

Once in a Hundred Years: Does COVID-19 Present an Opportunity to Restructure the Professional Image of the Social Worker in Israel?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed social work in the limelight alongside the various medical professions and has created a rare opportunity for transforming the oppressed image of the profession. Based on a broad perspective—historical, social and political—we show how the development of a collective needs-conscious identity can lead to active protests on the part of social workers against their condition. This process is brought into sharp focus by critical analysis of media reports on the protests held by social workers in Israel in July 2020. An analysis of the struggle points to a number of factors that are responsible for its success: creating a collective consciousness with respect to the profession and the use of anger (as against fear); increasing the visibility of the profession in the public eye and the media; developing a dialogue that defined the party responsible for oppressing the status of the social workers; highlighting the ramifications of this oppression not only on the social workers but also on society as a whole; and using rhetoric that enabled the professional struggle to be ended and collaboration to be continued. The significance of these findings and their theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: collective consciousness, COVID-19 pandemic, professional image, social work

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Background

Since its establishment social work has dealt with populations that have been marginalised, both socially and politically (Parker and Ashencaen, 2017). A primary emphasis in education for social work has been the development of practical means to lessen inequalities with respect to the economic and social resources of the weaker populations in society—from those who have to struggle with inborn or acquired limitations (Kaufman *et al.*, 2005) to those who face inequality based on culture or gender (Huss, 2009).

Some of the research conducted on the subject of inequality relates to ongoing oppressed social states in tandem with traumatic experiences (Canetti *et al.*, 2010). An ‘ongoing traumatic oppressed’ state can be defined as comprising long-term traumatic conditions resulting from oppressive social or political circumstances that continue into the present time (Kira *et al.*, 2020). Traumas of this nature are not the exclusive province of populations under the care of social workers but also of social workers themselves.

The current article argues that the lack of a ‘presence’ regarding social work as a profession has contributed to the perception of social work as having a lower status, relative to other professions, in the eyes of both the public and the social workers themselves. Based on a historical, social and political perspective, we show how the image of social workers in Israel has been engraved in the public consciousness as that of an oppressed population, at times exposed to societal censure.

A study conducted on the public image of social workers in Israel found the attitude towards them to be ambivalent: on the one hand, they are rated lower relative to other professions, and on the other hand, they are viewed as representing a profession that is moral (Kagan, 2016). In another study that examined public perception of child protection social workers (Ben Shlomo and Levin-Keini, 2017), ambivalence was found to be more extreme, with their being regarded as inept or even as child abductors.

O maintains that the social workers themselves have internalised this image, as manifested in their resignation to the professional norms that have evolved—unrewarding work or work with minimum recompense, and devaluation vis-à-vis other professions. We claim that a change in this situation may only occur as a result of the development of a collective needs-conscious identity (Simon and Klandermans, 2001). This in turn may lead to active protest on the part of social workers against their condition, resulting in a change in how they perceive themselves and, consequently, in how they are perceived by the establishment, the public and the media. Such a development could be particularly complex given the Israeli reality, in which the formation of a collective identity

must take into account a diverse employment setup, including local and national government sectors, private non-profit sectors and private for-profit sectors (Weiss-Gal and Levin, 2010) and environment that includes multicultural groups (Lewin-Epstein and Cohen, 2019).

Does the profession still bear the brunt of the fundamental principles established by Bertha Pappenheim, with the resultant devaluation of the professional self?

O states: 'In order to have an effect on how we as social workers are viewed, we must be aware about who we are and what we do.' Liu and Hilton (2005) suggest in this connection that history provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and who the 'other' is; historical narratives play a role in defining the members of a group and the boundaries that separate them from groups of others (Von Borries, 1997); In the context of social work others can include directors of government agencies or non-profit organisations that employ social workers and determine their professional status (Gibelman, 1999); members of the paramedical professions operating in the same territory (Fall *et al.*, 2000); and the public itself (Hodge, 2004). Since much of the public does not interact directly with social workers, perception of the profession may in large part be attributed to the depiction of social workers in the media. A historical examination shows that social work as a profession defined itself at the outset, in full awareness and out of choice, through limited social representations. Whether in Europe (Hering-Calfin and Waaldijk, 2003), or the USA (Axinn and Stern, 2001), the backdrop for this situation was the fact that in its early stages social work was performed voluntarily, only later becoming a remunerative profession based on professional knowledge.

