

Article

Translators, Advocates or Practitioners? Social Workers and Human Rights Localization

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Abstract

The importance of specific professions for human rights realization is increasingly recognized. Journalists, teachers, and civil servants are all considered to play a role because their work affects individual rights. This is also the case for social workers. The connection between social work and human rights is evident in the large amount of literature explaining how human rights relate to social work. At the same time there is more attention for human rights localization. These fields of knowledge are related: social workers are local professionals and if they start applying human rights in their work this may influence human rights localization. This article contributes to existing debates on human rights localization by reflecting on the potential role of social workers in local human rights efforts in the Netherlands. Since human rights localization in general and human rights application in social work are recent phenomena in the Netherlands this provides a useful case study for a qualitative analysis on whether and how social workers can be regarded as actors in human rights localization. By connecting different actors that are said to play a role in human rights localization to proposed forms of human rights application by social workers this article identifies three possible roles for social workers in human rights localization: as human rights translators, as human rights advocates, and as human rights practitioners.

Keywords: implementation; local human rights; professionals; social work

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Introduction

In May 2016 a group of social work educators from the Netherlands and Belgium posted a manifesto online titled: *Make Human Rights Central to Social Work* (Hartman et al. 2016). The manifesto argues that human rights should be part of social work practice and education because social workers aim to eliminate exclusion of people from society, and contribute to social justice and human dignity. Within a couple of days the manifesto had been signed by dozens of social work educators and continues to gain attention today. This development is taking place in the Netherlands where social workers are forced to reposition their profession as a result of decentralizations and simultaneous austerity measures in social support and care. Tasks in this area have been transferred from the central government to the local authorities, confronting municipalities and subsequently social workers with different responsibilities and tighter budgets. In this changing landscape of social welfare local actors are searching for new ways to legitimize their work and to ensure that no one suffers as a result of the reforms and transitions. Against this background embracing human rights may seem a logical step. It is thus not surprising that both social work educators and (policy-level) actors in the social work field are starting to perceive human rights as a valuable asset to their profession.

The importance of specific professions for the realization of human rights is increasingly recognized. It is not without reason that both the second and the third phases of the UN World Programme on Human Rights Education focus on different professional groups that are in need of human rights education (UN Human Rights Council 2010, 2015). Journalists, teachers, civil servants and law enforcement officials are all considered to have a role in human rights realization because their work is tied to the rights of individuals. This is also the case for social workers. Due to the fact that social workers work closely with people in a vulnerable position they have an inside view of the daily life of these clients. This means that social workers may be the first to notice that someone has ended up in a situation where her or his human dignity is not being respected.

The introduction of human rights in the social work field is a relatively new development in the Netherlands, but the connection between social work and human rights has long been made in other countries and at the international level. As this article demonstrates, a large amount of 'social work literature' exists explaining the different ways in which human rights can be related to social work. At the same time there is more and more attention for human rights localization. These two fields of knowledge are related: social workers are mostly active at the local level and if these professionals start applying human rights in their work this may influence human rights localization. Surprisingly, no connection has so far been made between human rights localization and social work. Different approaches to human rights localization do not mention social workers specifically as relevant actors, and the social work literature has made no reference to human rights localization concepts.

This article contributes to existing debates on human rights localization by reflecting on the potential role of social workers in local human rights efforts. The developments in the social work field in the Netherlands provide the case study for an exploration of whether and how social workers can be regarded as actors in human rights localization. In other words, why are certain stakeholders in the Dutch social work field positioning social work as a human rights profession? And how do they understand the role of social workers in human rights localization in the Netherlands? The Netherlands provides an interesting case

study for this qualitative analysis as both human rights localization in general and human rights application in social work are relatively recent phenomena.

