

# Social Services with People living in Poverty: The ‘Common Secret’ of Social Work and the Need of Awareness

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**Abstract:** *A number of researches had shown that the majority of the users in social services are confronted with poverty. This matter per se constitutes the need for social work to examine in more depth its role with the poor. This paper attempts to discuss further the literature concerning social services and poverty. Additionally the article discusses the need for awareness of the social workers in poverty’s issues within an emphasis in the definition of the poverty.*

## 1. Social services for people living in poverty: The common secret of the social services departments (SSDs)

According to a number of authors, many of the users in (state) Social Services Departments in both Britain and US, are people living in poverty [1], [2], [3], [4]. In particular, as [5] had shown the majority of the users of social services were benefit claimants. Moreover, as the authors argue the main users of social services are probably among the poorest people in the population while they also examine with a critical view the role of social work with the poor. As it concerns Greek literature there are some references to the poverty of the users of Social Services Departments. For example according to [6] the usual problems that the users in County Welfare Departments (CWDs) face are:

*“...social and emotional problems such as problems in the relationships among the members of the family, neglect of individuals (children, disabled, elderly), difficulties concerning accommodation due to unemployment, and a number of problems as consequences of the contemporary life style like alcoholism, use of drugs, prostitution, attempted suicide”.*

Still, the above quote rather focuses on life style, morality issues and not poverty. This is a common description in social work literature and indirectly keeps silence for the poverty of the user and its causes. More recently [7] carried out research from the perspective of crisis intervention model in families, in two CWDs. She also refers to testimonies

by social workers where again unemployed, homeless, lone mothers and so on who constitute the profile of the users. Similarly to the above, announcements by front-line social workers in SSDs in municipalities describe the categories of the population that face problems and use the public SSD in the Municipality of Athens as parents, children, young people, adults who face multiple socio-economic problems, people with disabilities, families and people who face poverty, elderly, minorities and refugees, people that are not aware of their welfare rights, unemployed, homeless, drug users, lone mothers [8], [9], [10]. For HiHPs (Help in Home Projects) the profile of the users’ research by [11], showed that:

*“the biggest percentage of the users 91.0% are of a low standard of living, under the limit of poverty and their monthly income is from 0€ to 500€ per month... “while almost the same are the findings for the county of Trikala with only 10% of the population of the study to receive pension more than 501€ per month”.*

The researchers suggest that it is the low pensions for both the elderly and those with disabilities that lead them to living under the limit of poverty [11]. The elderly, aged 65 or more is the dominant group of users, with the 62.32% of the total users to be elderly and the rest people with disabilities [12]. The majority of them are primary school graduates while 18.0% are illiterate. They have been informed about the provided services of Help in Home either by the staff of the programme or other people who work in Municipality, such as administrative staff (ibid).

For the programmes funded by EU even more data are available due to the character of these programmes as research and reports are demanded from them. For example, a study of [13] concerning the Network of Social and Supportive Services reveals some interesting data. Because of the character of the programme, the target-population were people “that are threatened” or face exclusion from the labour market. Consequently, the profile of the users is similar to the above where the majority of the users were unemployed 62.33%, employed 16.44%, lived on their pension 5.75%, and women

who cared for their home and families 6.34%. To be more specific, for 46,598 people who used these services all over Greece from March 2003 to October 2005 their income for

- 70.71 % ranged from 0 to 3.000€ per year,
- 18.09% ranged from 3.001 to 6.000€ per year,
- 8.38% ranged from 6.001 to 10.000€ and only 2.83% had an income of more than 10.000€ per year (ibid). As far as it concerns their family situation: they were married with children 43.66% and unmarried without children 37.54%. Regarding their health 35.13% were people with mental health problems, 22.66% people with other disabilities and about 35.0 % with other health problems. Again, 62.0% of the users were women. To sum up the profile of the users of these services can be described as people with low income, poor, unemployed with health problems, immigrants (8.87%), Roma (5.05%), some refugees (0.19%), and the majority of them were women (ibid).

