

Social Workers in Political Office

A Comparative Perspective on Recruitment, Career Patterns
and Social Advocacy



Edited by Tobias Kindler, Sigrid Leitner,
Eva Maria Löffler and Klaus Stolz

SOCIAL WORKERS IN POLITICAL OFFICE

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Portugal: delayed political engagement and short terms of office

Francisco Branco

This chapter analyses the engagement of social workers holding elected office in Portugal, focusing on the 21st century. As background, a historical perspective is adopted, analysing the first participation of social workers as elected politicians in the context of the authoritarian Estado Novo political regime (1933) and the restoration of democracy after the 1974 Carnation Revolution.

Methodologically, analysis of documentary and secondary sources was carried out, and fresh data were gathered through interviews with former and current elected social worker deputies in the national Parliament (*Assembleia da República*; 3) and the Madeira Regional Parliament (*Assembleia Legislativa Regional*; 1) as well as social workers elected as mayor (2). In the absence of systematic data on social workers elected at the municipal level, an online survey was circulated among members of the National Association of Social Workers (APSS) to provide a census of social workers elected at the municipal level. This covered region, municipality, positions, mandates, political affiliation. Information was gathered from a non-representative sample ($n = 43$) for the terms from 1990 to 2024.

Social work as a profession

The institutionalisation of social work in Portugal occurred in 1935 under the Francophone strand, which was evident in the early initiatives in training and the campaigns for its professionalisation (Branco, 2017a; 2018). In this context, the profession was termed ‘social service’ (*serviço social*), with absolute equivalence with the Anglo-Saxon term ‘social work’. As Laforest explains, in French-speaking or French-influenced countries where the Catholic religion is dominant, the term ‘social work’ derives from the decisive role of the Catholic Church in the development and framing of this activity (Laforest 1984, cited in Mayer, 2002).

This chapter is about the social worker (*assistente social*) profession in Portugal, not covering professional disciplines such as specialised educator (social pedagogy) and ‘sociocultural animator’ that, along with the historical

profession of *assistant de service social* compose, according to the Francophone designation, the professions of *travail social* (see Bouquet, 2005, p 35).

In Portugal, social work is a certified profession. Social work education is not regulated by national law, and universities and polytechnic institutes enjoy autonomy in designing their courses. However, these are submitted to a regular accreditation process, a soft regulation contributing to harmonisation of the core education requirements.

Policy engagement is not a core element of social work education in Portugal. Social policy only became a domain of social work education in the context of curricular reforms introduced after the Carnation Revolution in April 1974. Before this, social policy was limited to courses on social legislation. Since the end of the 1970s, social policy has been an established subject in social work curricula. It tends to take the form of standard two-semester courses in social policy or related subjects (Branco, 2009a), characterised by heterogeneity and different syllabi. The main topics covered are an introduction to social policy, the historical development of social policy and the welfare state, the welfare state crisis and its current reconfiguration, and the main areas of social policy in Portugal. The design and implementation of social policy, the relationship between social policy and social work and, specifically, policy practice in social work are often omitted or addressed without great depth (Branco and Amaro, 2018).

Figures regarding the number and sectors of social workers in Portugal are lacking, but Branco (2009b) estimated in 2009 that 14,875 people in Portugal had a degree in social work. Nowadays, the number is estimated to be more than 20,000, representing 0.48 per cent of the active population in the country (4,151,112, according to the 2021 census). It has been estimated that around two thirds of social workers work in the social security and health sectors (Carvalho, 2020). In 2015, 24.4 per cent of social workers operated in the ageing sector, whereas 23.5 per cent did community protection work (Ribeiro, 2015). The non-profit sector constitutes social workers' foremost field of labour since non-profit organisations have been the major social services providers for several years, especially in the fields of older people and children (Branco, 2009b). Non-profit organisations employ 53.6 per cent of social workers, while 33.8 per cent work in the public sector, 5.5 per cent work in the private sector and 7.1 per cent work in more than one sector.

Social workers are a small professional group compared to professionals in education or health, but they can be considered one of the main professional groups in the field of social services. Portuguese social workers' principal activities are direct psychosocial intervention and child protection (child welfare). However, their role is also relevant in the coordination and administration of social services in non-profit organisations, especially in the areas of disability, children, older people and people who are homelessness.

According to Carrilho and Branco (2023), only 9.1 per cent of Portuguese social workers are involved in policy decisions, while 73.9 per cent act on implementing public policies through casework and community work activities.