The article first provides an overview of different actors that are said to play a role in human rights localization. This is followed by an elaboration on the relationship between social work and human rights and the ways in which social workers can potentially play a role in local human rights practice. The case study of the Netherlands then builds on these theories by analysing the emergence of human rights in the Dutch social work field. This exploration is based on two qualitative data sources: interviews with social work actors and participatory observation. The methodology used for studying this phenomenon is described in detail below. The case study looks at why and how specific social work actors are starting to adopt human rights and what roles this professional group can play in human rights localization in the Netherlands. It explores the potential role of social workers as *human rights translators*, *human rights advocates*, or *human rights practitioners* and reflects on how these roles are understood in the Dutch context.

Actors in human rights localization

In order to explore the connections between social work and human rights localization it is necessary to take a closer look at the different actors that have so far been identified in human rights localization. Human rights localization in this context is understood as the application and appropriation of human rights at the local level (Vandenhoe 2012: 81). The term ‘human rights application’ is used throughout the article as a broader concept than ‘human rights realization’ or ‘human rights implementation’ to denote any type of effort by specific actors aimed at improving the local human rights situation. Here, an overview is provided of the various actors that are considered to play a role in local human rights application, demonstrating how social workers have thus far been largely absent as actors in the human rights localization discourse.

The most prevalent literature on human rights localization concentrates on the value and meaning of human rights at the local level. These approaches to human rights localization fall within the category of discursive approaches to human rights according to which human rights are constructed through social practice (Goodale 2007: 8–9; Vandenhoe 2012: 92–3). This means that many types of actors can play a part. Goodale (2007: 24) emphasizes the need not to privilege any one type of actor, but to include all ‘individuals, institutions, states, international agencies, and so on, who practise human rights within any number of different social contexts’. De Feyter (2010: 15–25) identifies human rights claimants, duty holders and local authorities. Human rights claimants are groups that are identified by a common need or interest. Duty holders can be any public or private actor that poses a threat to human rights. Local authorities are those authorities that the human rights claimants choose to address, including the local government, lawmakers, judges, and human rights institutions. Desmet (2014: 129–31) proposes four types of human rights users: rights claimants, rights realizers, supportive users, and judicial users. Rights claimants are the intended beneficiaries of human rights and rights realizers are state authorities. The supportive users include any actor who supports human rights causes: ‘grassroots organizations, NGOs, media, human rights defenders, lawyers, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and human rights bodies’ (ibid: 131). Judicial users are courts and tribunals that impose the implementation of human rights. Other authors stipulate that

national and international actors are expected to work together to ensure that local experiences are taken into account at the global level (Oré Aguilar 2008: 12). Destrooper (2016) also notes that this type of local to global cooperation is necessary, but indicates that local actors can have difficulty accessing global actors. In this context Merry (2006: 39–40) refers specifically to ‘the people in the middle’—community leaders, NGO participants and social movement activists, who act as intermediaries by translating local experiences to global human rights and vice versa. Although the broad range of actors mentioned in these approaches to human rights localization may, by inference, also include social workers, no specific mention is made of this professional group.

In other literature on human rights localization human rights are applied to specific local issues and considered as an instrument for local application. The starting point is an undesirable situation at the local level and the focus is on how local actors use human rights in attempting to change this situation. The relevant actors thus depend on the issue that is being addressed. Using the right to health to guarantee access to health care for homeless families, for example, means engaging service providers, homeless hostels, civil society organizations, and the homeless families themselves (Stuttaford et al. 2009). Addressing housing deprivation with human rights arguments involves another set of actors: tenants, the local housing authority, community workers, a local human rights action group, the local government, and the human rights commission (Hearne and Kenna 2014). Taking a rights-based approach to food insecurity (Chilton and Rose 2009) can mean involving government agencies, professional associations, community leaders and those who have experienced food insecurity first hand. Local government institutions have also been added to the group of actors that can foster local human rights protection by monitoring local elections, tackling child exploitation, combating discrimination, or promoting migrants’ rights (Marx et al. 2015). The relevant actors depend entirely on the context of the human rights issue. As a result different professions are often mentioned if they (can) play a role in addressing the issue from a human rights perspective. Even though, as will be shown in the next section, much has been written on human rights in social work professional settings, studies on human rights based approaches at the local level rarely refer to social workers. If related professionals are mentioned, this is usually in more general terms such as ‘support workers’ and ‘service providers’ (Stuttaford et al. 2009) or ‘community workers’ (Hearne and Kenna 2014).

