

Challenges and Opportunities to the Profession of Social Work in Pakistan: A Review



Sajjad Hussain *

Sumera Farid †

Amir Alam ‡

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Abstract: *Social work education at the postgraduate level is faced with various academic and non-academic issues. Despite the compatibility of these methods with our culture, the paucity of local research and knowledge related to our community which are necessary for the uplift of the profession is impacting its progress. So far, Pakistan has no national and provincial council of social workers that could link them with the international social workers' Federation whereby it could build their professional competence and capacity. This gap between theory and practice can be filled by developing a link between the two domains. Lack of public awareness regarding the field and the deteriorating role of inadequately trained field supervisors working for different organizations are other contributing factors. The study suggests that professional social workers should be inducted into all the social welfare organizations so that the new undergraduate students could be interested in taking admissions in BS social work degree.*

Key Words: Social Work, Profession, Academic, Theory, Associations

Introduction

Social Work is a leading academic discipline as well as a profession which enables individuals, groups and communities to lead a standard life (British Association of Social Workers, 2021). In addition, it also aims the uplift of the marginalized segment of society by providing professional services which include protection of human rights, fulfilment of basic needs and access to justice (Shah, Rauf and Farooq 2022). Hence, due to its multi-faceted roles, the social work profession is gaining importance in contemporary society. According to Ali and Rafi (2019), some social workers conduct research, advocate for the provision of quality services and are working at the planning and policy formulation level. Some of these professionals specialize in serving a particular segment of society. They work locally and globally but they are not exposed to the outside world so that they may equip

themselves with modern knowledge and techniques of the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000).

After the independence of Pakistan, there was a movement of millions of people from neighbouring countries e.g. India. This influx of refugees from India resulted in so many problems for the new state of Pakistan (Asia Society, 2023). In addition, there was a lack of resources for addressing the socio-economic problems of the newly established state. As a result, the UN advisors visited Karachi and after necessary deliberations, they concluded that there was a dire need for training for volunteers as well as for those who were working in the field of social welfare (Azam & Mazid, 2022). Resultantly, professional social work was started as a short-term course on social services in Karachi. In that training, both men and women volunteers were trained. Consequently, the University

* Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand, Chakdara, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

‡ Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Warai Campus, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

of Punjab took the lead to establish the first Social Work department on campus in 1954 at Lahore. The department started providing professional pieces of training to aspiring social work practitioners. In 1961, the University of Karachi launched another department to fulfil the growing demand for experts in social work (Khalid, 2020).

Although social work departments in Pakistan have been established at universities long before, still this academic discipline is faced with problems and is not yet recognized as a profession and it is struggling for its identity. Social work is still considered a charitable activity and is merely limited to the provision of assistance to needy people. The people are unaware of the fact that social work like other disciplines is founded on scientific knowledge and requires specific skills (Riaz, 2018).

Lack of knowledge and theoretical base, curriculum and fieldwork issues, lack of local literature, lack of job facilities, and unavailability of professional pieces of training and refresher courses (Shah, 2020) are the responsible factors for it. At the professional level, a national council that can regulate the academics and professional practice of social work does not exist. Moreover, those social workers who are delivering services at government departments lack a service structure which is the main source of their worries and a hurdle in their career development (Shah, 2018).

In Pakistan, like a universal phenomenon, virtually all professionals have got their respective accreditation councils. Unfortunately, the social work profession has no such council either on a national level or on a provincial level. Though each province has its own provincial directorate of social welfare which oversees the welfare services of the social welfare agencies. However, they have all been unable to keep an identical standard of social work. There is a huge gap between social work philosophy and what is rendered by these welfare agencies. Though a number of committees and professional social workers have recommended the establishment of national and international councils of social workers, however, no solid and practical steps have been taken to materialize this dream.

This study aims to identify gaps in the available literature regarding the obstacles to promotion of the social work education and professional practice in Pakistan.

Objectives of the study

This study has been carried out with the following objectives:

- To understand various problems faced by social work education at the universities level in Pakistan
- To identify the issues and constraints in the establishment and development of professional social work in Pakistan
- To examine the gaps in the existing literature regarding social work education and the profession

Methodology of the Study

This is a review study where published books, research papers, newspapers and online sources are reviewed. In addition, to identify gaps in the available studies being conducted on the same topic so far.

Literature review

Social Work Practice in Pakistan

The term "Social Work" has been defined by different social scientists in their own way. According to Zastrow & Hessenauer (2022), It supports individuals, groups and communities to help solve their problems by developing their capabilities so that they function effectively in society. According to Ioakimidis & Sookraj (2021), social work aims to promote social change, empower the distressed sections of society and make sure that there are fewer social problems in society. Moreover, the focus of this profession is on the restoration of impaired capacity and provision of support to marginalized persons, and the prevention of social and physical disabilities (Turner, 2006).

