

**STATUS OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN ARMENIA:
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This article is focused on the development of profession of Social Work in Armenia, especially on the development of practice and education in this domain. The Social Work in Armenia appeared in the list of professions during transition from socialist society to the society based on the market relations. In this short period it became one of the important elements of the system of social protection.

Today Armenian society recognized, in general, the role of social workers in the process of social protection of population. There are many services having social workers in their staff. The institutionalization of social work in Armenia has successfully overcome. During all this period the social work educational system was operated in two directions. First, it was trying to solve its own problems. Second, it was trying to participate in the process of development of social services – implementing social work component in its.

Today problems waiting to their solution in the field of social work in Armenia are as follows: specialization of education, development code of ethics and system of classification for social workers.

Keywords: *social work, social protection, institutionalization, social service, social rehabilitation, integration of social services.*

**STATUTUL EDUCAȚIEI ȘI PRACTICII DE ASISTENȚĂ SOCIALĂ ÎN ARMENIA:
PROBLEME ȘI PROVOCĂRI**

Acest articol este axat pe dezvoltarea profesiei de Asistență Socială în Armenia, în special, pe dezvoltarea practicii și educației în acest domeniu. În Armenia, Asistența Socială a apărut în lista profesiilor pe parcursul tranziției de la societatea socialistă la cea bazată pe relațiile de piață. În această perioadă scurtă ea a devenit un important element al protecției sociale.

Astăzi societatea Armeniei recunoaște, în linii generale, rolul asistenților sociali în procesul de protecție socială a populației. Sunt multe servicii ce au în componența lor asistenți sociali. Instituționalizarea asistenței sociale în Armenia s-a realizat cu succes. Pe parcursul acestei perioade sistemul de educație în asistența socială a evoluat în două direcții. În primul rând, a încercat să-și rezolve propriile probleme, iar în al doilea rând – să participe la dezvoltarea serviciilor sociale prin implementarea componentei de asistență socială în ele.

Astăzi problemele din domeniul asistenței sociale, ce așteaptă de a fi rezolvate în Armenia, sunt următoarele: specializarea educației, elaborarea codului etic și a unui sistem de clasificare a asistenților sociali.

Cuvinte-cheie: *asistență socială, protecție socială, instituționalizare, serviciu social, reabilitare socială, integrarea serviciilor sociale.*

The profession of social work has only 25 years history of development in Armenia.

The development of profession was the result of collapse of Soviet Union system. The transforming processes of Armenian society and earthquake of the Spitak, as well as the Karabagh war generated numerous and diverse social problems related to poverty, homelessness, unemployment, emigration, disability, loss, bereavement, etc.

The development of the social work profession in Armenia has proceeded in three different ways. First of all, after the collapse of the Soviet system international and local non-governmental organizations started implementing a number of social projects, contributing to the protection of vulnerable groups of population. Very often these projects contained components of social work. The second way of the profession development was related to state activities trying to rebuild the system of social protection and establishing numerous social services in the process of the society transition to market economy where social worker became demanded specialist. At last, the third factor having significant influence on dissemination of professional culture of social work in Armenia was the Chair of Sociology at the Yerevan State University which from 90's of 20th century started teaching "Social Work" educational program at university level. The teaching professors were involved in trainings of the staff of new created state social services.

From the perspectives of the profession's development in this short period social work has been established in the professional structure of the Armenian society. Nowadays the social protection system of Armenia

includes numerous social services with social work component. Amongst them are the Regional Centers of Social Services (RCSS) that ensures the operation of the Family Benefit System. The beneficiaries of these services are the vulnerable families. The field of influence of RCSS covers the whole area of the Republic. The staff of these services has the status of a social worker and implements the roles of the social worker. At their disposal is a serious tool for measuring the level of poverty in families which ensures that the provided services are targeted in the social sphere of the republic. Such coverage is also provided by the Regional Centers of Employment (RCE), the beneficiaries of which are the unemployed and job seeking people. The main functions of the social workers in such services are registration of unemployed and job seeking people, provision of unemployment benefits, work with employers, recruitment of information about job vacancies and its provision to clients, organization of vocational trainings, etc.

