Symposium  ''Social Work Education and Practice – Dance on Wire“

The Symposium ''Social Work Education and Practice – Dance on Wire“ was held on 29th January 2018 at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb organized by the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, International Association of Schools of Social Work and the Croatian Chamber of Social Workers and under the patronage of the City of Zagreb, Mayor Milan Bandić and the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social policy. The aims of this Symposium were: 1. To provide an overview of the relationship between social work theory and practice (value aspects, commonalities, differences, discrepancies in mission and vision) from an international and Croatian contexts of social work education; 2. To present and discuss the realities of the process of transferring educational content to the practice fields and vice versa from different country perspectives; 3. To discuss main trends visible in regional contexts regarding balancing of social work education and practice as well as from the perspective of International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW ).

A welcome speech to the domestic and foreign participants of the Symposium was held by the Dean of the Faculty of Law, professor Igor Gliha. Tatjana Katkić Stanić, the Head of the Department for Policy Coordination and Promotion of Professional Activities of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, and Jelena Pavičić Vukičević, the Deputy of Mayor of the City of Zagreb expressed their support for this Symposium, as well as the professor Nino Žganec, the Head of the Department of Social Work, the President of the European Association of Schools of Social Work, and the Vice-President of IASSW.

The first plenary lecture was held by professor Kristina Urbanc on the topic of "Co-creation of knowledge for social work education and practice". She stated in her presentation that there are discrepancies between users' needs and system resources, and the efforts of experts to do quality, professional work and limiting opportunities in the time of an prolonged crisis. She also pointed out the gap between professional, institutional and public values, recognizing users' needs and declarative helping them to live better, while at the same time denying them access to public or collective goods. She believes that, in order for social work professions to remain humane and social, it is necessary to teach students that social work is mainly practiced in the field (not in the office), and that world is not divided into people who deserve and those who do not deserve help in achieving better living.

The next plenary lecture was held by professor Darja Zaviršek from the Faculty of Social Work in Ljubljana on the topic of "Deinstitutionalization: From social work education to social work practice". It is pointed out that deinstitutionalization is a matter of social work and human rights that has been addressed by social work, but because of its inadequate power, thousands of elderly people, people with disabilities and mental health problems have been living in the regional institutions since the beginning of their lives. It was stated that students learned best when the educational environment was linked with institutions so that they could interact with users and get closer to their daily experiences and see the examples of good practice as well as violations of human rights within institutions.

The first plenary session was opened by Martina Podobnik, a PhD student of social work and social policy, who highlighted the importance of social work students' participation in practice through volunteering and working in various organizations, which helps them to prepare better for work in the social welfare system.

Romana Galić, the Head of the City Office for Social Welfare and People with Disabilities, said that the social welfare system in Croatia is highly centralized, which enables local communities to create their own social policy. Although social policy's aim is linking theory and practice, it can deliver programs for citizens only through close cooperation with all stakeholders.

The President of the Croatian Chamber of Social Work Antun Ilijaš presented the work and activities of the Chamber as a professional organization of social workers in Croatia. He pointed out that professional development was the right and the obligation of social workers, which also creates the conditions for renewing approval for independent work related to performing social work activities.

Nataša Koražija, the Director of the Social Welfare Center Samobor, presented the work and the authority of social welfare centers, highlighting their current problems, among which is the lack of system capacity and the great discrepancy between what social workers do and what the public expects them to do. This is why the need for redefining the position of social work and social workers has arisen, leading to the need to review the contents of the academic program.

Marcus Knutagård from the University of Lund presented the challenges facing contemporary social work, among which are: 1. Marketization of social work and tensions between what faculties see as the knowledge student needs to gain and the knowledge that practice requires; 2. The gap between individualized practice of social work with a focus on specific methods and documentation systems, whereby social work education becomes highly academicized; 3. The question of power and influence on social work education by the government and other actors (e.g. insisting on a curriculum covering topics of domestic violence, competence regarding minority languages, elderly care etc.); 4. Digitalization of social work that opens up numerous opportunities but also challenges for the profession and faculties, which opens up an important debate on ethics.

John Victor Rautenbach from the University of Fort Hare, referred to the specifics of social work education and warned that the education system does not create experts but thinkers, explaining that education is the beginning, not the end of the process of becoming a social worker.

Hernando Munoz Sanchez from the University of Antioquia highlighted in his presentation the importance of deep and infinite respect for the people, with a clear position of respect for human rights and duties. In addition, he stood for empowering communities in the sense of rights, co-responsibility and building critical thinking, developing ethical and political education that would serve others and the needs of communities, and deconstructing the unreasonable separation between professional education and practice.

The final plenary discussion "Education and Practice of Social Work - Towards Global Understanding" was opened by Barbara Shank, IASSW's Secretary, who presented the role and the importance of IASSW, an association that has been promoting the development of social work education around the world for 90 years, which develops standards for improving the quality of education in social work, promotes international exchange, provides a platform for research exchange and social work scholarships, and promotes human rights and social development through political and advocacy activities.

Vishanthie Sewpaul, the representative of the African Association of Schools of Social Work, emphasized that IASSW's initiatives are aimed at deconstructing a dominant Africa-related archetype (e.g. poor education standards, lack of intelligence, poverty and illness), research on the ability to take regulatory action functions related to online offers (''education on sales''), which decontextualizes social work education and training and which may compromise the skills and values ​​of the profession.

Nilsa Burgos, the president of the Latin American Association of Schools of Social Work and the Vice President of IASSW, emphasized that positivist theory is still influential in the practice of social work in Latin America, but the use of critical theory and the view of the profession as a political one has been observed more recently. She said that access to solving social problems requires cooperation between different disciplines, as well as cooperation between diverse community and user sectors.

Zulkarnain A. Hatta, the president of the Asian-Pacific Association of Schools of Social Work and the Vice President of IASSW, referred to cultural differences and their impact on the practice of social work as well as on the practice of creating and implementing top-down standards, which can produce resistance and weaker results in the field of practice.

Kathy Hogarth, the representative of the North American and Caribbean Association of Schools of Social Work, said that the part of the challenge was dichotomy between education and practice. She believes that this gap should be overcome in a way which strengthens the identity of the profession, as there are no practitioners without educators, nor educators without practitioners, unless social work is moving in the direction of deprofessionalization.

Prof. dr. sc. Nino Žganec, as the Vice-President of IASSW, explained in the final statement the importance of intercultural sharing of knowledge, practice and experience. He emphasized the need to fill the gap between social work education and practice, by intensifying the linkage between future and existing social work professionals, which is the task and the challenge of the academic community, social work organizations and social work chambers, in order to create conditions for realizing the greatest possible benefit for the beneficiaries of the social welfare system.

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