

Secretary-General's Opening Speech for the IFSW General Assembly 2018

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Dear members of the IFSW Assembly, my teachers, my mentors,

Acknowledgments

I would like to start by expressing my sincere thanks to you all. The work, actions, reflections and commitments that to you have provided has had an enormous impact. Consequently, the profession is continuously gaining in strength, visibility and success. It is clear that social work is providing leadership in many countries that is transforming social policy, basing it on rights, inclusion, and social justice. We will discuss some of these examples over the next two days, as with each success, more governments and bodies such as the United Nations are sitting-up and paying attention to social work solutions. Because of your work we can be confident of a secure and expanding profession.

I want to also include within these broader acknowledgements, my praise of the IFSW Executive. It is a committee that has fully embraced its responsibilities with care, consideration and skill. It is not easy being on the IFSW Executive. Structurally there are pressures from the region that need to be balanced with pressures from the global perspective. The Executive has had to deal with an enormous level of complexity and on a number of the issues they have rightly brought them to your attention here in the General Meeting.

The work of the Commissions has also not been simple over the past two years. Nigel Hall and the Human Rights Commission members have had to respond to major social crises, as well as calling for justice when social workers that have been killed or imprisoned for providing ethically sound social work practice. Dawn Hodby and the members of the Ethics Commission have also been involved in an extremely challenging process of jointly reviewing the Statement of Ethical Principles. Both Commissions will speak to these complexities and present their solutions later in our agenda.

There are three other people I want to acknowledge. Pascal Rudin and Lola Casal who have been working alongside me in the Secretariat in part time roles. The world largest international NGO, IFSW, runs on the thinnest of staffing structures and the pressures upon Pascal and Lola are incredible. The functioning of the Federation would be lost without them and indeed this meeting would not have been possible without their tireless dedication.

Finally, and most importantly I want to acknowledge the IFSW President Ruth Stark who has worked voluntarily fulltime for the Federation for the past 4 years. Her list of achievements in this role stretch far beyond my time constraints, but tomorrow when she stands down for her role we will have the opportunity to reflect on contributions and to give her our expressed thanks.

90 Years of Professional Social Work

We meet today to reflect on our past and to plan strategies to maximise the impact of this wonderful profession. It is the perfect time to undertake this exercise as this year marks the 90th anniversary of the International Federation of Social Workers.

This profession had wonderful parents. They came from all lands and cultures and in 1928 travelled long distances to meet in Paris and give birth to the permanent international secretariat of social work, that that 28 years later renamed itself as The International Federation of Social Workers. As we assemble now here we can ask ourselves: 'Have we met our forebear's expectations', 'Would they look upon us proudly' and can we match the incredible contributions that they gave to the world?'

Our profession's forebears of course had lives well before 1928. Jane Adams was already a world leader in women's liberation, an international activist for peace and social justice. She was so effective and fierce in her commitment that the FBI described her as 'The most dangerous person in the United States' in 1919.

Generations before the idea of the United Nations, our forebears, organised international social reform conventions. They adopted resolutions that were mandatory to all their countries members. They took actions and made standards on the care and treatment of all people, which at that time would have been revolutionary. Among the conventions they stated:

- That asylums should not contain more than 100 children.
 - That children under the age of 18 should not work at night.
- That workplaces should pay for children's education.
- That children of all ages, and regardless of ability, should have education.

Then, in 1928 they came together and articulated the need to establish the international social work profession. They identified the need to establish ethical principles, education for social workers and professional associations that could maintain standards.

All of this sounds familiar 90 year later as over the next two days we will discuss how to 'bring social work education and practice together'. We will review the Statement of Ethical Principles, and we will also define the obligations of social work associations in advocating for all people's rights and what constitutes their 'independent social work voice'.

It is perfectly appropriate that we are discussing the same issues 90 years later. Over time the profession's well-tested principles have remained reasonably constant, but each generation must learn for itself how to interpret and enact on those principles as the social conditions change.

What would Jane Adams, the mother of the modern profession and the 'most dangerous person in the USA' say to us today? Build on what she has written, I imagine this:

On the profession's principles: Put the principles at the forefront, never lose your courage in advancing social justice, and take-up the challenges created by capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.

On the voice of profession: Never give away your voice, it is built on the shoulders of intergenerational successful and real experience.

On the profession's capacity: If strategies are not progressing human rights, change them.

I also believe our forebears would also have compliments. Social work was one of the voices that advocated that the SDGs include social protection systems in every country. Consequently, over the next 12 years the world has targeted a seismic-shift from only 29% of people having adequate social-protection to 100%. With this development will come the enormous expansion of our profession, as social workers will be key workforce, but they will also be needed to shape new services to ensure they meet the real aspirations of the communities they serve.

The profession's parents and particularly our indigenous forbears would also praise that we have restored 'environment sustainability' as an objective. Yet we are only at the beginning of this restoration. Social work education needs to embrace the sustainable justice agenda. Those of us in practice also need to pay attention to how the environment effects our communities, and how our communities effect our environments, and use this information in advocating for policy change.

As I conclude my opening comments, I want to acknowledge the enormous contributions that social workers make in every country. Our profession is populated by heroes that take risks and make sacrifices because they care and are committed to social justice. Let this 90th anniversary be a time to honour them. Let this General Assembly be a time to reflect on the giant steps our forebears made long ago when they said, every society needs an active social work presence that will dedicate itself to a better future for all.