



TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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Social Justice, Systems, and International Social Work in Field Education

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Field education is a site for the intersection of social justice, systems, and international social work. To explore these intersections, we consider our own lived experiences in coordinating students for field placements when we were assigned field education courses in our doctoral studies, in addition to the relevant literature in social work practice and field education. As doctoral students at the University of Gondar in Ethiopia, our practice context informs our understanding of the strengths, lessons learned, strategies, and techniques both to address and overcome challenges in field education. We consider the gaps between theory and practice in Ethiopia, and we explore how these could be addressed in order to bring about social change in systems to promote social justice in international social work. This chapter deals with the realities of social work practice in Ethiopia that present challenges for organizations providing field placements for students, also known as field works or social work practices. It highlights the important role of field education in addressing visible gaps while also engaging in social work research, evaluation of programs or projects, and planning social work interventions at various levels. Our study further discusses the implications of integrating social justice, systems, and international social work within field education. Field education

is an important platform through which international social work is the venue for Indigenous and local, context-specific social work practice. Finally, readers will be invited to use their privileged position as social work academics, researchers, and practitioners to advocate for social justice initiatives when they place students in field education, provide liaison with social work students, write reports, and engage as practitioners.

Context of Social Work Education in Ethiopia

Shawky (1968) stated that tracing the origin of the social work education in Africa was challenging because it was shared with other disciplines such as social administration, social welfare, and community and social development. There is a generalized consensus among scholars that Western colonial powers played a fundamental role in introducing social work education in Africa (Shawky, 1968; Ibrahima & Mattiani 2019; Mwansa, 2011). After independence in many African countries, there were attempts to redefine the focus of social work education to attend to the actual service needs and priorities of African people; however, social work training was informed by Western curriculum (Shawky, 1968).

The social work profession has a relatively brief history in Ethiopia. There is a dearth of research on the historical roots of social work education and practice in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country, and apart from a 5-year occupation by Mussolini's Italy, it has never been colonized (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2022). Kebede (2019) reported that the development of social work education in Ethiopia can be framed in two important historical trajectories: pre-2004 and post-2004. Social work as an academic discipline was first introduced in Ethiopia around 1959 (Mwansa, 2011; Tesfaye, 1987) as part of the imperial regime's desire to reform the entire social welfare service delivery system (Tefsaye, 1987). Accordingly, as Tesfaye (1987) noted, the major emphasis was to produce trained professionals who could lead the provision of social welfare services. Hence, Haile Selassie I University (the present-day Addis Ababa University) started to enroll students in social work with a 2-year diploma program in 1959.

Stout (2009) reported that efforts to provide social work education in Ethiopia were soon paralyzed when the socialist regime came into power in 1974. Given the regime's suspicion that social work, as a profession, was

a “tool of imperialism,” consequently social work ceased to exist as an academic discipline (Kebede, 2014, p.161). Beyond closing the school of social work, the socialist regime openly discouraged anything related to the social work profession, including methodological approaches and reference materials (Kebede, 2014). As a result, the social work profession was placed at the margins of academic disciplines and many social work professionals were forced to flee the country (Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021).

After almost three decades of silence, social work education resumed in 2004 when Addis Ababa University reopened the School of Social Work (Kebede, 2019). Several factors contributed to the reinstatement of social work as an independent academic discipline at Addis Ababa University. The downfall of the socialist regime facilitated the rebirth of social work in Ethiopia, which was coupled with the new government’s goals to liberalize the economy and to expand the number of higher education programs (Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021). Changes in government policy also paved the way for Ethiopian social workers trained abroad to establish partnerships with foreign universities, which supported efforts to reinstall the schools in the country. Other factors that fueled the resurgence of social work education in Ethiopia include increasing demands from governmental and non-governmental organizations for social work training (Kebede, 2014).

Social work education in Ethiopia has long been influenced by several factors. It is evident that government’s ideology and political orientation have influenced the status of social work education in the country. Government policies had a direct implication on social work education during the Marxist era (1974–1991). The return of social work education in Ethiopia was initiated within the context of Western social work with the support of United States-based universities and foreign-educated Ethiopian social work professionals. There is no doubt that social work education in Ethiopia is evolving to respond to local concerns. However, there remains a great deal of work to ensure the interface between social work education and addressing the major social problems in the country (Northcut et al., 2020).