The proposed actors fulfil different roles in human rights localization. Although there is no clear coherence in the literature on what these roles may be, three recurring types of actors with corresponding roles can be identified. State actors are most frequently mentioned and their role involves various measures aimed at the local realization of human rights. Another type of actor is the rights holder who plays a role in claiming individual rights at the local level. Civil society actors support the rights holders through local advocacy or act as intermediaries between the local level and the international human rights system. No distinct roles are attributed to the professionals mentioned in the literature. State actors, rights holders and civil society can be regarded as the ‘traditional’ actors of the human rights movement. It seems that these same actors are also found to play the predominant roles in human rights localization. The question is how social workers, as local actors, fit into this picture.

Social workers as actors in human rights localization

In taking stock of the numerous actors in human rights localization it becomes clear that social workers have thus far not been regarded specifically as actors in this field. This section shows that human rights have long been considered part of the social work profession and identifies three roles they may take up in human rights localization.

Social work as a human rights profession

The conceptualization of social work as a human rights profession is not a new development. In 1988 the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) made a policy statement that 'social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession' (IFSW 1988; Healy 2008: 735–6). This was followed by collaboration with the United Nations (UN), which resulted in a manual on human rights and social work (UN Centre for Human Rights 1994). Subsequent scholarship has resulted in publications that further clarify the possible role of human rights in social work (Ife 2012; Reichert 2011). But while the link between social work and human rights has been repeatedly acknowledged, human rights have yet to be fully embraced in social work field settings (Berthold 2015: xii; Steen et al. 2017: 9).

The relationship between social work and human rights stems from the mission and values of the social work profession. As the new global definition of social work states:

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. (IFSW 2014)

At the national level social work associations also tend to align their professional values with human rights. A study of social work codes of ethics indicates that explicit reference to human rights in these documents is common practice (Keeney et al. 2014).

Clearly, social work principles are found to overlap with human rights. However, because social workers can fulfil a variety of roles in practice, the ways in which a social worker may be confronted with human rights can differ. Generally speaking, social workers work with individuals or groups to 'address life challenges and to enhance wellbeing' (IFSW 2014), but the field of practice is very broad. This means that a social worker may work with people to address issues related to poverty or homelessness, but may also work in a clinical institution for mental health problems or people with disabilities. Within these settings a social worker may encounter clients who have experienced human rights violations related to any number of issues from physical integrity, to an adequate standard of living, to access to public services (Reichert 2011: 208–13).

Human rights in social work practice

Despite general agreement that there is a relationship between social work and human rights, there is much discussion on the practical consequences of this relationship. In other words: how can social workers apply human rights in their actual work? Although different approaches are taken in the social work literature, three main forms of human rights practice can be identified: social workers contributing to the interpretation of human rights, social workers using human rights as a basis for advocacy, and social workers applying

human rights to daily work with clients. This section demonstrates how these three forms of human rights practice are interpreted in the social work literature on human rights.

The proposition that social workers can contribute to the interpretation of human rights by ensuring that daily realities are integrated into human rights norms is widely supported in social work scholarship. This can be attributed to the (often referenced) work of Ife who has written extensively on how social workers can contribute to human rights. In his view social workers can broaden the human rights discourse by including voices that are often forgotten (Ife 2012: 201). He suggests that 'social work practice itself can be seen as part of the ongoing process of the reconstruction of human rights' (ibid: 205). In this context Ife (ibid: 196) also addresses the necessity of local to global cooperation, stating that social workers can interact with global actors to make local voices heard within the international human rights system. As such social workers are regarded as playing an active role in further defining and clarifying what human rights mean in practice. This would mean that social workers who apply human rights could take part in advancing the development of human rights in general by helping human rights acquire meaning at the local level.

