

ETHICS IN SOCIAL WORK.

WORKING WITH VULNERABLE GROUPS

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Resumé:

Le travail social est un activité professionnelle qui se concrétise par l'intervention ou l'aide dans des situations de difficultés. Cette action suppose pour le travailleur social la connaissance et la compréhension d'une réalité complexe aux dimensions multiples qui se caractérise aussi par un changement continu et nécessite une action multidimensionnelle. La profession d'assistant de service social a consigné ses règles de déontologie qui concerne les bases éthiques, les principes, les objectifs et les devoirs professionnels de l'assistant de services social.

Mots clé: éthique, le travailleur social, les normes professionnelles, assistance sociale, les groupes vulnérables

Social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession, having as its basic principle the fundamental value of every human being and as one of its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures, which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity. IFSW and IASSW believe that greater knowledge and understanding of human rights will improve the actions and interventions of social work professionals for the benefit of those who require their services. In a 1994 publications, IFSW and IASSW declared that human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics and practice (U.N., 1994, 5).

Social workers work with their clients on a variety of levels: the micro level of individual and family, the meso level of community, and the macro level of society nationally and internationally. Concern for human rights must be manifested by social workers at all levels and at

all times. Social work originates variously from humanitarian and democratic ideals. Social work practice has since its beginning been focused on meeting human needs and on developing human potential and resources. Social work is a profession whose purpose is to bring about social changes in society in general and in its individual forms of development (IFSW, 1976, 1).

Professional social workers are dedicated to service for the welfare and self-fulfillment of human beings, to the development and disciplined use of scientific knowledge regarding human and societal behavior, to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations, and to the achievement of social justice (IFSW, 2004, 1).

Social workers are involved in planning, estimating, applying, evaluating and modifying preventive social policies and services to groups and communities. They intervene in numerous functional sectors, using various methodological approaches, working within a broad organizational framework and providing social services to various sectors of the population at micro, meso and macro levels. Social work education is aimed at promoting social development and worldwide quality education, training and knowledge for social work practice, social services, and social welfare policies (IASSW, 2004, 2). Social work is always practiced in five contexts (U.N., 1994, 5) which, while they may be analyzed separately, are part of a whole. These contexts are geographical, political, socio-economic, cultural and spiritual.

- Geographical. All practice is located within some set of boundaries: agency, nation, state, region.
- Political. Every country has a political system. This sets the context for practice, whether the system is liberal or repressive, socialist, social democratic or capitalist.
- Socio-economic. An adequate livelihood, work, health and facilities, education and, if possible, access to social security and social services are basic human aspirations. The social cohesion of any group or nation depends, to a large extent, on an equitable sharing of available resources.

- Cultural. The practices, beliefs, aspirations and culture of individuals, families, groups, communities and nations have to be respected, though without prejudice to the evolution of certain practices and beliefs. Unless this is done, discriminatory acts that are destructive for society will occur.
- Spiritual. No society in which social work is practiced is value-free. It is central to social work/human practice that attention is paid to the values, the philosophies, the ethics and ideals of those with whom social workers work and, at the same time, to social workers' own values.

Paying attention to geographical, political, socio-economic, cultural and spiritual contexts gives conscious direction to social work striving and practice, and makes manifest the human rights components in social work. Social work is concerned with the protection of individual and group differences. It is after forced to mediate between the people and the state and other authorities and to provide protection when state action for the public good threatens the rights and freedoms of particular persons or groups (in cases of the removal of children from their families, of institutionalization of elderly or disabled people, or of housing conflicts resulting in homelessness). In 2004, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work approved this definition of social work: “the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing 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” (IASSW and IFSW, 2004, 2). Whatever one’s conceptual definition of human rights (IFSW, 1994), globalization (IFSW, 2006), or international social work when working with the UN, it will involve avoiding stereotypes, appreciating differences and being mindful that the values that one is accustomed to believing are universal are rarely so (Pollak D., 2007, 115). In 2000, world leaders agreed to the Millennium Development Goals an agenda to promote sustainable human development in all countries. The specific targets for poverty

reduction, health, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability and global partnerships to be reached by 2015.

