

Human rights at the heart of the social work curriculum

Abstract for the organization of a symposium at the EASSW Conference 27, 28 and 29 June 2017

The current international definition of social work confirms this stance and states that: *“Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.”* Social work is neither a value-neutral practice nor a practice devoid of power in addressing issues of injustice and inequality. It comprises essentially a social, political and ethical mission and practice. In that sense, it could be argued that social work is a human rights profession.

To prepare future social workers for this assignment, human rights should be given an explicit place in the social work curricula at Universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences. In recent years, courses in social work have often been subject to technical and instrumental conceptions of professionalization. As a result, the normative dimension of the professionalization of social work such as human rights and social justice became underexposed. For human rights to be given more attention in the social work curricula in higher education, representatives from Universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences have been written a manifesto to ask for the recognition of human rights in the social work curricula. More in particular, five claims were formulated:

- 1) **Recognize human rights as both a socio-political framework and a framework for social practice.**
Social work needs to develop its own approach to human rights and implement this approach in social work curricula, emphasizing the fact that human rights need to be *practiced*.
- 2) **Embed human rights in the social work curricula in an integrated and explicit way.**
Explicit reflection on human rights, embedded throughout the curriculum instead of separate (elective) modules in an integrated way is therefore necessary.
- 3) **Learn how to use human rights as a framework for self-critical and politicizing social work.**
Social work education should pay attention to ensure that students learn how to read contexts and enhance their awareness of which issues of human rights and injustice arise in particular situations and how to respond to these issues.
- 4) **Work towards professional development of lecturers in the field of social work and human rights.**
For the development of a social work perspective on human rights attention is needed for further professionalization of teachers who are responsible for the different learning modules.
- 5) **Initiate research in order to boost the incorporation of human rights into the curricula of social work.**
Social work research on human rights contributes to the development of a social work perspective on human rights, and thus to the ‘Body of Knowledge’ of social work.

With the organization of this symposium we aim at exchange inspiring experiences and practices from national and international partners in how to teach human rights issues to social work students. More in particular, we want to discuss objections, pitfalls or drawbacks of the ambition to have thoroughly implemented human rights into the social work curricula. Finally, we aim at developing an international professional network of partner organizations that actively contribute in developing and disseminating human rights in social work curricula.

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Symposium paper 1: Human rights in social work curricula

This presentation addresses the second ambition stated in the manifest Human Rights at the heart of Social Work Education: *Embed human rights in the social work curricula in an integrated and explicit way*. For students to understand human rights and experiencing the full meaning and significance of human rights in social work, it is necessary that they internalize it. Explicit reflection on human rights, embedded throughout the curriculum in an integrated way, therefore is necessary. This starts with a vision of higher education and how it is further implemented throughout the curriculum. In this presentation, we want to discuss and share knowledge and experience related to embedding human rights in social work curricula.

In the first part of the presentation, our vision of how human rights should be embedded into social work curricula is presented. The second part of the presentation focusses on the current situation in the Netherlands. We make a distinction in two levels. First, the level of required courses and elective courses offered throughout the curriculum. A subject such as human rights is taught throughout the bachelor e.g. by conducting research related to human rights, by personal and professional development (reflective practitioner), or treatment methods and social work interventions. Second, the level of didactic methods, didactic teaching and exercises that are used to teach about, learn about, learn for and through human rights. For example by reflecting with help of casuistry, creating a portfolio, through games, watching movies or documentaries and having debates, forum theatre. Some examples will be presented.

If you have any information, literature references, course manuals, didactic methods, exercises or other interesting information regarding human rights education in social work that you want to share? Let us know and send an e-mail to sociaalwerk.en.mensenrechten@gmail.com

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Symposium paper 2: Teaching human rights in social care: experiences from Ireland

Social Care work in Ireland is a profession at present undergoing legal regulation by the statutory body called CORU. In March 2016 CORU published draft *Standards of Proficiency for Social Care Workers*. These standards locate human rights as a central tenant of contemporary Social Care practice. The proficiency domain of *Professional Knowledge and Skills* specifies that graduates of educational programmes in Social Care must understand and be able to apply principles of social justice. These include being able to challenge negative discrimination and unjust policies and practices, and work towards social inclusion. This domain further specifies the application of a human rights-based approach to Social Care Work which includes the promotion of the service user's participation in his or her care; applying principles of non-discrimination; empowerment of other staff members and service users to realise their rights; awareness of the legality of actions within a service, including the need to comply with any relevant legislative requirements while adhering to human rights obligations.

It is clear that the emerging Social Care professional model in Ireland centralises human rights as a core component of practice. This paper reflects on the experience of teaching human rights to social care undergraduate students and considers how human rights and ethical principles can be further embedded into the curriculum.

