Challenges and Realities of the New Social Work Professionals

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the challenges and realities faced by new social work professionals in the province of Guayas, from the perspective of future social workers. To this end, a quantitative research study with a descriptive design was proposed. The results of the study indicate that social work is a profession that presents important challenges, including a lack of knowledge about its functions. Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, the field of social work is expansive and can be managed and transformed in a manner that is beneficial to professionals, thereby expanding their job opportunities and improving the assignment of their functions to those that they should really perform and not those that are currently assigned to them due to a lack of knowledge. To this end, the need for a comprehensive training program that is adjusted to the reality and current needs of the profession, as well as for continuous training, is highlighted. Furthermore, the importance of generic and specific competencies that are constantly evolving and of a strong vocation of service is underscored.

Keywords: *Social Work; Skills; Functions; Role; Trends; Professionalization*

INTRODUCTION

The profession of social work is defined by the functions it performs within the social order, which is shaped by the specific conditions and events of the environment. This allows it to be recognized according to the needs and characteristics present in each period and territorial circumstance. Consequently, it is evident that social work is a social construct, given that its evolution is contingent upon the context. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the role of normative, training, and research factors in the practical consolidation of social work. (1).

Consequently, the competencies of social work are associated with and understood through interactions with individuals, their families, groups, organizations, and communities. These interactions are undertaken with the purpose of creating transformations, promoting development, and achieving a better living condition. The focus of social work is on the development and preservation of relationships, cooperative work with different audiences for crisis prevention and coping with problematic situations, and the prevention of relationships from ending inappropriately. Additionally, social work intervenes in decision-making based on arguments of value (2).

In response to the aforementioned considerations, higher educational institutions ensure that their training programs in the field are aligned to provide skills, abilities, and knowledge in accordance with social reality. This entails the training of competent professionals, as well as social workers capable of contributing to development through the production of new knowledge and innovations. In light of the above, it has been proposed that educational plans should incorporate content capable of responding to current social problems, in addition to environments for practice and research in the field, which should also consider social work in the rural and indigenous context, contemplate strategic approaches regarding supervision and placement in the workplace, and in general provide comprehensive training that corresponds to the field and industry (3).

In Ecuador, social work professionals are required to operate within an environment characterized by contradictions and conflicts. Consequently, they are perceived as an active manager who intervenes in social reality with the aim of promoting and defending labor rights, social and political rights of the people, groups

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and in general of the societies with which it interacts. Muñoz (5) asserts that social work professionals have confronted various challenges, both within the academic and non-academic realms. Consequently, they have been able to adapt their actions to the ever-changing landscape of a globalized society, a complex Latin American context, and a local reality in Ecuador.

In this context, the necessity for new professionals to develop generic and specific skills to effectively address the challenges and realities of social work has been emphasized. Consequently, generic or essential competencies are defined as those that signify the knowledge, skills, and fundamental attitude necessary for every individual to achieve fulfillment in their life as an active member of society. These intrinsic elements are essential for the successful completion of subsequent learning. Specific competencies are considered to be knowledge and techniques that correspond to a professional context. They are acquired through training systems and are strengthened with the exercise and professional practice (6).

The professional practice of a social worker, from an intervention perspective, is currently required to address a range of complex issues, including social exclusion, social inequalities and injustices, labor problems, human rights violations, domestic violence, gender-based violence, and circumstances associated with vulnerable populations (such as drug addiction, alcoholism, rape, and mental health problems). In reference to this topic, Tocol & Levicoy (7) state that the scenarios where the social worker intervenes are generally provided by public and private sector entities. However, new contexts of action have arisen due to the diversity of problems. Therefore, NGOs and even foundations and associations that are not for profit also participate, which is a guarantee in the mediation of knowledge through new practices that allow the solution of conflicts, which in many cases cannot be addressed by the governmental sector itself.

In this way, the social worker has the opportunity to relate the knowledge he has obtained in his academic training to contexts that allow him to reflect on the successes and errors of the education received. This enables him to identify and address the needs of segments of the population with great demands through social intervention. This arises in the identification of actions carried out as actors of change in environments characterized by trends traced by the entities. In this way, the social worker can be recognized as an agent of transformation within the community and is able to understand its relationship with the context from a critical perspective, corresponding to the development of knowledge with the professional demand and labor needs.

