

**PART ONE:
SOCIAL WORK POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN STUDY**

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This paper is based on a study which examined the political participation of social workers in KwaZulu-Natal. Part One presents the major findings and the need for a follow-up study. Part Two extends the discussion on the nature of the political roles in which social workers engage and reports on the follow-up study.

The political nature of social work derives from the activities in which social workers engage to remove social injustice (Gray 1996). "Understanding how social workers can and do participate in the politics of social welfare policy is integral to advancing the profession's philosophy and goals" (Dietz Domanski 1998:156). Social workers have always been urged to assume a key role in social welfare policy formulation and this call gained momentum with the rise of the radical movement where everything social workers did was construed as political and engagement in the political process was seen as an integral part of the social work task (Corrigan & Leonard 1978; Daniel & Wheeler 1989; Galper 1980). Making meaningful contact with the political process was seen as the duty of all social workers and social work was said to be "better placed than any other agency or institution to act as advocate for the dispossessed and to empower the powerless in society" (Daniel & Wheeler 1989:21). For radical social workers, all social work activities involved consciousness raising, empowerment, social action and policy analysis, and the ultimate aim of social work was social transformation (Mullaly 1993). In the recent past several South African writers have drawn attention to the importance of social work's involvement in political processes as an essential part of the developmental social work approach (Gray 1996; Mazibuko 1996a & b; Ntusi 1998). Developmental social work calls on social workers to engage in political action which can take many forms.

More recently the political aspect of social work practice has been expressed in human rights discourse where human rights are placed at the core of a social work understanding of social justice, and where human rights are seen as basic to social work practice, forming the foundation of social work codes of ethics and models of practice. Within this discourse the central question is how social workers, both individually and socially, should respond to human rights abuses and contribute to the promotion and realisation of human rights.

IDENTIFYING SOCIAL WORK'S POLITICAL ROLE

One way in which to determine the political involvement of social workers is to examine what they do in practice. Gray (1996) identified the following political activities of social workers:

1. Policy implementation: In their daily practice, most social workers implemented policy and, in so doing, were ensuring that clients obtained all the benefits to which they were entitled by making them aware of the protection legislation afforded them and the services that were available to them.
2. Influencing policy: Social workers influenced policy makers by participating in decision-making processes.

3. Policy change: Social workers contributed to policy change when they analysed, commented on and responded to pending legislation; when they served on policy-making structures; when they formed pressure groups for or against legislative proposals; and when they lobbied for the support of influential politicians, government officials and prominent individuals and organisations in the community.

Gray (1996), Mazibuko (1996a & b) and Ntusi (1998) all drew attention to the need for social workers to play a more proactive role in the political realm. "Social workers cannot avoid political involvement if they accept that their primary function is to create and maximise opportunities for social development" (Gray 1996:34). Political participation involves a range of activities which vary from voting in an election to reading policy documents, to commenting on them, to responding to them, and to involvement in structures making, changing and implementing policy. Dietz Domanski's (1998) study of political participation among social workers identified ten activities (Figure 1), from which she devised ten prototypes of political participation (Figure 2), which were adapted for use in the present study.

FIGURE 1
SOCIAL WORKERS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ACTIVITIES

- 1. Lobbyist**
 - Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, fax on a national government policy problem.
 - Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, fax on a local government policy problem.
 - Responded to the American Hospital Association Action Alert.
 - Lobbied individual policymakers or legislators.
- 2. Voter**
 - Voted in the 1994 state elections.
 - Voted in the 1994 national congressional elections.
 - Voted in 1994 city or county elections.
 - Voted in the 1994 primary elections.
- 3. Campaigner**
 - Actively worked for a political party during 1994.
 - Actively worked for a specific candidate during 1994.
 - Attended a political meeting or rally held by a candidate for office.
 - Participated in the activities of a political party or a political organisation.
 - Attended a town meeting held by a legislator currently in office.
- 4. Collaborator**
 - Organised a professional or community group to work on a government policy problem.
 - Organised a professional or community group to work on an agency or organisational problem.
 - Organised or maintained a social action coalition.
 - Participated in the lobbying activities of a professional public interest association or organisation.
 - Worked with others on resolution of a government policy problem.

