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## PRACTICES OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORKERS (CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN)

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**Abstract.** *Nowadays, many careers still suffer from stereotypes that have been developed over the years, and which are difficult to move away from. One of these careers is a social worker. Therefore, an important aspect is the selection of social workers who will be the "face" of the social service. Social work, its mission and mandate should also be defined on the state political arena and included in the discourse of social policy and the social protection system of the country's population with the support of relevant structures and organisations. The public should be informed about social work as a career that contributes to prevention of violence, social injustice and development of an adequate social policy focused on addressing the issues of socially vulnerable groups of the population. Positive understanding and perception of social work in the Kazakh society develop a broad public support, joint efforts in achieving global goals in its professional promotion and development of social work as an activity at the micro and macro levels.*

**Keywords:** *help, negative image, civil service employee, service providers, social work.*

### **Introduction**

Social work is a relatively young profession in Kazakhstan and despite the intensity of its development, it faces certain difficulties associated with gaining professionalisation. In addition to the structural problems that exist due to the natural and historical development of social work such as social solidarity and the preservation of traditions of support, there are restrictive barriers for the development of social work, particularly in Kazakhstan. According to many scholars, one of these barriers is the lack of available information about social work and its opportunities, as well as the certain negative image of a social worker that has developed in Kazakhstan's society. A few Western studies on the public perception of social work demonstrate the existing negative perception of the profession

due to misconceptions about it, stereotypes, erroneous and negative representation of social work in the media (Zugazaga et al., 2006; Honcharenko and Polianychko, 2020). The lack of reliable information and knowledge about social work, about the many services and functions provided by social workers within their profession contribute to the development of a negative image of the profession.

Thus, the need to create a positive image of social work and the social worker makes the issue of studying the public perception of social work relevant. The importance of studying public perception as a factor of the effectiveness for social work is defined by the existing contradiction between the high significance of this work for society and its low social status and prestige. The study of the main factors of influence on the development of public perception, understanding of the low social status of social work and social workers in Kazakhstan remains relevant. A proper understanding of the specificities of the social work career and the functions of a social worker will increase the range and efficiency of services provided to the categories of the population in need (Berezovska, 2020).

In its turn, understanding the current perception of the social worker and social work as a career, as well as developing a right perception of this work, will help reduce the resistance of clients when providing them with social and psychological assistance, thereby allowing social workers to interact with them more effectively and productively by establishing mutual trust. In addition, the development of a favourable image of this career will reduce the mental barrier of the population of Kazakhstan to request and receive social services. A proper understanding of the specificities of the social work career and the functions of a social worker will also increase the range and efficiency of services provided to the categories of the population in need. It is important to understand that identifying the main factor that influence the development of public perception is key for understanding the reasons for the low social status of social work and social workers. Notably, the public perception of social work affects the development of the career for a long period. Thus, creating a positive image will encourage the recruitment of a wide range of talented social workers in the future.

## **Literature Review**

When going through the evolutionary stages of its development, social work as a profession was defined and perceived ambiguously (Staniforth et al., 2011). However, according to some scholars, the interdisciplinary nature and wide scope of social work services also contributes to a negative public perception (Corvo et al., 2003; Urusova and Zubachova, 2020). Since the beginning of the professionalisation period, the social structure of society, as well as the structure of the social work profession, has changed significantly. In July 2014, the General Meeting of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) and the General Assembly of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) adopted the global definition and description of the social work profession: “Social work is a profession based on practice and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment of people” (Global Definition of Social..., 2014; Knowledge and Practice of Social Work, 2021).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars began to study the public perception of the profession of social work and the factors of its development. Some data included a comparison of the status of the social worker profession with other professions (Ayre, 2001; Searle and Patent, 2013; Tulebayev and Abdiraimova, 2019). One of the studies by C.D. Condie et al. (1978) involved 250 homeowners in four different US states. The results of the study showed that in comparison to the first wave of similar studies conducted in the 1950s, the awareness of social work has increased significantly. One of the goals of the Australian study (Sharples, 1986; Ellett et al., 2007; Buy, 2020; Chenot, 2011) was to observe the public's attitude towards social workers in comparison with psychologists, psychiatrists and professional consultants. The study data showed that there was excessive workload, lack of professional knowledge and qualifications, uncertainty of the role and functional responsibilities among the shortcomings of this profession. In 2004, in the United States LeCroy and Stinson (2004) conducted a random telephone survey with 386 respondents. The study participants were asked questions about their attitude to social work and social workers, where 60% of respondents noted a generally positive perception of the profession of social work and social workers themselves.

