

SOCIAL WORKER PERSPECTIVE ON WORKING CONDITIONS, SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE PROFESSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ITS ADVANCEMENT

ABSTRACT

Social work represents an applied profession and academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, empowerment and emancipation of individuals. This paper aimed to gain an insight into the perspective of social workers on working conditions and social attitudes towards the profession, with recommendations from professionals for advancing its current position. The thematic analysis was applied within a qualitative research framework. Research results indicated negative perceptions on working conditions among research participants – social workers in Croatia – pinpointing issues, such as financial insecurity, understaffing, inadequate office space, shortage of business vehicles for field visits, an excessive scope of work and administrative burden, disrespect for social workers' dignity, and difficulties in establishing cooperation with ser-

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vice users. Social workers' recommendations for addressing these issues concerned: improving working conditions (amendments to the legal framework, employment of professional staff and professional training), improving workplace security (reinforcing the public official status and increasing security staff), and promoting the social work profession, involving enhanced media relations, consistent communication and raising public awareness through best practices from the organisations and institutions in the system.

INTRODUCTION

Social work represents an applied profession and scientific discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, empowerment and emancipation of individuals (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). The social work profession must address many unmet needs of individuals, families, and communities in quite diverse personal and social circumstances (Knežević, 2013). The social work activity relies on a set of individual and joint professional procedures based on the knowledge base and principles of the social work discipline and practice. It involves providing information, assessment, social work interventions, individual planning, counselling, casework, psychosocial support, early intervention, assistance with inclusion in early childhood and school education programmes (integration), family mediation, social mentorship, supervision, psychosocial and psychotherapeutic counselling, crisis intervention, evaluation, expertise, processing and drafting paperwork, legal advocacy, public advocacy and empowerment, social action, social planning, professional and operational support, social management, cooperation with stakeholders, human potential development and management, educational and research activity, public relations, community development and organisation (Act on Social Work Activities, Official Gazette No 16/19, Article 3). Indeed, social work serves the public interest of the Republic of Croatia, providing social assistance to vulnerable individuals, including persons living under adverse personal or family circumstances. Its services involve prevention and promotion of change, assistance in meeting the basic life needs, and support to individuals, families, and groups, aiming to improve their quality of life, empower service users, and ensure social inclusion (Social Welfare Act, Official Gazette 2020, Article 3).

According to the *job characteristics model*, the critical prerequisites of professional success in all occupations, including social work, are three psychological states in the workplace, linked to high work motivation, high-quality performance, and job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1974, in Robbins & Judge, 2013). The latter presumes that employees consider their work meaningful, have a sense of responsibility for the work process and its outcomes, and can identify the results of their

work. Notably, this model does not consider workplace safety and adequate physical working conditions, seen as prerequisites of the modern workplace. Active promotion of the social work profession and raising awareness on social work and human rights are pivotal for familiarising the general public with the profession (Emmert, 2011). Underpinning an active role of social work, Amadasun (2020) called for an urgent social work response to raise the public appreciation for the profession within the social welfare system, against the human toll and undermined human rights arising from the current pandemic. Reviewing the social welfare system, Družić Ljubotina & Friščić (2014) observed that social workers performed over 140 different tasks in the scope of their work. Moreover, Ilijaš (2021) noted the challenges affecting the social work practice given the 150 public duties assigned to social workers. Social workers often felt helpless at work, in sharp contrast to a high sense of responsibility for the work process and results. Disapproving comments and attitudes towards the profession reflected considerable public dissatisfaction with the current operation of the system. Moreover, the public seemed to casually assign collective blame to social workers for the issues affecting the social welfare system (Zagreb Psychological Society, 2020). According to a survey from the Croatian Chamber of Social Workers, 29 social workers experienced physical violence, and additional 271 professionals faced verbal abuse in the workplace in the previous year (HKSR, 2019). Čulo (2021:1) reflected on the public perception of the social work profession: *“Social workers are the silent backbone of society, compromising their safety, physical and mental health every day in an attempt to heal social fractures. The social work occupation has no spokesperson. The decisions of the social welfare centres and direct interventions from the social work practice attract significant media attention and disapproving comments from the public. Against this backdrop, social workers cannot “defend” themselves as they are bound by professional secrecy, preventing them from disclosing any information on the cases in question. Media reporting on the interventions is hence quite biased. Against dwindling trust in the overall effectiveness of public services, stereotypes emerge, labelling social workers as the “social parasites” and “child thieves” and accusing them of “reacting too late”.*