The first purpose of the IFSW Declaration of Ethical Principles is to formulate a set of basic principles for social work, which can be adapted to cultural and social settings (IFSW, 1994, 1). Social workers in everyday practice encounter different cultures with values that conflict with their own and must struggle with the practical question: "when is different just different and when is different wrong?" (Lynne M. Healy, 2007, 13). These dilemmas arise frequently in social work, especially in situations regarding equality claims for women, children, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities or involving tensions over individualism against the claims of the group or community. In a 1994 publication, IFSW and IASSW declared that human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice (UN, 1994, 5). In this training manual social workers are told that they must advocate for human rights, even in authoritarian countries where it is dangerous to do so. Human rights are delineated in a set of extensively ratified United Nations documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 provides a foundation that has been further elaborated in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted in 1966. Rights of racial groups, women and children were expanded and detailed successively in other new Conventions. The roles and status of women and children in families, communities and cultures are probably the most frequent sources of value clashes over social work ethics and human rights between individual rights and cultural traditions.

There are some social work values that are common to the international ethical document, Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles, and to codes of ethics from individual countries. These are loosely identified as cornerstone values of the profession. They include belief in the worth and dignity of each person, commitment to non-discrimination and equality, acceptance of the rights of persons to self determination and to confidentiality in their dealings with social workers, and recognition that social workers have multiple ethical

responsibilities to those served, to the profession, to employing institutions, to colleague professionals and to society at large.

The fundamental principle of equality of all human beings is set out in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is applied in everyday life, not least in the various aspects of interpersonal relations. For social workers it is a crucial concept for personal and professional attitudes. It is also the cornerstone for the all-important principle of justice, requiring serious consideration of just and unjust equality and inequality based on biological factors, on psychic, social, cultural and spiritual needs, and on individual contributions to the welfare of others. Once the principle of equality is accepted, it becomes impossible to discriminate against any person or group of persons. Non-discrimination is, in fact, based on the twin principles of equality and dignity.

Discrimination can be said to be the denial of the fundamental and universally accepted rights of all human beings to persons or groups of persons who are excluded. Discrimination takes various forms such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. New grounds for discrimination appear constantly in a changing world - sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS infection. The National Code of Ethics contains very strong standards in this area: social workers should not practice, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, colour, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion or mental or physical disability. In addition, there are at least two relevant statements of social workers societal - level responsibilities for equality:

- Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation and discrimination against any person, group or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, colour, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion or mental or physical disability;
- Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity, to promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the

expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.

These principles are also reflected also in the IFSW/IASSW document when it requires social workers to challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs (IFSW/IASSW, 2004, 4.2.1).

Value for life is a sine qua non for all human rights work. The worth of life, human and non-human existence, is the fountain-head for all other ideals and values that follow. In many countries social workers have to work with clients affected by these factors. They are also confronted with serious dilemmas in their practice relating to matters such as contraception, abortion, or their clients' management of terminal illness. The value and quality of life will be among the considerations which can assist them in their counselling activities.

The principle that "all human beings are born free" is contained in the first two articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The fundamental freedoms-the right to liberty, freedom from slavery and servitude, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence, and freedom of movement and residence-are set out in the next 19 articles. To be free and having the right to liberty presupposes that each human being has the freedom of choice in the conduct of his or her life. In parts of the world where freedom does not exist social worker pay a heavy price in oppression for pursuing their principles.

Various aspects of justice have to be taken in to consideration: the legal, judicial, social, economic and other aspects which constitute the basis of a society upholding the dignity of its members, and ensuring security and integrity of persons. Social workers have long promoted such principles and are conscious of the fact that human rights are best upheld by a just state. Impartiality in the administration

of justice is an important tool to safeguard the rights of the vulnerable members of society who make up the majority of social work clients, access to fundamental services in the areas of health and education, equal opportunities at the start, protection for disadvantaged persons or groups.

Solidarity is another fundamental intrinsic value which implies not only understanding and empathy towards humankind's pain and suffering, but also identifying and taking a stand with the sufferers and their cause. Social workers are expected not only to stand by people who are struggling, but also to express their solidarity in words and deeds in the face of any form of denial of people's political, civil, social, economic, cultural or spiritual rights. Solidarity may stretch beyond individuals to families, groups, communities, populations and entire racial or ethnic groups. The social work profession must identify itself with victims of violence, torture, expulsion or limitation of freedom anywhere in the world. Solidarity can likewise be extended in natural disasters, and is essential in the many tragedies arising from want, inequitable distribution of resources, social neglect and injustice. Poverty, hunger, starvation, homelessness and denial of the means of subsistence are perhaps some of the greatest violations of human rights that are not sufficiently recognized.

Social responsibility is action undertaken on behalf of sufferers and victims: standing for them, championing their cause and helping them. It could thus be said that social responsibility is the implementation corollary of solidarity. The principle of social responsibility is crucial for a profession such as social work.

