

Social Work in Poland: a helping profession in need

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This article presents results of a national survey on the situation of Polish Social workers.

Social Work

Modern professional Social Work is important for a society that wants to be fair and democratic toward all its citizens. Social workers support citizens to participate in society. They do not only support vulnerable citizens (unemployed, disabled, homeless, orphans, elderly etc.), but they also offer services to citizens in housing districts and villages who want to improve the quality of everyday life, as well as citizens depending of vital services who wants to organize and participate as patients, clients or consumers. Because of these functions, Social Work is for authorities and institutions an important instrument to develop and carry out social policy.

As in other Eastern European countries, Social Work in Poland has little priority and insufficient means to cope with the many social problems, and to support the upcoming civil society. Operating as Social Worker in these circumstances is much more difficult than in Western countries where Social Work is an established, integrated part of a relatively well provided social infrastructure.

Survey

To find out details and to come up with hard facts on the position of professional Social workers in Poland, the Dutch-Polish Matra SIC! Project initiated and financed a nation wide survey. As Project manager I designed a research programme and a questionnaire, formed a research group, and directed the implementation by Fundacja SIC! Social Innovation Centre, operating from Poznan.

The questionnaire was titled "50 Questions to Polish Social workers" and was conducted via Internet, from June 8 until July 17, 2006. The questionnaire was aimed to collect facts and opinions about working conditions, workload, career satisfaction and expectations.

A total of 1162 Polish social workers responded by filling in and returning the records. This number of respondents is relatively high. It means that 4% of the approx. 30.000 professional Social workers in Poland took part in the survey!

Polish Social Workers

The characteristics of the 1162 respondents correspond with what is known of the population of Polish Social workers:

- gender: 89% of the respondents is female, 11% is male.
- age: 26% is 20-29 years, 36% is 30-39, 29% is 40-49 and 9% is 50-59 years
- education: 54% of the respondents has a diploma of Social Worker, 15% has a bachelor's degree, 46% as a master degree and 10% has various education

This outcome is more than 100% because 45 % of the respondents did two studies

- experience: 56% has 10 years or more experience in the job, 23% of the workers has 4-9 years experience, and 21% less than 3 years
- position: 72% of the respondents is frontline Social Worker, 8% is supervisor, 11% is middle manager, 2% is consultant, and 15% is in other positions

This outcome is more than 100%, because some workers have more than one position.

- work fields: all work fields are represented.
- Most of the respondents work in two or more fields

The respondents are working all over Poland, in small and big places, in small and big institutions, in the governmental, non governmental and private sector.

- provinces: respondents come from all 16 provinces in the country. Statistic analysis shows that our sample is representative for the distribution of the population over the provinces, with a maximum deviation of 3%.
- cities and towns: 17% of the respondents is from big cities (500.000 or more), 14% is from medium sized cities (100.000-500.000), 44% is from towns with less than 100.000 inhabitants and 25% of the respondents is from rural areas
- institutions: 28% of the respondents work in institutions with 1-9 workers, 36% in institutions of 10-49 workers, 13% in institutions with 50-99 workers, and 24% of the respondents work in institutions with over 100 workers. This outcome is more than 100% because 4% of the respondents works in two or more institutions. 96% of the institutions are governmental institutions.



Social workers

The characteristics of the sample group do not show relevant significant differences of what is known of the population of Polish professional social workers.

This similarity is caused by four factors, namely:

- the large number of respondents;
- the nation wide research approach;
- the use of national media and Internet to reach social workers and to stimulate their participation;
- in between mailings to social workers in provinces with low response.

One aspect seems to be questionable: the participation of workers without computers with Internet connection. I deliberately write: "seems to be", because, despite their participation via Internet, 19% of our respondents report (via Internet, sic!) that they have no access to internet at work, and another 8% has only limited access!! (question 31.4)

"Insiders" will not be surprised by this fact, because networking and mobilizing resources are key qualifications of social workers!

Working hours

80% of social workers works fulltime or more (37-48 hours per week), while 15% works 8 hours or less per week. Half of the workers (52%) say that they normally

make overtime, without being paid for it. If workers receive compensatory time for it, 40% is not able to take this time off.

Besides the 15% with a handful of hours and a small rest group of 5%, it is obviously not attractive to work part time in Social Work. At the other hand, working more than the agreed number of hours is not attractive either, because in many cases it is not paid or it is hard to compensate it in free time.