The expansion of public services observed since the period of democratic restoration (1974) and the development of third sector organisations in the field of social services through agreements with the state has contributed to the consolidation of social work in the system of professions in Portugal, which is shared with professions based in the social sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology), sociocultural animators, physicians and nurses.

Concerning wages, there is a clear divide between the public, the private social and the for-profit sectors. As public servants, social workers earn salaries similar to those of other social sciences and humanities specialists. In the private social sector, wages are lower than in the public sector, and a collective bargaining agreement regulates labour relations. Also, for social workers, professional careers are less favourable in the private sector than in the public services sector. In the for-profit private sector, except for large companies covered by collective bargaining agreements, a considerable number of entities, particularly in the provision of social services to older adults, have no collective bargaining agreement, and labour relations are marked by precariousness and meagre pay, in some situations at the level of the national minimum wage.

Institutional opportunity structures

According to the Portuguese Constitution, adopted two years after the Carnation Revolution in 1974, the new democratic political system in Portugal is a unitarian three-tiered state structure comprising central, regional and local levels, though administrative regions have only been established in the autonomous regions of Madeira and the Azores.¹ Thus, the primary political structure comprises the central government (and the regional governments of Madeira and the Azores) and municipalities at the local level.² Local government has a consolidated and relevant role in public policy administration despite the incomplete, incremental and variable level of decentralisation of competencies from the central government to the local sphere – specifically in relation to the transfer of resources and decision making (Branco, 1997; Magone, 2003; Teles, 2022).

The relationship between the Parliament and government in Portugal can be considered a ‘hybrid [form] of semi-presidentialism – a constitutional design that enshrines both presidential and parliamentary powers’ (Neto, 2023, p 122). Despite their reduction, presidential powers – namely, to appoint and dismiss the government and dissolve Parliament – remain significant (Neto, 2023, p 125).

The national Parliament is unicameral. It is composed, since 1991, of 230 deputies who are elected for four years by a proportional representation system based exclusively on political party lists. This privileging of political parties serves to prevent the clientelism that was present in the political system in the past (see [Goes and Leston-Bandeira, 2022](#)).

At the regional level, the political structure is composed of a regional government and a regional parliament – the regional parliament in Azores has 57 deputies and the regional parliament in Madeira has 47. Portuguese municipalities are governed by an executive council (*Câmara Municipal*) and a municipal assembly (*Assembleia Municipal*), bodies elected for four years³ by proportional representation and, since 2001, via independent lists. The municipal assembly scrutinises and approves the municipality's main initiatives and governance instruments. The Portuguese political system is completed by the civil parish (*Freguesia*),⁴ the lower tier of local government. The elected presidents of these sub-municipal units are inherently members of the municipal assembly (see [Oliveira et al, 2014](#); [Teles, 2022](#)).

Parliamentary party groups are central actors in the national Parliament. They are complemented by parliamentary committees, which are organised according to areas of speciality related to legislative activity and public policies. Parliamentary committees, over time, have gained more substantial powers in terms of parliamentary auditing of civil society organisations, academics, cabinet members and other key informants or interests involved in public policy areas, but also in terms of government scrutiny and, on an ad hoc basis, inquiry into critical and controversial issues ([Fernandes and Riera, 2019](#); [Goes and Leston-Bandeira, 2022](#)).

At the national Parliament level, proportional representation under the d'Hondt method, closed party lists and the absence of intra-party competition are the characteristics of the electoral system, which 'makes political parties the pivotal actors in the delegation of power' ([Fernandes, 2022](#), p 181). The party statutes provide most of the rules for the candidate selection process, except for the quota system established by law in 2018, which is based on a minimum threshold of 40 per cent for both sexes and prohibits more than two consecutive positions of the same sex on the candidate list. The candidate selection process is characterised by a multilevel negotiation between central bodies and local and regional branches, without affecting the power of the party leaders and the voice of the 'party's people', and with a comparatively low degree of decentralisation ([Jalali and Sanches, 2022](#), pp 329–35 and Table 21.1).

Parliamentary representation has been dominated by four parties since 1974: the Right-wing Democratic and Social Centre (Centro Democrático y Social – CDS); the centre-Right Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata – PSD); the centre-Left Socialist Party (Partido Socialista – PS); and the Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português).

Another Left-wing party, the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda), was registered in 1999. More recently, four new parties have obtained representation in Parliament: the animal rights party People-Animals-Nature (Pessoas-Animais-Natureza – PAN); the populist radical Right-wing party Enough (Chega); the liberal-libertarian party Liberal Initiative (Iniciativa Liberal); and the green/Left-libertarian party LIVRE.⁵

According to [Jalali \(2019\)](#) and [Pratas and Bizzarro \(2022\)](#), we can characterise the current Portuguese party system as an institutionalised and consolidated party system constructed after the democratisation that followed the Carnation Revolution, with the main parties surviving unchallenged for most of the time since.

