

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN ORGANIZING SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

This article explores the structure and significance of social services provided to elderly individuals, with a focus on the role of social workers in their effective organization. The concept of “old age” is examined in the context of Azerbaijani legislation, highlighting not only biological but also psychological and social dimensions. The study emphasizes that social services are professional interventions aimed at enhancing social integration, addressing daily needs and improving quality of life for the elderly. Social workers play a central role by assessing individual needs, identifying challenges and applying tailored service models across three key areas: social care, social treatment and social rehabilitation. The article systematizes the primary economic, psychological and health-related problems elderly individuals face and underscores the strategic importance of social workers in addressing them. It concludes that social services promote not only personal well-being but also active social participation and dignity in later life.

Keywords

Elderly, social services, social worker, social care, ageing period, well-being of the elderly.

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1. Introduction

The concept of “elderly”, defined with the aim of ensuring the social well-being of older individuals, is clearly articulated in legislation. According to the legislation of Azerbaijan, Article 1.0.8 of the Law “On Social Services” defines an elderly person as an individual who has reached the age of 70 (Government of Azerbaijan, 2011).

Biologically, the term “elderly” refers to individuals aged 70 and above. From a social perspective, aging can also be defined as a subjective experience: individuals who perceive themselves as old often feel older than those whose aging is measured solely by calendar age. Regardless of chronological age, people who consider themselves old often feel significantly older (Payne, 2021).

The concept of social services refers to the services offered to the elderly, which they require to address their needs. Social services encompass the challenges elderly individuals face in the social sphere, as well as the interventions aimed at resolving these challenges. But what constitutes a “problem”? A problem can be described as a persistent situation that complicates an individual’s daily life activities and creates discomfort (Payne, 2021).

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Social Service Institutions for the elderly provide assistance to individuals over the age of 70 who are unable to care for themselves and who do not have able-bodied relatives or legal representatives to provide such care and support (State Social Protection Fund of Azerbaijan, n.d.).

What do we mean by “social” in the phrase “social problem”? The term “social” is sometimes used synonymously with “public”, as both refer to systems of relationships that bring individuals together, the structural organization of society and the mutual interactions among individuals. While the two terms are often interchangeable, “social” conveys a broader meaning. Specifically, it refers to relationships between individuals and groups, whereas “public” relates to collective interests and common issues. The social dimension includes a person as an individual in relation to their family, friends, workplace, environment, etc. In every context where an individual interacts and communicates - be it the family, job, pension or social network - concerns and discomfort may arise. Therefore, any intervention aimed at alleviating or minimizing these concerns constitutes a social service. All such interventions are inherently social in nature. In summary, efforts to address the social problems of the elderly are defined as social services.

2. The Professional Status and Coordinative Role of the Social Worker

In modern society, the social worker plays the role of a helper, mentor and coordinator for those in need. They hold a crucial position in safeguarding social justice, combating inequality, ensuring access to social services and protecting the rights and interests of vulnerable groups.

Various professionals and even volunteers may provide social services in parts or segments. However, the coordinator and the architect of intervention strategies in this field is the social worker. This is primarily because the social worker has received a four-year higher education specialized in this profession. The social worker serves as the main coordinator in the planning and implementation of these services. They are the lead actor, the principal figure who identifies and applies models that align with the assigned tasks and objectives.

For instance, a social worker patiently listens to the problems of an elderly person, consistently striving to find solutions that resolve or at least minimize these issues. These solutions and measures are then shared with the elderly individual. Simultaneously, the social worker persuades the elderly person to trust the proposed resolutions. Moreover, the desires and wishes of the elderly are taken into consideration. If the elderly individual suffers from economic deprivation, the social worker seeks ways to eliminate these economic hardships. If there are legal issues involved, the social worker provides legal support and guidance. If the elderly person faces health-related problems, the social worker not only offers moral support for medical recovery but also strives to ensure access to relevant health services. Just as a physician is an expert in physical/medical health, the social worker is an expert in social well-being.

In their practice, the social worker is not only a helper but also the primary coordinator who ensures the proper organization and direction of social services. Their role is not limited to organizational tasks; rather, it encompasses a comprehensive approach to addressing the social difficulties faced by individuals. Within this framework, the social worker plans at multiple levels, performs coordination functions and continuously monitors the progress of the services provided.

Based on the information gathered, the social worker evaluates the challenges faced by the elderly individual and takes necessary steps to select and implement services that respond to their specific needs. If the elderly person encounters a legal problem, the social worker refers them to the appropriate legal institutions and monitors the process. When medical assistance is needed, the social worker liaises with relevant healthcare facilities to ensure accessibility to the required care.

Furthermore, the social worker is responsible not only for delivering services but also for the continuous supervision and coordinated management of these services. They propose initiatives that may lead to changes not only at the individual level but also at the structural level, which adds a strategic dimension to their work.

The role of the social worker in working with elderly individuals is not limited to technical assistance. They are a fundamental element of a support system that ensures the elderly person's active participation in social life, protects their rights and addresses their psychosocial needs. From this perspective, the social worker acts as a guide, advocate and motivator in the life of the elderly individual.

