



## SOCIAL WORK: TENSION BETWEEN ASSISTENTIALISM AND RIGHTS. A STUDY FROM THE SELF-IMAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

## SERVIÇO SOCIAL: TENSÃO ENTRE ASSISTENCIALISMO E DIREITOS. UM ESTUDO SOBRE A AUTOIMAGEM DOS ASSISTENTES SOCIAIS

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**Abstract:** This article presents part of the results from a study and aims at analysing the incongruence between, on the one hand, how users, professionals and institutions regard the social work profession and, on the other, the functions performed by social workers in primary care services. The present study employed a questionnaire administered to 30 primary care social service workers from Majorcan municipalities under twenty thousand inhabitants. The reflections presented result from a quantitative analysis conducted using Google Forms and a qualitative content analysis. The data was subsequently analysed through the SPSS software. The results show the tension between the fundamentals of social work and its practice, a professional practice torn between managerialism and the defence of citizens' rights, while also burdened by a culture of assistentialism and the influence of an institutional context shaped by social policies.

**Keywords:** Social Work. Rights. Assistentialism. Profession. Social Policy.

**Resumo:** Este artigo é resultado de investigação cujo objetivo foi analisar a contradição entre a concepção que usuários, profissionais e instituições têm sobre a profissão de Serviço Social e as funções exercidas pelos assistentes sociais nos serviços de atenção primária. Para a pesquisa, foi aplicado um questionário a 30 assistentes sociais dos serviços sociais de cuidados primários dos municípios de Maiorca com menos de vinte mil habitantes. As reflexões apresentadas resultam de uma análise quantitativa, desenvolvida com recurso ao software Google Form, e de uma análise qualitativa de conteúdo. Posteriormente, os dados foram analisados por meio do software SPSS. Os resultados mostram a tensão existente entre os fundamentos do Serviço Social e sua prática, sob o peso de uma cultura assistencialista e a influência do contexto institucional proposto pelas políticas sociais. Uma prática profissional que debate entre o gerencialismo e a defesa dos direitos de cidadania.

**Palavras-chave:** Serviço Social. Direitos. Assistencialismo. Profissão. Política Social.

Submetido em 22/05/2023. Aceito em 13/12/2023.

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## Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> presents part of the results of research dedicated to analysing the incongruence between, on the one hand, how users, professionals and institutions view the social work profession and, on the other, the functions and roles performed by social workers in primary care services.

The study analyses the knowledge that Spanish citizens (users, general population and politicians) have regarding social work as perceived by the social workers themselves. It was driven by the hypothesis that citizens and political guidelines relegate social work to a simple welfare intervention, thus assigning these professionals the tasks of managing financial aid and social resources for the population at risk of social exclusion.

With this objective in mind, the first section of the article presents a theoretical analysis of the nature and foundations of social work and its relationship with social policies. Subsequently, the second provides the results of a questionnaire administered to 30 social workers analysing their perception of the functions they perform in their institutions, as well as the functions deemed specific to this profession by the institutions themselves.

The results reveal a tension between the fundamentals of social work and its practical implementation – a professional practice torn between managerialism and the advocacy of citizens' rights, all the while burdened by a culture of assistentialism and the influence of an institutional context shaped by social policies. Finally, we present some final considerations that serve as nothing more than an invitation to further extend the initiated debate.

## 1. Nature and fundamentals of social work and its relationship with social policies

In their daily work, social workers are called to respond to citizens' needs in a context of tension among social policies, the vision and mandates of their employing institution and their professional role. This tension arises from the autonomy of social work in configuring itself as both a discipline and a profession, coupled with societal recognition of the social need for the profession, whose function is the social division of labour. Estruch and Güell (1976) declared that “the social function and the real object of a profession are mutually determined” (Aguilar, 2013, p. 55). In addition, the object is recognised by the different social theories considered most appropriate by the profession as a whole and, in turn, influenced by the professional capacity to assume, criticise and reconceptualise it. Thus, social workers contribute to the construction of social work through their inseparable relationship with history and ethical-political values.

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<sup>1</sup> This research has been funded by *Proyecto Interlocuciones* [Interlocutions Project] between the particularities of Brazilian and Spanish social work: a study about the socially constructed image and the self-image of the social work profession (PIP/PROPPI - UFOP Edital 03/2019-2020).

Currently, social workers face a harsh reality due to one of the largest health, economic, social and ecological crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This remains true even if we assume a conservative position – maintaining the *status quo* of this social reality – or advocate for the defence of citizens' rights.

In European countries, after the subprime crisis of 2008, capital interests prevailed. This forced public institutions to implement fiscal adjustments and social austerity policies to rescue banks and other business corporations, which brought about very negative repercussions on the working class. Social policies abandoned Keynesian-style actions and those inspired by Beveridge embracing instead the logic of consumption, assistentialism programmes and income transfer according to the neoliberal model.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the global political context assumed an ultra-conservative tone, as reported by the Centre for International Information and Documentation in Barcelona (*Centre d'Informació i Documentació Internacionals a Barcelona – CIDOB*; CIDOB, 2021) in its report on the 27 member states of the European Union. The rise of ultra-conservative and even reactionary ideas is also evident in the Spain region. In the April 2019 election, the Vox party emerged, with 52 members elected to the lower house after a 40-year absence of such an explicit presence of the extreme right-wing in the Spanish legislature.