From the perspective of a social worker running for elected office, the Portuguese political system can be characterised as an institutional structure that, by its multilevel nature, provides a significant number of political careers opportunities. Analysing the *accessibility* of elected offices in Portugal, we can say that the legal rules for candidates are not restrictive beyond age, citizenship and political rights criteria. The absence of geographical constraints, the electoral rhythm, the order of elections ([Borchert, 2011](#), pp 121–3) and, in particular, the gender quotas can benefit social workers. The quotas are key given the female predominance in the social work profession. Against this formal background, the political career opportunities for social workers in Portugal are similar to those for other professional groups, including professions with a high prevalence of women. Still, it is necessary to put into the equation the profession's social status, political career traditions and the importance of the role of political parties in candidate selection. In Portugal, women have been under-represented in political participation ([Barroso et al, 2022](#); [Espírito-Santo and Weeks, 2022](#)), though this has lessened with the introduction of gender quotas in 2006, the activism of women's organisations and the gender equality policy agenda of government agencies (see [Espírito-Santo and Weeks, 2022](#)).⁶

The *attractiveness* of a political career is related to the benefits of elected offices. The income varies according to the specific office,⁷ making some offices more attractive than others, but attractiveness also depends on the social worker's occupational sector, since wages differ between public, private social and private for-profit workplaces. Career maintenance and advancement are other drivers for pursuing political office, along with other immaterial and material rewards, such as power, prestige, public visibility, political influence and staff support ([Borchert, 2011](#)). The erosion of the professional prestige of social workers in the country due to criticism, especially by the media ([Payne, 2006](#); [Branco, 2017b](#)), may act as a strong barrier in terms of attractiveness. Still, the evidence does not confirm this assertion given the relatively low number of social workers engaged in elected office, as we observe in the next section.

Political recruitment

The participation of social workers as elected politicians in Portugal started after the establishment of the Estado Novo political regime in 1933, a corporatist and authoritarian system, opposed to public intervention in the social sphere and the welfare state conception. The first social worker was elected in 1949 as deputy of the Assembleia Nacional,⁸ the parliamentary body of the political system at the time. In the period up to the Carnation Revolution in 1974, five social workers were deputies in the national Parliament (Table 9.1), all women from the regime's political organisations and Catholic associations, and members of the Parliamentary Committee on Labour, Welfare and Social Assistance and the Committee on Education, Popular Culture and Spiritual and Moral Interest (Vargas, 2000, pp 49–60). As Vargas (2000) notes, in a male-dominated parliament, social workers and teachers were the most represented professional groups among women deputies until 1974, two occupational groups valued by the political regime given its familist and maternalist ideology.

After the fall of the Estado Novo regime and the restoration of democracy, it was almost two decades before there were social worker members of the national or regional parliaments again (Rodrigues, 2014). This meant a long period of distancing of social workers from elected political positions in national and regional legislative bodies, and this is observed also at the level of municipal elected bodies. This study sheds some light on the reasons for this gap. The social workers' biographies (see appendices A and B) reveal that their affiliation to party organisations and participation in local and regional party bodies or local government preceded their prospective candidature for political office. The democratic context of the post-Carnation Revolution can be considered a facilitator in this time-demanding process. However, for a deeper understanding, a comparative analysis of other professional groups is needed.

Table 9.1: Social workers elected to office in the Assembleia Nacional, 1934–74

Legislature	Deputy, age at election	Female deputies in parliament
1949–53 (V)	Maria Leonor Correia Botelho, 34	2/120
1953–57 (VI)	Maria Leonor Correia Botelho, 38	2/120
1969–73 (X)	Maria Raquel Ribeiro, 44	4/130
	Luzia Neves Pernão Pereira Beija, 50	
1973–74 (XI)*	Josefina de Encarnação P. Marvão, 34	9/148
	Maria Ângela Craveiro da Gama, 44	

Note: * Parliament was dissolved in April 1974 in the context of the Carnation Revolution.

