

Dear colleagues

The International Association Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) are collaborating to develop a set of common social work principles, which we hope to have adopted at the General Assemblies of IASSW and IFSW in July 2018. This draft document (that includes principles developed by the IFSW Executive) was developed by the IASSW Ethics Taskforce.

We are beginning a process of widespread consultation and we would really like to hear your views.

Please send your responses to Professor Vishanthie Sewpaul, Chair of the IASSW Ethics Taskforce, before **31 January 2018**.

E-mail: [SewpaulV@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:SewpaulV@ukzn.ac.za)

## Statement of Ethical Principles: Social Work

This Statement of Ethical Principles (hereafter referred to as Statement) is designed to facilitate social workers'<sup>1</sup> aspirations towards the highest possible standards of ethical practice, through processes of constant debate, self-reflection, willingness to deal with ambiguities, and to engage in ethically acceptable processes of decision-making to achieve ethical outcomes. This Statement, makes an explicit commitment to value the people with whom social workers engage. Implicit in our acceptance of this Statement, as social work educators, researchers and practitioners is our commitment to uphold the core values and principles of the social work profession as set out in this Statement. A Statement such as this works best when it reflects the moral impulse on the part of the social worker, with a commitment to beneficence, nonmalficience, dignity and to the universal and inalienable rights of people.

---

<sup>1</sup> The concept "social worker" is used to be inclusive of social work educators, researchers, and practitioners; and to categories of social workers, variously called in different contexts, such as youth workers, community development practitioners, child care workers, probation officers and social welfare officers, except where such categories are separate and independent of social work and might have their own codes of ethics.

The IASSW and IFSW acknowledges that no Statement of Ethical Principles, nor any Code of Ethics can assure ethical practice, but requires that social workers support the realization of the principles in this Statement.

Recognising the embodied vulnerability of ourselves and, more particularly of the people whom we engage with, this Statement is designed to ensure multiple levels of accountability: towards the individuals, families, groups, and communities that we engage with; ourselves; the organisations that we work in; and the broader societal contexts within which social work education, practice and research is located.

We recognize a need for a fundamental theoretical and ethical shift from situating human dignity primarily within the context of autonomy to recognising the inter-subjectivity of human dignity and human rights. Of particular salience to social work, is the concept of the embodied vulnerability of humanity<sup>2</sup>, and the thesis that dignity predicated on individual autonomy is a fantasy born of “a desire to escape the risks of being vulnerable”, and the importance of conceiving of human rights, not in a narrow sense of “inhering within individuals” but rights located “between” individuals.<sup>3</sup>

Social work, as a profession, is dynamic, critical, and engaged with people and their multiple environments. There are an array of values and ethical principles, which inform us as social workers; this reality is recognized by the 2014 Global Definition of Social Work, which is layered, and encourages regional and national amplifications. Likewise, this Statement may be amplified and/or adapted at national and/or regional levels, as long as they are in accordance with the intention and spirit of this Statement of Ethical Principles document.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bergoffen, D. (2003). “February 22, 2001: Toward a politics of the vulnerable body”, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 18 (1): 116-34

<sup>3</sup> Feder, E. K. (2014). *Making sense of intersex: Changing ethical perspectives in biomedicine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (p. 179).

This Statement serves as an overarching framework for social workers to work towards the highest possible standards of professional integrity. Each of the principles in this Statement must be read in relation to each other and not separately.

Social work employer organisations, and education and research institutions must work towards the provision of infrastructural arrangements, and developmental opportunities to facilitate the achievement of ethical imperatives. It is not only social workers who must ensure ethical practices; organisations must fulfil their obligations in supporting ethical practices<sup>4</sup>.

