A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON THE ROLE OF MICRO-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE CALLING FOR ITS APPLICATION IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a personal reflection on social work and what constitutes a social worker, with special reference to Sri Lanka. Drawing from global literature, it observes that the field of social work has evolved to become a package of knowledge, skills, competencies, code of ethics, and accreditation standards. Therefore, qualified social workers today possess a set of practical as well as academic competencies that is designed to address issues not only at the macro and mezzo level, but also at the individual and family levels. The paper argues that Sri Lanka has yet to adopt a multi-faceted social work approach like this, and explores the possibility of enhancing the institutional capacity of the National Institute for Social Development (the country's only institute of higher education that offers professional social work education) to deliver such approach.

Keywords: Social Work, Higher Education, National Institute for Social Development, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, since its beginning in the early twentieth century, social work has developed as a professional practice and an academic discipline. It now possesses a comprehensive package of knowledge, skills, competencies, code of ethics and accreditation standards.

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Hence its purview, though not categorically concrete, is demarcated adequately for training professional practitioners. The key purpose of social work action entertained remedial and preventive perspectives until about the 1970s and since then, with the emergence of ideas of Social Development it has embraced developmental perspectives as well, setting social development as an ultimate goal to be achieved.

The definition of social work itself sets parameters encouraging social workers to be firmly committed to helping people move out of crises or dysfunctional situations in their lives. The role of social worker is not to carry them but to help them become empowered and be the masters of their own change towards progress. As a helping profession, social work is strongly value-based but social workers are not emotional sympathizers. They are emotionally intelligent professionals (Howe 2008) capable of reaching correct and professional decisions on how to help persons deal with their issues without being unwarranted intruders into their world.

This piece of work, a personal narrative, elaborates our understanding of what and who constitute modern professional social work and worker, and presents the opinion that we now badly need professional social work practice in our country, Sri Lanka. We promote the burning need of establishing professional social work education in the country with an intensive, probably clinical or casework oriented perspective. It is because we now need a competent worker who can practice the profession at the individual and family levels. We also present the opinion that the National Institute of Social Development, the only higher education institute in the country offering social work education and training, currently focusing predominantly on community and social development perspectives of social work, possesses the capacity to do it if it is further strengthened with more resources and mandate. The extremely important requirement of absorbing it into the country's university system is also emphasized.

SOCIAL WORK AND CHANGE

Social work helps move people forward from the situations of their dysfunctional conditions, and enables them to regain the change they want. Turner (1996) says that "people are seeking help because of dysfunction, change or desire for a greater life and self" (p. 20). Once they are enabled to move, they themselves start enthusiastically moving ahead because, as Tuner continues to say, "most people do not consciously start a journey of personal growth unless the pain of not growing is greater than the pain of growing" (Ibid). When we examine the mission statements of social workers' associations of different countries all around the world, we find that helping people moving forward for a change from the conditions of dysfunctional to functional, is the key objective of all of them albeit enveloped and presented in different nomenclatures. With help, once the journey towards change is started it is virtually impossible to return, and the journey becomes a constant ongoing process of change.

SOCIAL WORK DOMAIN AND CLIENTS

The world of people, of course, is social work's domain. If the world we work happens to be complicated and turbulent, the need to make sense and know our way around it is even more urgent. Social workers practice in such a world….. They deal with people in need and under stress. They operate in environments where there is inequality and injustice, power, money and opportunities are unfairly distributed (Howe 2009, p. 2).

Social workers work with everyone needing their service, but particularly engage with

those who are disadvantaged in society. Women suffering quietly from many forms of discrimination, and domestic and other types of violence; abused, abandoned and sexually victimized children, people with various types of disability, youth needing help to escape unemployment and then from the pathway to poverty and exclusion, all those who are addicted to alcohol and other types of drugs; elderly living in socio-economically insecure and undignified conditions, the homeless etc. are actually a few to mention from a long list of social work clients. We work with them at the individual and family levels which constitutes our micro-level work in the community. For those of us who practice social work in group and community work contexts, some specific social groups (for example groups of single mothers and unemployed youth) and some specific communities (for example ethnic minorities and indigenous communities) become clients of our mezzo level work. Whereas some social workers engage in research, program planning and policy analysis and development, some others practice the profession in the context of social development, and they all engage in macro level work. However, social development seems to be contextually both macro and micro level practice as some promote it as a goal as well as a strategy of social work practice (Midgley 1995 and 2010). Some discuss and endorse international social work as a field of contemporary social work practice with seemingly community development goals (Cox 2006; Pawar and Cox 2010).

