The Nascence of Social Work Education in Somalia: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Way Forward

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Abstract: From clan-based politics in the years leading to independence to clan-shaped legislature and clan-oriented cabinets in the civilian governments following independence, military dictatorship and malfeasance dominated 1970s and 1980s Somalia. Early in 1991, the country became swamped in a clan-based civil war that crumbled state structures and the public services they provided. The ensuing lawlessness increased monumentally, making violence and abuse against women, children, minorities, and the vulnerable among the society very rampant. Social workers, in other words professionally trained people who could steer the provision of the crucially needed social services to the vulnerable ones among the society, most of whom were psychologically traumatized in one way or the other, either did not exist in the country or were barely known about. As the state of neglect became a major concern, UNICEF, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development of the Federal Government of Somalia, in conjunction with the Swedish government, created a platform to address the conundrum by contracting six selected universities in Somaliland, Puntland and Mogadishu in 2018 to start training the first batch of Somali social workers in certificate and diploma programs that culminated into a 4-year bachelor's degree study. From this background, this essay aims to contribute to the existing literature on social work by discussing the introduction of formal social work education in Somalia.

Index terms: Social Work Education, Social Work Practice, Social Work Profession, Somalia

I. Introduction

A General Overview of Social Work

Although every community had its own means of providing services to help individuals or groups among its members in times of difficulty, social work has become recognized as a credible profession for the provision of crucial social services during the past century or so. Passing through different stages, social work has developed in scope, practice, and performance, expanding both its depth and breadth academically and professionally. The expansion has reached the African continent as many vocational professional schools and higher learning institutions established various levels of programs offering qualifications from stand-alone professional certificates and diplomas to bachelors and master's degrees, although none of the institutions in the East African Community zone had a PhD program in their social work study by 2017, according to Spitzer (2019:571).

Chronicling a review of available literature on social work, Bhatt and Sanyaal (2019), whose work the current study invokes along with that of Umoren (2016), dispense a revelation of the development of the profession from its early days to the present. Their classification of the developmental stages of social work gives the reader an understanding of the ideological framework guiding the practice of the profession each at its own time and by its definition. According to Bhatt and Sanyaal (2019:6), the earliest philosophy of social work was shaped by its definition as a "charity or philanthropic" movement. During this early period of social work, from 1915 to 1940, "The entire focus was on curing a social disorder and changing human attitudes. Therefore, a more curative, charitable, philanthropic attitude for help was seen as social service and social welfare," (Bhatt and Sanyaal, p. 9).

As the profession moved into its second phase, 1941-1965, its definition has taken a different feature that interpreted it as a "welfare model". It was in their discussion on the trends of social work in the 2nd phase of its history that Bhatt and Sanyaal interpolate how "the concept of social security, economic well-being and standard of living" emerged to be the central theme of the profession. In the same vein of thought, Witmer (1942) believed that the principal duty of social work was the provision of "assistance to individuals in regard to the difficulties they encounter in their use of an organized groups service or in their performance as a member of an organized group."

The currency of the ideological dispensation of social work during the second phase since its emergence as a formal professional entity can be carefully gleaned from Gisela Konopka's description. In her volume *Eduard C. Lindeman and Social Work Philosophy*, the second part of which discusses the values of social work from approximately 1920 to 1953, Konopka elaborates:

> Social work is an entity representing three clearly distinguished but inter-related parts: a network of social services, carefully developed methods and processes and social policy expressed through social institutions and individuals. All three are based on a view of human beings, their interrelationships, and the ethical demands made on them. (Konopka, 1958:83)

Thus from 1966 to 1990, Bhatt and Sanyaal note that social work has framed itself in the "development phase". Their presentation is reflective of the currency of the definitions and interpretations scholars and experts have attributed to the field. For instance, Moorthy and Rao (1970, cited in Bhatt & Sanyaal 2019:12) comment on social work as: "help rendered to any person or group, who is suffering from any disability, mental, physical, emotional or moral, so that the individual or group so helped is enabled to help himself or itself."

Incubation of the Social Work Profession in Somalia

Similar to other African countries, I intend to place the practice of social work in Somalia well prior to the arrival of European colonialism or spread of Islam into the country. Indeed, the cultural practice, tradition, and customary institutions all provide a long history of social cohesiveness—call it family- or extended family-based work, tribal group work, clan or kin-based work, or just any other form of communal work done to contribute to the well-being of either an individual or a family or any group in need of the service concerned. I also take the opportunity to illuminate in this thesis of limited scope that while some of these services were paid for and purchased in one way or the other, similar to today's provision of professional social work service, others were offered selflessly and purely on the basis of philanthropy and self-help, as was mentioned elsewhere by Ahmed (1995, 1996) and Eno (2008).

