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Is social work an endangered breed? an analysis of the challenges for social work in Malta

Ix-xogħol soċjali huwa razza fil-periklu? analiżi tal-isfidi għall-ħidma soċjali f'Malta

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ABSTRACT

Literature about the challenges to the development of the social work profession, particularly in Malta, is scarce. A review of the literature shows that there are similar trends in other countries. This paper is based on the data stemming from one of the questions in the qualitative interviews of a doctoral research study. The findings suggest that some of the challenges for social work in Malta include a shortage of social workers, issues with professional identity, status, professional autonomy, differing views between frontline practitioners and management, lack of support, and relatively poor work conditions. The authors recommend possible solutions to address the challenges faced by social workers in Malta and possibly elsewhere. More social work research needs to focus on the contemporary development of social work across the globe.

SOMMARJU

Il-letteratura dwar l-isfidi għall-iżvilupp tal-professjoni tax-xogħol soċjali, partikolarment f'Malta, hija skarsa. Analizi tal-letteratura turi li hemm xejriet simili f'pajjiżi oħra. Dan id-dokument huwa bbażat fuq id-dejta li toħroġ minn waħda mill-mistoqsijiet fl-intervisti mal-partecipanti fi studju tad-dottorat. Is-sejbiet jissuġġerixxu li wħud mill-isfidi għax-xogħol soċjali f'Malta jinkludu nuqqas ta' ħaddiema soċjali, kwistjonijiet ta' identità professjonali, status, awtonomija professjonali, fehmiet differenti bejn il-ħaddiema soċjali u l-manigment, nuqqas ta' appoġġ, u kundizzjonijiet tax-xogħol relattivament inferjuri. L-awturi jirrakkomandaw soluzzjonijiet biex jiġu indirizzati l-isfidi li jiffaċċjaw il-ħaddiema soċjali f'Malta u possibilment band'oħra. Aktar riċerka fuq ix-xogħol soċjali jeħtieġ li tiffoka fuq l-iżvilupp kontemporanju tax-xogħol soċjali madwar id-dinja.

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Introduction

Social work has a significant global presence; 147 national associations are affiliated with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2023). Throughout history, the social work profession has faced numerous challenges, debates, and controversies about its function, identity, and status (Bamford, 2015; Bamford & Bilton, 2020; Rogowski, 2020; Younghusband, 1981). Several authors have shown their preoccupation with how the social work profession is being transformed and challenged (Albuquerque, 2019; Butler-Warke et al., 2020; Engelbrecht, 2015; Harris, 2019; Hyslop, 2018; Lavalette, 2019; Ornellas et al., 2019; Ornellas et al., 2020; Rogowski, 2011; Rogowski, 2020; Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019; Ullrich et al., 2023; van Bochove et al., 2018). Randall and Kindiak (2008) voice their concern that the professional status of social work is threatened leading to de-professionalisation. Healy and Meagher (2004, p. 244) define de-professionalisation as 'the fragmentation and routinisation of social work and the concomitant loss of opportunities for the exercise of creativity, reflexivity, and discretion in direct practice.'

Neoliberalism is an economic ideology that promotes free markets, deregulation, minimal state intervention, and privatisation (Bamford, 2015). Bamford (2015), Lavalette (2019), Butler-Warke et al. (2020) and Rogowski (2020) assert that neoliberalism is the main culprit that is transforming or, rather, deforming social work. Neoliberalism has left a profound impact on social work practice around the globe (Ornellas et al., 2019). One of its most evident manifestations is the privatisation of children's services in England, allowing private companies to provide statutory children's social work (Jones, 2019). Jones (2019, p. 1) states that this development is 'an alarm call to other countries and administrations' where neoliberalism has been embraced. The second example of neoliberal influence is the elimination of any reference to human rights from the Social Workers Registration Board Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics, Republic of Ireland, in a clear attempt to tame the profession and bring it more in line with the dominant neoliberal ideology (Brockmann & Garrett, 2022; Garrett, 2024).