The commonality of the engagement and commitment is that everyone is however on a common mission;

> As social workers, (social work) educators, community workers and social development practitioners, we are working every day with lives at its extremes, witnessing the highs

and lows of human capabilities and behavior. We recognize that, for many people, the opportunities for social mobility and full realization of their potentials are beyond their own efforts; family inheritance and place of birth (be it locality, community or country) and access to resources are determining factors for many. We are also aware that being born into some communities makes self-improvement personally challenging and immensely difficult. We are, therefore, realistic about social limitations whilst optimistic about human potential" (IFSW n.d.).

WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?

Payne (2005) says that

> at this moment, somewhere in the world, "clients" are struggling into an office to meet with a "social worker", or worker is visiting the client's home, works with clients groups, in a community work or works in an agency setting doing administration, developing policy or doing research. People assume that these social workers are doing "something" useful. In most societies, this something called "social work" goes on" (p. 5).

Social work is a "helping profession", not merely a "charity work". Social work, as the most comprehensive of human service occupations, is recognized as the profession that centers its attention on helping people improve their social functioning. It helps people strengthen their interaction with various aspects of their world, from family to community. It is also committed to changing factors in the society that diminish the quality of life for all people, especially for those persons who are most vulnerable to social problems (Morales et al 2010).

Social work has however been hard to

define. Reaching a formal definition of this strongly value-based profession has been a prolonged deliberation. Different dictionary definitions treat social work as a set of skills; a job title; or even an activity that might be performed by volunteers. None of these dictionary definitions treat social work as a profession with extensive academic and practice skills required for the work.

The first effort to develop a formal definition of social work, though not comprehensive, was in 1958, by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) of the United States of America. It identifies three main goals of the profession so that social work is to: (1) assist individuals and groups to identify and resolve or minimize problems arising out of disequilibrium between themselves and their environment; (2) identify potential areas of disequilibrium between individuals or groups and the environment in order to prevent the occurrence of disequilibrium; and, (3) seek out, identify and strengthen the maximum potential of individuals, groups and communities (as quoted by Morales et al 2010). During the 1980s, NASW again came up with a one sentence definition of social work "as a professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favourable to that goal" (as quoted by Morales et al 2010). This received widespread acceptance across the world for some time but soon was attacked by social workers who pointed out its failure to recognise the role of social work in promoting social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment of people based on the key values and principles of the profession.

This assertion encouraged a lengthy discussion among social workers of different countries for years. As a result, in 2015 the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) agreed upon a universal definition, which says that;

> 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" (IFSW n.d.).

Though it is universal, in recognition of the need for appropriately localizing (or indigenizing as some say) the practice of social work profession, IASSW and IFSW even leave room for amplifications of this definition as required by national conditions. This enables progressive social workers to comfortably embark on their quest for localized alternatives of helping when they confront situations that require frameworks for interpretations and assessments beyond the framework of Western worldviews.

ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers who are sometimes nicknamed as "Street Bureaucrats" (Ife 1996), bear a designation that has been constantly used in many different generic meanings in our society. What exactly it is and whom we call social workers is still confused in the country. Some call charity workers, volunteers, members of various benevolent societies, philanthropists, members of community organizations, NGOs, religious institutions etc. social workers. We do not want to be unfair to any of these "altruists". They are contributing significantly to the community and receive recognition and appreciation for it. Yet we must also concede