The analysis of numerous foreign studies shows that, despite all the recent changes in the process of professional training of social workers, including the factors of globalisation, as well as the increasing professionalism and the increasing range of services provided, social workers still experience tension and negative public perception (Jordan, 2004). The prevailing negative perception of the social work career exist due to the misconceptions about it, stereotypes, erroneous and negative portrayals of social work, which significantly undermines public confidence in social work as a social service field (Beddoe, 2015; Polishchuk, 2019). Similar studies were done in Scotland with 1,015 participants older than 16 years old (Davidson and King, 2005), in New Zealand with 386 participants (Staniforth et al., 2014), in Israel with 1,417 participants older than 21 years old (Kagan, 2016), and in 2015 in Turkey with 500 respondents (Bolgün and Sahin, 2018; Kovalenko, 2019).

In May 2015, out of 6,150 graduates of social work programme in Turkey 4,625 were employed in public institutions, 2,381 were employed in the Ministry of Family Affairs and Public Policy, 938 in the Ministry of Health, and 449 in the Ministry of Justice (Bolgün and Sahin, 2018). In a 2015 Turkish study, experts sought to answer the following questions: what the public awareness of the professional status of social work is; what are the sources of information that shape the public perception of social work as a profession. Comley noted that one of the main reasons for the current negative image of social work is the lack of input from social workers themselves (Comley, 1985). One of the key aspects of this responsibility is the continuous attraction of applicants and the training new competitive specialists. They could to become social workers, which are needed in public and private structures and organisations, where such positions are often occupied by specialists from related fields (Biggerstaff, 2000).

S.T. Dennison et al. (2007) conducted a comprehensive study among second-year undergraduate students of various social and humanitarian specialties at the University of North Carolina. The approved Likert scale consisted of 45 points, including demographic data (5 points), attitude to social work (4 points), awareness of social work (1 point), and

the following 34 points were divided into 3 scales: awareness of social work as a career (11 points), awareness of the working conditions of social workers (18 points), awareness of the positions of social workers. Scholars have identified an independent variable that affects the degree of awareness and interest in social work, which is volunteering or working in organisations that provide social services (Dennison et al., 2007).

I. Weiss-Gal and P. Welbourne (2008) note that there are still some obstacles in society that need to be overcome to achieve an unambiguous professional status, even though the current progress is obvious. A positive image is critical to the viability and effectiveness of the social worker career (Reid and Misener, 2001), especially in light of research that demonstrates that most people do not come into personal contact with a professional. A study in the UK in 1981, which included 994 respondents, found that only 29% of respondents had contacted with a social worker directly (Weir, 1981). The public image and image of the profession is also developed through the social workers' self-assessments of their professional activities, that is, their professional significance. The low prestige of the social worker career and the low level of remuneration also determine the difficult situation on the labour market and in the choice of professions (Vyshnevsky, 2009). The analysis shows that the existing discrepancies in the categorical definition and the established negative public image of the profession reflect the uncertainty of the professional community itself about the mission and main functions of social work (Agresta, 2004; Staniforth et al., 2011; Olin, 2013; Staniforth et al., 2014). Whereas the existing negative image not only presents social workers as non-professionals unable to truly help but also creates a sense of shame associated with seeking help from a social worker based on a preconceived opinion that they are sensitive only to certain types of social injustice.

## **Materials and Methods**

A positive perception of this profession contributes to the growth of public confidence in social workers and the number of appeals, consultations and assistance if necessary. Whereas the existing negative image describe social workers as unprofessional and unable to genuinely help people. In addition, it evokes shame associated with seeking help from a social worker based on a preconceived opinion that their task is to take care of dysfunctional families in the first place. In this context, the promotion, creation of advertising and informative projects is crucial. In addition, a systematic study of the public image of the profession and the resolution of disagreements about how to represent the profession is extremely important.