Another group of social services with social work component are composing the services in criminal justice system - Social-psychological rehabilitation services of prisons and Departments of Alternative Punishments. The largest social sphere in Armenia which includes social workers is the child protection area. During the past years social services – Regional Child Protection Units (CPU), different institutions and centers of child care, were formed and developed within the scope of which an important contribution is provided by social workers. The first attention of social workers was put towards children as one of the most vulnerable groups of society. In this sphere the government implements strategic programs which aim the deinstitutionalization of children and organization of foster care for children without parental care, prevention of child neglect by support of risk families and solution of other problems related to the care and socialization of children.

The social work profession is still relatively weak in the sphere of education and health care.

Relying on the above mentioned three factors, in Armenia on its first stage social work developed very patchy because of which today's social workers have different education and profession, different ideas about their profession and different sizes of loyalty to the requirements of the basic principles and values of the profession, which represents the profession to professionals. However, today the discussions over the ways of further development of social work often bring out the idea that social workers should obtained license. As a result of this process non professionals will leave the field and certain criteria will be clarified for everyone obtaining the position of social worker. The Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of RA, which is responsible for social protection of the population, is studying now the practical field in order to define national standards for social work. This will contribute to standardized formal and contextual requirements for social workers at different levels and provide for more control over their operations. Moreover, specialists with adequate professional education will be more protected.

The past two and a half decades were not only the years of self-establishment of social work, but also the period when this professional activity became institutionalized and occupied its worthy place in the institutional structure of the society. Newly established institution of social work made significant changes in the institutional structure of the society. First of all it began integrating with different institutions introducing its approaches, principles and institutional culture. The appearance of institution of social work not only contributed to the improvement of the functioning of society, but also significantly democratized the institutional culture of Armenia. The primary target of social work intervention turned to be the institution of family, which have had serious difficulties and changes during the social transformation of Armenian society – poverty and homelessness, low parenting resources and child neglect, difficulties with socialization and care of children, disabled and elderly, increasing rate of divorce, growth of the number of conflicts, gender discrimination and etc. At the beginning, when the social work was doing its first steps of development in Armenia, in the opinion of many people the greatest obstacle on that way was the circumstance that the Armenian family is much closed, which would complicate the social workers' interventions in beneficiary families. And in fact, during the first difficult cases which demanded visits and work related to the children and their families, social workers met with serious resistance from these families. The application of family interventions became easier for social workers as a result of adopting the Child Rights Law in 1996 and gradually increased the public awareness about social work. Moreover the government defined the procedure in the Family benefit system addressed to the poor families according to which those families which apply for social benefits are obliged to assist to home visits and needs assessments processes by social workers. As a result of the Social workers' activities families became more open and willing to cooperate. Despite to difficulties the culture of social work was gradually accepted by the population. On the first stages of profession development people expected only financial assistance from the social worker. Today there are a number of cases when people apply to

social worker for other types of assistance is gradually increasing. Several social programs targeting child protection are implementing with the focus on family which serves as an object of intervention for the social workers. Among them there is the program of deinstitutionalization of children which requires work with families in order to return their children from orphanages and boarding schools to the family. Socio-economic challenges of previous years forced many families to send their children to orphanages, which is counter-indicated from the point of the best interest of the child. Afterwards, in the result of various discussions on the professional and official level the government changed its attitude related to children without parental care and committed social workers of orphanages' and communities' to work toward the deinstitutionalization of the children. The continuation of this program turned to be the foster family program, in which the main performer again is a social worker. In accordance with the established procedures the social worker evaluates the family applying for fostering, its capabilities in terms of providing child's care, organizes the meeting of the children and foster parents. Social workers also monitor the process of fostering, support to children's and family's mutual adaptation and provide further help and assistance during fostering. The social workers function in CPU-s is to identify children without parental care, register their cases in the electronic data base and develop an individual plan of development for each child registered in that data base. Hereby, today social workers are working with families in order to prevent child neglect or abandonment and to return children from institutions to their biological or foster families. Another and relatively new occasion for the social worker's intervention is the result of family conflicts and violence, the resolution of which more and more requires the participation of social worker. Especially, violence against children requires immediate intervention of the social workers. Social workers' task to struggle against family violence was formulated by NGO-s. The discussions between the representatives of public and state sectors lead to the statement of the fact of seriousness of the problem. As a result of such discussions a new legislative document about family violence has been prepared. In the case it is approved by the Parliament of RA, social workers will have a new field of interventions.