Neoliberalism promotes efficiency and cost-effectiveness and typically underscores audits, outcomes measures and accountability (Butler-Warke et al., 2020; Engelbrecht, 2015). Butler-Warke et al. (2020) argue that managerialism, disguised as efficiency, imposes business principles and logic on a profession whose core values may not be in alignment with business. There has been a strong emphasis on outcomes and measurement rather than the process. Such outcome-oriented decisions are often top-down (Butler-Warke et al., 2020), and the performance of social workers is often measured by whether they have met targets (Engelbrecht, 2015; Harris, 2019). As a result, social workers are spending more time on bureaucratic procedures and administrative tasks and less time with their clients. A report in the UK showed that social workers spend less than 20% of their time with their clients due to administrative tasks such as completing forms, inputting data into computers and internal meetings (www.futurecsc.com, 2022). Moreover, social workers spend disproportionate hours on repetitive tasks, leading to deskilling (Engelbrecht, 2015; Harris, 2019; Ornellas et al., 2020; Schram & Silverman, 2012).

Evetts (2018), in analysing the professions, argues that there has been a shift from professional to organisational forms of occupational control. Bureaucracy, hierarchy, standardisation, and performance management have increased control of organisation-based professionals. This context is characterised by a decline in occupational professionalism and the rise of organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2018). In organisational professionalism, the organisation, not the professional body or regulator, dictates the parameters or the professionals' performance. The organisation determines threshold criteria and the level of support it can offer, and limited resources that often constrict service provision. Organisations may even lobby the state to modify the regulations of the profession to safeguard the institutional interests of the organisations (Evetts, 2018). Evetts argues that when professionals become employees, the relationship between the employer and the professional is transformed to the point where constant supervision, assessments of professional performance and audits become the order of the day, resulting in the curtailment of professional autonomy.

Though the notion of having social workers trapped in organisational bureaucracies is not new, as Simpkin (1983) and Howe (1986) argued, organisations are evolving following a managerialism and 'modernisation agenda' increasingly controlling the social work process (Rogowski, 2020, pp. 20–21).

This section has highlighted how neoliberalism and managerialism hinder the progress of social work as a profession. Scholars have shared their concerns about the erosion of social work, its identity, and its functions in various countries. Social work in Malta is not immune to the neoliberal assault.

Social work in Malta

Malta was a British colony for 164 years, from 1800 until its independence in 1964. Malta joined the European Union in 2004 and is the smallest state in this bloc (Xuereb, 2022). The Maltese archipelago is situated between Sicily and Libya, at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. In 2022, the estimated total population of the Maltese islands stood at 542,051, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world (National Statistics Office, 2024a).

Malta has a long tradition of generosity and welfare, which is evident from the fourteenth century with the arrival of major religious orders and bolstered by the Knights of St John between 1530 and 1798 (Cassar, 2006). Social welfare still enjoys a cross-party consensus with occasional 'ideological differences' favouring a generous welfare system (Vella & Galea Curmi, 2022, p. 24). Neoliberalism in Malta has different characteristics, adopting a third way of reconciling typically opposing discourses and implementing policies such as lowering taxation, privatisation and liberalisation (Briguglio et al., 2016; Briguglio, 2014). Malta's welfare tradition does not neatly fit a particular welfare model, such as the Liberal and Social-Democratic in Continental and Southern European countries (Briguglio & Bugeja, 2011). The adoption of a hybrid model presents an 'untypical mixes of regime ingredients' and a 'liberalism Mediterranean style' featuring a high expectation of social welfare in conjunction with lenient enforcement (Pace, 2020, pp. 368–369). There seems to be a possible mixture of a 'a hybrid wine in rightist bottles (with leftist labels)' (Pace, 2009, p. 344). Neoliberalism in Malta is not reflected in typical budget cuts in the social sector. The budget allocated to the largest public social welfare agency increased from €7.7 million in 2012 to €26.6 million in 2022 (FSWS, 2023). It was further augmented to €30 million in 2024, an increase of 389% since 2012 (Government of Malta, 2023). Moreover, in 2022, 35.1% of the Maltese population received some form of social security assistance (National Statistics Office, 2024b).

