

Social workers affecting social policy in Portugal

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Policy practice has been gaining a growing interest in social work literature, since it is considered that such practice may promote social policies committed with the furthering of social welfare and justice, but more research is needed on how policy practice is embedded in social worker's professional practice and which factors may enhance or constraint such kind of practice. This communication is based on the first extensive study trying to ascertain if and how Portuguese social workers incorporate it in their daily professional work, by developing activities focused on influencing social policies, bringing some light on the level of involvement of social workers in policy practice in Portugal. The study approach was quantitative, based on a snowball sample of 265 valid answers to an online survey. The conceptual model was supported in the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba, et al, 1995) on political participation, and on the Policy Practice Engagement Model (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015) which described the main predictors for engaging in policy practice in social work. The findings led to the conclusion that the social workers showed a low level of engagement in policy practice activities, especially those which imply a greater public exposure, acting with the media, policy makers or public officers to share opinions, make a proposition or report a problem. Considering as main factors the socio-political context, the professional context, the organizational context and individual factors, the findings showed that the last explained most of the differences in the social workers involvement in policy practice, especially when considering interest and efficacy. The study pointed out the need to further research in this area. Given that policy practice implies acting in the political structures, political participation may work as a strong predictor for engaging in policy practice. The study showed that social workers are not politically active and distrust the main political institutions. Although in other countries social workers are more politically active than the average citizen (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Ritter, 2008) the level of distrust and disaffiliation shown in this study suggest the need to further studying social worker's political participation. Professional associations and academia are the main stakeholders in the reinforcement of policy practice. The professional associations may work as actors by proxy once social workers recognize the importance of having strong professional associations that allow them to avoid the direct exposure to the political structures. Regarding the academic background, results show that social workers acknowledge that to influence social policy is part of their professional purpose, however they don't seem to know how to do it and need to develop the required skills for a better performance in this field. Therefore, Academia can play a lead role in the reinforcement of social workers activity in the social