

## ***Incorporation of Religious Knowledge and Spirituality into Social Work Education: A Case of Pakistan***

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### ***Abstract:***

*The current review-based paper sets to argue that religious knowledge and spirituality should be included in the social work curriculum in the context of Pakistan. Incorporation of religion knowledge and spirituality in the social work education and practice is getting attention of researchers and scholars at global level. This has become significant for making social work practice more effective and acceptable in Muslim countries. At the moment, Pakistan is 5<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world with an overwhelming majority of Muslim population. Here, professional social work started in early 1950s soon after independence of the country but still could not acquire status of a recognized and socially accepted profession as it is in the Western world. Despite existence of social work education in Pakistan for more than six decades, till date social work education and practice model is mainly westernized and needs indigenization for addressing local social problems and needs in the cultural context. Islam is complete code of life and provides comprehensive guidelines for all aspects of human life including carrying out welfare activities for the fellow human being. Islam spread in Sub-continent region through sufis who were embodiment of spirituality and enlightened minds and souls of millions of people. That is why religion and spirituality occupy central place in social lives of people of Sub-continent in general and Pakistan in particular. Based on religious mindedness of local people, mosque and prayer leader occupy a central place in the society and are very important in influencing public opinion at large. That is why, message delivered by prayer leader from mosque is considered significant and is hardly dishonored by people. Based on massive belief in religion and spirituality, incorporation of religious knowledge as well as spirituality in social work education and*

*practice would be fruitful in term of its effective practice and social acceptance by common people in an Islamic country like Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Religious knowledge, social work curriculum, professional social work, spirituality, Pakistan.

Incorporation of religious knowledge in the social work education and practice has recently attracted attention of researchers and scholars at global level (Husain, 2017). The Islamic republic of Pakistan appeared as an independent country on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 as result of partition of British India. Official religion of the country is Islam and currently it is 5<sup>th</sup> most populous country with a population of more than 220 million. With this population volume, it becomes second largest Islamic country with more than 96% of its population as Muslims. Economically, Pakistan is placed in the list of developing countries with per capita income of \$1543 which is one of the lowest with respect to its neighboring countries (Government of Pakistan, 2019). The country is mainly an agricultural one and majority of its population is directly or indirectly dependent on agricultural (Government of Pakistan, 2019). There are almost half a million mosques in Pakistan spreading all over the country. In a recent survey, literacy rate in Pakistan was reported 62.3 %, gender wise 72.5% and 51.8% was literacy rate of males and females respectively (Government of Pakistan, 2019). Overall, almost one third population of Pakistan is living below poverty line, and more than this proportion of population is vulnerable to poverty because of being slightly above the line of poverty.

There is similarity between core values of social work profession and Islamic teachings such as elevating human dignity, emphasizing on social justice, extending helping to the poor and paupers and exhibiting integrity in performing one's duties (Hatta et al., 2021). Based on this commonality, the current paper makes an argument that religious education and spirituality should be made part of social work education in a country like Pakistan.

### **Professional Social Work in Pakistan**

The history of professional social work is not much old as compared to other widely accepted professions such as medicines, law and engineering etc. In this regard, Elizabethan Poor Laws of 16<sup>th</sup> century are considered first organized initiative for running welfare-oriented services for the poor and needy (Skidmore & Thackeray, 1976). Social work as an academic discipline emerged almost 100 years ago in Europe and America and is significantly growing day by day (Midgley, 2001). The aims of social work education is to impart training to students for getting knowledge and techniques for addressing socio-economic problems met

by individuals, groups and communities (Young, 1998). According to Nanavatty (1990), “No curriculum design is determined on a blank slate or in a vacuum; it is confined by time, place and the prevailing social, political, economic and cultural context in a given country”. That is why most of the countries design their own curriculum in line with socio-economic and cultural values. But this is not true in case of developing countries especially South Asian region which most often follow western curriculum. That is why in most of the countries, westernized version of social work education is being imparted till date (Noble, 2004).

The initiation of social welfare in most parts of global south can be traced on two lines; firstly, religious teachings and cultural values and secondly colonialism. Since Pakistan was created in name of religion, therefore its social welfare program was necessarily based on Islamic teachings. As result of mass migration across the border, newly born state of Pakistan had to deal with millions of refugees who migrated from India as result of partition of United India (Graham, Al-Krenawi & Zaidi, 2007; Rehmatullah, 2002 & Jabeen, 2013). So, complex social problems emerged with the birth of Pakistan.