A classic historical case showing the manner in which the underplayed image of the social worker has been moulded is attributed to Bertha Pappenheim, also known as Anna O, the first psychoanalytical patient of Joseph Breuer (Freeman, 1990). Pappenheim, born into a wealthy family that had arrived in Frankfurt in late 1888, soon joined a voluntary force made up of the city's women. In 1895, she assumed a role of leadership in accepting responsibility for managing one of the community's institutions—an orphanage for Jewish girls. She took on the position because of both the challenge involved and her sense of mission, inspiring her to funnel her salary back into the institution. Throughout her tenure she refrained from accepting any wage for her work, regarding it as a good deed to be performed voluntarily. She won to her cause other women who also enjoyed an affluent way of life.

Pappenheim believed that if social work were to be a paying profession, it would be devoid of personal involvement and a love of humankind. This approach turned out to be problematic after First World War, when a number of events were taking place concurrently, altering the picture. Post-war Europe was in dire economic straits, whilst the Spanish flu pandemic, which had broken out towards the end of the war, had reached its peak and was to continue for a full two years. In parallel, the birth of the welfare state and the professionalisation of social work led to a situation in which it no longer depended on volunteers but rather on paid personnel working under state supervision (Gerhard and Levin, 1992). The external reality created new conditions, many middle-class women were beginning to look for sources of income, and a relatively new profession was offering an opportunity for redefinition.

Although Pappenheim hired professional workers in the institutions under her management, she insisted that these workers be recompensed to as modest an extent as possible. Bitter confrontations ensued with women of the younger generation against the backdrop of her beliefs and the discourse she spearheaded. Whilst continuing to claim that the profession should be regarded as a noble cause, her peers—some of whom led independent lives and were unmarried—considered social work as a profession that combined both a mission and remuneration (Kaplan, 1972).

Pappenheim's political power and doctrine held tremendous sway, which is why social workers began to direct their professional efforts mainly in the direction of weak, marginalised populations, such as children at risk or families living under the threat of violence (Mendes, 2007), whilst investing much fewer resources in the profession itself, including its prestige and immunity.

Surprisingly, Pappenheim's perspectives found their way freely even into the existing patriarchal society long after her death. England and Folber (1999) note, in this connection, that care-giving is identified with feminine attributes and is perceived as 'the air we breathe'—no price can be attached to it, it is invisible, is taken for granted and is therefore not valued. This view of social work is rooted dichotomously between the world of markets and profit-making (the male sphere) and the world of care-giving and social relations (the female sphere).

A political and social reality that underscores capitalistic values and underrates the prestige of social work is associated primarily with unpopular social problems and people who are unable to adequately cope with the level of changes and competition in a post-industrial society (Kunneman, 2005). This fact influences society's view of social work as a profession.

As stated above, the media plays a key role in this process through the shaping of public opinion and concern about social problems in general, and in particular about the issues with which social work as a

profession must contend (Franklin and Parton, 1991). O, who conducted a review of research studies that examined how the profession is perceived by the media and society, states that a number of common negative perceptions exist: (i) an overall ignorance of the extent of social work's mission (often thought to be predominantly child welfare); (ii) a lack of understanding of what social work roles include (often perpetuated by the profession's lack of clarity); (iii) a negative view of social workers' competence when compared to similar helping professions; and (iv) an unfavourable view of some client populations with which social work aligns itself. Gibson (2014) emphasised how the marginalised self is internalised even by social workers themselves. Social workers operate within a complex environment where the failure to live up to expectations can lead to negative self-judgments or negative judgments from others, a sense of inadequacy and not feeling 'good enough' (Gibson, 2014).

Outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for change

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world order and in this respect has raised public awareness of the central role of social workers in the context of acts helping populations on the margins of society. The European Social Workers Union states that 'Social work has an essential frontline role in the fight against the spread of the virus through supporting communities to protect themselves and others through physical distancing and social solidarity' (IFSW, 2020).

In April 2020, the National Association of Social Workers in the USA published a report emphasised that the primary mission of social work is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty (NASW, 2020).

In an editorial in the *British Journal of Social Work*, Golightley and Holloway (2020) also point out the traditional role of social workers during times of crisis like the current one, stating:

Social work must look out for, and speak for, the most marginalized and vulnerable in our society. Now, more than ever, we must take the lead in building coalitions that will share and adapt existing expertise to address issues of well-being and survival for those who do not have the resources to do this for themselves.

The conditions under which social workers in Israel entered the COVID-19 arena have been particularly complex. The state has

experienced an ongoing constitutional crisis and has operated without an approved budget (Gesser-Edelsburg *et al.*, 2020). The profession itself has suffered from a shortage of manpower (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2020). The staff have had to cope with a situation in which they were declared essential, whilst at the same time seeing the country's economy come to a standstill (Gal, 2020), undermining the sense of personal and family security. Moreover, in view of the burgeoning cases of infection, some of the care has had to be administered using remote technology, a fact that has required the social workers to acquire a skill in an unfamiliar field (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2020). It is against this background that one of the most significant struggles ever staged by the country's social workers got off the ground.

The following pages demonstrate how, based on a critical discourse analysis of media quotations, the battle conducted by social workers in Israel shortly after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the repressive professional image with which they have to cope. At the same time, it will be shown how, unlike the protests staged by social workers in the past, the present struggle has yielded significant results.

Critical discourse analysis is an interpretive analysis that attempts to explain discourse structures rather than merely describing them. It focuses on an examination of the structure and frequency of claims or narratives and the cultural reverberations of specific images. The texts are regarded as links in a historical and ideological chain from which meaning is derived and culture propagated (Parker, 1992). The social workers' struggle that took place in Israel during July 2020 was reported in both the printed and electronic media. We chose to analyse the quotes that appeared on Israeli news websites, as these reflected events in real time, were reproduced verbatim and were minimally edited. Repeated on a number of sites, the quotes in some cases represented right-wing elements in the political map whilst others were identified with the left.

We, therefore, perceived them as representing the rhetorical discourse that characterised the struggle on the part of all the players.

Social workers protests in Israel

The welfare system in Israel has undergone many changes over time. Whereas it was at first based on the principles of a conventional welfare state, political upheavals in other parts of the world that trickled into the country resulted in its welfare policy being based increasingly on neo-liberal principles. Neo-liberal economists tend to view social policy in terms of an expenditure rather than an investment, as consumption rather than production (Classen *et al.*, 2005). The process of reducing employment costs has worsened the employment conditions of social

workers, including the reduction of job allocations in the public sector, erosion of work conditions, determination of wages according to collective agreements, encouragement of employment through subcontractors and engagement of personnel on a part-time or hourly basis.

The first fight for rights was staged by Israel's social workers in 1994. Lasting for 45 days, it achieved significant results in the way of salary increases and promotion practices. However, pay additions were linked to the cost-of-living index and salaries underwent considerable erosion over time (Social Workers Union, 2020).

The next major battle took place 17 years later, in 2011, starting on 6 March and ending on 28 March of that year. The agreement reached was viewed by many social workers as a selling out, leading to a bitter protest against the then Chairman of the Social Workers Union, who was quoted as saying: 'Had we been convinced, even for a moment, that we could achieve a better deal for the social workers, we would not have acceded to this wage agreement' (Social Workers Union, 2020). The spokesperson of the Social Workers Union then claimed, on behalf of the union, that: 'What we succeeded in achieving is the maximum that the Finance Ministry was willing to give, and even this was made possible by the intervention of the Chairman of the Histadrut [General Organization of Workers in Israel] in the negotiations' (Social Workers Union, 2020).

