**Challenges face Social work Profession in Palestine**

*Samah Saleh*

*An-Najah National University- Palestine*

**Introduction:**

In this paper I aim to discuss the professional challenges facing social works in Palestine. I am going to provide a historical background of the profession’s development in the Palestinian territory under precarious conditions the Israeli occupation. I am going to discuss the ambiguous role of the social worker in Palestine, and how it influences the professional intervention approach in cases of emergency, especially when other specialists play the role of social workers. These challenges can be divided into two sections; the first one starts with academic programs that consider social work as part of other social science programs. The second one is the ambiguity in defining who is the social worker. By the end of this paper, I will show how such a new profession in Palestine was developed when interacting with international organizations, in addition to the accumulated experiences of Palestinian social workers responding to the needs of an unstable community suffering from the practices of the Israeli occupation in their everyday life.

**Methodology:**

Social work is considered a new profession in Palestine which creates many challenges facing social workers in the field. The history of social work activity in Palestine is long established but it is scarcely documented (Lyndsay et al, 2007). Due to the lack of references, and in order to learn more about the challenges the profession of social work encounters to develop, I have built this article based on reflections from my own experience as a social worker, in addition to my academic experience at An-Najah National University. I conducted five interviews with social workers in international and local organizations to understand their experiences, dilemmas, and the challenges the social work profession faces. In addition to that, I held discussions with social workers and the Palestinian Syndicate of Social Workers and Psychologists in Nablus to further understand the ambiguity of social work in Palestine.

**Historical Background:**

Social work started in Palestine in the beginning of the twentieth century (Al-Kilani,2017). It started with the British mandate and it evolved in the wake of the huge number of refugees in 1948 as a result of Al-Nakba (Palestinian Exodus), which was caused by the establishment of the State of Israel. Crisis intervention was needed at all time; the Palestinian community was mobilized by individuals who felt it was their responsibility to help other people in need. This intervention took different forms including opening their homes to provide shelters for refugees, as well providing food or medical aid. Mrs. Hind Al- Huseni was a well-known woman for her role; she sacrificed her life to provide support for orphans who lost their parents during the war. She started as a teacher, then she quit to become a community worker. Hind Al-Husiani established the Women’s Social Solidarity Association in 1945 and built a women network in 22 places distributed all over Palestine before 1948. She organized a group of volunteers who worked together to support people who were affected by war, as well she started different social programs in her Association such as literacy centers for women and children, vocational skills program for women, and many other programs that aimed to empower women. After 1948 she opened a shelter for orphans and schools that remain open till now. In her intervention, she was providing emergency relief services for refugees and affected populations (selwadi, 1994). In the early 70s, she lunched the first two-year social work diploma program in Est Jerusalem (Faraj, 2017). Through this example and many others like it, we can understand the roots of community work in Palestine.

Social services were organized by community grass root groups in different neighborhoods and committees, which was a way for Palestinians to support each other. They used the concept “O’neh” which represented community organization to confront the political and economical situation that resulted from the absence of the state (Al-Araj, 2018:33). This help “O’neh” has become part of the Palestinian tradition, especially since we live a precarious life at all times. The continuous precarity of the political life that has been affected by the struggles of the Israeli occupation became the main cause of the social-economical problems for Palestinians. Palestinians have long experienced social problems such as high rates of poverty and unemployment (Safadi, Easton, 2014). These social problems necessitate the development of services in response to community needs. This came in parallel with the hope of building a Palestinian state within the context of the struggle against the Israeli occupation (Al-Kilani, 2017). These services aimed at furthering people’s resilience, and to support each other in order to meet their basic need to survive the situation and maintain hope and strength in confronting life hardships. Paker (2018) argued that ‘social work’s potential for developing and encouraging resilience and hope is indicated in the ‘sacrifice' social workers make when working alongside marginalized and disadvantaged people’.

The services were provided based on the knowledge volunteers had about their community; it was a spontaneous response for people’s urgent needs. Ramon (2006) argued that ‘Palestinian social education, and health services in the occupied territories have expanded, as a result to the impact of conflict’. Following the events of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, UNRWA was founded by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 to carry out direct relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). This humanitarian and political crisis required emergency intervention. Community workers who were providers of social services were not trained to be professional social workers; they were doing what they felt they had to do to serve their community (UNRWA, 2019). UNRWA provided essential education, health and relief services to registered refugees. UNRWA employees were providing more organized services; however, few of them were trained as social workers, as Ramon (2006) confirmed that there was no formal professional social worker or social services. But since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, state services have been developed, supported by international donors (Ramon, 2006).