Pakistani society is known for its charity, philanthropy and volunteerism, that is why social work activities are majorly carried out by religiously motivated volunteers and right-wing activists. Along with volunteerism and philanthropic approach, there have been efforts to shift social work practice in Pakistan from charity-based activities to professional services. At the moment, it can be claimed that development-oriented approach of social work is in place in Pakistan and the social work practitioners are focusing on social justice and empowerment of the powerless segments of the society (Samta, 2016). Nevertheless, popular model of social work practice is charity based and religious organizations play pivotal role in confronting any natural calamities across the country.

### **Social Work Education in Pakistan**

Social work education in Pakistan was started with the recommendations of UN technical experts who were called by Government of Pakistan for seeking consultancy about how to overcome socio-economic problems of this newly born country. On the recommendations of UN experts, first in-service training program was started in 1952. The training program aimed at introducing professional social work and strengthening skills of the trainees for preparing them to be leaders in the field of professional social work in Pakistan (Rehmatullah, 2002).

It was the year 1954, when University of the Punjab, Lahore offered two years diploma course for training social workers on the professional line. It is worth mentioning that curriculum by that time was in accordance with western cultural values as the subject was naïve in the country

(Rehmatullah, 2002). By that time, it was assumption that westernized curriculum would be discouraged and replaced with indigenous stuff that reflects cultural values of the Pakistan (Rehmatullah, 2002). But this remained merely a dream which could not be materialized mainly because of lack of interest and sheer negligence of the social work academia. Till this day, there are only few books to name which have been written by local authors.

It is well known that there are commonalities between Islamic teachings and western concept of modern social work such as elevating human dignity, equal opportunities for everyone, integrity and providing financial as well social support to the poor and vulnerable groups of the society. The west originated knowledge of social work has many positives; however, it is not meant to properly cater to social problems prevailing in the Islamic countries (Hatta et al., 2021).

University name	Currently offered programs	Starting year
University of the Punjab	BSW, MSW, M. Phil, PhD	1954
University of Karachi	BSW, MSW, M. Phil, PhD	1961
University of Sindh Jamshoro	BSW, MSW, M. Phil	1966
University of Baluchistan, Quetta	BS, M.A M. Phil and PhD	1974
University of Peshawar	BS, M.A M. Phil and PhD	1976
The Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science & Technology	BS, M. A	2002
University of Sargodha	BS, M.A M. Phil	2003
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur	BS, M.A M. Phil	2004
Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University	M.A	2005
Kohat University of Science and Technology	BSW, M. Sc, M. Phil	2007
Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University	BS, M. A	2012
University of Malakand	BSW, M. A	2015
Women University Swabi	BSW, M. A	2013
Lahore College for Women University	BSW	2016
University of Okara	BSW	2020

## Table 1

*Universities Offering Social Work Education in Pakistan*

Source: Developed by author based on online information

It has been noted that in most of the cases, social work program is being offered in the universities and colleges located in the urban areas whereas as more than 60% of the population of Pakistan is living in the rural areas. Social work graduates prefer to get field work training and job in the urban areas (Riaz, 2016).

**Social Work Curriculum in Pakistan**

A profession like social work meets more challenges in designing curriculum than any other discipline because it directly deals with the human subject which keep on changing continuously with the passage of time (Young, 1998). According to Rikhotso (2013), all the practicing professions including social work have their theoretical knowledge base and reflect values, culture and socio-economic problems of that particular society where it is practiced (Rikhotso, 2013).

Researcher such as Riaz (2016) are of the view that modern social work has appeared as profession and undergone evolution in term of curriculum design and qualification which has improved from diploma to degree. According to Rehmatullah (2002), in the beginning social work curriculum was categorized into three parts; orientation phase of social work which includes social work as profession, social problems of Pakistan and allied social sciences which are closely related to social work profession.