Given the above, the objective of this research is to identify the challenges and realities faced by new social work professionals in the province of Guayas. To achieve this, the following specific objectives have been outlined: to evaluate the perception of new social work professionals on the current working conditions in the field; to identify the skills and aptitudes that new social work professionals consider necessary for professional performance; and to describe the perceived perspective on the future of social work for new professionals in the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Microenterprises play a pivotal role in fostering economic growth, particularly in developing countries (8) posits that an examination of the critical entrepreneurial abilities related to entrepreneurial aptitudes, such as saving literacy, entrepreneurial acumen, competitiveness, and the recognition of microenterprise benefits, is essential for ensuring the sustainability of the company. It is of paramount importance to comprehend the factors that affect micro-entrepreneurs' capacity to repay debt, as this understanding is instrumental in promoting their financial sustainability and overall business success. This study examines the potential impact of saving literacy and knowledge transfer on microenterprises' capacity to fulfill their loan obligations.

A robust foundation in saving literacy can markedly enhance micro-entrepreneurs' capacity to manage debts effectively. By being aware of savings mechanisms and planning for future financial needs, entrepreneurs are better equipped to allocate resources efficiently towards debt repayment and business expenses. Research conducted by (9) indicates that increased savings through proper budgeting positively influences debt servicing rates among low-income households. This finding can be extended to microenterprise owners.

The term "knowledge transfer" is used to describe educational interventions that aim to equip individuals with the relevant skills necessary for managing finances efficiently within an entrepreneurial context. The

implementation of training programs that concentrate on budgeting techniques, cash flow management methods, risk assessment strategies, or even accounting principles provides invaluable insights into effective debt repayment practices (10). The transfer of such knowledge to micro-entrepreneurs has been found to be beneficial in reducing default rates and encouraging responsible borrowing behavior throughout their entrepreneurial careers.

The combination of an extremely low level of personal savings and high levels of personal debt among individuals gives rise to concerns, given that personal savings represent the primary source of finance for entrepreneurs seeking to launch and expand their businesses. The accumulation of savings and the management of personal debt are two crucial elements in the process of achieving effective personal financial management. The accumulation of savings plays an instrumental role in fostering investment and accelerating economic growth (11).

It is of paramount importance to ascertain whether financial education affects saving literacy and to identify the most effective educational programs. The empirical evidence regarding the impact of financial education and information provided on saving literacy is conflicting (Lusardi, 2004). Moreover, even when studies indicate a notable benefit of financial education on savings, the underlying mechanisms driving this effect remain poorly understood (12).

METHODOLOGY

The research is developed under a descriptive design with a quantitative approach in that the characterization of the reality of social workers is proposed to identify their challenges and realities, therefore, in coherence with what was stated by Hurtado (8), it is sought, through questions, the definition, classification and categorization of the object of interest.

Instrument

A questionnaire has been designed which consists of 10 closed multiple choice questions with a single answer, which were posed according to the objectives of the research. To validate the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used, which registered a value of 0.828, a result that denotes its internal consistency.

Population and sample

The sample was selected considering the convenience criterion, that is, a non-probabilistic and non-random sampling, due to the conditions for collecting information and the time available for said process. The participants in the research process were students of the last two levels of social work, graduates, recent graduates and graduates during the last year in the field of social work, residents in the province of Guayas who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. To this end, they were informed of the purposes of the research and were informed of the confidentiality of personal data, as well as the use of the records solely for academic-scientific purposes, so they were not obliged or conditioned in any way to provide information. , demonstrating the non-existence of conflicts of interest.

Thus, we proceeded to work with 250 informants, including men and women, during the months of June and July 2023, with 132 from a public institution and 118 from a private entity, who were contacted directly in the educational entities where it is taught. the social work career in the province of Guayas.

Analysis of data

The results were processed in a SPSS Statistics 22 database. It is necessary to mention that non-parametric statistics were used because we are working with a sample that does not have a condition of normality. The Pearson Chi-Square test was also used as a correlation measure, which allows establishing the existence of a difference between categorical variables in the same population group (9). The significance value of the study corresponds to $p < .05$.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The assessment of new social work professionals regarding current employment conditions reveals significant challenges in obtaining a job position and limitations for the exercise of the professional role. Correa and other researchers (10) reflect on this topic, indicating that social work in the workplace is confronted with two realities. The first is situated within the particularities of the profession itself, while the second pertains to a relative construction of the first point. This lack of value in the work context is further compounded by the fact that it remains, rather than being eliminated, as a delimitation imputed at the institutional level.

