

## **A day in the life of a Social Worker**

Probably, during the nineties it would have been uncommon to speak openly about Social Workers or consider social work as a profession. Fifteen years ago, Social Workers worked mainly with children in children's homes, single mothers, and people suffering from mental health problems. In other words, Social Workers worked mainly with people who were, and still are, considered at the margins of society.

Things have changed considerably. The main reason being that society has changed radically over these past few years. Today, life is putting more pressures on individuals and there are more risks of finding less quality time for building healthy relationships. Our society is developing in such a way that individuals live in smaller nuclear families with less contact with the extended family. The implications for this lifestyle result in poorer social networks. The huge demands imposed by work, technology and a frenetic lifestyle lead to stressed individuals who have a higher chance of experiencing complicated situations but who do not possess adequate coping skills. Yet despite all these changes the social worker is still there to support and assist the poor, vulnerable in society and those who because of their financial and/or social and personal situation are at risk of social exclusion.

### **The public image**

This change has brought about an increase in the need of social work intervention. However, the increase in the numbers of Social Workers and in the services offered does not seem to have brought about a positive image of social work in general. It seems that the public developed two common, even though contradictory, stereotyped images of Social Workers. On the one hand there is an image of cold-hearted, detached workers always on the look out to "kidnap" children and deprive them from the attention and care of guiltless adults. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to sense the idea that Social Workers are incompetent professionals who leave vulnerable children with abusive mothers and fathers. However there is more to social work than this.

### **What is it all about?**

Social Workers spend their days supporting individuals and families with complicated psychological, health, social and financial problems. They assist families in need and provide counselling and support to individuals who see no way of improving their lives and their personal situation. Most people are aware of the role Social Workers play in child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse and dysfunctional families, however it seems that few are aware of the presence of Social Workers in residential homes for the elderly, in schools, in the law courts and, in hospitals. Their role is to assess and advocate for individuals. They work hand in hand with different professionals to identify and maximize their own strengths as full members of the community.

The role of a Social Worker varies depending on what type of setting one is working in. Normally, the day of a Social Worker starts with innumerable calls of people requesting help. It is not uncommon for individuals to shift their own responsibility of their particular present situation onto the Social Worker. The Social Worker's role is to understand the person's problem and how the latter perceives the situation in order to be able to help that individual. Very often, persons expect their Social Worker to take out the magic wand in aid of their problems. And many a times, the Social Workers would really wish that they could do so!

### **The art of empathizing**

Nonetheless, even if it was possible for the Social Worker to magically solve complicated situations, this would not be the right thing to do. The Social Worker has to respect the person's autonomy while respecting and defending human dignity. Respect demands that the Social Worker has to "move" into the other person's experience as if it were his/her own. However this has to be done without losing oneself as a professional. This means that the Social Worker has to do his/her utmost to empathize and comprehend how a woman who has been abused by her husband for the last twelve years still loves him or how a man turns to the bottle even though he knows that his drinking problem has left him unemployed and without a family. The Social Worker has to feel the feelings of other people, keeping in mind the society s/he is representing and the values that this society has. If this society treasures the pleasures of childhood and believes that the children have to be cherished, taught and brought up with dignity, then the Social Worker has to help a mother/father who, because of other problems, is neglecting or abusing a child. The Social Worker can never justify or excuse a person's actions. The Social Worker can only condemn unjust behaviour and take action to minimise the consequences. Understanding another person is no easy task, and sometimes (with the individual's consent) the Social Worker needs to meet also the other members of the family or people from one's own environment to delineate the situation comprehensively well.

Listening all day long can be very strenuous, especially when another taxing task is still waiting. By nature, the profession of social work demands collaboration with other professionals and this can be very demanding in itself!

### **Working with other professionals**

After listening to a distressing story of a single man who had his leg amputated, a hospital Social Worker liaises with other professionals in hospital. This sometimes might mean clashing with other professionals whose main focus would be the medical aspect of the situation. Thus, the Social Worker has to build a bridge between the client, the medical professionals, and society in general by making sure that the client is involved in all the decisions; find, strengthen and build support networks; and, most of all, help the person adjust and cope with the new self. This implies that the Social Worker has to be familiar with the services available and keep abreast

of what goes on in different local communities and by furthering their education and develop their knowledge.

Whilst showing concern and interest in clients, other professionals sometimes resist the Social Worker's perspective. Sometimes, other professionals see only one aspect of the person, related to their own profession, and not the whole self. This may lead the other professionals to perceive the Social Worker as an obstacle or as an alien to the team of professionals.

Back at the office, the Social Worker has to recollect his/her energies in order to face multiple tasks. Trying to understand a client, empathizing with him/her and challenging his/her behaviour or beliefs which are creating the existing problem is already a taxing job in itself. Furthermore, liaising with other professionals, presenting the client's case and advocating for a service the client might not necessarily be legally entitled to, can be strenuous. Things get further complicated when, after all the efforts done and the concessions obtained, the client comes back stating that s/he has changed his/her mind or worst still, when the client acts difficult, is aggressive and even violent towards the Social Worker.

### **After word**

Every day brings a crisis to deal with, new problems to understand, new headaches to bear and new heartaches to suffer. Many clients have come and gone – some are now able to face their everyday problems, others still need to be assisted and supported to deal with and face the difficult and complicated life situations that have become part and parcel of their life.

Throughout these years, Social Workers have been threatened, coerced and manipulated by both their clients and social institutions. Unfortunately, it is not the first time that Social Workers have been stalked or even physically abused. Despite this social workers persevere in promoting the basic values underlying their work – that of respecting and promoting human dignity, self respect and respect for others and assisting individuals and families in achieving a better quality of life.

But being a Social Worker also means laughing with clients. Clients share their stories and experiences and pour their heart out. But they also cry with us, they trust us and look for guidance and support, even on superficial matters. This is the result of constant work with other people, helping them live life with dignity and self-respect. Working with people when they are most vulnerable, when they have problems, when sickness or misfortune has stricken, makes us bear in mind how fragile and yet strong we can be. This is why Social Workers choose this profession in the first place. They will not be able to change the world but at the end of the day, they might have helped a person to change or heal.

**Article provided by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, which incorporates Aġenzija Appoġġ ([www.appoqq.gov.mt](http://www.appoqq.gov.mt)), Aġenzija Sedqa ([www.sedqa.gov.mt](http://www.sedqa.gov.mt)) and Aġenzija Sapport ([www.sapport.gov.mt](http://www.sapport.gov.mt)).**