

Challenges of Social Work Practice with Muslims in India

Md Asif Iqbal¹ & Dr. Tarique Najamee¹

Abstract

Social work practice with Muslims in developing countries has followed the western model in the belief that professional practice is universal. But this model has largely failed due to its exclusion of religious values and spiritual aspects. During the last decade, western professionals realized that the inefficacy of social work practice was due to its avoidance of spiritual and religious aspects in theory and practice.

In India, Muslims are largest minority group, constituting 13.5 percent of total population based on 2001 census. The uniqueness of their religious values and family practices and the multi-dimensionality of issues that they face pose a challenge to the field of social work and its practitioners. The lack of adequate understanding and skills necessary to deal with the various social problems confronted by Muslims demands serious consideration of Islamic values as a component of social work intervention.

There is a need for further research and explorations in this area that will provide an opportunity to consider the importance of Islamic approaches to working with Muslims. It will examine how Islamic cultural characterization is reflected on social work practice and to what extent social work practice respond to the needs of Indian Muslims.

This paper aims to provide an insight that will help to fill knowledge lacunae in the area of social work practice with Muslims in India. It will examine

aspects of knowledge, skills and values that are important to working with them.

Key words: *Muslim, Social Work, Islam*

Social work practice with Muslims in developing countries has followed the western model in the belief that professional practice is universal. After fifty years of social work practice in these countries, however, we find that this model has largely failed due to its exclusion of religious values and spiritual aspects. During the last decade, western professionals realized that the inefficacy of social work practice was due to its avoidance of spiritual and religious aspects in theory and methodology. (Afaf Al-Dabbagh)

There is a need for further research and explorations in this area that will provide an opportunity to consider the importance of Islamic approaches to working with Muslims. It will examine how Islamic cultural characterization is reflected on social work practice and to what extent social work practice respond to the needs of Indian Muslims.

Indian Muslims: A socio-cultural context

For much of Islam's history in India, Indian Muslim civilization was regarded by Muslims throughout the world as one of the jewels of Islamic civilization. And until the division of the subcontinent's Muslims into at first two and then three nations, there would have been little question that this was one of the great national traditions within Islam, if not the greatest. Muslim Indians struggle with a difficult balance: on the one

hand, they take pride in their religious-cultural heritage and in the larger national culture that it has formed; on the other, Islam was the basis in 1947 for the division of their homeland. Muslim Indians also take pride in being Indian. They are the ones who chose to remain in a multi-religious India rather than migrate to the new Muslim nation of Pakistan. (Pandya, 2010)

In India, Muslims are largest minority group, constituting 13.5 percent of total population based on 2001 census. They are not only the largest minority community, but their presence is visible in all the states and union territories. The Sachar Committee Report (SCR) outlines that Muslims across most parts of India, as a community are deeply impoverished and suffer from huge illiteracy, a high drop-out rate, depleting asset base, below average work participation and lack of stable and secure employment. Their deplorable situation is further compounded by their limited access to government schemes and programmes, poor credit flow from public banks and other financial institutions and meagre share in public employment. Regional variations notwithstanding, Muslims, as a whole, have performed only a shade better than scheduled castes and tribes (SCs/STs) on most indices of development, while they have lagged behind the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Fazal, 2013).

Nonetheless, discrimination, social stagnation and educational marginalization have cumulatively resulted in growing economic backwardness of the Muslims in large parts of the country (Sikand,

¹Crosspondent Author, Department of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (India)

Email: mdasif92@gmail.com

² Faculty, Department of Social Work, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad (India)

2006). Though, a process of marginalisation of minority communities exists in almost all societies and there is nothing to warrant that the same is not true of Muslims in India to a greater or a lesser degree (Ahmad, 2007). The uniqueness of their religious values and family practices and the multi-dimensionality of issues that they face pose a challenge to the field of social work and its practitioners.

Spirituality, Religion and Social Work

Religion and spirituality are matters of concern to social work research, education, and practice. There are inherent tensions between what social work and religion bring in response to human needs. Some clients' religious values conflict with those of social work. Discerning this conflict and clarifying some of its underlying values in our effort to assist our clients in making decisions are challenges for us as clergy social workers. The outcome of this process has moral implications for our clients and for us as social workers. How religious issues are addressed in social work practice can affect the well-being and identity of our clients and the integrity of the social work profession (Frederick, 2008).