Caring for one another, in many cases without consideration of or regard to tribal, social or kinship background, represents the common traditional practice of the Somalis (Eno 2008; C. C. Ahmed 1995, A. J. Ahmed 1995, 1996). But with disregard to all these attributes, Lewis (1994), and about a decade later Kapteijns (2013), and a section of Western scholars calibrate the Somali society mainly on the basis of the horrendous situation of instability that engulfed the country and haunted it since the civil war. In fact, while the two preceding sentences represent the sharp contrast prevalent among the views of Somalist scholars, I note in my polite argument that the devastation which the country had experienced did neither significantly compromise nor fade away the Somali's more sacrosanct humanistic philosophy, the reality of voluntarism, the selflessness and/or moral-based provision of services.

To present my argument more effectively, the community-based organization of activities among neighbors from different kinships and clan entities, transportation of the sick and the wounded to the medical facilities (Gargaar Newsletter 2015), accommodating strangers into a safe haven and within the 'supposedly enemy family', the caring for orphans and children strayed from their homes and parents during the escape from bombardment, all (but to name just a mere few) respond to the compassionate attributes of the Somali society and the cultural values sustained over the years—both in peacetime and wartime. Therefore, unlike the pessimistic view of the colonial writers mentioned above and other Western scholars of the same thought, the Somali people have neither abandoned the provision of social services to the needy nor have they become deprived of their hope and optimism for both the present and the future. However, finally, those years of traditionally oriented social service provision, and the need for coordinated social work education culminated into the robust action that paved the way for Somalia's recent endeavor towards the professionalization of social work.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief on Social Work from an African Perspective

A section of African and foreign scholars associates the origination of social work in Africa with the arrival of colonialism in the continent. They write on how social work was introduced to tackle the various problems colonialism and its agents had brought to the continent (Mabeyo 2014; Muridzo et al 2021). According to this view, the general portrayal of the origination of social service itself is referred to as a practice that has been emulated from western countries in the 1900s (Mupedziswa 2020; Muridzo et al 2021). However, I concur with Umoren's discussion problemitizing social work from the perspective of its "informal" (if we may call it so), non-professional practice among the African communities that exercised/practiced aspects of social work within their communal structures, cultures, and traditions while following their indigenous approach to the delivery of social service.

To provide a more appealing description, Umoren (2016) conjoins the African and the European paradigms of social work in the continent while attributing the origination or existence of social work practice in Africa right to the African people. According to Umoren, the indigenous African's philosophy of social and communal practice was effectively in place prior to the European venture to conquer the continent while the latter is acknowledged for introducing the systematized feature of social work as scholarship and as a profession with a work ethic conducive to the contemporary time. Umoren's analysis supports that of Singh (2015) that people or communities anywhere always operated within the spirit and experience of social work before the practice was developed into its current scientific approach towards the end of 19th century. Hence, Umoren (p. 191) aptly pays each of the European and the African endeavor its rightful place by admitting: "The missionaries, other African mutual aid organizations, in partnership with Europe and other parts of the world came up with various activities that led to the colonization of the continent by external powers there by (sic) contributing to social work development on the continent."

Umoren (2016:192), paraphrasing Darkwa (2007), acknowledges that beyond their intervention in areas of religious proselytization, capacity and skills building of the African community, "the missionaries also projected, to a substantial level, an informal display of official responsibility in areas of service delivery and social work interventions—thus functioning as informal social workers." In a comparative view acknowledging the African perspective to social work, Umoren (p. 192) elucidates, "Family members accessed services from various mutual aid societies prior to the development of statutory welfare system." In this indigenous system, social work was implemented for the benefit of society, its welfare and well-being, where participation was often a "family" affair or a "kin-based" activity. Wairire (2014:94) brilliantly discusses the indigenous form of social work in the Kenyan context as follows:

> In pre-colonial times, social support mechanisms in Kenya were embedded in the sociocultural practices of different communities. Social responsibilities were clearly defined for different community members through traditional socialization. Individuals with different needs requiring social interventions were, therefore, helped at the community and individual levels. … household heads and village elders served many of the roles which modern social workers play today, particularly with regard to the enhancement of the social functioning of individuals in the society. Heads and mentors of age groups locally known as *rika* equally played significant roles that helped an individual or group to manage problems of living"

