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**SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN SRI LANKA:
FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
AND PRACTICE****Manjula Wijsekera***Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka.*

Abstract: Social work as an action oriented profession to minimize social problems, is still struggling to deal effectively with the prevention of contemporary social problems which have emerge as a result of rapid social changes in Sri Lanka. This paper examines the future directions of social work education and practice. It also identifies the key changes in the content in Bachelor of Social Work program which require improving social work professional involvement in preventing and assuaging social problems in Sri Lanka. The study was based on an empirical study conducted using 10 purposive samples of faculty members and 20 students who were from Sri Lanka School of Social work. The methods for gathering data included interviews and used a semi structured approach. Competency based learning model based on learning theory served as the theoretical foundation for this study. The result indicated that there was a great need for expansion of the existing curriculum and practice to identify social problems with an emphasis on intervention at the micro, mezzo, and macro

levels. Social work educational curricula need to adopt a social development approach and empowerment practice with the understandings of oppressed and excluded people and social work policy educations effectively tackle the various social problems in the country. Therefore the study focuses on What changes are more appropriate in Bachelor of Social Work program which require improving social work professional involvement in preventing and assuaging social problems in Sri Lanka. The only conclusion to be drawn at this point is that the developments of social work education and practice in Sri Lanka require effective design and changes for strengthening curriculum in order to help communities deal with new waves of Social problems.

Key words: Social work education, social work practice, social problems, Social work curricula, Prevention

INTRODUCTION

Social work as an action-oriented profession originally developed to work with a number of social problems in the society. The uniqueness of social work among other human service professions is its focus on the social functioning of people and helping them interact more effectively with their social environment. A professional social worker performs this role by applying helping techniques in disciplinary manner and working to improve social functions and prevent them from emerging and already existing social problems. Therefore, Social work profession must develop intervention strategies which are needed for address specific social problems in contemporary society.

Even though Sri Lanka displayed low poverty head count ratio (World Bank, 2017) and achieved significant social development among other developing countries, rapid increase of social problems and issues in recent years is an evident fact. Crimes, alcohol and drug abuse, family disorganization, domestic violence, suicide, mental illnesses, sexual abuse, corruption, Provincial level disasters in the country such as floods, landslides, and draughts etc., have emerged as major social problems connected with comprehensive social relationships Poverty and economic inequality, modernization and urbanization, failure of social institutions, rapid growth of wants and aspirations have created more social vulnerabilities in Sri Lanka. It is obvious that economic income development and higher income would not reduce social problems and it is necessary to socially regulate the economic development in the country (Hettige, 2012).

Social work occupies as a profession, a field in the important areas of knowledge, attitudes and exploring the possible pattern of intervention in the field of the social problems the profession should adapt to change social conditions to become more appropriate in the realities of the local context. Hence, social work education must play a big role to strengthen social work educational programs to prepare graduates to contribute in preventing and assuaging human, social, and environmental challenges in the country. These can be achieved only through curriculum change (Darkwa, 2007) and social work education has to adapt to change social conditions to become more appropriate in the local context (Patel, 2005).

Although the social work education in Sri Lanka originated in 1952 with the establishment of the Institute of Social Work. The growth of social work professional education in Sri Lanka is quite slow and it has taken more than 50 years to begin graduate level Social Work education in the country (Ranaweera, 2012). National Institute of Social Development (NISD) as a degree awarding institution first started Bachelor's degree in Social Work, in 2005. The first group graduated from NISD with BSW (Bachelor of Social Work) in 2008 and universities began social work education in more recent years in Sri Lanka. The curricula of BSW consisted of 23 course units and mainly including introductory courses in Social Work, methods courses and information giving courses such as Sociology, Psychology, and Economics etc. Disanayaka (2002) Chandrarathna (2008) Ranaweera (2012) have emphasized that even though the social development approach visible in the curriculum methodologies taught in social work, could not be dealt with most prevailing social problems in the country and which needed to be included through social policy and program intervention. There is a great need for rethinking in terms of curriculum content, teaching, social work practice and research concerning how social workers respond to social problems in the country. Hence social work education in Sri Lanka presents some challenges which require rethinking in terms of curriculum content, teaching, social work practice and research concerning how social workers respond to social

problems in the country (Chandraratne, 2008; Ranaweera n.d). The purpose of this paper is to describe what changes are more appropriate in Bachelor of Social Work program which require improving social work professional involvement in preventing and assuaging social problems in Sri Lanka. Hence, the importance of the study is this help to reconsider the quality of social work education programmes by making adjustments and improvements with the growing needs of Social work graduates and in the field of social work to respond contemporary social problems in Sri Lanka

Objective of the Study

To Identify more appropriate changes in the content of Bachelor of Social Work program which require improving social work professional involvement in preventing and assuaging social problems in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

National Institute of Social Development as the pioneer institute providing Social Work Education and an offering bachelor's degree in social work program in Sri Lanka, it has been selected for this study. The overall design and approach of this study has been to adopt a qualitative approach to establish students, field supervisors and faculty member's perceptions. The study was based on survey of secondary sources to review of the Bachelor of Social Work programme and the empirical study conducted using 10 purposive samples of faculty members and Field supervisors and 20 students who were engaged 1st, 2nd and 3rd field placement in Sri Lanka School of Social work academic year 2015-19. Purposive sampling was used for selecting the research respondents due to the relative ease of access. The methods for gathering data included semi structured interviews to capture all the respondent's precepts related to variables. Competency based learning model based on learning theory served as the theoretical foundation to justify the need for functioning social work as a professional education and providing opportunities for bachelor of social work students by developing different strategies to learning relevant to emerging social problems in the Sri Lankan context.

