

# THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION

AUTHOR

Mustafa Emin AKÇİN - Oğuzhan ZENGİN



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## **Author**

Mustafa Emin AKÇİN - Oğuzhan ZENGİN

## **Editor**

Prof. Dr. Gülay GÜNAY - Dr. Emel BEDİR

## **Graphic Design**

Deniz TANIR

## **Contact**

Karabük University

<https://www.karabuk.edu.tr/tr>–<https://www.karabuk.edu.tr/en>

Karabük University Main Campus

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## **AUTHOR**

Res. Asst. Mustafa Emin AKÇİN  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7750-3138

Prof. Dr. Oğuzhan ZENGİN  
ORCID: 0000-0002-2682-0870

## **EDITOR**

Prof. Dr. Gülay GÜNAY  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8234-6683

Dr. Emel BEDİR  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8138-7136

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AKÇİN, Mustafa; ZENGİN, Oğuzhan

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## INTRODUCTION

In professional terms, social work is a relatively young discipline compared to other established professions throughout world history. Therefore, understanding how individuals perceive the social work profession is of paramount importance for attracting both practitioners and service users, as well as for enhancing the profession's overall effectiveness and functionality (Olin, 2013, p. 93). Moreover, strengthening the confidence of public authorities—who provide the legal framework for social work practice—depends largely on the profession's ability to cultivate a positive image in the public sphere (Zugazaga, Surette, Mendez, & Otto, 2006, p. 633).

It is well known that for many years the social work profession was perceived merely as a set of charitable services intended for the poor (Öztürk, 2009, p. 105). This long-standing perception has hindered the development of broader social attitudes toward social work and has brought issues of professional recognition to the forefront. Particularly in countries such as Turkey—where the discipline of social work and its professional practices were introduced more recently compared to Western contexts—the development of the profession has progressed while confronting various structural and contextual challenges. As a result, the profession has experienced difficulties in effectively presenting and establishing its professional identity within society.

Informal practices known as social services, such as assistance mechanisms within an individual's social circle, including family, relatives, neighbors, and friends, continue to exist strongly within the Turkish family structure and are frequently encountered (Selcik and Güzel, 2016, p. 466-468). The deep-rooted family ties and the importance placed on social solidarity in Turkish-Islamic culture have created a negative impression for many years regarding the profession being seen as a field of specialization.

The fact that the profession is rooted in traditions of mutual aid and charitable assistance has constituted one of the major challenges encountered by social work worldwide in its professionalization process. Throughout its evolution into a scientific discipline, the social work profession has faced various disadvantages before reaching its current form. In addition to the process of scientification, the struggle for societal recognition and acceptance has further complicated the development of the profession, creating a dual-layered difficulty (Acar & Duyan, 2003, p. 2). Considering these factors together, several questions emerge regarding whether the profession struggles to promote itself, the extent to which it is recognized, and how it is perceived by society.

The social work profession requires numerous approvals, permits,

and authorizations to demonstrate its competence and ensure its applicability in its field. The approvals obtained and the authorizations granted to social workers lay the groundwork for their work (London & Freit, 1999, cited in Duyan, 2016, p. 3). These approvals and authorizations that are granted to social workers must be provided at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in all areas of practice. Providing the necessary environment for social workers to fully apply their professional skills in line with their training varies depending on the social worker's work environment and is also related to the legal basis provided by the government agency and the number of social workers it employs. Obtaining these approvals and authorizations is also considered to be linked to the recognition of the social work profession and its members. The more policymakers, clients, institutional administrators, and society at large recognize the profession and believe in its professional competencies, the more authority, approval, and permission will be granted to the social work profession by both individuals and policymakers. In short, the more respect a profession enjoys in society, the more media coverage it receives, and the more recognition it gains, the more effective its work environments and practices will be. Within this framework, this book aims to examine the historical development of the scientific and professionalization processes of the social work profession globally and in Turkey; to identify problem areas in Turkey; and to discuss the processes of gaining recognition for the profession.

# **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION**

Since the beginning of their journey on Earth, humankind has tended to live a social life and to survive as social beings. As social beings, humans have developed their social life by forming communities such as families, groups, tribes, and states, and have survived to the present day. From the earliest times to the present, humans have become accustomed to living together and, in a sense, dependent on this condition. They have learned the requirements of coexistence, developed them, and even professionalized them in many areas. Social interaction, whether through cooperation to hunt prey or the mutual exchange of basic needs, has evolved over time according to interests and goals but has steadily increased people's adaptation to social life. People have repeatedly experienced the benefits of living together and the mutual advantages of cooperation.

Humankind, adapted to social life and accustomed to living together, has since ancient times considered helping those who lack sufficient access to the goods and services produced in society, such as the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. It is known that such humanitarian ideas have existed since ancient times (Kongar, 1972, p. 147). However, it is difficult to say that the actions taken as a result of these thoughts fully met the needs of those in need. Social life has required the social work profession to address this deficiency, and the need for the professional delivery of services has become a pressing issue. The charitable behaviors exhibited by people in social life, regardless of their underlying motivations (religious, humanitarian, or any other reason), have become the focal point of the social work profession. Social work began to blossom within the scientific community to provide these services to disadvantaged individuals in a more professional manner. Since its inception, the discipline of social work has not only focused on the professional delivery of services to disadvantaged groups by professionals but has also adopted a rights-based approach as a principle, aiming for these services to be a natural right of disadvantaged individuals and for these rights to be grounded in a legal framework.

## **The Historical Development of the Social Work Profession Worldwide**

Social work has emerged from two main sources. One source is the search for solutions to problems arising in social life because of rapid development in countries pursuing growth through capitalist methods. The other source can be said to be the humanitarian feelings that people create within their own inner worlds, in a more abstract sense. It is contrary

to the nature of social work to define it universally, as it is a profession focused on society and the individuals who comprise that society. According to social work practice and philosophy, the profile of those who seek services is unique, and the fundamental goal is to provide a service model tailored to them. For this reason, social work practices can take shape in different models at different points (Kongar, 1972, pp. 2–4). It can be said that defining the discipline and profession of social work does not fit into a universal mold, and it is difficult to place its development from the historical process to the present day into a complete chronology.

Defining clear boundaries for social work, delineating its scope, and tracing its historical development may vary depending on the country in which these initiatives are undertaken. This is because the social work profession is highly sensitive to cultural, social, and socioeconomic factors (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 26). Consequently, when attempting to document the global history of social work, one encounters uncertainties. Indeed, it is almost impossible to pinpoint a specific beginning for social work in a professional sense (Healy & Link, 2012, p. 55). However, it can be said that the journey of social work toward becoming a profession and its emergence as a scientific paradigm began in Western societies. The Industrial Revolution and the changing social life in the West, along with diversifying social problems, gave rise to social work (Çağlar, 2012, pp. 31–33).

To briefly summarize the historical journey of social work, it can be said that it began with charitable individuals providing various forms of social assistance to the poor in cities shaped by industrialization and development. Subsequently, these efforts began to take shape according to the internal dynamics of each country and continued to develop in that direction. As the process progressed, the need arose for these charitable behaviors, which stemmed from humanitarian feelings, to be offered within a professional understanding and discipline. Based on this need, institutions providing education related to social work began to open, particularly in the UK and the US (Acar & Duyan, 2003, p. 18). In other words, the emergence of social work in a professional sense can be considered to have coincided with periods such as the Industrial Revolution, the rise of industrialization to a prominent position in social life, changes in family structure, and the acceleration of technological developments. For this reason, the firsts in the history of social work generally occurred in countries that were the first to industrialize.