In the labor market, there is a greater demand for professionals with skills than for those with knowledge. Consequently, there is a lack of demand for specialized social work professionals. While this may seem exaggerated, it is based on the fact that other careers in the social sciences are expanding, which is undermining the profession. In light of these developments, social workers must navigate a complex reality in which the boundaries between social professions are increasingly blurred. This has led to a situation in which they must compete with other professionals who are more worker-oriented than specialists or technicians (11).

This line of analysis indicates that social work constitutes an active component for decision-making and for addressing the requirements and needs that arise in the environment. Consequently, the significance of social work within institutions hinges upon the acknowledgment of the requisite attention for collaborators, as this action facilitates a connection with optimal management processes, pertaining to the care of users, in addition to the services they demand in diverse circumstances. Consequently, it is of paramount importance that social work is integrated with other professional disciplines within the organization, and that its capabilities are recognized as a means of serving the organization and society as a whole. This discipline can be incorporated into interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary environments due to the critical and objective capacity of the social worker. In light of the aforementioned considerations, it is imperative to remove the constraints on the performance of social work professionals, particularly those related to a lack of awareness of their roles and responsibilities.

In a similar vein, Campos and other researchers (13) posit that the role of the social worker, from the 1980s to the present, has been to propose academic frameworks at various universities, thereby facilitating a profound understanding of the profession. Consequently, topics pertaining to social management and strategic planning have been incorporated into the curriculum, resulting in significant shifts in the roles of social workers while concurrently addressing the challenges facing the social, territorial, political, economic, and cultural sectors in which the profession is already embedded.

In light of the aforementioned circumstances, it is imperative that higher education institutions align their academic curricula with the prevailing social realities and their attendant challenges. This entails fostering a culture of continuous reflection through experiential learning and the generation of new knowledge, as well as the development of effective intervention strategies. This entails the creative enhancement of the specific and generic skills of new social work professionals.

In this context, it is important to note that in work environments, it is essential that social workers possess a range of additional skills. These include the ability to apply and explain certain knowledge in multidisciplinary environments, the capacity to express judgments, opinions, criticisms, and arguments, assertive communication with technical and non-technical audiences, the ability to validate and recontextualize research, the consolidation of oral and written texts based on a systematic review, and others. It is not uncommon for such skills to be undervalued. However, due to the actions of the social worker, it is necessary that they be able to perform adequately and not only possess basic general skills.

Furthermore, Ramón and other researchers (14) have demonstrated that the social worker currently requires a profound humanitarian vocation and is oriented towards a social transformation based on the change of the individual as a leading actor in his or her individual development and in society. Consequently, social work necessitates that the professional be proactive, with the capacity to mediate and argue about their actions in a responsible and ethical manner.

Reyes (15) posits that social work is no longer regarded as a neutral profession in the face of reality and the social problems it addresses. Instead, it is oriented towards participatory political action with regard to the

organization of power relations, the form of distribution, and the development of environments for social participation. This is with a view to guaranteeing that vulnerable or popular sectors are included in decision-making and the definitions of collective social projects that concern them. In this regard, the functions that a social worker must perform today are in response to emerging problems, which has resulted in a diverse range of actions. However, all these actions must be based on knowledge and professional intervention with the objective of overcoming social exclusion and the conditions that limit individuals from achieving a quality of life. This is to be achieved through the active participation of the subjects themselves.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

Below are the results of the research developed with future social work professionals in the province of Guayas in accordance with the established objectives.

Perception of current employment conditions in social work

Table 1. Difficulty getting a job

Scale	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	13	5.2%
Somewhat disagree	33	13.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	45	18.0%
Somewhat agree	65	26.0%
Strongly agree	94	37.6%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

Table 1 shows the results corresponding to the question of whether they considered it would be difficult to get a job in their area. In this regard, the informants indicated that 37.6% agreed, 26.0% somewhat agreed, 18.0% remained neutral, while 13.2% considered they somewhat disagree and 5.2% strongly disagree. And many of the participants in the research consider that the situation in the country is complicated to get a job but they also explain that their branch of work is not well understood.