5. Advocate

- Provided services to a community agency or group involved in social action or policy reform.
- Advocated for change within my organisation to improve services.
- Made efforts in a professional capacity to influence opinion among co-workers about an agency policy problem.
- Worked to influence media coverage of an issue.
- Advocated with a government agency on behalf of a client.

6. Individualist

- Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, or fax on a local government problem of personal concern.
- Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, or fax on a national government problem of personal concern.
- Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a local government problem of personal concern.

7. Witness

- Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a local government problem of personal concern.
- Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a national government issue of personal concern.

8. Activist

- Participated in an organised demonstration supporting a government policy.
- Participated in an organised demonstration protesting a government policy.

9. Persuader

- Attempted to persuade others how to vote.
- Made efforts in a professional capacity to influence opinion among the general public about a government policy problem.

10. Communicator

- Keep informed about political and social policy issues.
- Engaged in electoral or political discussions with family, friends, and colleagues.

Adapted from Dietz Domanski (1998)

FIGURE 2

PROTOTYPES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY SOCIAL WORKERS

Prototype	Conceptual definition	Operational definition
Communicator	Person who obtains information about and discusses political and policy issues.	Keeps informed about political and social policy issues. Engages in electoral and political discussions with family, friends and colleagues.
Advocate	Person who engages in micro or macro advocacy on behalf of clients.	Provides advocacy services for/on behalf of individuals, groups, or organisations. Advocates for or influences co-workers' opinions about organisational policy change.
Voter	Person who takes part in elections by voting.	Votes in at least one of four categories of elections: primary, local, state, or national.
Lobbyist	Person who contacts or lobbies government officials on a policy issue.	Undertakes at least one contacting activity such as calls or correspondence to government officials on a local, state, or national policy problem. Engages in an association's or organisation's lobbying campaigns.
Persuader	Person who makes an effort to influence the opinions of others on a political issue.	Attempts to persuade others how to vote. Uses professional skills and expertise to influence public opinion about a government policy issue.
Collaborator	Person who collaborates with others on policy issues.	Participates in, organises, or maintains an organisation or group for resolution of government or agency policy problems.
Campaigner	Person who takes an active role in electoral politics.	Actively works for a political party or candidate; participates in political organisation. Attends constituent meetings held by congressional representatives.
Individualist	Person who contacts government officials on policy issues of personal concern.	Contacts government officials on personal or local political or policy concerns.
Witness	Person who takes part in public or congressional hearings.	Attends or testifies at public or congressional hearings on local or national policy issues.
Activist	Person who engages in organised political actions.	Participates in an organised demonstration in support or in protest of a government policy.

Adapted from Dietz Domanski (1998)

The context giving rise to the research

Since the transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994, opportunities for political participation have abounded. Social workers have, more than ever before, had the opportunity to participate in politics and policy-making in relation to numerous policy-making processes, among them the White Paper on Social Welfare and Social Welfare Action Plan (SWAP); National Interim Consultative Committee (NICC); Inter-Ministerial Committee for Youth at Risk (IMC); Transformation of South African Interim Council for Social Work (SAICSW); Higher Education Policy; National Drug Plan; Policy for the Aged; and new Child Care legislation.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to develop a model of political participation to enhance social workers' understanding of the political dimensions of social work practice and to show social workers how to engage in political processes. Placed within human rights discourse, the study could contribute to finding ways in which social workers could engage in social or political action at various levels through:

- Social work practice
- Collective action
- Professional associations
- Other community or activist groups
- Social work education
- Raising public awareness
- Policy development and advocacy.

