

Background information to the 2025 (current) censure

The below questions and answers provide further details to the current censure and were drafted by Joachim Mumba, IFSW President, in reply to an enquiry of an IFSW member association.

Are other professional organisations in countries at war also called upon to take a stand against military service? For example, in Ukraine?

Thank you for this important question. The IFSW Executive did not initiate action against the Israeli Union of Social Workers (IUSW) on its own accord. Rather, the Federation received numerous letters from member associations, including the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists (PUSWP), demanding the suspension or expulsion of the IUSW. These letters alleged that members of the IUSW were actively engaged in military combat during the current Gaza war and therefore complicit in atrocities affecting civilians, including women and children. Notably, all the correspondence and formal complaints received by IFSW referred specifically to Israel and not to Ukraine or other contexts.

In response, the Executive Committee reviewed the matter in line with the IFSW Constitution, By-Laws, and the Global Statement of Ethical Principles. As the Executive has no authority to suspend or expel members, it followed due process and resolved to issue a censure. A three-member team; the IFSW President, the IFSW Europe President, and the Secretary-General was appointed to engage directly with the IUSW. Several meetings took place, during which we urged the IUSW to advocate with their government for the exemption of social workers from active military combat roles.

This position was grounded in our ethical mandate: social workers are called to uphold human dignity, promote peace, and work for social justice. Active participation in combat contradicts these principles, as it entails direct involvement in violence that harms individuals and communities.

Despite these discussions, the IUSW declined to take such a stance, arguing they were being singled out and that social workers in other war-affected countries may also serve in military roles. We explained that the Federation had acted only because of the formal complaints received, and that if similar concerns were raised regarding other member organisations, IFSW would investigate and engage in the same manner. We also reminded IUSW that all member organisations are required to uphold a Code of Ethics consistent with the international Statement of Ethical Principles.

Throughout our engagement, we acknowledged both the profound trauma of Israeli society, including the hostage situation and existential threats, and the equally devastating trauma of Palestinians, especially the mass killings in Gaza. Our purpose was not to deny the pain of either people, but to emphasise that social workers must stand as agents of peacebuilding, healing, and reconciliation.

The decision to censure the IUSW was therefore taken within the scope of the IFSW Constitution and By-Laws (By-Law 4 on Censure, Suspension or Expulsion from Membership), and was based on the Executive's concern that the IUSW, as an independent professional body, declined to uphold the principle that social workers should serve in peace-promoting rather than combat roles. In doing so, the Federation acted consistently with its mission and responsibilities to its members worldwide.

On the basis of which initiative (members of the Executive Board or other bodies / persons) was the initiative launched? What is the motivation for this harsh approach?

The Executive did not act on its own initiative, nor was there any hidden motive behind this decision. The process began when formal complaints were submitted by member organisations of the Federation, including the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists (PUSWP) as stated above. In line with our governance procedures, the Steering Group first considered these concerns and recommended that the matter be discussed by the full Executive Committee.

Following this, the Executive appointed a small team to engage directly with our colleagues in the Israeli Union of Social Workers (IUSW). The decision to issue a censure was not taken lightly or arbitrarily; it was the outcome of a careful process of dialogue, negotiation, and reflection on the responsibilities of social work in conflict situations.

It is important to stress that no ill intent or punitive motivation guided the Executive's actions. All decisions are made collectively, following deliberation and a formal vote, and are grounded in the IFSW Constitution, By-Laws, and the Global Statement of Ethical Principles. The censure was therefore issued solely on the basis of the ethical and constitutional obligations of the Federation, and with the aim of upholding the profession's core values.

Refusing military service is hardly approved of by the public. The Israeli state has a large number of enemies who could escalate the conflict militarily at any time. The military has too few servicemen and women. What justifies making such a strong demand on social workers? Does it make sense to make a request in this conflict-ridden situation with no prospect of success, apart from disapproval? See below for a suggested procedure.

The Executive never called upon our member to refuse military service. Rather, we requested that they consider asking their government to exempt social workers from active combat roles, while recognising that social workers may still serve in other non-combatant capacities within the military structure. Our reasoning was guided not by political calculation, but by the professional and ethical foundation of social work; to uphold human dignity, promote peace, and work toward social justice.