Despite the marital and family conflicts are very typical for Armenian families, the social workers of Armenia are still very passive in the scope of family therapeutic interventions. Staying unsolved these conflicts bring to the weakening of families. For modern Armenian families' separation is also very typical. Very often one of the parents, usually father, leaves the country for work, as a result of which the family meets serious social problems, which have been thoroughly studied at the beginning of 20th century by W.Thomas and F.Znaniński [2]. If in the past such separation or migration took a seasonal character, later the cases of separation more often had a long term character.

Thus, the modern Armenian family has numerous and diverse social problems, the solution of which requires a constant and intensive work of social workers. According to the official data the 33% of Armenian population are poor. This means that every third citizen has at least the problem to prevent the poverty and other problems related to it which, first of all, is addressed to the social workers. Social work with the families will make them more open, democratic, more protected, but on the other hand the interventional character of social work will unintentionally weaken the strength of the family. We can predict that by the establishment of the social service network the attitude that in the case of any problem emergence we should rely on the assistance of social services will be formed among the people. As a result of this responsibility of family and their members can be weakened towards all things that happened in the family.

Thus, as we see, the main target of today's Armenian social worker is the family, which is still playing an important role in the Armenian society. But for the increasing and strengthening of families, social workers should enlarge their presence in families; assist all needed families by provision of different services.

The next social institution, in which social work institution has integrated to, is the Institute of Law, especially the system of the executions of criminal punishments. When Armenia became a member of the European Parliament, the Armenian government was obliged to implement some innovations in this area. One of these innovations was the involvement of social workers in the processes of correction and rehabilitation of offenders. In all the prisons of Armenia there were established social-psychological rehabilitation services, applying functions of social workers. Also in the system of criminal punishments of Armenia there were founded the Departments of alternative punishments, which are responsible for the organization of punishments alternative to imprisonment. The Ministry of Justice set the functions that must be performed by a social worker working with offenders. Though enough time has passed since then, the correctional and rehabilitative functions of the system has not been improved. As the results of recent sociological research show the correctional

institutions of Armenia do not provided rehabilitation services [1, p.9]. People involved as social workers either in Departments of Alternative Punishments or in prisons do not perform their functions efficiently. It can be explained by the fact that during the system transformation process the positions of social workers were supplemented by the previous employees of the system who passed some short-terms trainings. There are no certificated professional social workers in that system. As a result such social processes as needs assessment, intervention plan formation, re-offending risk assessment, etc., are not carried out correctly and serious difficulties related to the application of the methods of social work and rehabilitation programs were observed. Moreover in the case of alternative punishments employees are even sure, that there is no need of correctional and rehabilitative work with their clients. The situation is the same with the correction of delinquents registered in the juvenile departments of police station. According to experts desired efficiency in process of correction and rehabilitation of offenders can be achieved only with the involvement of professional social workers [1, p.12].

The next institution where social work started to do its first steps is Education. The program of inclusive education implementing by the government assumes compulsory participation of social workers in the proposed procedures – identifying children with special education needs, working with their families, working in the school environment and, etc. Previously, school-aged disabled children were sent to boarding schools where their care and education was organized. But the discussions over the issues of children protection were brought to the idea that the separation of children with limited abilities in boarding institutions contributes to their social isolation and at least to their social exclusion in the future. The National program of child protection requires to asses the educational needs of all disabled and handicapped children and to divide them into two groups – children with special educational needs and children capable to study in inclusive schools. Children of the first group are directing to the schools of special education, and the children of the second group are directing to the inclusive schools. Both types of schools have multidisciplinary teams of specialists, including also social worker, who is trying to solve the problems arising on this way. Perhaps the process of inclusive education is the appropriate way by which social worker can be involved in primary schools, since only in a few schools from 1600 there is a social worker. Today school directors have an opportunity to hire social worker, psychologist or social pedagogue for the school processes organization. But as most of them are not enough informed about social work they prefer a recruit psychologist or social pedagogue. In fact there is an acute need of social worker in schools as there were such social problems as children out of school, different problems – brought from families, intergroup and interpersonal conflicts, problems of accessibility of school education and, etc. In the case these issues are not addressed, it will affect the education and upbringing of children. Despite the importance of school social work has already been recognized the issue remains unresolved due to financial difficulties and lack of specialists.