Based on a sample of 50 social workers employed in health care in Slovenia, Jeleč Kaker (2009) determined that the burnout syndrome intensity was mid-range, against a clear connection between emotional exhaustion and workload, arising from conflicting professional and administrative tasks and ambiguous professional roles. Social workers often failed to acknowledge the symptoms of depression and did not seek professional help, fearing the reactions from their immediate personal and professional environment. Their stress may result from work overload, work schedule, understaffing, oppressive bureaucratic environment, and inadequate support (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Marković (2012; in Sharifi, 2012) observed an

unfavourable attitude of the media towards social workers, who, in turn, regarded their communication with the public as poor, especially in terms of information availability. The same author noted social workers' conviction of their bad public image and scepticism towards the media, entailing an inevitable breakdown in public communication. The media impact on society and the need for professional cooperation concerned all professions, including social work. Namely, there were two tangible effects of good public image: funding and support to noteworthy projects and programmes of local community interest (Hajoš & Skoko, 2009). Furthermore, a positive public perception of the social welfare system equally facilitated cooperation with stakeholders in the local community and efficient execution of the primary tasks of social work. It allowed social workers to act in the best interest of individuals and vulnerable groups, protect children, youth and families, and strengthen community and social capacities for coping with current challenges, as well as the upcoming and unpredictable calamities, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, earthquakes, floods and other crisis circumstances.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aimed to gain an insight into the perspective of professionals in the social welfare system on working conditions and social attitudes towards the profession and obtain social workers' recommendations for advancing the current position of the profession. The following research questions were defined in line with the research aim:

1. How do social workers describe the environment in which they perform social work activities?
2. How do social workers perceive social attitudes towards the social work profession?
3. Which recommendations do social workers formulate for advancing the social work profession?

Research implementation and data collection

Research started with an e-mail invitation to the Social Welfare Centre Zagreb, explaining the purpose and the aim of the research study. Upon confirmation of interest from the centre, a letter of intent was sent to the branches of the Social Welfare Centre Zagreb. Formal oral consent from individual social workers ensued. Social workers who wanted to participate in the research study contacted researchers to arrange the time and location for the interviews. A direct invitation was also

sent to social workers in associations and other social welfare institutions. Upon their consent, social workers confirmed the time and location for the interviews. The interview arrangements conformed to the preferences of research participants, generally involving their business offices at a convenient time. They were guaranteed voluntary participation, data confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were asked for consent to record the interviews, stipulating that only the research team could access the recordings. The interviews took place in November and December 2019.

Research participants

Intentional sampling was used to select research participants having considerable experience and information concerning the research aim. The research sample included employed social workers with at least five years of professional experience at the time of the interviews. The sample comprised social workers (N=23) employed in institutions (N=17) and associations (N=6) in the city of Zagreb. Data collection took place in November and December 2019. The statements of the only male research participant were transcribed in feminine form to ensure his anonymity and data confidentiality. The research participants were 39 on average, and they had 14 years of professional experience.

Methods of data processing and analysis

The empirical evidence was collected through semi-structured interviews within a qualitative research framework and in line with a structured research protocol. Interviews lasted 36 minutes on average. Thematic analysis was applied in data processing, given its wide applicability to different theoretical and epistemological contexts. With the theoretical liberty it offered, the thematic analysis represented a flexible and efficient research method producing a detailed and complex set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data processing involved six stages: studying the empirical evidence, generating initial codes, identifying themes among codes, further analysis of themes, defining individual theme(s), and drafting the final report. Research results were subjected to a triple independent analysis to ensure data validity and reliability. The process started with a multiple reading of transcripts by three researchers, identifying answers relevant for the research aim and research questions and summarising individual analyses. Participant statements were marked by ordinal numbers with codes from SR1 to SR23 to ensure confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are presented through three thematic areas in line with the research framework: working environment of the social work practice, perceived social attitudes towards the social work profession and recommendations for advancing the profession.