Source: Based on Vargas (2000)

Table 9.2: Social workers elected to office in national and regional parliaments, legislative mandate VI to XIV, 1974–2028

Legislative mandate	Deputy, age at election (party)	Female deputies in parliament
NP 1991–95 (VI)	Ema Leite, 47 (PSD)	20/230
NP 1995–99 (VII)	Filomena Bordalo, 48 (PSD) M. Lurdes Farinha, 48 (PS, substitute)	28/230
NP 2005–09 (X)	M Conceição Cruz, 57 (CDS) M José Gamboa, 57 (PS) Paula Nobre Deus, 35 (PS)	49/230
NP 2009–11 (XI)	M José Gamboa, 61 (PS) José P. Marques, 37 (PS, resigned in 2010)	63/230
NP 2022–24 (XV)	Patrícia Faro, 49 (PS) Irene Costa, 49 (PS)	85/230
NP 2024–25* (XVI)	Patrícia Faro, 51 (PS) Irene Costa, 51 (PS)	76/230
RP Azores 1996–2000 (VI)	M Fátima Moniz Sousa (PS)**	5/52
RP Madeira 2015–19 (XI)	Lina Pereira, 32 (JPP; for seven months from 2017 in a replacement regime)	10/47
RP Madeira 2023–24 (XIII)***	Lina Pereira, 36 (JPP) Mónica Freitas, 27 (PAN)	14/47
RP Madeira 2024–28 (XIV)	Lina Pereira, 36 (JPP) Mónica Freitas, 27 (PAN)	21/47

Notes: NP: national Parliament; RP: regional parliament; * the National Parliament was dissolved in March 2025; ** age not available for this RP; *** the Madeira regional Parliament was dissolved in March 2024, five months after the regional elections in October 2023

Source: Based on [Rodrigues \(2014\)](#), Pordata and national and regional parliament websites

As shown in [Table 9.2](#), from 1974 to the most recent legislative mandate (XVI, 2024–28), the elected social workers at national level have all been women, belonging to the 45–60 age cohort, though a younger cohort is found in the Madeira Regional Parliament.

As shown in [Table 9.3](#), social workers represent a low proportion of the parliamentarians at national and regional levels, at most 2 per cent, except for the Madeira Regional Parliament in the most recent election, at 4.25 per cent. Compared with other professional groups, social workers are less well represented than lawyers, magistrates and other legal professions (19.7 per cent and 19.1 per cent in legislative mandates VI and VII, respectively), and teachers at all levels of education (23.2 per cent and 27.3 per cent in legislative mandates VI and VII, respectively), though they compare better with other human sciences and health professions (see [Freire et al, 2001](#)).

In legislative mandate XV, according to data from the national Parliament,⁹ as of 2024 there were 58 lawyers, magistrates and other legal professionals (25 per cent), 37 teachers at all levels of education (16 per cent) and just 2 social workers (1 per cent).

Analysing the weight of these occupational groups in the Portuguese active population to consider the extent of parliamentary representation, a distorted distribution is observed, with a much higher representation of lawyers (0.88 per cent of the population with 25 per cent of all MPs) and teachers (4.5 per cent of the population with 16 per cent of MPs) compared to social workers (0.48 per cent of the population with 1 per cent of MPs; Table 9.3).

Considering the party affiliation of social workers in national Parliament, they belong primarily to the parties of the parliamentary Left, specifically the Socialist Party, though a minority belong to parties of the centre-Right and Right-wing, such as the Social Democratic Party and the Democratic and Social Centre. This political profile is also observed at the regional level, with some nuance in that in the Madeira Regional Parliament, the elected social workers are affiliated with new political parties: the Together for the People civic movement party (Juntos Pelo Povo – JPP) and the PAN.

According to the data gathered, no social workers from ethnic minorities held political office in the national and regional parliaments. National and regional deputies have degrees in social work, some at postgraduate level (master's and PhD). Their occupational expertise is diverse, covering family and child welfare and protection, equality and women's rights, health, social security and education. Their most common professional activities are

Table 9.3: Occupational groups in national parliament, legislative mandate XV, 2022–24*

	Number of MPs	Percentage of occupational group in national Parliament	Number in the population	Percentage of occupational group in the total population	Percentage of MPs in the occupational group
Teachers	37	16	186,600	4.50	0.02
Lawyers	58	25	36,634	0.88	0.15
Social workers	2	1	20,000	0.48	0.01
Total MPs	230	100			
Active population**			4,151,112		

Notes: * Figures are for 2024; ** the number in the 2021 population census

Source: Based on Pordata, a national Parliament website, Perfil do Docente, 2020–21, Direção-Geral Das Estatísticas da Educação, and Justice Statistics for 2023

coordination of services and victim support, especially for women, followed by teaching, training and, in one case, political consultancy.