We believe that this political-ideological movement affects governmental responses to the “multiple expressions of the social question” (Iamamoto; Carvalho, 1983, p. 77), such as unemployment, precarious work, poverty, housing difficulties, gender violence, mental health, homelessness, dependency and health crises, among others. These expressions, in turn, impact the socioprofessional realms of social workers, impacting their work and confronting their theoretical-methodological, technical-operational and ethical-political knowledge.

In the present context, the questions “what to do?,” “how to do it?” and “why do it?” are present in professional practice. In the field of social work, the need remains to reflect on how the profession, its nature and its fundamentals are understood.

A paradigmatic example of this need is the 14<sup>th</sup> State Congress and 2<sup>nd</sup> Ibero-American Congress of Social Work, organised by the Spanish General Council of Social Work (*Consejo General de Trabajo Social de España – CGTS*) scheduled for May 2022 under the motto Social Work in essence: Change to advance, create to grow. This congress focuses on three axes of debate: the essence of the profession, the foundations of change and the reconceptualisation of practice.

In the Spanish field-specific literature on social work, this profession is recurrently regarded as “a helping profession” (Aguilar, 2013, p. 21). Other contributions regarding the nature of the profession declare that social work cannot be established “in an essentialist manner, disregarding the epistemological constraints of social sciences” (Vázquez, 1998, p. 270). Additional views interpret social work by considering its historical origin from the perspective of a “professional identity [that] depends on the past, wherefrom the first identifications of the profession arise and allow it to play a key role in society” (De La Fuente; Sotomayor, 2009, p. 125-126). In addition, its historical-critical perspective includes the genesis and

fundamentals of the profession as a process that develops in a stage of monopoly capitalism within the socio-technical division of labour and determined by tensions between classes (Netto, 1992; Iamamoto; Carvalho, 1983; Montaña, 2000). Currently, specifically defining the nature of social work is a controversial issue in both academic and professional fields. This involves understanding what is considered its essence (as a helping profession), its strict relationship with the future of the other social sciences or an identity arising from the development of its historical background. We locate this historical background in social assistance and charity or its social significance in a capitalist society in which the profession “only exists in historically determined social conditions and relations” (Iamamoto; Carvalho, 1983, p. 20). The present study is based on the latter perspective.

In any case, the historical reference is inalienable. If we analyse the history of the social work profession in Spain, we identify three key periods in the search for defining and understanding its nature.

The first period covers the 1960s and 1970s. This historical moment, preceded by the creation of the School of Social Workers (*Escuela de Asistentes Sociales*) in Barcelona (1932) during the Second Spanish Republic is characterised by a deeply repressive social and autarchic political-economic system, albeit longing to join the European capitalist development. This system coexisted with an incipient mobilisation of Spanish society, mostly underground movements. The convergence of these factors heralded a frenetic social, economic, political and cultural change. In such a complex context, certain professional associations of social work joined social struggles and protest movements (Carrara *et al.*, 2017). Back then, more than forty “social assistance” training schools (a concept subsequently replaced by social work during the democratic transition) had already been created in Spain. From these organisations, deep reflections on the profession began to emerge through meetings and congresses promoted by professional associations and schools dedicated to training social workers.

The democratic transition and the implementation of the first welfare policies starting in the 1980s represent the second period of Spanish social work. As a discipline, social work studies were finally integrated into the curricula of Spanish universities, albeit with a lower status – that of a Diploma – and without access to research through doctoral studies. However, perhaps the most significant aspect of this period lies in the prominent role of social workers in social policies linked to the nascent Spanish Welfare State and to the creation of the Public System of Social Services (PSSS).

The third period of social work starts in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the incorporation of the Spanish university in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), resulting from the Bologna process. For social work training and professional practice, Bologna marks a before and after, placing social work on an equal standing with all university studies. With this transition, the production of scientific knowledge, research and teaching are developed without the need to resort to other disciplines through “bridge courses,” as was required until then. However, the Bologna process also forced the profession to respond to new and old demands of capitalist society.

In the 1970s, in a Spain moving towards a democratic transition, two professional projects clashed: one, conservative, defended social work outside political ideology, maintaining traditional practices linked to philanthropy and assistentialism, steeped in religiosity and paternalism; the other, progressive and more sociological, was led by professionals who had been conducting politicised work, committed to the defence of rights and linked to social movements working on building a democratic Spain. The latter aspect was partly influenced by anti-capitalist movements and by the progressive sectors of the Catholic Church (Barenys *et al.*, 1975; Banda, 2017, *apud* Matos-Silveira *et al.*, 2021). This tension between assistentialism and the defence of citizens' rights remains unresolved to date (Jaraíz, 2011; Idareta; Ballesterro, 2013; Girela, 2017).

