

SOCIAL WORK- A PROFESSION THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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Abstract:

Social Work is a professional activity that facilitates human growth and development and also enhances social functioning of individuals, groups and communities. Social work education in India started in the year 1936 and currently there are a large number of educational institutions that provide undergraduate, post graduates and research programmes in social work. The number social work graduates join the Indian job market increases every year. There are a large number of institutions- both public and private sector- currently actively involved in development projects. This article highlights the scope of professional social work in the development sector and the necessity of establishing practice standards in various specific practice settings.

Key words: Social Work , Community, development, Practice Setting

Social Work is a unique profession with a power to make a difference in human lives. The scope of Social Work in the current society is remarkably extensive. Their work can cover any aspect of people's lives from cradle to grave performing a wide range of interventions. They help people in the most difficult periods of their life. Social work is a challenging yet rewarding career. Would you enjoy a career in Social Work?

It is quite hard to find out a concise definition encompassing all of the activities in which social workers engage. At a very fundamental level, social work is a profession devoted to helping people function at their maximum level, within their social environment and when necessary, to

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changing their environment to make that possible. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) the primary mission of social work profession is to enhance human well being and help meet basic human needs, with particular attention to the needs of vulnerable, oppressed and poor people. (NASW, 1996). Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) defines Social work as a profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of quality of life, and to the development of full potential of each individual, group and community in society. The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work(International Federation of Social Workers(IFSW)). Social Workers are change agents in society and in the lives of individuals, families and communities they serve. Social Workers have done this in a variety of roles in society and various fields of practice.

For over a century the Social Work profession has been instrumental in working to accomplish civil rights and human rights across the globe. Social Work has made and continues to make a considerable contribution in response to social and economic challenges and to support vulnerable people and communities. Social work practice has since its inception been focused on meeting human needs and on developing human potential and resources to enrich people's lives and enhance social functioning

Multiple domains of Social work

Social work is an indispensable profession in our complex and dynamic society. It is a profession characterised by diversity. Social workers engage in a broad range of activities in various fields and are required by a variety of organizations and people. Social workers work with people of all ages, races, ethnic groups, socio economic levels, religions, sexual orientations and abilities. In micro practice, which also known as direct practice, social workers provide a range of evidence based interventions to help individual clients to manage issues. Mezzo practice deals with the various systems which affects the clients, like family, school, peer group, neighbourhood. Macro practice brings about changes in organizational, community and policy arenas.

The most common settings of social work practice include family, schools, hospitals, community health, mental health clinics, child protection, and care of people with disabilities. Social workers provide support to clients in correctional settings, migrants and refugees, people with substance abuse, and victims of physical and emotional abuse. Social workers play a vital role in the wake of natural and manmade disasters. Housing, community development and employee assistance program are other venues of professional social work practice. Social workers gained recognition through the provision of specialized services in palliative care, end of life care, rehabilitation and geriatric services. Social workers work with survivors of trauma and abuse, grief and loss by providing counseling and support services to minimize the impact of trauma on their life. Social Workers organize therapy groups incorporating educational, social and behavior change components. Social Workers adopt different job titles such as counsellor, case manager, investigator, mental health clinician, therapist, child/youth worker, case worker, outreach worker and so on. In all these roles social workers do comprehensive assessments of their clients in order to understand their needs and problems and also to deliver tailored support.

In all the above settings social workers view clients as persons with intrinsic worth and dignity and respectfully respond to their needs. Although there are other professions that are concerned with social problems and how individuals and families function, it is social work's distinctive focus on the persons and the person's environment makes social work unique among the various helping professions. The person-in-environment framework attends to several interrelated dimensions of the person: biological, intellectual, emotional, social, familial, spiritual economic, cultural and so on (biopsychosocial-spiritual perspective). Social work profession recognizes that there are personal and environmental barriers that create and maintain distress, injustice and inequality and prevent the achievement of full potentials. Another key understanding is that when there is a favorable change in the person's environment, the person will be more likely to make positive changes towards growth and development. The strength perspective recognizes individual's strengths and abilities to cope with problems. The multiculturalism and cultural pluralism entail social workers who are culturally competent and culturally sensitive to be capable of adapting knowledge and skills in a way that best assists clients. It involves an ability to feel comfortable with differences. Expertise in relationship is central to social work practice. The primary resource the social worker brings to the helping process is his or her

