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Social workers in Italy: role, tasks and image

By Silvana Mordeglia, President of Italian Order Social Workers

The Social Workers Association was established by Law n. 84 of 23 March 1993. The law established that to carry out the activity – as a freelance or as an employee - it is necessary to be enrolled into the professional register. There are currently 42,000 social workers in Italy.

The Association brings together the professional community and it is their expression; it safeguards the interests of its professional members and of those who use or are clients of professional social workers in order to guarantee the level and quality of service.

The Association safeguards the social interest of the Italian State and is a no-profit public institution subject to the surveillance of the Ministry of Justice. It is subdivided in local offices, thus there are 20 Regional Association and 1 National Committee.

The role of social workers in Italy – as in other European countries – is evolving. It is now fundamental to create networks in order to be more influential under a political and organisational point of view. This allows to reduce social alienation, a key issue at all levels in these times of crises. Thus, having relationships at institutional, political and social level are a key issue if one wishes to achieve these goals. Our reference context has changed; it is now more complicated and critical. That is why we cannot think to carry out this activity using instruments that are now obsolete and no longer effective in a society that has undergone great changes.

In Italy, local social and health services foresee the professional activity of social workers for families, minors, teenagers and all those in difficulty or at risk of social exclusion and isolation.

Social workers work to help the weaker ones, such as the elderly, people with great physical or psychological disabilities, foreign people from non-EU countries, drug addicts, alcoholics and people with mental health problems.

Social workers are fundamental – together with the Juvenile Court and the Juvenile Judge – in adoption and fostering processes as well as in issues regarding precautionary measures, alternatives to detention and probation of adults and minors.

All these issues are linked to Italy's new social-economic and cultural scenario.

This explains why social workers activities are always under observation and are often treated in an unfair manner.

Sometimes, due to superficiality, badly made analysis or the lack of in-depth activities, the media tend to give social workers responsibilities that actually belong to others.

These responsibilities are in reality linked to limited economic resources allocated for social working activities; this is due to the long lasting economic crises coming from the Central or Local Governments – especially commons.

That is why in order to safeguard and sustain the social workers activity it is necessary to safeguard communication regarding our professional image.

The National Board meeting of 2014 saw the creation of the Communication Group, coordinated by the National Counsellor Federico Basigli. The other members are the President Silvana Mordegli, the Vice-president Gianmario Gazzi, the Secretary Counsellor Maria Concetta Storaci and the Treasury Counsellor Patrizia Del Principe.

The Communication Group has prepared a new strategy as the role of social workers and their actions play a key part in Italy's overall scenario.

That is why we believe our profession has the right to participate to the Italian political and media debate.

Our communication activities allow us to give opinions and comments; we make proposals and give advice and solutions to problems in which social workers are involved every day.

An example is provided by our intervention during the making of the so-called 2015 Stability Law – i.e. the law regulating the Government's yearly expenses. We have explained why it was not possible to take away other resources to social services; we supported the increase in expenses sustained by Councils for the care of foreign minors without a family. We have also played a part in the approval of the so called "dopo di noi" – after us – law for families of disabled children.

We are active members operating in today's political-institutional scenario. This is a great change: we no longer want to be passive subjects that just defend themselves.

We cannot accept any longer – especially when it comes to matters involving minors and their families – to be judged by the media. We do not want to run after show information.

That is why we now have a new communication structure - made by professionals – that allows us to improve the effectiveness of our communications.

We do not refuse to face the media when it comes to news in which the image and the activities of social workers are under the spotlight.

We do not accept superficial judgements by the media for this sort of news.

The skills, knowledge and professionalism of social workers cannot be subject to superficial and emotional judgements.

We now stand tall. We work to make our profession be respected and considered as reliable when it comes to those matters we take care of every day.

Welfare, the new poor, new families, immigration, prisons, social security, minors and the elderly, all political issues on which we develop our political communication.

We are driving our members to make them become active subjects, not passive or – even worse – absent members of the Association.

We are working to improve the perception stakeholders as well as central and local decision makers have of us.

Our professional community must have a clear identity, know everything that is going on around and about us.

The work of the National Board will be more effective if – together with the fifteen national counsellors, the regional counsellors, the unions and the associations – we have a professional community that is aware of what is going on.

Our first communication tool is – obviously – represented by our website (www.cnoas.it).

The website is regularly updated and shows all our activities. Access is growing overnight: last year we saw a ten-fold increase in accesses and visited pages. Every month we have almost 20 thousand accesses and 500 thousand visited pages.

A newsletter summarising all latest activities is sent every 15 days to about 30 thousand colleagues out of the 42 thousand members of the Association.

The monitoring of the political media scenario is very important. We do this in two ways: through a daily press review sent also to Regional Associations and through a control made in real time of the news that could be of interest to our profession coming from the most important press agencies.

The latter tool allows us to intervene immediately with communications, comments and statements when it comes to news regarding our activities.

The last few months saw the increase of our press releases and amount of news given to our members.

All this helps to improve the way the public opinion and decision makers see us.

We also attend several Round Tables, Work or Study Groups, Parliamentary Committees, other kind of Committees, Sessions and initiatives made together with other associations, such as those of lawyers, magistrates, journalists, psychologists, and so forth.

Finally, we would like to highlight our work to make sure Italian laws regulating our profession are always up to date with the activities of social workers.

The Italian Senate is discussing a new law that will indicate and better regulate all new responsibilities involving our profession.

We are following this initiative carefully and actively also with the help of many MPs we have made aware of these issues. Our hope is that this new law will be approved soon.