More than half of the social workers (58%) works outside regular office hours and/or in shifts. Most of them are workers with 1-3 years experience.

10% of the social workers works in weekends, while 1 on 3 workers incidentally works on Saturdays or Sundays.



Social work office

Shortage of staff & time pressure

According to a majority of social workers, their institutions have a shortage of staff to complete the work to an acceptable standard. This majority of 64% is equally formed by frontline workers, supervisors and managers. 22% reports not to be sure about a shortage of staff, while only 14% answers that there is a sufficient number of workers.

The shortage of staff is one of the major problems in social Work institutions. According to 64% of the workers, this shortage causes waiting lists for clients, and puts ongoing time pressure on workers.

Asking Social workers for more details, the time pressure they feel is caused by:

- too much paper work (89%),

- too much work altogether (83%)
- new duties (71%)
- complexity of work load (71%)
- too fast work tempo (57%)
- changes in policy (54%)
- covering for other staff (38%)

Technology

The effects of technology (computers, E-mail, Internet) on the work are considered positive by 71 % of the workers. The younger the workers are, the more positive they judge, but the differences between the age groups are relatively small.

Sickness

From practice and literature is known, that Social workers are dedicated to their clients. In the questionnaire this is illustrated by a worrying fact, namely: 62% of the Social workers do not stay at home when they are sick, but go on working! Another 25% reports that they “sometimes” work when they are ill. Only 9 % answers that they rarely work during sickness, while only 4% simply does not work. These figures are more or less the same for all positions in Social Work.

Working circumstances

A well facilitated work place has a positive effect on workers and their clients. Only 29% of Polish social workers are in these circumstances. 31% find their work place acceptable, while 27% of the workers consider their work environment as a problem. 13% qualifies their work place as “a disaster”! In other words: 40% of social workers do their work in poor circumstances!



Worker with client

Privacy of clients

The privacy of clients is in general an important value, and in Social Work an ethic standard. The situation in this respect is in Poland very bad. In only 18% of all cases the work place offers sufficient possibilities for the privacy of clients! A majority of workers (58%) are not able to offer their clients sufficient privacy. They straight answer “no” on our question! In the other cases (24%) the situation is considered as more or less acceptable.

Organization

We asked workers to give their opinion about six different aspects of the organization of their institutions.

On a scale of 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good) social workers scored as follows:

- modern: 3,93
- flexible: 4.12
- effective: 4.24
- efficient: 4.29
- open: 4.33
- client friendly: 5.06

The average score for the organization of the institutions is 4.3 on a scale of 7. In school terms it means that the organization of the institutions just pass for the exam ($0,55 \times 7 = 3.85 = \text{beta minus}$)

The figures show a need for further modernization of the Social Work institutions. The scores on the different aspects indicate the priorities and the way to proceed.



Paper work

Management

Social workers gave their opinion about the management of their institutions. Our respondents scored the various aspects of the management on a scale of 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good) as follows:

- supporting workers: 3.29
- clear and consistent policy: 3.34
- delegation of responsibilities & means to workers: 3,60
- open and flexible toward staff: 3.65
- open for suggestions and changes: 3.67
- informed about everyday work: 3.68
- vision and new ideas: 3.69
- appreciated & respected by workers: 3.88
- cooperation with other institutions: 4.11
- competence / expertise: 4.57

The average score for the management is 3.75 on a scale of 7. In school terms it means that managers are not doing well, and do not pass for the exam ($0,55 \times 7 = 3,85$). The weakest points of management are: support of workers, policy of the institution, and delegation of responsibilities & means. Stronger, but still not good, are competence / expertise, and cooperation with other institutions.

These aspects of management can be, and should be, targeted by a national programme of further education, supervision and quality assurance.



Working room

Space and influence

Social workers are educated professionals with an own professional code, working for and with clients. The workers need a certain autonomy to do their

work according to an acceptable professional standard.

We asked the workers: "Does your institution offer you sufficient space to operate and to take your own decisions?" On a scale of 7, the total score on this question is low: 3.84.

More than 60% of the workers feels hampered in their professional functioning. Almost half of them scored extremely low (1 or 2). This outcome does mesh with a low score for delegation of responsibilities and means by managers.

We also asked Social workers if they have influence on the working circumstances in their institutions.