The interviews conducted with former and current elected social worker deputies (three from national Parliament and one from a regional parliament) indicate that the motivation to enter politics is related to representation of ‘the social realm’ and under-represented territories (MP1), the opportunity to ‘contribute to a better world’ at the political level (MP2), the opportunity ‘to be able to change and create public policies adapted to the areas of professional and academic expertise’ (MP3) and the opportunity to do politics in a different way by promoting people’s participation, listening and giving voice to citizens and enacting political advocacy for people’s needs (MP-RP). At the local level, contributing to community development and meeting the human and social needs of peripheral or low-density communities was the primary motivation of social workers elected as mayor (Mayor 1 and Mayor 2). Despite the variation in motivations, these are all associated with the values and purpose of the social work profession.

At the local level, social workers have been elected in municipal political bodies as city councillor and municipal deputy, and less so as mayor (see Table 9.4).

Regarding regional distribution, the sample reveals a higher concentration of elected social workers in the regions of Alentejo, Lisboa e Vale do Tejo, and Central Region. From a longitudinal perspective, the data gathered show increasing numbers of social workers in elected office at the municipal level, the highest figures being observed in Alentejo. This may be explained by greater policy engagement associated with the small scale of these municipalities and political affiliation with Left-wing parties.

Table 9.4: Sample of social workers elected to office at the municipal level, by position, 1990–93 to 2022–25

Municipal body	1990–93	1994–97	1998–2001	2002–05	2006–09	2010–13	2014–17	2018–21	2022–25	Total	Number of office holders*
Mayors		1	1			2	2	1	2	9	4
City councillors	1			2	2	3	2	12	9	26	20
Municipal deputies				3	5	4	3	7	12	33	19
Mandates	1	1	1	5	7	9	7	20	23	68	43

Notes: N = 43, non-representative sample; * one person can be elected several times

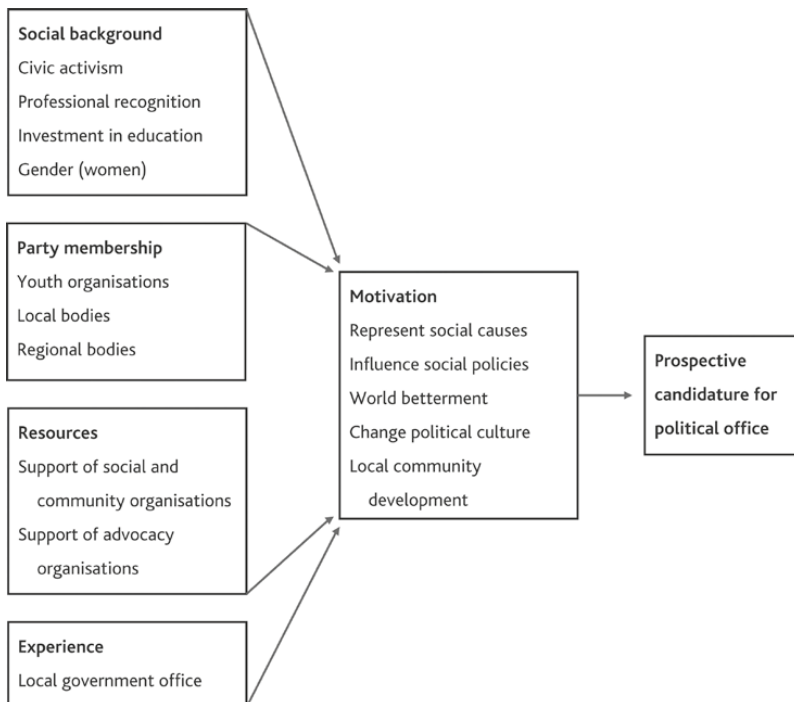
Source: Based on the Social Workers Elected Officers in Portugal Survey, 2023

Political career patterns

The interviews with social workers, elected parliamentarians and mayors show that their pathway into politics follows the pattern described in the international political science literature regarding political careers generally. The individuals were recruited based on civic and professional reputation and recognition, previous or current affiliation to party organisations, with prospective candidature for political office preceded by participation in local and regional party bodies or local government offices. These recruitment drivers (see Figure 9.1) are consistent with the thesis that ‘individual and group-based resources [are] strongly associated with different forms of activism, in political parties, interest and community groups’ (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, p 143).

