CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORKERS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Social workers face a world of work that persistently requires increasingly competent and adequate labor to face the constant social transformations in the country, where the profession must transit in intervention scenarios that present constant challenges. In this context, the objective of this study was to present, through a bibliographic research, the challenges faced by social workers in their professional practice. It was found that one of the greatest challenges that permeate the professional practice, to go beyond the fundamental analysis of the social reality in which the user of the services is inserted, is the creation of feasible intervention alternatives, and it is necessary for the social worker to expand not only his theoretical framework, but mainly his technical-operative framework for the execution of competent actions that can be effective, to materialize and preserve social rights. Faced with this scenario, social workers face the challenge of not uncritically implementing social policies, but must support the interests of the working class, mobilizing to denounce situations of injustice and inequality.

Keywords: Social Work. Professional Challenges. Social Policy.

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INTRODUCTION

On a daily basis, Social Work professionals have to face and solve increasingly complex situations and their professional role is subject to the social and personal situations of the individuals they serve, the institution, the theoretical models, the methodology for solving social problems, the current situation in which services and resources are increasingly scarce.

From its emergence to the present day, Social Work has undergone continuous transformations. As Falcão and Neto (1987, p. 51) clarify, on a daily basis, "its specificity lies in the fact that it acts on all the human needs of a given social class, that is, the one formed by subaltern groups, impoverished or excluded from the goods, services and wealth of that same society".

The current configuration of the profession presents the dimension of social protection and promotion. As social protection, there are sectoral social policies and the defense of rights. Social promotion focuses on the development of the individual and society from the perspective of building emancipatory and democratic practices. Both dimensions of professional performance broaden the understanding that the user of social services is not only the low-income population, as other social levels are also excluded from social rights and find restrictions on access and information that limit their quality of life (Yazbek, 2016).

In the current conjuncture, Social Work has, as an ethical principle, the intransigent defense of human rights, the expansion and consolidation of citizenship, an effort to eliminate all forms of prejudice and the option for a professional project linked to the process of building a new societal order, with its ethical-political project in divergence from the current order (Iamamoto, 2021). According to Aguiar (2012), the social issue is one of the founding elements of Social Work, as these professionals work in the execution of public social policies that constitute responses to the various expressions of the social issue, produced by capitalist society. In its trajectory, professionals in the area have been participating and working in the search for alternatives to face such issues, seeking to act, in health, in accordance with the principles discussed and recommended by the defenders of the health reform and set forth in the Code of Ethics that governs the profession.

Through its set of norms, the Code of Ethics establishes rights and duties for Social Work professionals, representing for society a mechanism for defending the quality of services provided to the population, as well as a form of social legitimation of the

professional category. The code represents an instrument that indicates and determines parameters for professional practice through rules and sanctions, substantiating the professional identity before society; also considered an evaluative and political milestone for the category (Aguiar, 2012).

Professional practice requires continuous training and qualification of professionals in practice, taking into account the ethical-political aspects, considering the defense of the human rights of the populations, according to the various fields of intervention. Thus, there must be a rupture of professional conservatism, in order to promote a social transformation in the defense of human rights. However, in addition to this issue, these professionals face several challenges in their professional practice, which often frustrate and wear out in highly complex situations.

In this context, the objective of this study was to present, through a bibliographic research, the challenges faced by social workers in their professional practice.

THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER

According to the Federal Council of Social Work (CFESS, 2009), the assistance character refers to the main demands presented to Social Work professionals, while the socio-educational perspective refers to reflective orientations and socialization of information to users through individual, group or collective approaches; constituting the main axis of action of the social worker.

The object of the social worker's work is the social question and its origin is based on the contradiction that defines capitalist society, with its increasingly social production; and the appropriation of labor, its conditions and its results, increasingly private. In this way, it operates in a space of convergence and contradictions, which is society itself, mediated by contradictory interests, where the professional, understanding this contradictory character, seeks to break with fatalism/pragmatism (deterministic view of society) or messianism/voluntarist (heroic view of the profession), as both views are distortions of social and historical processes that do not recognize the reality of the labor market (Menezes, 2006).

In this sense, when analyzing the paths of the social worker's professional practice, Simionato (1999, p. 89) states that they are faced with two distinct theoretical perspectives:

> The one that understands professional action as a field of fragments, restricted to the demands of the labor market, whose apprehension requires the mobilization of a body of knowledge and techniques that does not allow extrapolating the appearance

of social phenomena; and another, which understands professional action from a perspective of totality, of a historical-ontological character, referring the particular to the universal and including the objective and subjective determinations of social processes. To this end, a professional with theoretical-critical and practical-operative qualifications is required, capable of intervening on and in the immediate demands and of building new alternatives of action connected to macro-social processes that transcend the horizon of the post-modernity project.