From the sociohistorical process and a critical perspective, we asked ourselves: what is the genesis of the profession and its relationship with capitalism? The answer led us to identify social work as a profession that responds to a need of the bourgeois order, but one which can become a professional and theoretical field committed to the struggles for human rights and emancipation as contradiction mobilises social relations (Marx, 1974). In its need to legitimise the bourgeois order and simultaneously respond to the demands of capital in its monopoly phase, the State “commits” to social protection, thus developing social policies that express the struggles and conquests of the working class (Netto, 1992). Social policies are, contradictorily and concomitantly, privileged instruments of conflict reduction, as well as expressions of the struggles and conquests of the working class. The capitalist state needs professional agents to work in the new institutions, and social work was one of the professions called on to act with the social function of executing social policies developed by the State (Iamamoto; Carvalho, 1983; Netto, 1992; Montaña, 2000).

The recent crisis contexts have exposed some of the significant contradictions within the Spanish PSSS. Between 2008 and 2013, our extraordinarily weakened PSSS faced the harsh consequences of the crisis (Carbonero *et al.*, 2012) in a scenario of profoundly “austericidal” neoliberal policies. In the current crisis, although government responses have been radically different, the system has once again shown its weakness. In both contexts, we have realised how consolidated the role of social workers had become as resource managers, while pressured by the significant increase in social vulnerability and by the responses that both citizens and political leaders demanded from the collective and the social services. However, social work movements have simultaneously appeared with the support of professional associations that demand reformulating the role of social work to recover collective action and consolidate social workers as promoters of social rights (Carbonero *et al.*, 2012).

## **2. Methodology**

As mentioned earlier, this article aims to analyse the incongruence between, on the one hand, how users, professionals and institutions regard the social work profession and, on the other, the functions and

roles performed by social workers in primary care services. For this purpose, we have focused our analysis on a subset of the 30 questionnaires administered to social workers of primary care social services from April to May 2018 in Majorcan municipalities under 20,000 inhabitants.

Authors such as Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud and Fiddler (2001) or Giménez (2010) discovered that social workers in rural areas or small municipalities faced greater challenges in carrying out their professional duties. This is due to the fact that their services depend only of social workers as professionals, and the entire scope of social intervention in their territory relies on them.

The research methodology combined qualitative and quantitative analyses by using two techniques: a literature review to identify the fundamentals of social work in Spain and an analysis of the results from the questionnaires to gain a direct perspective from the participating professionals. These questionnaires provided data on social workers' sociodemographic characteristics, their service and their relationship with the profession, the socially constructed and self-image of the profession and the exercise of the profession.

The sample was collected using event sampling (Gerrish; Lacey, 2008). In this sampling strategy, we focused on regional meetings coordinated by professionals of the Territorial Support Service (*Servei de Suport Territorial – SST*) of the Majorcan Institute of Social Affairs (*Institut Mallorquí d' Afers Socials – IMAS*). These meeting were chosen as integral events because they were the sampling typology that best matched the characteristics of the research for both the subject of the study and the descriptive information gathered *a priori*. As the first part of the fieldwork was governed by the criterion of convenience, 49 social workers in the territory under study were contacted by the SST-IMAS professionals, and 30 of them eventually participated in the research.

To access the sample, we first approached the participants' environment and then contacted them. The sample was selected through intentional, theoretical and non-probabilistic convenience sampling.

Considering this, the sample selection criteria were based on the inclusion of professionals who met the following conditions:

- Having a degree in social work;
- Working in Majorcan public primary care social services in municipalities under 20,000 inhabitants;
- Being professionally active at the time of the call for research regardless of their contractual relationship, thereby excluding professionals on leave of absence or on sick or maternity leave;
- Providing direct care in fieldwork at the time of the study; and
- Having minimum working experience of two years.

To administer the questionnaires, the researchers travelled to social services centres. Throughout the procedure, all ethical standards were met, especially regarding informed consent, and the adoption of roles was agreed upon with each participant during the data collection. The questionnaires were coded, tabulated and analysed using Google Forms to perform a quantitative analysis. The data has been

subsequently analysed using the SPSS software. The qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions was performed using the content analysis technique, identifying the thematic frequency of the answers organised into analytical categories by interpreting concepts and propositions in comparison with the theory and with the results (PÉREZ, 1994; BARDIN, 1996; VALLÉS, 2000).

### **3. Results**

From an analysis of the questionnaire's sociodemographic data, we observed that 100% of the participants were women, with a mean age of 46.03 years. The participants have a long professional career as 60% have been practicing the profession for more than 20 years; of these, 36.6% have been in the profession for more than 30 years. In addition, 44.7% of the participants have been in the same service for more than 15 years. Among the participants, 80% studied at the University of the Balearic Islands, and 86.7% accessed university studies through the general system of access to the first cycle of Spanish *bachillerato* studies (equivalent to A levels in the United Kingdom or high school in Brazil). Furthermore, 36.7% of participants received a scholarship and 50% worked while studying, of whom 43.8% worked between 35 to 40 hours per week and 25% between 20 and 35 hours per week. Based on these results, 86.7% of the participants needed funds to study because 73.3% worked to be able to financially contribute to their studies.

