

Encyclopedia of Social Work

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) a

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Future priorities and challenges that face IFSW updated. Bibliography and citations expanded to reflect recent research.

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Abstract and Keywords

The International Federation of Social Workers is an international organization representing the interests of social workers around the world. This organization works in cooperation with global regional social work bodies, national organizations, and other associations to organize international events, publish policy statements, encourage cooperative initiatives, and link to other international bodies. It is active in human rights and social development and in the promotion of best practices and high professional social work standards.

Keywords: profession, international links, human rights, ethics, social policy, global conferences

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is the international organization representing professional social workers, although membership is through national social work organizations, not individual status. Currently, social work organizations are found in 100 countries, representing nearly one million social workers across the world. Association members collaborate through IFSW toward developing the common goals of the profession and in working on issues of concern to social workers internationally, such as global ethical standards (IFSW & IASSW, 2004) and human rights issues. IFSW encourages this cooperation by establishing and maintaining relationships with social work associations and their members and representing them in international bodies; sponsoring biennial international symposia and conferences; developing and publishing policy statements to guide social work practice worldwide; advocating for the protection of human rights of practicing social workers; providing consultation to the United

Nations on issues of human development and human rights; and providing means for the discussion and exchange of ideas and experience through meetings, study visits, and research projects and publications.

History of IFSW

IFSW's history dates back to the First International Conference on Social Work held in Paris in July 1928, where it was agreed that an international representative body be formed, and in 1932 it became the International Permanent Secretariat of Social Workers (IPSSW). The IPSSW operated from Berlin, Geneva, and Prague until 1956, when the IFSW was formed in Munich with twelve national member organizations. A new secretariat was established in New York, sharing offices with the National Association of Social Workers. IFSW joined its partner organizations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), in sponsoring the journal *International Social Work* in 1959.

The IFSW Executive Committee decided to establish a permanent and paid secretariat in 1971 in Basel, Switzerland, later moving to Geneva in 1975. The strengthening of the secretariat also heralded an era of increased activity in membership levels and IFSW's representative status with various organizations. The secretariat later moved to Oslo, Norway, in 1992 and then in 1999 to Berne, Switzerland, while in 2013 it returned to Basel.

The late 1970s saw considerable work undertaken on the definition of social work. This document was endorsed at the Brighton Conference in 1982 and remained unaltered until 1996 when a committee was established to revise and prepare a new definition of social work, ultimately adopted by both practitioners and educators in May 2001 (IFSW, 2002A).

The 1980s were particularly active years for the IFSW in the area of human rights and social justice. The federation worked to promote the UN International Year of Peace 1985, recognized by the UN officially declaring IFSW a "Peace Messenger," an award recognizing the humanitarian activities of selected organizations contributing toward global peace and understanding. Eight years later the United Nations designated IFSW as "Patron of the International Year of the Family" for exemplary support of this program.

IFSW promotes human rights by publishing statements on human rights issues and related matters and by raising awareness about the profession's commitment to its human rights heritage. To implement this work, a special commission has been set up—the Human Rights Commission. Apart from its work on behalf of imprisoned and

persecuted social workers around the world, the commission has successfully developed two landmark publications with international partners, on human rights and social work (IFSW & IASSW, 1994) and social work and the rights of the child (IFSW, 2002B). The human rights manual examines human rights instruments and identifies ways in which they illustrate and enhance the responsibilities of social workers, while the training manual on the rights of the child provides information and guidance to social workers and students on how they can respond to the high ideals of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. IFSW has also produced a series of edited books on social work in different countries, now in its fifth issue (Hall, 2012). Regional newsletters and journals are also published wherever possible.

Organization and Activities

IFSW has been granted Special Consultative Status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), with a special relationship later extended by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In addition, IFSW is working with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Teams of representatives are in action at the United Nations in Bangkok, Geneva, Nairobi, New York, Santiago de Chile, and Vienna, and their work is highly valued by the federation. These teams advocate on various issues of concern and interest to social workers within the United Nations system—such as the needs of older people and the necessity for child (birth) registration in countries where this is not undertaken. IFSW also has formal partnerships with Amnesty International, CONGO (Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the UN), Council of Europe, European Union, Habitat, IASSW, and ICSW. A series of international policy papers has also been developed and is regularly revised. Topics that the current policy papers cover include: Responsibilities of Employers of Social Work, Human Rights, Statement of Ethical Principles, Global Standards (for education and training of social workers), Displaced Persons, Globalization and the Environment, Health, HIV and AIDS, Indigenous Peoples, Women, Migration, Ageing and Older Adults, Peace and Social Justice, Protection of Personal Information, Conditions in Rural Communities, Refugees, People with Disabilities, Genocide, Cross-Border Reproductive Services, Youth and Protection of Personal Information (view at <http://ifsw.org/policies/>).

