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No.12 (2011-2013) June

From NEPAL

Social Work Education in Nepal:

One step forward and two steps backward?

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Access to higher education in Nepal- a young republic federal democratic country

Nepal entered its first democratic era only in 1951 and as a result the development of higher education gained momentum. In 1952, Nepal had only two colleges but three years later, the number had increased to 14; a total of 915 students and 86 teachers attended. The situation changed after 1990 democracy as several government and private colleges were established. Currently there are five universities serving the higher education needs of about 150,000 Nepalese students. Three universities were established only after the 1990 democracy: Kathmandu University in 1991, Purbanchal University in 1995 and Pokhara University in 1996. All five Universities provide affiliation to colleges (a majority of them are set up under the company Act- allowing profits to distribute among share holders, a very few colleges are initiated under community colleges and not for profit mode). The expansion of universities and their affiliated colleges offering higher education is a step forward

in providing further access to students of all income groups but has also lead to involvement of private sector investment that has led to commercialization of education in the country. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world with 29 million people. The country is going through a series of transitions and is currently rewriting its constitution through a constituent Assembly. As a post conflict country, the vital role that professional social workers could play in nation building does not need any further explanation.



**Initiation of Social Work Education:
a step forward to craft an inclusive
society**

The Nepali Civil War (labeled as People's War by the Maoists) was declared in 1996.

The internal conflict between government forces and Maoist fighters in Nepal lasted until 2006, marking a decade long insurgency costing more than 15,000 lives and loss of national assets and unrest in the social fabric. Parallel to these events, the first three years BA in social work program was initiated in 1996 by Fr Charles Law S.J., an American by birth at St.Xavier's college affiliated to Kathmandu University with the help of Nirmala Niketan School of Social Work in India. Till 2005 this is the only institution providing bachelor level education in social work. The first batch of graduates (about 20) came out with a degree in social work in the year 1999. As there was no Masters in Social Work program available in the entire country by that time many of the graduates opted to go to India and other countries to pursue their masters in social work and some have changed their study of focus and some opted to work in Non Governmental Organisations. Nobody knew what professional social work, ethical standards is and felt a need for a professional body. The situation continued till 2005.

Expansion of Social Work in Kathmandu Valley: (1996- 2012)

A group of young scholars from Nepal and India came together in 2004 and felt the need for trained professionals who can make a difference to the country that is going through severe conflict and costing human lives. The group are drawn from different disciplines including social work (Dr.Nikku is one of the member of this team) pooled some resources, came to some common vision and approached Purbanchal University to seek a permission to affiliate a college which will provide social work education to the

students who are motivated, see social work not only as a career option but as a passion! The university extended its support and the team worked over a year to prepare the BSW and MSW syllabus for the University. Consequently Kadambari Memorial College secured affiliation in 2005 and the first batch of 22 students graduated with Bachelors in Social Work (BSW) degree in 2008. The St Xavier's college secured affiliation and offered MSW for the first time in 2006 and Dr.Nikku became the head of the department. There was a lot of struggle for getting the right human resources, securing right field work placements and in meeting the aspirations and needs of the Nepalese society. In addition to these training opportunities the Tribhuvan University has approved a course on Social Work and the students of B.A can now choose social work as one of the two main courses in their Bachelor courses. By 2011 about 20 affiliated colleges of Tribhuvan University have introduced course often without the required human resources. All of these colleges are located in Kathmandu and *studying social work* is becoming an option for many students by 2012.



Current Challenges and Status Social Work Education in Nepal

My conversations with many students over time and my involvement in the admission/selection committees gave me an opportunity to learn about students' motivations. To my surprise, for the majority of students, the main motivation to study social work is to go abroad or to work for the U.N system or join the International NGOs who pay a lot of money. Many parents and guardians thought social work is good for their daughters and it is easy to pass and there are good opportunities to go abroad. However, I found some very few students and parents for whom social work is an opportunity to serve their own conflict-stricken communities and nation and citizenship building.

The team which founded the Kadambari College went also to Tribhuvan University and sought an affiliation to initiate their BA with social work major in 2007 and was successful. The both initiatives joined together and resulted in the birth of **Nepal School of Social Work** with a goal to strengthen social work education and seek recognition for social work as a profession in Nepal.



To voice out the issues of social work at the international forums, the Nepal School

of Social Work secured memberships of Asian and Pacific Association of Social Work Education (APASWE) in 2007 and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2009.

The NSSW took leadership in celebrating World Social Work Day in Nepal to bring awareness about social workers and their contribution to the Nepalese Society. It is also a strategy to facilitate formation of a National Association of Professional Social Workers and to federate with International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).



Future of Social Work: Two steps backward?

From a single department of social work in 1996 to many colleges that are offering some form of social work and the birth of Nepal School of Social Work is a major achievement for social work education in Nepal. I believe numbers matter but only the quality will survive in the age of markets. This applies to Social Work also in Nepal. The social work students are struggling to get their rightful jobs as there is a huge variation in their training standards and there is a competition from other related disciplines like sociology, development studies and gender studies.

As of now only two colleges have become members of the regional and international bodies. The colleges are not able to work together to ensure minimum standards in teaching social work. Lack of qualified social work educators is another major issue. Social Work educators who can inspire and instill the core values and skill of social work to students to become change agents are need of the hour. The lack of coherence and common core standards are resulting in producing mediocre social work graduates who are not able to deliver the services that are ethical and efficient. The universities are not showing any inclination to initiate social work departments within.

The University Grants Commission of Nepal is yet to respond to form a council on social work education with a vision and legitimate powers so that this body can monitor and develop core standards to accredit social work programs. There is an immediate need to lobby with the government so as to recognize and pass the social work act so that social work becomes a recognized profession

in Nepal in the near future. To achieve all these milestones and to step forward, Nepal needs I believe *social work champions* who can run an extra mile for the cause of building a profession in a transition country.



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