

**The standards in social work practice meeting human rights as support to guarantee that the child's best interest is a primary consideration in the social workers' decisions**

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The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organisation striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the promotion of social work, best practice models and the facilitation of international cooperation.

Human rights are at the heart of social work and IFSW was pleased to take a leading role in creating a successful Human Rights Training Manual for the Social Work Profession and Schools of Social Work, first published by the United Nations in 1992 and reprinted in 1994. That manual has been an inspiration for many, and is still used around the world.

**Social Work and the Rights of the Child**, Publication of IFSW, 2002

[http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw\\_124952-4.pdf](http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw_124952-4.pdf)

IFSW has been granted Special Consultative Status by the **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**.

In 2002, IFSW has published a professional training manual on the UN Convention "Social Work and the Rights of the Child" to provide stimulation and guidance to social workers, social work students and educators, as well as colleagues in related fields, who wished to live up to the high ideals of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and to implement them in their work with children. This convention is of singular importance to all social workers.

The aim of this manual is to ensure that children's human rights, as set out in the Convention, are fully respected and implemented within the context of social work. The manual is useful to trainee social workers, as well as to social workers and fellow professionals working with children. It is also valuable to groups and organisations run by children and young people, as a self-advocacy tool.

This manual has four objectives:

- To promote knowledge, understanding and awareness of the rights of children and of social justice among social workers, students, teaching staff and others involved in social care;
- To provide case examples so that those using the manual can apply the Convention to their everyday social work practice;
- To introduce some of the dilemmas posed by the Convention, including the potential for tension between children's rights and adult's rights;
- To encourage users of the manual to develop their own contribution in order to monitor and implementation of the Convention at micro and macro levels.

Within the framework of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, IFSW has affirmed that the Convention is extremely important to the future shape and health of our planet and stated that members will continue to use the convention to help our states meet their treaty obligations.

<http://ifsw.org/news/ifsw-celebrates-25-years-of-the-uncrc/>

Also in 2002, the General Meeting approved the proposal that IFSW should join the **Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children**. This initiative was launched in April 2001 and aims to speed up the end of corporal punishment of children across the world.

<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/children>

Since then IFSW, at the global level, has produced more papers (statements and policies) focusing on the Rights of Children, as follows:

. **Children's right to education**, Statement of IFSW, 14 October 2005

<http://ifsw.org/statements/childrens-right-to-education/>

. **The best interests of the child**, Statement of IFSW, 6 February 2009

<http://ifsw.org/statements/the-best-interest-of-the-child/>

**. Guiding Principles for Social Workers Working with Others to Identify and Protect Children from all Forms of Sexual Abuse**, Policy Statement of IFSW, 31 October 2014 IFSW

<http://ifsw.org/policies/guiding-principles-for-social-workers-working-with-others-to-identify-and-protect-children-from-all-forms-of-sexual-abuse/>

Europe is one of the five regional divisions of IFSW.

IFSW Europe e.V. is a registered legal body, a member of the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform) and the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP), the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). It also represents the social work profession in the Council of Europe.

IFSW Europe e.V. works closely with the European Association of Schools of Social Work and the European Region of the International Council of Social Welfare, with whom, as well as 3 other European organisations has formed the European Network for Social ACTION (ENSACT).

IFSW Europe promotes human rights and social justice through meetings, symposiums, policies, statements, signing joint letters with our partners and engaging in campaigns for Human Rights. Some examples of these can be found at:

<http://ifsw.org/europe/statements/>

IFSW Europe has been joining our partners in the European Social Platform and other international bodies by making representations about children's rights to the European Council. A **Joint open letter to the European Council calling for European commitments on children's rights to be prioritised in future common migration and asylum policies**, was sent on the 22nd of May 2014.

[http://picum.org/picum.org/uploads/file\\_/Joint%20letter%20to%20European%20Council%20calling%20for%20children%20rights%20to%20be%20strengthened%20in%20future%20EU%20Home%20Affairs\\_22%20May%202014.pdf](http://picum.org/picum.org/uploads/file_/Joint%20letter%20to%20European%20Council%20calling%20for%20children%20rights%20to%20be%20strengthened%20in%20future%20EU%20Home%20Affairs_22%20May%202014.pdf)

**Social Work Standards Meeting Human Rights**, Publication of IFSW Europe e.V., May 2010

[http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw\\_45904-8.pdf](http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw_45904-8.pdf)

The European Region of the International Federation of Social Workers has taken this important step forward to promote Human Rights across European Social Work, by publishing a set of standards that meet Human Rights, making clear what is expected of social workers and their employers in order to meet their obligations that arise from the various international conventions on Human Rights.