Despite many ups and downs, the social work profession is currently flourishing in Ethiopia. With about 115 million people, Ethiopia is the second most populous nation in Africa after Nigeria (World Bank, 2020).

Currently, there are 13 universities delivering social work education programs in the country at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels (Kebede, 2019). As the Ministry of Education (MoE) is harmonizing the curriculum, whereby students at different public and private universities are expected to receive a similar level of education in terms of content and programs, all schools of social work in the country ought to deliver similar courses accordingly.

Field Education in Ethiopia

Field education is a partnership established between the social work profession, agencies, academic institutions, and students to enhance the professional competency of students and strengthen the theory to practice linkage (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2017). Field education, as a crucial element in the social work education, is essential to equip students with the relevant skills and knowledge for social work practice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008; Parker, 2007). Moreover, Lemieux and Allen (2007) stated that field education enhances critical thinking and innovative problem solving among social work students. Field education provides students with insightful exposure to critically analyze the interface between theoretical discussions in the classroom and the actual application of theories and models in solving practical problems (Bellinger, 2010, Wayne et al., 2010; Zeira & Schiff, 2014). Additionally, field education may also play a vital role in identifying and intervening in unjust and oppressive practices at the individual, group, and community level. Hence, field education has long been integrated in the curriculum and pedagogy of social work education (Bogo, 2006; Papouli, 2014).

Despite the lack of empirical evidence on the status of field education in Ethiopia, it is possible to contend that field practicum is an integral component of social work education in the country's harmonized curriculum. Accordingly, Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students are expected to complete a specific number of hours in the field in order to earn their degree in social work. For instance, BSW students must complete three field practicums, each weighing four credit hours. A student who is enrolled in a 4-year BSW program is to complete a minimum of 200 field hours per placement, for a total of

600 field practicum hours in the BSW program. Similarly, MSW students are to complete a total of 900 field hours in two field placements (450 field hours each) to meet the requirements for a master's degree in social work.

Field education, particularly at the BSW level, aims to graduate students for generalist social work practice, whereas field education at the MSW level is primarily focused on developing students as competent professionals who could function as specialists in specific social work fields. Field education in social work is implemented in collaboration with various agencies that are working on a host of social issues. Northcut et al. (2020) reported that social work field education at the University of Gondar has been carried out in partnership with several agencies working in the areas of substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, or with elderly people and children who are experiencing homelessness. Moreover, social work students are deployed to different government sector offices such as police departments, courts, and hospitals (Northcut et al., 2020). In many instances, social work departments secure written agreements or develop a memorandum of understanding with agencies to facilitate formal engagements of students.

Schools of social work in Ethiopia have developed a field education manual to guide the overall performance of the program. The manual provides a detailed account of the program, including the aim and purpose of field education, and the responsibilities of the parties involved such as the department, students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons. Furthermore, ethical standards, engagement protocols, student evaluation parameters, and reporting are also included in the field education manual.

Hay et al. (2016) stated that field instructors are important sources of mentorship, education, and evaluation. Ayala et al. (2018) further noted that field education also helps field instructors learn new skills in the process of mentoring and teaching students. Several stakeholders are involved in the process of implementing social work field education. Field instructors are also among the essential elements in social work field education in Ethiopia, although, due to insufficient empirical data, it is difficult to provide a conclusive statement concerning their role and responsibilities. Therefore, in the implications section of this chapter, we draw from our personal experience as social work educators and students. Accordingly, field instructors play an important role in field education by providing

students with the skills needed to apply theories into practice. In many instances, field instructors are tasked to help students learn how to solve practical problems by encouraging them to work collaboratively with agency social workers and staff. Moreover, field instructors are mandated to educate, mentor, and supervise the performance of practicum students. Finally, field instructors are expected to submit a conclusive evaluation of each student to the school or department of social work based on the student's overall engagement and activities in the field placement.