Despite the hybrid nature of neoliberalism, the latter is still affecting the development of social work. Social work in Malta is a relatively young profession when compared to the rest of the world (Cole, 2019; Fenech, 2009). In 2004, social work became a recognised profession under the Social Work Profession Act of 2003 (Chapter 468 of the Laws of Malta) and the Malta Social Work Profession Board (MSWPB) was established. It was one of the first social welfare professions to be regulated in Malta. The regulation of the social work profession was 'the culmination of a slow but steady process' (Cole, 2009, p. 87). The Malta Social Work Profession Board (MSWPB) keeps the register of warranted social workers (registered social workers). The qualification required to be a registered social worker in Malta is a B.A. (Hons) in social work, a four-year full-time programme of study, or a Master of Social Work (MSW), a two-year full-time postgraduate course of studies. The latter programme targets students who have graduated in other subjects and wish to pursue a career in social work: Part-time routes for these two courses are also available. The above courses are provided by the University of Malta. In October 2024, a new four-year degree course started being provided by the Malta College for Science, Arts and Technology (MCAST). A general downward trend of social work graduates is noted over the years as seen in Figure 1.

Old and new challenges persist and shape the social work profession in Malta (Cole & Kenely, 2022). This paper examines how social workers in Malta perceive the profession and the challenges to its development.

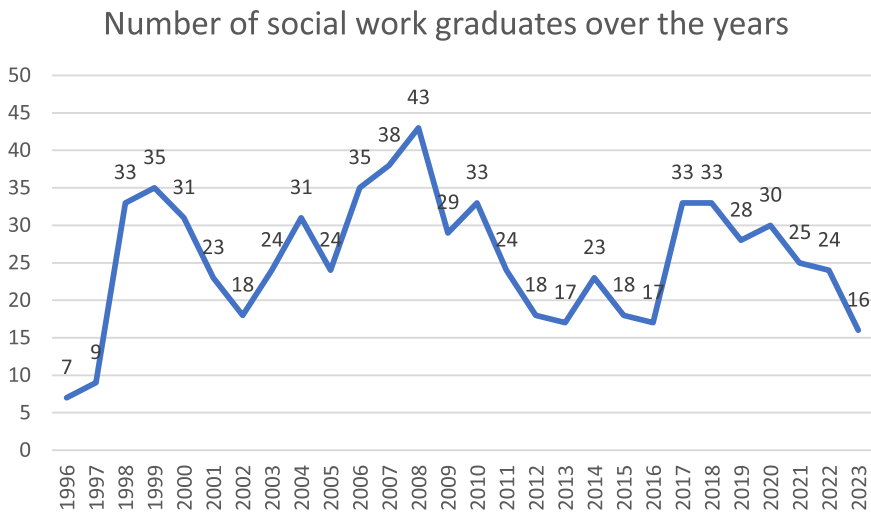


Figure 1. Number of social work graduates since 1996. Information was retrieved through personal communication with the Office of the Academic Registrar, University of Malta.

Methodology

This paper draws on the first author's doctoral research findings on evidence-based social work practice in Malta; this research study is still in progress at the time of writing this paper. The study adopts a mixed method grounded theory method (MM-GTM), which is a 'methodology that embeds a dialectical logic in the constant comparative method and grounded theory procedures to develop a mid-level theoretical framework or to elaborate an existing one' (Creamer, 2022, p. 7). The researcher is fully aware of the methodological challenges that MM-GTM may present (Creamer, 2022; Guetterman et al., 2019; Howell Smith et al., 2020). This paper's findings, however, stem from one of the questions in the qualitative interviews, where participants were asked to discuss their main preoccupations about social work in Malta.

