

The Ethics of Social Work Principles and Standards

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1. Background

Ethical awareness is a necessary part of the professional practice of any social worker. His or her ability to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to clients.

The purpose of IFSW's work on ethics is to promote ethical debate and reflection in the member associations and among the providers of social work in member countries.

The basis for the further development of IFSW's work on ethics is to be found in "Ethics of Social Work - Principles and Standards" which consists of two documents, **International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work**, and **International Ethical Standards for Social Workers**. These documents present the basic ethical principles of the social work profession, recommend procedure when the work presents ethical dilemmas, and deal with the profession's and the individual social worker's relation to clients, colleagues, and others in the field. The documents are components in a continuing process of use, review and revision.

2. International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work

2.1 Introduction

The IFSW recognises the need for a declaration of ethical principles for guidance in dealing with ethical problems in social work.

The purposes of the *International Declaration of Ethical Principles* are:

1. to formulate a set of basic principles for social work, which can be adapted to cultural and social settings.
2. to identify ethical problem areas in the practice of social work (below referred to as 'problem areas'), and
3. to provide guidance as to the choice of methods for dealing with ethical issues/problems (below referred to as 'methods for addressing ethical issues/problems').

Compliance

The International Declaration of Ethical Principles assumes that both member associations of the IFSW and their constituent members adhere to the principles formulated therein. The IFSW expects each member association to assist its members in identifying and dealing with ethical issues/problems in the practice of their profession.

Member associations of the IFSW and individual members of these can report any member association to the Executive Committee of the IFSW should it neglect to adhere to these principles. National Associations who experience difficulties adopting these principles should notify the Executive Committee of IFSW. The Executive Committee may impose the stipulations and intentions of the Declaration of Ethical Principles on an association which neglects to comply. Should this not be sufficient the Executive Committee can, as a following measure, suggest suspension or exclusion of the association.

The International Declaration of Ethical Principles should be made publicly known. This would enable clients, employers, professionals from other disciplines, and the general public to have expectations in accordance with the ethical foundations of social work.

We acknowledge that a detailed set of ethical standards for the member associations would be unrealistic due to legal, cultural and governmental differences among the member countries.

2.2 The Principles

Social workers serve the development of human beings through adherence to the following basic principles:

2.2.1.

Every human being has a unique value, which justifies moral consideration for that person.

2.2.2.

Each individual has the right to self-fulfilment to the extent that it does not encroach upon the same right of others, and has an obligation to contribute to the well-being of society.

2.2.3.

Each society, regardless of its form, should function to provide the maximum benefits for all of its members.

2.2.4.

Social workers have a commitment to principles of social justice.

2.2.5.

Social workers have the responsibility to devote objective and disciplined knowledge and skill to aid individuals, groups, communities, and societies in their development and resolution of personal-societal conflicts and their consequences.

2.2.6.

Social workers are expected to provide the best possible assistance to anybody seeking their help and advice, without unfair discrimination on the basis of gender, age, disability, colour, social class, race, religion, language, political beliefs, or sexual orientation.

2.2.7.

Social workers respect the basic human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration.

2.2.8.

Social workers pay regard to the principles of privacy, confidentiality, and responsible use of information in their professional work. Social workers respect justified confidentiality even when their country's legislation is in conflict with this demand.

2.2.9.

Social workers are expected to work in full collaboration with their clients, working for the best interests of the clients but paying due regard to the interests of others involved. Clients are encouraged to participate as much as possible, and should be informed of the risks and likely benefits of proposed courses of action.

2.2.10.

Social workers generally expect clients to take responsibility, in collaboration with them, for determining courses of action affecting their lives. Compulsion which might be necessary to solve one party's problems at the expense of the interests of others involved should only take place after careful explicit evaluation of the claims of the conflicting parties. Social workers should minimise the use of legal compulsion.

2.2.11.

Social work is inconsistent with direct or indirect support of individuals, groups, political forces or power-structures suppressing their fellow human beings by employing terrorism, torture or similar brutal means.