Table 2. Limitations in work performance

Scale	Frequency	%
Mobilization problems	13	5.2%
Inadequate relationship with collaborators	23	9.2%
Lack of schedule coordination	38	15.2%
Lack of financial resources	45	18.0%
Lack of support from senior management	60	24.0%
Lack of knowledge of functions	71	28.4%

Total	**250**	**100.0%**

The perceived limitations in the performance of the social worker were also identified, the most relevant being the lack of knowledge of the functions of the social worker as mentioned by 28.4% of informants, while 24.0% explained that there is a lack of support from of senior management in organizations for the development of their work and projects, in addition to 18.0% explaining that investment is required in the area, so sometimes this can be a limitation as there are not enough economic resources for management (Table 2).

The lack of coordination in schedules is also recognized by 15.2%, referring to this as a planning problem of the organizations or their policies that prevent them from carrying out work in the field, for example. While 9.2% mention the poor relationship with collaborators, especially in large companies where there are a large number of employees, so it is not possible to serve everyone, generating discomfort among them; and 5.2% explain conflicts with mobilization, especially when long trips must be made or cross the city due to visits or field operations that are necessary, this considering that the country is in a security crisis and that, in addition, many Companies do not usually recognize all the categories related to mobility (Table 2).

Table 3. Role of the social worker in the company

Scale	Frequency	%
Counselor	20	8.0%
Promoter	33	13.2%
Adviser	45	18.0%
Planner	63	25.2%
Mediator	89	35.6%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

In reference to the role of social worker in organizations (Table 3), informants in 35.6% of cases perceive that they are assigned as mediators either between the entity and the collaborators, or between the worker and the family, the company and the community, to mention some examples, this with the purpose of reaching agreements in the event of conflicts or to prevent them. On the other hand, 25.2% explain the role of planner, understood as diagnostic management in the social field to identify the reality of an environment for the approach of a project so that the objectives set are adjusted to this situation.

On the other hand, 18.0% indicate counseling as the role of the social worker, thus ensuring the guarantee of human rights and the promotion of social inclusion based on the fact that all individuals have the same opportunities and rights. In addition, 13.2% explain the function of promoter, which is responsible for enhancing capacities and consensus decisions between users and groups, adding to this the design and implementation of social policies, while 8.0% refer to themselves as a counselor who is responsible for the creation and development of programs to support the individual's incorporation into the workforce and advice, involving explanation, education, persuasion, and recommendation to manage situations and even emotions (Table 3).

Table 4. Responsibilities of the social worker in the company

Scale	Frequency	%
Create important changes for the worker and the company.	40	16.0%
Accompany and provide support to the worker and company in labor and social aspects.	43	17.2%
Respect and enforce the rights and duties of the worker.	55	22.0%
Ensure the physical, social and psychological well-being of the worker and family environment.	112	44.8%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

When analyzing the responsibilities of the social worker in the company, it is recorded that 44.8% consider that they are aimed at ensuring the physical, social and psychological well-being of employees and their family environment. 22.0%, on the other hand, explain the respect and fulfillment of rights and duties, meaning that the role of mediator and advisor is evident here; 17.2% consider the accompaniment and support of the collaborator and the organization in labor and social issues with the intention of solving them or reaching agreements before conflicts, and 16% point out the management of change for both the worker and the company, this has to do with the approach of proposals and alternatives for the maintenance of harmonious and beneficial relations for the parties (Table 4).

- **Skills and aptitudes necessary for the professional performance of the social worker**

Table 5. Social Worker Skills

Scale	Frequency	%
Intervention with cases and families	16	6.4%
Management and administration	18	7.2%
Leadership/teamwork	23	9.2%
Relationships	25	10.0%
Mediation and negotiation	30	12.0%
Research and social diagnosis	30	12.0%
Management of information and communication technology	30	12.0%
Project design and planning	35	14.0%
Communication	43	17.2%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

When investigating the skills that the social worker must possess, 17.2% allude to communication, 14.0% to project design and planning, 12.0% ICT management, 12.0% research and social diagnosis, 12.0% mediation

and negotiation, 10.0% relationships interpersonal, 9.2% leadership and teamwork, 7.2% management and administration and 6.4% intervention with cases and families (see table 5).

Table 6. Social worker skills

Scale	Frequency	%
Autonomy	25	10.0%
Ethics and professionalism	25	10.0%
Responsibility	33	13.2%
Empathy	44	17.6%
Service vocation	55	22.0%
Proactivity	68	27.2%
Total	**250**	**100%**

Regarding the skills of the social worker, it is evident that the informants perceive the need for proactivity in 27.2%, vocation for service 22.0%, empathy 17.6%, responsibility 13.2%, ethics and professionalism 10.0% and autonomy 10.0% (see table 6).