Despite the opinion attributing the coming of social work practice in Africa to simply the European arrival for colonialism; we need first and foremost to critically problematize the definition of social work and the scope of its practice regarding the African continent. Doing so will help us come to a basic understanding of what was and still is real of social work practice in Africa. Linda Kreitzer (2016) in her review of the book *Professional Social Work in East Africa: Towards Social Development, Poverty Reduction and Gender Equality*, denotes the contribution of both pre-colonial and post-colonial period by writing:

> From clan and kinship networks of pre-colonial Africa, to the introduction of colonial social welfare institutions and to the post-independence struggles to offer social support to the continent, social work is a product of these influences and much more. In fact, today, social work is coming into its own on the African continent. (Available at: https://www.ifsw.org/professional-social-work-in-east-africa/)

A close analysis of available literature, as outlined above, permits us to distinguish between various factors that seem to have been taken for granted without really committing them to critical scrutiny—such as that of social work coming to Africa only at the wake of European missionaries and/or in the advent of colonialism. However, there is less dispute over the fact that the different trends the profession has taken during the past century elucidates "the changing patterns of ideology in the practice of the profession," to invoke Bhatt and Sanyaal (2019:6).

Cohesiveness of Somali Society

The spirit of Somali social cohesiveness stays alive—albeit the testing times of war and devastation. None has expressed this culture of cohesiveness better than Somali scholar and poet, Ali Jimale Ahmed of Queens College, and the Graduate School of City University of New York. Using versification as one among the several of his media of communication, Ahmed comments on this unique kind of national cohesion as a representation—

> "… of a new mix, the splash of/ Colors, a mishmash of totems where/ The rooster mummy and the serpent mummy/ And the scorpion mummy and the skeletal crab/ Coalesce/ The convergence ushering in the era of a new totem/ With the body of a camel, the horns of a bull/ The udders of a cow, hooves of a horse, the/Mane of a lion, the beard of a goat, the gull of a fish/ And the contours of red earth embroidered/ With fresh stem from galool berde yicib yaaq beeyo/ Murcood gob qare galley misego waambe qamadi/ Sarmaan shilan foodcad masaarojabis/ Isku dume, Isu dume, Molder of nations, where are you?— (Ali Jimale Ahmed 2012:17 [a further analysis of the poem is underway in a forthcoming volume one of the authors, Mohamed Eno, is coauthoring with Prof. Danson S. Kahyana of the Department of Literature at Makerere University]).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses observation as a data collection method. Data were collected during the 2021 Social Work Annual Review Meeting held in Mogadishu from 12 December to 14 December 2021. The participants consisted of stakeholders from the Ministry of

Women & Human Rights Development (MOW&HRD) of the Federal Somalia Government, the Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs of the Regional Administration of Puntland, the Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and Family of the Administration of Somaliland, UNICEF, universities offering the 4-year Bachelor Program, higher learning institutions from different Federal Member States, Ministries of Women & Human Rights Development from Federal Member States, selected local NGOs actively engaged in child protection (CP) as well as a selected number of beneficiary students of the social work education program. Data include notes taken by one of the authors (M. Eno) during the various sessions of the 3-day meeting where speakers dissected the challenges, lessons learnt and issues on the way forward. The study invokes discursive analysis by extracting various quotations selected from the presenters' speech discussants' view points as well as relevant opinions provided by other participants.

IV. Findings and Discussion

Collaborative Response

Social work, in its formal setting as a discipline in higher education and as a profession, came to birth in Somalia under the auspices of UNICEF, the Ministry of Women and Human Development of the Federal Government of Somalia and the Swedish government. It was therefore a coordinated collaborative initiative aimed at training and producing the first cluster of academically qualified young Somali men and women. The concept was built on the provision of world class education and professional potential to the trainees in order for them to spearhead a systematic implementation of a real-world social work practice.

At the preliminary piloting stage of the program, the joint effort of the government of Sweden and UNICEF, through the Ministry of Women and Human Development of the Federal Government of Somalia, "sponsored the first batch of Somali students in the Central and South-central regions to be professionally trained in the social work discipline and as the pioneering social workers" a social work lecturer stated. Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Hargeisa politely corrected by adding: "…although the University of Hargeisa in Somaliland, in spite of being one the implementing institutions, had in earlier years established its Department of Social Work." Six higher learning institutions including "three universities in the capital Mogadishu, two in Puntland and one in Somaliland were assigned to provide the training," according to an official of the MOW&HRD of the FRS. "Consultants hired from overseas with high expertise in Social Work education designed Somalia's first social work curriculum with careful consideration of cultural and religious aspects of the Somali society," the official from the MOW&HRD of the FRS stated. Inaugurated in 2018, the program is expected to graduate the first batch with a Bachelor of Social Work Degree around mid this year (2022).