**Academic programs and the ambiguity of social work profession**

In the early seventies, five Palestinian universities were offering programs on social sciences such as sociology and social work; graduates from these departments were hired as social workers. At the same time, several social service providers (Go, NGOs) were established and provided social services through social work graduates ((Harrop and Ioakimidis, 2017). The lack of knowledge provided in university academic programs influenced the graduates’ sense of professionalism and created ambiguity regarding the social work profession within the local community. With time, the accumulated field experiences from community and social workers, as well interaction with international organizations resulted in the development of the social work profession to be differentiated from other social sciences and have independent departments for social work. However, there was still resistance against the independent social work profession and specialty. In this section, I am going to reflect on my own experience as an academic member of the staff at the social work department at An-Najah National University.

In 2009 I became a staff member at the sociology and social work department at An-Najah National University after I finished my master’s degree in social work from McGill University. It was confusing for me how social work was treated as a faction of sociology; those who have a degree in sociology were teaching social work. It felt to me and others that social work did not have an independent identity, and our students were not trained enough to be social workers. As a response from the university to the job market need for qualified social work graduates, social work was added to the Sociology department as a minor, so students started to take some courses in social work. After revising the program by the staff members who specialized in Sociology, the department became the Department of Sociology and Social Work; they were treated as one subject, and students were taking courses from both specialties. This combination of sociology and social work is common in some universities in Palestine and other Arab countries. There were few young and new academics who specialized in social work among the staff, which made it hard for us to influence the department. We tried to work together to separate social work from sociology, to construct a clear identity for our graduates, meet the requirements of the development of social work profession in the field, as well construct new criteria to define who the social worker is. This was a big challenge for us; we encountered some of the staff who have sociology background, and some who felt threatened to lose their jobs and power. Those senior staff members had more power than us, and they were the majority in the department so we couldn't create any change. It was a big challenge when we needed to hold any professional discussions and was a frustration for us.

After 2011, our graduates started to face challenges in being accepted for jobs that require a social work background. We tried to understand and help our students. We were informed that failure to be accepted in jobs was because they are not trained as social workers and they took more courses in sociology. This was a stepping stone for the department to increase the number of social work courses, but not to create a new program in social work as members of the department refused. We kept fighting as social workers, academics, and practitioners tried to explain the difference to our administration. We faced a plethora of challenges from our traditional senior staff members who agreed to combining sociology with social work and treating them as one specialty. We just increased the number of hours in the field, and staff members with a sociology background who never practiced social work continued teaching which also influenced the quality of our graduates.

In 2017, I became the head of the Sociology and Social Work Department, and I, along with other colleagues with a social work background, had the opportunity to propose a new independent social work program to offer a professional social work background for our graduates. In 2018, we established a social work department as a result of our belief in the profession and its values, as well the right of our graduates to get a more in-depth training as social workers. Moreover, the development of the social work profession in Palestine requires us to create change in order to meet the criteria for our students to get a license to practice social work. This also includes developing a code of ethics and laws for social workers, all of which defined who a social worker is and what kind of training they should have. The journey of the Social Work Department at An-Najah National University is a reflection of how the accumulated experiences of social workers have developed this profession, and how the profession has started to have a clearer identity but remains in development. It took us 8 years to establish this department, but we still face a lot of challenges, such as the lack of staff with advanced degrees in social work and the voices calling to bring back sociology and casting many doubts on social work. This confusion influenced our students who we were aware that they didn't have a clear identity qualifying them to be social work graduates. The students struggled further when they could not find jobs as social workers which created a problem for them after graduation. They had a great role in influencing and pressuring the university to make this move and transition to social work.

**Ambiguity of social workers in the field**

The role of social workers was ambiguous as sociologists, psychologists, or any person with a social sciences degree was entitled to apply and practice the job of a social worker. During the second Intifada in 2000[[1]](#footnote-1), social workers and psychologists were doing the same tasks in emergency intervention as a response to the Israeli occupation invasion of Palestinian territories. Social workers provided psychological support and intervention. When any organization needed to employ social workers, vacancy announcements asked for social workers, counselors or psychologist; the three specialties were treated as one. In the field, they carried out the same kind of intervention, which created more chaos and ambivalence. Ishtia is the head of the Palestinian Syndicate of Social Workers and Psychologists in Nablus, and the dean of the Social Work Faculty at Al-Quds Open university. For him, the intersection between social workers and psychologists, in addition to combining social sciences with social work created confusion that influenced the jobs that were offered by the different organizations. Moreover, the confusion influenced the practices social workers use in the field.

