

## **Social Work Education in the Arab Countries**

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Social work is yet to be recognised as a discipline independent of Sociology. In order to develop as an independent discipline in its own right, social work educators need to come together and examine the need to set standards for social work education and practice appropriate to their cultural contexts. This article attempts to review historical emergence of undergraduate, graduate and post graduate level social work education in Arabic countries.

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The Western model of health care services, which has evolved rapidly in Saudi Arabia, incorporates multi-disciplinary professional teams. Social work practice forms part of the patient care team (Yalli, 2008). Social workers work with clients suffering from various emotional, spiritual and mental disorders that may require professional intervention.

In the Arab world, a trained social worker has to develop a treatment programme keeping in mind the situational environment of the client. Social workers need to be knowledgeable about their target populations and be holistic in their co-operative engagement with the client, client's family, other related agencies and hospital departments. Furthermore, social workers require refined interpersonal communication skills to interact with male and/or female clients requiring their support. Cultural sensitivity is also required given that religion plays a major role in the lives of people in the Arab states. For example, in view of the fact that alcohol consumption is religiously and socially illegal in Saudi society, it is most likely that there could be a social stigma attached to becoming

official university in Lebanon that has adopted the French system of higher education. Social work education at this University exists in two colleges: a) the College of Health which focuses on medical social work requiring theoretical courses in social and health fields, applied research and field placement throughout the four years of study leading to a BA degree in Social Work; and b) the College of Social Sciences which offers a three year undergraduate level social work programme without field placement. However, those who want to continue their higher education can study one more year *maitrise* to gain mastery or expertise which allows them to pursue postgraduate level MA and PhD degrees in social work. The second institution is Saint Joseph's University which is a private university following the French system of higher education. This university offers four different degrees in social work—(1) bachelors degree after six semesters of study, (2) *maitrise* after two semesters of study, (3) postgraduate diploma after two semesters of study, and (4) masters degree after two semesters of study. The third institution is the Lebanese American University which is a private and independent university following the American system of higher education. This university offers only BA programmes in social work.

In Libya, education for social work was started in 1964 at the first intermediate institute for boys in Benghazi and in 1967 for girls in Tripoli. The programme at both the Institutes require four years of study. More intermediate institutes in social work mushroomed throughout the country, but all of them closed by 1988.

In 1989, the Professional Secondary School of Social Work was established to offer a certificate in social work at the intermediate educational level. This school also closed shortly after opening a BA in social work had begun at the Libyan University in 1970, but it closed in 1989. Two new social work institutes, one in Tripoli and the other in Benghazi, re-opened. The BA programme in social work in these two academic institutes took three years of study. The institutes offered postgraduate diplomas in social work in three majors: (a) social welfare, (b) community organisation and development, and (c) insurance affairs. While the Benghazi institute is still open, the Tripoli institute closed in 1989 and reopened as the High Institute of Applied Social Sciences to become the College of Applied Social Sciences in 1991. Before the college was closed in 1996, it was offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social work. In 1997, a Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Arts in Alfateh University in Tripoli was

an alcoholic. Given the strong negative repercussions of this social stigma, some individuals may avoid seeking medical intervention or treatment. Social workers in the treatment process should develop ways to provide more privacy for patients and their families. In this context, group therapy would be culturally inappropriate in Saudi society as people are uncomfortable discussing their personal problems in the company of others. Therefore, more individualised treatment is a more acceptable line of treatment. All medical stakeholders need to be engaged to maximise the efficacy of the intervention.

Another facet of the role of the social worker relates to prevention strategies and management. Social workers are required to engage in a dialogue with other professionals to be able to organise marriage guidance workshops. In other words, social workers are expected to take the initiative to assist and encourage the participation of other stakeholders in the medical institution. Social workers, as part of their professional duties, may find that they could be engaged in community out-reach programmes beyond the confines of the hospital setting. The College of Social Sciences programme at the Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) includes courses on casework, group work, community organisation, administration and research in social work. Also, there are courses in core fields such as delinquency and crime, medical social work, school social work, family and child welfare, and social work with the disabled members of society (DSW, 2010).