Notwithstanding the urgency and sponsorship, almost all the chosen institutions embarked on delivering the new study without specialized faculty with qualifications in the social work discipline. However, they overcame the hurdles along the way with the expertise they had gained over the years in the higher education sector and the fact that "social work education," like other inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary studies, borrows substantially from "other departments…" and fields of study—both in the social sciences and in the humanities, a participant submitted. Moreover, collegiality among the pioneering faculty, support from university administration, consultation with and monitoring by the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development as well as a "constructive evaluation" of the program progress by UNICEF, not to undermine "motivation of the young talents undergoing the training," all contributed to illuminating the dark spots at the end of the tunnel and the shimmers of success realized, according to one of the participant lecturers.

Challenges of Social Work in Somalia

Social work is at its earliest stage in Somalia, a fact which can be based on the reality that as I write this paper "…the first intake of 2018 for the Bachelor of Social Work program has not yet graduated," though very close to the exit point, as was elaborated by a MOW&HRD official Among the most crucial factors of the program is that of the orientation of the job market. From this perspective, "employability" is at the core of the profession as "after graduation the young professionals expect to climb up the ranks of professionalism," according to a female SW undergraduate. This is a tough task in several folds. First, social work is a new profession whose benefits a majority of the Somali society is not yet much aware of. Therefore, an avenue for a massive "awareness exercise needs to be implemented," a participant stated, in order to showcase the indispensability of the service of the newly graduated social workers.

Second, to embark on the fulfillment of the broader social work mission, the preliminary considerations of the actors and stakeholders must include "supporting the young graduates and acknowledging the need for their expertise and services," opined an eloquent undergraduate student representing one of the course-offering universities. The third point calibrates the issue from another perceptive—that of a steady mind. A steadily growing conscious mind is that which observes critically and functions towards the delivery of good quality service—and that of the social worker is not an exception. Because the social problems social workers confront so daringly and attempt to resolve everyday are too many and more often than not complex in their nature. Therefore, "These young professionals need a decent employment of good middle-class income level—to say the least," emphasized the Executive President of the University of Southern Somalia. The fourth factor is the assumption that with all these considerations come the undeniable benefit of increased motivation, dedication, and amelioration of the quality of service provided—thus assurance of best practices.

The preservation of the professional social worker's dignity, therefore, needs to be thought of with a high regard. Allowing the social work profession to be approached with the disdain that marred Somalia's teaching profession (Eno 2018:81) will lead to the drastic failure of the delivery of the anticipated professional service. Furthermore, it will lead to the deterioration of the best practices as well as undermine dealing effectively with the social ills social work is sanctified to fight. The unfortunate impact of such a disdainful policy and practice will result in a brain-drain whereby the trained professionals will either abandon the profession for better paying jobs available in the local market or, worse still, leave the country and contribute their expertise to another country.

Streamlining an effective social work profession and the social services it provides depend on not only the adoption of a well-designed curriculum of study but the implementation of a sound strategic plan that renders sustainability of the overall goal of the program, including retention of the social workers. In economic, academic and professional terms, to name just a few examples, retaining those who have been trained, learning from what has been achieved, and addressing emerging problems promptly stand to be factors that deserve optimal consideration. A strategic policy, stakeholders' unreserved participation coupled with collective responsibility are needed to make the program successful. Learning from the experiences gained and lessons learned are factors paramount to the sustainability of the social work project and its practice professionally. Relatively, expanding social work education to other regional/state administrations and the appropriate strategy to follow pose another challenge the sponsors have to factor in (a separate study on the inception of Social Work Education in the Southwest State of Somalia is underway).

Nurturing the Social Work Profession: Towards a Promising Prospect

Professional social work means a people with a sound knowledge base, people who are well trained both in practice and theory, people who have a well-defined code of ethics, and people with a well-defined area of social responsibility. — (Wairire, 2021).

Aside from the trials and tribulations in the delivery of social services and particularly in social work practice, the prospect of social work in Somalia is very bright. From being an unknown or a little known about profession, several states/regions in Somalia currently have the pride of producing and qualifying well trained social workers ready to take over their professional leadership in their field of specialization. This ascertains that social work, when joined by young men and women academically equipped with basic and professional knowledge, has never had a better outlook in this war-ravaged nation. However, does that really end the need for more social workers? Or, said differently, can the acquisition of a bachelor's degree be the ultimate satisfaction/goal of a professional social worker operating in an ever-growing field with increasing demands? These questions tend to prefigure the possible challenges the profession is facing that need to be focused on by the stakeholders.