Social work profession aims at inculcating specific and specialized knowledge, a set of skills and professional attitude to the students. At the beginning of social work education in Pakistan, it was not easy for this new profession to expand because of lack of education and training facilities as well as government interest and appreciation for professional social workers. That is why, in five decades (1950s to 2000), only five public sector universities were offering social work degrees (Khalid, 2006). Till date, due to lack of recognition as one of the professions, private universities are not offering social work which remains one of the reasons for not getting due space in the educational spectrum of Pakistan (Riaz, 2016).

**Existing Practice Models of Social Work in Pakistan**

As discussed in previous section, there are two models of social work practice in Pakistan. First one is the centuries old traditional method of doing welfare-oriented activities for the fellow human being. This model of social work practice is deeply influenced by Islamic teachings. Since Pakistan is a Muslim majority country, so social welfare activities in

Pakistan are colored by Islamic teachings. There are several welfare institutions of Islam such *Zakat*, *Bait ul Mal*, *Fitrah* and *Sadqah*. At the same time, there are several religion-based organizations in Pakistan which are rendering massive welfare services for the poor and vulnerable population. Few of the prominent organizations includes *Al-Khidmat* Foundation, *Minhaj* Welfare Foundation, *Shoukat Khanum* Trust, *Sahara* Trust and *Dawat Islami*. These organizations are run by religiously motivated volunteers who work free of cost, just for getting reward in the life hereafter. These organization receive huge funding from multiple sources such as philanthropists' donations, *Sadqah* and *Fitrah* and are operative throughout the country. Their activities include provision of food, free education, free medical treatment, help in building homes/living conditions, provision of dower to the poor girls and creating awareness on the part of masses. The role of these religious organizations in provision of rescue and relief services during disasters is well recognized by national and international agencies.

The second model of social work practice is that one known as western or modern social work. As mentioned in the previous section, its dates back to early fifties immediately after independence of Pakistan. This model of social work practice is largely adopted by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which receive financial aid from international donor agencies including UNO welfare organization, USAID, DFID, JICA, and alike. These NGOs engage professional social workers and are rendering multiple services such education, health, advocacy and training for income generation. Although these NGOs hire services of professional social workers for delivery of several services, but still professional social workers do not have inputs/sound voice in decision and/or policy making process. Majority of the NGOs in Pakistan are being headed those who are not qualified social workers.

### **Mosque, Prayer Leader and Social Work Practice in Pakistan**

Islam is complete code of life and offers an all-embracing way of spending life to its followers, that is why social work practice with Muslim service users should be in line with Islamic teachings and values (Devore & Schlesinger (1994) & Al-Krenawi and Graham, (2000). Muslim society and plays an important role in maintaining and retaining social relationships (Mughal, 2015). That is why, mosque is all the time well known place and a symbol of national identity in Pakistan such as *Baadshahi Mosque* and *Faisal Mosque* in Lahore and Islamabad respectively. Mosque is an important place right from beginning of Islam, as it has been a community center for the Muslims other than a place for offering congregational prayers. The institution of mosque is centuries old and occupies central place in social lives of Muslims across

Pakistan. In addition to a place for offering prayers, mosque is also source of welfare for the poor and destitute. When people meet in the mosque for the congregational prayers, they also ask about welfare of the fellow Muslims. In general, mosque is not an institution for financial help but yet needy and the poor are helped by philanthropists (Mughal 2015). Mosque occupies very important place in the Pakistan society and one can found at least one mosque in each of the village/locality throughout Pakistan. Based on sanctity of mosque in the Pakistani society, it remains hub of social life and provides very effective platform for establishing and maintaining social relationships. Likewise, Prayer leader (*Imam masjid*) is given high respect and regard and is considered someone who is pious, honest and trustworthy. That is why generally people have a thorough belief in what prayer leader says in his sermons and speeches. In most of the cases, when there is conflict between two persons/groups, they would have approached prayer leader and would accept unconditionally whatever he decides. In rural areas especially prayer leader is central figure in reconciliation and settlement of mutual conflicts within groups and communities. In many cases, community people discuss their personal and private matters and seek opinion from prayer leader.

On the other hand, there is poor perception about NGOs and their role in socio-economic development is also questioned and doubted by most of Pakistani people, its main reason is opposition of prayer leaders who preach that NGOs are extending western agenda and working against the religious and cultural values of Pakistan. Based on this strong message from mosque, NGOs as well professional social workers serving in them failed to earn social recognition and trust of local community people.