capacity to develop positive relationships and assist clients to take actions that will improve the quality of their lives. In order to be attuned and helpful to the client social workers should have high level of warmth, acceptance, unconditional positive regard, empathy, genuineness and spontaneity. In many settings social workers are part of the multidisciplinary team and provide distinctive contribution towards client assessment and treatment interventions.

Social workers have numerous transferable skills and many of the techniques and experience can be translated into working with various client groups. Social Workers assist clients to gain expanded self awareness and insight, of which active listening, empathy, paraphrasing, interpretation and confrontation are employed most extensively. Using the skills, social workers assist clients to become aware about real needs and goals that imply in their description about problem and difficulties. This enhances clients' awareness of their strengths and potentialities and motivation for change and growth. Clients are helped to make explicit goals which are SMARTI (Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time bound and interesting) that pave the way to change oriented actions.

Hundreds of new graduates in Social work enter into work place every year. Attaining and maintaining competence in practice is an ethical requirement for social workers. Social Workers need specialized competence to work in different settings. They must demonstrate on a daily basis that they are capable of providing effective services and are committed to conducting their practice in a responsible and an ethical manner. Through education and reflective practice experience, social workers develop practice wisdom. Each Social Worker has his/her own unique style integrating personal characteristics, special talents and exceptional approach in helping clients.

Social work values and Attributes

Social work is a value driven profession. Social workers inevitably encounter ethical dilemmas when delivering services. Support through regular professional supervision is critical to effective social work practice. Professional supervision is an ethical responsibility under social work code of ethics. Supervision helps in reflecting upon the social workers' challenging experiences and turns them into constructive learning opportunities. It is the responsibility of workplace to ensure

regular supervision to their employees. As human beings, social workers are not immune to the effects of trauma and stress. Vicarious exposure to traumatic stress causes compassion fatigue, compassion stress and burn out among social work professionals. Supportive work environment and adequate supervision mitigate the incidence of secondary traumatic stress and burn out. When a social worker becomes aware of impairment of any kind including psychological distress related to job, it is also the social workers responsibility to seek help. It is not ethically sound to allow personal distress to interfere with job performance and doing so may put clients at risk. Regular supervision with experienced and competent social workers provides opportunities to discuss hesitations and fears and also to develop personal coping strategies.

Social Workers are required to adhere to professional standards and code of ethics. Social work organizations should ensure resources such as access to private space when meeting with clients to safeguard confidentiality and trust. Access to clinical supervision and debriefing, education and training to update knowledge and skills and specific policies and procedures that reflects the ethical standards of the profession are essential in a social work practice setting. Continuous professional development is another importance requirement for social work practitioners to maintain, improve and broaden their skills, knowledge and expertise. The title of ‘social worker’ to be restricted to those with professional qualification in social work. Trained social workers should not be ashamed of being labelled as ‘social worker’ in all the settings they are employed.

Role of Educators

As field practicum is the signature pedagogy of social work education social work educators are to be encouraged to engage in contemporary social work practice to familiarise themselves with field realities. They should facilitate independent learning through participatory training methods such as case study, role play, simulation exercises and guided field work training. Students should be given adequate orientation before placing them to agencies for internships. Proper professional supervision should be ensured in the placement agencies. The educational institutions should conduct periodical meetings of field practicum supervisors – onsite and offsite – in order to evaluate the performance and professional development of students.

The professional associations of social work are responsible for formulating practice standards and code of ethics for social work practice considering the social and cultural context of each country. There should be a collaborative effort between social work academia, practitioners and social work organizations in raising the standard of social work profession.

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