Working with vulnerable groups

Children The goal of child welfare services is to provide an array of prevention and intervention services to children and families, particularly children who have been or are at risk of abuse or neglect; children with special medical or mental health needs; delinquent children; and children who do not have adult caregivers. The child welfare system is designed to support families and to protect children from harm.

The professional social worker in child welfare practice is expected to advocate for resources and system reforms that will improve services for children and their families, as appropriate, within the context of their job. Social workers in the field of child welfare should use a range of skills to advocate for and with clients for policies that promote the welfare of children and child protective services. Advocacy should be directed at improving administrative and public policies to support children and their families. Such advocacy should move toward the empowerment of children and their families in both urban and rural settings. System changes can be implemented by making changes in direct practice as well as by making changes in laws or policies. Emphasis on system reforms should seek to make child welfare services more responsive to children and their families, communities, and diverse cultures.

Social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate a working knowledge of current theory and practice in child welfare to include compliance with state and federal child welfare laws. Social workers in child welfare shall possess knowledge related to child development, parenting issues, family dynamics, and the community/local systems where the client resides.

Incidence, statistical data, legislative and protective measures, governmental programmes and the responses of the voluntary stand of the profession might be useful indicators for the study of the various aspects of children's life. Shortfalls in service provision, institutions and the standard of services for children might also be considered. Although many children are too young to stand up for their rights, older ones can do so. Social workers shall maintain adequate safeguards for privacy and confidentiality in their relationships with children. Respect for the client as a person and for his or her right to privacy underlies the social worker – client relationship. Except for federal, state, or local legal and other overriding requirements, the social worker will share information only with the informed and signed consent of the children, the family, or both. Although assurance of confidentiality enhances the relationship and the willingness of the

youth to develop and adhere to a case plan, the youth should be advised that there are circumstances in which confidentiality cannot be maintained.

Social workers shall assume an active role in contributing to the improvement and quality of the work environment, agency policies and practices with clients, and their own professional development. Social workers are responsible, in part, for their own empowerment as staff of the organizations in which they work.

Women

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by 175 countries. Social work encounters the fight between cultural tradition and women's rights in cases such as:

- providing counselling, support and alternatives to victims of domestic violence;
- introducing family planning practices or counselling women on reproductive options;
- poverty alleviation efforts that involve micro-enterprise projects for women to increase economic independence; efforts to introduce change in female circumcision practice (also labelled female genital mutilation).

In such cases, as social workers struggle to practice ethically, they need to contend with the tensions between individual rights and cultural sovereignty, between equality and non-discrimination and the continuation of cultural practices many would label harmful. Traditional attitudes embodied in law and/or custom, powerlessness, societal and religious prejudice against women, impediments in decision-making, low status and double workloads are some of the main symptoms of the disadvantages faced by women. Social workers should link up with woman's non-governmental organizations at the local, national and international levels.

Elderly persons

The main symptom faced by elderly persons is that of marginalization. By tradition, old age, except in some societies, is viewed negatively. The gradual withering away of the extended family in many countries has taken from old people the comfort of a recognized place within the family. Longevity as well as a shift from rural to urban life are underlying causes of the present crisis. Elderly persons' low self-esteem, their relative poverty, their acceptance of second-rate services in institutions and tensions with offspring, among other things, compound the crisis. On the one hand, the potential of the elderly population which is not a burden is not sufficiently recognized or utilized. Mass services are produced, as it were, for a homogeneous group in which elderly persons clearly are not represented. The main deficiency, however, lies in the stigmatization of age and the categorization of people by age alone. The social work profession must not save its role as simply responding to crises but as helping to build support systems to improve crises. Furthermore, social workers must try to enhance old people's self worth and knowledge of their rights. They should encourage the formation of self-help groups and cooperate with them for improvement and the self-affirmation of elderly persons.

Disabled Persons and Clients with substance use disorders

An improvement in early detection facilities for mental illness might go some way to diminishing mental disability. Superstition and ignorance concerning mental impairment in some societies are serious barriers to be overcome. A negative self-image is one of the symptoms common to many disabled persons. One of the most constructive ways to analyze disability might be to concentrate on the potential of disabled persons for integration into the mainstream of education, work and life as a whole. Advocacy for recognition of the rights of disabled persons as full members of the human family is an important role for social workers to undertake with their disabled clients. Social workers' faith in the inherent capacities of their disabled clients will help those clients get their optimum levels of performance, a balanced self-image and a place in society acceptable to themselves and to others.