Working environment of the social work practice

Table 1 Working environment of the social work practice

THEMATIC AREA: Working environment of the social work practice	
CATEGORIES	CODES
Working conditions	Financial insecurity
	Shortage of professional staff
	Inadequate office space
	Shortage of business vehicles
	Excessive scope of work and administrative burden
	Difficulties in establishing cooperation with service users
	Aggressive service users
	Occurrence of crisis situations
	Supportive and collaborative professional team
Workplace safety and security	Workplace security
	Sense of peril during field visits
	Sense of safety in the presence of colleagues
	Introduction of security measures after tragic incidents
	Inadequate security
Public official status	Granting rights and increasing responsibility
	Discrimination against other professional workers
	Ineffectiveness against aggressive behaviour from service users

While describing the working conditions, research participants pointed to **financial insecurity** affecting workers in associations: *“And...um...our financing is, in fact, exclusively tied to project funding. Therefore, we always have this, let’s say...um...feeling that we are not 100% certain about our salaries.”* (SR1). Namely, social work

in the non-profit sector commonly presumed financial dependence on donations and the degree of social recognition for the non-profit sector (Alfirević et al., 2013). According to a research study by Orešković Vrbanec (2018) involving 90 associations, they generally provided services in local communities that involved raising the culture and quality of life (14.6%), psychosocial support (12.14%), counselling for different groups of the population (11.32%), educational services, professional development training, and lifelong learning (8.23%). The associations offered a wide range of quality, integrated support services to vulnerable groups, including families, parents, and children in local communities. However, the wide availability of different services for individuals and families in their immediate environment required adequate funding and human resources.

Participants further suggested a **shortage of social workers and other professional staff**: *“Our team is understaffed; we have many service users...”* (SR11); *“Two of our colleagues cover only a fraction of tasks at the retirement home; we are understaffed”* (SR2). Indicative of the situation in the social welfare system, social welfare institutions employed 8,880 workers in 2014, followed by a ban on employment until 2018. As a result, the number of employees decreased to 6,900 in 2018, while the unions warned the sector was understaffed by 20% in 2014 (SZDSSH, 2019). Participants considered that **inadequate office space** considerably affected the quality and confidentiality of service provision: *“Two or even three of us share the same office space”* (SR10); *“The ratio of social workers to service users is unbalanced; we are understaffed in fieldwork and the employment policy does not respond to the needs of professional practice”* (SR7). Social workers called upon employers to promote quality working conditions with more support, consideration and recognition of social workers for their work (Tham & Meagher, 2009). In Sweden, statistics showed that 30% of social workers left the profession in 2015 on average, further increasing to 34% in 2016 (Akademiker för bundet, 2017).

Although social work practice presupposes fieldwork, research participants indicated a **shortage of business vehicles**: *“...I am exasperated by the unavailability of business vehicles which prevents us from making all the visits necessary or appointed for that day...”* (SR19). Mänttari-Van DerKuip (2014) found that as the economic pressure increased, the resources for an ethical and responsible social work practice decreased. Participants further pointed to an **excessive scope of work and administrative burden**: *“Well, the workload is considerable; the job is complex and highly responsible, and yet, there is too much work. This is the biggest problem”* (SR6); *“Juggling tasks and mounting administrative work”* (SR15). Astvik, Welander, & Larsson (2020) generally linked excessive job demands and understaffing to an increased scope of work, lower job satisfaction, and poor physical and mental health. Professional understaffing in the social sector is a major issue in several countries.

Overall, a high turnover of professional social workers represents a critical challenge for the social work profession (Astvik, Welande & Larsson 2020). Krasniqi, McPherson & Villarreal-Otálora (2021) called for greater efforts in fostering cohesion between the social work profession, professional practice and the environment, and for safeguarding worker dignity. Milić Babić & Laklija (2019) examined the difficulties for social workers in the health care sector, involving discrimination, subordinate position in the hierarchy, and poor working conditions.