This Statement takes as its point of departure the 2014 Global Definition of Social Work, which reads as:

*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*

## **Principles:**

### **1) Recognition of the embodied vulnerability of human beings**

- 1.1) Recognising the embodied vulnerability of all human beings<sup>5</sup>, social workers work towards making being there for the *Other* (people who social workers work with) one of the foundations of ethical practice, where the social worker, accords the unique *Other* that priority assigned to the Self. The aspiration is to treat all human beings as they want to be treated, and as we would like to be treated.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Agius, A., & Jones, D. N. (2012). *Effective and ethical working environments for social work: The responsibilities of employers of social workers*. Bern: International Federation of Social Workers. Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/policies/effective-and-ethical-working-environments-for-social-work-the-responsibilities-of-employers-of-social-workers-3/#.UFvw6fZe0Jc.email>.

<sup>5</sup> All people are embodied beings; they are not fragmented, isolated entities, where the Self is considered as separate and independent of the roles that people perform. By virtue of being in the world all people carry varying degrees of vulnerabilities. This principle challenges the notion of the social worker as expert, detached and neutral, and supports the idea of a shared embodied vulnerability with all of humanity. This principle must be read in relation to 1.2 for further clarification.

- 1.2) The recognition of such embodied vulnerability calls for critically reflexive social workers. As social workers we (as do the people whom we engage with) bring to the working relationship our histories, pains and joys, values, and our religious, spiritual and cultural orientations. Critical reflection on how the personal influences the professional and vice versa, must be the foundation of everyday ethical practice.
- 1.3) Social workers demonstrate respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings, in attitude, word and deed. This calls for differentiation between unconditional positive regard for persons and people's attitudes, behaviours and/or socio-political and cultural environments that may be deemed to be in need of change. While we respect persons, we challenge beliefs and actions of those persons where they may devalue or stigmatise other persons.
- 1.4) The recognition of our embodied vulnerability does not negate the strengths and inherent dignity that all human beings possess. Tuning into, acknowledging and dealing with vulnerabilities, is constitutive of strengths, and a source of growth, development and human flourishing.

## **2. Human Rights**

- 2.1 Social workers embrace and promote the fundamental and inalienable rights of all human beings, as reflected in human rights instruments and conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the International Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.
- 2.2 Social workers support 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation rights.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.3 Recognising that culture often serves as a disguise to violate human rights, social workers serve as cultural mediators to enable consensus building, to find an appropriate balance between competing human rights, and to advocate for the rights of marginalized, stigmatized, excluded and oppressed individuals and groups of persons.
- 2.4 Social workers recognize that human rights need to coexist alongside collective responsibility, understanding that individual human rights can only be realized on a day-to-day basis if people take responsibility for

---

<sup>6</sup> 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation rights are inter-dependent. First-generation rights include civil and political rights such as free speech and conscience and freedom from torture and arbitrary detention. Second-generation rights are social, economic and cultural and include the rights to reasonable levels of education, health care and housing and minority language rights, while third-generation rights focus on the natural world, such as the right to a clean and healthy environment, to inter-generational equity and the right to species biodiversity

each other and the environment, and if they work towards creating reciprocal relationships within communities.

- 2.5 Social workers advocate for the dignity and rights of people at all levels, and they realize and respect the inter-dependence among people and between people and the environment.

### **3. The Right to Self-Determination**

- 3.1 Social workers recognize people as self-determining moral agents.
- 3.2 Social workers respect and promote people's rights to make their own choices and decisions, provided this does not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others.
- 3.3 Social workers recognize that while individuals are self-determining in that they have the freedom to think – perhaps a most fundamental freedom - which cannot be taken away, the freedom to think does not guarantee the exercise of self-determination.
- 3.4 Social workers recognize that the taken for granted assumption of the right to self-determination in many contexts denies the often oppressive, marginalizing and exclusionary socio-cultural, economic and political determinants of human development and functioning.
- 3.5 Social workers acknowledge the realities of people, whose self-determination is often curtailed on account of various factors, including the control functions that social workers exercise in fields such as child protection, criminal justice and mental health.
- 3.6 Social workers recognize that the agency of individuals intersect with structural conditions, and that the ideal of self-determination requires resources like good education, decent employment, access to health care, secure and stable housing, safety and security, adequate sanitation, clean water and pollution free environments.
- 3.7 Social workers recognize that dominant socio-political and cultural discourses and practices contribute to many taken-for-granted assumptions and entrapments of thinking, which manifest in the normalization and naturalization of a range of prejudices, oppressions, marginalizations, violence and exclusions.
- 3.8 Social workers recognize that developing strategies to heighten critical consciousness that challenge and change taken-for-granted assumptions for ourselves and the people whom we engage with, forms the basis of everyday ethical, anti-oppressive practice.