It behoves all those associated with the profession across Europe to engage with these standards, to work actively towards their attainment in day-to-day professional practice and to ensure that all new recruits to the profession know these standards and the obligations to society that are required.

**Social Work is - DVD** - IFSW Europe e.V., 27 July 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FXqIHp6iRw>

IFSW Europe e.V. developed a DVD focusing on **Social Work and Human Rights**. The DVD "Social Work is", launched by IFSW Europe in 2011, highlights the contribution that social workers make to the well-being of individuals and groups who require support and assistance to overcome the very difficult situations that many citizens face at some time in their life.

The video is composed of nine small situations. Each situation depicts the outcomes of social work with different groups and individuals in society. These are examples of positive images that encourage disadvantaged, marginalized people or people dealing with difficulties in society, to be supported by social workers, for a better quality of life.

The lyrics of the song "Social Work is", written by executive member Cristina Martins, inspired by the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession, has been warmly received across Europe. The DVD got more than 20.000 views till the moment.

- What are the challenges and difficulties that social workers face in their important role in decision making for the child's best interests?

Social workers have the responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society in general and in relation to the people with whom they work. Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values, ethics and practice. Advocacy of such rights are an integral part of social work.

My professional experience as a social worker has always been in Health Institutions in Portugal, working for 20 years in the Portuguese Institute of Oncology of Porto, namely in the Oncology Paediatric Service.

A health institution is very often the place where situations of children at risk or in danger are identified for the first time.

As a member of the health team in a Paediatric service, the social work intervention aims to contribute for a better life quality of the patient and family (children and families), through social advocacy, in order to provide the support needed to face the illness situation and to ensure that the rights of services users are met and their voices heard. It also works to provide the support needed to face any problematic situation that is identified. Social workers have an important role in proposing changes in social policies to obtain better rights for the children and their families.

The document "Child abuse in children and youth - Health Intervention ", published by the Health Ministry in Portugal states that the primary health care units and hospitals in the National Health Service with paediatric care, must be equipped with multidisciplinary teams, called Supporting children and young people at risk's teams in the first case, and supporting children and youth at risk hospital teams in the second, to support the professional interventions in this area, linking up and cooperating with other agencies and institutions .

The Supporting Children and Youth at Risk's Teams have the mission of intervening when the physical, mental and social well-being of any child / young user of a health institution is or may be in danger, so that the legal proceedings are taken, closely with the Project for Family and Children Support (PAFAC - *Projecto de Apoio à Família e à Criança*). Each Team shall consist of one Doctor (Coordinator), one nurse, one social worker, one psychologist and one legal expert. The Teams receive guidance from Directorate General of Health's Monitoring Commission for the Health Action for Children and Youth at Risk, and one of its tasks is the promotion of the Rights of Children and Youth.

Particularly in Portugal, we are very proud to have a good Law of Protection of Children in Danger (*Lei de Protecção das Crianças em Perigo*) that provides a very important tool for social workers to identify situations in which children may be in danger.

Law No. 147/99 of 1 September – Law for child protection and youth at risk, referred to in Article 3 on the legitimacy of the intervention:

*1 – The intervention for promoting the rights and protection of children and youth in danger occurs when the parents, the legal representative or whoever has the de facto custody endanger their safety, health, training, education or development, or when this danger results from an action or omission of third parties or of the child or young person, to which they do not object properly to remove it.*

*2 - It is considered that the child or young person is in danger when he/she is, inter alia, in one of the following situations:*

- a) Is abandoned or lives left to itself;*
- b) Suffers physical or mental abuse or is a victim of sexual abuse;*
- c) Does not receive the care or affection appropriate to their age and personal situation;*
- d) Is required to do activities or work that are excessive or inappropriate to their age, dignity and personal situation or harmful to the formation and development;*
- e) Is subject, directly or indirectly, to behaviours that seriously affect their safety or their emotional balance;*

