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PROFESSIONAL
SOCIAL WORK
EDUCATION
EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Ilango Ponnuswami
Abraham P. Francis

Professional Social Work Education
Emerging Perspectives

Professional Social Work Education

Emerging Perspectives

Edited by

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**Introduction:
Professional Social Work Education—
Emerging Perspectives**

—Ilango Ponnuswami and Abraham P. Francis

Professional social work education began in India as early as 1936 and the profession has survived and grown during the past more than seven decades. The profession is celebrating its Platinum Jubilee this year. The number of social work schools and departments offering social work education in colleges and universities has been grown rather exponentially resulting in healthy and unhealthy trends of late. Social work education in the country, being a part of the traditional arts and science stream of higher education, is faced with innumerable challenges. There are no regulatory mechanisms and quality assurance strategies in place due to the absence of a national council and proper standardization and accreditation of institutions offering social work education. The noble helping profession of social work is at the crossroads in India right now, having to look back and take stock of what all have been accomplished so far, understand the current realities and challenges and decide future directions taking into consideration, the various opportunities and threats.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DILEMMA

The ethical and moral foundations of the profession and its priorities seem to be challenged by the tirades of market driven demands. With the tremendous pressure from market forces,

the profession has been moving away from the original 'welfare' approach to more of a 'managerial' approach these days. The origin of social work as a profession in India, as elsewhere, had been rooted in a philanthropic movements and charitable activities. Over the years, increasing professionalization and specialization lead to distinct difference between voluntary social work and professional social work with proper university level education. Until the advent of the new economic policy and the resulting tirades of powerful market forces and demands, professional social work education and practice in the country had a welfare orientation. But, with liberalization, privatization and globalization, a subtle paradigm shift has occurred and the so-called helping profession started leaning more or rather heavily on a managerial approach. During the recent decades, there has been a strong inclination among social workers to get into human resource 'management'. At this juncture, there seems to be a philosophical, or may be even moral/ethical dilemma in the profession as to whether the traditional welfare oriented functions of social workers should be retained with the interests of the poor, needy, marginalized or alienated people in mind or the profession should just cater to the demands of the market forces and demands and re-invent itself. But, then we have a serious problem or rather, an identity crisis of the profession. Social work education in the country has been seriously affected by this philosophical dilemma and social work educators seem to be feeling helpless victims of circumstances.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I have attempted a SWOT Analysis of social work education across the country. There may be wide variations in terms of the quality of social work education offered by institutions in different regions. The points that I make need not be taken as generalizations or sweeping statements. But, by and large these observations and insights may be true with regard to a vast majority of social work schools or departments in colleges and universities.

THE STRENGTHS

Undoubtedly, the mushrooming and exponential growth of

institutions offering social work education in different regions of the country is by itself valid evidence to the fact that the profession of social work has survived and even with all the competition around, it has come a long way. Professional social workers have occupied the higher echelons of governance and administration in almost all major sectors. Another strong point is that the number of trained and qualified social work professionals has increased manifold and surely, there will be hundreds of thousands of social workers. This huge size of professional social work fraternity is certainly a strength. Some social workers are leading large scale social movements even nation-wide movements for human rights, environmental justice, social upliftment, social justice for marginalized and socially excluded groups. Prominent NGOs are being lead by professionally trained social workers. Several social work graduates have entered into civil service and rendering their services in various capacities at various levels. Some social work professors have held the position of Vice-Chancellors of Universities and one professor even provided leadership to the University Grants Commission as its Chairperson. In the field of HIV / AIDS, professional social workers have carved a niche for themselves by making their presence felt and because of their valuable contributions by way of services, psycho-social interventions, research, consultancy etc. Almost all Family Counselling Centres and De-Addiction Centres functioning with grants-in-aid from the CSWB have professional social workers as essential staff. Premier institutions like NIMHANS have trained professional social workers at an advanced level to work in the field of mental health. They have also made significant contributions to psychosocial rehabilitation, disaster management, school mental health, life skills education, so on and so forth.