The qualitative stream included eighteen individual interviews conducted between January and August 2022. Theoretical sampling was used in this study. Clark et al. (2021, p. 615) define theoretical sampling as a 'purposive sampling carried out so that emerging theoretical considerations guide the selection of cases and/or research participant'. By the time of preparing for this paper, no more interviews were required, possibly reaching theoretical saturation, a point where no new theoretical insights were being generated (Charmaz, 2014; Clark et al., 2021). The lead author aimed to target registered social workers with diverse experience from the frontline, management and academia. All registered social workers in Malta were eligible to participate, and they were contacted by the intermediaries (cooperating institutions). Participants who were willing to take part in this study contacted the researcher directly. Participants were from public entities, voluntary organisations, and academia, with different years of experience and roles (frontline social workers, managers, and academics). By the end of 2021, 34 organisations employed social workers in Malta. Given that there are only a few full-time academics in Malta, and thus easily identifiable, part-time academics were also included. All the interviews were conducted online, each taking approximately one hour and were conducted either in Maltese or English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed; NVivo versions 12 and 13 were used to analyse the data (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in the interviews.

	Role	Specialisation	Qualifications
1	Senior social worker	Elderly	Adv PG Qualification
2	Social worker with a supervisory role	Gender issues	Adv PG Qualification
3	Social worker with a supervisory and managerial role	Gender issues	Adv PG Qualification
4	Social worker with a supervisory and managerial role	Child & Family	Adv PG Qualification
5	Social worker	Child & Family	B.A. (Hons) in SW
6	Senior social worker	Substance abuse	B.A. (Hons) in SW
7	Social worker with a supervisory and managerial role	Community	Adv PG Qualification
8	Social worker	Disability	Adv PG Qualification
9	Social worker with a supervisory role	Mental Health	Adv PG Qualification
10	Social worker	Community	Adv PG Qualification
11	Social worker with a supervisory and managerial role	Community	Adv PG Qualification
12	Social worker	Community	B.A (Hons) in SW
13	Social worker	A representative of the Board or Association	Adv PG Qualification
14	Social worker	A representative of the Board or Association	B.A. (Hons) in SW
15	Social worker in management	Disability	Adv PG Qualification
16	Social worker in management	Community	Adv PG Qualification
17	Academic	University of Malta	Adv PG Qualification
18	Academic	University of Malta	Adv PG Qualification

*Some participants had a supervisory role and formed part of management. Other managers do not necessarily supervise social workers. No age range or classification of the organisation, be it public or non-governmental, is provided to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Participants' characteristics

Challenges

When participants were asked to discuss their concerns about their profession in Malta, they delved into several issues. Challenges can be grouped into four categories: shortage of social workers, diminished professional status and autonomy, limited support (such as inadequate supervision or training) and relatively inferior work conditions.

Shortage of social workers

The shortage of social workers was one of the leading emerging themes from the interview data. According to Participant 9, people are not choosing the social work profession as it does not have the same status as other professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and architects. According to the same participant, parents of children with good academic grades would want to see them choose other professions that are perceived to have better career prospects, such as medicine.

Diminished professional status and autonomy

Lack of respect for the profession

Participant 18, an academic, claimed that the lack of respect for the profession has resurfaced. 'I am seeing a resurgence of lack of respect by some professions towards social work' (P18). Social work was regarded as a 'lesser profession'; it was just a 'stepping stone': getting a degree in social work, working for a while, and then moving to other professions such as family therapy and counselling (P8). Participant 18 had heard comments like, 'You do not need a degree to become a social worker; my grandma was a social worker. My mother does social work as she goes and helps out the elderly in the parish'. This participant asserts, 'So, I think this professional identity is being eroded, and it's worrying, it's worrying!' (P18).