The average score on this question was even lower than that on the former one: a score of only 3.04! Almost half of the workers answered that they have no influence at all! 30% have little influence, while only 10% feels able to influence their working circumstances. Most Polish Social workers have no or little influence on the working circumstances in their institutions. They also lack sufficient space to take full professional responsibility for their work.

These are worrying facts. They are illustrative for the weak position of the profession and for the dominance of management and bureaucracy in many of the institutions. It also means that changes have to come mainly from outside and from above to win the workers' trust and to activate them! These problems have to be targeted by the trade unions and professional interest organizations, backed up by political support.

Wages & benefits

According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Labour, salaries in Social Work belong to the lowest in the country, together with those in health protection, hotels & restaurants and fishery (Poland 2005 - Report Labour Market p. 41/42). The average gross monthly salary in health protection & social assistance was in 2004 (the latest published figures) 1.888.37 Polish zlotys (480 Euro). By adding 2 years x 5%, we can estimate the average gross monthly salary in 2006 on 2078 PLN (530 Euro).

1071 of our 1162 respondents work full time. Their average gross monthly salary is even lower than the official lowest salaries, namely: 1844 PLN!. Our survey proves that 65% of Polish Social workers has a gross monthly salary, lower than the official lowest average gross monthly salary in health protection & social assistance. More than half of these workers earn far less than that, namely between 800-1600 PLN gross per month. Including the 13 month salary (90% of the workers gets it), and some (small) bonuses, (the official figures are not clear about that) makes a small difference of 10-12%, but does not change the fact that most Social workers earn so little!



Social workers team in Gdansk

The salaries of frontline Social workers are even less than those of supervisors, managers and consultants. The average gross monthly salary of frontline Social workers is 1645 PLN. Most Social workers with a gross monthly salary less than 1200 PLN, are less than one year in the job. They are young and live on their own. 64% of these starters reports that they can not, or hardly, live from their salary. 28% find it difficult, while 8% reports that they manage to survive. 51% of all Social workers report that they can not, or hardly live from their salary, while 36% finds it difficult. In 80% of all cases, more than 1 person has to live from the Social Worker's salary.

It is for a fact that Polish Social workers earn one of the lowest salaries in the country. In this respect there is truth after all in what many Social workers often say: "We are not better off than many of our clients." It is no wonder that 90% of the Social workers are not satisfied or even angry about their payment. The workers expressed their opinion as follows:

In our helping profession, salary is not important 4%
Polish society can not afford to pay us more 3%
It is okay, I can live from it 3%
Comparing to the work they do, Social workers don't get much 48%
Social Work is an underpaid profession 35%
It is a shame what society pays us 7%

Career Satisfaction

The character of Social Work, and the conditions under which it is done, are not without personal effects on workers:

- 80% of the workers reports that their social and family life is negatively affected by the stress of the job
- 43 % of the workers is more irritable with colleagues, and 38% with clients
- 27% reports to get sick more frequently
- 24% feels depressed
- 19% makes more mistakes

We asked Social workers to rate the satisfaction with their career as Social Worker on a scale from 1 to 7 (very dissatisfied until very satisfied). 37% is unsatisfied with their career, 40% is satisfied, and 23% keeps the middle. The most pleased with their career are workers between 50-59 years with a gross monthly salary of more than 2600 PLN. Very unpleased are workers from 30-39 who earn no more than 1200 PLN.

To make career satisfaction more concrete, we asked the workers: “Would you advice your child or someone else to choose a career in Social Work?” Only 10% answers “yes”, and 35% answers straight forward “no”. 40% let us know that it depends, while 15% is not sure.

Obviously many social workers are hampered to be proud of their profession, because of the difficult working conditions and a disappointing societal appreciation of their work. In order to motivate workers, and to make the profession attractive for young people, these problems have to be tackled and solved.

Role of the government

The financing of Social Work will stay, despite fashionable market talk, mainly a public matter and responsibility. The governments, and their Social Policy, are of vital importance for Social Work.

We asked the workers to score the following three statements:

The governments invests more than enough in Social Work 3%
The government does not invest enough in Social Work 34%
The government neglects Social Work 63%

This outcome is very critical toward the government. Social workers in Poland feel neglected by authorities. It is high time governments pay attention to this important professional group and make some gestures of good will.