In conclusion, the social worker stands at the center of the social service system, ensuring the proper orientation of services. Their work contributes not only to resolving individual problems but also to strengthening social welfare on a broader scale.

3. Social Welfare of the Elderly and Intervention Models

Social health refers to the state of well-being on a social level. It is not surprising that people encounter social problems, which are addressed through social work interventions. Social health is defined as a state of feeling healthy, successful, satisfied and content, based on social relationships.

What kind of social problems might the elderly face? These may include loss of communication with their environment, family, friends and relatives; health problems that hinder their ability to engage in desired activities; lack of knowledge about where to seek help for these issues; inability to motivate themselves to solve problems; rejection or refusal of services and support provided for their benefit; uncertainty about how to spend their free time; difficulties in socializing and making friends. The problems mentioned above can be classified as social illnesses.

To eliminate such difficulties, social services implement individualized support mechanisms tailored to each person's situation. Social services provide everything necessary to restore the social health of individuals, including the elderly. Naturally, the elderly may be at one of three different stages regarding the resolution of these problems:

- a) They have the power to solve their problems but lack the courage or are unaware of their strength.
- b) They do not have the power to solve their problems independently but can do so with social service interventions; they are in a process of regaining decisive power.
- c) Due to their living conditions, opportunities and environment, they lack the ability and capacity to resolve their problems. In some cases, it is also unrealistic to encourage the individual to overcome the problem by strengthening their internal resources.

At the initial stage, the social worker identifies which of these three positions the individual belongs to and then determines different solutions appropriate to each group.

In the first case (referring here to the elderly), the social worker demonstrates through profession-specific methods and techniques that the individual can solve their

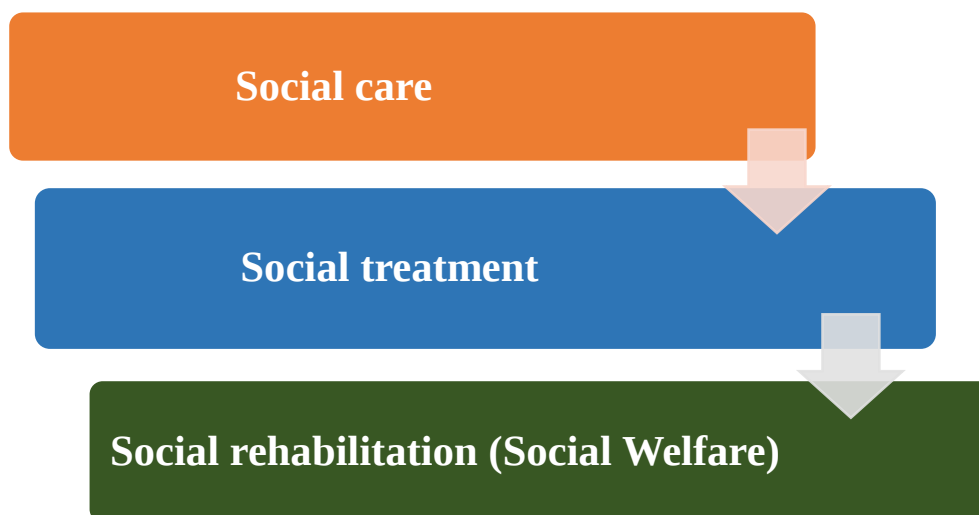
problems independently. They encourage and motivate the person, provide moral support if necessary and assist them in problem-solving.

In the second case, if the elderly person lacks the strength to solve their problems independently, efforts are made to help them regain this power. This increases their self-confidence, strengthens their ability to cope with difficulties, boosts morale, reconnects them with life and ensures that the solution to the problem comes from the elderly individual themselves, providing support throughout the process.

In the third case, if the elderly person lacks the necessary conditions, environment and opportunities to solve the problem independently, the social service team or social worker intervenes directly to resolve the issues faced by the elderly.

Social work primarily focuses on social health and aims to promote social well-being. Within the framework of social health, it provides economic, social and cultural services. In this context, it also includes various medical service types.

Table 1. Main Areas of Social Services



When elderly individuals require care, the social worker develops a social care program. If the social issues or social “illnesses” faced by the elderly are severe or have become chronic, a social treatment program is implemented. In cases where there is a disruption in adaptation to the environment or society, a social rehabilitation program is introduced to restore social harmony. But which interventions are appropriate for which elderly individuals?

Social treatment is a set of decisions, procedures, interventions and actions aimed at resolving social problems at various levels. From this definition, it can be concluded that social treatment is a phenomenon observable and analyzable at different organizational levels within society. In particular, situations such as social isolation, decreased life motivation, psychological tension and difficulties in daily functioning experienced by elderly individuals necessitate social treatment interventions.

Social rehabilitation of elderly individuals refers to the process of adapting older people - who face physical, psychological or social difficulties - back into full participation in society and restoring their lost functional abilities. The main goals of this rehabilitation process are to maintain independence, improve quality of life and enhance social engagement. In the implementation of rehabilitation measures, healthcare

professionals, psychologists, social workers and volunteers work together to provide the necessary support for the reintegration of elderly individuals into society.

