

SOCIAL WORK CODE OF ETHICS

Values and Principles for
the Social Work
Profession

**Malta Social Work Profession Board &
Maltese Association of Social Workers**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction	04
2.0 Definition of Social Work	05
3.0 Purpose of the Code	06
4.0 Values and Principles	08
5.0 Importance of Human Relationships	08
6.0 Guidelines to Ethical Practice	09
6.1 Responsibilities towards Service Users	09
6.1.1 Service Users' Interests	09
6.1.2 Service Users' Self Determination	10
6.1.3 Cultural Awareness	10
6.1.4 Confidentiality, Record Keeping and Information Sharing	10
6.1.5 Competence	11
6.1.6 Private, Exclusive and/or Sexual Relationships	11
6.1.7 Physical Contact	12
6.1.8 Termination/Interruption of Service	12
6.1.9 Irregular payment for Services	12
6.2 Responsibilities towards Colleagues	14
6.2.1 Conflict of Interest in Professional Relationships	14
6.3 Responsibilities towards Employing Organisations	14
6.3.1 Private Practice	15
6.3.2 Organisations providing Education, Support and Research	15
6.3.3 Organisational Context of Social Work	15
6.4 Responsibilities towards the Social Work Profession	16
6.4.1 Responsibilities as Professionals	16
6.5 Responsibilities towards the Community at large	17
References	18

1.0 INTRODUCTION

i. Social Work is a professional activity regulated by the Social Work Profession Act, Chapter 468 of the Laws of Malta. The Code of Ethics, which expresses the values and principles that are integral to and characterise the social work profession, is intended to serve as a guide for the conduct of social workers. It also serves as a basis for the adjudication of issues in ethics when the conduct of social workers is alleged to have breached the standards expressed or implied in this code.

ii. This Code of Ethics is based on the recommendation of the International Federation of Social Workers to encourage reflection and dialogue on ethical issues in order to help the profession maintain, defend and develop its ethical judgement.

iii. This code recognizes that social work is a value-based profession where value judgements play an important role in practice. It is important to recognise that these values are also manifested in expressed opinions and attitudes, as well as organisational structures and other contexts that social work operates within.

iv. This Social Work Code of Ethics is a statement of values and principles that should bind social work professionals and guide employers. It is a document that should be kept alive through periodic reviews.

v. The Malta Social Work Profession Board (MSWPB) and the Maltese Association of Social Workers (MASW) have established this Code of Ethics which is to be adhered to by social workers practising in Malta. In cases of alleged breaches of this code, independently of any internal procedures which may be undertaken by the employing organization, the complainant may refer to the Malta Social Work Profession Board and initiate a formal complaint in accordance with the Inquiry Procedure as laid down by said Board.

2.0 DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK

i. In the Social Work Profession Act (Cap 468), social work is defined as 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. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

ii. Malta forms part of an international network of social work bodies, namely the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (2001) states that :

The Social Work Profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

iii. Social Work involves primarily but not exclusively :

- a. Engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation;
- b. Therapeutic services
- c. Development, promotion and delivery of human services programmes;
- d. Advocacy for social justice, equal opportunities and social cohesion;
- e. Applied research.

iv. Providing a social work service requires the expert and comprehensive

knowledge, skills, judgement and ethical conduct of a distinctly professional nature as provided for in social work education at university level.

3.0 PURPOSE OF THE CODE

i. This Code of Ethics recognises ethical conduct as a fundamental part of the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who use social work services. Therefore, this code is intended to serve as a guide to the ethical practice of social workers as well as to promote ethical reflection, practice and debate among social workers, their employers, policy makers, amongst academics and social work students.

ii. Consequently, the Code shall:

- a.** identify the values and principles which underpin ethical social work practice;
- b.** provide a standard for social work conduct and accountability;
- c.** provide a foundation for ethical reflection and decision making;
- d.** provide a framework for social work organisation to sustain a working environment that corresponds with ethical practice;
- e.** inform service users, employers and other concerned parties about what constitutes ethical social work practice;

The Code of Ethics also serves as a basis for the investigation and adjudication of issues related to professional ethics when the conduct of social workers is alleged to have deviated from the principles expressed or implied in this Code.



4.0 VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

In the determination and pursuit of its aims, social work is committed to the following core values: human rights and human dignity, social justice and service. These values determine the principles to which each social worker should aspire.

4.1 Human rights and human dignity

Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, irrespective of individual and cultural diversity. It values every person's needs, choices and potential and advocates for human rights and self-determination through partnership and empowerment. Social work primarily ensures the protection of people in vulnerable situations, within the limits of respecting the rights of others.

