

Social workers are key change makers in SA

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For centuries social workers have been at the forefront of helping people navigate times of disruption and radical change. Often referred to as a noble profession, social work has its roots in the 1800s when societies grappled with the emerging impacts of industrialisation. Social workers have historically played a critical role in advocating for social reforms and giving voice to people who are excluded, exploited, or left behind in a changing world. It is no surprise then, that in today's tech-driven revolution era, social work is one of the relevant fields for those with a passion to make a difference.



Despite the transition to democracy, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the modern world. Poverty, crime, unemployment, and lack of equal opportunities are deeply rooted in many South African communities. Gender-based violence, substance abuse and mental health issues are prevalent throughout the country. Financial challenges and the digital divide exclude vast numbers of young South Africans from engaging in the global economy and finding chances to lift themselves and their families out of endemic poverty.

Dr Poppy Masinga, head of the [Social Work & Community Development Faculty at SACAP \(The South African College of Applied Psychology\)](#) says: “The need for social workers in the country is urgent, if we are to fulfil the long-awaited promise of a democratic, free, and fair South Africa. The country needs social workers to take their place at the forefront of the fight for social, environmental, and economic justice, the building of a more inclusive, peaceful, and compassionate society.”

Community empowerment

One of the primary functions of social workers in South Africa is to engage deeply in local communities to jointly identify unique needs and challenges, and work collaboratively to design and implement programmes that promote sustainable development. By empowering communities to take charge of their own growth, social workers help foster a sense of ownership and agency among the people. This approach promotes resourcefulness and resilience, strengthening the social fabric and creating a sense of unity and shared responsibility.

Mental health and trauma healing

South Africa has high rates of mental health issues and a lack of access to mental healthcare resources, especially in disadvantaged communities. Working in association with schools, primary healthcare clinics and non-government or community-based organisations, social workers can serve as vital frontline mental healthcare practitioners.

Social workers play an important role in mobilising resources, providing counselling, as well as coordinating interventions such as support groups and implementing awareness and educational campaigns. On-the-ground professional support helps individuals and communities heal from the psychological aftermath of historical injustices, intergenerational trauma, and promote mental wellbeing and social cohesion.

Advocacy and policy reform

Social workers in South Africa also contribute significantly to shaping policies that advance human rights, social justice, and equality. Drawing on their experiences working at the grassroots level, these professionals offer valuable insights to policymakers, helping to craft legislation that addresses the needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations. The advocacy role played by social workers drives positive change on a systemic level contributing to access to basic services, poverty alleviation, gender equality and respecting diversity. In addition, South African social workers are focused also on advocating for access to varied services such as access to the digital economy.

Dr Masinga says: “There’s a need for social workers to operate across diverse sectors which amplifies their influence across the nation. Whether they are employed in government institutions, non-profit organisations or business settings, their presence is testament to their adaptability and commitment to improving lives. Social workers are catalysts for transformative change, ensuring that equality and justice permeates all walks of life.



Social workers in the climate change era

As the world grapples with the escalating challenges linked to climate change, social workers are poised to play an increasingly vital role. Dr Masinga says: “The climate crisis exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities. Social workers, with their deep-rooted commitment to environmental justice, are well-equipped to address these challenges head-on. They are also capable of spearheading community resilience initiatives, preparing communities for the impending risks and building adaptive capacities.

In addition, as climate crises fuel mental health concerns and trauma, social workers are essential in providing counselling and support services. Their expertise is invaluable in helping individuals and communities cope with the emotional toll of environmental disruptions. It is clear that the social work profession is indispensable. At a time when the world of work is changing rapidly and some jobs are becoming obsolete, social work will remain a long-lasting, in-demand career.”

Have you got what it takes to be a social worker?

Embarking on a career in social work in South Africa is an impactful decision. To thrive and make a meaningful difference in this field, young South Africans should develop a specific set of qualities that will empower them to navigate the complexities of social work and contribute effectively to the betterment of their communities.

Here are 10 top qualities that young South Africans considering a career in social work should cultivate through accredited social work education:

1. Empathy and compassion
2. Ethical integrity
3. Cultural sensitivity and diversity
4. Strong communication skills
5. Problem-solving abilities
6. Resilience and emotional well-being
7. Advocacy skills
8. Adaptability and flexibility
9. Teamwork and collaboration
10. Patience and persistence

Dr Masinga says: “It’s clear that social workers need to develop an in-depth understanding of self and others. This is why the Sacap Bachelor of Social Work degree is strongly underpinned by theories in applied psychology. An important aspect of social work is problem-solving, and when you can figure out what people are going through, you can figure out solutions.”

Sacap is one of the only two private higher education institutions that offers a fully accredited, four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree, which is available at its Cape Town and Johannesburg campuses. Applications for January 2024 are open now. [Find out more here.](#)

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