### **4. The Right to Participation**

4.1 While participation is power, social workers recognize that it takes power to participate.

4.2 Social workers work towards building the self-esteem, and the capabilities of people, resourcing people to participate fully on their

societies, and promoting their full involvement and participation in all aspects of decisions and actions that affect their lives.

## **5. Treating people as whole persons**

5.1 Social workers recognize the biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of people's lives, and understand and treat all people as whole persons.

5.2 Such recognition is used to formulate holistic assessments and interventions, with the full participation of people, organisations and communities with whom social workers engage.

5.3 Recognising the complexities of people as biopsychosocial, spiritual beings, social workers are cognizant that no one profession is the panacea for the resolution of issues, and they collaborate with members of inter-disciplinary teams to achieve holistic, favourable results.

## **6. Respect for Confidentiality and Privacy**

6.1 Social workers respect, and work in accordance with people's rights to confidentiality and privacy.

6.2 Such rights to confidentiality and privacy might be breached when there is risk of harm to the self or to others.

6.3 Social workers recognise that a person's right to confidentiality and privacy might be restricted in certain statutory settings.

6.4 Social workers inform the people that they work with, about such limits to confidentiality and privacy.

6.5 In some cultural contexts, characterized by we-centered, communitarian living, social workers respect and abide by the people's right and choice to shared confidentiality.

## **7. Social Justice**

Social workers promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people whom they work with. This means:

### **7.1 Challenging Discrimination**

7.1.1 Social workers challenge discrimination, which includes but is not limited to: physical and/or mental differential abilities, capacity, age, culture, gender or sex, ethnicity, language, religion, spiritual beliefs, political opinions, socio-economic status, poverty, class, type of family, relationship status, civil status,

nationality (or lack thereof), other physical characteristics, and sexual orientation.

7.1.2 Social workers work against institutionalized discrimination in all its forms.

## **7.2 Respect for Diversity**

7.2.1 Social workers work towards strengthening inclusive communities that respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of societies, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.

7.2.1 Social workers recognize that respect for, and acceptance of diversity must not be used to stretch the boundaries of moral relativism, to the point where the rights of some groups of persons, including the right to life (e.g. of women and sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities) are violated.

7.2.2 Social workers recognise that constructing and dealing with socio-economic concerns as cultural issues often denies or minimizes underlying structural factors that contribute to psychosocial challenges.

### **7.2.3 Access to Equitable Resources**

7.2.3.1 Social workers advocate and work towards access and the equitable distribution of resources and wealth.

7.2.3.2 Social workers support people's right to sustainable income, which could be provided through decent work and/or universal social security.

### **7.2.4 Challenge Unjust Policies and Practices**

7.2.4.1 Social workers bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public, situations where policies and resources are inadequate or where policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful. In doing so, social workers must not be penalized.

7.2.4.2. Social workers must bear in mind that resistance often brings counter-resistance, which might threaten their own safety and security and they must make judicious choices in such circumstances. Social workers are not compelled to act when they would put themselves at risk. However, they are encouraged to call upon their national and/or international colleagues to be their voices where their safety is at risk.

7.2.4.3 Global bodies such as the IASSW and IFSW, in collaboration with social workers' employers and/or national professional/statutory organisations, have an obligation to protect and defend social workers who are threatened in the line of duty, because of their opinions or when they draw attention to injustice.

## **7.2. 5 Building Solidarity**

Social workers actively work in communities and with their colleagues, within and outside of the profession, to build networks of solidarity to work towards transformational change and inclusive and responsible societies.

## **8. Use of technology and social media**

8.1 The ethical principles elucidated in this Statement applies to all contexts of SW practice, education and research, whether it involves direct face-to-face contact or use of e-technology and social media<sup>7</sup>.