4.2 Social justice

Social work is committed to the promotion of social justice in relation to its service users and to all members of society. Social justice encompasses fair access to resources and treatment without prejudice and discrimination. It challenges the abuse of power and unjust practices.

4.3 Service

Social work promotes service to others above self-interest. It provides service in the interest of human well-being and assists people in need to address personal and social problems. It provides a quality service by maintaining competence and offering an honest, reliable and confidential practice.

5.0 IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Social workers value human relationships and acknowledge that these are of

fundamental importance. Social workers appreciate that the process of change is facilitated through contact and interaction between and among people. Thus, relationships are a principal medium for change. By connecting with people as partners in their therapeutic process, social workers endeavour to strengthen relationships between systems with the aim of supporting, rebuilding, maintaining and improving the wellbeing of individuals, families, social groups, organisations, communities and society as a whole.

6.0 GUIDELINES TO ETHICAL PRACTICE

This section serves as a guide to ensure professional and ethical practice in various contexts. The responsibilities below are not listed in any order of priority, and are equally complementary.

Social workers have responsibilities towards:

6.1 Service Users

6.2 Colleagues and other professionals

6.3 Organisations

6.4 The Social Work Profession

6.5 The Community at large

6.1 Responsibilities towards Service Users

Social workers should treat service users with respect. They should strive to establish working relationships founded on co-operation and mutual understanding.

6.1.1 Service Users' Interests

Social workers shall safeguard the best interests of service users, with due regard to the interests of others. Social workers should bring to the attention of the appropriate bodies any violations of services users' rights that they may become aware of. Social workers should keep service users' needs and interests as the

focus of the interventions carried out with them. They must always maintain professional boundaries and be aware of potential conflicts of interest particularly where social workers may be fulfilling different roles.

6.1.2 Service Users' Self Determination

The social worker shall respect the personal integrity of service users and promote their autonomy and resilience. The social workers shall inform the service users of their rights, responsibilities, and obligations. They shall help the service users to increase the range of choices and opportunities open to them. They shall also enable them to identify and reactivate resources to make the best possible informed decisions to reach their goals. Even in situations where service users' self determination has to be curtailed, these principles shall guide such practices.

6.1.3 Cultural awareness

Social workers should respect cultural diversity, recognising the impact their own views and biases may have in their practice. Social workers should not engage in discriminatory behaviour or practices.

6.1.4 Confidentiality, Record keeping and Information Sharing

- i.** Social workers should respect the privacy of the service users and treat with confidence any information obtained in the course of professional service.
- ii.** Information obtained in the course of professional service is confidential and should be treated with great discretion and within the national and European Union legal framework.
- iii.** Personal information shall be regarded as the property of the service users and shall only be used for the purpose for which it was originally obtained, or with written informed consent, for other purposes.
- iv.** This information shall not be kept any longer than is necessary

and shall be used with care and responsibility in accordance with data legislation enforced.

v. Personal information shall only be shared by the social worker and other interested parties with the informed consent of the service user, except when there are issues of child abuse or when the social worker is convinced that the service user or other persons are at serious risk of harm. In this case, information should be disclosed to others on a professional need-to-know basis. Social workers shall emphasise the importance of confidential practice with all parties involved.

vi. Service users' consent shall not be sought if it is deemed that such information might prejudice the investigation of a crime.

vii. All record keeping shall be done according to the above principles.

6.1.5 Competence

i. Social workers are to practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

ii. Social workers are expected to develop and maintain the quality skills and competence to practice social work in the best interests of their service users by committing themselves to continuous professional education and training.

iii. Social workers may need to consult and reflect with colleagues or seniors when they recognise that they are not addressing their service users' needs effectively. They should refer service users to other services when service users' needs are beyond their competence.

6.1.6 Private, exclusive and/or sexual relationships

i. Social Workers should not engage in private, exclusive, commercial and/or sexual relationships with service users whether such contact

is consensual or forced. Such relationships include those created or maintained through social networking or use of other Information and Communication Technology. In such cases, social workers are bound to promptly bring such issues to the attention of line management, where applicable, and supervision for necessary action.

ii. Social workers should not provide services to individuals with whom they have had a prior personal and/or sexual relationship. Such relationships would make it difficult for the social worker and service user to maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

6.1.7 Physical Contact

Social workers may only engage in physical contact when this is set in clear, professionally appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries. Social workers should be aware that such physical contact may lead to the possibility of psychological or physical harm to the service user.

6.1.8 Termination/Interruption of service

Social workers should terminate professional relationships and services when these relationships and services no longer serve the interests or needs of service users. Measures should be taken to ensure that the process of termination or referral to another service initiated by a social worker is done in the best interest of the service user.

