



Perceptions of Academics from European Universities Regarding the Refugee Issue and the Role of Social Work

Dr Stavros Fragkos

Social Work Department, Democritus University of Thrace, Komotini, Greece
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1317-5451> (stavros fragkos)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the discourse of five academic professors of Social Work, from European universities, regarding the refugee issue in the EU, in the period before the pandemic and before the war crisis in Ukraine and Russia. The aim is to highlight the positions, perspectives and perceptions of the contributors regarding the way social work approaches the refugee phenomenon. Although the common denominator in the social work profession internationally is the same values and principles, this does not take away the interest in following the views of different academics who focus on different issues in a unique way. This is a qualitative research based on semi-structured interview, conducted in the context of a European seminar, in Switzerland. The research sample: consisted of social work faculty from 2 universities in Switzerland, 1 in Austria, 1 in Germany, 1 in Sweden (two women of which one is a refugee and 3 men). The research questions were related to the following: How do academic social work professors conceptualize the refugee issue in Europe before the pandemic, how do they define the role of the CE with refugees and what suggestions do they adopt to manage the refugee challenge. Thematic data analysis includes a) Personal perceptions of the refugee issue, b) The role that social work is called upon to play and c) The proposed changes around social policy. The issues addressed in this research highlight interesting themes. Of particular interest are the priorities set by CE teachers in conjunction with the way they perceive the refugee issue. Comparative social work can highlight the different philosophy of each field looking forward to improving the theoretical background in the field.

Keywords: Social Work, Refugees, Education

I. Introduction

Refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and others included in the so-called "weak" social groups have sought a better life for themselves and their families, experiencing discrimination and social

exclusion in their daily lives [6,3]. The deprivation of basic human rights of vulnerable groups does not only affect the groups themselves, but reflects on the whole culture, social justice and social rights of a society. The unequal treatment and discrimination experienced by refugee children and their families are significant obstacles to their smooth integration into society and the development of their personalities. In Europe, the number of refugees has increased dramatically over the last ten years due to the war in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This fact, combined with the negative attitude of the countries of central and northern Europe to accept refugees, has left Greece and the other countries of the south unprepared to deal with the new situation.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) stresses in particular the priority to be given to the psychosocial needs of refugees, which is a fundamental right of human existence. Although this is a global phenomenon, social workers' engagement with refugees is a complex issue that is difficult to find common themes, however, highlighting the unique characteristics that frame the phenomenon brings about useful insights. According to McBride [7], what emerges from the study of the international literature is that perhaps the most essential element in intervening in the issue of refugee children is, a holistic approach, which studies the environment in which the child lives and focuses on meeting the complex needs for the development of their personality, this requires the social worker to intervene in education, health, community, and more generally in all agencies involved. At the same time, it highlights the crucial role played by the field of education with regard to the development of children's skills that will lead them to overcome any kind of social exclusion. Taylor and Sidhu [12] also agree with this statement, adding the importance of the refugee's reception environment, addressing racist attitudes, which are based on ignorance and fear of the unknown and the foreign, and finally, addressing the traumas that refugee children may carry from the country from which they fled. Butler [1] as



well as Robila [9], complementing this perspective, point out that workers - specialists, professionals dealing with refugees are called upon to manage issues that are highly complex, with multidimensional perspectives that relate to economic, educational, health and social structure factors and for this reason they need.

The power held by social workers as part of the system, which derives mainly from their job position, is multidimensional. Starting from their political power and ending with the management of their personal biases, the range of complexity of their intervention is easily seen [8,13]. In addition, the importance of understanding the role that social workers are called upon to play especially in refugee structures is noted [5]. Multidimensional roles, a wide range of tasks, emotional strain are some of the elements that directly affect their work.

Equally interesting is the view of [2], according to which, what is referred to as the refugee crisis includes, at a deeper level, other types of crises in our current culture. In light of this, it is particularly important for experts to identify and understand the structural inequalities of any society and how they are reproduced.