Among challenging working conditions, participants mentioned **difficulties in establishing cooperation with service users, other institutions and professionals**: *“We involve psychologists, occupational medicine and rehabilitation specialists; harmonising all these opinions can get quite challenging...”* (SR3); *“Some institutions are pretty disorganised and uncooperative; they get surprised when we come to do a workshop and make cooperation and implementation difficult...”* (SR8). In the context of difficult cooperation, when resources do not match the organisational goals or quality standards, social workers may succumb to strategies that compromise the quality of service (Astvik et al., 2014). Research participants frequently encountered **aggressive service users** in their practice: *“I made a print screen of threats over Facebook and sent them to the police”* (SR4); *“...I sometimes feel afraid going to work if I am expecting an unpleasant conversation with a client that day...”* (SR10); *“We hear mean words at work, we receive numerous threats over the telephone...”* (SR10); *“Users call us on the phone on their bad days, when they are frustrated; they protest, they even insult us.”* (SR1); *“Users can surprise you in front of the centre, on the parking lot; they can even come to your doorstep”* (SR23). Macdonald & Sirotych (2005.) underscored verbal abuse as the most common form of abuse social workers reported. *“We often have clients yelling, banging on the table, in the hallways... once, a man threw bricks on our colleagues and waved an axe...”* (SR23). Research studies in Croatia showed that 4% of survey respondents experienced physical assault in the previous year, with 83% not taking sick leave after the incident (HKSR, 2019). **Crisis situations** also distressed research participants: *“Occasionally, there is a suicidal outcome – for me, it is one of the most difficult situations at work; they are seldom, but they do occur in the course of professional life...”* (SR18); *“...We encounter incidents of severe violence and abuse with tragic consequences...”* (SR22). Tham (2018) observed a transformation in the social work practice. Notably, the work content changed, suggesting a stronger focus of the contemporary practice on investigations and administration, unlike in 2003, when most social workers had other tasks, such as advising and support, as part of their practice.

Nevertheless, among positive aspects, research participants underscored **supportive and collaborative professional teams**: *“We have good support from the director; the fact that we are all connected and aware of support is critical”*(SR2); *“The*

best and the dearest rewards are the appreciation from colleagues for our practice and their eagerness to work with us" (SR4). Olsson & Sundh (2018) remarked that socialising, taking a break to drink coffee together, and foremost, mutual assistance with casework and joint planning of activities fostered a positive working environment.

Participants described safety at work as the **workplace security**: *"We have security service throughout the working hours, a detector and a hand detector"*(SR5, SR10, SR13, SR23); *"I think, if somebody wanted to harm us, the very presence of a security officer at the entrance could act as a deterrent, at least to some extent"* (SR17). Although most social welfare institutions had introduced mandatory security equipment, there were still some exceptions: *"For example, we are one of the rare institutions, um, that does not have a metal detector"* (SR4). A research study involving 1,129 social workers in California and Pennsylvania confirmed that most social workers regarded violent behaviour on behalf of service users as a major issue in the profession (Macdonald & Sirocich, 2005). Furthermore, research findings by Harris & Leather (2012) linked the extent of violence and adverse social reactions towards social workers to different workplace settings in the social welfare system. Accordingly, the residential staff seemed to bear the brunt, while home carers were the least exposed. The same authors found, as the exposure to violence increased, job satisfaction decreased, accompanied by a higher incidence of stress symptoms. Our research participants suggested a **sense of peril**, primarily during fieldwork: *"Every time you do fieldwork, and you enter someone's home, you are exposed to a certain level of risk"* (SR1); *"Our only protection is to go in pairs"* (SR2). Research findings from Iceland confirmed that 70.5% of social workers experienced different types of emotional abuse in the previous six months (Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson Brink, 2020). According to Hamama (2012), professional experience and support from colleagues and superiors significantly contributed to decreasing the intensity of burnout. Moreover, supportive working conditions in the workplace, professional experience and mutual support lowered the overall burnout incidence (Hombrados-Mendieta & Cosano-Rivas, 2013). The research participants, who felt safe at work, indicated the **presence of colleagues** as the main reason: *"Having someone present when you talk to users"* (SR2); *"In terms of safety, I feel safe because there are colleagues nearby, down the hall..."* (SR7). Friščić (2006) revealed that most social workers considered their job stressful, with 32.6% finding it very stressful. Among specific stressors in the social work profession Macdonald & Sirocich (2005) underlined direct work with service users facing hardship and the inability to meet user demands due to objective circumstances. On **introducing security measures after tragic incidents**: *"...Well, it should have been done earlier; unfortunately, something bad has to happen to finally implement and adopt the formal measures by law"* (SR7); *"...sadly, effective security measures were introduced only after a fatal incident at the social welfare centre..."*