According to the evidence gathered from the biographies of four social workers in elected office (see Appendix A), the political career of social workers in Portugal has not been characterised by a typical pattern of professionalisation – which departs from the pattern observed for most professional groups represented in Parliament – or by career maintenance and advancement (Borchert, 2011). Effectively, despite these politicians

Figure 9.1: Recruitment drivers for MPs



Source: Based on interviews with MPs and mayors, 2024

leaving their former occupations in social work to pursue full-time professional politics, their political biographies do not reflect long-term political careers and advancement opportunities. In the case of MPs, the maximum period in office was two four-year mandates.¹⁰ This may be followed by non-remunerated local government office, returning to a social work post or retirement. In the case of the member of the Madeira Regional Parliament, the parliamentary activity recorded is very recent, but considering that she was elected party leader, this could lead to the advancement of her career as a politician. Despite this, she stated: 'I never stopped to create a strategy of pursuing politics exclusively. It's just that [I wanted] to have a political career or to go into or try public administration. I've never done that because, until today, I've always been mobilised by projects' (MP-RP, Pos 47).

In two cases (MP1 and MP2), it must be emphasised that the social workers were candidates for a new parliamentary mandate in ineligible seats; this was as a direct result of primary elections or the decision of regional political bodies in the face of the occupation of eligible seats by party members who held government posts. As we observe in one case (MP2), after their parliament office mandate, the social worker was appointed to a non-elected political office in the regional administration for two years, which could be seen as a reward for not continuing as an MP. In another case (MP1), retirement was accompanied by a voluntary and honorary position as chair of a local development association, thus following one of the typical stages of the end of a political career, as pointed out in the literature (see [Norris and Lovenduski, 1995](#); [Borchert, 2011](#)).

Considering social workers elected to office as mayor, some differences compared to the biographies of MPs are identified. These mayors present a longer political career consisting of several mandates, extending over 20 to 25 years, as city councillors and mayors, covering practically all their working life (see Appendix B). The political career of these social workers took place exclusively in local political bodies. No transition to higher levels of state administration was recorded, in contrast with the general pattern that can be observed of holding local political office as a stepping stone to becoming a member of Parliament (MP) or a member of government. Related to what [Norris and Lovenduski \(1995, p 174\)](#) call 'drive' (or 'the persistence, vigour, and intensity with which applicants try to get selected and elected within a particular opportunity structure'), this can be explained as their choice (M1) or as a lack of opportunities in the recruitment process at local and regional levels (M2).

A political career, always, in the town hall, yes. I have had several invitations to become a member of [regional] parliament and never accepted. (M1, Pos 31)

I can clearly say that I was not given a chance. [...] It did not necessarily have to be as a deputy. Other interesting places were in [city] and around [regional public administration places]. [...] I did nothing to stay in politics. I would have liked to, as I said, but I realised that this opportunity could have arisen naturally, and it did not. (M2, Pos 23)

Social advocacy

Analysing elected social workers' commitment to social justice causes, we can consider their involvement in parliamentary committees and their contribution to bills, policy measures and political resolutions related to vulnerable groups and relevant social problems.

The parliamentary participation of Portuguese social worker MPs includes participation in the Labour and Social Security Committee (MP1, MP2), the Health Committee (MP2, MP3, MP-RP), Social Inclusion and Youth (MP-RP), Environment, Climate and Natural Resources (MP-RP), and Rights, Freedoms, and Guarantees Committee – which covers issues of gender equality, domestic violence and migration (MP3), domains that are linked with social workers' professional expertise – or the party's programmatic agenda, as in the case of the PAN regional parliamentarian. The PAN MP-RP is one of the few exceptions, as they were also a member of the Eventual Commission for the Consolidation and Deepening of Autonomy and Reform of the Political System of the Autonomous Region of Madeira, a matter of a highly political nature.

Following this pattern, some of the significant legislative initiatives of these elected officers also show a relationship with their areas of expertise and professional engagement, such as:

- an amendment to the Labour Code to protect the labour rights of victims of domestic violence;
- inclusion of children and young people in the framework of protection for victims of domestic violence;
- an amendment to the Labour Code to promote the reconciliation of professional and personal life;
- early intervention legislation;
- an amendment to the State General Budget to guarantee regular financial support for the National Support Network for Victims of Domestic Violence;
- participation in the Parliamentary Committee on Inquiry of Waiting Lists at Madeira Regional Health Service.

The following comments by MPs emphasise social workers' contribution to parliamentary activity, acting as a liaison and a kind of ombudsman on

the ground and in social life, promoting a more effective relationship with citizens and peripheral territories.