The then Chairman of the Histadrut organisation was blamed by the social workers for acting to limit their demands and restore industrial peace in the sector, or in other words, maintain the existing social order. At a session held some days later in the national labour court, a majority of the Centre members reached a decision to adopt the arrangement that had been formulated with the Ministry of Finance, with the addition of a few amendments. Union representatives claimed that 'This agreement is the best thing that we could arrive at. If we could have altered the wage scale as well, it would have been ideal for us. However, there is opposition to this in the Ministry of Finance' (Social Workers Union, 2020).

The anger, disappointment and desire to hold 'another round' in the battle gained in intensity when the social workers discovered, to their shock, that the strike days had been docked from their salaries by way of a penalty for having dared to fight for their rights.

Anger found its way into the subsequent political struggle as its prime mover (Valentino *et al.*, 2011). These were the first signs of active mobilisation that was to make an appearance some years later, even if it was at this stage no more than a mental awareness of the professional deprivation undergone by social workers.

The woman who had spearheaded the protest over the agreement reached in 2011 also led the third battle by Israel's social workers in July 2020, the focus of the present article. Announcement of the battle

could have been foreseen, having been planned two years earlier. Its timing, however, was surprising. Israel was still licking its medical and economic wounds after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and medical and welfare personnel were being lauded publicly for their endeavours. There was thus a tacit agreement that this was not the time to demand higher wages. Against this backdrop, the decision to launch a protest became a controversial issue, even in the internal dialogue that was conducted between the social workers themselves on social media. Ultimately, those in favour of protesting won out and demonstrations were launched in early July, though not before a vain attempt had been made to conduct negotiations with the Ministry of Finance. The struggle was backed by schools for social work in Israel as well as by the Israeli Association of Social Workers.

On seeing the Ministry of Finance turn its back on the demands of the social workers, the Chairperson of the Union of Social Workers reinforced the collective identity of the personnel (Simon and Klandermans, 2001) and praised their professional commitment, whilst pointing to the agent that was trying to undermine everything—the Ministry of Finance.

We discovered to our amazement that the Ministry of Finance has not tabled any proposal to prevent a shutdown of the social services. The ministry clearly has an almost stated intention to shut the welfare services down. We approached them with a number of proposals for reaching an agreement that would prevent closure of the welfare services, but to our regret the ministry did not even agree to discuss them. (Carmon, 2020a)

Subsequently, when welfare staff were already on strike, the Chairperson drew attention to the social workers' oppressed status, even in the context of gender. The femininity of the profession was pointed out, weak economically vis-à-vis a strong male sector.

'The disregard on the part of the Ministry of Finance is chauvinistic. We are economically enfeebled women, but ministry officials ignore us.' Another message from the Union of Social Workers stated: 'They would have conducted serious negotiations with a strong male sector long ago' (Carmon, 2020b). Six days after the start of the strike, contending with the complex health issues by wearing face masks, social workers began to hold demonstrations at major intersections throughout the country. In response, the Head of the Budgets Department in the Ministry of Finance stated: 'Talking now about wage increases in every single public sector is simply not relevant.' (Yaron, 2020a).

Unlike the protests in 2011, when social work leaders rushed to sign an agreement, accompanied by the statement that 'this agreement is the best thing that we could arrive at', in the 2020 fight they did not yield to fear or submissiveness in conducting their protests.

The response of the social workers to the Head of the Budgets Department was as follows: ‘At the moment the most insidious virus with respect to the welfare services is the Budgets Department. We call on the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance to demand that the Head of the Budgets Department withdraw his statements, which are detached from reality and insulting to the social workers’ (Yaron, 2020a). The same day a critical analysis appeared in Israel’s leading economic newspaper that shed light on the complexity of the situation in which the two key players—the social workers and the Ministry of Finance—were embroiled:

On the one hand it is not particularly costly to end the strike by the social workers. It is a question of a few hundred million shekels ... for workers whom everyone knows are truly deprived. On the other hand, the social workers could not have found a worse time to strike than in the COVID-19 crisis and the economic crisis. Not only are they being constantly upbraided by Ministry of Finance officials over the timing, the government must also take into account the fact that largesse towards them could encourage other sectors to conduct a wage battle precisely at this time. Except that the social workers realized that there would not be a better time for a strike in the near future. (Ilan, 2020)

The article illustrated how this battle had the potential to upset the existing social order: if the status of the social workers was to be improved, then other downtrodden sectors would also clamour for an improvement in their condition.