(SR8). *“Regretfully, something so horrible had to happen before things changed...”* (SR1); *“It was really about time to introduce security measures...”* (SR21). An Australian research study attested to violence against workers in the social welfare system, with most social workers (67%) experiencing at least one form of abuse in the previous year (Koritsas et al., 2010). Depicting tardy implementation, a proposal for introducing security measures appeared only in 2019 – quite late, given the recognised need for security measures (Central State Office for Demography and Youth, 2019). Participants further remarked that **security was inadequate**: *“Until I see it myself, I won’t believe it...”* (SR4); *“...Well, I think social workers have never been particularly protected...”* (SR12); *“...despite security measures, the risks remain considerable; an angry user, or a user who wants to harm a public official, will do so, regardless of the existing security measures, which are relatively modest, and considering a poor interconnectedness of different systems that persists...”* (SR16). According to Littlechild (2005), social workers often risked their lives on the job despite security measures. Our research participants remarked that the status of public official granted certain **rights, but also increased the responsibility** of social workers: *“Criminal charges follow an official procedure, performed by default”* (SR2); *“If we commit a felony, we are also treated differently”* (SR10). Granting the status of public official promotes more safety and security as well as the right to criminal prosecution ex officio against perpetrators, instead of private prosecution, for threat and verbal or physical assault (Central State Office for Demography and Youth, 2019). However, research participants pointed to **discrimination against other professional staff**, who were not social workers, or social workers employed outside the social welfare centres: *“Social workers are protected primarily at the social welfare centres...this provision should also apply to the rest of the team carrying the same responsibilities; this way, we discriminate against lawyers, psychologists, and other colleagues who are equally involved in decision-making”* (SR20). Although social workers have been granted the status of a public official, further legal amendments should introduce provisions for expanding the status to involve all professional workers in the social welfare system, and not only social workers (Bedečković, 2019). Finally, participants argued that the status of the public official was **not entirely effective against aggressive behaviour from service users**: *“I do not think it will solve all of our problems, but it is a step forward”* (SR8); *“...Frankly, I am not sure how it would work in practice and whether it would have any positive effects...”* (SR10). According to Bitzan & Herrmann (2018), social workers were particularly exposed to conflicts and violent incidents given their role – both supportive and restricted by the system that governed it – which entailed numerous challenges for the social work practice.

Perceived social attitudes towards the social work profession

Table 2 Perceived social attitudes towards the social work profession

THEMATIC AREA: Perceived social attitudes towards the social work profession	
CATEGORIES	CODES
Negative social perception	Disrespect for worker dignity
	Poor understanding of the profession
	Support from family and people familiar with the social work activity

Concerning the **negative social perception** towards the social work profession, participants signalled a **disrespect for social worker dignity**: *“We are marginalised; our work is invisible...”* (SR11). Research participants also linked the social reactions towards social work and the disrespect for professionals to their workplace: *“The society regards social workers as incompetent employees of the social welfare centres”* (SR17). Namely, attitudes towards social workers largely corresponded to their workplace settings, notably their employment by the public or private sector and/or non-profit organisations (Blomberg et al., 2015). According to participants, prejudices and judgement commonly marked social reactions, which included insulting remarks on the profession: *“Up until recently, I often heard, oh yeah, you are the ones who steal children...”* (SR2); *“People react: “Why would you choose that profession?” While opening a bank account, the clerk asked: “Oh, and which studies did you finish?”* (SR13); *“All my life, I heard people around me say: “Oh, why did you have to choose social work?”* (SR16). Legood et al. (2016) proposed two effective strategies for tackling the predominantly negative public perception of the profession: fostering cooperative relationships with the external factors of public perception (e.g. the media) and engaging in a more proactive self-promotion of the profession. *“In Croatia, we commonly witnessed media reporting, in written or oral form, overflowing with false information and sensationalism to attract spectators/listeners/readers...”* (SR20). Professional ethics should be at the core of professionalism in every occupation, including media reporting, which can shape the public opinion on an occupation, including professionals in the social welfare system. Research participants noticed a **poor understanding of the social work profession** in their environment: *“People first ask: Is it sociology?”* (SR8); *“Generally, people are not familiar with the social work activity, they do not understand who we are and what we do”* (SR9); *“...As a profession, we are not recognised by the society, in terms of understanding what*

