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Social work in Nepal: challenges and options

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ABSTRACT

Nepalese social work is still young but slowly developing. Presently, it has many challenges, including relying on western methods and approaches because there is not any existing Nepalese model of social work. Other challenges include lack of adequate training, lack of regulation and guidelines, interference from the government, organisations or donors and lack of integrity and accountability on the part of some 'social workers'. Not all people working as social workers in the country have training or qualifications in social work. To protect service users, families and communities, the factors that are hindering professionalism should be solved. Accelerating social work training should be one of the solutions, together with professional licensing and regulation. It would be important if social workers advocate for better social work education and practice approaches – this should help identify the basic elements to develop a Nepalese model of social work. Rather than using the western perspectives and concepts, it is necessary to come up with local approaches and practices of social work. Academics, practitioners, government even service users can work inclusively in developing the Nepalese model of social work. If the government recognizes social workers, public financing in the social work sector could improve. Getting the profession recognized, publishing adequate literature and making the association of social work strong should be the vision for the social worker in future. This article focuses on the situation of social work in Nepal with particular emphasis on challenges and options.

KEY TERMS: challenges, options, professional power, power dynamics, power relation, Nepal, service user, social work

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INTRODUCTION

Nepalese social work is still young but slowly developing. Presently, it has many challenges, including relying on western methods and approaches because there is not any existing Nepalese model of social work. It does not have its own approach and model of social work despite there thousands of 'social workers' working in more than 30 000 non-government organisations (NGOs) promoting 'development' for more than 30 years. Graduates mostly from the social science discipline are considered as social workers but there are also students from other disciplines such as natural sciences and management who work as social workers. Nepal being one of the lower middle-income countries, it has received millions of dollars as foreign aid in the community development sector. Despite having received significant amounts of aid, 'social workers' and their NGOs have not been able to make ample positive change in Nepali society. Many charitable and development projects initiated, planned and implemented by NGOs and international NGOs (INGOs) have been found to be unsustainable. There has been some changes and development here and there, but this is not significant compared to the large numbers of NGOs and 'social workers in Nepal. This lack of tangible improvement in the lives of individuals, families and communities, leads to the question – what challenges is social work is facing in Nepal? This article focuses on the situation of social work in Nepal with particular emphasis on challenges and options.

CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK IN NEPAL

Lack of a Nepalese model of social work

Social work is not new in Nepal. It has been practiced differently by families, communities, helpers and volunteers for several generations. For example, voluntary helping, and social services are provided by religious and cultural institutions, and this has been happening since time immemorial. Ethnic associations provide *dharamshala* (residences for poor and elderly) and *patipauwa* (public resting and interacting place). There are many other social services that are provided. However, professional social work has been in existence for about 30 years. Professional social work includes trained helpers who work with families and communities to solve social problems using methods and approaches that are relevant, contextual, appropriate and acceptable. In the case of Nepal, the training has been inadequate mainly because there are a few training institutions whose syllabus is based on western methods and approaches.

Inadequate education and training

Professional social work requires intensive knowledge and expertise. It is the social worker's foremost priority to maintain the integrity and abide by professional ethics which are extremely essential in the context of exercising power and autonomy (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2016). In the case of Nepal, there are very few institutions that provide social work education. In Nepal there are more than 30 000 NGOs but very few have trained social workers, yet they are involved in the assessment and decisions making for the service user. This is a precarious situation where service user needs are not adequately assessed and addressed. This shows the urgent need of training for social workers in Nepal. A social worker in Nepal has to work in different rural settings with vulnerable group who are deprived of basic rights and who are living in poverty (Adhikari, 2011; Amatya et al., 2018, Sharma & Dangal, 2019). There is one dilemma in this situation. People from other educational backgrounds such as community development, sociology, psychology and sometimes even the graduates from management disciplines are working in the social work sector directly with service users (Nikku, 2010; Yadav, 2017). This creates problems while exercising professional power. The graduates coming from other backgrounds apart from social work are not often times aware about service user needs assessment, ethics and professional guidelines of social work. This is one of the reasons it becomes challenging for many social workers to work in these settings in rural areas because of the difference in ideology and practice with non-social workers (Adhikari, 2011).

Inadequate skills to deal with complex social issues

Similarly, even the people from rural areas come from different cultural, religious and caste backgrounds which often creates a complex scenario for social workers. Some of the people from minority groups regard themselves as a lower caste so it is difficult to work with the service user who feels inferior to the social worker whom they regard as people from upper caste. In this kind of situation, it becomes impossible to initiate any plans, research or two-way communication for the social worker (Uggerhøj, 2011). Adding to this, when there are workers from

other disciplines such as management and natural sciences in these kinds of scenario, they fail their professional power. Failing professional power in these circumstances not being able to understand the complexities in society, not follow the ethical and social values of social work, not prioritising the people and their needs, not accepting and realising their cultural and religious beliefs. On top of this, the diversity in the community makes it difficult in practising and working for the best interest of the people. In practice, there is minimal or no participation of service users.

Lack of support from government and municipalities

Some of the major factors that impact their professional power and practice are lack of enough support from the local municipality and government offices. The government neither has any support nor say about the profession. It does not have any position for social workers in government. The cases of juveniles are handled by police and lawyers. The government should take a step further in recognizing the social work as a licensed profession. This will segregate the licensed social worker providing them broader opportunities in working in the community.