Among the 29 participants responding to this questionnaire (one of the 30 professionals surveyed did not answer), 79.3% do not practice any religion, of whom 53.8% are non-practicing Catholics. Another aspect to analyse is that 60% of the social workers did not participate in any social movement, non-governmental organisation (NGO) or student association during their time as university students. Currently, 62.1% do not participate in any social movement. Of the 11 people who do participate, only five are related to an NGO or political activities; the others are related to leisure activities or parental responsibilities.

The analysis of the working conditions highlighted strong heterogeneity among the participants, as shown in their contractual relationship, working time and salary. Regarding the contractual relationship, only 17.6% are career civil servants; all the other professionals work under a contract that does not guarantee job stability, namely, 13.3% temporary employees, 3.3% self-employed (freelancers) and 50% permanent employees. The final category does not ensure continuity in their jobs given the Spanish legislative reforms of 2012, and that accounted for the highest percentage of social workers who participated in this study. Regarding the working time, that is, the number of working hours per week, 60% of the social workers work 37.5 hours per week, but 33% work 35 hours, 3.3% 37 hours and 3.3% 40 hours per week. Their heterogeneity in gross monthly salary also stands out: 33.4% earn less than €2,000, 20% earn between €2,000 and €3,000, and only 13.3% earn more than €3,000 in gross monthly salary. It is important to point that 33.3% of the participants did not answer this question.

In the analysis of the conceptualisation of social work, the participants presented diverse definitions of the object of their profession, as shown in Figure 1, with 33% of the participants conceiving

social work as helping people, families or groups, 23.3% as being agents of social change, 16.7% as promoting the defence of rights and justice in society, 10% as working to empower people and provide resources for personal growth, 3.3% as providing accompaniment and professional support while 13,3% gave other answers. Thus, the results were coded into two categories: 1) individual-family intervention to care for people in situations of need, and 2) social work as an agent of social change, defence of rights and justice, the transformation of society and reductions in socioeconomic inequalities. Based on these categories of analysis, 46.3% of the respondents regard the profession as helping people, families, or groups by providing support and resources for growth and empowerment and, thus, improving their quality of life and well-being; while 40% regard social work as a profession aimed at causing social change, working to reduce socioeconomic inequalities and claiming social welfare rights. For this question, 13.3% of the answers were included in the “others” category.

*[Figure 1 near here]*

A more in-depth analysis of how participants “currently” regard social work yielded the following concepts of a social worker: solutions manager, resources manager, “currently [social work] is highly bureaucratic and technocratic,” “a way of paying off people’s debts,” “with the level of demand, one cannot provide quality work,” and “a profession not recognised enough, and simultaneously highly necessary.”

When asked about “The object of intervention of the profession” (Figure 2), of the 30 participants, 56.7% answered helping/providing accompaniment to the person, family or group, 23.3% working for the community or social welfare/quality of life, and 10% reducing inequalities or working for equity. For this question, 10% of the answers fell into the “others” category.

*[Figure 2 near here]*

Based on the results of the question, “what is the role of social workers?” (Figure 3), of the 30 answers, 66.7% of the respondents answered “helping”, understanding helping as supporting, accompanying, facilitating or empowering the person or family to improve their situation (social, economic or psychosocial); 23.3% being an “agent of change”; and 3.33% being for social justice and the fight for rights. In this question, 3.33% of the answers were included in the “others” category and 3.33% in the “did not answer” category.

*[Figure 3 near here]*

When we asked the participants about the citizens’ perception of the social work profession (Figure 4), we observed a general lack of knowledge. Of the 30 answers, 36.7% perceived a lack of knowledge among citizens about what social work is, 36.7% described that citizens regard social work as a bureaucratic profession that manages care and economic resources, while 23.3% described it as a profession that cares for people at risk of social exclusion (e.g. poor people, immigrants). One respondent did not answer. In the analysis of the answers, among others, the following quotes were recorded: “They do not comprehend or understand it”; “Most of them understand that we only manage social benefits”; or “They



struggle to understand what it is. It is a mixed bag where everything fits.” These quotes indicate that, based on the perception of social workers, citizens generally do not know the profession.

*[Figure 4 near here]*

Conversely, when the research participants were asked how users of social services conceptualise social work (Figure 5), they stated that, unlike citizens in general, many currently understand their functions: of the 29 respondents (one did not answer, 3.3), 36.7% of the social workers think that users consider them to be managers of social resources or user benefits, whereas 33.3% understood that they provide help or accompaniment, and 26.7% did not know the roles of the profession.

*[Figure 5 near here]*

Question 5.4 of the questionnaire (“As a professional, what does the institution expect of you?”) had 11 possible answers. The group of participants selected a total of 130 answers indicating what they perceived the institution expected of them. The results (Figure 6) show that, in general, of these 130 answers, 16.9% of the participants pointed out that the institution expects psychosocial care of them at the individual-family level, 13.1% that it provides help/benefit, and 13.1% noted professional accompaniment in situations of loneliness, isolation or social alienation. Other answers, each of which accounts for 10% of the responses, were the control and inspection of aid, paperwork and the defence of the rights/empowerment of people. Conversely, fostering user participation (6.9%), training people (6.2%), creating mutual aid networks in the territory (5.4%), territory improvement intervention (5.4%) and collaborating with social movements and associations (3.1%) were the options with the lowest response percentages.