As the largest allied health profession, social workers regularly encounter individuals, families, and communities faced with substance use disorders. Many social workers specialize in the alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs field, while other social workers provide services to individuals and their families in other specialty and no specialty settings in which substance use disorders are often integral to the clients' presenting problems. These settings include health and mental health centers, hospitals, child welfare and aging services, courts and correctional facilities, employee assistance programs, and private practice. There are many pathways to treatment for people with substance use disorders; however, the wide range of settings in which social workers practice allows the profession to address the needs of the whole person as he or she seeks to recover from a substance use disorders. There is a growing emphasis alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in the field on short-term, limited interventions. However, many individuals who are dependent on drugs need longer-term interventions that recognize that substance dependence (often called addiction) is a chronic, relapsing disorder that may not resolve for months or even years. Social work is in a unique position to influence the delivery of services to address the acute and chronic needs of this vulnerable population of individuals with substance use disorders and their families. By developing and applying evidence based approaches that incorporate established interventions and evolving technology based on emerging research findings, social workers can markedly improve treatment services for clients and their families. This approach to service delivery requires that social workers be knowledgeable about the processes of addiction and recovery and that they and their clients develop effective treatment plans together, using existing and emerging resources. Intervention for clients with substance use disorders is offered in a variety of settings, including substance use treatment and recovery programs, hospitals, community mental health centres, schools, courts, correctional facilities, and primary health care centres. Each setting can present a unique set of ethical demands for social workers. The social worker's primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of his or her client. Furthermore, social workers shall be familiar with a number of intervention strategies including counselling,

medication, care management, parenting instruction, vocational rehabilitation, and social and legal services. Social workers shall be knowledgeable about how these strategies are delivered in the context of client age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural background.

Prisoners and restricted persons

Poverty, anomy, a breakdown of traditional structures and support systems, and a consumer-oriented society are linked with criminality. The focus of the criminal justice system on general enforcement rather than on consideration of the specific individual might be counter productive for minor offences. Deficiencies can be found in detention/imprisonment facilities for the various categories of offenders. There is great potential for improvement in the prison systems of most countries to counter dehumanizing effects. There is also potential for reinforcing prisoners' bonds with their family's.

Probation has long been one of the areas of social work which requires specific knowledge and skills. Social work intervention during imprisonment prepares the groundwork for a possible rehabilitation and integration of prisoners into society. Work with political prisoners requires consistent advocacy, especially under authoritarian regimes, as well as provisions for the prisoners and their families. Where permitted, it can be of great importance in morale building.

Refugees

Causes for the flight of individuals, families or large segments of the population from their country of origin are easily detectable (war, persecution, conflict between national, ethnic, racial, political, religious factions). Symptoms such as total destitution, lack of status and loss of nationality are some of the tragic burdens that refugees have to bear. Deficiencies in reception facilities in countries of final asylum are possibly unavoidable. There appears to be a growing lack of political will to admit refugees on the part of countries of first asylum and countries of intended final destination. There may be some potential for preventive, economic and other action in countries of origin, which could possibly help to ease tensions and thus avoid the exodus of nationals in search of refuge and asylum elsewhere. In

campes, in the case of mass arrivals, social workers can attempt to alleviate immediate tensions through counselling in cooperation with earlier arrivals or members of the present group. Their action is also vital in ensuring effective legal advice and in participating in relief management and humane camp administration. Social workers should be well versed in such skills and collaborate with relief and other agencies on an interdisciplinary basis.

Migrants

Among the main causes of migration are unfavourable conditions and surplus labour in the country of origin, and a lack of unskilled labour in the generally more developed country of settlement. Migrants usually, though not always, move in order to improve their social and economic position. However, there also exist religious, political and ethnic causes of migration. Shortfalls may concern, among other things, unsatisfactory reception facilities, housing, pay and social security in the receiving country. Exploitation and abuse can be severe. Social discrimination and racism turn migrants into second-class citizens. The potential of the population and of migrants themselves to change attitudes and to defeat a widespread bias against migrants is real but requires time and constant advocacy and action. Apart from definite counselling roles for social workers in countries of emigration and immigration, their intervention is also required for internal migrations. The strategies for intervention in both cases are similar. Social workers must challenge discriminatory treatment of migrants and acquaint them with their rights. They can put their skills at the disposal of migrants' associations and self-help groups if requested by them.

If defined by a commitment to human rights and social justice, international social work involves challenging oppression at the individual, community, regional, national and international levels, guided by a clear vision of a more equitable global society. (Haug E., 2005, 133) International social work includes any social work activity anywhere in the world, directed toward global social justice and human rights, in which local practice is dialectically linked to the global context.

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