According to Dietz Domanski (1998), social workers engage in political processes by adopting various political roles and activities such as advocacy, lobbying, witnessing, voting, campaigning, lobbying, collaborating, persuading and communicating. The study therefore assumed that by exploring the extent to which social workers engaged in these activities, it would be possible to speculate about the degree of social workers' involvement at the political and human rights level. This would be helpful to those committed to convincing social workers of the need to involve themselves actively in human rights issues.

Methodology

This study aimed to examine the nature and extent of political participation in which social workers in KwaZulu-Natal have engaged since 1994 and whether or not they perceived this participation as having been effective. To this end the study asked the following questions:

1. Do social workers have an interest in influencing policy?
2. What attempts have they made to influence policy?
3. Have these attempts been successful in the past five years?
4. Do social workers believe that they can have an effect on the future of welfare in South Africa?

A total of 482 questionnaires² was sent to a randomly selected sample of social workers in KwaZulu-Natal.³ The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the political activities in which they had engaged. To this end it explored, *inter alia*, the particular policy processes or issues which had gained their attention since 1994; the nature and extent of their participation, that is, whether they had read the document, responded to it, participated in

² A copy of the mailed questionnaire is available on request from the authors.

³ This constitutes one in every three social workers from KZN registered with the South African Interim Council for Social Work (SAICSW).

meetings and discussions about it, or engaged in any other action in relation to it; and their perceptions as to the nature of their contribution and whether it had any real impact. Respondents were not asked to provide identifying details and remained anonymous. Postage paid, addressed return envelopes were included with the questionnaire and two weeks after the date of the original mailing reminder postcards were sent to the entire sample. In all 197 questionnaires were returned, six of which were received too late for inclusion in the data analysis. This constitutes a 40% response rate.

Results and discussion

Eighty-four per cent of the respondents were currently in practice, a third having been in practice for between one and five years and well over half having up to ten years practice experience. The respondents ranged in age from 22 to 76 years with the average age being 38 years and the modal age being 28 years. Ninety per cent were female and 44% had a four-year bachelors degree in social work. An additional 24% had an honours degree. Thus 68% of the respondents had a four-year qualification in social work and just over 10% had a postgraduate qualification (masters degree 8.5% and PhD 2%). Nearly 37% were in the field of child and family welfare, while a further 17% worked in government welfare services. Nearly a quarter of the respondents (23.3%) were in supervisor's or similar junior management positions. Almost 54% worked in urban settings while 25% were in rural areas. The remainder commuted between the two. It is surmised that this reflects the profile of social workers in the general population in that social work remains a female-dominated profession which is largely urban based and requires four years of study for professional practice.⁴ Most social workers are employed in the child and family welfare field and a large number are employed by government. Being experienced social workers, one would expect that the respondents had been involved in policy-making processes and, therefore, could provide valuable information on social workers' political participation.

Taking the prototypes developed by Dietz Domanski (1998), the study examined the political participation of respondents as shown in Figure 3. Grouping these responses (shown in Figure 4), the most dominant political activity engaged in or role played by social workers is that of communicator (87.5%)

Dietz Domanski (1998) described a "communicator" as a person who obtains information and remains informed about political and social policy issues, and engages in electoral and political discussions with family, friends and colleagues. In terms of the prototypes of political participation (see Figure 2), this represents a fairly non-directive role and tends to be focused away from direct client issues. The suggestion that attempts are made to keep informed about political and social issues does, however, indicate a level of awareness that could impact on the nature of services offered by the social workers, given that the specific action of remaining informed about issues with professional impact (see Figure 3) obtained a very high score of 90.5%. It was interesting to note that within this prototype the highest 'activity' score across all activities (other than that for having voted in the 1994 elections) was recorded - this being the activity of political discussion with friends (91.1%).

