
A Tribute to Professor Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (1936-2026)



It is with profound sadness that the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) mourns the passing of Professor Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, one of the most influential scholars in the history of social work education and a steadfast advocate for human rights and social justice. Professor Staub-Bernasconi passed away in Zurich during the week of 27 July 2026.

The global social work community has lost an extraordinary scholar, educator, mentor, and visionary whose work transformed the understanding of social work as both an academic discipline and a profession. Her pioneering contributions have shaped generations of educators, researchers, practitioners, and students across the world.

Born in Zurich in 1936, Professor Staub-Bernasconi qualified as a social worker in Zurich before pursuing further studies in the United States. Her career began in practice, working with migrants in Zurich and in community-based social work in New York. These experiences deepened her commitment to addressing social inequality and advancing social justice. She went on to study sociology, social ethics, and educational psychology at the University of Zurich, where she earned her doctorate. Throughout her distinguished career, she combined professional practice, rigorous scholarship, and teaching with exceptional dedication. She taught at the Zurich School of Social Work, where she served as Professor from 1967 to 1997, and later as Professor at the Technical University of Berlin from 1997 to 2003. Her scholarship significantly advanced the theoretical foundations of social work.

Professor Staub-Bernasconi was internationally recognised for her pioneering work in establishing social work as an independent academic discipline with its own scientific knowledge base, professional ethics, and societal mandate. Her theoretical perspective viewed social problems not as the result of individual fault or impersonal conditions alone, but as intricate obstacles to meeting human needs and participating in social life. As one of the leading architects of the systems-theoretical paradigm in social work, she developed

influential frameworks for understanding social problems as complex interactions between human needs, social relationships, structural inequalities, and power dynamics. She argued that social work should empower individuals to meet their needs by mobilising both their own capacities and the community resources available to them, in pursuit of subjectively experienced well-being. She further maintained that social work must also challenge and transform rules within service users' social environments that violate human rights into ones that uphold human dignity.

Among her most enduring contributions was her articulation of social work as a human rights profession. She argued that human rights are not merely aspirational values but the normative foundation of professional social work. Her influential concept of the 'triple mandate'—integrating accountability to service users, societal and institutional responsibilities, and the profession's independent commitment to scientific knowledge, ethics, and human rights—continues to shape social work education and practice around the world.

Building on these foundations, Professor Staub-Bernasconi's scholarship consistently challenged the profession to confront injustice, question oppressive structures, and advocate for dignity, equality, and participation for all people. Her work provided social workers with the theoretical foundation and the ethical responsibility to critically examine policies and practices and to contribute to transformative social change.

Her influence extended far beyond Europe. Through her international collaborations, teaching, publications, and advocacy, she inspired scholars and practitioners across continents. Her contributions to international social work education were recognised by IASSW through the Katherine A. Kendall Award in 2010, which honoured her outstanding contribution to social work education worldwide.

Professor Staub-Bernasconi's legacy lives on in the countless students she mentored, the scholars she inspired, the institutions she strengthened, and the profession she helped redefine. Her intellectual courage, unwavering commitment to human rights, and belief in social work's responsibility to challenge injustice will continue to guide and inspire the profession for generations to come.

We extend our deepest condolences to her family, friends, colleagues, former students, and the international social work community as we mourn her passing.

Prof Antoinette Lombard
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