

Torill Tjelflaat¹

State of art

The history of the child has changed over time. Historically, there has been little attention to children and childhood as a social issue before the end of the middle ages. As a group, children were, for a long time, almost non-existent. They were not conceptualised, and had no rights. Gradually children became more visible, and understood as a separate group with specific needs. The 20th century has been called “The Century of the Child” after a book written by Ellen Key (1900). Even if the century did not meet Key’s optimistic expectations, the status of the child and childhood became significant issues, politically and also in social work. Two world wars in the last century also affected children. In Europe, millions of parents and children had to escape, and flee to foreign countries. Many children lost their parents and ended up in huge institutions. The bad conditions for many children, also led to establishing voluntary organizations to help these children who had been victims of the wars. An example was “Save the Children International Union” which was established just after World War I. The organization had five main goals which were transferred into a five points program that later on was adopted into a declaration on children’s rights named «The Genève Declaration on Children’s Rights of 1924». The declaration’s main goal was to secure children basic rights. The Declaration was reconfirmed in 1934. According to Verhellen (1994) then children’s rights became a concept in international legislation. After World War II, working with a new declaration, built on the principles of the declaration of 1934, started. A result was «The UN Declaration on Children’s Rights of 1959». The declaration consisted of ten principles on children’s rights. They underlined that children are vulnerable and need care and protection. Protection against discrimination was stressed. This was a consequence of the refugee problems following the war. But despite the development of documents to secure children’s rights, it took long time before this was reflected in the society, and that the child was understood as an individual with own rights.

Historically, an important international document about children’s rights is «The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child» that was issued in 1989. Simplified, it is claimed that the two declarations mentioned earlier, reflect an understanding of the child as an object; the child should be protected. The UN Convention reflects more an understanding of the child as a subject, and also a subject with legal rights (Lurie, 2001). The Convention together with its Optional Protocols also gives the duties the governments have to secure children’s rights. Governments must report to The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, about how they take care of all the important issues in children’s rights (Lurie & Tjelflaat, 2012). But, conventions are not legal tools that can force specific actions to be done. They can however contribute to increased awareness of children as human beings with own rights and create an ideological basis for the society and professionals working with children; including social workers. To have any legal impact, conventions must be integrated in national law (Verhellen, 1996). In Norway, the UN Convention became Norwegian Law (01.10.03) through incorporation in The Human Rights Law of 1999. This gives The Convention a legal power; e.g. if there are contradictions between the UN Convention and The Child Protection Act, the Convention apply. In Norway, specific changes in The Child Protection Act (1992) (and other legislation), was adopted to highlight the UN Convention in Norwegian legislation. Guidelines for

¹ Correspondence to: Torill Tjelflaat, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, RKBU, Klostergata 46, 7030 Trondheim, Norway. Tel: +47 93004587

practice have been issued to safeguard implementation of principles of children's rights to social workers in their professional role when working with children and their families. Children's rights are also included in the education of social workers.

But even if there are good intentions and legal, ethical and professional frameworks with the aim to secure children's rights, many children are daily exposed to abuse and neglect. Violence is omnipresent in society and manifests itself in different settings including the family, school, neighbourhood and relationships. Children are also abused at community, national and global level; either directly or indirectly.

Children in today's world live under very different circumstances dependent upon which country they grow up, and the status and living conditions of their family. Children cannot choose where to live or their parents. It is like being in a lottery. They can be unlucky, and be born into poor families and societies with deprivation of basic human needs: food, water, sanitation, clothing, shelter, health care and education (absolute poverty). They might be forced to work for little money to help their families, and to avoid being deported or sold to sex industries. Many are exposed to violence, abuse and neglect; maltreated, raped and even killed.

Even worse, many children live in countries ridden by war, riots, extremism and contradictions between religious and political groups. Lives have little worth and people are used as political means. Children can witness, but also be involved in violent activities. Families with children are trying to escape the unsecure and perhaps life threatening situation they live in; becoming refugees on their way to a better life. Many of them are victims of trafficking. We see examples of people leaving Africa in boats, hoping to arrive safely in Europe. Hundreds drown every year in the Mediterranean Sea; including many children. Thousands of minority people, including children, have left Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh in boats to escape from persecution, but have been denied access to other countries with the consequence that they are floating around at sea in overcrowded ships without necessary food, water and sanitation. Refugees from Middle Eastern countries are trying to reach Europe after strenuous travels. There are lots of other examples that prove that the world can be a hard place in which to grow up, and also can be fatal for children. But many, who have succeeded in reaching Western countries, have not arrived in paradise. Trying to settle down and get resident permits, they end up as asylum-seekers often placed in refugee camps (while European countries argue about how many they shall allow into their country). Among them are also single minors.