that their role and the activities they carry out do not fall under the purview of the definition of professional social work and social worker.
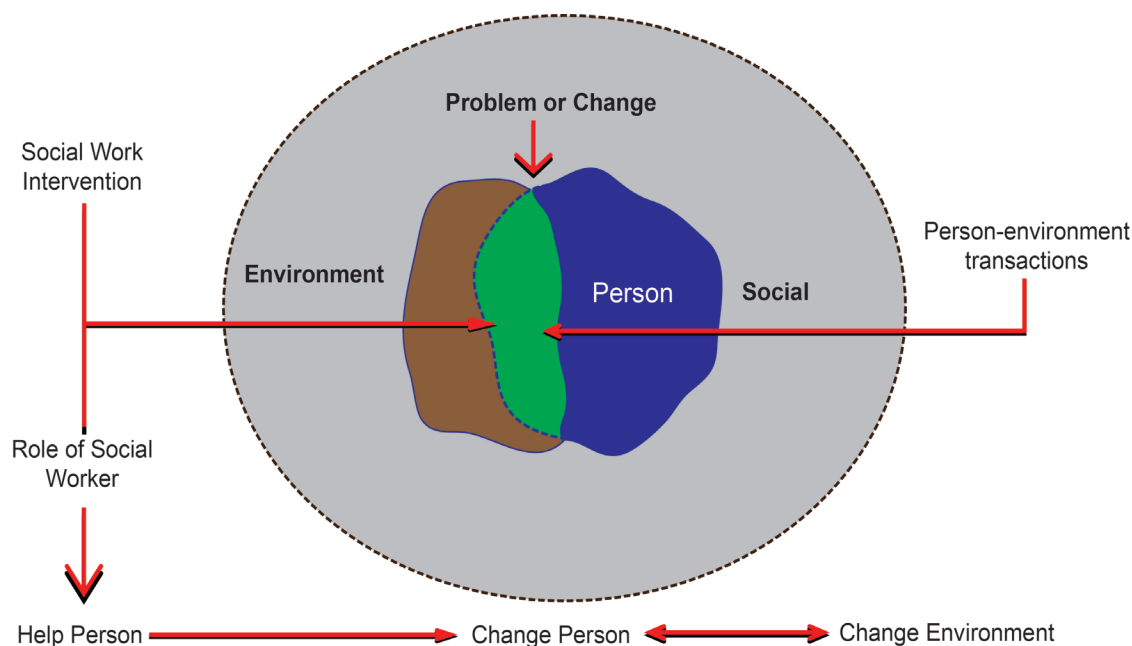
Social work is an academic discipline of higher educational level as well as a professional activity which requires a proven level of competency that has to be acquired through thorough methodological training. The professional social worker is thus equipped with scientific academic knowledge and professional practice skills. Again, social work is a strongly value-based profession and is also driven by a specific set of principles. Therefore, social workers are essentially required to adhere to the values and principles of the profession, and are bound to function within a specific framework of a standard code of conduct too (Reamer 2013). As such, the professional social worker is a package of competency in formal knowledge and practice skills.

Once they acquire accredited competency and commit to the profession's values and principles, social workers are mandated to pursue the goals of: (1) active involvement in situations of personal distress and crisis working with individuals towards the realization of their intellectual, physical and emotional potential; (2) working to address the barriers, inequities and injustices in society working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources; (3) promoting respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and religions amongst different ethnic groups and societies; and, (4) involvement in research, policy development and analysis and consultancy. Social workers are thus not simply charity workers or community volunteers who enter the client's world without any professional competency, affiliation and statutory mandate (Definition of Social Work n.d.).

Another important aspect of social work practice is that it is mostly interdisciplinary in nature. The factors we deal with are perhaps complex so that a clear assessment requires integrating knowledge and expertise from other disciplines as well. We carefully evaluate and use knowledge from other disciplines (belonging to the Social Sciences,

Interface between person and environment

Source: Morales et al 2010

Humanities and Biological Sciences) as well as from other professions (Psychiatry, Nursing, Law, Public Health, Social Administration and Public Policy).

Professional social workers practice at the interface, the focal point for action between people and their psycho-social environment. They employ their expertise in a systematic process of intervention. It includes: (1) comprehensive identification of the disequilibrium between the person/s and environment (2) thorough assessment of the gravity of the existing condition or problem and identification of what needs to be changed or improved; (3) formulation of intervention strategy / action plan; (4) implementation of the action plan; (5) monitoring and evaluation of the direction towards achieving set goals/objectives; and (6) reassessment of the outcome, and conclusion of withdrawal upon satisfactory completion of the work or referring the client to other services or bringing other services into the existing work and continuing it in the best interest of the client.

Comprehensive identification of the focal point where the intervention has to be carried out is important because, even though workers operate at the boundary between people and their environment, they are not prepared to deal with all boundary matters. Rather, they address those matters that are identified as contributing to the problematic condition of each individual and family. They only temporarily enter the lives of their clients to help them improve their transactions with important elements of their environment. And also social workers always operate not only within the framework of their scientific knowledge and skill, but in professional consideration of the strong values, principles and code of conduct of the profession that they are essentially required to adhere to when they enter to the clients' world. Once they enter they help the client move out of

the point at which they are dysfunctional in their psycho-social environment, and enable them to regain the functional capacity to deal with the change they want. Turner (1996) says that "people are seeking help because of dysfunction, change or desire for a greater life and self" (p. 20). Once they are enabled to move, they themselves start enthusiastically moving ahead because as Tuner continues to say, "most people do not consciously start a journey of personal growth unless the pain of not growing is greater than pain of growing" (Ibid), and with help, once the journey for change is started it is virtually impossible to reverse it and it becomes a constant ongoing process of change. Social worker exits the client world once the process of change has been facilitated.