WEAKNESSES

One of the major weaknesses of professional social work education in India is the serious lack of uniformity and standardized curriculum all over the country, in fact, even within states, there is a lack of uniformity with university

curriculum being different from the syllabi of autonomous colleges. While there is a need to have some flexibility in order to encourage innovations and best practices, there is a need to maintain at least some minimum standards. Then, there is too much of classroom orientation with much of the teaching and learning happening within the confines of the classrooms. Even though we have concurrent field work, there is hardly any field-based supervision and guidance taking place with all the multi-tasking teachers have to do in the present higher education scenario. Another problem is the lack of clinical orientation in our field practicum. The reason I am saying this is because much of what our trainees do in the field work agencies or in the communities seems to be very general and routine 'social service' type activities without any serious 'clinical' or 'interventionist' approach. There are some serious problems with student intake. We are forced to follow the state government guidelines for admissions to various post graduate programmes of study. We conduct the so called 'entrance tests' which merely test the knowledge of the prospective students and not really his/her aptitude, value system and philosophy of life which are far more important for social work training. Then, there are innumerable problems with pedagogy since social work educators have allowed themselves to be absorbed by the societal expectations or even the expectations of the students. They go about teaching social work subjects like teaching languages, history or economics. There is almost no innovation in the teaching-learning methodologies used. The issue of social work teachers without practice experience is rather intriguing since even our government rules and institutional policies do not encourage simultaneous practice by teachers. These days, with mushrooming of self-financing social work colleges all over, we find a large number of poor quality and inexperienced faculty being recruited for social work teaching positions. With the hustle and bustle of academic environment, there is a serious lack of interaction of faculty and students with agencies and there are innumerable problems in field work training also. Problems with conventional examination system, unique problems of being a

part of arts and science stream, UGC requirements, lack of regulatory mechanism and absence of accreditation, lack of proper supervision and monitoring of social work programmes and lack of documentation of best practices and innovations are some of the other serious problems relating to social work education.

OPPORTUNITIES

Liberalization, privatization and globalization have brought some benefits to the economy of India. However, the neo-liberal market driven economy has led to increasing psychosocial problems, life-style related health problems, growing ecological concerns and to sum it all, growing social justice / human rights concerns. In the recent times, we have been witnessing civil society becoming more active all over the nation. Industries are still grappling with the lofty ideals of Corporate Social Responsibility. Quite a few qualified social workers are emerging as Whistleblowers (RTI Activists) and challenging the macro-level problems with a rights-based approach. Increasing importance is being given to research and publications by professional social workers. Growing sector of service industries keeps opening newer avenues for employment for social workers. Rapid urbanization and resulting problems, displacement of populations and resulting problems, more serious issues such as care of the elderly and terminal care have broadened the scope of employment of social work professionals. On the other hand, Proactive Social Work (Life Skills Education, Disaster Preparedness etc) is the trend which is being emphasized these days since prevention is better than cure. The socio-political transition which the country is going through at the moment throws open even a greater challenge of entering into active politics for social workers. International social work is another recent trend globally and India is no exception. Due to the 'shrinking of the universe', social work profession, like many other, also needs to become 'trans-national' and this has opened a whole new area for the active engagement of professional social workers. All these trends have created an ever-increasing demand for professionally

trained social workers. If the social work educators and administrators are sensitive, they can capitalize on these enormous potential and cater to the needs of not just to one society but to the international community as well.

THREATS

Even though there are seemingly endless opportunities, there are also some very potential threats for the profession of social work both from within and from without. Newer but overlapping professions have emerged and they are here to stay. Then there is stiff competition from other helping professions. One of the biggest threats to the profession is the serious lack of evidence-based practice, evidence-based research and lack of proper and sufficient documentation which are absolutely essential for any profession to be recognized as 'socially relevant' and useful to the society by policy makers and planners. Absence of a 'truly national' professional body has created a precarious situation where the social work profession has become 'voiceless' in India. Absence of a council, licensing and accreditation have created serious doubts in the minds of policy makers concerning the 'credibility' of this so called 'profession'. Another challenge is the cutting down of welfare funding by governments and the trend of 'outsourcing' everything that has lead to scarcity of job positions in the government sector for social workers. The rapid 'massification' of social work education in the country has lead to drastic decline in the quality of professionals and their services which has further lead to lowering of the public image of the profession. There are serious conflicts of interests, even within the profession like for example, the social workers with Human Resource Management specialization working for the market driven corporate forces and others with specialization in Community Development trying to serve the interests of the very same people marginalized by the corporate industrial houses. Blurring of professional domains of social work and related professions have further worsened the situation. Hence, there is a constant need to innovate and establish best practices of social work education.

CONCLUSION

Social work educators have been living in oblivion and functioning from their 'ivory towers' far too long and time has come for them to wake up, understand the realities and do something to enhance not just the quality of the profession but also the public image and social status enjoyed by the professionals. Even though, a lot of things need to be done in the realms of social work research and social work practice / extension, the starting point has to be from the social work education because the future of the profession lies in the hands of the present generation of social work trainees and even the generations to follow. If social work educators take some positive steps with a pro-active and futuristic mindset, we can be absolutely sure that the profession of social work in India will certainly have a bright future.