But some children seem also to be lucky in the world lottery, and are born into families and live in societies which have the resources to take care of them and fulfil their needs, which give the potential for the child to develop and thrive. The European countries should be examples of well-regulated societies with significant welfare systems and security nets. Despite this, even in these countries, childhood is not always a happy experience. The relative poverty rate (measured by income – 50 % of median), can be really high (ea. 25, 5 % in Romania) (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012). The poverty rate is also increasing. Children are exposed to abuse, neglect and violence. The unemployment rate is high in many European countries mostly due to recession, and it is particularly the young people who are the victims. For example, in November 2014, the seasonally adjusted youth unemployment rate in Spain was at 53.5 percent (persons younger than 25 years) (The Statistical Portal, 2015). The low prospects of getting work, and increasing number of families under the poverty limit, can also influence children and young people's possibilities and attitudes to education, and might lead to even more problems. These children and young people are often referred to as "the lost generation".

Social work can of course not solve all the problems many children, youth and their families face in today's world. They cannot help everybody either. But, social workers can make an important contribution by taking and spreading a moral basis in accordance with the principles of the UN Convention to safeguard children's rights regardless the child's situation, and always work in the best interest of the child. This refers to all children and youth in difficult situations, from those living in extreme poverty to young people with few future prospects of work, residency and welfare.

Contradictions and challenges

In The Preamble of the UN Convention, the following statements are outlined:

- Childhood is entitled to special care and assistance
- The family, as the fundamental group of society, should be afforded necessary protection and assistance
- A child, for the full and harmonious development of his/her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding
- A child should be brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the UN charter - peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity
- The child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards, care and legal protection
- There are children living in exceptionally difficult conditions in all countries who need special consideration
- International cooperation is important for improving the living conditions of children, particularly in the developing countries

If we look at many of the living conditions of today's children, we can, without doubt, say that the statements in the convention have not been fulfilled. An important question is what status and role the UN Convention has in countries that have ratified it, but where the political system is not only violating the legal obligations in the UN Convention, but also contribute to conditions for children that are far from acceptable in a human and children's rights perspective. When political will and moral is absent, and the country is not ruled by law but fear: How could then the UN Convention have any power?

Some key challenges for social work in this area are:

How to

- contribute to spread the message about children's rights – implement it and make it more than just a rhetoric expression
- influence political parties to take children's rights seriously and fulfil their obligations to children
- safeguard children's rights in a culture sensitive way
- establish international cooperation to safeguard children's rights
- spread and work within an understanding of the principle of "The Best interest of the Child" in accordance with every child's special needs.

Programme for the future

Being a child can be a challenging project. A child is a dependent, vulnerable individual who needs care and protection. The parents are the main responsible caregivers. However, when they, for different reasons, are not able to fulfil their children's needs, the state has the responsibility both to protect the child and to provide suitable conditions for growing up. To secure acceptable conditions for children it is important to have:

- A welfare system/model securing families' and children's welfare and well-being including a security net
- A sufficient child protection system
- Measures to secure children's rights

This requires an overall understanding that:

- Children are valuable human beings (subjects)
- Childhood needs special care and attention

Social work plays an important role in safeguarding children's living conditions and rights.

The following definition of social work was approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014 (IFSW, 2014): "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels".

The definition strongly underlines the multi-dimensional aspects of social work, and that social workers' duties cover a spectre of different tasks and approaches at different levels. Today's mainstream social work understands the client in relation to his society which is defined in a broad psychological, social, political, cultural, material and human framework. At the same time, the client is also an individual who needs special attention and protection, and possibilities to exercise own rights. All this also refers to children. Therefore, it is fair to say that social work involves an ethical commitment to use contextual and individual knowledge "In the Best Interests of The Child", which includes practice and advocating at different levels.

Even if it is impossible to get rid of all serious burdens that affect children negatively, it is an important aim to eliminate and combat them.