The social work profession is making its first steps also in the field of health care. The transition to market economy led to the introduction of paid medical services in the health care sector, and as a result accessibility of health care services decreased for the vulnerable groups of population. Lack of medical insurance on the one hand, exclusiveness of social workers from this system, on the other hand, lead to the situation when various social problems remain unsolved in this field. It depends on the decision of administrations of medical institutions whether the social worker should be involved in the sphere of health care. If the facility manager is aware of and understands the importance of the role of social worker in the team then he/she provides his presence in it. Undeniable is the NGOs' role in this process as the NGOs have significant input in spreading the professional culture of social work in health care system. Especially in the field of mental health, they have an important point by the day-care centers creation and development. But still issues, such as the provision of palliative care or rehabilitation services organization remain unsolved and problematic.

Thus, social work in Armenia had a bit chaotic nature in its first stages of the development because of the society's anomic situation caused by transformation processes, earthquake and war which were quite delayed. In this period the development of social work mostly had situative character. Any innovation in this sphere depended on authors' ideas, potential resources and rarely on donors' wishes and perceptions. Today the Government of RA is trying to control the development of social work institution. On the level of social policy it had stated the necessity of the social work application towards the protection of vulnerable groups of population. There were developed and implementing a number of social programs, in which the important role had been given to social worker. In practice field we can meet many people having the position of social workers but without any diploma in social work. The lack of state criteria in the sphere of social work led to the development of the opinion that to become a social worker is very easy. Even though we can meet the

opinion, that social work is not a profession. The roots of such stereotype are in the soviet system, where the job of social servant did not require professional education. Now even with the implementation social work profession its name contributes to the simplification of the essence of the profession. Especially in multi-disciplinary teams of child care institutions, CPU-s and etc, where there is no strict division between the functions of specialists, the managers often give social work tasks to all members of the team. This brings to the misunderstanding, that in workplace the social worker can be easily replaced by other specialists.

The responsibility for further development of social work profession is now been carried out by the government of RA with the participation of the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues which today is the biggest employer for social workers. Currently, it is implementing two programs which will contribute in clarification and strengthening the status of social work in the country. The first program refers to issues of defining state criteria for social work. Today in Armenia many people are involved in the social work practice and their activities are often not controlled by the state. The same procedures are carried out by different interpretations and no one knows to what extent they are loyal to professional values and principles. Very often there are no significant differences related to the requirements of social workers and other helping professionals who work with them. This problem is of great importunacy in the services where multidisciplinary team works. As a rule, in this kind of services the functions of social worker are usually assigned to psychologists, teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc. This resulted in misunderstandings that social work does not need special trainings. The lack of social work standards leads to the fact that not all employees who have a status of social worker use the appropriate working methods, techniques and procedures. Moreover, the lack of standards does not also allow the understanding what kind of additional knowledge and skills must be possessed by a social worker in a specific field. Therefore, the definition of state standards for social work will also clarify the requirements for social work education.

The implementation of the above mentioned program will allow the defining criteria's for social work practice. Today the practice sphere of social work involve social workers with different backgrounds: starting from the specialist who has passed only short term training to specialist who has six years university education /Master's degrees/, and all of them are qualified as a social workers. If a social worker does not work in the civil service system it is not specified what types of knowledge and skills should he/she have for working in this or that service. For instance, there is no official document which defines the professional knowledge and skills of junior and senior social workers. However, in the civil service system it is defined the junior, senior and master professional positions, but the division among the functions is not clear enough. At best, this classification is based on official duties, but professional functions are not taken into account as well.