Themes such as the lack or weak identity of social workers, and the related lack of respect from other professionals have emerged. The roles and functions of social work are unclear. An experienced social worker (P13) in a multi-professional context said, 'Nothing distinguishes social work'.

No tasks belong to social work and can only be done by social workers. Participant 13 further elaborated, 'However, I feel that unless social work becomes more evidence-based in our practice, any idiot can do it [...]. I get such feedback from others confirming what I am saying, that my job can be done by anyone'. This participant argues that social workers know about the services, carry out assessments, and refer and support, 'but at the end of the day, all you need to do is to be a bit humane and compassionate because the rest, they come along with the job'.

Diminished of professional autonomy

Participants feel that professional discretion and creativity in social work are crucial. Participants 5, 7 and 17 shared the view that a dominant managerial control power may diminish the autonomy of social workers. Participant 5 said, 'I think we have become like workers in a factory, I am so pressed for time that you learn things by heart, what you have to do, and you just do it'. Participant 17 said the following:

One of the things that they mentioned is that social work is very much influenced by a managerial culture. They are concerned that the social worker's role is becoming more prescribed and administrative. Many procedures and much bureaucracy [...].

Moreover, there seems to be a priority on statistics, performance indicators and outcome measures, as shared by Participant 7, who is concerned that strict adherence to outcome measures deviates from the primary purpose of social work.

[...] But the moment you're bound by outcome measures, and your work becomes 'yes, no, 5 out of 6, 4 out of 5, 3 out of 10', that does not make sense. That's not social work! You have an indication yes, so that you work on certain issues and say, 'Look, outcome measure, we have to see that this woman avoids [prevents] the issue of unemployment, for instance'. And we work on that, right? Not just being concerned with putting a number.

Superficiality in social work

Social work was being reduced to a social brokerage (referral agent) or case management function that coordinates and links services. Participant 6 said, 'When a client requires a bit of in-depth work, I refer them.' Participant 18 argued that social workers quickly referred their clients to specialised services even when clients presented minor issues, suggesting that social workers were uninterested or unprepared to spend time with clients exploring their issues.

[...] I have encountered professionals from different Units; they literally spend ten minutes [with the client] and leave, and I tell them, 'Are you leaving after just ten minutes, it's not even worth the hassle of coming here'. [The other social worker would reply], 'Yes, I have nothing more to say'. It really strikes me because how could it be that with a person who has been through so much, you spend only ten minutes with them and leave? (P3).

[...] the reality of social workers facing a client, and their reaction is 'referral'. Out of fear of 'I am a social worker, I fill out forms for housing, we find him a fridge, food'. These are important aspects of our work, but not only that, right? (P18).

Unqualified persons doing social work

Most participants spoke about the employment of persons who are not qualified in social work but who do social work nonetheless.

I am worried about the easy fix of employing persons under a different job title, not social work, who are not regulated or adhering to any code of ethics. We give them social work tasks, again reinforcing [the idea] that anyone can do our work (P13).

There is concern about compromised standards; these are practitioners with no training in social work and have no basics that may result in unsafe practices. Clients have no voice; it is a huge responsibility (P17). One participant said that the social work qualification and the warrant were the minimal guarantee. 'At least there is a bit of guarantee, an official stamp saying, "You should know these [social work basics and good practices]"' (P12). Participants expressed their concerns

about this development and the profession's future: 'So this is something that worries me as far as social work is concerned because when I speak about the future of social work, I don't know, I don't see it unfortunately. It scares me!' (P11).

Frontliners and management may have different priorities

A social worker in management said that teams must have a certain output level to reach their objectives. This participant lamented that social work services lack evaluation mechanisms, and they had not seen any serious evaluation exercises in their years of social work experience. One of the participants, a social worker in a voluntary organisation, expressed their frustration with the management, 'Social workers get frustrated because they would love to work with the heart of a social worker, but the management would think differently'. They referred to financial constraints and differing management priorities, which may not coincide with their care plans as a social worker, even if such plans were well-informed.