Interestingly, female social workers comprise close to half of the registered social workers in Saudi Arabia. After education and health, the discipline of social work is considered to be one of the most popular career options for women in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, as is the case in the health field, social work allows women social workers to work with both male and female clients.

Given the above overview, this paper will endeavour to articulate the fact that there is recognition that social work practice requires a specially designed education programme cognisant of the cultural aspects of a large predominantly state-run government welfare service delivery system. Arab universities are now aware that the content and pedagogy of their courses must align with the tenets of Islam.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Having taken a glimpse of the current position of social work practice, it is important to trace the origins and history of the development of formal social work education in Arab countries. Egypt was the first country to

recognise the need for social work education in the 1930s. Initially, social work education followed the social settlement model by supporting the poor in the community. It has been alluded that this impetus came from women belonging to the royal family who saw the need for well trained social workers, and the king approved the initiative to establish a social work education centre.

Social work education focused on utilising existing models of case work to work with individuals and families experiencing difficulties due to poverty, illiteracy and other social problems. The mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed a move towards nationalisation with a changed perspective to social and economic development. The second half of the century saw the influence of socialist ideologies on most of the Arab governments in their commitment to meet fundamental needs of their societies with regard to health care, education, housing, and employment. As reflected in detail later in this paper, a move from a socialist model to a free market economy in the 1970's meant that some educational training institutions were closed due to funding issues as allocations were diverted to public housing and employment projects. With a decline in the number of social workers and an expansion in globalisation and technology, it has taken time to reassess old curricula and introduce new programmes to meet the human power needs for well trained social work undergraduates (Midgley, 1990).

As such, the curriculum for social work education programmes were derived largely from foreign models, particularly from the United States and England. The Western curricula were adopted with little to no change to accommodate the cultural and ethnic environments of Middle East clients (Ragab, 1995). By the early 1980's, key incompatibilities surfaced when there was a realisation that the social work models of social work curricula and pedagogy were not founded in Islamic origins. Martin Marty (1980) pointed out that social workers needed to incorporate the 'religious' or 'spiritual' aspects into their theoretical models of social work education and practice as their clients were religious, and living in a society that values spirituality.

### **Country by Country Perspective**

The beginning of social work education in the Arab world was first seen in Egypt in the 1930's. (This programme then spread to other Arab countries in the ensuing years). The Ministry of Higher Education in Egypt established a four year social work programme in two colleges in Alexandria in 1936 and Cairo in 1937. The first batch of students of

these two colleges graduated in the academic year 1939–1940 (Albrithen, 2008; Albrithen, 2010). In 1946, the Egyptian government recognised the Diploma of Social Work of the two aforementioned colleges, now named The Higher Institute of Social Work. In the same year the government founded The Higher Institute of Social Work, which later became the Faculty of Social Work at Helwan University.

At present, there are social work colleges at four national universities: Helwan, Fayoum, South Valley, and Assiut conferring degrees at the bachelor's level (Albrithen, 2008; Albrithen, 2010). About six institutes award a Graduate Diploma of Social Work and about thirteen award Postgraduate Diplomas in Social Work.

The curricula in the 1940s were exact copies of the social work curricula in the United States of America. The courses taught comprised social work, social welfare, social work methods—social casework, social group work, community organisation, field placement, and auxiliary sciences. To name a few, some of the textbooks used were those by Fink, Stroup, Siporin and Richmond (Abdullatif and others, 1993). These courses were taught by Egyptians with American M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in social work. Social work curricula have undergone several changes since the 1950s, but the substance of the syllabi have remained more or less unchanged.

The Higher Council for Social Reform in Egypt was established in 1936, and the Ministry of Social Affairs was established in 1939. The task of the ministry was to oversee all social work educational institutions and organisations delivering social welfare services. Additionally, social work was incorporated in the fields of medicine, education, labour, prisons, family and child welfare, as well as in youth welfare after the 1950s. Social work practice expanded only after 1950.