### **The Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Social Work**

The revolution in family structure that occurred parallel to the Industrial Revolution is considered one of the most profound social changes in human history. Even after the Cognitive Revolution and the



Agricultural Revolution, human life was organized around the nuclear and extended family and the local community for hundreds of thousands of years. Until the Industrial Revolution, the family remained the fundamental institution of production, care, and social solidarity. In the pre-industrial era, the family represented a comprehensive structure that undertook numerous functions—from economic production and childcare, to supporting the elderly and sick, to transferring vocational skills, and to maintaining social security and social order. However, the Industrial Revolution largely transferred these traditional functions to state and market institutions, weakening the central position of the family and community within the social structure. Therefore, the transformation wrought by the Industrial Revolution radically redefined not only modes of economic production but also individuals' relationships to security, belonging, and solidarity, removing the family as the cornerstone of human societies and paving the way for the emergence of a fragmented, more individualistic social structure (Harari, 2015, pp. 350–352). These changes in the family institution led authorities to seek a new instrument to replace the social support resources offered by the traditional family structure, and the need to provide a professional approach to social problems that had become more visible with the nuclear family structure began to be discussed.

Industrialization rapidly transitioned traditional family and social structures into modern social life, making it impossible for individuals to self-identify and solve social problems (Zastrow, 2013, p. 38). In the process, the traditional family structure was replaced by the nuclear family. Tasks such as elder care and childcare were no longer undertaken by family members and were instead delegated to non-family institutions. The failure of the family institution to fulfill its traditional responsibilities led to the emergence of social problems that constitute the primary focus of social work (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 79). In short, this revolution in family structure is one of the fundamental reasons for the need for the social work profession.

The new phenomena that emerged with the Industrial Revolution were cities and the working class. During this period, the working class grew rapidly and became vulnerable to exploitation. The working conditions of the early years of the Industrial Revolution were far removed from those of today. Therefore, working life created areas of exploitation and inequality. The Industrial Revolution not only created problems in industrially based urban working lives but also led to the emergence of problems in the agricultural sector and rural areas. The desire to increase agricultural production and the ambition to compete brought about mechanization. Although the Industrial Revolution created new job opportunities both in

agricultural areas and in newly emerging cities, rural areas were negatively affected by mechanization. Rural populations began to lose employment opportunities due to mechanization and migrated to cities where the workforce needed by newly established sectors offered opportunities. As a result, industrialization shifted masses from rural areas to cities. The increasing urban population also created problems such as unemployment and poverty in cities, leading to the emergence of new social problems (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 79). The emergence of these problems shifted the state's perspective on social issues and the masses' expectations of state authority. Traditional solutions began to be replaced by planned and organized institutional approaches. States gradually began to assume greater responsibility in social life, leading to the emergence of concepts such as the social state, the welfare state, social welfare, and social policy.

When we talk about a welfare state that embraces social welfare and social state practices, we think of a state, a policy, or a set of rules that guarantees a minimum income for all citizens, protects them against potential threats in social life, creates a social security environment, and ensures a certain standard of education, healthcare, and housing for all citizens, regardless of their social standing. The concept of the welfare state, born out of the idea of social welfare, reflects the understanding that public authority—which established the legal framework—should intervene in social life and not remain a bystander to the problems arising from industrialization and the increasing inequality it produces, with the aim of improving political rights (Şenkal, 2005, p. 276). When it comes to welfare state and social welfare practices, it is possible to say that these practices may vary depending on the political and socioeconomic conditions of the period. Therefore, there is no definitive definition of the social welfare state or of the public's understanding of social welfare, and the meaning of the welfare state varies across time and place. The beginning of the concept of social welfare is generally associated with the Elizabethan Poor Law. Although this law was initially designed for only a select segment of society, social welfare eventually became a matter of concern for society as a whole (Süleymanoğlu, 2016, p. 295). This law is considered a turning point in world history in terms of social welfare practices and provided the first indications of social welfare globally (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, pp. 82–83). When focusing on the history of social work, it is useful to discuss the Industrial Revolution and some of the phenomena it engendered to provide a historical background. The welfare state, which began to manifest itself more clearly with the Industrial Revolution, and the Elizabethan Poor Law, which offered the first signals of welfare-state practices, are also important topics in the history of social work.

## **The Concept of Social Welfare and the Elizabethan Poor Laws**

In 1601, the Elizabethan Poor Law was enacted in England to combat poverty. It can be said that the law consolidated the measures taken in England up to that time. According to the law, people in need of assistance were divided into three categories: the able-bodied poor, the disabled poor, and children in need of protection (Kongar, 1972, pp. 150–151). Problems such as famines, epidemics, wars, the collapse of feudal order, and droughts during the Middle Ages increased the number of people in need. The systems that existed at the time, such as the church and the traditional family—which had previously helped to heal the wounds of society, began to prove inadequate. The number of people begging in cities increased, and these individuals began to attract the attention of the rulers of the period. Numerous “Poor Laws” were passed in England from the 1300s to the 1800s to address certain social problems, such as poverty and forced begging. The most important and all-encompassing of these was the Elizabethan Law of 1601 (Zastrow, 2013, p. 50). The first regulations concerning poor laws and similar social welfare measures were introduced in England, and these also laid the foundations for charitable organizations.

During the Middle Ages, a period of strong support for the Church and Western Christianity, church aid was a widely used method for assisting those in need. However, church philanthropy experienced periods of uncontrolled and wasteful assistance, which began to create economic problems in terms of labor supply. Thus, state authorities prohibited those who could support themselves from receiving such aid (Şeker, 2008, p. 28). In other words, one of the reasons for the emergence of 1601 Poor Law can be attributed to the economic concerns of the state’s ruling class. During the period when industrialization was just beginning to take hold, it was believed that unplanned and unsystematic aid provided by state power through traditional means and religious groups encouraged certain groups not to work. This law effectively “killed two birds with one stone,” addressing the problem of labor supply—the cornerstone of industrialization and economic growth—and reducing the financial burden of aid.

Like most laws inspired by social welfare and social policy in their early stages, the poor laws enacted in England were largely motivated by the new economic understanding of the time. Therefore, they generally serve to increase labor market efficiency. These laws, which were already a regulatory element of the state in both social life and the economic sphere, were largely shaped by minds in need of labor. However, it would be wrong to say that all poor laws were solely driven by economic concerns (Kovancı, 2003, p. 131). Regardless of their motivation, such laws—especially the 1601 Poor Law—laid the seeds for the social state, welfare policy practices,

and social services throughout world history. Therefore, they are considered a milestone in the emergence and development of social services.

Another point worth mentioning in the history of social work is that social welfare programs and social work practices are sometimes used interchangeably, and social service organizations are often referred to as social welfare institutions. The scope of social welfare and the focus of social work are similar, but social welfare is a broader term. When discussing social welfare, what comes to mind creates a framework that encompasses social work. Social work is a profession that operates on issues encompassed by social welfare, and it can be said that almost all social workers work within the field of social welfare (Zastrow, 2013, pp. 38–42). However, although social work emerged with the idea of a welfare state (Süleymanoglu, 2016, p. 296) and continues to exist within social welfare systems, it is important not to confuse the concepts of social work and social welfare.

