

To IFSW General Meeting 2004

Proposal for a new Ethical Document

Introduction

This document is the proposal from the Permanent Committee on Ethical Issues to be presented at the IFSW General Meeting in Adelaide in September 2004. It will replace the Ethical Principles and Standards adopted in Sri Lanka in 1994. The document is designed to be shorter than the 1994 version, and remains largely at the level of general principles. It is not the role of IFSW to prescribe more detailed rules of conduct for social workers in the many different countries in membership of IFSW. Rather, it is expected that member organisations will develop their own ethical guidance and codes with reference to this document, along with their own procedures for disciplining those who violate the ethical guidance and mechanisms for promoting education, debate and discussion on ethical issues in social work.

The process to develop a new ethical document has been going on for several years with discussions, consultations and hearings in several IFSW bodies. The first draft document was presented in Geneva in June 2002. The second draft was presented for the IFSW Executive Committee in Copenhagen May 2003. All the member organisations of the IFSW have been asked to comment on the first draft. The IASSW has been informed of the process of the development of the new document, and has had the opportunity to comment as well. Altogether we have got more than 30 comments on the two drafts from organisations and individuals. The responses are quite different in form, but there seems to be a general agreement of support for the draft documents among most of the responding organisations. One comment seems to be directly questioning the content of the document. It questions the inclusion of "sexual orientation" in the anti-discrimination paragraph, and suggests an additional paragraph on "Acceptance". In addition one organisation wants a more developed universal code of conduct. The other comments can be regarded as suggestions for improvements within the line of the drafts. Some organisations have commented on the definition of social work. The Ethical Committee has not seen it as its task to work on changes of the definition, and will therefore forward these comments to the secretariats of IFSW/IASSW.

Final proposal: *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*

1. Preface

Ethical awareness is a necessary part of the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who use social work services.

The purpose of IASSW and IFSW's work on ethics is to promote ethical debate and reflection in the member organisations, among the providers of social work in member countries, as well as in the schools of social work and among social work students. Some ethical challenges and problems facing social workers are specific to particular countries; others are common. By staying at the level of general principles, the IFSW statement aims to encourage social workers across the world to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case. Some of these problem areas include:

- The fact that the loyalty of social workers is often in the middle of conflicting interests

- The conflicts between the duty of social workers to protect the interests of the people with whom they work and societal demands for efficiency and utility.
- The fact that resources in society are limited

This document takes as its starting point the definition of social work adopted by the IFSW at the General Meeting in Montreal, Canada in July 2000 and then jointly with IASSW in Copenhagen in May 2001 (section 2). This definition stresses principles of human rights and social justice. The next section (3) makes reference to the various declarations and conventions on human rights that are relevant to social work, followed by a statement of general ethical principles under the two broad headings of human rights and dignity and social justice (section 4). The final section introduces some basic guidance on ethical conduct in social work, which it is expected would be elaborated by the ethical guidance and in various codes and guidelines of the member organisations of IFSW.

2. Definition of Social Work

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

3. International conventions

International human rights declarations and conventions form common standards of achievement, and recognise rights that are accepted by the global community. Documents particularly relevant to social work practice and action are:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination
- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Indigenous and tribal Peoples Convention (ILO convention 169)

4. Principles

4.1. Human Rights and Human Dignity

Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this. Social workers should uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being. This means:

1. Respecting the right to self-determination - Social workers should respect and promote people's rights to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices, provided this does not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others.
2. Promoting the right to participation - Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives.
3. Treating each person as a whole - Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community and societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognise all aspects of a person's life

4. Identifying and developing strengths – Social workers should focus on the strengths of all individuals, groups and communities and thus promote their empowerment.

4.2. Social justice

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

1. Challenging negative discrimination - Social workers have a responsibility to challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs.
2. Recognising diversity – Social workers should recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of societies in which they practice, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.
3. Distributing resources equitably – Social workers should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need.
4. Challenging unjust policies and practices – Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where people are living in poverty, where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful.
5. Working in solidarity - Social workers have an obligation to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and to work towards an inclusive society.

5. Professional conduct

It is the responsibility of the national organisations in membership of IFSW to develop and regularly update their own codes of ethics or ethical guidelines, to be consistent with the IFSW statement. It is also the national organisation's responsibility to inform social workers and schools of social work about these codes or guidelines.

Social workers should act in accordance with the ethical code or guidelines current in their country. These will generally include more detailed guidance in ethical practice specific to the national context. The following general guidelines on professional conduct apply:

1. Social workers are expected to develop and maintain the required skills and competence to do their job.
2. Social workers should not allow their skills to be used for inhumane purposes, such as torture or terrorism.
3. Social workers should act with integrity. This includes not abusing the relationship of trust with the people using their services, recognising the boundaries between personal and professional life, and not abusing their position for personal benefit or gain.
4. Social workers should act in relation to the people using their services with compassion, empathy and care.
5. Social workers should not subordinate the needs or interests of people who use their services to their own needs or interests.
6. Social workers have a duty to take necessary steps to care for themselves professionally

7. Social workers should maintain confidentiality regarding information about people who use their services. Exceptions to this may only be justified on the basis of a greater ethical requirement (such as the preservation of life).
8. Social workers need to acknowledge that they are accountable for their actions to their clients, the people they work with, their colleagues, their employers, the professional association and to the law, and that these accountabilities may conflict.
9. Social workers have a duty to collaborate with the schools of social work in order to support social work students to get practical training of good quality and up to date practical knowledge
10. Social workers should foster and engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions.
11. Social workers should be prepared to state the reasons for their decisions based on ethical considerations, and be accountable for their choices and actions.
12. Social workers should work to create conditions in employing agencies and in their countries where the principles of this statement and those of their own national code (if applicable) are discussed, evaluated and upheld.