Notably, two main elements in the public perception of the profession of social work are the negative image of the profession, as well as false ideas about social work career. The negative image originates from stereotypes and stigmas that create doubts among the public and, thus, destroy trust in social workers and social services in general. As a result, social workers are forced to develop confidence in their profession from the starting point, which is significantly lower than that of other more prestigious professions. Negative perception is accompanied by the feelings of injustice and alienation in the professional community, which creates difficulties in recruiting applicants and qualified personnel

in clinical social work. In general, improving the public perception of the social worker contributes to the development of the trust that social workers need for practical activities, both with individuals and with communities, facilitating the involvement of individuals in public actions, which also contributes to attracting funding of social services by non-governmental and third-party organisations.

In 2018-2020, the Centre for Sociological Research and Social Engineering of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University conducted a series of studies with the purpose of studying the image of social work as one of the new professional activities:

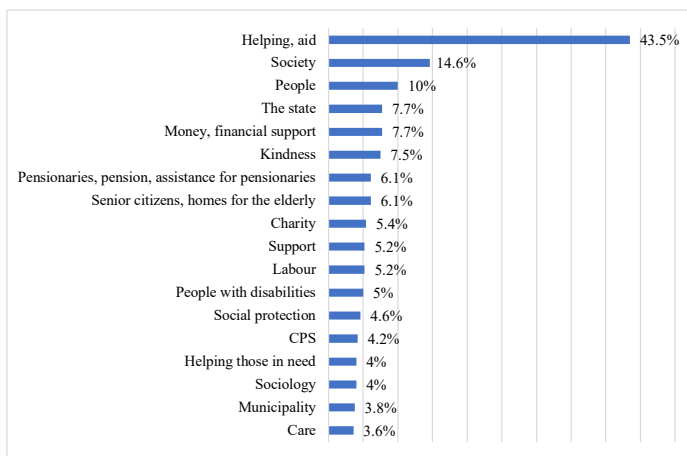
- 1) in October 2018, an assessment of the understanding of the professional image among students of the specialty of social work in Almaty was made, which was attended by 200 students of different levels of study (Bachelor's, Master's, PhD). The purpose of this study is to analyse the main motives for choosing a career, self-assessment of personal and professional competencies necessary for social workers, satisfaction of students with the education received, as well as analysis of the existing image, statements and stereotypes among future social work professionals;
- 2) in March 2019, a quantitative study was conducted among the population of a large metropolis (Almaty). A total of 526 people participated in the survey. The study is focused on identifying the level of awareness of social work; studying the public perception of social work as a career and social workers as specialists providing services, as well as determining the factors that form these images; analysing the image, statements and stereotypes that have developed in Kazakh society;
- 3) in May 2020, a series of expert interviews with social workers was also conducted to identify their perception of their profession, self-identification, existing barriers of professional and career growth, satisfaction with working conditions and the situation of social work.

This comprehensive research allows to focus on the holistic understanding of the image of social work among general public and its dynamic among students and social work professionals.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the study, conducted among population of Almaty when identifying the image of social work and social worker in Kazakhstan, respondents were asked to name three concepts associated with the social work career. According to the data obtained, 43.5% of respondents noted a concept of "assistance" as one of the most common associations with this profession. Conceptual associations are also associated with "society" (14.6%) and people (10%). Another 14.9% of respondents found it difficult to name their associations, which indicates the low awareness of the public about social work as a field of activity and as a profession. Thus, the general public perception and awareness of social work in Kazakhstan remains at a low level. The results of this study show that the general public has only a general idea of the purpose of this profession as helping people. Notably, there is no more detailed and holistic perception of the social protection system, including the structure of social work, and social workers as an integral part of it. The associative

ranking includes the concepts of “state” (7.7%), “monetary assistance” (7.7%), “kindness” (7.5%) (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1. Concepts associated with social work, n=526**

*Note: CPS – Centre for People Services*

Whereas, among students, the concepts associated with social work are “noble and selfless profession” – 75.8%, “the profession of the “future” – 59.8%, but also 52.1% associated it with low salary and heavy workload. In the qualitative part of the research, in expert interviews, experts noted that the associations they most often receive regarding their profession are “unskilled help, volunteering”, “Department of State agents”, “shoulder to cry on”, “the person who delivers food” and etc. Therefore, despite the low level of awareness of social work and social workers, general public still have the idea of a voluntary helping nature of this profession. Whereas students have higher aspirations as they are aware of the specifics and career opportunities. However, social workers themselves claim that they receive negative feedback which can then in turn result in self-stigmatization of social workers.