On the one hand, Patel, Naik, and Humphries (1998) emphasized that 'religious cultural practices' and 'religion as therapy' have 'no place in social work education and practice'. Instead, these authors advocated for a more informed understanding of religious differences and for social work students to become better prepared to practice in a pluralistic society. On the other hand, while fully recognizing that social work must protect its boundaries and remain a wholly secular profession, Derezotes (1995) observed that the religious and spiritual values of clients will sometimes influence the assessment and intervention strategies developed by social workers. Attempting to find the

right balance, Gilligan (2003) observed:

'There is clearly an ... unresolved confusion amongst many social workers and social work educators about what role discussion of religion and belief can play, in an apparently "modern" and "secular" age, and more especially in the context of a commitment to anti-oppressive practice'.

In the early twentieth century, the profession of social work emerged in the North, with strong assumptions regarding the primacy of the individual: for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with self-actualization as its pinnacle; Mahler's notion of separation, individualism and autonomy; and Erickson's ideas on the importance of autonomy in the development of individuals. These and other currents of helping professional theory are strongly grounded to Northern, individualistic cultures (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). In Islam, more emphasis is on collectivism rather than individualism.

The foundation of social work theory and its practice is deeply rooted in religion and spirituality (Day, 2009). Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2011) indicate that social workers are interested in working with the person as a whole; the mental, emotional, spiritual, and the systems that affect their lives. Even though social work historically placed significant value on religion and spirituality, social workers struggled to find a place in the professional world. As social workers moved toward a more professional approach, they began distancing themselves from religion and spirituality, by adopting more secular approaches (Kaplan & Dziegielewski, 1999).

Islam and Social Work

Worldwide literature on Islamic indigenisation of social work remains limited both in number

and scope (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003).

"The essence of the service of Allah, Almighty is firstly to worship Him and Him alone and secondly to render service to His creatures."

There are the two important duties of Muslims. This indicates that Allah Almighty may shower His Mercy and forgive the sins of His Servants (Except of course the sin of making partner to his Lordship) related to *Huqooqullah* (i.e. duty towards Allah) but will not forgive the sins related to *Huqooqulibad* (i.e. duty towards mankind) unless otherwise the people concerned forgive him. This highlights the importance of duties and responsibilities of a Muslim in religio-social context.

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask; and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayers and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which you made; and to be firm and patient in pain (or suffering) and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God fearing" (Quran 2: 177).

The above verse is the concept of social work in Islam. It is however more than a philosophical concept but a practical draft that outlines the why, whom, and who of service delivery (Shahina, 2002).

- Why - we believe form of worship incomplete without helping deeds
- Whom - categories of people and groups and issues related to be met
- Who - characteristics of workers

In the Muslim tradition, charity is not only something to strive for, but is a personal, lifelong and in many senses codified duty.

According to Islam, everything that people earn is given by God, Allah and, in turn, Muslims have to be generous towards others, just as God is generous to them. Charity is thus a sacred duty and the compulsory giving of alms (zakat), calculated according to income and wealth, is one of the pillars of Islam. Fasting, another of the cornerstones of Islam, also emphasises the key role of charity: fasting during the month of Ramadan reminds believers about the poor, who are not able to choose when they are able to fill their stomachs (Klas Borell and Arne Gerdner, 2011).

Islamic teachings balance the individual to the group in terms of responsibility, accountability, and meeting of needs. According to Islamic precepts, just like the body, the viability of any Muslim community depends on the mutual interdependence between its different members. Just as no single part of the body can work for itself unaided, no one individual or group can achieve goals without drawing upon the rest of the community as a unified entity. (Barise ,2004)

Challenges of Social Work Practice with Muslims in India

The profession has been taught to understand and respect various cultures, and provide culturally relevant programs and services. The *NASW Code of Ethics*, intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers, includes the principle that “social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients’ cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures and differences among people and cultural groups” (NASW, 1999).

Social workers seeking to practice with clients from ethnic and racial groups that are a numeric minority,

religious minorities, or recent immigrant communities need to develop an:

- Understanding of the underlying ambitions of individuals from marginalized groups seeking recognition, especially their symbolic features, such as language;
- Understanding the political context and possible areas of activism vis-à-vis facilitating communications and collaborative work;
- Understanding the basis of the fears of the “majority”;
- Understanding of social work within a multicultural context. (NASW 2005)

Social workers must be aware of the different levels of religiosity and acculturation within the Muslim community. It is unethical to force Western social work methods on the clients who do not believe in them. (Barise, 2004)

Social workers should still be aware of the different cultures as well as levels of acculturation and religiosity within the Muslim community. They should still appreciate the potentially different experiences of racial, gender, and age groups as well as individuals. They still need to be able to use competently their attitudes, knowledge, relationship, and skills to work effectively with persons from cultural backgrounds different than their own (Barise, 1998).

