as family relations, social environment, psychological needs, ability, skills, interest and socio-economic level. Throughout the human history, socio-economic level affects people's choosing a career at most. Firstly, people consider choosing a career, which pledges good salary, however, social work is not one of them and will not be. For this reason, almost all social workers choose this career not for profit. Social workers, who do not mind material profit, find different moral satisfaction. This satisfaction makes most of the social workers dedicate themselves to their professional lives. It can be clearly defined that lives of social workers are dedicated to "human rights and social justice".

However, social workers are impeded by several obstacles to work by sticking to principles of human rights and social justice. Thus, social workers are required to acquire knowledge about possible problems and obstacles, and to be prepared for such cases during their master's degree. For Sheafor and Horejsi (2002:19), while social workers suppose not to encounter administrative and political obstacles during implementation of the knowledge they acquired during undergraduate education, they face administrative and political obstacles; as a result, they get disappointed. Yet social workers need to be prepared against administrative and political obstacles. Every social worker has own belief, thought and value judgement. Similarly, it is normal for institutions and organizations to possess certain principles and basics. Social workers have to consider and respect them. Providing such principles and basics contradict main social work principles such as law, social justice or human rights, social workers have to act considering code of ethics. Such behaviours will gain

social workers confidence and prestige among their clients and friends. A confident and respectable social worker will contribute much to society in a way that he will be able to help people in need and to provide professional service.

Besides a professional life, social workers have private life, as well. One of the ultimate dangers in social worker's professional life is negative effect of the profession over the private life. Social workers should be prepared for this threat. As the profession necessitates, social workers work with clients, who have trials and tribulations in their lives. For example, a client lacking in food for dinner will prevent social worker from having his dinner tranquilly. In addition, there may be problematic type of clients constantly putting social workers to trouble by impeding intervention. Such clients as drug addict children, who run away from home, behave illegally, and refuse receiving treatment, may prevent a social worker sleeping at peace. When such set of problems unites with institutional policy, time limit or administrative workload, social workers may find themselves in stressful environment. This stress in their working life will necessarily reflect on social workers' private life. Social workers' problems in working life may lead to unexpected results on their private lives. Thus, social workers should know powerful strategies for managing stress, as well. Institutions or organizations may organize in-service training courses and seminars for social workers in order for them to manage stress in their professional lives. Problems in professional life will have an effect on private life, however, social workers needs to have "plan B" to eliminate negative impacts of such problems. Social workers should not hesitate to receive help from their colleagues, supervisors or experts of other professions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Emerged as philanthropic activities and accepted as a profession firstly in 21<sup>st</sup> century, social work assumes critical

responsibilities in ever-changing and developing societies. In such a short period of time, social work does not only become a profession for people in need but also for great expectations of politicians and legislators. The idea that problems encountered or to be encountered in social sphere are to be treated by a professional member paves the way for social work to be defined as a profession. Primarily employed in army during World War I, social workers spread to many fields. Thus, social workers assume vital responsibilities over social problems. However, these responsibilities necessitate education of wise, capable and effective social workers. Today, social work education, hence, is provided pursuant to current needs and problems on knowledge, skill and value base in many countries. Additionally, it is important to further personal development in terms of profession's improvement. Social workers constantly need to be open to learning, development and change. In addition, it is important for them to abide by social work's code and principles of ethics.

Social work has not been a highly respected profession, since it often works with disadvantaged groups such as the poor, homeless, disabled, old people or orphans. However, as the gap between the rich and the poor widens, so does the number of people in middle class who have social problems rises. Increase in the number of people in middle class calls for need for social work practice. Such needs will ensure social work profession and social workers' respect they deserve in time. It is important for social workers to have their supervisors' support in order to manage stress. Social workers should also consider taking temporary-permanent or paid-unpaid time off in such cases. This is important not only for psychosocial health of social workers and their family, but also for clients' psychosocial health. Since an ideal social work intervention is only possible with physically, mentally and socially healthy social workers.

For World Health Organization, a healthy person is in a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. It is



important for a person to be healthy not only socially but also physically and mentally. Being in different environments and communication with different people are among basic requirements for a healthy social life. Therefore, it will be beneficial for social workers to have social contact with other people as well as their colleagues. Contacting with people of other profession will make social workers stay away from problems and stressful life for at least a short period of time, in other words, this is kind of renewal for social workers. In addition, other people will convey new and different information to social workers; hence this will contribute to social workers to have a successful professional life; social workers will develop different viewpoint. Such an eclectic side of social work profession will help social workers to develop their knowledge, skill and value base. However, they should be careful not to contact with other people while their clients are present. They should not be any other relationship but professional one between social workers and their clients. This is important for social workers to professionally keep their clients at bay in order to maintain self-respect and respect of other people. However, social workers should not confuse this with the first step of planned social work intervention, namely, 'meeting' step, when they welcome their clients and behave friendly and sincerely. Since the limits of the relationship is predefined in order to guide social workers professionally. As a result, social workers have to avoid digressing from these limits.

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