- **Perspective of the future of social work for new professionals in the field**

Table 7. Functions of the social worker

Scale	Frequency	%
Research function	11	4.4%
Management function	15	6.0%
Evaluation function	18	7.2%
Monitoring function	20	8.0%
Mediation function	23	9.2%
Social promotion function	25	10.0%
Teaching function	30	12.0%
Planning function	30	12.0%
Direct attention function	35	14.0%
Preventive function	43	17.2%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

Regarding the functions of the social worker, 17.2% assume that they should be preventive, 14.0% direct attention, 12.0% planning, 12.0% as an educator, 10.0% social promotion, 9.2% mediation, 8.0% supervision, 7.2% evaluation, 6.0% managerial type and 4.4% research (Table 7).

Table 8. Intervention programs in social work

Scale	Frequency	%
Family integration	19	7.6%
Community mediation	28	11.2%
Training	30	12.0%
Social marketing	33	13.2%
Psychosocial risks	40	16.0%
Prevention in occupational health	50	20.0%
Advice on social welfare policies	50	20.0%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

On the other hand, they were consulted regarding the intervention programs that are generally developed in the area of social work, with frequent advice in the formulation of social welfare policies according to 20.0%, likewise 20.0% refer to the prevention in occupational health, 16.0% indicates psychosocial risks, these three aspects being those that are increasingly required in companies as part of their regulation and legalization. Social marketing interventions are also currently being considered with increasing frequency, so programs are articulated with the specific area for this, however this depends on the type of company according to 13.2% of informants. 12.0% indicate training, 11.2% refer to community mediation and 7.6% to family integration (Table 8).

Table 9. Social work trends

Scale	Frequency	%
Performance management	22	8.8%
Workforce capacity	28	11.2%
Reinvent human resources	45	18.0%
Learning and development	45	18.0%
Leadership	50	20.0%
Culture and commitment	60	24.0%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

When evaluating the trends in social work (Table 9), the informants consider that professional practice is oriented towards culture and commitment according to 24.0%, leadership 20.0%, learning and development 18.0%, reinvention of human resources 18.0% , strengthening the capacity of the workforce 11.2% and focusing on performance management 8.8%.

Table 10. Work sector for the professional

Scale	Frequency	%
Legal	21	8.4%
Health	33	13.2%
Education	43	17.2%
Business	43	17.2%
Social	50	20.0%
Public	60	24.0%
Total	**250**	**100.0%**

Table 10 show that 24.0% consider that the sector where the social worker has the most job opportunities is in the public, 20.0% indicate in the social field which implies institutions with this focus, generally non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 17.2% mention the business sector, referred to as the private sector, 17.2% believe that in the educational context there are job possibilities, 13.2% in the health field and 8.4% consider that the legal field.

Correlations between variables

The Pearson Chi Square test was performed to identify the existence of correlation between the type of educational institution variable and the study items. The results are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Correlation according to the type of educational entity

Item	Indicator	Result
Difficulty getting a job	.376	There is no relationship
Limitations in work performance	.001	Significant relationship
Role of the social worker	.002	Significant relationship
Social Worker Responsibilities	.011	Significant relationship
Skills	.235	There is no relationship
Aptitudes	.129	There is no relationship
Features	.010	Significant relationship
Intervention programs	.355	There is no relationship
Social work trends	.001	Significant relationship
Work sector for the professional	.001	Significant relationship

A significant relationship has been identified between the variable type of educational entity and limitations in work performance, role of the social worker, responsibilities of the social worker, functions of the social worker, trends in social work and sector of work for the professional. No significant relationships are found between educational entity and difficulty in obtaining employment, skills, aptitudes and intervention programs.

CONCLUSION

Considering the analysis, it can be concluded that it is of paramount importance for both future and current professionals to develop, hone, and continually update their generic and specific skills in order to remain relevant and effective in a rapidly evolving environment. The challenge for the social worker, whether a novice or an experienced professional, is to remain at the forefront of social reality, its evolution, needs, and problems, as well as forms of care. This requires new knowledge, the use of technologies, adaptation to environments, innovation, creativity, empathy, and a strong capacity for managing change and social transformations. However, this also demands a strong commitment to service.

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