In summary, the discipline of social work, whose origins and underlying foundations we have attempted to explore, historically began with humanitarian aid practices and came into being with the recognition of the necessity of professional presentation. This belief in that necessity led to the idea of providing training to those working in the field of social assistance, and the idea of establishing schools of social work emerged to transition social work from field-based practice to theoretical grounding.

### **The Professionalization of Social Work and the Establishment of Schools**

Social work, which can be defined as both an art and a science (Duyan, 2016, p. 2), first emerged as a practical profession and continued its development. Later, by seeking a scientific paradigm, it gained a place within the social sciences (Çağlar, 2012, p. 32). To better understand the history of social work and, in addition, to understand the recognition of social work, which is the subject of this book, it is important to examine the profession's efforts to become a recognized occupation. This is because social work has struggled for many years to gain recognition as a profession and to establish a conceptual framework for itself. Due to its relatively young nature and field, social work, like other professional occupations, has experienced a challenging process in gaining acceptance.

In the 1800s, efforts were made to address social problems, especially poverty, in areas experiencing intense urbanization through the private initiatives and charitable contributions of religious leaders and religious groups. These services are generally focused on meeting basic needs and provide psychosocial religious indoctrination. The socio-economic climate of the period necessitated the implementation of these

initiatives by educated individuals. Until the 1900s, these efforts were carried out by individuals who had no prior training in human nature and who volunteered for these organizations. Therefore, it can be said that social work is a young profession and does not have a long history (Zastrow, 2013, p. 2).

Ultimately, the social work profession emerged to more effectively address urban poverty following the rise of cities in England and the United States as a result of industrialization and the changes it brought about. People motivated by philanthropic ideas and willing to volunteer in this field launched various initiatives. As a result of these initiatives, various institutions and associations were established, and the first applications of social work began to be introduced to society through these institutions.

According to Van Wormer, the motivations that shaped the development of the social work profession were two social initiatives that emerged from the idea of social welfare, which began in the late 19th century. One of these was the establishment of associations called Charity Organization Societies (COS), and the other was the opening of settlement houses in various regions (as cited in Healy & Link, 2012, p. 56).

Many associations were established to prevent poverty, but the most significant breakthrough came with the Charity Organization Society (COS). COSs were first established in England in 1869 and then spread to the United States and all its states (Karataş, 1999, p. 37). The first COS in the United States was established in Buffalo in 1877 (Healy & Link, 2012, p. 56). Settlement houses were also established during the same period as COSs. The first of these houses was Toynbee Hall, established in London. After Toynbee Hall, settlement houses began to be established in England and in many major American cities. These houses also contributed to the recognition of Jane Addams (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 88), who was at the forefront of social work in the 19th century, and to the spread of her influence in the field of social work (Zastrow, 2013, p. 3).

Meanwhile, the first juvenile court was established in the United States in 1899. This contributed to the development of individual-centered social work practices. These courts, first established in the United States, served as models for other European countries and began to spread rapidly throughout Europe. By 1905, social work had also begun to gain a foothold in hospitals for the first time. In the United States, Dr. Richard Clarke Cabot appointed social workers to monitor patients' post-hospital processes and ensure the full effectiveness of treatment, taking into account the psychosocial dimension of health (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 89). These developments broadened the scope of social work, fostering recognition and establishing it as a widespread profession. Subsequently, the number of institutions and organizations offering social work services

increased and spread to many countries, thus raising the issue of training social work personnel.

Explanations of the history of social work often focus on the establishment of social work schools (Healy & Link, 2012, p. 55). This situation, which we commonly encounter when reviewing the literature on the history of social work, is thought to be since social work began with practical applications, followed by the establishment of training programs and schools. The social work profession and its early practitioners first gained experience in the field and through practice, and only afterward began receiving theoretical and formal training in the schools that were established.

The development of social work schools is essentially based on the in-service training programs initiated within charitable organizations and the systematic expansion of these programs through case studies (Austin, 1983, p. 366). The world's first social work school (Institute for Social Work Training) opened in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 1899. This school began providing two-year theoretical and practical training to volunteers dedicated to charitable work. By 1910, fourteen social work schools had opened in the United States and Europe (Tufan & Koşar, 1999, p. 2).

Because this chapter focuses on the history of social work and its emergence as a profession, another name worth mentioning is Abraham Flexner. This book also examines how and to what extent the social work profession gained recognition. From this perspective, Abraham Flexner's contributions—particularly his raising of the question “Is social work a profession?”—are valuable both in terms of historical background and in relation to the central focus of the book.

### **Is Social Work a Profession? A Historical Debate**

Abraham Flexner was one of the most influential figures of his time in the field of professional education, particularly in medicine, in the United States. He served as assistant secretary of a society called the General Education Board, which was supported for the improvement of education in America (Austin, 1983, p. 361). In a paper he presented at the 1915 conference of the National Council of Charities and Rehabilitation Centers, he surprised his audience by stating that social work was not a profession, that it had no educational technique, and that the boundaries of the profession were very broad (Popple, 1995, cited in Healy, 2008, p. 58). He also criticized social work, stating that it was an amateur pursuit based on volunteerism within aid organizations in the 20th century and could not be established within a professional framework (Altındağ, 2011, p. 6). Flexner's criticisms constituted a major step toward the emergence of social work as a profession and its acceptance as such (Acar & Duyan, 2003, p. 4).

Through his statements and criticisms, Flexner encouraged influential figures in the field of social work to engage in self-criticism and to focus their attention on the process of professionalization.

Following Abraham Flexner's statements, Mary Richmond, another highly important figure in the history of social work, published her book *Social Diagnosis* in 1917, which is considered one of the cornerstones of social work and the first to propose a theoretical framework and methods for the profession. With this book, Mary Richmond introduced a framework for working with individuals and the necessary body of knowledge for casework to the field of social work (Zastrow, 2013, p. 4). Thus, Mary Richmond transferred her efforts in the process of establishing social work as a profession, as well as her experiences gained from the field, into a theoretical framework.

Mary Richmond is considered one of the founders of social work. Through her efforts in the field throughout her life, she paved the way for the profession to reach its current state. She made significant contributions to establishing social work as a professional occupation and achieved substantial progress in gaining acceptance for the profession. She also worked toward the establishment of social work schools and the development of professional standards. In addition to her many contributions to literature and to practice, her work *Social Diagnosis* has been particularly influential. Richmond, who was the first in the field to emphasize the importance of the family—thereby directing the discipline's focus toward the family institution—continues to exert her influence in social work through her ideas, writings, and contributions (Başçılar, 2020, pp. 153–158).

If we begin by evaluating the conditions of the period, we can say that before the twentieth century only a limited number of occupations were considered worthy of being called professions, and these were restricted to fields such as medicine, law, academia, and the clergy (Poppo, 2018, p. 169). Given this situation, the social work profession also made efforts to define itself as a profession. However, it was quite difficult for these efforts to bear fruit in the case of social work. This is because the profession, which emerged from voluntary work driven by philanthropy and religious sentiments, could give rise to the misconception that anyone with humanitarian or religious feelings could perform this work. For this reason, social service workers and leaders who were active in the field at that time and who gained practical knowledge through experience made efforts not only to educate workers and establish schools but also to ensure that the profession would be accepted both in social life and in academia.