2.2.12.

Social workers make ethically justified decisions, and stand by them, paying due regard to the IFSW International Declaration of Ethical Principles, and to the **International Ethical Standards for Social Workers** adopted by their national professional association.

2.3 Problem Areas

2.3.1.

The problem areas raising ethical issues directly are not necessarily universal due to cultural and governmental differences. Each national association is encouraged to promote discussion and clarification of important issues and problems particularly relevant to its country. The following problem areas are, however, widely recognized:

1. **when the loyalty of the social worker is in the middle of conflicting interests**
 - between those of the social workers own and the clients
 - between conflicting interests of individual clients and other individuals
 - between the conflicting interests of groups of clients
 - between groups of clients and the rest of the population
 - between systems/institution and groups of clients
 - between system/institution/employer and social workers
 - between different groups of professionals
2. **the fact that the social worker functions both as a helper and controller**

The relation between these two opposite aspects of social work demands a clarification based on an explicit choice of values in order to avoid a mixing-up of motives or the lack of clarity in motives, actions and consequences of actions. When social workers are expected to play a role in the state control of citizens they are obliged to clarify the ethical implications of this role and to what extent this role is acceptable in relation to the basic ethical principles of social work.
3. **the duty of the social worker to protect the interests of the client will easily come into conflict with demands for efficiency and utility**

This problem is becoming important with the introduction and use of information technology within the fields of social work.

2.3.2.

The principles declared in section 2.2 should always be at the base of any consideration given or choice made by social workers in dealing with issues/problems within these areas.

2.4. Methods For The Solution of Issues/Problems

2.4.1.

The various national associations of social workers are obliged to treat matters in such a way that ethical issues/problems may be considered and tried to be solved in collective forums within the organization. Such forums should enable the individual social worker to discuss, analyse and consider ethical issues/problems in collaboration with colleagues, other expert groups and/parties affected by the matter under discussion. In addition such forums should give the social worker opportunity to receive advice from colleagues and others. Ethical analysis and discussion should always seek to create possibilities and options.

2.4.2.

The member associations are required to produce and/or adapt ethical standards for the different fields of work, especially for those fields where there are complicated ethical issues/problems as well as areas where the ethical principles of social work may come into conflict with the respective country's legal system or the policy of the authorities.

2.4.3.

When ethical foundations are laid down as guidelines for actions within the practice of social work, it is the duty of the associations to aid the individual social worker in analysing and considering ethical issues/problems on the basis of:

1. The basic **principles** of the Declaration (section 2.2)
2. The ethical/moral and political **context** of the actions, i.e. an analysis of the values and forces constituting the framing conditions of the action.
3. The **motives** of the action, i.e. to advocate a higher level of consciousness of the aims and intentions the individual social worker might have regarding a course of action.
4. The **nature** of the action, i.e. help in providing an analysis of the moral content of the action, e.g. the use of compulsion as opposed to voluntary co-operation, guardianship vs participation, etc.
5. The **consequences** the action might have for different groups, i.e. an analysis of the consequences of different ways of action for all involved parties in both the short and long term.

2.4.4.

The member associations are responsible for promoting debate, education and research regarding ethical questions.

3. International Ethical Standards for Social Workers

(This section is based on the "International Code of Ethics for the Professional Social Worker" adopted by the IFSW in 1976, but does not include ethical principles since these are now contained in the new separate **International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work** in section 2.2 of the present document.)

3.1 Preamble

Social work originates variously from humanitarian, religious and democratic ideals and philosophies and has universal application to meet human needs arising from personal-societal interactions and to develop human potential. Professional social workers are dedicated to service for the welfare and self-fulfilment of human beings; to the development and disciplined use of validated knowledge regarding human and societal behaviour; to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; and to the achievement of social justice. On the basis of the **International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work**, the social worker is obliged to recognise these standards of ethical conduct.

3.2. General Standards of Ethical Conduct

3.2.1.

Seek to understand each individual client and the client system, and the elements which affect behaviour and the service required.

