

# **Social work as a human rights profession: discussions and tensions**

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According to the international definition of social work, human rights are a fundamental frame of reference for social work. Some even argue that social work is pre-eminently a 'human rights profession'. The development of a human rights based approach in social work is generally considered as a paradigm shift. This new paradigm can be characterised at different levels. First, care is considered as an enforceable right by which the 'charity character' of care practices is abandoned. Second, care is no longer considered as a practice that needs to pursue an external goal (e.g. social control, law enforcement etc.). Instead, care practices aim at realizing human dignity, an objective that essentially needs to be fulfilled in dialogue. Third, the agency and participation of service users is of key importance, recognizing them as subjects rather than objects of care. Fourth, selective social policies are abandoned in favor of universal approaches. Fifth, A human rights based approach does not start from a 'deficit thinking', but attempts to link up with the capabilities and opportunities of people. Finally, practices of care are no longer merely a matter of the private sphere, but have become a collective responsibility of society in the public sphere. Notwithstanding the positive evaluation that is granted to a human rights based approach in social work, human rights are under discussion on several grounds. A first issue is related to the conditionality of human rights in social work. In a broader societal context of 'no rights without responsibilities', the entitlement to human rights is linked to numerous conditions. In practice, conditionality can result in new dynamics of social exclusion. A second issue concerns the matter of the absolute character of human rights in social work. In a broader context of individualization, human rights are increasingly translated as individual entitlements. This often results in competing rights claims. At the same time, processes of individualization go together with an increasing tendency to 'rights talk', often resulting in a profound 'de-solidarisation' of social relations. A third issue is about the dynamic of social control, something that even in a human rights based approach in social work seems to be unavoidable. This appears especially at stake in the case of so-called anti-social behavior, specifically in a societal context of 'being tough on crime' and 'moral panic'. What is striking in the debate on social work and human rights is that social work is mostly considered as a 'victim' rather than a co-constructer of these tendencies. Generally, human rights based social work is understood as a counter-movement for these broader societal developments and a solution for the excesses of the neo-liberal welfare state. In this presentation, we argue that social work should be more aware of her social role in relation to the realization of human rights and the struggle for human dignity. To develop our argument, we make use of empirical data of a PhD study on children's rights in Belgium. Two particular issues will be analyzed to show the role of social work in developing a human rights based approach. The first one is the plea of social