BETWEEN PASSION AND PRESSURE: EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF SOCIAL WORK

A MINOR FIELD STUDY IN BANGKOK, THAILAND.

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ABSTRACT

This following study explores the experiences of licensed social workers, volunteers and employees of a social enterprise in Bangkok, Thailand. The focus is on the different challenges the participants face while working in the social work field. What resources they lack and what motivations drive them forward. This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' realities in an urban Thai context. Using a qualitative perspective, with semi structured interviews, eleven interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants who all work in the social work field in Bangkok. The data reveals several recurring challenges through all groups, such as limited funding, staff shortage, emotional strains and bureaucratic constraints. A significant gap was identified between the increasing social needs and the institutional support available to address them. Despite these difficulties, the participants all express a desire to keep working in the field for the foreseeable future. Internal motivations rooted in compassion, a sense of community and personal values are some of the things that keep the participants active. These insights might help and contribute to future discussions about how to better support social workers, in all fields, in Southeast Asia.

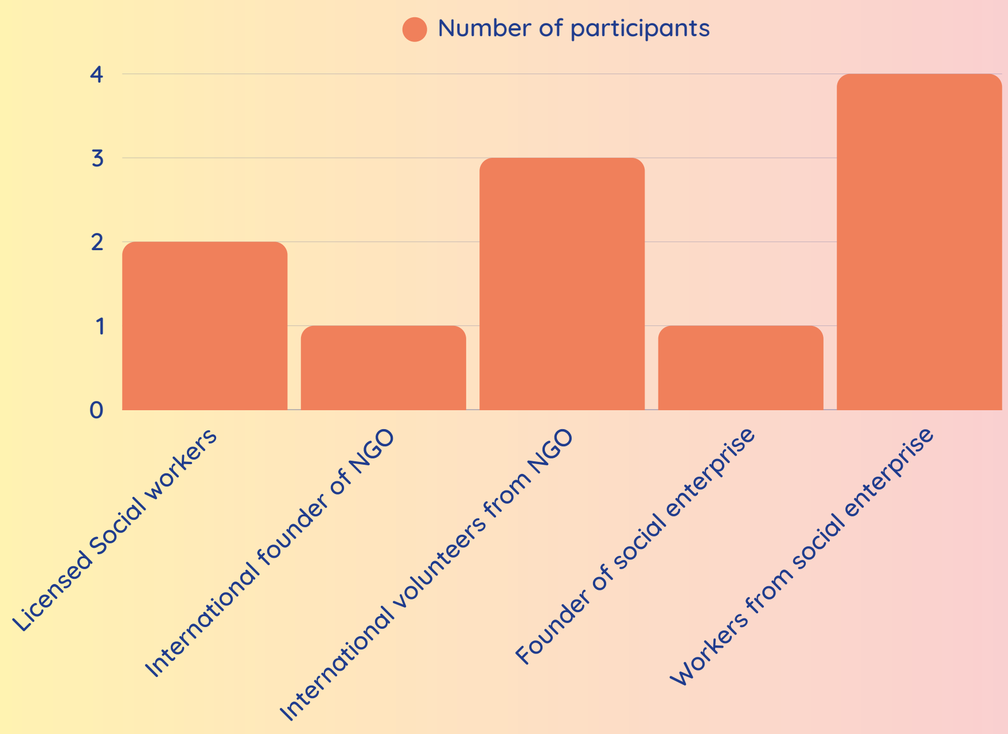
METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven participants working in the social work field, including licensed social workers, volunteers from an NGO, and employees of a social enterprise. Participants were selected through a combination of local contacts, online searches, and referrals from a translator. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and were conducted mainly face-to-face, with two held via Zoom. Some interviews required a translator due to language barriers.

RESULTS

The results show that practitioners in the social work field in Bangkok face several structural and personal challenges. Many participants described staff shortages, heavy workloads, and limited funding, which make it difficult to provide adequate support. Social work is also often misunderstood by the public and associated mainly with charity, which affects the recognition of the profession. Participants further highlighted the emotional demands of working with vulnerable groups. Despite these difficulties, many continue working in the field due to a strong sense of purpose, personal values, and commitment to helping others.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS









ANALYSIS

The analysis shows that the challenges described by the participants can be understood through both structural and individual perspectives. Limited resources, staff shortages, and heavy workloads reflect the conditions described in street-level bureaucracy theory, where frontline workers must manage high demands with insufficient support. This often forces practitioners to prioritize tasks and adapt their work despite institutional constraints. At the same time, ecological systems theory helps explain how broader societal factors, such as public attitudes toward social work and institutional structures, influence the practitioners' experiences and working conditions. The findings suggest that the difficulties faced by social workers are not only personal or organizational, but are also shaped by wider social, political, and cultural systems.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social workers and other practitioners in Bangkok face significant challenges, including staff shortages, limited funding, heavy workloads, and low public recognition of the profession. These structural limitations make it difficult to meet the growing social needs in the city. Despite these difficulties, many practitioners remain committed to their work due to strong personal values, a sense of purpose, and dedication to helping vulnerable groups. The findings highlight the need for greater institutional support, improved resources, and increased recognition of social work in order to strengthen the field and better support both practitioners and the communities they serve.