

Social work education *not* profession: A response

Though I am not a very regular user of WhatsApp but I have opened my WhatsApp today in the evening soon after paying gratitude to the several emergency workers as warriors/ fighters against Corona virus spread. During Janata curfew, I read a message on one of the WhatsApp group titled as *social work professionals* comprising of 145 members. I believe all of them are professional social workers. While there were many congratulatory messages on Janata Curfew suggested by Prime minister on 22nd March and also expression of gratitude towards emergency workers from almost all parts of the country at 5 p.m., of course by members, I was stuck up with one message from a social work educator. The message reads like ‘while offering my respect to all people those who work in emergency, how social work professional can be a part of this list. Please guide us for professional visibility, identity and credibility’. None of the members except one has made any comment on this post in past 24 hours. I believe that members of this group may have different reasons from finding the question as not so significant or many others have their own explanations. I believe that some of us might have laughed on question or on the seekers ignorance with our academic arrogance of not knowing even this basic. One of the reasons for non response is probably we have stopped thinking on basic issues. I understand that the seeker has raised a very valid question for social work fraternity. The simple answer of this question is to enlist set of activities with a lot of emphasis on what social workers *should do*. But this may not be enough as this question requires a deep introspection with our level of professional maturity on our philosophical underpinning and appropriate reasoning. We have lost inclination of raising valid questions and also responding the questions as matter of habit.

One of the most senior social work educators, Prof Amba Das Mohite has responded (in Marathi), with a pinch of salt, that “an event has passed, we will stay at home comfortably for a few days, but what about those whose stomachs are empty, affected by this disaster. (translated from Marathi)” He also suggests a list of activities which I grouped in three groups for the sake of better understanding: i) humanitarian including simple courtesies which can be taken up by any empathetic human being including a professional social worker such as to arrange for minimum tea/ water for the policemen who are deployed for settlement; to try to help the district administration, gurudwara anchors, other charities, Shiv Thali (a food plate); to raise funds and send to Chief Minister Emergency Fund; to assist the police force in making the arrangement and

other work supportive to their tasks etc. The second group of activities are managerial in nature which can also be done by any person who has a little knowledge and skills of working with people and organizations such as to assist in the work of the District Administration / Local Government Institutions; to work with public and private hospitals, social care organisations, to work with doctors' networks, to provide minimum services to patients and others not affected by the virus; to collect information and data in your city / town on different aspects like financial, social, educational, health, for designing appropriate intervention/ monitoring/research/planning etc. The third set of activities are specifically meant for social work professionals like to set up an "aid room", guidance room, counseling room in your social work college; to create a team of professors and students in each college for disaster management awareness; to share ideas with authorities and health department; and to provide assistance to needy, and authorities. If we consolidate some of the activities and we add more in the list, the social work professionals can intervene in many areas, namely crisis intervention, scientific relief/charity (where this profession born), information, education, awareness, engagement, action and intervention. coordination and networking, support services. Many of us as professional social workers are engaged in one or many such activities.

Some of the above listed activities can be even taken up by an ordinary person but some of these activities will definitely requires specific knowledge and skills. Each professional activity requires rationale for its execution as it has to be performed with scientific knowledge requisite specific skills set. Therefore, a profession cannot be activity based venture alone and it should be socially relevant. In India, we do not figure in the government list of emergency workers where as social workers find their place throughout world. In USA, according to the DHS Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), there are 14 employment categories that the agency identifies as Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers and social workers are in first category health care and public health workers. In many other countries, they are placed on high pedestal but in India, we are struggling for professional visibility, identity and credibility. We are trying to figure out our place in the list of those emergency workers to whom country had paid it gratitude by clapping taalis or banging thalis. In fact, we are not always working in emergency uniformly. Most of the time, we raise this issue 'what we are supposed to do or how we can equate ourselves with other professionals. A doctor has to provide treatment to its patients, a nurse has to offer nursing, a lawyer has to give legal services. Similarly, if we as professional

social workers have to provide *social help* to the needy or people in trouble, why we should ask every time 'what we should do.' It is precisely that we are missing to translate our philosophical base in practice with discernible activities. We are swinging like pendulum between humanitarian to charitable to restoring adjustment to problem solving to welfare to bringing change to well being and so on. We have more on our plate than we are capacitated to chew. We have yet to convince ourselves and other stakeholders about our expertise, our services, and our relevance. We are not sure on the societal mandate for us as professional yet we do take wide ranging activities, mostly prescriptive, between humanitarian concern to change for social justice or human rights. Probably, each time we have to decode the core concern of our profession i.e. *human relationship and help*, in the process of decoding our work with people at different levels we sometimes either becomes too moralist or too radical, without specifying the core of our profession. This is time to redefine, to respond and to reassure the society about our intents, professional expertise and capacities as well as our actions.

Unfortunately, this question has risen because we have more visibility of social work education not of social work as a profession. Social work educational courses in Indian higher education are one of the most popular courses in social sciences and are also considered job oriented courses. This fact can be simply testified by the fact that we have added almost 400 social work educational institutions in past two decades. Our identity in social sector as professional has somewhat established but again not as social work professional. We have been producing human power for employment in the field of social welfare and social development. The question of identity, visibility and credibility is being raised which is not new as it has been raised many a times on different forums earlier also. The credibility is about the quality of being believed or accepted as true, real, or honest which is expressed through its many constituent elements, such as righteousness, reliableness, trustworthiness, objectivity. These are only attained by continuous practice by professionals. The same is also required to cover a big hiatus between understanding of professional social work by the society and the community of professional social workers. The social acceptance as one of the components of a profession is still missing in our professional demeanor; however, it should not be mistaken as credibility. In our profession practice-visibility, identity and credibility are linked with each other which can be interjected with actions only. Social work education is more visible, social work profession is lesser visible while it should be vice versa. For the latter to happen, there is need of strong professional associations,

networks and more responsible educational institutions. Social Work educational institutions especially teaching fraternity have to owe this mistake/gap and have to make a commitment for developing the professional spirit in particular and professional culture in general. We need to take small steps for creating an identity in the society. We need to share our viewpoint as a profession on each social issue/ problem affecting our society. Since we, as human service professionals, are suffering with our own half hearted efforts to create a credible and visible identity in public eyes and some extent in our own eyes; we need to introspect on the quality of social work teaching, research and action.

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(The views expressed are personal not any one of those organizations to whom I am associated.)