Limited support

Poor supervision

One participant said their supervisor would attend to phone calls and respond to emails even during the supervision session.

So, it is what it is. So I get 45 minutes out of a two-hour scheduled supervision, perhaps. It is definitely not a space where I can reflect or process what's burdening me [...]. It is not the space. I don't have that space! (P3).

High turnover

Participant 11 said that burnout could be one of the reasons why social workers do a master's degree in something else to have a Plan B in place.

[...] However, I see myself having a Plan B because I do not see myself doing social work when I am around 50 years old, especially if problems are so complex and social work, as a profession, is not respected (P11).

Participant 14 underscored the lack of support, and as a result, social workers could leave the profession.

The reality is that social work is an area where the social worker is subjected (*sic*) to burnout [...]. We work in areas that, day in and day out, we are dealing with issues where [the social worker] needs a lot of support [...]. It is good that we ask why not enough social workers are graduating or why we are losing social workers. We already have experienced social workers who are leaving social work. It could be due to low income; it could be a lack of support (P14).

Relatively poor work conditions

Relatively low pay

Low pay is a recurring theme discouraging people from entering and staying in the profession. Participants discussed the challenges of practising social work, which entails long working hours and relatively limited financial rewards. Participants imply that their financial packages do not reflect the complexity of their work.

Participants 9 shared that money is even more important; the salary could be one reason people do not choose social work. Participant 5 said, 'The salary is what it is. I work long hours, to make ends meet. Thank God, I have my own place. Others would say, 'No way, I do my masters in something else that gives me more money [...]' (P5).

Limited career progression

Another issue is limited opportunities for career progression. There is limited room for further progression after social workers are promoted to senior practitioner positions. Participant 13 reflected

that, for instance, doctors have better career progression, and with that, their conditions improve (P13).

[...] to tell you the truth, I discussed it today with my colleagues at the office, what could be done [to enhance] career progression so that a person who started as a social worker, then after a while is promoted as a senior social worker and that's it, remains a senior social worker. What else could be done? (P1).

Social workers also have ambitions and compare conditions and status with other professionals. Participant 9 says, 'I have doubts, and I see other social workers worried when I look around. I feel that if I were part of a different profession, at this point, I would have had higher status, more promotions, and earned more money.'

Discussion

Social workers are part of a neoliberal system. Participants in this study show that social workers aspire to better financial rewards, work conditions, and opportunities for career progression that other professions offer. Neoliberalism underscores individual success, and social workers, as part of the system, are not immune to it. Adams and Estrada-Villalta (2019, p. 192) would call this psychological phenomenon the 'entrepreneurial self' and the 'growth imperative' as an ongoing project.

Findings in this study seem to suggest that social work may be less appealing because of the lack of recognition regarding salary and professional status. Prospective students are more likely to choose a profession that pays more, is more respected by others, and is less stressful. Participants may consider social work a transitional profession; they are more likely to leave the frontline as they age. However, they may decide to move on to other careers that seem more prestigious and pay more, such as psychotherapy, family therapy, counselling or management. This mirrors findings published by the National Audit Office of Malta (2020), which shows that qualified and experienced social workers leave the profession for various reasons, including difficulties that arise due to the nature of social work practice, heavy workloads, feelings of burnout and the lack of recognition of the professional status. The authors of this paper must underscore that since the data collection of this research study, new collective agreements in the Maltese public sector have entered into effect, resulting in improvements in social workers' salaries.