*[Figure 6 near here]*

In turn, when asked to indicate with which of the previous statements the participants most identified themselves regarding their conception of social work (Figure 7), the most common answer was the defence of rights (30%), followed by individualised psychosocial care (15.4%), territory improvement intervention through coordination with other entities in the professional field (10%), training people in different types of skills (10%), creating mutual aid networks (6.2%), fostering user participation (6.2%), developing skills (3%), empowerment (3%), others (6.2%) and “did not answer” (10%). Therefore, the analysis of the set of 130 responses about the conception of social work from the social workers’ perspective enables us to examine the responses for whether social workers regard the profession from a rather communitarian (52.2%) or individual-family care (31.6%) perspective. For this question, 10% of the respondents did not answer and 6.2% of the responses were included in the “others” category.

*[Figure 7 near here]*

#### **4. Discussion**

The analysis of the results reveals heterogeneity as the defining characteristic of this research. This heterogeneity is primarily observed in the roles played by social workers in their professional practice and

the participants' conception of social work. However, the sociodemographic data indicates a clearly feminised profile as all professionals surveyed were women. The feminisation of the social worker profession is a recurring theme in the specialised literature. Báñez (2012) explained this fact from a sociohistorical perspective in which both voluntary and professional aid activities in Spain have been considered by the Catholic Church and society as an extension of the traditional role of women in the family – a sort of “social motherhood”. On the other hand, quoting Álvarez Uria (1985, *apud* Báñez, 2012) the author adds, “this ideological consideration of social assistance as a feminised activity highlighted the consequences of poverty, albeit without questioning or modifying its ultimate causes” (p. 90).

Inevitably, we should relate the feminisation of the labour market to its precariousness. According to OXFAM (2018, p. 4) “In Europe, as in Spain, women are twice as likely as men to be employed in low-paid work”. In the present study, despite the strong heterogeneity in contractual relationships, working time and salary, all data on the working conditions of social workers shows mostly precariousness, specifically precarious contracts, long working hours and unequal salaries.

The data, nevertheless, also shows some homogeneity when considering the professional experience and the average age of the social workers who participated in the study. All of them have a long professional career dedicated to social work, and their average age is over 40 years. This data matches the findings of Mestre (2015) on the primary care social services of Majorcan municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. The profile of the social workers was clearly female (90.91%), with an average age of 42.3 years and long professional careers averaging 16.16 years. The data on the working and economic conditions of the social workers under study also indicated strong diversity in both contractual relationships and salary conditions (MESTRE, 2015).

One other fact stands out: most participating social workers studied with public scholarships or by combining studies with a job, which indicates a working-class socioeconomic profile. The relationship between social class of origin of social workers, the characteristics of their practice and their conception of social work has been largely overlooked. For this reason, certain studies, such as Cortinas (2012) on the search for social advancement through higher education, must not to be dismissed. According to this study, professionals from working families can more effectively transfer into practice the value of “education” as an expression of the “essence” of social work.

Regarding social participation, a significant percentage of social workers either have not participated or are not currently involved in any movements or social entities. This low degree of participation matches the data provided by FOESSA (2019), whose analysis of social exclusion situations from a multidimensional perspective showed that 21.9% of the Balearic population does not participate in social or political life, which exceeds the Spanish average by almost 9 points (12.8%). This percentage is worrying because civic-political participation promotes social integration (FOESSA, 2019).

Regarding the theoretical-methodological conception, duality is the main characteristic, including two great visions of its fundamentals: social work as a helping relationship or social work as a defender of

citizens' rights. Thus, if the professionals themselves conceive of social work from different perspectives, society will unsurprisingly ignore the conception and functions of the profession.

In addition, although the users of social services present – from the participants' perceptions – greater knowledge about the functions of social work than society, in general, the majority still relate social work to a profession that exclusively manages social benefits and resources. The *I Informe sobre los Servicios Sociales en España* [First Report on Social Services in Spain] (ISSE), presented in 2013 by the General Council of Social Work [*Consejo General del Trabajo Social* – CGTS], and which resulted from a survey of 1,361 licensed social workers, provides data that reinforces this idea. According to this report, 26.4% of the people who use social services request financial aid; 23.4% other types of benefits; and 23% information and guidance. The others are distributed in very low percentages among requests for services (8.1%), individual-family support (4.8%) and other demands.

Moreover, social workers perceive that their institutions assign to them the work of processing social benefits and occasional aid to individuals and families to meet their basic needs. Not surprisingly, the functions that society attributes to the profession are those of resource managers as this is precisely the institutional mandate. This correlation shows the extent to which the institutional, political and ideological context determines and conditions the practice of social work.

According to the *Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública* (INAP, 2021), the institutional guidelines for managing social benefits and individual social work were accentuated through the last two economic crises. Even the few services with group and community projects that began in recent decades have begun to disappear. Moreover, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, primary care social services had to be reorganised, with the only institutional guideline that all professionals (psychologists, educators, social workers and even administrative assistants) process social benefits (INAP, 2021). Thus, the last two crises have consolidated assistance-type interventions, focused on resource management and disregarding the weak structure of social protection systems, specifically the Public System of Social Services (PSSS).