The aspirants willing to select and develop a career in social work deserve more insightful consideration. A more carefully approached training will help them enjoy a better learning environment and therefore a better quality of learning and professional growth. To solidify the foundation of the profession and its best practice, though, faculty with higher learning degrees at Master and PhD levels are the suitable workforce that can maintain the quality in question here. In other words, a Bachelor of Social Work, taught mainly by specialists in non-social work subjects and/or lecturers who themselves hold only a Bachelor's Degrees from other departments, neither promises the continuity of a quality social work program, nor produces a well-cultivated professional with critical outlook of his/her profession.

That said, furthering the social worker's or social work student's experience from traditional classroom or lecture hall interactivity to that of field experience, inquiry into cases or case studies and research in general will flourish the sophistication and academic prowess of the social work practitioner. In addition to all the above, accessibility to professional conferences, seminars and workshops by senior experts in the field are necessary for continuous professional development purposes. Here, I am referring to a reflective kind of learning, one that covers "the gamut from education through to professional training," as Watts (2020:2) puts it. Hence continuing professional development (CPD), "as an *ongoing and recursive process* that takes place throughout one's professional life," is so indispensable (italics as in the original). Opportunities for participating in CPDs address the "need for practitioners to continually update skills throughout their professional lives," (Devaney 2015:2) and gives "considerable pay-off for service users," (p. 4). Continuing Professional Development, according to the frequently cited definition by Madden and Mitchell (1993: 3), enriches professional practice because it articulates:

the maintenance and enhancement of knowledge, expertise and competence of professionals throughout their careers according to a formulated plan with regards to the needs of the professional, the employer, the profession and society.

Need for a Regulatory Body

Social expectation of social workers is one of professionalism, practitioners who are humanistic, empathetic, and sympathetic; people who can operate under extremely stressful and critically difficult situations. Therefore, social workers' encounter and interaction with vulnerable clients in need of multifarious approaches to treatment and wellbeing demands not just knowledge per se but a professional experience beyond training. More than anything else, it requires responsibility which comes with a sense of accountability to the clients and to the social work profession they belong to and are part of.

However, social work education and the social work profession are a new arrival to the Somali society. Unlike professionals and practitioners in the legal or medical occupations, which are among the earliest established trades in the country, social work education is just making its debut and growing into its 4th year as a degree offering program of study. This new endeavor or rather 'birth' makes social work the youngest profession to join the Somali job market soon as the students trained under the first 4-year academic program are expected to graduate in a few months' time (mid 2022).

To a great deal, therefore, the upcoming social work professionals and practitioners are expected to gain respect, recognition of their service and place in society, and the dignity they duly deserve. Therefore, like other professionals, social workers are expected to follow ethical principles that make them accountable for any professional misconduct, breach of ethics or confidentiality between them and their clients. But a caveat needs to be put in order here: that of the absence of a professional body, an association to oversee the Somali social worker's performance, attitude toward his/her clients, peers, profession and the society. An undesirable performance in a *laissez-faire* kind of practice runs a considerable risk of damaging the reputation and decorousness of the young profession, thus leading to loss of trust and therefore of credibility.

In order to establish and maintain credibility of the profession and society's good faith in it, an all-inclusive, legitimately created organization or association that provides oversight, designs ethical standards, and pursues compliance by its members is required as a necessary step. Through this approach, compliance and quality assurance measures for the social work professional will usher in adherence to ethics with a sense of accountability. To achieve the goal, related knowledge-base as well as expertise to move forward can be gained from already existing schools and professional bodies in the East Africa Region, institutions that have pioneered best practice in social work and have gained a considerable stretch of success over the years. The establishment of such an oversight body is also necessitated by the rationale that when all the ideals related to the social work profession are in one way or the other achieved, it remains the sole responsibility of the social workers to be steadfast in asserting their professional etiquette, values, ethics, and best practices. Without an oversight institution, the professional fabric will be like loosely-knit threads unable to hold together.

V. CONCLUSION

The inception of the social work education in Somalia aims to address the need for trained professionals who can deliver the required social work services. Expected to improve social services in child protection, gender abuse, counseling, poverty alleviation, and mental illness to access to social justice, the practice of social workers has never been more demanding. However, all the input made to the project may not yield fruits if the professional social workers cannot access decent jobs relevant to their training and practice. Likewise, the young social work professionals will not experience professional growth in an environment where either higher degree studies or continuous professional development programs are inaccessible and may therefore create early fossilization of the social worker, demotivation and migration from the profession and/or practice. For the profession to remain fostering and attractive, stakeholders can capitalize on the good initiatives taken so far and work on establishing a professional body that guides and oversees the professional performance of the social workers as well as caters for their concerns.

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