8.2 Social workers must recognize that the use of e-technology and social media may pose particular threats to the principles of confidentiality and privacy, and must take the necessary precautions to guard against this. Informed consent must make such possible limits to confidentiality and privacy clear.

8.3 Social workers appreciate that verifying the identity of users of online services, including their ages and geographic locations may pose a challenge e.g. with being registered and/or licensed to practice in one location, when on-line users are located outside of the jurisdiction, or the difficulty of ensuring that the person is of majority age to provide informed consent. Social workers need to discuss the pragmatic and ethical implications of issues such as these with their registration and/or licensing boards.

8.4 Social workers recognize the potential pitfalls of asynchronous communication, and of the unverifiable identities of persons that they are working with, for example when suicidal or homicidal intentions, child sexual abuse or domestic violence are disclosed. Online counselling does not preclude the social workers duty to report, as per national statutory requirements, and to protect the person or others from potential harm or danger.

8.5 In using group based e-technology services (e.g. an e-mail or Whatsapp group) social workers ensure that they abide by the principle of inclusivity, and that no person is excluded from participation through deliberate omission.

8.6. Social workers do not post pictures of people that they work with without their consent, and they must not post pictures of children, without the consent of their parents or legal guardians.

---

<sup>7</sup> These include e.g. counselling and research via e-mail; videos; on-line self help groups or use of Facebook and Whatsapp that may be used as stand alones or in conjunction with face-to-face interaction.

8.7. Neither social workers nor their supervisors or managers should use media platforms to air personal conflicts and grievances.

8.8. With regard to social work education, as reflected in 6.4 of the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training, educators must ensure high quality of the educational programme whatever the mode of delivery. In the case of distance, mixed-mode, decentralised and/or internet- based teaching, mechanisms for locally-based instruction and supervision should be put in place, especially with regard to the fieldwork component of the programme.

8.9 It is the responsibility of the social worker to provide proof of ethical practice, irrespective of the mode of practice.

## **9. Professional Integrity**

It is the responsibility of the national organizations to develop and regularly update their own codes of ethics or ethical guidelines, to be consistent with this Statement, taking into account local situations. It is also the responsibility of national organizations to inform social workers and schools of social work about this Statement of Ethical Principles and their own ethical guidelines. Social workers should act in accordance with the current ethical code or guidelines in their country.

9.1 Social workers must hold the required qualifications, and develop and maintain the required skills and competences to do their job.

9.2 Social workers support peace and non-violence. Social workers may work alongside military personnel for humanitarian purposes and work towards peace building and reconstruction. Social workers must not allow their knowledge and skills to be used for inhumane purposes, such as torture, military surveillance or terrorism, and they should not use weapons in their professional or personal capacities against people.

9.3 Social workers must act with integrity. This includes not abusing their positions of power and relationships of trust with people that they engage with; they recognize the boundaries between personal and professional life, and do not abuse their positions for personal material benefit or gain.

9.4 Social workers recognize that the giving and receiving of small gifts is a part of the social work and cultural experience in some cultures and countries. In such situations this should be referenced in the country's code of ethics.

9.5 Social workers and their employers recognize the need to take steps to care for themselves professionally and personally to prevent burnout and to enhance working relationships and outcomes.

9.6 Social workers acknowledge that they are accountable for their actions to the people they work with, their colleagues, their employers, the professional associations, and local, national and international laws and conventions, and

that these accountabilities may conflict, which must be negotiated to minimize harm to all persons.

9.7 Social workers, and their employing bodies, foster and engage in debate to facilitate ethically informed decisions.

9.8 Social workers are accountable for their decisions, choices and actions and must be prepared to be transparent about the reasons for their decisions. Decisions should always be informed by empirical evidence and/or practice wisdom, and ethical, legal and cultural considerations.

9.9 Social workers, and their employing bodies, work to create conditions in their workplace environments and in their countries, where the principles of this Statement and those of their own national codes are discussed, evaluated and upheld.