## **The Historical Development of the Social Work Profession in Turkey**

Social work, which began to blossom in England and the United States with the Industrial Revolution and the social transformations that accompanied it, began to gain prominence in Turkey in the second half of the twentieth century with the encouragement of the United Nations. Turkish history, however, is replete with examples of social services—though not necessarily professionally provided—rooted in philanthropic and religious traditions, as well as state administrations aligned with the concept of a social state. From a historical perspective, it is evident that the states established by Turkish society and their cultural heritage have offered diverse social service practices to the public, with an approach similar to the contemporary perspective of the social work profession. Thanks to both the pre-Islamic culture of social solidarity and the post-Islamic concept of philanthropy grounded in religious principles, Turks have long been familiar with concepts such as the social state, social assistance, and social welfare, demonstrating a strong tradition in these areas throughout history and in every region in which they have lived. Although Turkish society was not unfamiliar with social solidarity, philanthropy, and the concept of a social state—and social networks such as family and kinship held an important place in daily life, which was an advantage in terms of facilitating the provision of social services—this also created a disadvantage regarding the initiation of social work training programs. As a result, social work did not begin to professionalize in Turkey until the 1960s.

The 1950s and 1960s are known as the years when Turkey and neighboring countries first began to become acquainted with the professional aspects of social services. In 1959, Law No. 7355 established the Institute of Social Services within the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance, as it was known at the time. Subsequently, in 1961, the Academy of Social Services, offering a four-year education program, was established under the Social Services Institute within the same ministry. The General Directorate of Social Services was created within the ministry, and the academy was affiliated with this directorate. By 1967, the School of Social Work had been opened within Hacettepe University. In 1969, the school continued to provide education under the name Department of Social Work and Social Services within the Faculty of Social and Administrative Sciences (Karataş & Erkan, 2011, p. 47).

As can be seen, the 1960s were highly dynamic years for Turkey in terms of social services and social service education. During this period, social services began to be included in development plans, and interest in the macro-level social work dimension of social services increased (Karataş



& Erkan, 2011, pp. 47–48). One of the factors that made the 1960s so productive in terms of social work was the generosity of the 1961 Constitution—which was approved by referendum—in its approach to the welfare state. The 1961 Constitution acknowledged that the state had to assume numerous responsibilities as a social state and guaranteed rights in many areas such as social security, unionization, cooperatives, collective bargaining, the right to strike, healthcare, and education (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 109).

Another factor enabling reforms in the structural framework and educational model of social services in Turkey is the significant role played by external actors. At the forefront of these actors is the United Nations, which has provided support in this regard in many developing countries. The enactment of the Law on the Establishment of the Institute of Social Services, dated 1959 and numbered 7355—which laid the legal groundwork and constituted one of the cornerstones of the beginning of social work education in Turkey—was the result of the efforts of consultants sent to Turkey by the United Nations (Karataş & Erkan, 2002, pp. 115–117).

Another important development for Turkey took place in 1983. In that year, Law No. 2828 on Social Services and the Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK) was enacted. This law aimed to ensure that all social service applications were provided by a single institution. The Social Services and Child Protection Agency served as the leading institution in the field of social services for many years, and most social service organizations operated under its umbrella. In 2011, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies was established to replace SHÇEK. Before the ministry was established, SHÇEK functioned as a directorate general under the Prime Ministry, but it was subsequently incorporated into a ministry. In 2018, the name of the ministry was changed to the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services, and in 2021, it took its current name, the Ministry of Family and Social Services. In recent years, most state-run social service programs in Turkey have been carried out by this ministry. It can be said that many social service graduates who have completed their licensure education and are qualified as social service specialists are employed within this ministry.

### **Social Work Education in Turkey**

The 2000s marked a turning point for social work education in Turkey. Until then, social work had been a somewhat isolated field, operating in its own bubble, so to speak. However, in the 2000s, it began to attract significant attention. While social assistance remained at the forefront, notable developments occurred in areas such as forensic social work, disability welfare, child welfare, and elderly welfare, and these

developments brought social work education into greater prominence (Alptekin, Topuz, & Zengin, 2017, p. 2). The socio-cultural environment that emerged after 2002, in particular, prepared the ground for the establishment of social work departments, and by 2006, the increase in such departments had gained considerable momentum (Alptekin, Topuz, & Zengin, 2013, p. 354). From those years to the present day, many social work departments have been established in Turkey and have begun to provide education. Although it was initially believed that this development would lead to positive outcomes regarding the status of the social work profession in Turkey, the departments that were opened without adequate planning and programming have negatively affected social work in various ways in the long term.

Social work undergraduate programs are not required to be affiliated with a specific faculty. Therefore, they have been established at various universities in Turkey under different schools and faculties. Social work departments may be affiliated with either a faculty or a school, depending on the preferences and inclinations of the faculty and university administration. There is no difference in the education or curriculum offered whether they are established within a faculty or a school, and graduates from either structure qualify as social workers. Furthermore, in parallel with the increase in social work departments mentioned above, the number of social work graduates in Turkey has begun to rise steadily and continues to do so. The first negative consequence of this increase is the potential employment problem, which is likely to emerge given Turkey's employment conditions (Aydemir & Yiğit, 2017, pp. 135–136). Employment is crucial for the sustainability of a profession and of the programs that train these professionals. The greater the employment opportunities created for social workers, the more effectively the profession can demonstrate its competencies in the field and strengthen its desirability.

In its early years, the social work profession was viewed as a form of assistance provided with a basket in hand, but it is now defined as a discipline based on scientific methods, whose implementation depends on skill and knowledge (Kuntay, 1961, pp. 19–20; Karataş & Erkan, 2002, p. 113). Despite these definitions and the progress made globally, problems in social work education in Turkey simplify the field and distance it from its aims and objectives. With the belief that there is a great need for professionals working in the field of social work and for academics involved in social work education, social work education in Turkey has emerged in an unplanned manner, without sufficient regard for national and international standards (Alptekin, Topuz, & Zengin, 2017, p. 17).

In summary, social work in Turkey began its journey in the 1960s

and continued horizontally until the 2000s. After the 2000s, it began to accelerate upward, experiencing positive developments for the field itself, for its professionals, and for the service recipients it serves. The emergence of social work from its shell occurred rapidly, influenced by Turkey's education and social policies at the time. Social work departments were opened across the country, and social workers began working in more diverse fields with the increasing number of social work institutions. While it is accurate to say that this situation represented a major development for social work in the early years, it would also be correct to state that unplanned and rapid growth in subsequent years had negative repercussions for the profession. These negative repercussions can affect social work indirectly or directly at various levels and are important in terms of the recognition and prestige of social work, which is the focus of this study. Therefore, briefly discussing the problems of social work will be useful for the objectives and aims of this research.

### **Problems Facing Social Work in Turkey**

In this section, based on the data and views presented in the relevant literature, several problem areas that are considered challenging for social work in Turkey—areas that negatively affect professionals, students, and social work educators and that influence the recognition and representation of the profession—will be discussed.