6.1.9 Irregular payment for Services

Social workers should not accept and/or request goods, services, or other financial remuneration for providing services through agencies that offer services without payment. Only modest gifts may be accepted if this is not detrimental to service provision or influential on decision making, and if it is not prohibited by the policies of the organisation. In such instances the organisation should be informed accordin



6.2 Responsibilities towards Colleagues

When relating to colleagues and other professionals, social workers should adhere to values inherent to the social work profession. Social workers should create a working environment that fosters respect and support towards colleagues, and respect towards their performance even when there are differences in opinions. Social workers should maintain their responsibilities in line with social work values.

6.2.1 Conflict of interest in professional relationships

Social Workers should avoid engaging in sexual relationships with supervisees, students, trainees or other colleagues over whom they exercise professional authority, whether such relationship is consensual or forced. Social workers should be aware of any conflict of interest that may arise from personal and commercial relationships with colleagues.

6.3 Responsibilities towards Employing Organisations

- i.** Social Workers should acknowledge and conform to the overall objectives, policies and management of the employing agency, as long as they are in accordance with the requirements of this Code.
- ii.** Social workers should work towards the best possible standards of service provision. When in doubt about ethical issues, social workers should seek the advice and counsel of social work supervisors and experienced colleagues, and refer to the Malta Social Work Profession Board when such consultation is in the best interests of service users.
- iii.** When social workers are of the professional opinion that the organisation is in breach, directly or indirectly, of the ethical principles inherent to the profession, they should take appropriate action to see that the situation is remedied. If the situation persists, they should report to relevant superiors if advisable, or refer the case to the Malta Social Work Profession Board for guidance.

6.3.1 Private practice

In addition to all the other requirements stipulated in this code, social workers engaged in private practice will:

- i.** Advise clients regarding fees and any other costs prior to commencing professional service;
- ii.** Charge only for hours and services contracted by them;
- iii.** Charge fair and reasonable fees;
- iv.** Arrange appropriate temporary or substitute service for service users when unavailable or unable to continue practice when possible;
- v.** Not solicit private practice from their alternate/previous place of work, or from any social worker or any other professional in private practice.

6.3.2 Organisations providing Education, Support and Research

Social workers engaged in organisations providing education, training and research should also conform to this Code of Ethics. These include social workers whose role includes mentoring, supervision and/or consultation to student social workers and/ or colleagues.

6.3.3 Organisational Context of Social Work

Employers of social workers should:

- i.** Be made aware of the values and principles of this Code of Ethics;
- ii.** Create conditions and have policies in place to enable social workers to meet the requirements of this Code, and other standards and guidelines set out by the recognised national social work bodies;

- iii.** Provide social work supervision to support social workers and to maintain effective, reflective, critical and creative practice;
- iv.** Commit to safeguarding social workers' interests and wellbeing.

6.4 Responsibilities towards the Social Work Profession

- i.** Social workers should uphold the dignity and integrity of the social work profession by promoting professional standards of practice, codes and guidelines, and working for their advancement by association to national and international social work professional bodies;
- ii.** Social workers should participate, foster and engage in professional debate with their colleagues and employers;
- iii.** Social workers should act to prevent and/or report to the competent authority any professional misconduct, gross negligence or incompetence by a social worker.

6.4.1 Responsibilities as Professionals

- i.** Social workers have a responsibility to maintain best practice by making appropriate and regular use of supervision.
- ii.** Social workers should ensure their own proper care given that the principle tool of the social worker is the self.
- iii.** Social workers should take responsibility and recognition only for the work they have actually performed and to which they have contributed. Moreover, social workers should grant recognition to the work and contribution of others.
- iv.** Social workers should collaborate with social work educational establishments with the purpose of supporting social work students to get good quality practical training and advanced functional knowledge.

v. Social workers should be guided by the ethics of the profession, in accordance with current employment and industrial legislation if engaging in any action, industrial or otherwise.

vi. Social workers should acknowledge that the provision of essential services should supersede any personal interest. If any such action has to be taken, social workers should ensure that there is provision of emergency services for service users deemed to be at risk of harm.

6.5 Responsibilities towards the community at large

i. Social workers have responsibilities towards Maltese society in that they should always act to promote the welfare of all with special regard to disadvantaged or oppressed groups and individuals.

ii. They should ensure that all persons have access to the social welfare services that they need and that the services and policies address these needs in ways that are sensitive and anti-discriminatory.

iii. Social workers should facilitate the process of involvement by the public, particularly service users, in influencing social policies and practices.

iv. Social workers should ensure that action plans set out by Court Orders or other bodies are carried through and implemented.

References

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