Several studies (*ASOCIACIÓN ESTATAL DE DIRECTORES Y GERENTES DE SERVICIOS SOCIALES*, 2021; Mestre, 2015) have shown the structural weakness of social services in the Balearic Islands. In addition, according to Mestre (2015), this weakness conditions the intervention of professionals, directing their attention towards individual and family concerns to the detriment of group and community social work. On the one hand, this fact further reinforces the societal perception of the profession by identifying its individual care functions. On the other, the intervention of social work in the community is not visualised, thereby perpetuating this duality between assistentialism and the defence of citizens' rights, a distinction emphasised by the assistentialist policies implemented in the latest economic crises.

Research must also shed light on the relationship between the characteristics of the professional exercise of social work with the characteristics of social policies – understood as the institutional context where the profession is developed (Caro *et al.*, 2016; Herrera; Castón, 2003) – and the culture of the State,

expression of thought, symbols and established values, which are inseparable from the social, sexual and ethnic-racial division of labour. However, social policies also result from the correlation of forces between capital and labour. Therefore, these forces are conditioned by the capacity for struggle and the political incidence of social movements, including the professional organisations of social workers.

Culturally, the image of social work as a helping profession and not as a defender of rights prevails. According to Dietz (2008) national-Catholicism subsists as a historical legacy because either Spanish society itself continues to be perceived as homogeneous regarding the dominant religion or because of the close relationship between the State and the Catholic ecclesiastical institution. This perception remains despite the democratic transition process that began in 1975.

In conclusion, the present study highlights the tension between the fundamentals and the practice of social work. The prevailing culture tends towards assistentialism, whereas social policies often exhibit ambiguity, oscillating between the developmental and residual models. This dichotomy can be linked to the characteristics of a late welfare state. Yet, some “resistance” movements seek to base social work on the defence of citizens’ rights.

Therefore, how can we address this tension? From a professional standpoint, the fundamentals of social work must be at the centre of the debate, thus promoting an epistemological change beyond the historical assistentialism (Aguilar, 2010) and managerialist (CAstanyer, 2017) heritage. From an academic standpoint, training should begin with an analysis of the structural processes that lead to inequality and exclusion and incorporate critical social work, understood as critical perspective (ideo-political); as critical capacity (theoretical-methodological) and as critical attitude (ethical-political) (Montaño, 2019).

Regarding social policies, and more specifically those linked to the PSSS, these should consider the rights perspective as one of their central points. Breaking with the assistentialist and managerialist tradition of social services cannot become a reality without deep changes in their organisation. Now that the Spanish PSSS formulated during the transition to democracy has been overcome, it might be the time for a new reconceptualisation.

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## Figures

Figure 1. Question 5.1 For you, what is social work today? How would you define it?

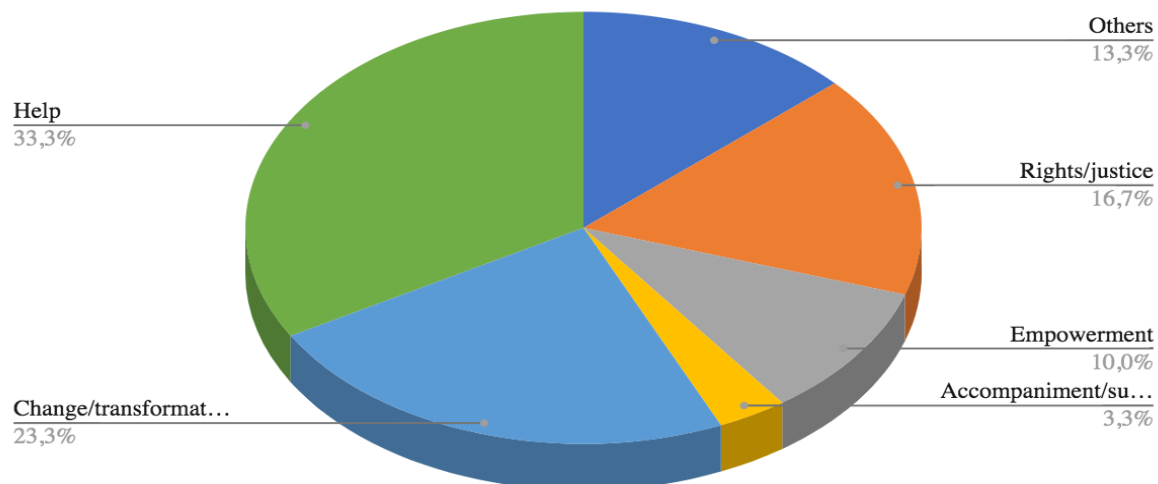


Figure 2. Question 5.1.1. What is the object of the intervention of social work?