Field coordinators, commonly referred in Ethiopia as faculty liaisons, are another important stakeholder in field education in Ethiopia. Field coordinators assume a leadership role in planning, implementing, and evaluating the performance of the entire field practicum program (Robertson, 2013). Several schools of social work in Ethiopia have established a separate unit responsible to coordinate and supervise the implementation of field education programs. For instance, a field education coordinator or faculty liaison at the University of Gondar is mandated to consult both students and field instructors concerning the field practicum programs. Faculty liaisons are also in charge of assigning students to different agencies, providing guidance and counseling services to students in need, and assessing opportunities and major challenges for the field education programs. Evaluations of the field practicum program in general and, specifically, the performances of students are also included in the job description of field coordinators or faculty liaisons across many social work programs in the country.

Absence of National Regulatory Body in Social Work Education

Social work is a practice-based and professional academic discipline, and hence requires regulatory bodies that monitor the educational and practical dimensions of the profession. There is no doubt that social work education is flourishing in Ethiopia. However, there still exists no regulatory body at the national level to control and evaluate the quality of social work education. The absence of a regulatory body in social work education has been among the major factors that compromise the quality of social work education in general, and specifically in field education. Since many social work educators likely lack the necessary professional framework that guides education, they may provide education and training which deviate

from the values and principles of the profession. In the absence of regulatory bodies, different social work education programs cannot graduate social work professionals with similar levels of professional competence. Therefore, it is difficult to ensure the quality of social work education at the national level. Social work educators are challenged by the fact that they do not share a common platform to evaluate the actual performance of the profession and its ability to address social issues — old and new — that demand the attention of social workers.

The absence of an independent national body that exclusively regulates social work education in Ethiopia has hindered efforts to harmonize social work education across the country. This is apparent in the lack of uniform policy and approach in social work field education. For instance, Kebede (2019) noted that some schools of social work have developed a field education manual that guides students' engagement in field education, whereas others deploy students to field practicum without any field manuals. Moreover, the absence of a regulatory body in social work education has also resulted in the lack of a national code of conduct that governs the professional behaviour of social work educators. Kebede (2019) asserted that this reality blurs the boundary between the social work profession and other disciplines in the country. In sum, despite the potential of field education to promote social justice at different levels, the lack of relevant regulatory institution has crippled social work's commitment and ability in challenging unjust practices.

Challenges Facing Social Work Educators and Practitioners

The social work profession has dramatically expanded over the past two decades in Ethiopia. The number of public and private universities providing social work education has grown from two in 2004 to thirteen in 2019 (Kebede, 2019). Beyond the expansion of social work education in Ethiopia, there are noticeable attempts to enhance the influence of the profession in the country. Field education is serving as an important avenue to promote the profession across a wide spectrum of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Despite its importance to enhance the problem-solving skills of students, field education in Ethiopia is passing through a series of challenges that have crippled the promises enshrined in the profession. Furthermore, as indicated in the previous section, field education is a highly marginalized concept in social work research in Ethiopia. There is an urgent need to foster field research scholarship in Ethiopia. Our discussion in this section, thus, is mainly based on the review of the few available empirical contributions, as well as our professional and personal experience and communications with field educators.

Agency-Related Challenges

Lack of Trained Field Instructors. The social work profession in Ethiopia has long been portrayed as “a grey discipline” that can be performed by anyone with a university degree. This may be partly related to the brief history of social work (Liu et al., 2021) in Ethiopia. Moreover, the absence of a strong professional association that enforces practice standards is a contributing factor. Above all, the tendency to confuse the social work profession with adjacent disciplines, such as philanthropy and sociology, has attracted individuals from other disciplines to assume the role of social worker in different agencies with very limited or no training in social work. In this regard, Northcut et al. (2020) reported that field instructors at different governmental and non-governmental agencies in Gondar have very limited knowledge about social work method and practice. Kebede (2019) noted that the absence of field instructors with a social work background is belittling all efforts to equip students with practical knowledge. Similarly, Liu et al. (2013) revealed that the lack of well-trained field instructors is among the major factors compromising the quality of field education in mainland China. We have learned from our experience as MSW students that individuals with a remote relationship to social work (such as geography and economics) have been assigned as “social worker” in court and school settings. The lack of trained social work field instructors is a key challenge in social work field education in Ethiopia.