Ironically, just a few days after the Head of the Budgets Department came out against raising the wages of the social workers, the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance announced a programme for distributing NIS 6 billion to the country’s citizens in light of the COVID-19 crisis, irrespective of their economic status. This sum could have been sufficient to meet the demands of the social workers for more than a decade ahead, and the move boosted public support for the sector. Articles addressing radical social work emphasise that resistance to the populist agenda of governments can gain momentum only if social workers take the initiative of forming a professional community that will enable them to work directly with society as a whole for the benefit of its members (Noble and Ottmann, 2018).

Support was forthcoming from other sectors too. The General Secretary of the Teachers Union in Israel, for example, addressed the social workers in the course of their strike, saying: ‘You cannot give in to them, and we cannot give up on you. So be strong and of good courage, we shall do whatever we can and whatever you wish to assist you because we are all in the same boat. So be strong and of good courage. Bravo’ (Hamal Editorial, 2020). A total of 140 heads of authorities from the Local Government Centre, constituting the social workers’ main employer, approached the Minister of Finance with great urgency,

requesting that he resolve the crisis, and stating that they second the social workers' demands for reducing their workload, providing security and protection against violence towards them, improving their status and raising their wages.

Politicians too supported the battle being waged by the social workers, although it is interesting to note the martial language they used in creating a public awareness of their plight. (Military service in Israel is compulsory for everyone over eighteen, so it has become commonplace to use militaristic terms whenever the urgent attention of the public is sought.)

Thus the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Social Services tweeted that the social workers '... are the ones at the front, buffering the impact of the impending tragedy. If this onslaught fails in a second [corona virus] wave, there will be no retreating.' So saying, he drew attention to their role as 'the people's army'. One of the Knesset members told the social workers that they were alone under the stretcher, thus referring to them as shouldering a heavy burden.

On 13 July, 11 days after commencement of the strike, the social workers made public the following announcement after no one had deemed it proper to talk to them:

The strike has been going on for days and no one is talking to us at all. How is this not urgent, not a burning issue? The workers are ready for a long strike ... for more than a week no attention is being paid to children at risk, the elderly, battered women, COVID-19 victims, the unemployed, and red towns. We are in a strike that could last a long time. Our aim is an agreement to save the social services. (Yaron, 2020b)

In speaking to the nation about its public needs, relating this to a rescue of the social services, the social workers continued to win public favour.

The following day (14 July 2020), possibly by virtue of the above announcement, the social workers were invited for the first time to talk with the Ministry of Finance. However, exactly one week later (21 July 2020), an impasse in the negotiations was declared. The Ministry of Finance dug its heels in and asked the local authorities, who had shown support for the cause of the social workers, not to transfer salaries to the strikers. The Ministry of Finance was thus trying to exert pressure on the social workers indirectly through the local authorities. However, the local authorities recognised the importance of welfare services during a time of crisis and did not yield to the attempt to stifle changes in the existing social order.

The social workers' anger over the above move resulted in hundreds demonstrating once again at intersections throughout the country, demanding that the Minister of Finance come up with a resolution. They claimed it was inconceivable that the Finance Ministry would want to

break their backs at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The connection between the COVID-19 crisis and injury to the social workers was made possible by public recognition of their role in the vanguard of the battle against the virus alongside the doctors and scientists—a situation that would not have existed before the pandemic.

The next day (22 July 2020), with the unprecedented backing of the public and the media, the social workers succeeded in achieving their goal. Most of their demands were met.