social workers do, for example, compared to sociologists or psychologists. The general public is not familiar with it..." (SR23). More than half of the participants of a research study in Turkey had never heard of the social work profession (Bolgün & Şahin, 2019). On the contrary, in New Zealand the surveyed population seemed relatively well informed about social work activities and generally had positive attitudes towards social workers (Staniforth, Fouché & Beddoe, 2014). Among positive reactions, participants mentioned **support from family and people who were familiar with the social work activity**: "Some people regard me with respect, acknowledging that I have a very responsible job" (SR10); "People around me appreciate the fact that I am a social worker and are even proud of me" (SR19). According to a research study from Israel, social workers not only received support for their work from family and close people, but equally from the broader community (Kagan, 2015).

Recommendations for advancing the social work profession

Table 3 Recommendations for advancing the social work profession

THEMATIC AREA: Recommendations for improving working conditions	
CATEGORIES	CODES
Improving working conditions	Increasing salaries
	Amendments to the legal framework
	Increasing employment of qualified professionals
	Professional training
Improving workplace security	Granting the status of public official
	Increasing the security service staff
Promoting the social work profession	Establishing media relations
	Raising public awareness
	Organisations and institutions as public ambassadors

Research participants proposed several mechanisms for improving their working conditions, including **increasing salaries**: "...We should definitively have higher salaries in the profession as we work directly with service users..." (SR1); "Higher salaries and coefficients to validate the work are necessary..." (SR21). Participants also suggested **amendments to the legal framework**: "Work organisation and clear guidelines how we should proceed" (SR3); "I would suggest reducing the admin-

istrative burden for social workers..." (SR15). Invariably, legislative inconsistencies have unfavourable repercussions for professionals and service users. As a result, users are restricted or denied their rights, while professionals become insecure over procedures and are often imposed additional workloads (Ilijaš & Podobnik, 2018). Moreover, participants requested **increasing employment of qualified professionals**: *"Well, we should hire more staff or find other approaches to equip the personnel"* (SR2); *"...Appoint efficient, competent management..."* (SR22). Social welfare centres struggled with excessive administrative burden, while frequent legislative changes introduced insecurity over procedures in the social welfare system (Ilijaš & Podobnik, 2018). Furthermore, participants demanded more **professional training**: *"Perhaps, institutions could introduce joint supervision"* (SR2); *"... We need continuing and specific training for social workers and other public officials..."* (SR4); *"...Our system is below standard considering the offer of continuing, innovative, and creative training tailored to different tasks and working conditions..."* (SR7); *"... For example, introducing continuing training to strengthen competences for service provision in specific areas of the practice..."* (SR18). Buljevac, Opačić and Podobnik (2020) advocated a professional competence framework advancing the professional practice and educational programmes for social workers. Several analyses signalled critical understaffing of the social welfare centres, some having twice as many service users than foreseen. The centres also struggled to ensure basic work supplies and adequate training opportunities (Office of the Public Ombudswoman, 2019). Among suggestions for improving workplace security, participants considered the **status of public official**: *"...Granting the status of public official, to introduce some security..."* (SR7); *"...In my opinion, the primary benefit of the public official status is the right to prosecution ex officio, instead of private prosecution against perpetrators, which was the case up until recently..."* (SR19). The amendments to the Criminal Code (Official Gazette No. 126/2019) introduced an important breakthrough concerning the status of public officials the same year our research was conducted. For the first time, Article 87, Paragraph 3, stated: *"professional worker executing activities from the social welfare and education domains"*. As of 1 January 2020, all social workers and professional staff in the social welfare system have been granted the status of public officials. Accordingly, every assault against social workers is now treated as a felony, prosecuted and sanctioned under the provisions of the Criminal Code. On the other hand, if social workers in the social welfare system, as public officials, committed a crime on duty, they were equally subject to prosecution and sanctions in line with the Criminal Code (Bedečković, 2019).