More recently the research by [14] had shown that the majority of the users in public and semi-public social services in Greece are people facing poverty and deprivation.

The above literature review reveals some added characteristics besides poverty such as age, disability, gender and race. Similarly, in studies of poverty in Greece there are frequently references to at least some of the above issues. Specifically, a longitudinal study from 1974 until 1999 indicated that poverty is more common in families living in agricultural areas, whose heads are people of low educational level, the elderly and the unemployed [15]. But the rise of unemployment in cities seems to reveal that the problem is growing in the urban areas as well. Additionally, there are several references in Greek as well as English literature concerning the women's poverty. Lone parent families and specifically those in which the lone parent is a woman appear to have high percentages of living in poverty while they also experience social stereotyping and stigmatisation [16]. Moreover, the researchers point out a number of problems that lone mothers experience in Greece such as the lack of day nurseries and, in general, state care and health care for their children, "high percentages of unemployment", low income, "lack of information about the welfare system" and about the "labour market" (ibid:28). Particularly women are at high risk of poverty.

As Glendinning and Millar (cited in [17]) claim:

*"Female poverty is the outcome of an accumulation of deprivations within the three resources systems (family, labour market and welfare systems)"*.

More recently according to Eurostat [18]:

*"The household types most at risk of poverty are single parents with dependent children, single elderly people and single females"*

According to [19], traditionally, radical social work analysis emphasized the "*working-class character*" of social work's clients with regard to the "*oppressive relationships*" that they experienced. However, she argues that after 1980s there was an attempt to illuminate the oppressive relations by taking into consideration the "*growing recognition of the specificities of oppression, according to gender, race, class, age, disability and sexual orientation*" and including "*anti-discriminatory*" (Langan and Lee cited in [19]) approaches in critical social work. These issues are important for social work and its interventions in various vulnerable groups of the population/ users. The practitioners need to take into consideration the power and oppression that is produced by the dominant ideology and is reproduced on societal level in order to be aware of their role. Overall, it seems that according to the above findings, all the above categories of the population, often the users of SSDs, share some "common characteristics" such as the fact that they "have the marginal if any relationship to waged labour" and they are the "poorest of the poor" [20].

In the Greek social work literature there are some references to the poverty of the user but the analysis remains as a narrow description of the phenomenon rather than one analysing this common characteristic of poverty with regard to the role of social work.

Overall, in the Greek social work literature it is common to find material for some of the above categories of population for example material on social work with families mainly from a psychological perspective that focuses on the therapy of the family while their poverty is rarely discussed in contrast with the English literature and research.

## **2. The need for poverty awareness in social work**

As [5] claims the personal judgements of the practitioner, attitudes and beliefs affect their actions and interventions. In parallel, these attitudes and beliefs are affected by the dominant perceptions, education and policies towards the poor.

To my mind, one of the core-elements in the awareness of poverty is its definition (and the debates as well) as that could be useful knowledge for the social workers, at least for the Greek context. Firstly, because it informs the practitioner and adds knowledge that in turn affects their criteria of what poverty is, who the poor is and so on. Secondly, it contributes to the arguments of the social workers as professionals for persuading those higher in the hierarchy for the provision of benefits. Additionally, this knowledge can be used as a tool for the policy makers to be persuaded about the need of services, cash and material provision for those in need. Finally, the so-called as poverty lines as well as the

definitions of poverty include or exclude parts of the population and affect policy measures [21].