Social workers must understand the importance of the family and community among Muslims (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). Because of perceptions that practitioners are immersed in the dominant meta-narrative, and consequently may not respect Islamic values, Muslims may be reluctant to seek assistance from social workers (Altareb, 1996).

Several practical ways to demonstrate these characteristics have been suggested. Addressing and attempting to meet practical needs may be an effective way to

engender trust (Al-Krenawi, 1996). Addressing the husband first, or oldest male in his absence, and requesting his permission to speak to other family members may build trust given that such action implies purity of intent for many Muslim men and women (Mahmoud, 1996). Confrontation, or even direct communication, between Muslims should generally not be encouraged because it can be considered selfish and insulting to the community. Similarly, clients may—at least on the surface—conform to requests, treatment plans, and so forth, as disagreement might be perceived as confronting the therapist. Consequently, workers should identify phrasing accepted in the local Islamic community to communicate concerns (Hedayat-Diba, 2000).

The activation of Islamic values and practices is widely held to be an important factor for Muslims (Banawi & Stockton, 1993). Religiosity has been shown to moderate the effects of job stress (Jamal & Badawi, 1993) and discrimination for Muslims (Byng, 1998). Assessment of spiritual beliefs and practices can lead to interventions that activate Islamic values. Prayer, fasting, and rituals are traditionally considered to be among the most effective means for healing distress (Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994).

References:

- Afaf Al-Dabbagh, Research Note on [Islamic Perspectives on Social Work Practice](http://i-epistemology.net/communication-a-human-development/485-islamic-perspectives-on-social-work-practice.html), retrieved from <http://i-epistemology.net/communication-a-human-development/485-islamic-perspectives-on-social-work-practice.html> dated: 20.02.2014.
- Ahmad, I. (2007). Exploring the Status of Muslims in the Economy, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(37), pp. 3703-3704.

- Al-Krenawi, A. (1996). Group work with Bedouin widows of the Negev in a medical clinic. *Affilia*, 11, 303–318.
- Altareb, B. Y. (1996). Islamic spirituality in America: A middle path to unity. *Counseling and Values*, 41(1), 29–38
- Azhar, M. Z., & Varma, S. L. (1995a). Religious psychotherapy as management of bereavement. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 91, 233–235.
- Banawi, R., & Stockton, R. (1993). Islamic values relevant to group work, with practical applications for the group leader. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 18(3), 151–160.
- Barise. (2005). Social Work with Muslims: Insights from the Teachings of Islam, *Critical Social Work*, 6(2), pp.30-35.
- Byng, M. D. (1998). Mediating discrimination: Resisting oppression among African American Muslim women. *Social Problems*, 45, pp.473–487.
- Frederick J. S. (2008) Religion and Social Work: Dilemmas and Challenges in Practice, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 83(2/3),
- Hedayat-Diba, Z. (2000). Psychotherapy with Muslims. In P. S. Richards & A. E. Bergin (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and religious diversity* (pp. 289–314). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hodge, David R. (2005). Social Work and the House of Islam: Orienting Practitioners to the Beliefs and Values of Muslims in the United States, *Social Work*, 50 (2).
- Borell, K. and Gerdner, A. (2011). Hidden Voluntary Social Work: A Nationally Representative Survey of Muslim Congregations in Sweden, *British Journal of Social Work* 41, 968–979.
- Mahmoud, V. (1996). African American Muslim families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. K. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 122–128). New York: Guilford Press.
- Pandya, A. A. (2010). *Muslim Indians: Struggle for Inclusion*. The Henry L. Stimson Center: Washington, DC
- Sikand, Y. and Ali, I. (2007). *Survey of Socio-Economic Conditions of Muslims in India*, <http://www.countercurrents.org/comm-sikand090206.htm> retrieved on 20.02.2014.
- Tanweer, F. (2013). Millennium Development Goals and Muslims of India. *Oxfam India working papers series* January 2013 OIWPS – XIII, New Delhi: Oxfam India