SITUATION IN SRI LANKA

Applying Western social work techniques to deal with personal and social issues at the individual and family levels has received somewhat ambiguous reception across many non-western communities. Even in Sri Lankan society there seems to be substantial resistance existing for the social work profession to be accepted as an effective strategy of treatment for a range of psycho-social issues at the individual level.

Social work education and practice in our country has evolved with a predominant focus on social and welfare service paradigms in social work. Currently, while social welfare service focus still remains to some extent, it has also moved towards community and social development as a goal to be achieved. This is in a sense commendable. It permits an application of a multi-faceted paradigm to social work practice while at the same time incorporating national socio-cultural parameters into the training and practice framework. However, our opinion is that this setting needs a little more rethinking.

Adopting a social development approach is justified by the trend of expanding social

work education and practice with social development as an ultimate goal of macro social work practice even in many Western countries. In non-Western socio-cultural contexts, it permits localization, or rather indigenization, of social work as applicable to national socio-cultural realities. Some focus on social development with an international social work perspective. Overall, the Sri Lankan attempt is actually praiseworthy as it keeps in touch with new global trends in social work education and practice. Nevertheless, we become skeptics on the question as to whether there is something missing in our overall approach to social development in the country. Have we somehow neglected the growing global trend of promoting and facilitating social work practice as an effective way of helping increasing numbers of dysfunctional individuals and families in their own domain?

Unlike many other human service professions, modern professional social work is well equipped with knowledge and skills to help people at the individual and family levels to realize their potential and use it for their own welfare and wellbeing. Talking about individual and family related complex issues within group or community contexts, and utilizing techniques developed elsewhere to such a contextual practice have proven somewhat ineffective in many instances. It was already pointed out earlier that one broad purpose of social work is to assist individuals and families to identify and resolve or minimize problems arising out of "disequilibrium" between themselves and their environment where the person is involved in a complex web of relationships. Very often, changes at the interface of the person-environment interaction domain, due to a range of many external factors, sometimes originating even beyond the boundaries of all main and sub socio-cultural systems that the person is involved in, can cause such imbalances. They need some

way of personalized help to regain their lost balance and become normal functional members of the society.

With rapid social change, Sri Lanka needs professional social work knowledge and skills for treating equally rapidly increasing social and personal issues at the individual and family levels. Not only in the context of a rapidly changing society, points of imbalances at the interface of person - environment interaction can also happen at times such as life and family cycle changes, relationship breakdowns, loss of loved-ones, loss of livelihoods, sudden natural disasters, civil conflicts, wars, etc. This is but a few of a long list of possible events that could disturb the smooth function of the individual. The critical need of professional social work intervention at the individual and family levels was eloquently reiterated by a group of concerned relief professionals in the aftermath of the Tsunami disaster. Similarly, those who have been involved in crisis relief, recovery, social reconciliation and reconstruction programs after the end of a decades long civil war in the country are still continuously voicing their concern about the country's dearth of professional social workers who can perform the extremely important outreach role that would help trauma affected individuals and families to become re-integrated into the social system. Our focus is very much on group and community context actions but anecdotal evidence clearly demonstrates that many thousands of trauma affected individuals and families are still neglected and left in the dark without face-to-face support mechanisms.

NISD INTO UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Practice-oriented professional social work education is still not established in our university system, except for a few ad-hoc trainings in the name of social work here and there producing community development workers. The National Institute of Social

Development (NISD) is the only higher education institute in the country offering professional social work education. The NISD primarily aims to produce professional social workers to service the social welfare system and promote social development. For years now since its inception, as a statutory body, it has been functioning under the purview of the ministries of Social Empowerment and Welfare.

The experience is that the NISD is considerably under-resourced. It seems to have however escaped the hassles of bureaucratic red-tapes, which had affected the full effectiveness of its functions for years, with the recent overtaking of executive administration by social work professionals. The valuable standalone contribution of the NISD to the field of social work in Sri Lanka with a distinct local perspective has been well described and recognized (Chandraratna 2008; Ranaweera n.d.). However, at the same time, its lack of focus on individual and family level practice training can be highlighted as a drawback. If the Institute is strengthened with more resources and required mandate as a higher education institute within the country's University system, our opinion is that it will be well equipped with the capacity to expand its current services with a much more comprehensive and holistic package of professional social work education and training. If armed with this infrastructure, the NISD will be able to produce social work practitioners who can professionally perform an active role at all individual, family, group, community and societal levels that our country currently desperately needs. Overall, the NISD product will possess competent practice skills:

• to deal with the social complexities and issues triggered by rapid socio-economic transitions (this includes one-to-one basis response too, for example, generic counseling, casework and case

management, emergency relief and crisis management etc.)