An emerging theme in this study is the concern about the erosion of the social work identity. Social work roles, especially in multi-professional teams, may still be elusive and residual, giving the impression that anyone could perform social work tasks, or odd jobs should be performed by social workers that other professionals in the team were unwilling to do. Trappenburg and van Beek (2019) reported similar observations; there was a general perception that social work tasks could be undertaken by lay people and volunteers, leading to social work de-professionalisation. In trans-disciplinarity, more flexible and overlapping boundaries may enhance streamlining and efficiency (Martin et al., 2023). Multi-professional working is seen to be the way forward in many fields as they provide social workers, along with other professionals, the opportunity to learn how to collaborate with others and negotiate their roles to allow personal and professional identities to emerge in the teams. Professionals need to move beyond the standard professional packages, as articulated by Payne (2006). 'Equally, we need to give meaning to our participation – about the ways in which we are important to others, and the ways in which we are making a contribution – for it to contribute to our identity' (Payne, 2006, p. 147).

Moreover, participants were fully aware that, to a certain extent, they were constrained by their low professional status when working with other professionals who were perceived to have a higher status. In Beddoe's (2011) study, they found that social workers lacked the 'distinctive space' (Bourdieu, 1984, as cited in Beddoe, 2011, p. 32) to be more than just a 'go-between craft' (Todd, 1919, as cited in Beddoe, 2011, p. 24). Professional decline is characterised by diminished power, status and autonomy (Evetts, 2018; Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019). Drawing on a critical and radical

perspective, the fact that social workers have had an anti-professional approach, as they see professionalisation as merely safeguarding self-interest rather than clients', has impacted the development of the professional trajectory of the social work profession (Bamford, 2015; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Lee, 2022). Trappenburg and van Beek (2019, p. 687) argue that social workers, being 'modest' professionals, are likely to undermine their expertise to promote clients' expertise instead, thus diminishing their contribution in that process. If used responsibly, professional power, status and autonomy may work in the client's favour, especially in interprofessional and inter-agency endeavours (Healy & Meagher, 2004).

Findings in this study refer to instances when social workers feel like factory workers and mostly fill out forms, manage caseloads and do social brokerage (referring clients to other agencies). Social work may have become dominated by legal procedures and requirements in specialised areas regulated by law. Their professional discretion and autonomy have been curtailed due to the high bureaucratisation and scrutiny. Similar findings can be found elsewhere regarding social workers feeling enslaved due to 'an excess of bureaucracy, quantification and screening procedures' (Albuquerque, 2019, p. 320). The focus may be more on the organisation's efficiency and effectiveness than the clients' needs (Rogowski, 2011). Managerialism and bureaucratisation have eradicated critical and reflective practices using procedural models with typical box-ticking/checklist approaches (Engelbrecht, 2015; Harris, 2019). The audit system has augmented 'protocolisation', and consequently, it has 'increasingly formalised and straightjacketed' the process (Munro, 2004, p. 1093). Risk-averse defensive practices are committed to showing that the established procedure has been followed thoroughly. Auditing is directed to the paperwork rather than case-to-case complexities (Munro, 2004). As seen in the findings, the management may have different priorities than the frontliners. Managers may underscore 'outputs', 'outcomes' and 'evaluation' while social workers may wish to push more person-centred approaches. Management has become more concerned about the rational and technical measurement of success and effectiveness in achieving higher strategic objectives (Payne, 2024). Findings seem to suggest that even voluntary organisations may be adopting neoliberal business principles and logic which have to satisfy funders and regulators, a trend identified in other studies such as the one conducted by Alexander and Fernandez (2021).

The findings in this research study seem to refer to superficiality in practice. Due to lack of time, high caseloads, bureaucratic procedures, or even personal attributes, social work may no longer be seen as relationship-based. Social workers refer to other specialised services and professionals for more in-depth work. Moreover, the social work process has been fragmented, and unqualified workers may be executing some parts of the social work process, resulting in fragmented services to the client, with *too many cooks spoiling the broth* (Healy & Meagher, 2004; Strier, 2019).