IFSW is divided into the five geographical regions, namely Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America, each of which is represented by a

regional president. An international elected executive committee steers the work of the federation with a global president and secretary general heading the body. The general meeting convenes every two years at the same time as an international conference, and regional seminars and conferences are held regularly in most regions. IFSW also has a program called *Friends of IFSW*, providing affiliating social workers, social work students, and organizations a link to the international body.

IFSW recruits members by reaching out to nascent social work bodies in nonmember countries and offering membership, and it retains members by representing the various interests of social work associations and organizations within the international community. Membership dues are based on the number of members and by a formula that provides a discount to member organizations in developing countries. Occasionally, political problems can create tensions between members, such as at times of conflict between Israel and Palestine (although these members worked hard to resolve some of the concerns), or the problems created by apartheid, which led to the expulsion of South Africa from membership at the time, although a unified body representing this country has now been formed.

An important current initiative is the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (the Agenda), which is being developed by IFSW with IASSW and ICSW. This effort was launched in 2010 to strengthen the international profile of social work and social development with the intention of enabling social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development. To gather evidence about the activities of social workers, educators and social development practitioners, which support the implementation of the Global Agenda, in order to give visibility and credibility to their contributions and to promote further action, the three global partners have decided to strengthen their collaboration and move it further. Activity is structured around the four themes of The Global Agenda: *Promoting Social and Economic Equalities* (2012-2014) and *Promoting the dignity and worth of the person* (2014-2016). The themes to be covered in subsequent years are: *Working towards environmental sustainability* and *Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships*. A focus on ensuring an appropriate environment for practice and education is included throughout. The Global Agenda Observatory is the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of The Agenda Commitments. The first report of the Global Observatory has now been produced and was launched at the 2014 international Social Work and Social Development conference in Melbourne (IFSW, IASSW, ICSW, 2014).

Future Trends and Challenges

Future priorities and challenges that face IFSW include

- promoting the Global Observatory along with IASSW and ICSW, drawing from a global network of regional centers, to support implementation of the Agenda, research its impact and study the work environments that promote positive outcomes in social work and social development.
- developing an online archive of material from IFSW's history with the financial support of the IFSW Friends program to make the Federation's archives accessible to social workers around the world.
- reviewing the international definition of social work and the international statement of ethical principles on an ongoing basis.
- lobbying to improve conditions for social workers in resource-poor settings. Social work practice is becoming increasingly international with the migration of social workers from many countries in the developing world to the developed. A challenge for IFSW is to link with other organizations that are trying to improve conditions in the originating countries and stem the loss of indigenous professionals.
- taking an even higher profile in defense of human rights. Conflicts and consequent human rights abuses have intensified throughout many regions of the world in recent years, and although IFSW issues statements of concern where violations of peoples' rights occur, the challenge is to ensure that these words are translated into actions.
- responding as effectively as it can to natural disasters such as the Asian tsunami of December 2004, the 2010 Haiti and 2011 New Zealand earthquakes, and Hurricane Sandy of 2012 in the United States by linking with other local, national, and international organizations to raise awareness of the plight of those affected and promote relief and developmental activities.
- engaging in debates and developing policy on poverty eradication following the forthcoming replacing of the Millennium Development Goals with the Sustainable Development Goals from 2015 through an African regional conference held in late 2013, IFSW's representation at the United Nations, and publications.

Some of the key founders and leaders of IFSW include Jane Hoey (1892–1968), Litsa Alexandraki (1918–1986), Chauncey A. Alexander (1916–2005), Eileen McGowan Kelly (1946–1996), Celia B. Weisman (1918–2000), Andrew Mouravieff-Apostol (1913–2001). The current secretary-general is Dr. Rory Truell, who is based at the Basel secretariat office.

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