• to contribute towards post-war social reconstruction and reconciliation programs

• to reach out to grassroots communities as facilitators and help individuals and families through capacity development and empowerment activities to use their own human resources, sometimes with the support of external development assistance programs (for example Samurdhi), for their own development

• to motivate individuals and families to look for personal prosperity without continuing to depend on the welfare state mentality and dismantle the decades-long attitude that state sponsored welfare service is the sole answer to personal / social problems and needs; changing the attitude towards personal progress from 'dependency model' to 'active model'

• to equip members of multi-disciplinary teams with employability skills who are involved in grassroots development (community level) to become multi-skilled, and be involved in tasks outside their comfort zone; and,

• to be continuously involved in policy dialogues in the country, especially social policy, and contribute to evolving social policy in line with and responding to new developments in national as well as international contexts

The NISD is still to be absorbed into the Sri Lankan university system, but discussion on its critical need has already started. If absorbed, the NISD would be enabled to readily access to more physical resources and other benefits such as more facilities to high quality staff training, research and development, more access to international resources including professional affiliations

and new developments in the field, etc. It will also become the authority of professional social work education and training in the country, enabling regular monitoring of the standards of professional social work in Sri Lanka that would ensure high quality service delivery to those in need. However, the pace of progress down this path has unfortunately been a matter of disappointment among many.

CONCLUSION

Modern social work is not an institutionalized or professionalized charity though it originated from the charities or benevolent societies of good hearted volunteers, especially in the early years of the twentieth century in the West. The evolution of social work as a professional practice and an academic discipline has produced varying definitions overtime because of the debate around the central purpose and strong value base of the profession. It now possesses a comprehensive package of knowledge and skills, a strong value base as a helping profession and a code of ethics which ensures firm commitment of the practitioner to the central purpose of the profession. The key purpose of social work action employed remedial and preventive perspectives until about the 1970s and since then, with the emergence of ideas of social development, it has embraced developmental perspectives as well, setting social development as an ultimate goal to be achieved.

Social work helps move people forward from situations of dysfunctional conditions and enables them to facilitate the positive change they want. The mission statements of social workers' associations of different countries all around the world demonstrate that helping people moving forward for a change from the conditions of being dysfunctional to functional is the key objective of all of them. Once equipped with academic knowledge and professional practice skills, professional

social workers practice at the interface, the focal point for action, between people and their psycho-social environment. They employ their expertise in a systematic process of intervention through comprehensive identification of the disequilibrium between the person/s and environment; assessment of the gravity of the existing condition or problem and identification of what needs to be changed or improved; formulation of intervention strategy / action plan; implementation of the action plan; monitoring and evaluation of the direction towards achieving set goals/objectives; and, reassessment of the outcome, and conclusion of withdrawal upon satisfactory completion of the work or referring the client to other services or bringing other services into the existing work and continuing it in the best interest of the client. This process of intervention at the individual or family level employs [sometimes intensive] face-to-face work arrangements, and the skilled practitioner ensures the client's active participation throughout the intervention process. Planning the entire process requires a substantial level of professional expertise from the practitioner to work at the individual level.

Social work education and practice in Sri Lanka has evolved with a predominant focus on social and welfare services, and currently, while social service focus still remains to some extent, it has moved to community and social development as a goal to be achieved. However, with rapid social change, Sri Lanka needs professional social work knowledge and skills for treating equally rapidly increasing social and personal issues at the individual and family levels. The country's dearth of professional social workers who can play an active role helping individuals and families in situations of distress has been highlighted in numerous instances.

Practice-oriented professional social work

education is still not established in our university system. The National Institute of Social Development is the only higher education institute in the country offering professional social work education and training. The experience is that the NISD is considerably under-resourced, but if the Institute is strengthened in terms of more resources and required mandate, it will be very well placed to produce social workers who can professionally practice at all individual, family, group, community and societal levels that our country currently desperately needs. The NISD needs to be absorbed into the country's university system enabling it to readily access more physical resources and knowledge on new developments and updates in the field.

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