#### **2.2.2.1 Employment**

First, we can say that the issue of social work employment is a more current problem compared to other topics. This is because social work education in Turkey was monopolized by only a few universities for many years, and due to the low number of graduates, there was no employment problem—or even if such a problem existed, it was not brought to public attention. However, in recent years, graduates from both open education faculties and newly established social work departments have created a significant surplus in the supply of social work graduates, bringing employment in social work to the forefront. Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted on social work and employment.

Social work, which has a broad scope of practice, can be carried out in many different areas within state-owned institutions and organizations. However, the current employment problem stems from the fact that, when the need for social work specialists in state institutions suddenly became apparent, professionals from other fields were assigned to social work positions during years when the number of graduates in social work was insufficient. Legal regulations were introduced allowing professionals such as sociologists, teachers, and psychologists to be appointed to social work positions (Bolgün, 2016, p. 37). Even today, despite the large number of graduates and the difficulties they face in finding employment, it can still be

seen that professionals from other fields are employed in some of these positions.

Studies also show that social work students and graduates experience job anxiety. A study conducted by Işıkhhan and colleagues in 2016 with 134 fourth-year social work students revealed that the vast majority believed they would experience job anxiety after graduation. Another study based on TÜİK data showed that, in the year it was conducted, the highest unemployment rate among university graduates was 24% in the field of social work (Sevim & Altun, 2017, p. 62). A further study involving 355 students enrolled in a social work bachelor's program during the 2018–2019 academic year similarly revealed that the vast majority believed they would experience problems finding employment after graduation. Another noteworthy finding in this study was that the Ministry of Family and Social Services—then known as AÇSHB—ranked first among the institutions where students preferred to work (Ayan Kocabaş, 2019). Based on this finding, we can generalize that in Turkey, due to both working conditions and socio-economic factors, social work graduates prioritize government positions in their career plans.

In another study conducted by Doğan (2018), 50.8% of the 721 students participating in the research stated that they experienced anxiety about being unemployed after graduation. The students' thoughts about the future of the profession were also found to be moderate, with a score of 5.70 out of 10. A study conducted by Kılıç (2021) to identify the unemployment problems experienced by social work specialists also provides data on the employment experiences of social work graduates. The research was carried out with individuals who graduated in the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 periods, experienced unemployment, and were still not working in a job related to their field. Many of the participants stated that one of the reasons for the employment problem in social work was the insufficient recognition of the profession.

#### *Professional Titles and Professional Designation*

According to Duyan (2010, p. 8), while the use of the English word *social* in Turkish does not pose a problem, the translation of the word *work* into Turkish has been a controversial issue from the early years to the present day. This situation has led to a lack of a common language among academics, professionals, and social work administrators working in the field, which is one of the obstacles frequently encountered in the development of social work in Turkey (Cilga et al., 2016, p. ix). The lack of a common language has caused problems in defining the profession and has been a factor undermining its acceptance, recognition, and prestige in society (Acar & Duyan, 2003, p. 2).

Professions that can express their ideas in the shortest way using

the correct concepts and terms are advanced professions, and such professions are more easily understood and accepted by the public (Tomanbay, 2012, p. 108). One of the most fundamental problems faced by the social work profession and its academic environment in Turkey is the naming of the profession and its practitioners. This confusion, which has persisted for many years, has created a vicious cycle and has become increasingly difficult to resolve, reaching an almost intractable level. This situation has made it difficult for social work to be accepted by society and has created a major obstacle to its recognition and the attainment of professional prestige.

According to Tomanbay (2012, p. 105), the concept of “*sosyal hizmet*” in Turkish is used in two different senses. The first refers to social work as a profession, while the second denotes the field or fields in which the social work profession operates, that is, social service areas. When we look at the usage in the United States—one of the countries where social work first emerged—we see that the profession is called “social work”, whereas the areas in which the profession operates are referred to as “social service” or “social services.” In German as well, instead of *social work*, the term “Sozialarbeit” is used; instead of *social service*, the term “sozialer Dienst” is used; and for *social services*, the term “soziale Dienste” is employed. According to Tomanbay, this dual usage in these countries—meaning that one expression refers to the profession and another refers to the service areas in which the profession operates—prevents the conceptual confusion that exists in Turkish. Therefore, the proper equivalent of “social work” or “Sozialarbeit” is not “*sosyal hizmet*” but “*sosyal çalışma*” (Tomanbay, 2012, pp. 106–107).

In Turkey, the concepts of “*sosyal hizmet*” and “*sosyal hizmetler*” are conceptualized differently by various scholars. According to these views, “*sosyal hizmet*” is used to refer to the profession of social work, whereas “*sosyal hizmetler*” refers to all social service practices implemented in the country. However, according to Tomanbay (2012, p. 107), this distinction is a major mistake, and it is meaningless to claim that the singular and plural forms of the same word should carry different meanings. Tomanbay considers this situation an injustice to the Turkish language. In addition to this debate regarding the name of the profession, another long-standing issue concerns the professional titles, staffing positions, and designation of social work practitioners.

According to Tomanbay (2012, p. 123), referring to social work undergraduate graduates as “*social work specialists*” (*sosyal hizmet uzmanı*) is incorrect, and this situation creates an unfair disadvantage for individuals who hold a master’s degree. This is because the term *specialist* (*uzman*) is a designation that can only be obtained upon the completion of graduate-

level education. Those who agree with this view argue that, instead of using the title *social work specialist* for bachelor's-level graduates, they should be referred to as *social workers* (*sosyal çalışmacı*), and that staffing positions should be opened according to this title and employment should be carried out accordingly.

Another dimension of the confusion surrounding the name of the profession and the designation of social work practitioners concerns the definition of *social work officers* (*sosyal çalışma görevlisi*) in certain laws that constitute the cornerstone of social work practice in Turkey. In some of these laws, graduates of different fields have been defined under the title of *social work officer*. For example, in the Child Protection Law No. 5395, a *social work officer* is defined as “professionals who have graduated from programs providing education in guidance and psychological counseling, psychology, sociology, child development, teaching, family and consumer sciences, and social work.” Based on Tomanbay's argument mentioned above—that the profession should be termed *social work* (*sosyal çalışma*) and that the professional title *social work specialist* (*sosyal hizmet uzmanı*) should instead be *social worker* (*sosyal çalışmacı*)—it follows that the title *social work officer* (*sosyal çalışma görevlisi*) should likewise refer exclusively to individuals who hold a bachelor's degree in social work.

In conclusion, the performance of professional social work tasks—tasks that should be carried out by social work graduates—by practitioners from other fields, as well as the appointment of professionals from different disciplines to positions that should be filled exclusively by social work graduates, shifts the debate on professional terminology to yet another dimension and reflects the problems experienced regarding the recognition and visibility of the profession (Kalaycı Kırlioğlu & Kırlioğlu, 2021, p. 115). As stated at the beginning of this book, because the aim of the study is to examine the recognition of social work, the terms *social work* and *social work specialist* have been used throughout the book. This is because the concept of *social work* as the name of the profession and *social work specialist* as the title of its practitioners are more commonly used among professionals, in academic sources, and in social life, and the profession is more widely known through these designations.

### *Legal Boundaries of the Profession*

The social work profession requires numerous approvals, permits, and authorizations to demonstrate its competence and ensure its applicability in the field. The approvals obtained and the authorizations granted to social workers provide the necessary foundation for their practice (London & Freit, 1999, cited in Duyan, 2016, p. 3). These authorizations, which must be granted to social work professionals, are required at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels across all areas of practice.