Of further interest with regards this prototype (communicator) are the findings related to interest and awareness of new policy. It would not be unrealistic to assume that one of the prime ways of remaining informed on issues with professional impact would be through an awareness and

⁴ Of the 9901 social workers registered with the SAICSW on 6 March 1998, 89,8% were female, 35,6% had a three-year qualification and 55,9% had a four-year degree.

knowledge of current and new welfare legislation. While 90.5% of the respondents indicated that they do indeed do this, the findings suggested a varying degree of interest in new policy initiatives: 65.9% in the White Paper, 29.3% in the IMC Report, 7.3% in child welfare policy, 6.2% in the Child Abuse Protocol, 3.14% in the National Drug Plan and policy for the aged, and 2.09% in the Not-for-Profit Bill. Of those who mentioned that they were aware of the White Paper, 90.5% had read the document, 74.8% had read the IMC Report and 35.6% the Child Abuse Protocol. The figures become insignificant when it comes to responding to policy documents and participating in processes around them. Thus the results suggest that, although social workers are aware of political processes and issues, only a small percentage of respondents could be considered politically active. Participation increased in matters closer to home such as those involving agency or personal and professional interests.

FIGURE 3
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF RESPONDENTS

Lobbying	
• Contacted national government <i>re</i> : national government policy problem	35.5%
• Contacted provincial government <i>re</i> : provincial government policy problem	37.8%
• Contacted local government <i>re</i> : local government policy problem	37.8%
• Lobbied individual policy makers	23.4%
Voting	
• Voted in 1994 general election	92.6%
• Voted in most recent local government elections	56.1%
• Intend voting in 1999 general election	81.0%
Persuading	
• Attempted to persuade others to vote	29.1%
Campaigner	
• Worked for a political party prior to 1994 general election	9.0%
• Worked for a political party during 1994 general election	11.1%
• Currently active in a political party	4.2%
• Intend working for a political party in 1999 general election	11.1%
Social action	
• Attended a political rally prior to 1994 election	48.4%
• Attended a political rally as part of the 1994 election campaign	38.8%
• Participated in organised demonstration in support of government policy	9.5%
• Participated in organised demonstration opposing government policy	34.7%
Collaborating	
• Organised a group to work on a government policy problem	26.5%
• Organised a group to work on an agency-related policy problem	50.3%
• Participated in a social action group in a personal capacity	26.7%
Advocating	
• Participated in lobbying for a professional interest group	52.7%
• Worked with others to resolve a government policy problem	69.6%
• Worked with others to advocate change in agency services	82.9%
• Worked to influence media coverage of an issue	36.4%
• Advocated with government department for client	77.0%

Individual action	
• Contacted local government officials on issue of personal concern	35.6%
• Contacted provincial government officials on issue of personal concern	21.1%
• Contacted national government officials on issue of personal concern	9.6%
Witnessing	
• Attended public hearing/commission of enquiry	19.6%
• Testified at public hearing/commission of enquiry	7.9%
Communicating	
• Attempts to keep informed on issues with personal impact	87.8%
• Attempts to keep informed on issues with professional impact	90.5%
• Engaged in political/electoral discussion with family	84.1%
• Engaged in political/electoral discussion with friends	91.1%
• Engaged in political/electoral discussion with colleagues	84.1%

FIGURE 4
MEANS AS A CRUDE INDICATOR OF ROLES OR DIMENSIONS OF
POLITICAL ACTIVITY (IN RANK ORDER)

RANK	ROLE	Mean %
1	Communicator	87.5%
2	Voter	76.5%
3	Advocate	65.4%
4	Collaborator	45.1%
5	Activist	44.2%
6	Lobbyist	33.6%
7	Persuader	29.1%
8	Individualist	22.1%
9	Campaigner	20.4%
10	Witness	13.7%

Figure 4 indicates that the more active roles of voter (76.5%), advocate (65.4%), collaborator (45.1%), activist (44.2%), lobbyist (33.6%), persuader (29.1%), individualist (22.1%), campaigner (20.4%) and witness (13.7%) were next in order of importance after that of communicator.