In our experience many students initially feel intimidated by what they believe to be a very complex area of law. One of the techniques that worked well to address this was that students spent time reading and reflecting on the texts of the main human rights instruments. They then progressed to consider ways in which human rights issues can be asserted in professional Social Care. This paper explores the ways in which a human rights-based approach can bring unity of purpose to professional study and practice.

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Symposium paper 3: The Unesco ASPnet and Human Rights in Social Work

The presentation introduces how the Unesco ASPnet can serve as a (inter)national framework for social work students to ensure that they learn how to read contexts and enhance their awareness which issues human rights and (in)justice arise in particular situations and how to respond to these issues.

The first part of the presentation introduces the basic concept of the ASP net and its value for curriculum development for social work. UNESCO established the [Associated Schools Project Network \(ASPnet\)](#) in 1953 to encourage schools worldwide to educate students on issues related to UNESCO's overarching goal of promoting peace and international understanding. The program now includes 9000 thousand educational institutions in over 180 countries.

ASPnet schools work in four key areas: intercultural learning, peace and human rights, education for sustainable development, and the United Nations priorities. ASPnet schools integrate these priorities throughout their curriculum, celebrate internationally-recognized days (like Human Rights Day), participate in international exchanges, and join UNESCO-affiliated education programs. Schools ranging from preschools and elementary schools to university education departments are eligible for ASPnet membership.

The second part of the presentation will demonstrate inspiring experiences and practices from social work students in ASP projects and activities with human rights as context. The world day for diversity and dialogue on 21th May will be presented as a fertile project environment for creating integrated approaches where social workers and students can cooperate and promote freedom of speech with citizens and different kind of organizations and professionals. The handbook for Human Rights Educator of the UN and Equitas will be presented as a good awareness tool on human rights issues during their internship.

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Symposium paper 4: Researching Human Rights in Social Work practice

Social work nowadays often is referred to as a 'human rights profession'. However, from a historical and critical perspective the link between social work and human rights is not always that obvious. Social work over time has had an ambiguous attitude towards rights based approaches, reducing for example social problems like poverty to individual characteristics rather than analyzing it in terms of structural factors and rights. Also the current neo-liberal context, with fundamental rights under pressure and social work often being instrumentalised, makes the implementation of a human rights approach rather problematic.

But when we consider human rights to be an important frame of reference for social work practice, offering an analytical, normative and socio-political framework, the question is what exactly this means for daily practice, how social workers translate and apply a human rights perspective in their practices, what obstacles they meet, and how it influences and shapes professional practice?

As mentioned in the manifesto, research can be an effective tool that contributes to the further development of social work education. Research on human rights and social work practice can help to reinforce our understanding of how human rights can inform social work practice and the ability to translate human rights into practice. It will contribute to the development of a social work perspective on human rights and enrich social work education with practical knowledge about human rights.

In this contribution we will present a practice based research, recently initiated, and involving practitioners of different local organisations, focusing on if and how human rights are being used in various fields of social work, how it influences social work practice, and what effects it generates. We will focus on the research carried out so far, explore opportunities for joint international comparative research and its relation to social work education.

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Symposium paper 5: The Capability Approach and Human Rights in Social Work

The presentation introduces the Capability Approach (CA) as a normative, evaluative and action paradigm based on the concepts of human freedom and human development. The CA offers an overarching framework for socially just policy and rights based social work practice that challenges the ascent of neo-liberalism and the individualization of risk. Its core argument is that people should have the right to lead the life they want with reason. Pivotal in the CA is that human wellbeing; quality of life or the good life; should be the focus of human development instead of economic based factors. Though this seems obvious, it is not the case in the social policies of many EU countries. The presentation introduces the founders and foundations of the Capability Approach. Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen and feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum created this human developmental theory of freedom based on the key terms: capabilities, functionings, commodities, conversion factors and human agency. We relate these concepts with the values, position and mission of social work as defined in the IFSW global definition of social work. In the second part of the presentation we focus on social work as a human rights profession. According to the IFSW global definition of social work principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Human rights emphasize the importance of freedoms, including freedom in the form of opportunities and therefore connect to the core concepts of the Capability Approach. We present a case of an integrated approach where social workers promote freedom and create opportunities for mentally disabled people by implementing human rights in practice.

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The presenters are members of the Human Development and Capability Association and the Dutch-Flemish Network for the application of the Capability Approach in the Social Domain.

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General Symposium information:

The symposium will be held in English.

The symposium links up with the following conference themes:

- *Ethical issues: teaching ethics and being ethical teacher*
- *Development of curriculum and course contents in social work*