In Sudan, social work education at the BA level began at the Omdurman Islamic University (OIU) in 1967. In 1968, a post-secondary diploma and a post-graduate diploma were created at the University of Khartoum. In the early 90s, MA and PhD programmes in social work began at the OIU. In the academic year 2005–2006, the Al-Neelain University started a new major in the Department of Social Studies and awarded a BA in social work.

In Jordan, social work education started with the establishment of the Institute of Social Work in 1965. The Institute, which awarded a diploma in social work, had been affiliated with the Ministry of Social Development until 1998 when it became part of Princess Rahma College at Al-Balqa Applied University in Al-Salt region. In 1998,

the University of Jordan offered an MA programme, and in 2007 a BA programme was introduced by the Department of Social Work. The Master's programme, which is a non-thesis programme, provides advanced training in the study of community work and the empowerment of civil society. Currently, there are two more BA programmes, one being offered by Al-Balqa Applied University, which was initiated in 2000, and the other one being administered by Yarmouk University, since 2007.

In Palestine, social work education began in 1978 at Annajah National University. The BA students have to complete 137 credit hours. These include compulsory and elective courses as well as 'free' courses offered by the university college and departments. The Department of Social Work at Al-Quds University also awards a BA in social work. The programme totals 148 credit hours. There is another combined BA degree titled 'Sociology and Social Work' at Al-Azhar University in Gaza. This double major programme requires a student to complete 150 credit hours. In addition to these three BA programmes in Palestine, there is a fourth social work programme run by the Department of Social Sciences at the Bethlehem University. In this programme, a BA student needs to earn a total of 122 credits.

In Iraq, social work education was introduced at the Queen Aliah College (later named Girls' College) in 1950 with the help of the United Nations Organization. At the College of Arts in Mosul University, a Department of Social Work was opened in 1985–1986. The programme had a stilted start which then necessitated a change in the curriculum. Accordingly, the Department name was changed to the Department of Sociology in the academic year of 1995–1996. Postgraduate programmes were conducted by the Department for eight years, to be suspended in 2004–2005 due to understaffing.

In Syria, social work education began at the Damascus Institute of Social Work in the 1960s. However, the Institute was later closed to be reopened once again in 1981 under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs. It was developed to supply professional social workers to social sector programmes of the government. The study at the Institute takes two full years divided equally between theory in the first year, and practice in the second year. The students in the programme are awarded an intermediate Diploma in Social Work.

In Lebanon, there are three institutions that offer social work education. The first institution is the Lebanese University, which is the

established. The Department offers BA, MA, and PhD programmes in social work. This university houses the only advanced Department of Social Work in the country.

In Tunisia, social work education started in 1964 at the National School of Social Work. In 1965, some Tunisian institutions that dealt with youth and social affairs further established programmes in social work and education in collaboration with the UNICEF. These programmes did not exist for a long time because they aimed to produce limited number of professional social workers who were to fill a certain number of positions across the country. Since 1974, the National School became the National Institute of Labour and Social Studies; it belongs to both the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Social Affairs Solidarity and Tunisians Abroad. At present, it is the only institution that offers social work degrees in Tunisia—(a) License in Social Work after three years of study, and (b) Masters of Social Work after two years of study.

Compared with other Arab states, social work education in Yemen started in 2001 as a joint programme of the UNICEF, the University of Adan, and the Helwan University. A BA programme in social work was established in the College of Arts in the University of Adan. The agreement stipulated that the Helwan University would be responsible for curriculum, syllabus, and staffing. The programme comprises theoretical courses, applied research, and practicum totalling 136 credit hours. In 2003, a similar agreement was signed by the UNICEF, the Sana'a University, and the Helwan University. The agreement called upon the Sociology Department of the University of Sana'a to start a new one year programme in social work. The UNICEF however, wanted an independent Department of Social Work to be established in the College of Arts at the Sana'a University to offer a BA in social work in 2007. The issue is in the process of being sorted out.