The social worker plays a central role in this process: they assess the social and psychological needs of the elderly person, design individualized social rehabilitation plans, facilitate access to social services and support their adaptation to the social environment.

The decision to implement such interventions is made after conducting interviews with the elderly individual and other relevant measures are taken accordingly. These services are applied in collaboration with other social professionals.

The significance of social aspects and social work in the field of healthcare lies in the influence of both internal (biological changes) and external (environmental) factors on an individual's health status. This is because health is not only shaped by biological conditions but also by external social and environmental determinants.

4. Social Problems of the Elderly and the Organization of Social Services

Systematically classifying the social problems faced by elderly individuals allows for a clearer understanding of their current circumstances. The challenges, difficulties and feelings of hopelessness experienced by older adults can be grouped under several major categories:

1. Economic Problems - These arise primarily due to the inability to work or being past working age, resulting in insufficient income and lack of financial capacity to meet basic needs.
2. Social Problems - Including family-related issues, conflicts with neighbors and strained relationships within their immediate social circle.
3. Psychological Problems - Manifesting as depression, anxiety or other mental health concerns.
4. Cultural Issues - A mismatch between the individual's cultural background and the culture of the environment they live in.
5. Difficulties Accessing Basic Social Services in Old Age - For example, challenges in finding rental housing, paying rent or receiving a pension.
6. Intergenerational Problems - Conflicts arising from differences in perspectives between older and younger generations.
7. Loneliness - Stemming from the lack of sufficient communication and attention from children or relatives, often leading to depression.
8. Communication Barriers - Hesitation, anxiety or difficulty in initiating or maintaining social interactions.
9. Lack of Emotional Intimacy - Emotional deprivation due to the loss of loved ones or physical and emotional distance from others.
10. Health Problems - Chronic pain, mobility issues and inability to access medical care.
11. Hopelessness - Fear that their condition will not improve, such as thinking their pain will not subside, vision will not improve or hearing loss is irreversible.
12. Inability to Perform Household Tasks - Difficulty or inability to carry out daily chores or feelings of frustration and boredom related to domestic activities.
13. Boredom and Inability to Spend Time Meaningfully - For instance, not being able to read due to poor eyesight, lacking the confidence to travel alone and other related challenges.

These and similar issues constitute the core problems frequently encountered by elderly individuals. The challenges listed above often manifest in older adults as hopelessness, social withdrawal, anxiety and emotional distress. In most cases, it is not possible for elderly individuals to overcome such conditions on their own. Therefore, there is a significant need for professional support to improve their quality of life and ensure their social well-being. At this point, social workers and professionals from related fields must work collaboratively to help address these problems.

Social services for the elderly are provided in a variety of settings and under different conditions. These include inpatient healthcare institutions, nursing homes, adult day-care centers and any other residential settings where older adults reside.

Providing social services to elderly individuals is not a simple task and highlights the critical role of professionals working in this field. It is essential to first recognize that the person who may appear to be “in charge” of an elderly individual’s life is, in fact, a social worker. However, this does not mean that the power to manage the life of the older person is taken away from them. Rather, the social worker acts as a supportive figure who works *with* the elderly person, not *for* them.

The social worker assists in organizing aspects of daily life such as time management, financial matters and personal routines. It is important to emphasize that social workers become an integral part of the lives of elderly individuals - not merely as professionals providing a service, but as supporters, companions and trusted individuals.

Thus, social workers must engage actively in the lives of older adults, acting in accordance with their wishes, needs and personal choices. This relationship should be based not only on professional ethics but also on empathy and mutual respect.

Ultimately, in order for social workers and other related professionals to perform their roles effectively, a solid foundation must be established. This foundation should include the necessary knowledge, skills and resources required to accurately assess the needs of elderly individuals and to provide them with appropriate services and support. As a result, social workers will be better positioned to deliver targeted and effective interventions that promote the well-being and dignity of older adults.

5. Conclusion

Social services for the elderly are essential tools for enhancing their quality of life and enabling them to experience greater satisfaction and enjoyment in life. These services help integrate older adults into society, strengthen their social connections and ultimately serve as a safeguard for their physical and emotional well-being. They represent a form of social health support that connects older individuals to life, protects them from loneliness, despair and helplessness and promotes active social engagement.

In general, old age is a life stage characterized by dignity, social standing and accumulated experience. Aging is not the end, but rather a significant phase of life. The social activity of elderly individuals has a positive effect on their psychosocial stability and enhances their overall quality of life. As human beings, we are part of an ever-evolving, dynamic world and aging must be viewed within that continuous process of development.

From this perspective, we can see that potential physical, psychological and social problems in later life, as well as crisis situations, can be better managed with proactive approaches. If we address the social problems faced by the elderly and promote their integration into society, we make them an active and valuable part of the community.

Approaching aging in this way aligns with the broader goal of fostering active aging, where elderly individuals are not seen as passive recipients of care but as essential and engaged members of society. The realization of this goal begins with the development and delivery of comprehensive, well-structured social services tailored to the needs of older adults. These services are the foundational steps toward achieving dynamic aging and building age-inclusive societies.

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