I could tell many stories ... and explain [to the peers] that the country they were talking about was not the country I knew based on my professional experience. Our country was different. It was a country with greater precariousness, weak social protection and fewer rights. (MP1, Labour and Social Security Committee, Pos 21)

One of the first measures we took when we were elected and had a parliamentary group was to create a mobile support office. We had a van ... we bought a van We had a telephone contact publicised on social media and in leaflets people received by post. [...] For example, on Mondays, we would be in [a municipality] and parked there in a well-known place by the town hall. (MP-RP, Pos 51)

This lens of analysis underlines the relationship between social workers' socialisation through education and the professional context. Still, it should also be considered that policy agenda-setting is influenced by several processes and actors and not only by the individual's own agency. Despite the different models of agenda-setting (Garraud, 2014), according to the MPs interviewed, important influences on their parliamentary activity include the specific government programme and the parliamentary group dynamics – namely, peers' perceptions and social representation of their advocacy agenda and vulnerable people, as the following illustrates:

Intervention in social areas and areas involving minorities are not considered noble policy areas. It will not be politically correct to say this, but it will be honest. Because they are minorities and, therefore, from the electoral point of view, less expressive than drawing up public policies that target citizens in general. (MP2, Pos 29)

This analysis should also consider the social worker MPs' limited parliamentary experience, political careers and skills in terms of political and policy skills, despite their previous participation in local and regional party committees.

A last aspect of reporting is the link that MPs and mayors maintain with their former social work profession through social work organisations. The data gathered reveal low activity and some circumstantial contacts.

Conclusion

In summary, the engagement of social workers holding elected office in Portugal was late historically and numbers at the national and regional

parliamentary levels are small. However, a significant increase at the local level is observed, suggesting the relevance of proximity as a recruitment driver.

These social work professionals are recruited based on civic and professional reputation and recognition as well as previous or simultaneous affiliation with party organisations. Prospective candidature for political office is preceded by participation in local and regional party bodies and/or local government office. The political career and professionalisation of social workers in Portugal is not characterised by a typical pattern, as has been observed for most represented professional groups in both career maintenance and advancement.

The engagement of social worker MPs in the social justice agenda is multidetermined, influenced by the specific government programme, the parliamentary group dynamics, the individual's social work experience and political skills and the individual's agency.

Further research is required to incorporate former MPs in national and regional parliaments. Above all, a mixed-methods methodology at the local level is needed; this should combine extensive research to attain a national census of social workers elected at the municipal level and interviews with city councillors and municipal deputies to gather evidence on drivers of recruitment, motivations, prospective careers and advocacy agendas.

Appendix A: Biograms of social workers elected to office in national and regional parliaments

MP1

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1971–72	23	Degree in social work	Social worker Non-governmental organisation for social promotion of women victims of prostitution	
1992–...			Social worker Family and Child Support Project (PAFAC) Ministry of Justice	
1997–98		Postgraduate qualification in child protection	...	
2000			...	PS affiliation PS local and regional committees
2005 (X)	57			Elected MP, 1st mandate
2009 (XI)				Elected MP, 2nd mandate

Portugal

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
2012 (XII)			Return to Ministry of Justice	MP candidate, not elected
2013–...			Retirement Board Member National Confederation of Social Solidarity Institutions	Elected President of Parish Council

MP2

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1995–96	25	Degree in social work	Social worker Child abuse protection non-governmental organisation	
1997–2005			... Social work teacher	
2000			...	PS youth commissioner in municipal elections (2001)
2001			...	PS affiliation (2002) PS local and regional committees
2005 (X)	35			Elected MP, 1st mandate Elected Municipal Deputy
2009 (XI)			Returns to child abuse protection non-governmental organisation	MP candidate, not elected Elected Municipal Deputy
2010				Vice-President CCDR Alentejo (Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission)
2012			Returns to child abuse protection non-governmental organisation	
2014		Master's degree in social work	...	
2022		PhD in social work	Social work teacher	

MP3

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1988	15			Membership of Socialist Youth

Social Workers in Political Office

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1992				Socialist Party affiliation
1996	23	Degree in social work	Social worker Social security ministry/ local services	Socialist Youth Oporto Committee (1995–97)
2003	30		...	PS affiliation PS local and regional committees
2003			Social worker Red Cross shelter for victims of domestic violence	
2011		MSc in psychology of justice	...	
2014			...	PS local committee (2014–17)
2017			...	Elected Municipal Deputy
2020		Completing a PhD in sociology	...	Chair of the Socialist Women Oporto region (2020–22)
2021			Specialist Office of Secretary of State for Citizenship and Equality	
2022 (XV)	49			President of the Socialist Women Oporto Region and Socialist Women National Council (2022–24) Elected MP, 1st mandate
2024 (XVI)				Elected MP, 2nd mandate