Creating the environment necessary for social work professionals to fully apply their professional skills in line with their education varies according to their workplace settings, but it is also connected to the legal framework provided by state institutions and the number of social work professionals employed. It is believed that the recognition of the social work profession and its practitioners is linked to the granting of such powers and authorizations. The more policymakers, service users, institutional administrators, and the general public recognize the profession and believe in its professional competencies, the more authority and authorization they will grant to the social work profession. In short, the more a profession is respected and recognized socially, the more efficient its working environments and professional practices tend to become.

Social workers, particularly in Turkey, deliver many of their services under the umbrella of state institutions, within the boundaries set by laws and regulations. However, social work has certain professional roles, such as defending the individual, family, and community at its core against their socio-economic environment and supporting them in turning their disadvantaged situation into an advantageous one. However, the high goals imposed by these professional roles make it impossible to work within the system itself and defend the applicant against the system. Thus, the social work profession can only fully manifest itself and function to the extent permitted by legal boundaries.

#### *Professional Organizations and Public Influence*

Social workers and social work academics have a responsibility to enhance the prestige of their profession and to promote it not only at the client level during practice but also through collaboration with communities and organizations (Duyan, Serpen, & Akgün, 2014, p. 19). This responsibility can only be fulfilled through a strong professional organization and through the profession gaining public recognition. Therefore, it is important to have common professional organizations in Turkey that represent all social work professionals and that actively carry out their work.

Individuals may differ from one another in political orientation or lifestyle. However, such differences should not result in divisions at the professional level or within professional organizations. It is important for the future and development of the profession that these differences come together to make joint decisions and develop shared plans. The inability of social work professionals to unite under professional organizations prevents the establishment of a single umbrella association that would enable social work practitioners to find common ground within their profession (Bolgün, 2016, p. 36). The existence of a unified professional organization is crucial in many respects, including the formation of a

professional culture, increasing the effectiveness of the profession's recognition, and influencing public opinion on matters related to the profession (Avşar, 2019, p. 82).

### *Problems in Social Work Education*

In addition to some of the issues briefly mentioned in the section titled "Social Work Education in Turkey," this section will attempt to address the problems encountered in social work education in greater detail. A review of the relevant literature suggests that the most significant problems in social work education in Turkey include the placement of social work programs within open education faculties, the employment of academics from outside the field in social work departments, and the possibility of students from unrelated departments transferring vertically into social work programs.

When examining the academic staff working in social work departments in Turkey, it is observed that only 36% have undergraduate and graduate education in social work, while 64% have no education in the field. Although social work is an interdisciplinary profession and it is common worldwide for departments to employ faculty members from related disciplines, the situation in Turkey has gone beyond establishing an interdisciplinary approach. Due to the lack of faculty members trained in social work, academics from unrelated fields have begun to fill these positions (Alptekin, Topuz, & Zengin, 2013, p. 361). Although the proliferation of social work schools and the establishment of departments at various universities across different provinces have created positive potential for social work education, rapid and unplanned expansion has led to problems concerning educational quality. Just as professionals from other fields were previously appointed to positions requiring social work specialists due to a sudden need for personnel, a similar pattern has emerged in academia, where departments have been opened by assigning staff with neither educational background nor practice experience in social work.

In Turkey, alongside bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in social work, there are also associate degree programs titled "social services." In this context, it is thought that the similarity in naming creates confusion both within the professional field and in the public eye and leads to uncertainty among social work graduates. Offering an associate degree program with such a similar title affects the prestige and recognition of social work and creates an additional risk factor in terms of potential misrecognition of the profession.



## THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSION

When we examine the literature, it becomes evident that it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the concepts of profession, occupation, job, and work (Seçer, 2007, p. 4). Indeed, when we consider Turkish usage, the distinction between *profession* and *occupation* is not very clear. However, from the perspective of English usage, translating the Turkish concept of *meslek* simply as *profession* would create a limitation. The concept of *meslek* is broader in Turkish. A motor mechanic, painter, plumber, furniture maker, or tailor also refers to what they do as a *meslek*, and society accepts this usage; similarly, a lawyer, psychologist, engineer, or physician also refers to their work as a *meslek*. In other words, in Turkish, *meslek* encompasses not only professional education, theoretical and institutional background, but also an individual's skill and expertise (Koytak, 2020, p. 18).

If we are to speak of a distinction in Turkish usage, we can refer to a difference between the concepts of *work* and *job*. This distinction derives from the fact that *work* may be performed either for pay or without pay (such as volunteering in a social responsibility project), whereas the term *job* is generally used to describe activities carried out with the intention of earning income and making a profit (Seçer, 2007, p. 4). When examining the use of these concepts in greater detail, it can be stated that social work may be characterized both as a profession and as a job.

It is noteworthy that in both English and Turkish, the concept refers to a title acquired through education, experience, skill, or authorization, based on systematic knowledge and abilities. In other words, a profession is a title obtained through specialization in a particular field, gaining experience, and learning the relevant body of knowledge. In Turkish, many different words may be used to convey the same meaning as "profession." For the purposes of this study, the term *profession* is used in an inclusive manner. That is, any activity that individuals engage in regularly and for economic gain—based on specific education, certification, diplomas, experience, or authorization granted by an institutional structure—is evaluated within the scope of the concept of profession.

The concept of profession plays an important role in social life. Owing to its socio-economic functions and its effects on the systems within society, it constitutes a fundamental component of social interaction. The profession a person acquires, or the job they perform, generally becomes a long-term project in their personal life. It affects individuals not only economically but also in many other ways, such as the social status it provides, the role it plays in how individuals perceive themselves and how

they are perceived by others, shaping their behavior, and facilitating social participation and integration. In contemporary societies, the necessity of sustaining life is structured around paid work, and an individual's identity and position are likewise shaped around their profession. From the moment individuals begin engaging in social life, they are motivated to acquire a profession (İlhan, 2015, p. 314). This drive makes the occupational class to which an individual belongs—or the occupational class of their family members—significant within today's economic system and way of life.

### **Recognition of the Social Work Profession**

The satisfaction individuals derive from their work as professionals influences all aspects of their attitudes and behaviors, affects their mental and physical health, and addresses their socio-economic needs. A positive perception of the meaning of the profession and the value attributed to it ensures that individuals' important psychosocial needs are met (Işıksan, 1998, pp. 38–42). All professions and professionals have their own sources of satisfaction. While some professions provide this satisfaction through the opportunities they offer, others provide professional fulfillment through factors such as social respect and status (Jelsen, 1975, cited in Özen & Gülçatı, 2006, p. 55). For this reason, professions and career choices carry significance both socially and individually (Owen et al., 2012, p. 135). The choice of a profession is influenced by how well it is known and perceived by society, what it offers economically, and how current professionals represent it. One of the key factors shaping all of these elements is the recognition—or, in other words, the popularity—of the profession in question.

The concept of professional recognition is used in this book as an umbrella term to refer to the awareness that has developed in society regarding a profession, the attitudes toward that profession, how well it is known, and whether it is known accurately or inaccurately. In this context, when we consider professional recognition, we can say that the recognition of a profession is shaped by many social interactions. In addition to being linked to these interactions, the fact that a profession is represented in various ways and in different settings by many individuals makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions about its level of recognition. This is because such conclusions involve numerous variables and are inherently complex. These variables include, first and foremost, how the profession is perceived by society in general; the employment status of the profession; whether access to the profession is easy or difficult; the respect the profession commands among its practitioners; the social and economic opportunities it offers; the quality of its practitioners; and how frequently and to what extent society needs that profession. Another important factor

is the metaphors society forms about the profession and the initial associations that come to mind when the profession is mentioned.