Lack of Sufficient Agencies for Placement. Field education programs are essentially planned and implemented in collaboration with agencies having direct relevance to the promotion of social work profession. Many field coordinators face challenges trying to find appropriate agencies for

students' field placement. According to Ayala et al. (2018), the lack of placements may be partly related to the discrepancy in the increasing number of social work programs and students on one side, and the absence of sufficient placement agencies to accommodate students on the other side. Demonstrating this, Schmidt and Rautenbach (2016) reported a high mismatch of student/placement agencies as a major problem in Cape Town, South Africa, which results in the failure of field education programs to expose students to experiential knowledge.

Currently, the number of schools offering social work programs in Ethiopia is increasing rapidly. However, the number of agencies that can offer student placements is not keeping pace with this increased enrollment. This in turn overwhelms not only the existing field placement agencies, but also compromises the quality of field education programs. Moreover, as Northcut et al. (2020) reported, some placement agencies have doubted the importance of field education programs in social work due to the lack of sufficient inputs and supply to efficiently manage the field education programs. Most field placement agencies are not equipped with adequate office supplies such as stationery materials, desks, computers, and other essential equipment inputs to facilitate the field education program (Northcut et al, 2020). Accordingly, several agencies are now declining to accept students for field practicum. Even worse, some placement agencies have ceased to exist for an array of reasons, including shortage of funding and termination of projects. There is a need for future research in field education to better understand the situation.

University Related Challenges

Insufficient Attention for Field Education. Despite field education's integration in the curriculum of social work education, field placement is still one of the most marginalized areas in social work education. Kebede (2019) in this regard reported that the existing structure across many social work schools does not allow permanent assignment of faculty members in the position of field coordinator or faculty liaison. Faculty members who are assigned as field coordinator are not provided with additional resources or privileges, and share similar teaching loads as other faculty members. The high workload and the increased administrative and coordination functions of the field coordinator position, along with teaching

responsibilities, contribute to deter faculty members to serve in this role. Faculty members are not motivated to support field education, and this also compromises the quality of field education programs.

Ayala et al. (2018) indicated that field coordinators face many complex tasks in matching students for placement. Many schools of social work in Ethiopia lack a separate unit in charge of coordinating, supervising, and evaluating field education programs, a situation that further compromises the quality of programs (Kebede, 2019). Furthermore, social work educators pay little or no attention to inviting faculty members, students, and agencies to critically reflect on the performance of field education programs in the form of seminars and research projects. Inadequate planning on the part of faculty liaisons is causing role confusion among students and agency social workers placed in different agencies. While the field education manual provides a generalized framework for the field education program, faculty liaisons are still expected to present students with background information about the nature of their engagement in the agencies. In many instances, students are simply deployed to the field with little or no clear information about their role in the organizations. Consequently, social work students are sometimes required to assume clerical responsibilities that essentially depart from the purpose of field education programs. There is potential, however, for field education programs to develop a monitoring and evaluation component in order to solicit feedback from stakeholders to improve field education experiences.

Misfits Between Field Education Programs and Actual Problems.

In many instances, social work curriculums in Ethiopia are highly informed by Western-oriented theories and intervention models that need further refinement to apply adequately to the Ethiopian social and cultural context (Northcut et al., 2020). Since field education programs are similarly designed to be in line with theoretical discussions in the classroom, little has been done to establish the link between field education programs and major problems in the community. Liu et al. (2013) also argued that field education programs usually exhibit the deficiency in social work curriculums to sufficiently integrate social work theories and practice. Kebede (2019) argued that the existing social work curriculums (including field education program) have often ignored the experiences of vulnerable communities in rural parts of the country. In many cases,

field education programs are designed based on a one-time assessment (if any) and assessments are not recurrently updated to incorporate emerging social problems.

Student Related Challenges

Failure to Suspend Personal Beliefs. Field experiences may be planned in such a manner as to challenge the personal beliefs and values of students (Lay & McGuire, 2010). Social workers are expected to detach themselves from commonsense and practice good sense in delivering services to clients (Sewpaul, 2013). Commonsense, according to Sewpaul (2013), refers to our general assumptions and what we have internalized without having any evidence on a given issue. Good sense, on the other hand, refers to one's understanding of the sources of oppression and undoing sources of privilege (Sewpaul, 2013). Henceforth, social workers are expected to suspend their beliefs and apply reflexivity in service provision to ensure that the voices of the oppressed are heard. Similarly, Tam et al. (2018) noted that students in field practice sometimes tend to violate the clients' own agency by exercising excessive power, and this usually constitutes a violation of ethical standards of the profession.