Role of scientists

Social workers do not only feel neglected by public authorities, but also by the intellectuals, the scientists in Polish society. The workers scored on three statements about scientific support as follows:

Scientists do not offer any meaningful support to Social Work 33%
Only a handful of scientists support Social Work 62%
Scientist offer sufficient support to Social Work 5%

This outcome means that professional Social Work in Poland has hardly any scientific support.

Role of interest organizations

There is a lot to do for the “own” organizations of Social workers. These organizations however, have to improve their own functioning, because many workers are not satisfied with it. On the statement that Polish Social workers are well organized and represented, the workers responded as follows:

- true: 3%
- it could be better: 21%
- we are far from that: 54%
- not true: 22%

I hope this outcome will be taken serious by the existing organizations, and that they will treat it as a challenge to change and to improve their functioning and organization. My first advice to them is: listen to the workers. Listen carefully. Pick up the core of what they say, translate it in new policy and act according to that.



Red light

Problems and barriers

We asked workers to mention, in order of importance, the most urgent social topics where Social Work has to deal with. The outcome is as follows:

Unemployment 54%
Poverty 19%
child and youth care 17%
isolation / loneliness 15%
elderly care 13%
homelessness 9%
alcohol and drugs addiction 8%
crime and vandalism 8%
democracy & participation 7%
low income housing 6%

Social workers also mentioned the most important barriers for the further development of professional Social Work in Poland. The outcome is as follows:

lack of money for Social Work 31%
shortage of Social workers 20%
bureaucracy 19%
lack of legal standards 19%
unattractive image of Social Work 12%
lack of training for workers 10%
low status of Social Work 10%
poor conditions of Social Work 9%
lack of governmental support 9%
lack of time / many new duties 9%

Polish Social workers operate under marginal and difficult conditions. It is clear that workers consider these conditions as barriers for the further development of the profession.

Conclusions

The outcome of the survey shows the weak position and difficult situation of Polish social workers. Polish social workers do their work in poor organizational circumstances with questionable management. In many institutions a shortage of staff is causing working in overtime and a permanent time pressure on workers.

Social workers have limited professional powers to do their work according to an acceptable standard. Changing their situation is not easy, because workers report to have little influence on their working circumstances. Social workers feel ignored by the government, and underestimated by the public opinion.

Polish social workers have hardly any scientific support, and do their work in difficult circumstances, mostly not able to offer privacy to their clients. Social Work can be a stressful and exhausting job, resulting in sickness. However, many social workers are so dedicated to their clients that they keep on working, even when they are ill.

As if this is not hard enough: the salaries of Polish Social workers belong to the lowest in the country! It is understandable that 90% of the social workers feel underpaid, and say they can not live from their salary or find it hard to do so.

Social workers in Poland are good willing professionals, mainly women, doing their valuable work for society under difficult circumstances as known now thanks to their willingness to take part in this survey. Social Work in Poland is a helping profession in need. It is high time that workers, interest organizations and governments become active and work together to improve the position and situation of social workers in Poland. Because of their valuable work for society - helping people, coping with social problems, stimulating participation and fighting social exclusion – a wider interest than only that of the social workers is at stake here. To improve the quality of life for all citizens, the country can not do without a modern, well equipped system of professional Social Work.

Coalition

The outcome of the survey was presented during a press conference in Warsaw on Friday October 27, 2006. At this meeting the four national organizations of social workers in Poland (Polish Association of Social Workers, Orange Movement of critical social workers, National Association “Forum” of social work directors, and Fundacja SIC! Social Innovation Centre) were official represented. They announced the forming of a coalition to improve the working conditions of social workers. The Polish Ministry of Social Affairs was also represented at the meeting. The official took the outcome of the survey for granted, and was willing to cooperate with the new formed coalition.



Presentation of the survey results in Warsaw, October 27, 2006

International solidarity

In the frame work of European cooperation and funds, there are today more possibilities than ever to support Polish Social Workers in their efforts to build up an effective and efficient professional system of social work services, and to create proper circumstances to do so. In my opinion, especially forms of durable “twinning” between social work institutions, schools and studies of social work, and social policy departments of cities and towns can be very helpful to initiate and support new approaches, methods and organization forms.

Fotos: Klaas van Langen, NHL, Netherlands

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Topics: [Poland](#), [professionalization](#), [social work](#)