These practices are not the same throughout the world. However, there are some common problems which clearly signify its practice in those communities. Although professional social work is gaining recognition in traditional societies, still it is faced with identity issues (Pawar, 2014).

Every profession has created knowledge and methods that its members use to help those in need (Hugman, 2009). Social work practices entail using social work principles, strategies, and values to assist clients or client groups in functioning successfully in society (NASW, 2017).

Social work is becoming more popular because of the rising number of social, economic, biological,

and psychological issues in contemporary society, not just in capitalist cultures but also in socialist nations. Additionally, it is beginning to emerge gradually in undeveloped nations (Azam & Mazid, 2022). Despite claims to the contrary, even today social work is not being recognized as a legitimate occupation on a global scale. Efforts like those focused on the rise of social work as a field of study and the development of a uniform curriculum for educational institutions are contributing to the recognition of social work as an organized profession (Nikku, 2014).

Providing assistance to target communities and emancipating vulnerable persons are the goals of the practice-based profession of social work (Nash, 2003). Like all professions, social work has a set of ethical standards. This line of work supports giving social aid to all segments of society, regardless of class, creed, or affiliation. Additionally, those in this profession use the most recent knowledge, abilities, and values to help both men and women who are in trouble. In this regard, the practice of social work necessitates an understanding of human behaviour in order to provide clients with appropriate services (NASW, 2022).

Similar to other professions around the world, social work has gone through many phases. In the areas that had been impacted by the conflict, there was a demand for professionals after World Conflict II. Consequently, the United Nations dispatched social work practitioners from developing nations to help those in need. They also received training in the delivery of social services. These skilled individuals subsequently attempted to create theories and began to implement them in their own developing nations (DuBoi and Miley, 2005). Their issues and requirements, nevertheless, were distinct from those of the West and were largely intended to serve their interests rather than those of the underdeveloped nations. Additionally, the underdeveloped countries' acceptance of Western concepts and innovations implied their subordination to the West, which was a component of neocolonialism (Riaz & Granich, 2022).

The globalisation of economies and technologies also has an effect on these practices. Similar to how it has been impacted by other cultures, traditions, customs, and religions around the globe. Due to the differences between societies and the potential for different practices, this diversity makes the practice of social work more difficult (Conrad, 1999).

These practices were first practised there in 1953 with assistance from the United Nations Technical

Assistance Administration (Ansari, 2015). Due to the state of the nation, social work has evolved into a very complex field since its inception. The main causes are peoples' adherence to traditions and customs, their tardy entry into the development process, and advancements in science and technology. In those days, social work was seen as a charitable endeavour, and Pakistan, a newly independent state, lacked qualified social workers to assist in addressing its socioeconomic issues (Noon, 1963).

For service delivery at the local level, the creation and operation of professional organisations are crucial (Islam, 2011). Registration, membership in professional organisations, and adherence to a code of ethics are prerequisites for the recognition of the profession (Sheafor, 2014). As a result, the International Federation of Social Workers revoked their recognition on the grounds that they were only registered with provincial chapters of Social Welfare Volunteers, lacked membership in Professional Social Workers, and had no organisations in their provinces (John, Krewani, & Zaidi, 2007).

Furthermore, social workers in Pakistan have failed to develop links with other international federations/bodies. This has deprived social workers of international exposure, and sharing of knowledge and experiences and is the major cause of frustration for them (Fazzi & Rosignoli, 2020).

In order to make social work a market-oriented profession, social workers in every country should be trained on modern lines, equip them with professional knowledge and a good working environment should be provided so that they can serve the people in a professional manner (Bährer-Kohler, 2018).

Social Work Education in Pakistan

Social work education is necessary in order to make sure that students and future practitioners integrate their international competence (Asamoah 2003). It must concentrate on what is considered important to the profession as it relates to a country's unique realities, including comprehending and picking up knowledge from concepts (Carrilio & Mathiesen 2006).

Social work was first established in South Asian nations, including Pakistan, in the second part of the 20th century. It began as a diploma course at Punjab University and developed into a top social science at institutions that provide degrees throughout the

course of fifty years (Butt & Ashiq, 2022). A number of universities have established social work departments in response to the demand for and potential for it. These universities provide social work BS, MS, and PhD programmes. Due to the outmoded social work curricula and traditional course content provided at these Pakistani colleges, the growth of social work as a science is stagnant. Additionally, the majority of the courses are based in the West and are not in coherence with the requirements of modern Pakistani society (Baluch & Razi, 2007).

Social work education is based on works of foreing others which are not relevant to the problems faced by the people. In Pakistan, local literature and research can be produced with the active support of the government of Pakistan and local communities as well. Still, traditional subjects like social casework and social group work are taught to students at the postgraduate level (Rehmatullah, 2002).

The knowledge base of the subject still remains weak. In addition, the gap between classroom learning and fieldwork practice and the lack of locally produced published knowledge is another hurdle in the promotion of this education. We as social workers, have always been inspired by the social workers of the developed states. We have always welcomed them in terms of social work techniques, ideas, and approaches (Smirnova & Poluektova, 2019).