Mosques also serve as center for providing financial assistance to the needy and the poor. People in Pakistan generously donate when there is call for financial assistance from a mosque with the belief of getting reward in the life hereafter. Muslim philanthropists also divide free food to participants of congregational prayers in Pakistan; hence it serves a place to feed to the hungry people. Based on this much influence of mosque and prayer leader, it can be stated that social work profession needs acceptance from mosques and prayer leaders which would be easier in case of incorporation of religious knowledge in the social work education and practice.

### **Social Work, Islam and Spirituality**

The social work profession, which emerged in North America and European countries, is generally recognized as secular and liberal globally. That is why, effect of religion on social work education and practice has been ignored during 20<sup>th</sup> century (Husain, 2017). Major aims

of social work profession include mitigation of human sufferings and enhancing wellbeing. For achieving this purpose, social work profession puts emphasis on fulfilment of basic human needs and making empowered to the lagging behind and socially excluded segments of the society (Hatta et al., 2021). Social work professions intend to promote social justice, provision of human rights and overall making efforts for fostering positive social change (IFSW, 2000), these goals of social work profession are in line with Islamic teachings and ideology.

Just like any other human being, social workers have different understanding of spirituality and its importance in their day to day to lives. It is worth mentioning that many of the service users may have different understanding of spirituality and may have varying importance of spirituality in their lives. That is why professional social workers should believe in broader definition of spirituality which includes range of beliefs being possessed by service users in their private lives. One such concept of spirituality has been given to the social workers which denotes that it is an attitude/approach to life which aims search for meaning, purpose and morally fulfilling relations with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality (Furman et al., 2005: 819). It can also be defined as:

Spirituality is a transformational process through which the different aspects of life are integrated (physical, emotional, occupational, intellectual and rational). It involves a connectedness to oneself, others, nature, and to a larger meaning or Presence. It is strongly associated with creativity, play, love, forgiveness, compassion, trust, reverence, wisdom, faith and sense of oneness. (Staude, 2005: 256).

The National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999) makes very specific mention of individuals' religious beliefs and practices:

Social workers also should be aware of the impact on ethical decision making of their clients' and their own personal values and cultural and religious beliefs and practices. They should be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly (p. 3)

Both IFSW and IASSW (2004) acknowledged that professional social workers need to have knowledge of the spiritual factor which requires them to develop an understanding of human development and behavior. Likewise, Sanzenbach *et al.*, (1989) noted that social workers have to deal with diverse service users who have different religious and spiritual beliefs and needs, social workers dealing such service users need to be aware and understand religion and spirituality if they have to serve those who signify religion and spirituality in their lives. It is obvious that social



work practitioners and educators need to give priority to knowing usefulness of religious and spiritual beliefs in education and training because they are supposed to meet such clients whose need to be dealt from religious and spiritual perspective. Social workers should be able to respond in befitting manner to all types of service users including those having great influence and inspiration for religion and spirituality (Gilligan & Furness, 2006). Mathew (2009) argued that all people have spiritual needs irrespective of their age, race, gender, culture, ethnicity and ability. Likewise, the author added that if professional social workers do not recognize and respect for religion and spirituality, they might not be successful in provision of care services and in dispensation of professional duties with the concept of person-centered all-inclusive care.

Being Muslim majority country, Pakistan is under deep influence of religion and spirituality as Islam spread in this region through *Sufis* (a Muslim ascetic and mystic) and their preaching using spirituality as an instrument. It is surprising to note that very little focus has been placed on training spiritually and culturally sensitive social workers who could appropriately deal with the Muslim service users. It has also been noted that there is very limited research on social work practice with Muslim families and communities. Besides, researchers and scholars have ignored Islam and its relationship with modern social work. There is wide gap on the literature on this subject (Borell, 2010). Islam is not just collection of rituals and prayers, rather it offers code for spending entire life, right from birth to death. According to Islamic teachings, true Muslim is one keeps care of fellow human being including those who are hungry, thirsty or needy. Islam teaches to its followers to do good with people on the earth, in return God on high will be merciful to you. Muslim scholars trace roots of professional social work in the Quranic teachings which emphasize upon doing good for fellow human beings as given under:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity, to fulfil the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, God fearing (Al-Qur'an, 2:177).