In general, respondents expressed positive attitude to the profession of a social worker, who believe that this profession is necessary for the Kazakh society (53.5%). Notably, almost 40% (39.7%) of respondents treat this profession indifferently or experience difficulty in expressing their attitude to it. This uncertainty and indifference also are the result of the lack of awareness of the population, a narrow spectrum of representation in the media, and the general lack of professional status of social work and social workers in the discourse of social policy and the social protection system in Kazakhstan. Among students of the social work programme, 50.2% never experience a feeling of discomfort and inconvenience, however 37% feel it sometimes, 10.5% experience similar feelings frequently.

Social workers in their interviews also emphasise that they have mixed feelings when they tell friends and acquaintances that they are social workers. During the expert

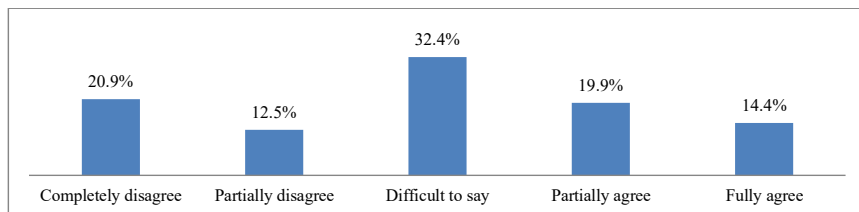
interview, respondents noted that they “feel awkward or ashamed only in front of their parents because they (the parents) do not consider this work to be serious” (respondent 1). According to expert interviews, social workers themselves are not sure that the public will encourage their children or close family members to become social workers.

Also, in Western studies, one of the main factors in shaping the perception of social work is personal relationships and direct contact with a social worker. To test this idea, the respondents were asked the question: “Did you or your family and friends use the services of a social worker?”. Thus, the majority of respondents claim that they have not used the services of a social worker (45.8%), 29.8% say that they have encountered social workers. 24.0% of respondents could not state for sure whether they have used the social workers’ services. There are the state bodies of local self-government, which signify stability and reliability (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Respondents' answers to the question “Would you, a member of your family, or a person close to you like to become a social worker”,  $n=526$

The same problem is faced by students ( $n=219$ ), 32.9% of whom only partially agree that their parents are proud of their professional choice, 31.1% fully agree with this statement, 11% of respondents believe that their parents do not feel proud of their children’s career. This uncertainty in several categories is not only an indicator of low awareness but also means the blurring of the boundaries between social work and other related professions in the Kazakh society, which provides for a lack of clear job descriptions and a confusion regarding functional responsibilities between social workers and specialists from related professional fields. Respondents were asked to express their attitude towards several statements about social work in Kazakhstan for clarifying this question. Thus, according to the data obtained, the majority of respondents (71.3%) agree to some extent with the statement that a social worker works with everyone who is in a difficult life situation. However, for 18.8% of respondents, it was difficult to determine the scope of the social worker’s activities. The analysis of the obtained data shows the differences and ambiguity in the opinions of respondents regarding the negative image of social workers in Kazakhstan (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3. Respondents' answers to the question "Do you agree with the statement "Kazakhstan has created a negative attitude towards social workers?",  $n=526$**

The International Association of Social Workers together with scholars has developed a number of measures to raise awareness and improve the image of the profession at the national and global levels. The national and international Social Work Education and Public Awareness Campaign focused on providing general guidance and resources, and developing basic protection indicators for social workers (Brawley, 1995; NASW Code..., 2008; Social Work Public..., 2021). Its activities focused on raising awareness and re-creating a professional culture for social work, spreading awareness about diversity, providing a better understanding about the social services, involving young people in social work as volunteers, and resource-based improvement of employment and employment opportunities for professional social workers. K. Tower (2000) notes that social workers themselves are responsible for spreading a negative image of social work, for the lack of truthful public information about social work and its clients.