In the modern era, the variety of occupations has increased to such an extent that it is impossible for an individual to become familiar with all of them—or even learn their names—within a lifetime (Kuzgun, 2000, p. 120). With industrialization, many jobs and occupations began to be performed on a professional basis. As technological capabilities continued to advance and reshape the way society lives, numerous new fields of work and many new professions emerged. The social work profession—which arose with the Industrial Revolution and established itself as a professional field—can be considered one of these professions. The social environment in which social work operates also affects its existence, its functionality, and the professional recognition of its practitioners, enabling them to work effectively and efficiently. Therefore, from a social work perspective, the social environment in which the profession operates and the extent to which the systems that constitute society recognize the profession are of great importance.

A positive public image—meaning high recognition of the profession and a favorable perception of it—is an important factor in the formation of a profession (Andrews, 1987, p. 484). Therefore, the social work profession and social work education require serious efforts to enhance their professional recognition within society. Increasing the functionality of a profession and the effectiveness of the educational field that trains its practitioners depends on the recognition and acceptance of that profession by society. In this way, the quality of professional practices within a well-recognized, well-understood, and respected profession will increase, and the job satisfaction of its practitioners will also rise (Işıkhani, 1998, p. 51). Conversely, if the profession is perceived as less prestigious than similar or related professions operating in the same environment, its attractiveness as a career option decreases. When more logical alternatives exist, the number of professionals entering a less-preferred profession declines over time (Auger, Blackhurst, & Wahl, 2005, cited in Kagan, 2016, p. 323). Being less preferred means fewer professionals, and consequently, reduced promotion and representation. Therefore, it is important that the field of social work is viewed by students as a recognized and respected profession when making university choices, as this contributes to the qualitative development of the field and is crucial for the benefit of society (Dennison, Poole, & Oagish, 2007, p. 159).

In professional terms, social work is a relatively young profession in world history compared to other established fields (Olin, 2013, p. 93). Its status as a young profession has made it difficult for social work to be fully understood. For many years, social work was perceived as a service

needed only by the poor, and this perception negatively affected how professionals, clients, and society viewed the field (Öztürk, 2009, p. 105). Moreover, the broad scope of the social work profession—with its many different roles and areas of practice—has made it challenging to define and recognize its professional boundaries. This wide professional spectrum has complicated efforts to represent social work within society, resulting in its reduction to a single professional role. For example, in the United States, social service professionals are often known as “those who take children away from their families,” creating the false perception that they work exclusively in the field of child welfare (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, pp. 30–31).

Social work is, by its very nature, a profession centered on both the individual and the community, and this dual focus distinguishes it from other helping professions. This focus places on social work the responsibility to intervene in individual problems, social issues, and the points at which individuals and society intersect. When considered in terms of its objectives, scope of practice, and the problems it seeks to address, there is no profession with a range as broad as that of social work (Şahin, 2002, p. 6). Although this breadth constitutes a strength of the profession, it has also created difficulties in specialization within the field (Tuncay & Tekin, 2021, p. 38) and in the perception, definition, and promotion of the profession. This difficulty, arising from the fundamental nature of social work and combined with the many issues mentioned above, has drawn the attention of the field and led numerous researchers to study topics such as the perception, recognition, and definition of social work, as well as society’s attitudes toward the profession.

### **Studies on the Recognition of Social Work**

Research on social work, the recognition and perception of the profession, and attitudes toward the field has been conducted both in Turkey and in other countries. Although studies abroad date back much earlier, research with this focus has emerged more recently in Turkey. This section presents the studies identified through the literature review and summarizes their main findings.

Condie and colleagues (1978) examined the public’s perception of social services and concluded that public perceptions had improved compared to studies conducted in the 1950s. Another noteworthy finding was that although 54% of participants had previously encountered a social worker, only 9% stated that they would seek help from a social worker when in need of counseling. This discrepancy suggests that familiarity with social workers does not necessarily translate into trust or a willingness to use their services, highlighting a gap between public awareness and professional recognition.

In a study conducted by Alperin and Benedict (1985) with 180

university students to compare perceptions of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, it was found that students viewed social workers as warm and skilled communicators; however, most indicated that they would prefer to seek help from psychologists for any psychosocial problems they experienced. This finding aligns with the results of the study in terms of preferences related to individual counseling processes. It also raises the possibility that the recognition of social work's professional interventions and individual-level practices may be relatively low.

Another study was conducted in Scotland with 1,015 individuals aged 16 and over to assess the public's knowledge of and perceptions toward social services. The study found that participants most associated social services with child neglect and abuse, as well as with child and elderly care. Additionally, 43% of participants held positive views on social services, whereas 23% expressed negative views. It was also reported that 40% of participants were aware of the training that social service professionals receive (Davidson & King, 2005).

Dennison and colleagues (2007), drawing inspiration from efforts initiated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to enhance the perception and recognition of social work, conducted a study to examine university students' perceptions of and attitudes toward the social work profession. The study, which included 678 undergraduate students from various departments, found that students who had previously interacted with a social worker held more positive perceptions of the profession. Another important finding reported by the researchers was that the majority of students believed that social workers were underpaid.

A study conducted with 386 individuals in New Zealand concluded that participants possessed substantial knowledge about the social work profession and social workers and had generally developed a positive attitude toward the profession. The findings also revealed that public perception tended to associate social work primarily with work involving children and young people (Staniforth, Fouché, & Beddoe, 2014).

A study conducted in Israel with 1,417 participants aged 21 and over who had not previously received social services examined public attitudes and knowledge regarding social workers. The study reported a lack of understanding about the professional roles and responsibilities of social workers. Another noteworthy finding was that, when compared with other professions in terms of the perceived effectiveness of treatment and assistance, social workers ranked fourth—after psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses (Kagan, 2016).

When examining research conducted in Turkey related to the

recognition of social work education and the profession, numerous studies can be identified. One such study was carried out by Aytar (2007) in the field of medical social work. The study, which aimed to determine family physicians' perceptions of the roles and functions of social workers, included 83 physicians in Düzce. The participants were asked whether they had taken any courses related to social work during their medical education. More than half of the physicians (66.3%) indicated that they had not taken any such courses. When asked whether they knew what social workers do, only 7% responded affirmatively. The study concluded that physicians' knowledge regarding the professional skills, roles, and responsibilities of social workers was inadequate (Aytar, 2007).

Another study conducted within the context of medical social work examined the recognition and perception of social work units among 70 patients at Istanbul Üsküdar State Hospital. The study concluded that the medical social work unit was not sufficiently known among patients receiving services in healthcare institutions. One striking finding was that when patients were asked whether they were aware of the medical social work unit in the hospital, 58.6% stated they were not aware of it, while 14.3% were undecided. Furthermore, when asked where the medical social work unit was located within the hospital, 70% of the patients responded, "I do not know" (Gündüz & Taylan, 2015:129–134). Based on the study findings, it appears that awareness among clients regarding medical social work—one of the primary practice settings of the profession—is quite low.