Thus, it is up to the social worker to place the real interests and needs of health service users at the center of the discussion, mainly because he is a professional who has contact with the perspectives of the user's daily life, and, because he is a mediator between them and the institution, his ethical-political duty is to defend that these demands are met and that health services consider them as priorities (Menezes, 2006).

In Yazbek's (2009) interpretation, from the 1990s onwards, Social Work began to contemplate a set of new values that give it a direction and prioritize its technical, critical and theoretical skills and its ethical-political commitments, to train professionals capable of unveiling the most diverse faces of the social issue.

In this sense, Iamamoto (2021) reports that the State began to create means to compensate for the inequality created by capitalism through Social Policies and, in this way, interfering in social issues.

> A social issue apprehended as the set of expressions of inequalities in mature capitalist society, which has a common root: social production is increasingly collective, work becomes more broadly social, while the appropriation of its fruits remains private, monopolized by a part of society (Iamamoto, 2021, p. 27).

From then on, Social Work overcame the condition of executor of social policies, assuming positions of planning and management of these policies, in the face of a conjuncture "dominated by the distance between wealthy minorities and miserable masses", confronting transformations in society, being challenged to understand and intervene in emerging issues, such as the precariousness of work, child labor, violence, ethnic-racial discrimination, among others common to contemporary society (Yazbek, 2009).

As Pontes (2017, p. 43) clarifies, Social Work has the following primary characteristic:

> To be an interventionist profession. Therefore, in addition to knowing the reality in its complexity, it is necessary to create means to transform it in the direction of a certain socio-professional project. This double dimension that characterizes Social Work challenges professionals to face it daily in the complex fabric of the social

organizations they work with. This confrontation requires a theoretical-methodological equipping that is equal to its complexity.

Therefore, it is necessary that the professional, in the exercise of his function, has a broad vision, which goes beyond the demands presented, putting into practice all the theoretical basis acquired, always seeking the exercise of sensitive observation, demonstrating ability to act professionally, understanding the social meaning of work and the significance of the area in the set of social problems, because the social worker's professional profile is surrounded by technical competence, theoretical criticism and ethical-political commitment (Iamamoto; Carvalho, 2015).

According to Iamamoto (2006, p. 12):

> The exercise of the profession requires, therefore, a professional subject who has the competence to propose, to negotiate with the institution his projects, to defend his field of work, his qualifications and professional attributions. It requires going beyond institutional routines and seeking to apprehend in the movement of reality the tendencies and possibilities present in it that can be appropriated by the professional, developed and transformed into work projects.

The Social Work professional needs to analyze the totality to reach the understanding of the essence. According to Setúbal (2007), the social worker must incorporate a professional practice that can lead him to learn not only to see and judge, but to act and with this reinvent, reconstruct and even build. To this end, it is necessary to break with academic limits in the perspective of going beyond, in search of totality, aiming at possibilities of recognizing the subject as a citizen, only then will it be possible to encourage people to overcome the adverse conditions to which they are subjected.

Therefore, the legitimacy of Social Work is fundamentally based on its ability to respond to social needs, the source of its demand, which must be problematized, seeking to understand the mediations that relate the fundamental needs of the productive restructuring process with the demands of the labor market. To this end, it is essential to identify the needs of the subjects (capital and labor) and, based on the knowledge of these needs, to be able to account for the requests placed in their daily professional lives by the labor market.

DEMANDS AND CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

From the perspective of Social Work, intervention is understood as the action organized and developed by professionals with people, groups and communities whose

objectives aim to overcome the obstacles that prevent progress in human development and the improvement of the quality of life of citizens, based on ethical, epistemological and methodological foundations, based on an integral approach.

The demands that social workers face in their daily professional lives are a consequence of capitalist society and their capacity to respond to meet these demands is entirely linked to the hegemonic project that has been put forward for Brazilian society in recent years.

> It is essential that professionals are clear about the projects that are in place, what they mean and their consequences. This means that the social worker, as a profession inserted in the social and technical division of labor, can in his professional exercise reinforce the neoliberal project with his selective, exclusionary and focalist policies, which aim to expand the private sphere to the detriment of the public sphere, contributing to undermine the rights of those who demand his work to meet their needs; or, on the contrary, to reinforce the project that defends universal, egalitarian, integral and quality access for the populations demanding public social policies, contributing to their work carrying out actions that point to the strengthening of the collective subjects of social rights (Bezerra; Araújo, 2007, p. 207).