Result and Discussion

The following results are presented according the study

4.1 From the perspective of social work students (1st, and 2nd field practice)

These two placements are concurrent and it focuses on training social work professionals to engage in direct practice and in middle level management in the country. Even though students have to learn contemporary social problems and issues during the second-year 1st semester, this course unite provides more information regarding contemporary social problems the module is not highlighted intervention strategies which can be adopted to deal with social problems in the Sri Lanka. Respondents 60%of the sample mentioned about the need of reorientation of the course contents to capture local issues and realities. Further, 72% of the sample mentioned about required skills, proper field practice which also prepares practitioners to respond effectively to future social issues and the demand.

From the perspective of social work students (3rd field practice)

The students commented that the importance of their learning experience developed by local content and understanding and they need, information from sources related to local issues and carry

out research assignments with local components and culturally constructed knowledge. Even though field placement for social work students in the BSW programme compulsory for all students, there are some issues in the structure and content of the field practice. Respondents also pointed out the majority of the course are deal with micro level practice methodologies in social work. Most of the social problems in Sri Lanka can be seen as structural problems which need to be dealt with social policy and programme intervention. Additionally, 25% of respondents reflected the macro concentration of the classroom teaching and field practice is very important to tackle social problems in the country.

Further, they mentioned that social work education in Sri Lanka is always influenced by western model of social work and the curriculum of undergraduates, teaching methods in the classroom, text books of social work education, social work educators, academic background of higher education has been internationalized. Respondents highly believe indigenization of social work education is required in order to make social work education applicable in the Sri Lankan context to overcome contemporary social problems.

From the perspective of field supervisors

Field Supervisors 72% of the sample highly indicated that the non-indigenous natures of social work educations and western background of the curriculum directly influence the understanding of social problems in Sri Lanka. They mentioned that social work education in Sri Lanka is always influence by western model of social work and the curriculum of undergraduates, teaching methods in the class room, text books of social work education, social work educators, academic background of higher education has been internationalized. They highly believe indigenization of social work education is required in order to make social work education applicable in the Sri Lankan context to overcome contemporary social problems.

From the perspective of faculty members

When examining distribution of course units which are responding to Social Problems in the curricula majority are deal with micro level practice methodologies in social work. Most of the social problems in Sri Lanka can be seen as structural problems which need to be dealt with macro practice. Lecturers 53% of the sample mentioned about even though changes in some course units have been made time to time, Intervention of Social Work that respond to social Problems in Sri Lanka has mostly not so far been considered.

The study sample emphasized curriculum or a field work component is a major part of the Bachelor's degree in Social work covering a significant amount (50%) of the degree programme. Three of the field placements and Social Welfare Education tour, Service Delivery in Human Settlements, Planning and Implementing a Social Development Project are subjects of the curriculum gives the student the experiential opportunity to understand social problems. But the following curriculum is not indicative of commendable changes over the time with modifications. It is important to mention that for the present studies all the available social work course curricula have been examine micro practice rather than macro practice. More than 80% of respondents mentioned about the micro focus of the curriculum and the need for macro practitioners to teach the subjects.

Conclusion

According to Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) a competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing upon and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills attitudes) in a particular context (Pritchard, 2009, Sullivan and Burce, 2014). This can be achieved by needing students to locate, discuss, analyze and evaluate information from a range of sources as they related to local issues; carry out research assignments with a local component and analyze of the cultural of construction knowledge and cross-cultural practices. Competence based learning emphasis rich learning environment that enables teachers and students to engage in meaningful learning process.

Kendall (1986) emphasized Asian Social Work schools are still struggling with problems of indigenization and the implementation of social development objectives in social work education. There is no serious effort in searching for the supplementary social work curriculum that is more relevant to national development.

Social problems can be viewed as societal issues of a variety of social contexts and it requires collective responses to prevent and achieve national development. A broad understanding of Social problem is required to take an account of the complexity of the context and social and political forces in which problems emerge. Therefore, what is considered as a social problem in one context may not be regarded as such in another. This difference shapes the social work response and intervention by social workers. So even though problems are same it will require local social work interventions depending on the resources and support available in context. Hence social work responses to social problems should be creative in their approaches and the societies should construct the kind of social work intervention that responds to social problems and the ways it would be possible to deal with these problems. Social work education needs new directions of standard in the curriculum, field practice and supervision, teaching and learning, online education in social work, indigenization and multicultural perspective, accreditation and licensing to effectively deal with local realities and minimizing contemporary social problems which have emerged as a rapid social change in Sri Lanka.

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