3.2.2.

Uphold and advance the values, knowledge and methodology of the profession, refraining from any behaviour which damages the functioning of the profession.

3.2.3.

Recognise professional and personal limitations.

3.2.4.

Encourage the utilisation of all relevant knowledge and skills.

3.2.5.

Apply relevant methods in the development and validation of knowledge.

3.2.6.

Contribute professional expertise to the development of policies and programs which improve the quality of life in society.

3.2.7.

Identify and interpret social needs.

3.2.8.

Identify and interpret the basis and nature of individual, group, community, national, and international social problems.

3.2.9.

Identify and interpret the work of the social work profession.

3.2.10.

Clarify whether public statements are made or actions performed on an individual basis or as representative of a professional association, agency or organisation, or other group.

3.3 Social Work Standards Relative to Clients

3.3.1.

Accept primary responsibility to identified clients, but within limitations set by the ethical claims of others.

3.3.2.

Maintain the client's right to a relationship of trust, to privacy and confidentiality, and to responsible use of information. The collection and sharing of information or data is related to the professional service function with the client informed as to its necessity and use. No information is released without prior knowledge and informed consent of the client, except where the client cannot be responsible or others may be seriously jeopardized. A client has access to social work records concerning them.

3.3.3.

Recognise and respect the individual goals, responsibilities, and differences of clients. Within the scope of the agency and the client's social milieu, the professional service shall assist clients to take responsibility for personal actions and help all clients with equal willingness. Where the professional service cannot be provided under such conditions the clients shall be so informed in such a way as to leave the clients free to act.

3.3.4.

Help the client - individual, group, community, or society- to achieve self-fulfilment and maximum potential within the limits of the respective rights of others. The service shall be based upon helping the client to understand and use the professional relationship, in furtherance of the clients legitimate desires and interests.

3.4 Social Work Standards Relative to Agencies and Organizations

3.4.1.

Work and/or cooperate with those agencies and organizations whose policies, procedures, and operations are directed toward adequate service delivery and encouragement of professional practice consistent with the ethical principles of the IFSW.

3.4.2.

Responsibly execute the stated aims and functions of the agency or organizations, contributing to the development of sound policies, procedures, and practice in order to obtain the best possible standards or practice.

3.4.3.

Sustain ultimate responsibility to the client, initiating desirable alterations of policies, procedures, and practice, through appropriate agency and organization channels. If necessary remedies are not achieved after channels have been exhausted, initiate appropriate appeals to higher authorities or the wider community of interest.

3.4.4.

Ensure professional accountability to client and community for efficiency and effectiveness through periodic review of the process of service provision.

3.4.5.

Use all possible ethical means to bring unethical practice to an end when policies, procedures and practices are in direct conflict with the ethical principles of social work.

3.5 Social Work Standards Relative to Colleagues

3.5.1.

Acknowledge the education, training and performance of social work colleagues and professionals from other disciplines, extending all necessary cooperation that will enhance effective services.

3.5.2.

Recognise differences of opinion and practice of social work colleagues and other professionals, expressing criticism through channels in a responsible manner.

3.5.3.

Promote and share opportunities for knowledge, experience, and ideas with all social work colleagues, professionals from other disciplines and volunteers for the purpose of mutual improvement.

3.5.4.

Bring any violations of professionals ethics and standards to the attention of the appropriate bodies inside and outside the profession, and ensure that relevant clients are properly involved.

3.5.5.

Defend colleagues against unjust actions.

3.6 Standards Relative to the Profession

3.6.1.

Maintain the values, ethical principles, knowledge and methodology of the profession and contribute to their clarification and improvement.

3.6.2.

Uphold the professional standards of practice and work for their advancement.

3.6.3.

Defend the profession against unjust criticism and work to increase confidence in the necessity for professional practice.

3.6.4.

Present constructive criticism of the profession, its theories, methods and practices

3.6.5.

Encourage new approaches and methodologies needed to meet new and existing needs.