According to research findings from Bosnia and Herzegovina, social workers were frequently victims of verbal and physical assaults, often feeling unsafe in the workplace (Dudić, 2020). Likewise, participants of the present research study called

for **increasing the security service staff**: *"...To have a procedure, at the entrance, an inspection of new and existing service users..."* (SR7); *"Maybe an entrance gate everyone needs to go through, like the one in courts..."* (SR10). Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison 2004.) found that younger social workers and men were more exposed to risk, while the employees of public and non-profit agencies reported incidents much more often than workers in private practices. Participants considered that enhanced media relations could contribute to promoting the social work profession: *"...We never read about positive stories, which are, in fact, numerous, while the horrid ones happen quite seldom, thank God..."* (SR1); *"Media relations should perhaps receive more attention; possibly, we could present inspiring stories from the social work practice, rather than letting the media wait for incidents to happen"* (SR2). Good public image has been considered important for every profession, while the media represented an influential intermediary between the professional and the general and political public (Association Pragma, 2020). **Raising public awareness** seemed crucial: *"Experience an entire day, an entire week, with a social worker to comprehend the range of tasks she performs"* (SR3); *"An open doors event, for people to see what our work involves and how it is performed"* (SR4). In public promotion of the profession, the human rights concept could portray the global, contemporary framework of social work. For example, the focus could be placed on the common issue of human rights protection that led to effective action, such as combating violence against women (Khan & Rasheed, 2016.). Finally, participants identified the potential of **organisations and institutions to become the public ambassadors** of the social work profession. Each professional should join the public promotion of the profession: *"All social workers, from social welfare centres and other institutions, should inform the public on all the activities undertaken"* (SR1). In New Zealand, continuing training served social workers to improve professional reputation (Beddoe, 2013). In Croatia, social workers from the health care system suggested mechanisms for improving the position of social work, such as enhancing cooperation with colleagues within and beyond the system, strengthening social work professionalism in health care, and other technical and organisational advancements (Milić Babić & Laklija, 2019). Concerning the Chamber of Social Workers: *"Our Chamber of Social Workers has a public relations committee that, on appropriate occasions, issues press releases, gives interviews to journalists, appears in broadcasts, and informs the public; I find this very important"* (SR6). The chamber's role is to advocate the interest of social workers, advance the social work activity and ensure compliance with professional standards (HKSR, 2020). On the Chamber of Social Workers: *"For example, the Chamber of Social Workers lobbied for a salary increase last year"* (SR20); *"The Chamber of Social Workers has been more engaged after all these unfortunate events and unfavourable reporting; now it does a better, more effective job"* (SR21). Besides informal support, associations and

other organisations also contribute to public promotion. Moreover, social support from informal sources and organisations has been found to reduce psychological stress accompanying burnout (Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2014). About the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy: *“The Ministry should offer partnership and support...”* (SR20). About the Social Work Department: *“...First and foremost, the social work studies, definitively...”* (SR8); *“...Well, I think our department plays a pivotal role in presenting the profession in the media...”* (SR12). In every profession, key stakeholders steer professional practice by regulating registration and licensing, education, and competence development of professionals. Stakeholders also impact the public image and promote professional achievement, involving research and raising the professional standard and efficacy of the direct practice with service users. McPherson & Abell (2012) recognised the contribution of universities to training future social workers in protecting the rights of service users and furthering the rights and competences of social work professionals.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research study offered a deeper insight into the social worker perspective on working conditions and social attitudes towards the profession, with suggestions for advancing the social work profession. Research participants were guaranteed anonymity and data confidentiality. While providing their consent, some participants expressed concerns about the possible disclosure of identity. Nevertheless, they all agreed to participate, motivated to contribute to the research study following a tragic incident at the social welfare centre in the town of Đakovo where two employees had been murdered – a social worker and a lawyer. Methodological limitations concern the convenience sample involving social workers in the city of Zagreb, which prevents generalising the results to all professionals in Croatia. In the aftermath of tragic incidents in the social work practice from the past decades, future research should address the impact of such events on the mental health of professionals in the system, including their views on the recent security measures and improvements to the working conditions (coefficients, public official status, elements of increased security, and introducing supervision and psychotherapeutic support after traumatic events). Future research could also encompass other professionals, members of professional teams at the social welfare centres.