MP-RP (Madeira Regional Parliament)

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
2009				Participation in the creation of the Citizens' Movement – JPP
2010	24	Degree in social work		
2012		Master's degree in social work Completing a PhD in social work	Assistant Professor at the University of Madeira	

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
2014				Elected member of Parish Council by JPP Movement
2015			JPP Parliamentary Group Advisor	Membership of the JPP (JPP became a political party)
2017			...	MP – Madeira Regional Parliament (replacement regime for seven months)
2018			...	Re-elected member of Parish Council
2024		PhD in social work		Re-elected member of Parish Council MP – Madeira Regional Parliament Elected party leader

Source: Based on interviews with MPs, 2024

Appendix B: Biograms of social workers elected as mayor *M1**

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1975		Degree in education	Elementary school teacher	Membership of Socialist Youth
1984		Degree in social work	Social worker Local social security office (1984–94)	
1990				Membership of the Socialist Party Elected as City Councillor (no mandate)
1994				Elected as Mayor
1998				Re-elected as Mayor
2002				Mayor candidate, not re-elected Elected as City Councillor (no mandate)
2010				Elected as Mayor

Social Workers in Political Office

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
2014			Retirement Chair of local development association (2015–23)	Re-elected as Mayor Resigns from office in 2015

Note: * Born in Azores

*M2**

	Age	Education	Professional career	Political career
1964				
1988	24	Degree in social work	Social worker Local social security office	
1989			Social worker Social solidarity non-profit organisation	
1992		Postgraduate qualification in family and social systems	...	
1994			Social worker at municipality	
1996			Mayoral assistant	Participates in the parliamentary election campaign PS affiliation (1998)
2001				Member of PS national, regional and local committees** Chair of Socialist Women, Coimbra Region (2002–10) Elected as City Councillor
2005			Returns to municipality as social worker	Declines invitation to new election as city councillor
2008				Elected as Mayor
2012				Re-elected as Mayor
2016				Re-elected as Mayor
2020			Returns to social security national long-term care network	

Notes: * Born in Coimbra; ** member of regional and local committees, 2002–18; member of National Political Committee, 2002–23

Source: Based on interviews with social workers who were elected mayor, 2024

Notes

- ¹ The implementation of the administrative regions was the subject of ongoing public debate. A referendum in November 1998 resulted in rejection of regionalisation by a two thirds majority (Magone, 2003).
- ² Portugal has 308 municipalities, 278 on the mainland, 11 in Madeira and 19 in the Azores.
- ³ In 2013, a limit of three successive mayoral mandates was introduced. According to Teles (2022: 25), this electoral reform ‘had a significant impact on the renewal of local political elites, but ... also produced long-term effects which are yet to be determined’.
- ⁴ There are 4,260 civil parishes in Portugal.
- ⁵ For more detailed information about Portuguese parties, see Jalali (2019) and Pratas and Bizzarro (2022).
- ⁶ The composition of parliament (230 deputies after 1991), evidences the under-representation of women. Before approval of the Parity Law, women made up: 8.7 per cent of deputies in the 1991–95 legislature; 12.2 per cent in 1995–99; 17.4 per cent in 1999–2002; 19.6 per cent in 2002–05; 21.3 per cent in 2005–09. In the first legislature after the Parity Law was implemented, women made up: 27.4 per cent in 2009–11; decreasing to 26.5 per cent of deputies in 2011–15. After that, the share was 33 per cent in 2015–19 and 38.7 per cent in 2019. This tendency is observed in all the parties represented, more so in the small and newer political parties (see Pordata at: www.pordata.pt). See also Espírito-Santo and Weeks (2022).
- ⁷ In Portugal, the salary for those in elected office is indexed to that of the president of the republic and varies according to the level in the administration hierarchy: central government and parliament, regional government and assembly, executive and municipal assembly, and parish executive. Remuneration at the local level is based on population numbers.
- ⁸ Maria Leonor Correia Botelho (legislative mandates 1949–53 and 1953–57) was 34 years old when she was first elected. She was head of the Social Service Department at the Family Assistance Institute; teacher at the School for Social Auxiliary Workers at St Vincent de Paul Homes, the Portuguese Red Cross Nurses’ School and the Portuguese Oncology Institute Nurses’ Technical School; and national vice-president of the União Noelista Portuguesa, the Red Cross of Benevolence (Vargas, 2000).
- ⁹ Data from the Divisão de Informação Legislativa e Parlamentar, February 2024.
- ¹⁰ Some mandates were not completed due to the early dissolution of parliament.

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