Thus, the social worker acts as a mediator between demands that result from the conditions of vulnerability of the population and those posed by the institution responsible for the implementation of public social policies, which are configured within a focalist, selective and excluding perspective for the provision of public services.

The intervention of the Social Work professional must always be guided by specific concerns with the ethical issue, directing the intervention to the satisfaction of specific human needs and to the guarantee of human rights and the effectiveness of social protection, working for the well-being and personal fulfillment of human beings, values adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (FIAS), from 1993 onwards.

In this sense, the Code of Ethics of Social Work is a milestone for the category, having been democratically elaborated, configuring, more than a set of norms, a new professional profile, whose social direction, according to Miranda and Cavalcante (2005, p. 14):

> Based on Critical Social Theory, it postulates the confrontation of old and new expressions of the social issue through the assembly of strategies that expand the limits imposed on citizenship and democratize public policies and their access in the face of the current accumulation pattern and the protection model that is inherent to it. However, in order to achieve these objectives, it is necessary to direct not only ethics, but also professional knowledge and knowledge to the construction of these new power strategies that enable the concrete confrontation of social inequalities, understanding that all professional conducts have practical implications and can contribute to different projects and solutions.

Thus, the professional needs to recognize the needs and demands of the population served, so that he is able to propose actions that meet these demands, and must break with ready-made proposals, in an attempt to make the professional project effective. For this, it is essential to bring it closer to the users, because, according to Iamamoto (2006, p. 34), otherwise,

> The social worker may have a discourse of ethical-political commitment to the population, superimposed on a relationship of estrangement towards this population, re-editing programs and projects that are alien to their needs, even if in the name of commitment. [...] it is necessary to break sterile routines and bureaucracy [...] for the triggering of collective actions that enable professional proposals capable of going beyond the instituted demands.

In this way, the social worker is committed to the quality and scope of the services provided, ensuring the defense of social rights, citizenship and social justice, articulating theory and practice in search of changes in the tutelary policies, aiming at the participation of users as political subjects and of law.

Such perspectives are only possible in the professional routine, as it is in this space that the social worker can build coherent alternatives to the professional project. To this end, according to Boschetti (2004, p. 29),

> One of the challenges posed today for the professional category is to maintain the achievements and advances of this professional project, because despite the adversities of the current situation, it is in the daily work that the possibilities of building alternatives coherent with it lie, that is, materializing it, articulating the theoretical, methodological and ethical advances accumulated over the decades. For this, it is also necessary to take an ethical and political position that rebels against the processes of alienation linked to contemporary logic, pushing us to dimension our work process in the search to break with dependence, subordination, depoliticization, construction of apathy that is institutionalized and expressed in our daily work.

When discussing the challenges of the professional practice of social workers, Iamamoto (2021, p. 59) states that:

> Social Work requires eyes open to the contemporary world to decipher it and participate in its creation, developing a work based on zeal for the quality of the services provided, in the defense of the universality of public services, in the updating of the ethical-political commitment to the collective interests of the user population. In this way, the exercise of the profession provides theoretical-practical, ethical-political, technical-operative skills to defend their field of work, their qualifications and professional functions. It is to go beyond institutional routines and seek to apprehend the movement of reality to detect trends and possibilities present in it, which can be executed.

Therefore, for Iamamoto (2021), the social worker is the articulator of the population with the agencies in which he works. Being the mediator in the relationship between the user and the institution, where he seeks to fulfill the objectives set out in the institutional programs, also seeking to identify the interests of the subalternized classes with which he works.

It is through the relationships built with the social worker that the user of the assistance services learns to relate to the institutions and their professional staff, understanding their propositions and limits. Often, the assisted person is able to distinguish the assistance of the professional from social assistance, a source of support and support in coping with the adverse situations he experiences, individually or collectively (Yazbek, 2016).

Also according to Yazbek (2016, p. 155):

> Despite the little effectiveness that is found in the actions to combat poverty and the compensatory nature of these in the face of the demands of the subaltern classes, assistance services are often a space for the recognition of their users in society. A recognition that, contradictorily, reveals the social place of those who are situated in society precisely because of their exclusion and subordination.

In this context, it is necessary for social workers to act critically and theoretically, so that they can demystify everyday life and its relationships in capitalist society, seeking, through ethical reflection, to build strategies that overcome the limits imposed on citizenship, with social justice and democracy as objectives.

The ethical-political commitment assumed by the category has revealed the challenge of professional competence, which must be based on the intellectual improvement of the social worker, with an emphasis on a "qualified academic training, based on critical and solid theoretical-methodological conceptions, capable of enabling a concrete analysis of the social reality" and enabling a process of permanent training, stimulating "a constant investigative concern" (Netto, 1999, p.105).