During the last few decades, there are few success stories in the field. There are internal and external weaknesses which include lack of relevant local literature, and low weightage to fieldwork (Shah, 2018). Uniform curriculum, course duration, academic activities, training and fieldwork are of utmost necessity for standard social work education across the country (Thomas, 2010). Unfortunately, in Pakistan, social work departments in universities offer different courses whether these are common or specialized subjects. In addition, there is no emphasis on organizing workshops and seminars which has led to a low standard of education (Riaz, & Granich, 2022).

In order to create a link between the theory and practice of social work, the students must be engaged in fieldwork under the guidance of professionally sound social workers (Hassan, 2016). These days, organizations in government as well as in the private (NGO) sector are managed by persons who have no academic background in social work (Azam & Mazid, 2022.) Moreover, there is no uniform module of

fieldwork and the agencies where the students are deputed are unstructured. In addition, social work institutions have dual responsibilities i.e. placement of students in organizations, their supervision, and teaching as well (Riaz, 2017).

Fieldwork has been and even today is among the mandatory components of the social work profession in Pakistan. Students of social work are normally placed in different social welfare agencies where they can learn a variety of techniques regarding how to deal with clients' issues. Unfortunately, untrained and non-social workers have been inducted by these organizations who are unaware of the technicalities of the profession. The graduates of literature, religious studies, political science, management sciences, and even biological sciences have been inducted into welfare organizations on the basis of political affiliation. Consequently, the students of social work, working under their supervision, deprives of the different methods and techniques on how to render welfare services or how to develop professional competence. This is a long-standing issue which needs to be resolved on a priority basis.

Lack of awareness among the common people regarding social work practice is another issue that warrants the immediate attention of policymakers. Owing to this, parents and their undergraduate students feel hesitation to get admission at the university level. One of the major reasons behind this dilemma is that the government of Pakistan has not taken this profession as seriously as it deserves. If people do not see or expect more job opportunities then surely they will select different subjects that have demand in the market.

Conclusion

The study summarizes that both the academics and practice of social work are of critical importance, particularly in developed nations where the field is yet to bloom. This profession has developed certain primary methods which directly deal with the problems of clients in social functioning. Methods like social casework, social group work, and community organization and development govern the practice of social work. The profession is relatively new in Pakistan as it was introduced after the inception of the country. The main reason for its introduction in the post-independence period was the increasing socio-economic problems faced by the newly established state of Pakistan. At the current, the social work

profession is faced with multiple problems, especially in Pakistan. This profession mainly originated in Western countries where the nature of problems is quite different from South Asian Countries. In addition, the concepts in the field are not indigenously grown but borrowed from the works of foreign authors which are not applicable to our society in most cases. Moreover, due to the lack of professional organizations i.e. Association of Professional Social Workers, it has not been recognized as a profession. It is still considered merely just like social welfare activity. The education of social work receives the same treatment as its practice in the country. Only a few institutions in the country are offering post-graduate programs in social work. There is a lack of locally published literature in the form of books which compels the students to resort to internationally authored sources. In most universities, traditional subjects are taught to the students where theories of social work are lacking. In addition, fieldwork, which is an important academic component of social work and which makes social work different from other social sciences needs to be streamlined as per its essence. In addition, there is a need for capacity building of non-professional staff members working in government and non-governmental organizations regarding the concept of fieldwork. Faculty members working in social work departments of universities need refresher courses and international exposure regarding the theory and practice of social work in modern-day society.

Suggestions

Based on these findings, the authors recommend that professional social workers should come together for the establishment of professional bodies in the form of the All Pakistan Social Workers Association where all

the provinces should be given equal representation. In this way, social workers will be able to influence those decisions which affect them directly and indirectly.

Social workers should build on their knowledge and skills so that they can be on par with other professionals in society. They need exposure visits, participation in international events and continuous capacity-building efforts.

There should be strong linkages between the social workers working in government organizations, NGOs/private sector and academia so that joint efforts can be launched to make the social work profession more responsive in society.

The curriculum at the post-graduate level needs to be changed and make market-oriented. There should be uniformity in curriculum and books should be published by local authors so that relevant literature should be available to the students.

The traditional methods of teaching methodologies should be changed with the modern techniques and a special focus should be there on revamping fieldwork. There should be casework, group work and community development laboratories in each social work department at the university level.

Social workers should also concentrate on their professional competency and should master the basic skill of interviewing, and counselling and should have knowledge about human behavior.

Furthermore, in the age of technology, social workers should have access to modern digital and linear media. In this way, they will be able to project their profession and subject in the best manner. Lastly, the study suggests that professional social workers should be inducted into all the social welfare organizations so that the new undergraduate students could get more interest in taking admissions for BS social work degree.

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