The importance of comparative social work comes to the fore as an important useful element. It concerns the exchange of international good or non-practices that in each case can make a significant contribution to understanding how difficulties in the social integration of refugees take place [4]. Although the structure of each host society differs however there are many common points of reference. Something similar is pointed out by Pratiwi et al [10], they focus on the importance of comparative social work as a valuable tool that can highlight beneficial tactics that emphasize the host society of refugees.

This paper attempts to highlight the discourse of 5 academic social work professors, from universities in Europe, regarding the refugee issue in the EU, aiming to make a meaningful contribution to the field for social work. The same values and principles at international level that social work stands for are shaped in different ways depending on each country. Of particular interest are the priorities set by the CE professors in conjunction with the way they perceive the refugee issue. Comparative social work can highlight the different philosophies of each field, looking forward to improving the theoretical background in the field/ This is a qualitative research based on semi-structured interview, conducted in the context of a European seminar, in Switzerland, which had the refugee issue as a theme, which means that all those involved were social

work teachers, whose research and teaching interests focus on the refugee issue, and conducted in the context of a European seminar, in Switzerland, which had the refugee issue as a theme, which means that all those involved were social work teachers, whose research and teaching interests focus on the refugee issue, and conducted in the context of a European seminar, in Switzerland, which had the refugee issue as a theme.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to highlight the positions, perspectives and perceptions of the participants regarding the way social work approaches the refugee phenomenon. On a second level, the aim is to contribute to the theoretical level of social work in this field.

Methodology

The research sample consisted of social work professors from 2 universities in Switzerland, 1 in Austria, 1 in Germany, 1 in Sweden (two women and 3 men)

Research questions

- 1) How academic social work professors make sense of the refugee issue in Europe before the pandemic,
- 2) How do they define the role of the CC with refugees and
- 3) What proposals do they adopt for managing the refugee challenge?

Thematic data analysis was used to analyze the research material.

II. Results

Thematic data analysis

The first thematic section deals with personal perceptions of the refugee issue.

It is about the teachers' report on how they perceive the position of social work in the refugee issue. What difficulties they identify, what are the key issues that affect the integration of refugees and what priorities they set themselves for changing the situation. In addition to the role that social work can play, they also refer to a broader level with economic social and political implications in general. Their views are shaped by their theoretical expertise in the field, as well as by their personal experiences in the area they work and live in.

Initially, the sense of security of refugees and of the host societies is mentioned as an important element. The sense of insecurity often felt by both sides, but especially by the host society is related to a) fear of losing the identity of the society b) ignorance of others - foreign different (non-European woman from Sweden). In this light, social



work can intervene with corresponding actions in a properly organized context.

A second area concerns the social integration of refugees by making use of the work factor. Integration into the labor market is a decisive factor. This is because work can provide prospects of stability and natural integration. It is also acknowledged that there has been an improvement over time - progress - but time is still needed. (male, German). With this realization comes to the fore the priority that needs to be given to the preparation of refugees, their constant support by appropriately designed programs by social workers.

Of particular interest is the statement of an academic from Austria, who puts the refugee issue on a separate footing. In particular, she says that 'we do not have a refugee crisis or there is no refugee issue, but we do have a solidarity issue or a solidarity crisis'. It is on this basis that we need to approach the refugee issue and for social work to understand the role it can play. In this way, it highlights the need for a horizontal intervention that includes the host society. It also states that there is a social deficit of solidarity, accessibility and participation in the community and stresses the need to promote the principles of democracy in relation to how we recognize and accept refugees. It links democracy and values to the refugee issue and stresses the importance of accessibility and participation of refugees in society so that their voices can be heard, which is currently not the case (woman, Austria).