With regards to the role of voter, one respondent asked 'Why the interest in these questions in the build-up to the 1999 elections?' Exploration of voting patterns was seen as important to a study of political participation and this item revealed an interesting result. Fewer respondents intended voting in the 1999 general election, only 81% as opposed to the 92.6% who voted in the 1994 general election, a drop of nearly 12%. There was more interest in voting at a national than a local level, with only 56.1% of respondents having voted in a recent local government election. While an 81% voting rate is high, the suggested decline (12%) is noteworthy. Although this particular study did not extend itself to establish specifically why changes could occur, the suggested reduction in rate of voting could be an area for further exploration. *Ad hoc* comments made by respondents on their general feelings of powerlessness at being able to influence policy processes within welfare could account for their lack of political involvement at a broader level. This might be reflected in the fact that, in recent elections for Council, only 14% of registered

social workers voted for the six elected social work representatives to serve on the transformed Council for Social Service Professions.⁵ Those who were elected were white. This might be due to the fact that the previous Council was predominantly white. One of the major criticisms of the Council, and reasons for the need for transformation of the Council, was that it was not representative of the social work profession. An obviously speculative explanation is that white social workers participated in the election at a higher rate than people of other races and that they voted for white representatives. It may also be that, because white social workers have historically had more access to voting processes, and have in the past been more active in the Council, that they had a greater interest in maintaining the *status quo* and maintaining the existing power balance intact. Black social workers have a history of boycotting the Council, one of the reasons being that social workers in homelands were not recognised as South African citizens in the apartheid system and did not qualify for Council membership - this might be a continued pattern until the transformed council has been phased in and developed credibility.⁶

The fact that less than half of the respondent group indicated that they were generally engaged in the roles of collaborator (45.1%), activist (44.2%), lobbyist (33.6%), persuader (29.1%), and campaigner (20.4%) requires further attention.⁷ This suggests that the criticisms of social workers first raised by radical theorists in the 1960s may still apply - that social workers are, by and large, politically conservative and believe that their practice can be politically neutral (Corrigan & Leonard 1978; Daniel & Wheeler 1989; Galper 1980; Gray 1996). However, preliminary findings indicate that the reasons for this could be more local, as the following respondent's comment suggests:

Very few social workers have an interest in participating in policy and politics. Some of the reasons for losing interest is the way social workers are treated; for example, the Department of Welfare does not motivate social workers to be active in such issues. Only the superiors are exposed to such issues, that is, it is unbelievable that Department of Welfare social workers do not even know the White Paper for their department as their superiors do not expose it to social workers.

Given the description of these prototypes (Figure 2), it would not be out of order to accept that the afore-mentioned are critical roles for social workers. They are implicit in social work intervention at the policy level and are discussed further in Part Two of this paper.

The role of collaborator, described as a person who collaborates with others on political issues, is interesting given the level of dissatisfaction expressed by respondents about the lack of opportunity to make contributions. This relatively low rating (45.1%) could have two related explanations (both, at this point, being relatively speculative and open to further debate). It may

⁵ The Council elections were held subsequent to the data-gathering process for this study. While we have speculated about the low percentage poll in these elections, in order to gain greater clarity on the reasons for this follow-up research is needed. Therefore, a questionnaire is included as an Appendix to this paper which invites readers to contribute to the follow-up study.

⁶ See Gray, M. (1999). The marginalisation of social workers in South Africa. Paper presented at the Joint Conference on AASW, IFSW, APASWE and AASWWE **Promoting inclusion - redressing exclusion: The social work challenge**. Brisbane, September 26-29, 1999.

⁷ A wealth of information is contained in the open-ended comments made by respondents which relate to the remaining roles where there was a response rate of less than 50%. These will be dealt with in a separate paper together with the follow-up study.

suggest that, while social workers claim to want to be given the opportunity to engage in collaborative policy development, they do not in fact take up this opportunity. Alternatively, it may suggest that, although social workers do indeed want to take up collaborative attempts to engage in policy development, they are not afforded the opportunity as policy development processes lack 'openings' for true collaborative participation and are 'top down' processes. The data indicated that relatively few participants had participated directly in policy-making processes. The respondents seemed most aware of the White Paper (65.9%) and IMC (29.3%) policy documents. Those who had endeavoured to influence policy over the past five years did not feel that their attempts had been successful. Concern was expressed at the lack of transparency in drafting policies and the lack of time given for them to study policy documents. At times policy issues had only reached their attention after the bill had already been passed. The transformation of the SAICSW was a case in point where the government had gone ahead despite protests from social workers, leaving them with the impression that this had been forced on them.