We acknowledge that such a request may not be accepted by the government, particularly in a highly conflictual context. Nevertheless, from the Federation's perspective, it remains important that social workers make their position clear and seek to shape the narrative of their role as protectors, healers, and peace-builders rather than combatants.

We also appreciate your suggested procedure and, as President, I note it with thanks on behalf of the Executive. Your reflections will help us strengthen our approaches in future situations.

Not doing military service ultimately means not being ready to defend oneself against existential dangers: Hamas wants to wipe out the existence of Israel; Hezbollah is fighting Israel; Iran supports terrorist groups, such as the Huthis in Yemen; Turkey / Erdogan wishes Israel destruction and misery; Qatar supports the leadership of Hamas; in Egypt, anti-Israeli agitation is widespread: Not doing military service means Israel's self-destruction. What legitimises this attitude?

Thank you for sharing these reflections. As the International Federation of Social Workers, we deeply respect the right of every nation and community to security, dignity, and self-determination.

We also acknowledge the grave existential threats and the fears they create, as outlined in your message.

At the same time, it is important to clarify that the Federation is not in any way endorsing violence or supporting those who seek the destruction of Israel or of any other people. The specific concern raised by colleagues relates not to the principle of national defense, but to the involvement of social workers in active military combat roles. From our ethical foundation, social work is a profession dedicated to protecting life, promoting peace, and supporting the most vulnerable in times of crisis. Participation in armed combat is seen as conflicting with this mission, particularly when it places social workers in situations where women, children, and civilians are directly harmed.

Our aim is to maintain dialogue across diverse contexts while holding firm to the global definition of social work and its commitment to human rights, dignity, and peace. We believe social workers can and should play crucial roles in conflict zones, supporting survivors, advocating for peace, and helping rebuild communities without compromising the profession's ethical core.

The people of Israel are traumatised to the core. After thousands of years of discrimination, persecution and annihilation, it thought it could live in the state of Israel within secure borders. This is proving to be an illusion. Refusing military service is hardly socially acceptable from this point of view either. Cultural memory is extremely strong in Israel.

We appreciate your reflections, which we receive with the seriousness and respect they deserve. The IFSW Executive is deeply aware of the profound pain and trauma that people in Israel are experiencing; not least due to the hostage situation, the existential threats you describe, and the deep cultural memory shaped by centuries of discrimination and persecution. We also recognise, with equal concern, the devastating pain and trauma of the Palestinian people, especially in light of the mass killings and destruction in Gaza.

In addressing these realities, the Federation holds firmly to its ethical mission: to promote human dignity, protect life, and work towards peace and social justice. Our recent decision was not intended as a dismissal of Israel's suffering or security needs. Rather, it reflected concern about the role of social workers in active military combat, which we see as conflicting with the global definition and values of our profession. Social workers are called to serve as agents of healing, reconciliation, and protection for the most vulnerable on all sides of conflict.

The IUSU issued a declaration in 2014, the content of which can be applied to the current situation. The current drama can hardly be compared with that of the past, but all the elements for a committed stance are present: a) 2-state solution (against the government); b) The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and a return of the Palestinians (it appears that the government does not want this); c) A clear commitment to a self-determined life in dignity for the Palestinians.

Thank you for reminding us of the important declaration issued by the Israeli Union of Social Workers in 2014. We recognise that statement as a progressive and courageous step, reflecting the very essence of social work's mission of building peace, promoting dignity, and standing for justice, even in the most complex and painful contexts.

The IFSW Executive Committee does not in any way take that achievement away from our Israeli colleagues. On the contrary, we honour it as an example of professional leadership that aligns

with the global values of our Federation. We can only encourage the Union to continue and expand such initiatives, as they provide a strong foundation for peace-building and for advancing the rights and dignity of all people in the region.

It is precisely through such principled commitments, whether to a two-state solution, the reconstruction of Gaza, or the recognition of Palestinians' right to a self-determined life that social workers can play a meaningful role in contributing to peace and reconciliation.

We understand how deeply sensitive and painful this is, and we remain committed to dialogue with all our members, including our Israeli colleagues, as we seek ways for the profession to contribute to peace and justice in the region.