Children in poverty, labour and education

Poverty can lead to marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion, and further problems for children affected, also in industrialized countries. Child poverty, child labour and lack of education are also closely connected. In developing countries, working children mostly live in poverty in the countryside. They work so their families can survive. The price they pay is a lost childhood, lack of education and future poverty. Gender issues are important – girls also have a right to education. Also children and youth in the industrial world experience under recession lack of education and work. Their future is unpredictable.

- Child poverty should be a specific and integrated part of social work education and practice.
- Social workers should be active in informing politicians and professionals about child poverty and its implications.
- Social work strategies should focus on establishing significant services and security net for families in poverty.
- Social workers must clearly express that negative forms of child labour should be eliminated.
- Social workers should initiate and participate in programs that compensate for lost childhood experiences and education.
- Social workers should contribute to strengthening cooperation with other services to help children participate in significant daily activities, have a good childhood, prospects of education, work and human and residential rights.

Children in extreme unstable situations, immigrant children

There is a huge challenge for social work to help children living in extreme circumstances characterized by insecurity and lack of predictability, and their escape/moving to other countries and the settlement period.

- Social workers must clearly reject war as any means in conflict.
- Social workers must work in ethical and culturally sensitive ways in helping children from different cultures.
- Social work practice with children coming to foreign countries must reflect a broad contextual understanding. Historical, cultural, and previous negative experiences have to be considered and their impact on the child (ea. trauma), and the child's needs have to be assessed and dealt with in a sensitive way.

Children abused in their families and other close relationships

Children might be exposed to abuse and neglect in their families and other close relationships including relatives, school and leisure activities. Children can also be abused in foster homes and residential care.

- Social workers must be active in preventing child abuse and neglect to happen in close relationships.
- Social workers must be competent professionals to assess, investigate and provide exposed children and youth with needed help, and secure the services provided.

Securing children's rights:

Even if governments have ratified the UN Convention, they might lack the political opportunities, will and resources needed to safeguard a significant childhood and children's rights.

- The UN convention should be an important part in social work education.
- The rights in the UN Convention should always be overarching guidelines in social work practice.
- Social workers should advocate that children's rights should be secured under all circumstances, and that the state and adults are the responsible parties.

Research

Research should focus on:

1. Migration and its impact on children.

Questions:

- Children and trauma
- Cultural sensitivity of the helping services
- Social work strategies

2. Child poverty and how it affects children.

Questions:

- Child poverty in different contexts
- Marginalization, exclusion and stigma
- Mental health and well-being
- Social work strategies

3. The “Lost Generation”

Questions:

- Prospects of work and residency
- Economical migration between industrialized countries
- Marginalization, exclusion and stigma
- Mental health and well-being
- Social work strategies

Social work researchers should initiate and conduct research focusing on the challenges children and youth meet in an unbalanced world, aiming to safeguard rights, well-being, future prospects and security. The research should be multi professional to ensure a contextual/ecological and holistic approach.

References

Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924/1934)

IFSW (2014) Global Definition of Social Work [Online] Available at:

<http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>.

Key, E. (1900) Barnets århundrade, Bonniers forlag, Stockholm.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959).

UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2012) Report Card 10. Measuring Child Poverty. Italy: Florence

The Statistics Portal (2015) [Online] Available at:

<http://www.statista.com/statistics/268830/unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/>

Verhellen, E. (1996) ‘The Convention on the rights of the Child’, in Exploring Children’s Rights. Third European Intensive Erasmus Course on Children’s Rights, ed. Saporiti, A.

Verhellen, E. (1994) Convention on the rights of the child. Background, motivation, strategies, main themes, Garant, Leuven Apeldorn.

Lurie, J., Tjelflaat, T. (2012) 'Children's Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Monitoring and Implementation in Norway', *Dialogue in Praxis: A Social Work International Journal*, vol. 1, no. 14, 41-56.

Lurie, J. (2001) 'Barns rettigheter i barnevern etter innføring av Lov om barneverntjenester. Er dagens praksis i henhold til lovens intensjoner? ', in *Sosialt arbeid: Refleksjoner og nyere forskning*, eds. M. Tronvoll, N. & Marthinsen, E.

Lov om menneskerettigheter av 21.05.99 (endret 01.08.03 med ikrafttreden 01.10.03). The Norwegian Human Right's Law (1999).

Lov om barneverntjenester (1992). The Norwegian Child Protection Act (1992).