Interference

Another interesting power dynamic comes when there are barriers from political parties. It becomes difficult for social workers to work according to their desire and meet the needs of service users. The conflict of interest arises in different communities due to the involvement of local parties and local youth members. There is the implication from the political sector and government sector that involves corruption and other vested interest. Similarly, the organization gives one direction to the service user that might not always lead in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people. The professional domain of social workers maintaining the core values and ethical consideration of their profession is sometimes jeopardized by the managerialism behavior of the organization, institutions or even different actors (government, politicians and media) (Beresford, 2003; Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019). This happens in Nepal. Resources and social workers are controlled by the organization that they are working for and donor agencies. These agencies and organizations always come with some agenda. The social worker in practice will always encounter difficulties because the real scenario and problems in the community will be different. Power relation between donor agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) leave the social worker in a vulnerable position as they won't be able to satisfy the service user every time (Adhikari, 2011; Nikku, 2014).

Problems of using a charity model of social work

There are instances when social workers and their organisations in Nepal focus more on aid than service. Others use a business model to deliver social services. The profession that is supposed to resolve social problem has ironically become a business and money earning medium in Nepal. This is a sad misuse of power in the social work profession. The profession itself is seen as charity based and people have the perception that social workers are using service users to do research and other programs just to earn money. This makes it difficult for social work as the intervention is not possible without the service user support and trust (Robbins and Cook, 2018). Until and unless both the parties completely trust each other, they will not have positive expectations from each other (Robbins & Cook, 2018). During the few decades of social work practice, trust has been decreased in the social work profession (Robbins & Cook, 2018).

Lack of professional power

Social workers in most developing countries like Nepal are still way behind in working to resolving issues of education, health, employment, transportation, clean drinking water, inclusion and other social issues in the society (Palattiyil et. al., 2019). Social workers should have power to intervene in the time of crisis or protecting the service user in a necessary situation such as domestic violence, child abuse and safety (Palattiyil et. al., 2019). In case of Nepal, it is not statutory. Social workers cannot directly intervene in case of child abuse, sexual abuse, children safety, and violence. It falls under legal jurisdiction which is handled by the government without involvement of social workers. In this case, it would be the police taking the first step then the lawyer, judge and relevant judicial bodies (Parker et. al., 2017).

Lack of professional regulation

Social work is a respected profession in the case of European countries, the United States, United Kingdom and in some African countries like Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia and many others. The same can be said of countries like Australia. In these countries, there are clear guidelines and regulations regarding what social workers can do and who can be social workers. In the case of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, social workers are oftentimes seen as untrustworthy. One of the reasons is due to reliance on aid from foreign countries for a long time without effective results. In Nepal, the people are fed up with social workers coming in the rural areas for similar projects for more than several decades without successful outcomes. Substantial change cannot be seen. The statistics and numbers from the NGOs try to highlight their coverage in the rural areas but in the field, impact is not enough. In the case of Nepal, the social workers are yet to establish a regulated or licenced profession. People trained in management, science, or any other disciplines are working as social workers. This often creates the problem in social work practice in Nepal. Social work is a profession related to social problems in the society. One area that is missing in Nepalese social work is radical social work. It is necessary that the advocacy and radical social work emerge to make some sustainable change in society (Dhakal & Burgess, 2021).

Weaker professional association

Social work associations play an important role in many countries and help social workers to promote social justice and welfare of the people. In Nepal, it is necessary that the association of social work should be made stronger and more active. The social work association should have a significant role in policy formulating and providing guidelines for the policy maker.

Weaker research and very limited local literature

Social workers need enough theoretical knowledge and practice skills. In case of Nepal, social workers do not have enough of these. Resultantly, there are very little research happening and very few publications. Most of the literature used is not local. There are academics and social workers trying to strengthen social work credibility by researching and publishing, but more is needed.

IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN NEPAL

The literature and practice have suggested that many actors want increased power for social workers so that they can protect the service user in safeguarding issues (Stevens et. al., 2020). This will strengthen the different sensitive issues by providing protective services to vulnerable people and adding legitimacy for social workers to act (Stevens et. al., 2020). There needs to be much research in social work involving user involvement, importance, perspectives, and their position. This will help to structure the organization and give NGOs a proper direction and guidelines (Beresford, 2003). It would also be better if Regional bodies like the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education work closely and provide training, resources, and expertise for countries like Nepal which are struggling in social work training and practice (Reamer & Nimmagadda, 2017). There should be strict regulation and guidelines regarding the position for social workers about what they can do and what they cannot. Some radical changes are necessary such as people with the social science background should only be allowed to work as social workers. These are some crucial changes that need to be implemented in order to maintain the professional power of social worker. To improve social work in Nepal, it is important to:

1. Creation of a Nepalese model of social work and development.
2. Make social work qualifications mandatory for all people doing social work.
3. Introduce and increase opportunities for social work education.
4. Introduce regulations and guidelines from the association and government.
5. Licence the profession to enable social workers to increase their professional power.
6. Increase research and publishing into Nepalese social problems to enable the development of locally relevant social work.
7. More professional development opportunities for social workers and people practising as social workers with qualifications in community development, rural development, development studies.

CONCLUSION

Nepalese social work is still young but slowly developing. Presently, it relies on western methods and approaches. It is time the profession transitions into a Nepalese model of social work. One area that has lagged is social work education and regulating the profession. This has resulted in many people who are not social workers practising social work. These 'social workers' have little understanding of social work methods, values and ethics. Often these social workers misuse the professional power they have. There are definitely some social workers working hard for the welfare and well-being of people but are in vulnerable position because of not enough support from the government. To protect service users, all the factors that are hindering professionalism should be solved. Social work training must be accelerated. The profession of social work should be licensed and properly regulated. The social worker should advocate for better social work education and practice approaches. The government should recognize social workers so that there would be more financing in the social work sector. There is not any existing Nepalese model of social work. Rather than using the western perspectives and concepts, it is necessary to come up with local approaches and practices of social work. Academics, practitioners, even service users can work inclusively in developing the Nepalese model of social work. Getting the profession recognized, publishing adequate literature and making the association of social work stronger should be on of the visions for Nepalese social work.

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