The official estimation of poverty line according to the European Community Household Panel (ECHP)

*“has been set as the 60.0% of the average ...of the person’s income in the country” while if “we have taken into consideration a common poverty line through all the European countries...then the percentages of poverty in Greece are more than doubled” [22],*

compared with the percentages of poverty in other European countries (ibid). Moreover, groups of population such as homeless, immigrants and asylum seekers are not included in the above measurements and therefore significant parts of the population in Greece are left out. The poverty line according to the National Statistical Service of Greece is estimated at 4,741.12 euro per person per year that is to say 350 euro per month per person. Unsurprisingly, this monthly income was not even enough for buying food in Greece in the pro-crisis period. These official poverty lines were set in a way that the poor is the person close to starvation. It is a convenient option by which the percentages of poverty are estimated in such a way that does not disclose the austerity that households face. Additionally, inequality is another commonly used indicator. [23] argues that the inequality includes a specific concept of what is perceived as equality while [20] argue that:

*“Measurements of income inequality are only one aspect of inequality, and are themselves reflections of a number of factors, including not only the operation of capitalism and its labour market (from which most incomes are derived) but also the role of the state in mediating the effects of the market through its systems of taxation and social security benefits”*

This approach is based on a more holistic concept of inequality that includes more aspects than just “income-distribution” in contrast with the usual official statistics.

In parallel, the last two decades the terminology of social exclusion has entered the dialogue posing an added discourse besides poverty and inequality. It’s beyond the aim of the research to examine in depth each term; however a comprehensive description of the three discourses that has been set out by [24] Williams is useful:

*“ ‘Inequality’ constitutes a key overarching structural dynamic which can operate at interpersonal, local, national and international levels, in a wide variety of social economic, political and cultural spheres; ‘social exclusion’ is a consequent process, though not a necessary one, linked to inequality; ‘poverty’ is a state or condition, but a not necessary one linked to both inequality and social exclusion.”*

Unsurprisingly, the interest on social exclusion and the common use of the term is linked with politics. For example, on European policy’s agenda the shift from 1990’s is now on the paid work through the integration in work *“...as exclusion is seen as the problem then insertion or integration into society is seen as the solution” [24].*

Although the terminology of social exclusion comes to describe the complexity of factors that set people in the margins of the society as Levitas argues, the European Commission’s (EC) social policy agenda focuses on the *“connection between exclusion and unemployment and not between exclusion and poverty” [25].* Additionally, the causes are not looked for in capitalism but to generalist description of the causes of “contemporary financial and social conditions” (ibid). Moreover, the focus of the EU’s policies is on the paid work, an “emphasis” that comes to “devalue unpaid work” which is mainly done by women *“and to distract attention away from economic and social inequalities (of ‘race’, gender, disability, age) that already exist in the labour market” (Levitas, cited in [24].*

This approach leaves aside parts of population such as the disabled or people that are not able to work but also the problematic issue with the term of social exclusion is the way that it is used by policy makers. Firstly, they respond to exclusion through integration and particularly through paid work and leave aside the other marginalised groups. Moreover, the above argument that the causes are the “general conditions” draws attention away from the real cause -capitalism *per se-* that seeks ways to increase and secure the profits rather than the well-being of people (ibid).

Overall, there is a long debate about the appropriate definition and measurement of poverty referring to those arguing for more positivistic approaches while the others include many more factors than just income. According to Townsend (cited in [1]:

*“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the kinds of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary....”*

Gordon et al claim there is a need for measuring both income and standard of living:

*“Standard of living includes both the material and social conditions in which people live and their participation in the economic, social cultural and political life of the country” [26].*

In addition [27] claims that *“measuring poverty must always be relative”* because of the necessity to be examined with regard to the context of each society at a particular time. Thus poverty is not just about income, but it also refers to the social aspects of deprivation. Low income is also linked with

reduced access to a number of social activities, to education, health and social services (Schorr, 1992).

The above and following approaches and discussion on poverty are important for the professionals that deal with the poor and participate in defining who the poor is and the “deserving poor” [1] for receiving the benefit. It is only one of the aspects of poverty awareness [5] ( which for the Greek context are necessary due to the direct involvement of the social work with the poor.

[1] claims that the debates about the definitions and measurement of poverty are mainly expressed in technical language while [21] argues that they are defined by “experts” while the voice of the poor contributes to “...an alternative approach to defining poverty based on human needs, rather on numerical aspects such as poverty lines”.

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