

Social work, solidarity economy and decent work

International Social Work
1–6

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DOI: 10.1177/00208728231185998

journals.sagepub.com/home/isw



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Abstract

Eradicating poverty is a fundamental objective of social work, both at local and at global levels. After COVID-19, the United Nations Commission for Social Development and Sustainable Development Goals, the global agenda developed by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Council on Social Welfare and the International Federation of Social Workers have placed the fight against poverty and the role of decent work at the forefront of the public agenda. We analyse most recent publications on decent work, highlighting two strategies to promote poverty eradication from social work: participation and education.

Keywords

COVID-19, decent work, social inequalities, social protection, social work, solidarity economy

Introduction

The labour market was harshly affected by the pandemic and work all around the world suffered from the economic crisis (Svicher and Di Fabio, 2021). Social workers made a huge effort to help the population at risk of exclusion, in many cases due to the loss of employment or work in poverty (Côté et al., 2021).

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This article presents the results of the meta-analysis conducted on decent work¹ and poverty eradication, with a particular focus on social workers. We emphasise the vulnerability associated with poor-quality employment, including that of social workers, and how to promote decent work for poverty eradication.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of social protection systems and accelerated the ongoing processes of digitalisation. In the realm of poverty eradication, the 60th session of the Commission for Social Development in 2022 focused on designing an inclusive recovery that promotes well-being. In 2023, the session of the Commission for Social Development was focused on decent work. Furthermore, the priority theme for the 62nd session of the Commission for Social Development in 2024 will be poverty eradication, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Social Policies, also considering the labour market.

We cannot eradicate poverty without decent work, and this must be done within the context of digital transformation and reorientation of public policies. In this regard, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution ‘Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development’ (A/77/L.60) at its 66th plenary in 2023.

The promotion of decent work is also crucial for the professional careers of social workers, who often work in poorly paid jobs and with a lack of professional advancement.

Poverty, vulnerability and social work

We analysed the main publications about decent work from 2020 to 2022. From a search on the Web of Science, the most cited articles were selected (N = 225). The initial search identified articles that mentioned the terms ‘social work’, ‘poverty’, ‘decent work’, ‘good job’, ‘decent employment’ or ‘good employment’ in abstracts, keywords or titles. Exclusion criteria were that if none of these terms appeared, the article could be excluded. Inclusion criteria required the articles to be from 2020 to 2022, written in English or Spanish, and relevant to the topic. The authors independently screened the articles. Subsequently, the results were compared, revealing discrepancies of less than 10 percent. Authors discussed differences and reached consensus.

From these publications, concrete issues were identified: need for education, support of the most vulnerable citizens and reform of public policies in the wake of the pandemic (Table 1).

The current search has limitations. It excluded publications from interested parties and only included articles in Spanish and English. However, the articles were selected from influential social science journals, thereby providing a significant sample of previous literature.

From our perspective, it is crucial to analyse vulnerability from precarious employment or working in poverty, a phenomenon that affects the advancement of individuals (including social workers). Decent work is critical to achieving sustainable development and reducing poverty. Vulnerability in the workplace is often associated with precarious employment, such as temporary, part-time or informal work arrangements, which offer little social protection (Jha and Mishra, 2022).

Vulnerable workers face a range of challenges, including low wages, poor working conditions, discrimination and a lack of access to social protection (Svicher and Di Fabio, 2021). They are also more likely to experience occupational accidents and illnesses and worse working conditions (Vargas Montero et al., 2020). Vulnerable workers are often unable to exercise their rights, which can exacerbate their vulnerability.

Discrimination is also a significant factor (Mackett, 2020). Women, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups often face discrimination in the workplace.

In the case of social workers, in many countries, they carry out their work under precarious conditions and face difficulties in developing a long-term professional career (Ravalier et al., 2022).

Table 1. Topics from the 225 selected publications. Search conducted in January 2023.

Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career adaptability • Age to enter the workforce • Digital skills and Fourth Industrial revolution • Socio-demographic factors • Rural areas • Years and quality of education • Resilience in education leaders • Professionally development at the workplace • Interpersonal skills
Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women • Non-white employees • Immigrants • Unemployed, underemployed • Developing countries • Inclusivity • Affected by COVID-19 • Educational level • Income vulnerability • Job security • Youth not in education, employment or training
Public policies reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic • Participation • Adaptation to the digital transformation • Work 4.0

Strategies to eradicate poverty through decent employment: What role for social workers?

The vulnerability in employment implies a precarious position in terms of social inclusion. Isolation, discomfort, insufficient income to lead a dignified life, and lack of promotion reinforce the precariousness in which many workers, including social workers, live.

The studies consistently present a strategy to promote decent employment: *fostering participation*. Through participation, we can change our environment, incorporate the demands of citizens and promote decent work on the public agenda.

The pandemic experience is related to the possibility of modifying public policies, from a participatory perspective. Scholars highlight the need for participation. Visseren-Hamakers (2018) showed the need for integration in public policies, given the complexity of the issues that are covered. Sénit (2020) pointed out the role of civil society in achieving participation, within informal and exclusive participatory spaces.

In this sense, social workers can play a relevant role in citizen mobilisation, as they are experts in participation.

In addition, the analysed articles also pay special attention to the qualification of workers in a post-COVID-19 setting. Training is highlighted to facilitate labour integration and move away from precarious employment. Therefore, *education* becomes a second strategy to address poverty. Mackett (2020) pointed out the relationship between decent work and education. According to McCord and Borhat (2001), the level of education is a relevant factor to obtain a good job.

The pandemic has accelerated the ongoing digitalisation (López Peláez et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a global consensus about the need for digital skills to achieve decent work. For example, a lack of these e-skills has been reflected in the DESI Report (Foley et al., 2019), confirming that 43 percent of the European Union (EU) population had an insufficient level of digital skills in 2017.

Nevertheless, there are differences across countries. Whereas Bulgaria, Romania, Italy and Greece present the lowest score on digital skills, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden show the highest values in Internet user skills and Finland, Sweden and Estonia are the top performers in advanced skills and development (Foley et al., 2019). Overall, the situation of digital skills outside of Europe is diverse. While some countries have made significant progress (e.g. United States, Canada, Japan, Australia and South Korea), others are still grappling with challenges such as limited infrastructure and educational opportunities (e.g. Brazil, China, India and South Africa).

In the case of social workers, it is necessary to enhance their digital competencies by improving education in this area within social work schools (Zhu and Andersen, 2022), including specific training in digital social work (López Peláez and Kirwan, 2023). Indeed, continuous training for social workers should place more emphasis on digital skills (Van Laar et al., 2020).

Conclusions

Reconstruction of our societies after the pandemic, the strengthening of intergenerational ties and the well-being of citizens are closely linked to the employment accessible in digitalised societies. The eradication of poverty must be based on the promotion of decent work, including within organisations that employ social workers. Our findings demonstrate two coping strategies for addressing precarious work: first, improving the education of professionals, including digital skills, and, second, aiming to increase participatory processes to redefine an inclusive and decent labour market in social policies. In both strategies, social workers and their global organisations play a significant role: (1) in public agenda debates and international forums, promoting decent work for poverty eradication; (2) in the promotion of participatory processes; and (3) in promoting the digital skills of users and social workers themselves to enhance labour integration.

Finally, the integration of decent work within the framework of the solidarity economy can create more inclusive economic systems. By ensuring workers are treated with dignity, receive fair compensation, and have access to social protection, decent work reduces inequalities and enhances overall well-being in our digitalised economies.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: ALP is International Council of Social Welfare executive director.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (grant number PID2020-115018RB-C31).

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Decent work, as defined by International Labour Organization (ILO), provides individuals with secure and fulfilling employment opportunities that offer fair wages, workers' rights, ensure safe working conditions, and foster equal opportunities. It emphasises the importance of job stability, access to social protection, and a healthy work–life balance while striving to eliminate discrimination, vulnerability and promote inclusive workplaces.

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