The Minister of Finance announced: ‘We have agreed to historic steps that will change the status of the workers and allow them to continue their dedicated work under conditions that are commensurate with the importance of the assignments they have taken upon themselves’ (Gil, 2020). The use of the word ‘status’ pointed more than anything else to the minister’s realisation that the agreement would change the existing social order in favour of one that was more just.

The Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Social Services resorted once again to military terminology in stating that the social workers are ‘our outstanding elite unit; we are all obligated to care for it and offer it our full support in the way of working conditions and protection’ (Gil, 2020).

The Chairperson of the Social Workers Union summed up the situation as follows: ‘This is a ground-breaking agreement. I am proud of the workers for their determined and inspired fight. My thanks are also extended to the team in the Ministry of Finance for their ability to bridge gaps and take part in the joint effort to bring about changes in social work as a profession in Israel, for the benefit of the social workers themselves, those seeking social services, and Israeli society as a whole’ (Gil, 2020). The adjectives used by the Chairperson of the Social Workers Union to describe the fight by the social workers (‘determined and inspired’) were indicative of its importance and uniqueness. At the same time, it is interesting to note her closing statement, with her mention of the main players—the Ministry of Finance, to which she addressed a placating message of thanks for its ability to bridge the gaps, and Israeli society in general, for whose sake the battle had been waged.

Discussion

This article examines whether a global health crisis, of a kind seen only some 100 years ago, can serve as a springboard for altering the professional image of social workers—an issue that is raised in light of the struggle waged by social workers in Israel. It is important to state the uniqueness of the occurrence relative to other major events, such as wars or natural disasters, in its constituting an ongoing global emergency that could point a way for social workers to operate hand in hand with

other professions in order to benefit the population as a whole (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2020).

One of the key issues enabling the fight to gather momentum was the change that had taken place since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in perception of social work as a profession. Like the other professions, such as medicine and nursing, social workers too were required to operate under inadequate physical conditions and in a state of uncertainty (IFSW; NASW, 2020). The hierarchy that had differentiated, prior to the medical and economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, between the more prestigious professions, such as medicine, and the ones less so, such as social work, was erased. One and all were viewed as being in the forefront of the action. Furthermore, for the first time, the social workers found themselves rendering assistance to populations that had not been part of their usual clientele.

Despite the increase in the need for the social workers' services, the budgets that had been allocated to welfare continued to remain at a relatively low level, whilst the workers' salaries did not reflect the overtime hours they were forced to put in at the expense of their personal time and that of their families—a fact that underscored the neglect of years and kindled a collective anger. At first this anger was inner-directed, being confined to discourse by the social workers on social media. Subsequently, it invaded the public domain, involving the population as a whole, initially in the form of demonstrations at key intersections and later on judicious control of the social and media agenda.

The collective identity that began to take shape amongst most social workers based on a recognition of the oppressive state they had been in professionally for years—a recognition that had finally become public—was an additional factor that drove the fight forward. Simon and Klandermans (2001) claim that a group can only achieve sustainable social action by creating a collective identity, starting with an awareness of a common injustice, and subsequently by determining who is responsible for the injustice so that a plan of action can be formulated towards effecting a change. According to them, anger is one of the principal passions spurring social activism, marshalling emotions in individuals and cohering them into a common political identity whose goal is protest (Stürmar and Simon, 2004). It may therefore be stated that anger, which increased in intensity in each passing day during the sixteen-day period of the fight and which replaced the fear and submission with which the social workers had lived in the past, also contributed to the success of the protest. The Chairperson of the Social Workers Union was adept in using this anger to strengthen the collective identity of the social workers as a force operating for the benefit of society in general, and the welfare system in particular.

Silverman (2012) draws attention to the importance of this identity: 'Without self-awareness of our own profession, mission, and professional

identity, how can we presume that others will understand us any better?.' Internal exploration of how the field should outwardly present itself is complex because of pressures to serve clients and communities whilst maintaining confidentiality. Yet perception affects financial support of programmes and efficacy of our work. A conflict emerges over who defines the social work brand: social workers, the public and/or the media. When social workers abdicate their responsibility, it allows others to control their image. This statement was undoubtedly an additional factor in making the fight a meaningful one during the sixteen days it was waged.