Another issue which was raised related to the communication of information within organisations. A government employee commented that policy documents were not passed on to them for comment, while a social worker employed in the private sector commented that agency management failed to facilitate a process whereby staff could participate actively in policy decisions. There also seemed to be a lack of feedback from national councils on policy matters.

Clearly social workers can and do participate in building the welfare system and no longer expect the government to spoonfeed them. However, for them the government remains the senior partner in the so-called partnership between the state and the private sector and NGOs are not given the recognition they deserve.

Generally social workers appreciated the importance of their involvement in policy-making processes but some felt constrained by family, home and work commitments. Some respondents felt that policy documents were too long, cumbersome and complicated and that more accessible summaries of policy documents could be made available to them. Some expressed concern about their lack of confidence in involving themselves in policy issues.

Current concerns of social workers

Although they were not directly asked about issues which currently concerned them, unsolicited comments revealed that social workers in South Africa were perturbed about the following:

- Their low status and poor salaries relative to other professions:
Most social workers are frustrated and demotivated in their field. Since they are the lowest paid professionals in the country, they are no longer interested in the profession ... and there are no incentives for social workers. I am leaving the profession as soon as I am finished with my studies and most social workers are doing likewise.
- The wide gap between government departments and NGOs, including the difference in salaries paid to social workers:
There are lots of changes, but there is a wide gap between the Government departments and the NGOs. There needs to be some narrowing of this gap. There is also the difference in salaries between the two.
- A top-down policy-making approach seemed to persist:
As an affiliate of the SA National Council I feel there is no feedback once one has commented on issues. Documents are usually sent at the last minute and we are not given enough time to read them. The White Paper on Welfare talks of partnership and this has not

been addressed by Government. Government continues to be the superior partner. NGOs are not given the recognition they deserve. Documents are usually not distributed to staff. Directors feel they are their property.

- The lack of unity in the profession:
Social workers are poorly organised and therefore cannot make a major impact on policy-making processes. This is especially true of KZN. Council hasn't done anything for social workers who should form unions instead. Social workers should form a strong professional social workers' association.
- The need for policy-making to be addressed in the social work curriculum:
Social workers must be encouraged to study about social policy so that they can be able to have input in influencing it. This will help them as well as the community because social workers know the felt needs of the communities.

There were several issues which the researchers anticipated might be of concern to social workers, but these were not mentioned at all by the respondents:

- Their marginalisation with other occupational groups threatening to displace them in several major areas of social work service provision, such as child care, probation and community development (Gray & Sewpaul 1998; Gray & Wint 1998);
- The possibility that in the future they would be supervised by people without a social work background, who were less qualified than they were but who were experienced in a particular field of service, such as community development;
- The employment of managers in social welfare agencies, both government and private, who have no knowledge of, or experience in, social work;
- The appointment, within the Department of Welfare, of people into key positions who did not have a background in social work, the Minister of Welfare being a case in point;
- Cutbacks in subsidies to private welfare organisations which directly affected social workers, both in terms of the stability of their positions and the resources available for services.

CONCLUSION

Social work's abiding commitment to social justice, social change and social improvement and its simultaneous commitment to the individual and society gives it its important political dimension. This research has attempted to add to theory on social work's political dimensions and to inform practice in this area by describing the nature of the political roles and activities in which social workers engage. If social workers are to have an effect on the future of welfare in South Africa, they need to influence policy-making processes effectively. To do this they need to develop an acute awareness of the political context in which their actions take place and of their political consequences. Social work is a small profession and if social workers are really to have an impact on welfare processes and structures in South Africa, they need to be far more politically minded and politically active.

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