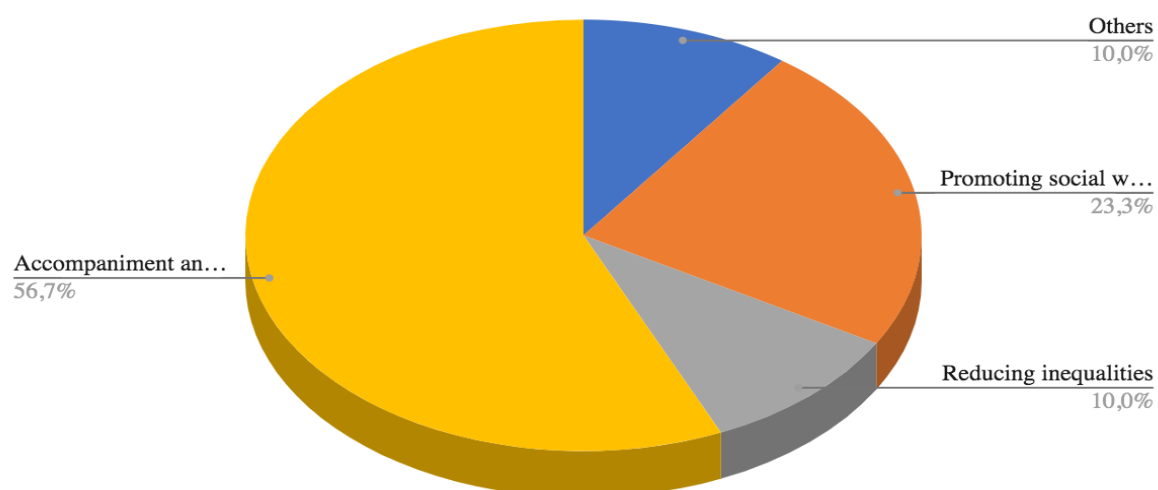




Figure 3. Question 5.1.2. What is the role of social workers?

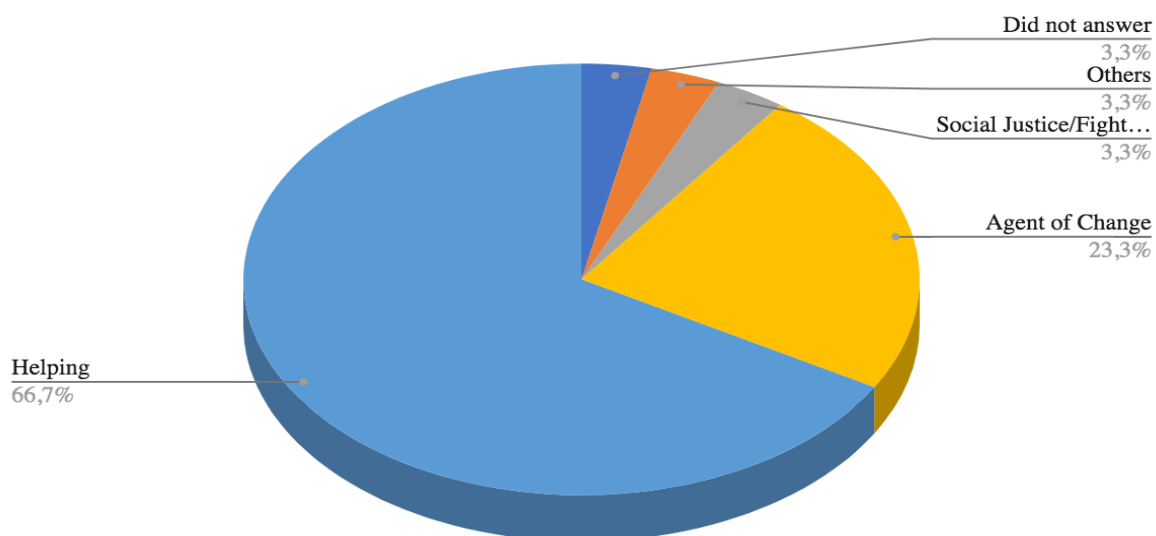


Figure 4. Question 5.3. For you, how do people (citizens, in general) who are not related to this field regard the profession of social work?