As is evident from above cited quote, holy Quran emphasizes upon extending assistance for orphans, needy and destitute. Generally, it is

perceived that Islam merely focuses on charity and philanthropy but deep study of holy Quran and *Hadith* (saying of holy Prophet peace be upon him) reveals that it focuses on self-dependency and autonomy as modern social work does.

### **Challenges for Incorporation of Religion Knowledge and Spirituality**

There is shortage of literature highlighting concept of social work in Islamic teachings in term of number and scope. So far, little academic work has been done on indigenization and contextualization of social work practice within Muslim countries (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). There is dearth of indigenous literature on overall social work and especially with reference to social work and spirituality. In developing countries, West originated knowledge is deemed as superior and scientific as compared to knowledge produced by local scholars (Hatta et al., 2021). That is why, any effort for modifying existing social work curriculum is nullified by those who believe that professional work has nothing do with religion and religious teachings.

Regarding incorporation of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice, many of the stakeholders are aware about its potential importance and have positive view point about it, however some of them show reluctance and are not willing to agree with the idea because they believe its outdated and extraneous things to do (Gilligan, 2003). Another obstacle according to Midgley (1981), is that there exists professional imperialism in social work profession in the developing countries because local cultural values and dynamics of development have never been not taken into consideration by professional social workers. Pakistan is one of the case where social work curriculum has not been indigenized despite its teaching and practice expanding over more than six decades.

Pakistan is predominantly Muslim majority country and large number of *sufis* buried in it, that is why there is massive acceptance and recognition of spirituality on the part of its majority of population. Approaching target individuals, groups and communities is quite easy and acceptable when applying religion and/or spirituality. But generally, religion and spirituality are represented by religious persons such as prayer leader, religious scholars (*Ulma*) religious leaders and spiritual healers (*pirs*). Generally, people of Pakistan have a pre-conceived notion that person(s) with a typical costume and appearance would talk about spirituality and not a person with pants-shirt without beard. That is why in most of the cases, when professional social workers representing any NGO interact with groups and communities are hardly trusted and accepted by local groups and communities.

In the context of Pakistan, there is availability of literature on spirituality but in local languages instead of English, that is why it has not been connected with social work theory and practice. Likewise, there is also misconception on the part of professional social workers that Islamic teachings and spirituality cannot be practiced while doing development centered activities (Western model of social work). In addition to this, professional social workers in Pakistan believe that spirituality has nothing to do with the socio-economic development and solution of day-to-day problems being faced by individuals, groups, families and communities. As pointed out by Mathew (2009), there is hardly discussion on religion and spirituality among the professional social workers, so far it can be stated that there is ambivalence or even expression of aggression about such types of interaction. Not to talk about spirituality, Islamic teachings have also not been made part of the social work curriculum. Out of several courses of BSW or MSW, only one course named as history and philosophy of social work has one topic: relationship between social work and Islam. There has been no inclusion of any other Islamic or spiritual concept in the course contents of social work in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

In the context of Pakistan, religion and spirituality are central to life of majority of people irrespective of age, gender, race and culture. Every one of us is influenced by religion and spirituality and most of our choices are shaped by religious values. Pakistan is predominantly a Muslim majority country where people have emotional and very strong attachment with religion and spirituality. Although Islam reached in sub-continent through Arab traders but spread through *sufis* who were embodiment of spirituality. That is why *sufis* and spirituality are widely known and near to hearts and minds of vast majority of population of Pakistan. Modern social work began in early 1950s, immediately after existence of Pakistan as an independent country but despite its presence for more than six decades, it still struggling for its legitimate status of a full-fledged socially accepted profession. Despite this, professional social work is being taught in universities and colleges and being wisely practiced in public and private agencies across the country. So far, social work education and practice in Pakistan is mainly following western model and has hardly been indigenized. Mosque occupies a central place in the Muslims societies and same is true in case of Pakistan. Professional social workers have to deal with variety of service users with socio-economic and psycho-social problems. So making religious knowledge and spirituality part of curriculum would help professional workers to

better deal with service users especially those who believe in religion and spirituality.

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