The Ministry of Finance's disregard of the social workers and its attempt to thwart development of their professional identity, which had begun against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, could have resulted in the social workers' capitulation, as had been the case during the 2011 crisis. The social workers, however, shrewdly raised the issue of status in the context of gender as well, referring to the fact that their profession was filled with women, was economically downtrodden and was operating side by side with strong male-dominated sectors.

One of the characteristics of the discourse between the social workers and the government agencies was the use of war-related metaphors. Such metaphors have been employed frequently since their meaning is clear to all and are accepted in the context of a fight against disease or in complex political or social situations. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in more extensive use of militaristic terms (Flusberg *et al.*, 2018), spurred by the battle waged by doctors, nurses, welfare workers and politicians against an invisible enemy at a time when ordinary citizens were incarcerated in their homes in order to safeguard themselves (Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020).

The public message/moral value conveyed by the social workers was one of the lax accountability on the part of public officials. The attempt by government representatives to view the COVID-19 pandemic as force majeure was rejected by the social workers, who used the discourse to draw attention to the fact that the insidious virus was really the Ministry of Finance itself, which was dismissive of the public's welfare needs.

As shown earlier, the demonstrations held by the social workers and the media coverage given them resulted in an enhanced visibility, in terms of both the personnel themselves and their work, which had hitherto been performed generally behind closed doors. What ensued was broad-based public support as well as the backing of other professionals, such as teachers, who identified with the social goals and moral stands set by the social workers.

The nature of the discourse that took place in the context of the fight and its contribution to the heightened visibility of the social workers cannot be ignored. Individuals construct their identity based on the entire set of dialogues conducted by them (de Fina *et al.*, 2006), especially

when they are in the form of narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Paradoxically, the attempt on the part of ministers and Knesset members to refer to the social workers using masculine language with martial overtones only underscored the downtrodden conditions that constituted the motive for the protests (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999).

This discourse may be viewed through the prism of populism, with a rhetoric directed towards the general public in order to win support and popularity. Many examples exist of the rise in political forces throughout the world using populist dialogue that makes frequent use of social media. When the head of the budgets department in the ministry of finance stated: ‘Talking now about wage increases in every single public sector is simply not relevant’ (Yaron, 2020a), the Chairperson of the Social Workers Union realised that the only way to counter this was to develop a dialogue that would advance the cause of rights and social justice, and expose the establishment with its populist claims—namely, that it was acting for the benefit of society—for its true role in injuring the rights of society’s downtrodden (Noble and Ottmann, 2018). Her response was:

“At the moment the most insidious virus with respect to the welfare services is the Budgets Department” She thus pinpointed the agency responsible for the condition of the social workers and the population they represent (in some cases the social workers themselves belong to the weaker segments of Israel’s population, such as the Bedouin).

Through her discourse, the Chairperson of the Social Workers Union branded herself and the identity of the social workers she headed as agents working for the benefit of society and helping to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical and practical implications

The present article shows how populist discourse used by the Government of Israel in its attempt to quash the social workers’ struggle failed to succeed. The fight not only intensified, but also rallied to its cause others from the general public who had been hard hit by government policy, as well as members of other professions who had been at the forefront of the fight with the social workers. What ensued was a heightened visibility of social work as a profession in the media.

In addition, the fight, which had adopted a rhetoric that underscored the rights of the population, contributed to stripping the populist statements of the political leaders of any legitimacy. By exchanging fear and submission on the part of the social workers for anger, the new vocabulary was instrumental in shaping a new social reality as well as a new professional identity.

Although the description presented in this article is based on the battle conducted in Israel, the COVID-19 pandemic has created similar challenges for social workers and their relationship with the political establishment everywhere. One can therefore also learn from the local struggle about the status of social workers in light of the epidemic elsewhere in the world.

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