A study conducted by Bolgün (2016) aimed to examine the opinions and perceptions of individuals living in the province of Manisa regarding social workers and the social work profession. According to the findings, 53% of participants reported that they had never heard of social work and were unaware that such a profession existed. The data therefore indicate that one out of every two people in the region where the study was conducted was entirely unfamiliar with the discipline of social work and its practitioners. Another notable finding was that, despite this lack of awareness, participants expressed generally positive attitudes toward social workers and the profession (Bolgün, 2016).

One of the fields of practice within social work—yet not fully implemented in Turkey—is school social work. In social work practices to be carried out in educational institutions, the perspectives of teachers, who will work under the same institutional structure, toward the social work profession and the professional competencies of social workers are considered important. One of the main factors influencing these perspectives is the level of recognition among other professionals working in the institution regarding the social work, profession and discipline. In the literature on school social work and perceptions of social work, two studies

conducted in Turkey were identified. These are Akyüz's (2018) study titled "*İlköğretim Öğretmenlerinde Sosyal Hizmet Algısı ve Okul Sosyal Hizmeti*" and Kuli's (2018) study titled "*Okul Ortamlarında Sosyal Hizmet İhtiyacı: Rehber Öğretmenlerinin Okul Sosyal Hizmeti ile İlgili Düşünceleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma*."

In Akyüz's (2018) study, it was reported that teachers held positive perceptions of social work, although their knowledge about the profession was insufficient. In Kuli's study conducted with 100 guidance counselors, more than half of the participants (67%) stated that they were familiar with the social work discipline and believed that the social work profession would contribute to addressing problems encountered in schools. Additionally, guidance counselors indicated that they had better knowledge of the social work profession.

Another study related to the professional recognition of social work was conducted by Uçan, Baydur, and Yıldırım (2019). In this study, carried out with 986 individuals aged 18 and over in the city center of Manisa, 66.2% of participants reported that they did not know the areas in which social workers are employed or the duties of social workers, leading to the conclusion that social services and social workers are not fully recognized. The study also found that as the level of education increased, participants' knowledge of social workers and social services increased as well. Overall, more than half of the participants stated that they were unaware of the competencies of social workers and did not know what social services encompass. The issue of the recognition of social work—also the focus of our research—was examined in this study at the societal level (Uçan, Baydur, & Yıldırım, 2019).

In the master's thesis conducted by Kılıç (2021), titled "*Sosyal Hizmet Lisans Mezunlarının İşsizlik Problemleri ve Buna Bağlı Olarak Yaşadıkları Sosyal Sorunlar*," the research was carried out with individuals who had graduated from social work programs but were unable to find employment. The study aimed to identify the unemployment problem and describe the social issues that accompany it. Among the views expressed by the participants, there were also striking statements regarding the recognition of the profession. Fourteen out of the fifteen participants reported that the social work profession was not recognized, and that those who claimed to know the profession perceived social workers merely as individuals who provide in-kind or cash assistance. Participants also emphasized that one of the major obstacles to employment is the lack of professional recognition of social work. When compared with Avşar's (2019) study mentioned above, it can be said that similar conclusions were reached. The findings demonstrate that employment—an issue of vital importance for any profession—is closely linked to the level of professional

recognition.



## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The historical and contemporary analysis presented throughout this book demonstrates that social work—both globally and in Turkey—has evolved within a complex intersection of social change, institutional development, and continuous efforts to establish a clear professional identity. Originating from philanthropic initiatives and responses to the social disruptions of industrialization, social work gradually structured itself as a scientific discipline and a profession grounded in specialized knowledge, ethical principles, and practice-based competencies. Nevertheless, its relatively young status, interdisciplinary nature, and wide scope of practice continue to shape the ways in which it is understood, interpreted, and recognized by society.

The Turkish experience reflects these global dynamics while presenting its own unique trajectory. Although traditions of social solidarity and charitable support are deeply rooted in Turkish culture, modern, professional social work began to take shape only in the 1960s, supported by state reforms and international collaboration. The expansion of social work education in the 2000s generated promising opportunities; however, rapid and unplanned growth also produced challenges. Issues such as the employment of non-social work professionals in social work positions, inconsistencies in professional titles, the opening of departments without adequate academic staff, and the existence of similarly named associate degree programs have contributed to confusion in professional identity and hindered the recognition of the profession.

At the societal level, empirical studies discussed in this book reveal significant gaps in public awareness and understanding of social work. A substantial portion of the population remains unfamiliar with the profession's scope, roles, and competencies, and when social workers are recognized, perceptions are often limited to a narrow set of functions, particularly in child welfare or financial assistance. Importantly, these findings highlight not negative attitudes but insufficient knowledge—an obstacle that can be overcome. Parallel to this, studies among students, clients, and allied professionals show that when awareness exists, attitudes toward social work are generally positive, recognizing social workers as approachable, skilled, and helpful practitioners.

A contemporary issue that must be acknowledged in any discussion of the profession's future is the influence of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and the unprecedented accessibility of information. While these advancements offer opportunities for innovation in service delivery and information management, they also underscore a fundamental truth: social work is intrinsically a human-centered profession. Empathy,

communication, relational practice, and the capacity to work directly with individuals, families, and communities cannot be replaced by technological tools. Therefore, in Turkey and elsewhere, it is essential that practical training occupies a central—not secondary—place in social work education. Fieldwork, supervised practice, and experiential learning are indispensable for developing professional competence and ethical judgment. As digital tools expand, the task is not to substitute practice with technology but to integrate technology in a manner that strengthens, rather than weakens, the relational foundations of the profession.

The findings presented throughout this book demonstrate that professional recognition is not merely symbolic; it is a structural requirement for the effectiveness of social work. Higher recognition enhances employment opportunities, improves interdisciplinary collaboration, strengthens public trust, and reinforces the profession's capacity to contribute to social welfare systems. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the professional identity, recognition, and societal value of social work in Turkey:

- Adopting clear, consistent terminology—particularly regarding the title of the profession and its practitioners—is essential for reducing conceptual confusion and reinforcing a coherent professional identity.
- Public institutions should actively communicate the roles and competencies of social workers. Clear institutional messaging will enhance both public understanding and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Assigning social work positions to non-social work professionals undermine the discipline's legitimacy and service quality. Employment policies should prioritize social work graduates for social work roles.
- The growth of social work programs must be accompanied by national standards for curriculum, faculty qualifications, and institutional capacity. Academic staff trained specifically in social work are essential for professional socialization.
- The establishment of a unified, national professional organization capable of representing all social workers would strengthen public advocacy, professional solidarity, and policy influence.
- Accurate and consistent representation of social work in media, public campaigns, and community programs is crucial for correcting misconceptions and enhancing recognition.
- Further empirical studies are needed to monitor how social work is perceived in different regions and sectors of society. These

findings should guide policy, education, and awareness strategies.

In conclusion, the recognition of social work as a profession is both a reflection and a determinant of its effectiveness in practice. Ensuring that social work is understood, valued, and supported by society is essential not only for the profession itself but also for the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. The historical development, current challenges, and future prospects discussed in this book affirm that social work is an indispensable component of a just, inclusive, and humane social order. Strengthening its recognition will contribute not only to the profession's progress but also to the advancement of social welfare systems and the broader pursuit of social justice.

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