Equally noteworthy is the position of the academic from Switzerland. He states that the refugee issue is 'not only a European but also a global issue of social solidarity and at the same time a European political challenge'. The existence of a European political crisis regarding the refugee issue is acknowledged. It also stresses the importance of the ban on the legality of refugee transit, considering it to be the main reason for the development of illegal ways of entering the EU and for favoring smugglers, which is the main problem. Furthermore, the inequality in the burden of refugees in the EU is acknowledged, with Italy, Spain and Greece bearing the greatest burden. Finally, it considers that what is happening in Greece is due to EU policies, blaming the EU. (man, Geneva). In this light, the holistic approach to the issue is also mentioned by the professor from Basel. The way in which the experts position themselves towards the issue determines their action. Therefore, 'we need to approach the refugee problem as such, i.e. as a multidimensional phenomenon with political, economic and social dimensions' (Mann, Basel).

The second theme is Social Work and Refugees

This section refers to the ways in which social work can be involved in the issue of social integration of refugees. The roles it can play in the project of removing social exclusion are reflected in a unique way for each academic. The first report approaches the issue in an individual-centered way. It pays attention to the feelings of people in the host society and how they are managed by experts in the field. It states that, "social workers have the responsibility to manage the ignorance and fear of the host society. but at the same time to recognize the uniqueness of each person (refugee or refugee), to focus on supporting individuals, exploring their needs, providing counselling and guidance, intervening in groups". Social work can make a substantial contribution to social change, but it is also underlined that 'very well' organized societies are difficult to change (Woman, Sweden).

On a broader interventionist level, the professional role of social workers is highlighted in relation to the political system in which they live and work. It is typically stated "The role of the κλ is to balance and recognize the boundaries between the role of the κλ as part of the system aiming at integration in supporting and integrating refugees and claiming structural changes in the system. Also important is the political representation of refugees and the need to find jobs for young people." At the same time, however, he highlights how professionals identify with the vulnerability conditions experienced by refugees and we have a reflection of vulnerability in professionals, who in a way isolate and identify with refugees (male, German).

It is important that the goal of social work is clear and well-defined from the outset. In order to bring about concrete results, it is necessary to set the framework for intervention from the planning stage and to adjust it along the way. In this respect it is stated that 'the aim of social work is to contribute to changing public opinion, to focus on reducing xenophobia, and to lead to the development of solidarity for the "other", the different (Woman, Austria). In addition, another professor points out that "social work is required to have an active political role. Although usually CLs do not participate in decision-making centers, they need to highlight the problem that refugees are 2nd class citizens? The problem is that the refugees are second class citizens. The current crisis is due to poor economic social management and not to the refugee issue". The importance of dreaming and emphasizing human value is also underlined. Material aid is important but material aid is not enough, something more is needed (man, Geneva). It is this "something" that needs to be



sought by social work and then become the object of intervention.

Precisely for the reasons mentioned above, the refugee issue is a challenge and an opportunity for social work and not just a problem. It is pointed out that 'it is necessary to clarify that the refugee issue is not linked to criminality more increased than in the majority society and that refugees are simply seeking a better life. Social workers should help to ensure that the host society adopts an attitude of advocacy for human rights, acceptance of each other's values and support for human dignity. It is also important that they contribute to mutual understanding of the other, the "foreigner" through the development of intercultural dialogue (man, Basel)

The third theme concerns the proposed changes and social policies that need to be adopted by each country or the EU

This theme takes a holistic approach to the issue. Changes can be made at national and European level that will lead to significant results. The teachers approach the refugee issue as a broader narrative that concerns contemporary European society and for which interventions designed and implemented by the state need special attention. The role of the state in achieving change in society is particularly important but also complex. This is due, among other things, to the innovative element of difficulty. Although in the past the refugee issue has often been of concern to societies, however, in recent decades it has not been a common occurrence. Consequently, there was a lack of familiarity with the difficulties and a corresponding lack of appropriate know-how and expertise to manage it effectively.