Social work education began in Saudi Arabia in 1962, when a Secondary Institute of Social Work was established for holders of intermediate school certificates. The Secondary Institute provided the students with courses in general social work, exposure to the three major methods of practice, and practice at the Center for Social Development in Addiriyah, an institute that was established in 1960. Ever since, eight batches of students, totalling 189 practitioners have graduated from this institute (Albrithen, 2010; Albrithen, 2008).

Currently in Saudi Arabia, there are BA programmes in social work offered by five universities. The first and the oldest programme is offered

by the Department of Social Studies, College of Arts at the King Saud University. The Department offers both sociology and social work majors. A student can choose his/her major after passing the second year. Social work students are required to take 127 credit hours that include theoretical courses and field placement. The second programme is administered by the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the College of Social Sciences, Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. To finish this programme, a student has to pass 169 credit hours that include theoretical courses, applied research, and field placement. The third programme is offered by the Department of Social Work at the College of Social Sciences, Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah which is the only department precisely named 'Social Work Department'. The programme offered by the Department requires 132 credit hours that include theoretical courses, applied research, and field placement. The fourth social work programme is exclusively for girls and is run by the College of Social Work, Princess Nora Bent Abdul Rahman University. The credit hours in this programme totals 128 hours. The newest 'BA' programme established just recently in 2009 as part of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, operates out of the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. This programme requires passing 124 credit hours that include theoretical courses, applied research, and field placement during the fourth year.

Postgraduate studies in social work began as a section of the Department of Social Studies at the King Saud University in Riyadh in 1978 (Albrithen, 2010; Albrithen, 2008). Currently, Saudi Arabia offers three MA and two PhD programmes in social work. All of them have structures and designs similar to those offered in the United States. The Department of Social Studies at the King Saud University teaches two programmes leading to MA and PhD degrees. The College of Social Work at the Princess Nora Bent Abdul Rahman University also offers two programmes leading to MA and PhD degrees. The Department of Sociology and Social Work at the Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University offers one MA programme.

In the State of Qatar, social work education began at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in 1977. There is only one BA programme in social work administered by the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University.

In the United Arab Emirates, social work education began with a BA programme in the Department of Sociology of the Emirates University in



the city of Al Ain in 1978. The programme totals 132 credit hours. Students take core courses and electives. These include introduction to social work, preventive social work, human behaviour and social environment, medical social work, as well as other courses.

In Kuwait, social work education began at the Faculty of Arts, Kuwait University in 1980. The College of Social Sciences established in 1998 hosts the Department of Sociology and Social Work that offers BA programmes in social work.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, social work education was established in 1995 as a section of the general studies of the University of Bahrain. The University awarded two year diploma in social work totalling 69 hours. In 1997, the programme was upgraded to the level of BA in social work with 105 credit hours.

Social work education in the Sultanate of Oman started in 2000 at the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the Sultan Qaboos University. The Department awards two degrees in social work—a BA degree after the student completes 127 credit hours and an MA degree that requires a student to finish 24 credit hours plus a thesis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Starting from the 1930s in Egypt, social work education and practice has gained acceptance by the regimes in the Arab World. Currently, there are more than 75 social work educational institutions in the region producing trained social workers with bachelors and masters degrees in addition to certificate and diploma holders. Despite the fact that there is no uniformity among them in terms of structure and curriculum contents of social work educational programmes, the fact that they have extensively adopted curricula developed by the Western countries stands out. Social Work as an independent discipline is yet to develop its own identity apart from Sociology. The extent to which the curricula and pedagogy have been Islamised is not clear. As in other parts of the world, social work seems to be popular among women and women are allowed to deal with both the sexes in the course of their practice.

It is noteworthy that in some countries, social work educational institutions and programmes were established, closed and re-established. It will be interesting to note if these episodes are in keeping with the trends of the emergence and regulation of civil society movements, social action and organisations.

In order to develop as an independent discipline in its own right, social work educators need to come together and examine the need to set standards for social work education and practice appropriate to their cultural contexts. The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2004) created by the International Associations of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) may be examined and adopted to the needs of the Arab World. Given the fact that the region is determined by the economic and political developments in each of the countries, the possibility of establishing a Common Council for Social Work Education needs to be explored.

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