

## **AGENDA 11**

### **Social Work Professional Autonomy and Personal Commitment**

As a helping profession, social work stresses the mission and personal commitment of social workers as integral parts of the process of service provision. This is also what the society and the sector expect. On the other hand, however, professional autonomy of a social worker also forms the foundation of professional service. The maintenance of this professional autonomy is also of utmost concern for the sector. It is believed that professional autonomy and personal commitment will be an important agenda for the development of social work in future.

#### **Major Trends**

The break between the ideal and the reality – The idea of survival and development of managerialism has led social workers to spend too much of their time on documentation and data for reporting service effectiveness with insufficient time for direct service. While administrative accountability is originally meant to reflect the effectiveness of the work, it now seems that the execution of work instruction aims only to reach or go beyond the target. This gives a real example of “putting the cart before the horse”!

Studying has become merely a personal pursuit of career development. It makes the students believe in the myth of “getting a bachelor degree or more advanced diploma guarantees promotion and salary rise”.

Sophisticated professional skills may not be helpful in tackling the needs and difficulties of the service recipients immediately and more effectively. Rather, it may only help to relieve and heal the feeling of powerlessness of the social workers. (Example: the counseling experience shared by Mr. Chu Chi Keung in *Sparkles of Light*)

Social workers who have seriously thought over the profession have either quit or put themselves under constant pressure and fear in order to keep their job. For the minority who has been lucky enough to be spared from the serious blow so far, how long can they hold on under such circumstance? In the current situation, keeping an occupation is already not easy. One should be grateful if there is no intense office politics or administrative pressure. In fact, the so-called professional development has failed to take care of the value of social justice, which was emphasized in the historical development of social work, even though social workers can provide some solutions to certain social problems. The so-called vocation, that the notion of integrating our life and values with the concept, knowledge and skills of social work as a calling, does not seem to exist any more in the social work profession nowadays.

#### **Concerns**

As a profession stressing “helping people to help themselves”, the foundation of social work lies in respecting human dignity, valuing human rights and social justice and implementing the professional ethics and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such values and ideals of social work seem to be incompatible with nowadays Hong Kong society, where people believe in free market and embrace economic rationality.

Thus, it is an unpleasing task for social workers to embrace mission, commit themselves to social justice and defend the rights of the service recipients.

Professional autonomy of social workers is built on the basis of professional knowledge and competence. Lack of autonomy in social work profession will in turn severely undermine the growth of professional knowledge and competence of the social workers, lower their indispensable professional status, and limit the development of their professional role and functions. Actually, the “basis of professional knowledge and competence” should contain diverse and copious elements found in the history of social work professional development. Simply put, while clinical treatment constitutes part of the basis of professional knowledge and competence, fighting for human rights, dignity and social justice by resorting to the concept and means of community organizing and non-violent resistance also falls within the scope of the social work profession.

To handle the current situation in a pragmatic manner, it is necessary to find, in the actual social, economic and political contexts, a win-win solution that will not sacrifice the principle of social work under the contextual limitations (such as managerialism, marketization of public service and low tax rate etc.). In particular, whether each organization can analyze the above macro-environment rationally and consciously so as to re-establish its mission and rely upon the participation of “all” colleagues or staff (from executive committee members, management and supervising level to frontline workers). While active intervention of the highest management level is necessary, the key is that such intervention cannot be based only upon a business model. However, in the past few years, the performance of the highest management level in general has really aroused anxiety among the frontline workers.

### **Challenges Ahead**

Professional autonomy is not equal to professional hegemony. Social work does not exist for the sole purpose of establishing and expanding its social status. To make service recipients rely on and believe in the social work profession is a distorted professional development thought. The meaning of social work professional autonomy should start from the self-respect and recognition of the diverse features in the development history of the social work profession before it is promoted to the public, hoping to gain the respect of the public (not necessarily support, but not going so far as to turn down) for our professional viewpoint and perspective.

Therefore, professional autonomy means that when the professionals are fulfilling their duties, they neither give up their principles because of external pressure nor submit to manipulation. Instead, they should make judgment and choices pursuant to their professional missions, values and principles. “Professional autonomy” should refer to the rights to exercise full discretion over the duties and to refuse powers and interests from interfering with the exercise of professional judgment. Autonomy is the key to the professional status of social work. The establishment of behavioral standards by professionals according to their independent professional judgment is the core element in judging our professional standard. However, under the influence of neoliberalism, the accountability culture is becoming more and more important in the

public service sectors, including social welfare, education, medical care and public housing during the past decade,. The culture stresses reporting figures, quality assurance over the systems, treating service recipients as customers while promoting the concept of “the customer comes first”, formalizing and standardizing professional intervention and services, trying to control the risk by establishing more refined risk assessment tools and manualizing intervention methods. All these are the administrators’ attempts to monitor service quality and upgrade service standard. Unfortunately, in this way, there is no longer such thing as professional judgment, which happens to be the most valuable asset of the experienced social workers.

In addition, the civic awareness of citizens continues to rise as Hong Kong society develops in general. The professional autonomy of social work must not only cater to the development needs of the sector, but also be on the same page with the interests of the service recipients so as to meet the moral requirements of the social work profession. How to drive the participation of service recipients in promoting social progress is something that a professional social worker should value and emphasize.

From the perspective of work, the professional practice of the management level and frontline workers is also affected by the current social welfare environment. Under the current development trend of managerialism, focusing on managerial competence more than professional qualification will inevitably make us anxious about the condition of “amateurs leading professionals”. Whether the management is assumed by the social work professionals is not critical. The key of the problem is: how to make these administrators persist with or share the social work values while carrying out the managerial work. This is a direction that we have to explore further. In recent years, because of the change in service funding mode, certain types of social work (such as school-based social work service in primary schools) do not even have a channel or platform for mutual communication, not to mention professional autonomy and personal commitment.

### **Possible Actions**

To conclude from the above viewpoints and situations, social workers in Hong Kong seem to be placed under a very restrictive historical situation at the moment. It appears that the workers who have thought over and braved the reality can only either live with it helplessly, or choose to keep plugging away at the tasks that they can handle... But this should not be the case! Even though we cannot change the macro-environment, we can at least act as a guardian to prevent us from being moved by this trend and pass on the diversified social work values and practices that we ought to have. Below are the specific actions that we can think of:

1. Reconstruct a discourse on social work which the public finds intelligible and receptive
2. Reform the current organizational governance model, such as:
  - Promoting the participation of the staff and service recipients in agencies
  - Providing platform for direct and open communication between the frontline workers and senior management
  - Training the senior personnels, such as the management committee of an

- organization, and adding the elements of social work values and their relationship with the operation of an organization
3. Formulating a funding charter in respect of non-profit service projects to prevent funders from intervening at their will in the work that should be implemented based on the professional judgment of organization.

How do you think about the themes/topics above? Are there any other themes left out that you would like to raise? What are other issues or problems related to this Agenda that you think should be explored and discussed?

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