Ranen is a counselor who graduated in 2011. I met with her when she was supervising her social work students in the Palestinian Syndicate of Social Workers and Psychologists in Nablus. She expressed her anger at her inability to find a job as a social worker anymore, “*Organizations are so precise about the requirements; they used to hire us for the same job… but not anymore*”. Ranen spent all her time searching for a job as a social worker after graduation and had few experiences practicing as a social worker. The ambiguity of the social work profession in Palestine impacted the unclarity of roles and interventions that social workers are trained for. It also impacted local NGOs and GOs organizations who found it hard to differentiate social workers from other specialties, thus the tasks and jobs social workers had to do were open for all social sciences and humanitarian sciences graduates.

The Palestinian Syndicate of Social Workers and Psychologists was founded in 1996 and has 14 branches in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, but not in the Gaza strip (PSWP strategic plan, 2004-2009). Graduates of psychology, social work, and sociology programs were allowed to become members of the syndicate. Having one body for all humanitarian and social science specialties impacted the ambiguity of roles which led to duplicating intervention instead of achieving integration. This is a reflection of the journey of the academic programs in some universities. However, as the social work profession developed, the Syndicate started to differentiate between the different specialities and to organize different programs for each. The Syndicate is now leading the national committee to launch a code of ethics for social workers.

The accumulation of social workers’ experiences and efforts in responding to the precarious Palestinian experience in everyday life as a result of the Israeli occupation enhanced the development of social work intervention programs. The Second Intifada in 2000 had directly affected everyone in Palestine; most people suffered different kinds of losses: losing their homes, safety, lands, and people close to them. Palestinians experienced road closures, so many people lost their jobs which influenced the community structure. As a response to these conditions, many international organizations started to provide services in collaboration with Palestinian social workers and organizations. This was an opportunity for Palestinian social workers to develop skills and learn techniques of interventions. Ramon (2006) argues that these trainings, organized and funded by international aid, were being piloted at the time to assist social workers in their practice with those who had been directly affected by the Intifada. Interaction with international organizations provided different emergency social intervention programs that help in forming the social work profession in the field. In the Social Development Sector Strategy (2017), they suggested that ‘the intervention of international organizations influenced the development of social work in Palestine, so the role of social worker has been modified based on policy changes at the different levels’.

**Challenges in the everyday life for social workers**

Palestinian social workers, as most social workers in the world, face a lot of ethical dilemmas during their interventions, but they work in precarious situations at all times being under the Israeli occupation. This adds different levels of struggle, politically, socially, and economically. Palestinian social workers are providing services while they themselves do not feel secure while reaching out to their clients. Palestine is a place of many checkpoints, barriers, and walls that carve up the area of the Palestinian Authority into small, circumscribed spaces. The simplest of journeys become arduous and degrading. We can spend hours trying to circumnavigate checkpoints to reach a destination. Our minds become limited, possibilities narrow, and our bodies become vigilant, hypersensitive to threat and danger. Out of fear and insecurity, we impose psychic fences around our own movements before we even encounter the cold steely metal and barbed wire of the checkpoint. We become suspicious of everything. We discipline and regulate ourselves without being conscious of it. This is the modern colonial revisioning of what Dubois called ‘doubled consciousness’ - the ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ For Palestinian social workers, providing services has become a way of resistance; they have become both helpers and survivors in their practices in time of stress and anger which can present challenges to professional values.

The Palestinian Authority has been facing a severe financial crisis as a result of the Israeli occupation control over the Palestinian economy that is dependent on Israel. In addition, the Israeli occupation is deducting funds from Palestinian tax revenues as a form of collective punishment. This has caused an economic crisis that influenced public servants’ salaries and services the PA provides for the Palestinian public. Social workers are affected by these conditions and suffer from this crisis as individuals. Despite their personal suffering, social workers continue to work with people trying to provide them with services as much as resources allow in the community. The director of the Social Development Ministry in Nablus commented, ‘It is our responsibility to keep our community together. We try our best in these hard conditions… but it is a challenge’. Palestinian social workers consider providing services for people in need as a national obligation in hope of a better future.

Conclusion

To conclude, the social work profession developed in Palestine as a result of the accumulation of practice and intervention programs responding to emergency situations caused by the practices of the Israeli occupation that led to the precarious everyday Palestinian experience. Nonetheless, this experience needs to be supported through advanced trainings and capacity building, as well through supporting the academic programs by bringing in people with high qualifications in social work, in addition to linking those programs to the international community in order to develop the profession. I end up with three questions that are open for researchers: how will social work play roles in liberating and building the Palestinian state? How and what can we do for the social work profession to get a respectful recognition emerging from our belief in the social work message and the important roles it plays in the Palestinian community? Finally, what can we do to help social work reclaim its profession in Palestine?

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1. The first Intifada (Uprising in Arabic) of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (1987–93) took the form of non-violent protests against the Israeli occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)