Currently the government of Armenia is going to create a new type of social services – integrated social services. Four types of social services – Regional Centers of Social Services, Regional Centers of Employment, Commissions of Medical-social expertise and Centers of Social Security, should be gathered under the same roof and function due to one window principle. The first one from the mentioned services is mainly engaged in family benefits and provides financial assistance. The second type of service is responsible for financial and other kind of assistance for unemployed. The third type of service is responsible for the definition of disability and appointment of disability pensions. And finally, the last type of service is working with appointing pensions for the elder generation. Integration of these services will increase not only the accessibility of the services for the beneficiaries but also will allow showing integrated approach for definition and satisfaction of their needs. Currently, the various services consider their beneficiaries in terms of present resources and provided services that is to say they provide fragment approach. As a result, many needs remain implicit or unsatisfied. However, within the framework of the new approach, even if the beneficiaries' needs are not met, then they at least will be revealed and registered. It is assumed that in the integrated services the assistance in the financial form should be separated and centralized in one structure and maximum formalized. Today the provision of this services waste the majority of the time of social workers and in a result they will not be able to provide other services. In the integrated service social case management process will become mandatory professional process which will significantly increase the social worker's status. It is assumed, that the integrated social service will provide three types of social service – social-administrative, general professional and specialized. It needed to fix on official level that the provision of social services is the privilege of social workers. This, on the one hand, will contribute to provide professional assistance for clients and will create new perspectives for the social work profession development, on the other hand. Today the specialized

social services sector is not developed at all in Armenia. Though the first issue within the frameworks of the social work development agenda is specialization and such classification will facilitate the process of specialization. The Institute of Education has prepared a generalist of social workers. While now it is the turn of specialization, the integration of services will speed up this process.

Hereby, such short excursion in the field of social work shows that the development of social work profession in Armenia has two flows – extensive and intensive. Social work gradually expands to different institutions and spheres of the society. At the same time the social workers gradually add their knowledge's and skills and become more professional. The labor market presents more and more new requirements to social workers. The system of social work education in Armenia has been developed by the Department of Sociology with active participation of sociologists. The latter had a significant role on the development of educational program of social work. This program development in Armenia was based on the traditions of European and American social work schools. The cooperation with a number of well-known centers of these countries contributed to develop highly competitive educational program in Social Work at the Department of Sociology in YSU. As a result of this permanent cooperation with foreign partners and participation in different projects the Armenian specialists are allowed to apply their theoretical and practical achievements, adapt them to local peculiarities and form the Armenian school of social work step by step. As a result of joining to Bologna process, the European educational standards were introduced and adapted into YSU educational programs, including the ones designed for social work profession.

Today the Yerevan State University provides BA and MA level courses in Social Work. Preparation of the doctoral Degree in Social Work is in the agenda. YSU also has an important role in the development and coordination of the distance learning system in social work.

The Social Work program includes theory, practice and research as compulsory components of training of future social workers. The organization of students' practices in different social services allows combining the achievements of field work with classroom work. University professors always participate in different social projects targeted to solution of field problems. This kind of involvement in practical sphere helps academicians to prepare students handling the problems which they might meet in their work places. The students practice lasts two years, which is an excellent opportunity both for students to find job vacancy, and for professors to understand how appropriate students manage their tasks.

Social work specialists who work at the University are contributing to the development of science of social work as well. The results of their scientific work are reflected in presentations and articles, books and dissertations. By this, they contribute to the development of the social work science and years latter they will have the answer to the question whether social work is a science or profession. Nowadays, this question very often causes long and impassioned discussions among the academicians without any positive results. At the same time university professors were permanently publishing manuals and textbooks for the students and practitioners. By doing this specialists try to decrease the deficit of social work literature in native language and parallel to solve the problem related to social work terms translation. Thus, as it can be concluded, gradually mutual links are establishing between the practice field of social work and the system of education. The system of education starts to react to the needs of practice field and the practice field expects graduates of social work.

The reforms in the system of social protection promote to strengthening of social worker's status and prestige of social work profession in Armenia. Today, social work is expanding its sphere of influence by transforming the institutional culture of the Armenian society. Dissemination of social work principles and values makes the social life in Armenia more democratic and tolerant. Social workers are struggling against violence and discrimination, for the protection of social rights of risk populations. By this social workers are developing the new social reality in Armenia, where everybody can feel protected and safe.

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