Nowadays, the image of social work in Kazakhstan is transitions from the image that was developed in the Soviet Union to a completely new form, while having some structural barriers on the way. *"We are in this transitional period when it is no longer done in the Soviet style, when social workers were associated with the delivering pensions for pensioners"* (respondent 1). At the same time, the general public continues to perceive social workers as volunteers working on a voluntary basis. According to the results of a study among the population of a large city, the majority of respondents believe that higher or even special education is not required to perform the functions of a social worker, thus 23.9% of respondents fully agree and 19% of respondents partially agree with this statement, another 23.3% find it difficult to answer, which again indicates a lack of image whatsoever and low awareness of the features of social work.

As a result, the conditions and prestige for social workers in Kazakhstan are assessed by the social workers themselves as low, and the emotional complexity of this profession is not considered. As defined by the social workers, the factors of the development of the public image included social workers themselves, the outdated understanding of the profession, attitude and mentality. Among factors that influence the creation of the positive image of profession is a stable status of the profession itself, based on quality education and decent wages for social workers.

Notably, the vast majority current and future social workers think that they are perceived negatively in society. Thus, this provides for negative self-stigmatisation, which



does not fully reflect the existing public opinion (Staniforth et al., 2014). According to the results of the study, the negative image of a social worker is the result of negative self-stigmatisation of social workers themselves. While the real challenge is not only to deconstruct the existing negative image of the social worker for the public but to raise professional awareness in the first place. Secondly, it is necessary to clearly define the boundaries and focus of social work in the Kazakh society, define and improve the status of a social worker in society and in the social protection system of the population to avoid duplication or false substitution of the functional responsibilities of social workers and representatives of other related professions, and as a result, creating a positive image of a social worker.

In addition, social workers in expert interviews note the stigmatisation among the population, as well as among the recipients of services social workers *“are treated as a person who is obliged to solve the problems of everyone”* (respondent 4). The modern realities require creating a positive image of social work and the social worker, which, in its turn, makes the issue of studying the public perception of social work, as well as the main factors of its development relevant. Perception develops and forms a profession over a long period and can contribute not only to the promotion of the profession but also to the qualitative recruitment of talented applicants.

There is a significant contrast in the level of influence of number of factors on the public perception of social work. Therefore, social workers themselves should be involved in spreading true and accurate ideas about social work and the creation of a more positive image of social work. Thus, having reliable information about the features, value foundation, resource and financial opportunities within this profession, every practicing social worker should take a proactive position and make an initiative contribution to the spread of objective information both among the public and the immediate environment not only in the local but also in the national context. At the same time, the creation of a professional network and community of social workers in Kazakhstan, the specific determination of the boundaries, focus, and functional responsibilities at both the micro and macro levels of social work is one of the effective tools for creating and improving the image of this career in the Kazakh society.

## Conclusions

Therefore, along with the development of professional social work, the expansion of the scope of its activities in Kazakhstan and the change in the prestige of the profession are associated solely with the need to develop a unified and holistic approach with clear priorities and measures for specific actions. The need to create a positive image of social work and the social worker makes the issue of studying the public perception of social work relevant. Nowadays, the current public perception of social work is limited and does not reflect the essence of the profession itself, which provides for its negative image as an ineffective approach to solving the problems of people in a difficult life situation. The low level of awareness, lack of information, negative public perception of social work can have many serious consequences, including distrust on the part of the population; negative

stigmatisation; a decrease in the number of services provided to those in need; a decrease in the quality of services provided; and lack of motivation among social workers.

Therefore, low level of awareness of social work and social workers, lack of information lead to the idea of a voluntary helping nature of this profession among general public. Whereas students have higher aspirations as they are aware of the specifics and career opportunities in social work and as service providers. However, social workers themselves claim that they receive negative feedback which can then in turn result in negative self-stigmatization of social workers and low professional self-esteem.

In its turn, understanding the current perception of the social worker and social work as a career will help reduce clients' resistance, thereby allowing social workers to interact more effectively and productively with their clients who trust them. In addition, the development of a favourable image of this career will reduce the mental barrier of the population of Kazakhstan to request and receive social services. In general, improving the public perception of the social worker contributes to the development of the trust that social workers need for practical activities both with individuals and with communities, facilitating the involvement of individuals in public actions, which also contributes to attracting funding of social services by non-governmental and third-party organisations. Notably, identifying the main factor that influence the development of public perception is crucial for understanding the reasons for the low social status of social work and social workers. A proper understanding of the specificities of the social work career and the functions of a social worker will also increase the range and efficiency of services provided to the categories of the population in need.

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