It is perceived that the professional needs to requalify, to have a critical view of reality, through a reflective, analytical, investigative and purposeful attitude towards reality. A daring, attentive and willing professional is required to appropriate and decipher new work proposals presented to Social Work. In this context, Guerra (2007, p. 27) states that "the values and principles of the current professional project refer to a new way of operating the profession, which presupposes criticism of the conditions and relations of its exercise".

Therefore, it is not enough to be indignant, it is necessary to develop moral awareness, to appropriate ethics as a critical reflection to establish tacit and strategic choices and actions that allow the organization of actions and historical subjects to intervene in the process of democratization of society, aiming at a just and equitable society, which involves the defense of human life.

However, it should be noted that it is not easy to enforce the rights of users due to the numerous difficulties presented in the daily life of the social worker, where sometimes the professional is subject to precarious working conditions, governed by temporary contracts, reduced salaries in institutions that do not have the minimum necessary to carry out their actions effectively.

In this sense, Paz (2015, p. 8) states that:

> The precariousness of the work of Social Assistance Policy professionals is not restricted to employment relationships, several factors contribute to the precariousness of working conditions, such as low wages, lack of material conditions and adequate physical facilities for the provision of services to users, high turnover of professionals, insufficient and poorly qualified human resources, absence of continuous training, insecurity in the work environment, productivity demands, in addition to the process of computerization of work, which, despite making tasks less arduous, intensify their development and increase productivity, making them increasingly mechanical and bureaucratic, through an intense process of filling out forms.

Facing these new and old challenges implies collectively rethinking the "social meaning of the profession" (Yazbek, 2003, p. 38), from a critical perspective, towards the construction of a new ethical-political project (Iamamoto, 2006). It also implies considering that the profession is historically inserted in the contradictory process of social relations, reproducing and preserving capital, which does not invalidate participating in its transformation (Yazbek, 2003), based on the empowerment of the population, strengthening its power (Faleiros, 2003).

From this perspective, it is necessary to remember that Social Work is intrinsically linked to the social issue and to the treatment of its expressions manifested by the crisis of capitalism, with its strengths and impacts on the world of work, a situation that resizes social policy in all its quadrants, imprinting a focused and assistentialist dynamic (Rosseti, 2011).

Thus, it is important to consider the conditions and relations of wage labor in progress in the world of work in its global trends. According to Abilio (2020, p. 112), the current uberization process has been a striking feature today, stating that:

The uberization of work defines an ongoing trend that can be generalized through labor relations, which encompasses different sectors of the economy, types of occupation, levels of qualification and income, and working conditions, on a global level. Derived from the social phenomenon that gained visibility with the entry of the Uber company into the market, in reality the term uberization refers to processes that are not restricted to this company nor begin with it, and that culminate in a new form of control, management and organization of work.

From the process of uberization, therefore, work regulated by means of a formal bond loses strength to give way to work without guarantees, with deregulation of protection, constituting the precariousness of work, expressed in working hours, wages, means of contracting, among others.

With regard to social workers, Camargo (2021) points out that these professionals have also been undergoing changes, not only related to the increase in demand, but also due to the intense precariousness of work relationships and conditions, with new forms of hiring, scarcity of resources, precariousness of social policies and the physical facilities where they work. Camargo (2021, p. 504) also observes that "among all the processes that question social work in the labor market, it is also worth highlighting the impacts of these conditions on workers' health".

Finally, it is important that social workers are always aware of the ethical principles of the profession, which include respect for human dignity, the promotion of social justice and the guarantee of rights. Standing firm on these values is an essential differentiator in challenging contexts.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When resorting to the social worker, the user expects the professional to be able to construct answers that meet their needs, even those of an immediate nature, such as the difficulty of accessing services, as well as the search for information and other guidance.

In this sense, it is up to the social worker to constitute the public space of recognition and social belonging of users, as well as an instance in which interests and projects are recognized as legitimate demands, thus contributing to ensure the effectiveness of public policies in social assistance services.

Thus, one of the greatest challenges that permeate professional practice, to go beyond the fundamental analysis of the social reality in which the user of the services is inserted, is the creation of feasible intervention alternatives, and it is necessary for the social worker to expand not only his theoretical framework, but mainly his technical-

operative framework for the execution of competent actions that can make effective, to materialize and preserve social rights.

Faced with this scenario, social workers face the challenge of not uncritically implementing social policies, but must support the interests of the working class, mobilizing to denounce situations of injustice and inequality. To this end, their role must go beyond meeting the immediate needs of users, understanding that their professional function is to nurture, encourage, help, allow, support and stimulate the internal forces of citizens to identify their potential and the resources available in their own environments, thus promoting equity and justice at all levels of society.

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