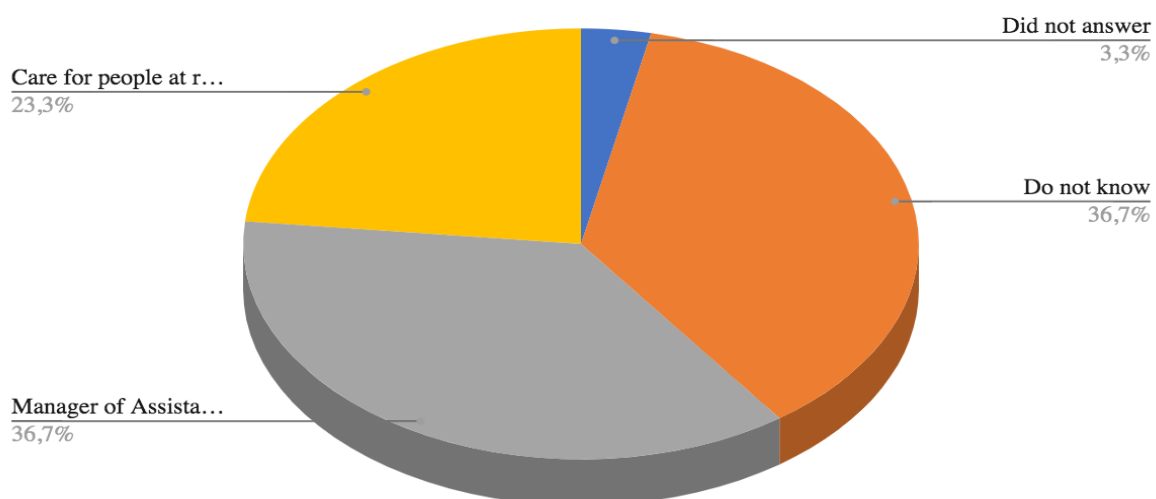


Figure 5. Question 5.3.1. How do users of social services in general understand the profession of social work?

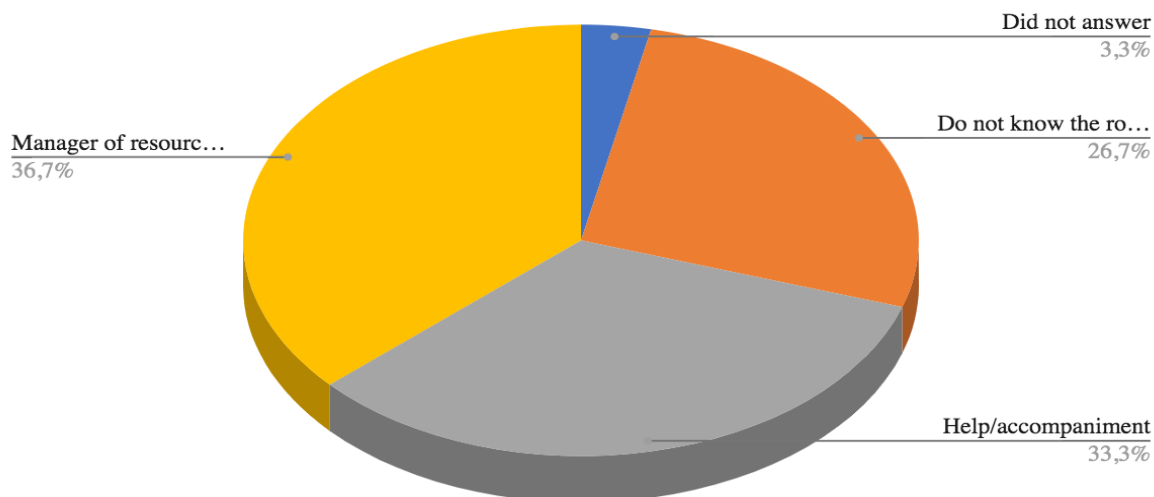


Figure 6. Question 5.4. As a professional, do you understand what your institution expects of you? (Indicate the three priority activities, with 1 being the most important and 3 the least important)

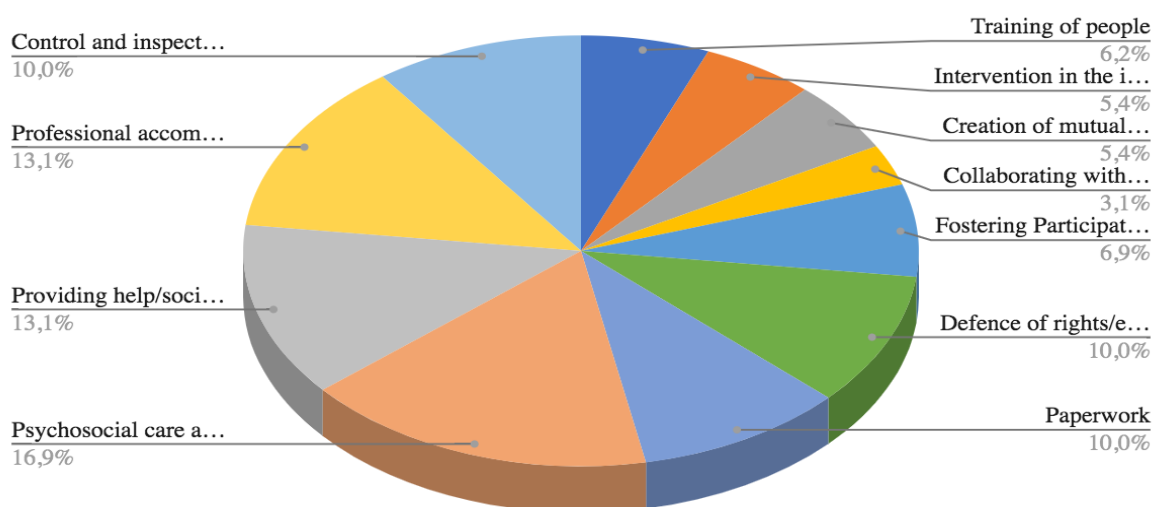


Figure 7. Question 5.5. From your conception of social work, with which of its activities do you most identify yourself? (Indicate the three priorities as in the previous question)