In this broader style it is stated by a professor that "it is considered difficult to change the whole project, to change societies, but important to develop initiatives to change mainly perceptions, such as there is a perception to help them in their countries. But how when there are dictatorial regimes? Therefore, among other things, it is particularly important that everyone is aware of what is happening in the countries of origin" (woman, Sweden). The professor from Germany takes a different approach. He focuses on two key points. The first concerns his optimism about the future. Change and improvement in the conditions for refugees will come about anyway. It is the young professionals who will make a significant contribution to achieving this change. Therefore, what social work science needs to focus on is accelerating these efforts. Specific interventions are needed to ensure that young professionals are properly trained, and through specialization they will be able to effectively manage

the difficulties that exist. The second point concerns the realistic integration policies that need to be adopted by governments. Specific targeting, combined with steady and persistent effort will be able to lead to substantial results. "I am optimistic about young professionals and I consider the design of realistic integration policies as a key issue, however in any case it is necessary to give them (young people) time and perseverance (man, German). The academic from Austria is on a similar level. "Democracy and values are very important. In addition, working opens up paths and changes social perceptions in the host country for the better, which can contribute to integration. I am optimistic because young people want to experience other worlds and cultures. Something that can contribute to the development of solidarity for the other different" (woman, Austria).

Another point of view is the position of the academic from Geneva. She specifically states: "It is important to preserve human values, to dream". He continues | "It is not only about knowledge, but also about recognizing the issue as something important for which an organized attitude is needed". He denounces the lack of neutrality of European countries. "Abstention on the part of the EU is not a neutral attitude but an avoidance" (man, Geneva). He goes on to point out that "the attitude of many EU countries could be described as 'anti-globalist' and self-centered, especially with regard to the closing of borders. It is important to constantly stress the human value, the danger of isolation, in order to change selfish and xenophobic voices and to promote mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. Similarly, the academic from the Basel region proposes international cooperation between social workers, the exchange of views and good practices, new perspectives that are very important, such as the use of Erasmus programs to promote interdisciplinarity and cooperation, not only between states but also between social workers, economists, teachers, doctors, etc. It also stresses the importance of putting the concept of democracy under the microscope (Man, Basel).

III. Conclusions - Discussion

Social Work is optimistic by nature, otherwise it could not work, as it advocates the improvement of the social conditions of any organized society. Migration is an increasingly familiar issue that is of concern to societies in Europe today. Because of the existence of this phenomenon, the concept of culture and socio-economic change is being understood in a different way. This phenomenon has a catalytic effect on both migrants themselves and the



society that welcomes them. The refugee issue is a positive development which is not an illusion but a realistic realization. Social work needs to focus on the importance of action at the individual level and at a broader level. In particular, intervention at the family, community and wider cultural level in areas that affect social functioning can be mentioned. Social work, and in particular the ecosystem approach, focuses on the multifaceted way of assessing and intervening in a situation. At the same time, it is a dynamic process because it is based on a multi-disciplinary empirical background from disciplines such as social work, anthropology, sociology and psychology. In other words, human nature and the broader context in which it is formed is a changeable condition. This for social work can be a fundamental element.

EU countries can, and perhaps should, cooperate and exchange useful views on how they are managing the difficulties arising from the refugee issue. A particular role in this can be played by academics with expertise in the subject, who have a significant influence on the education and professionalism of their students. Future professionals who will deal with the refugee issue are largely shaped by the academic field from which they come. Cooperation between academics at a wider transnational or European level can bring about substantial results. For example, the priority on employment and integrated intervention for social inclusion is an area where social work can make a drastic contribution. Also, political action by social work professionals (in a more or less radical way) can be coordinated, Europe-wide and focused on specific common objectives. The way in which each country prioritizes its interventions also reflects the position adopted by each profession in the field. For social workers, this means that it is essential to develop international cooperative relationships in order to achieve the objectives advocated by the principles and values of the profession.

Abbreviations

EU	European
IFSW	Union
	International Feder-
	ation of So-
	cial Workers

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