There is a significant concern among the social workers in this study that individuals without social work qualifications are practising social work, leading to the further devaluation of the profession. Participants have seen that some tasks that used to be strictly reserved for registered social workers are now being performed by persons with no social work training. This practice breaches the Social Work Profession Act of 2003 (Chapter 468 of the Laws of Malta), which protects the title and functions of social work. Though such measures may address the staff shortage in the short run, they may be counterproductive in the long run as prospective and current social workers may consider the social work profession to be undervalued and, thus, less attractive. The shortage of social workers due to low recruitment and retention rate is also experienced in other countries. Edwards et al. (2022) discuss these issues in the context of the UK after Brexit and Covid-19, and propose initiatives to address such shortage, including national recruitment campaigns.

Findings suggest inadequate support at work may result in high turnover and burnout. Limited support is manifested in insufficient induction training, poor orientation and inadequate supervision. Burnout can negatively affect the well-being of social workers and their clients (Maddock, 2024). Supervision is vital for effective social work practice and social workers' personal and professional development, which ultimately helps promote clients' well-being (Cole & Kenely, 2022). The literature refers to

the Resiliency-Focused Supervision Model (RFSM); it is a strength-based framework that assists supervisees address stress, prevent burnout and improve performance and satisfaction at work (Mack, 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

Social work aims to promote and enhance the well-being of vulnerable individuals, families, and communities in different societies (Bamford & Bilton, 2020; Payne, 2024). The authors argue that social work may adopt a more forward-looking and embrace its evolution. Being stuck in nostalgia and zenith periods of social work will not address contemporary challenges; social work is constantly changing in a volatile context.

The rising cost of living, poverty, wars, migration, global warming, and the re-emergence of far-right ideologies are some of the pressing contemporary issues (Payne, 2024; Saad-Filho, 2024). In this challenging context, vulnerable persons are here to stay and may still need professional support when required (Payne, 2024). Regulating such delicate and complex helping processes to ensure professionalism and accountability seems crucial; however, overregulation and over-bureaucratisation are likely to be counterproductive. In such a political context, social work may rediscover, not sideline, its radical mission emphasising its political nature, advocacy and human rights (Garrett, 2024; Rogowski, 2020). Education is crucial in increasing reflexivity in social workers who may have internalised the discourse and logic of neoliberalism (Brockmann & Garrett, 2022).

Governments, policymakers, academics, professional associations, and unions have an important role in the development of the social work profession.. Being a modest profession does not necessarily exclude social workers from demanding better conditions from their employers. Attracting younger generations (including Z and Alpha) to social work and retaining current social workers requires concerted efforts and effective strategies by all the stakeholders as also discussed in Edwards et al. (2022). Higher status, more professional autonomy, better pay packages and more ongoing support may help address these issues. Younger generations' perceptions of social work could be further explored through research.

Scholars call for actions to rise to the challenge, reform social work, and rediscover its radical mission (Rogowski, 2011) or re-professionalise social work (Healy & Meagher, 2004). Maylea (2021), however, takes a more fatalistic stance and argues that social work is beyond redemption and that its abolishment is the only way forward. The authors of this paper think that social work is changing, not necessarily dying or becoming obsolete. Further research focusing on the contemporary development of social work across the globe is required (Suarez, 2024). As one of the participants boldly said, 'I believe that social work is an important profession; I feel it is an effective profession. I feel that we are very important for the clients' (P9). As mentioned in the introduction, social work has faced many challenges, identity issues and controversies, yet its history has proven its resilience. Social work may not be a dying breed, but it is certainly evolving as it has since its inception.

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Ethical approval

The study was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Malta (ID no: 8908_27052021) and the University of Hertfordshire (UK) (protocol number: cHSK/PGR/UH/05129).

Limitations

Though similar trends in social work seem to be found elsewhere, generalisations are cautionary due to the unique features of the Maltese context. The findings stemming from the qualitative stream of this doctoral study do not necessarily represent the general views of all the social workers in Malta. Moreover, this paper focused on the challenges, rather than opportunities that social work in Malta might offer.

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Data availability statement

No data is made available to guarantee the anonymity of the participants. Participants never gave their consent to make their transcripts available to third parties.

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