CONCLUSION

The issues in the social welfare system flooded the media, Internet and forums in the past couple of years, undeniably affecting both social workers' activities and satisfaction with the perceived social status and the public perception of the profession. In this research study, social workers presented the shortcomings of financing programmes and employment for workers in associations, understaffing of qualified social workers and other professional staff, inadequate office space, shortage of business vehicles for fieldwork, an excessive scope of work and administrative burden, disrespect for social workers' dignity, difficulties in establishing cooperation with service users, other institutions and professionals, aggressive service users and crisis incidents. Among the strong points, research participants referred to supportive and collaborative professional teams. Concerning workplace safety and security, institutions and organisations had introduced security staff, metal detectors and cameras. Notwithstanding the security mechanisms, participants still felt unsafe during field visits, which was somewhat mitigated by the presence of their colleagues. Participants felt unprotected during fieldwork; they also regretted that security measures were only introduced after death incidents involving their colleagues. Moreover, research results suggested that, according to social workers, the status of public official granted certain rights, but did not safeguard against the aggressive behaviour of service users. Participants perceived the social attitudes towards the social work profession as unfavourable and the reactions from the environment as prejudiced and judgemental, including insulting comments in public discussions. Participants also considered that the public generally did not understand the social work mission. Finally, social workers had the following recommendations for advancing the profession: improving working conditions (notably, increasing salaries, amendments to the legal framework, employing additional professional staff, and professional training), enhancing workplace security and promoting the social work profession (improving media relations, raising public awareness, and advancing the social work profession with best practices from different organisations and institutions). In light of the research results, this paper may serve as a baseline for further research and encourage improvements to the working conditions in the social welfare system.

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PERSPEKTIVA SOCIJALNIH RADNIKA O UVJETIMA RADA, ODNOSU DRUŠTVA PREMA STRUCI I PREPORUKE ZA UNAPRJEĐENJE PROFESIJE

Socijalni rad je praktično utemeljena profesija i akademska disciplina koja promiče društvenu promjenu i razvoj, socijalnu koheziju te osnaživanje i oslobađanje ljudi. Cilj rada je dobiti uvid u perspektivu socijalnih radnika o uvjetima rada, odnosu društva prema struci te identificirati preporuke za unaprjeđenje postojećeg stanja iz kuta stručnjaka. Korišten je kvalitativni pristup, a pri analizi prikupljenih podataka primijenjen je postupak tematske analize. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da sudionici istraživanja – socijalni radnici u Hrvatskoj uglavnom imaju negativnu percepciju o uvjetima rada pri čemu ukazuju na probleme: nesigurnosti financiranja, nedostatka kadra, neadekvatne prostorne uvjete, manjak službenih vozila za terenske obilaske, prevelikog opsega posla i administracije, nepoštovanje dostojanstva radnika i teškoće pri uspostavi suradnje s korisnicima. Preporuke socijalnih radnika za unaprjeđenje opisanog su: poboljšanje uvjeta rada kroz: unaprjeđenje zakonodavnog okvira, zapošljavanje stručnog kadra i edukacije stručnjaka, poboljšanje sigurnosti na radnom mjestu (jačanje statusa službene osobe i povećanja broja zaštitarskog kadra) i promocije struke socijalnog rada uz razvoj suradnje s medijima te sustavno informiranje i senzibiliziranje javnosti kroz pozitivne primjere organizacija i ustanova.

Ključne riječi: socijalni rad; uvjeti rada; perspektive; društvo



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