Implications of Social Work Field Education for Social Justice

Social justice can be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth (United Nations [UN], 2016). Social justice is among the most pressing global social issues influencing global agendas in today's world. The ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has long been regarded as the first global initiative that signaled cooperation among nation-states towards the promotion of social justice. Many institutions, laws, and policies have been ratified at regional, national, and international levels to promote fair and equitable distribution of social, economic, and political resources. However, ensuring social justice remains a major challenge in the face of growing inequality and the violation of individual and group rights. The rights of individuals or groups continue to be denied by social systems and structures that operate in the widely accepted system called government. It is within these systems and structures that social work interventions are

needed to advocate for social justice by social work researchers, educators, evaluators, and interventionists. This is particularly important in Ethiopia given the current context of civil strife during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated inequalities and social injustices.

Social justice is situated at the heart of the social work profession. For instance, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW; 2014) defined social work as follows:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. (Global Definition of the Social Work Profession section, para. 1)

The global definition of the social work profession clearly indicates that the principle of social justice is central to the social work profession. Moreover, the notion of social justice is conceptualized broadly in a manner that promotes the social work profession's special commitment to the empowerment of the poor and vulnerable. Accordingly, IFSW (2018) noted that promoting social justice in social work includes challenging structural discrimination and institutional oppression, respecting diversity, ensuring access to equitable resources, challenging unjust policies and practices, and promoting solidarity with fellow professionals and service recipients.

Field education programs, as a critical element in social work education, could play vital roles in promoting social justice on several fronts. First, field education programs provide social work students with the opportunity to witness and challenge unjust policies and practices directly. In field practicum, students are set to work with experienced agency practitioners who have been working with vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population. This, in turn, encourages students to critically reflect on theories and methods of social work in the course of identifying and addressing unjust practices.

Second, field education programs enable social work students to realize how multiple factors in the social structure establish a mutually reinforcing circle of oppression that leaves individuals and/or groups vulnerable and marginalized. Field education programs are essential to learn more about how different systems and subsystems continually interact to produce and/or reproduce operation and injustice at different level. For example, while working with women living with HIV and AIDS, we have observed how age, gender, and patriarchy were intersecting to leave a young 14-year-old girl in an oppressed state when she was raped by her close relative, contracted HIV, and faced discrimination from her family members. In simple terms, field education can promote the application of the person-in-environment (PIE) context in this scenario. It also promotes students' capacity to comprehend the systemic and/or structural nature of social problems.

Promotion of the indigenization process is another potential implication of field education for social justice. It is widely reported that social work theories and methods have been dominated by Western-oriented perspectives and this can be portrayed as "unjust" practice in the social work profession. Field education programs, hence, can serve as a springboard to critically examine the applicability of theories and models of social work in the context of the Global South. In other words, field education may provide an essential platform to begin the decolonization process.

Conclusion

Social work is a relatively young profession in Ethiopia. However, the profession has been growing in prominence within the past two decades, following the increasing number of public and private universities providing social work education. Field education has long been integrated in the curriculum of social work education and almost all schools with social work programs have developed a manual that guides the implementation of field education. Furthermore, several stakeholders take part in implementing field education such as field instructors, faculty liaison, or field coordinators.

In Ethiopia, there are several factors that are impeding the successful implementation of field education. Lack of trained field instructors, inadequate number of placement agencies, poor attention from schools

managing social work programs, and mismatches between field practicum and community needs are all identified as major challenges in field education. Above all, the absence of an independent regulatory body or council responsible to oversee the quality of social work education has been a major barrier to social work field education. Field education programs, if designed and implemented carefully, could play a significant role in promoting social justice. Field placement enhances social work students' capacity to identify and address unjust policies and practices. Finally, we recommend that field education programs in Ethiopia promote the indigenization process by challenging the conventional knowledge production processes in social work.

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