

## **Transformative Social Work: Mental Health Access, Experience and Outcomes in Uncertain Times**

Jubilee Room, Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster, 25 March 2024

### **Social Work Challenges in Uncertain Times**

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I want to thank Vava Tampa for the invitation to offer a few reflections at this NHS Conference taking place this afternoon in Westminster.

I see that Elizabeth Folarin at today's event. Elizabeth and I have worked together on several projects, and I have always been struck by her openness and positiveness, curiosity to learn, and her indomitable energy, all of which inform her commitment to social work and tackling injustices and inequalities.

Social Work is going through a very difficult time. Various pressures exist, including socioeconomic, demographic, financial, and workforce capacity. These elements interrelate, perpetuating significant systemic and structural challenges which impact the quality of life of social workers and social work students.

First, I want to zoom out and consider broader challenges before offering specific reflections in relation to Global Majority social workers.

The hard figures around the level of government funding to attract people to train as social workers in our university and other universities tell a story.

- In real terms, the value of social work bursaries paid by the State in England fell between £1,000 and £1,500 because of a ten-year freeze in the bursary rate level, as students are paid the same amount in 2024 as they were paid in 2014 (Samuel, 2023).

- Furthermore, state support for social work placements through the NHS Education Support Grant (ESG) is frozen for the 10<sup>th</sup> successive year, at £20 per day for practice placement and £10 per day for skills development (Samuel, 2023).

Additionally, while the population of England will increase by over 2.75 million in 10 years to just over 57 million people this year, the number of state-sponsored social work bursaries available in England remains the same at 4000.

After social workers quality, there is a problem retaining them in the workforce.

- The average working life of a social worker in the United Kingdom is less than eight years (Curtis et al., 2010).
- More than eight in ten English councils in 2022 experienced challenges recruiting children's social workers, and almost three-quarters (72 per cent) had problems retaining social workers (Local Government Association, 2022). 71% of councils experienced difficulties recruiting adult social workers, and over 57% had difficulties retaining adult social workers (Local Government Association, 2022). The high turnover of early career social workers appears to be a national and local problem within the children's social work workforce.

Reflecting on this data can lead us to the reasonable conclusion that the current Conservative Government is insufficiently committed to both training and retaining social workers in the NHS or local authorities. This is not good enough if we want to address social problems in society. There is also an inefficient and ineffective use of public resources (e.g. using taxes to train social workers who do not stick with the profession, employers competing to pay recruitment agencies premium rates to attract agency social workers, and insufficient workforce capacity putting an inexorable strain on the existing system) (Le Grand et al., 2008). We deserve better.

Social workers from the Global Majority face additional challenges.

- Racism and discrimination drive black social workers out of social work posts in London. Poor experiences and the lack of support have pushed black social workers into agency work, an employment category which makes it difficult for social workers to progress in their careers (South East Sector Led Improvement Programme & London Innovation and Improvement Alliance, 2023).
- In another recent study (Gurau & Bacchoo, 2022), 28% of social workers in England reported experiencing racism from colleagues or managers at least once in the previous year. 9% said that they had experienced racism from colleagues or managers at least five times in the previous twelve months. Furthermore, 10% of the respondents stated that their career progression was limited by racism.

Currently, with a team of social work practitioners and colleagues, Goldsmiths, University of London, is finalising a research project exploring the career opportunities and constraints of black social workers across several local authorities in London. As a research team, we heard upsetting stories from Global Majority social workers about career obstacles (e.g. insufficient mentoring opportunities, typecast to work with certain families, feeling overlooked for promotion opportunities, and witnessing other social workers getting greater opportunities to advance their careers) (Moseley et al., 2024).

Perhaps another way to describe our respondents' experiences is to call out racial trauma or race-based trauma. Here, we refer to the cumulative effects of racism on mental and physical health. The effects of racism and discrimination are experienced in contexts before Global Majority Social Workers start their careers. This racial or race-based trauma can be relived in the social work workplace if one feels overlooked, unsupported or marginalised, generating psychological and/or physiological symptoms.

As social workers, we have an ethical duty to become aware of how to both understand and respond to the triggers, presence and effects of racial trauma. Developing a strong

sense of cultural identity, engaging with social support, and communicating the consequences of racism may foster healing (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

Thinking about what we can do at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels is crucial.

Thank you for allowing me to share some reflections this afternoon.

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