*f ) Assumes behaviours or indulges in activities or consumption that seriously affect their health, safety, training, education or development without the parents, the legal representative or whoever has custody of fact, oppose to remove that situation in an appropriate manner.*

In Article 4 the guiding principles of intervention are highlighted:

*The intervention for promoting the rights and protection of children and youth at risk is based on the following principles:*

*a) Best interest of children and youth - the operation is high priority on the interests and rights of children and youth, subject to the consideration that is due to other legitimate interests within the plurality of interests present in this case;...*

In my presentation at the Conference I will be presenting 3 cases I worked for as a member of the **“Supporting Families and Children’s Team”** in the Paediatric service of the Hospital, to underline evidence base of practical social work intervention and in order to promote some discussion around the support provided to children in danger - difficulties and challenges.

- Are social workers well supported by legal mechanisms in their daily practice while advocating for and ensuring the best interest of the Child?

- More support is welcome

Even with the best protective laws, existence of legal mechanisms, well trained team works, etc. social workers may not find enough means, tools and resources to achieve the best for the children they are working for. There’s a need for stronger prevention measures and policies, supported by adequate financial and human resources. Sometimes the lack of the most adequate response to the needs of the child can limit the social work intervention and the professional’s view and decision on the best interest of the Child (health institutions normally provide the first safe home for children at risk but this should be only for a transitional period).

- Courage in Social Work

It is required a lot of courage to a Social Worker who works in order to ensure the best interest of the child. He or she may have to fight some battles on the way, while advocating and working for the protection of the Child in Danger. This can include conflicts with family members (abusers), institutional personnel, community members, and others. A lot of bureaucracy of the system, some unexpected “interests” and “powers” can also sometimes become obstructions to the professional work in these cases. I would say that along with a bit of courage, lots of determination and not forgetting the special training in this particular area are absolutely necessary to deal properly with the demanding nature of our important mission on behalf of the best interest of the Child.

- Should Social Workers be more prominent in their action as political agents to make a difference for the best interest of the Child?

- YES! Yes, we should!

Social workers practitioners have a great experience in dealing with children at risk. They are able to use their knowledge of Social Work practice in the research they perform. Through this, they can develop methods for future Social Work practice.

IFSW Europe encourages Social Workers to be more active, by underlining the problems they face in their daily practice and use that knowledge and expertise to propose changes in policies than can better protect children in society.

The problem is that many social workers face serious limitations to put that into action. Their lack of

time to write down and to engage in extra actions due to the great amount of tasks and responsibilities that they already have during their daily work time is what limits them. This situation is more deeply felt by the professionals from the European countries that were most affected by the austerity measures, where social workers are having an increase of work cases (also one of the consequences of the social and economic crisis), working more hours a day (with less payment), and this has a large effect on their professional performances. But, besides facing all these types of constraints, social workers always make the effort to apply the Human Rights, as they are strongly committed with their values and mission.

Social work must be the Voice of the Child.

In resume, I definitely believe social workers are prepared through their courses, with the theoretical basis to intervene as political agents, but when they start working in practice for this particular area, as in all other professions, they require a more specific training. First of all, I think the most important characteristic of a social worker to intervene for the realization of Human Rights is to have Courage. Then, it is absolutely necessary to work in a multidisciplinary team to be sure that a proper evaluation of the case is made. After identifying the risk, the social worker needs to be prepared to activate the proper mechanism to report the “abuse”. It is very important to be very secure about what he or she is reporting and denouncing about, as the consequences of that action can turn into a bigger harm to the Child and/or Family.

#### Final remarks

. Social Workers have a duty to keep their knowledge and skills up to date and they must follow practice based on best evidence and current knowledge;

. Social workers face difficulties in their daily practice while protecting children of all forms of abuse. There's a need for stronger prevention measures and policies, supported by adequate financial and human resources;

. All Social Workers and service users should have the possibility to refer to a body with the legally recognised remit of safeguarding of professional ethics and providing redress;

. While the UN child rights' convention has changed the understanding of the rights of children and the way children are viewed and treated, in practice, much still remains to be done to better ensure the rights of children all across Europe and worldwide.