Another possibility often proposed in social work literature is that social workers take up advocacy on the basis of human rights. This can take the form of case-based advocacy where social workers stand up for the rights of individual clients or cause-based advocacy where social workers challenge human rights issues on a broader scale (Steen et al. 2017: 10–11; Reichert 2011: 199–212). Case-based advocacy at the individual level involves empowering clients by assisting them to claim their rights. Cause-based advocacy focuses on structural change through lobbying or by acting as a whistle-blower while using human rights as a frame of reference. For the purpose of advocacy human rights can provide a different perspective which helps recognize structural causes that underlie individual problems encountered by social workers. In the social work literature human rights are therefore often presented as means to bridge the divide between micro practice and macro practice (Androff 2016: 30; Ife 2012: 248–9). Micro practice can be understood as individual case-work; it refers to the social worker carrying out interventions at an interpersonal level. Macro practice, on the other hand, covers interventions in entire communities or systems. Viewing individual challenges as human rights issues can highlight the connections between these two levels of practice. As a result, social workers working at the interpersonal level can recognize that interventions at the macro level may be necessary to change a situation.

Since most social workers work directly with clients, a recurring theme in social work literature on human rights is that these norms could be integrated into clinical practice or case management. Awareness of human rights could then change the relationship between social workers and their clients (Androff 2016: 29). Instead of providing charity or assessing and meeting clients' needs, social workers aim to play a role in realizing individuals' rights (Berthold 2015: 5–9). This includes adopting a non-paternalistic approach and incorporating human rights principles into social work practice. Social workers would, for example, take human dignity into account by respecting a client's autonomy and be aware of discriminatory patterns that affect a client's wellbeing.

These three forms of human rights application found in social work literature can be used to specify the types of roles social workers might play in human rights localization. Ife's view that social workers can influence the interpretation of human rights at the global level by incorporating local realities into human rights norms attributes a role to social workers similar to that of Merry's 'people in the middle' who translate local experiences to global human rights (Ife 2012: 196; Merry 2006: 39–40). In this role social workers could

be regarded as *human rights translators* who help clarify the meaning of human rights at the local level. Alternatively, when social workers advocate for human rights locally they resemble the civil society actors that are found to play a role in human rights localization. Social workers could then be added to the list of Desmet's 'supportive users' such as NGOs or human rights defenders who play various roles in assisting the local realization of human rights (Desmet 2014: 131). These social workers acting as *human rights advocates* would then play a specific role by using human rights from a professional standpoint to address challenges encountered in daily practice on a systemic level. The incorporation of human rights in the interaction with clients does not necessarily create an alternative role for social workers as awareness of human rights is added to the existing professional role of the social worker. Although this role may be comparable to the role of the 'service providers' mentioned by Stuttaford et al. (2009: 266) integration of human rights in daily professional practice is not explicitly mentioned in the human rights localization literature. Nevertheless this role as *human rights practitioner* could be seen as part of human rights localization if the realization of clients' rights became an integral part of social work. In the following sections these possible roles of social workers in human rights localization are analysed in the context of social work and human rights localization in the Netherlands.

Human rights localization in the Netherlands

Developments in the Netherlands provide an interesting case study for an exploration of how social workers can potentially contribute to human rights localization. Dutch social work actors are only just becoming interested in human rights and human rights localization is still in its infancy. To provide a context for the empirical analyses of Dutch social work and human rights a brief impression is given of the current state of human rights localization in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has long presented itself as a forerunner in the protection of human rights (Krommendijk 2016: 3–4). However, much of the attention to human rights has been directed towards other countries. Consequently domestic adherence to human rights has served largely as a way to set an example and stimulate the realization of human rights abroad through foreign policy (Oomen 2013a: 44–9). It is only in recent years that human rights have come to play a role at the local level. As a result it is no longer uncommon for human rights to be referenced in discussions about budget cuts or the placement of refugees.

One of the first signs of local attention to human rights in the Netherlands is the appearance of human rights cities. From 2009 a growing number of Dutch cities have shown an affiliation with human rights through various means (Oomen and van den Berg 2014). Dutch cities have used human rights as a benchmark for local policy, to unite interest groups, and to defend local policies that are more progressive than those of the national government (ibid: 176–81). During this time Amnesty International collaborated with the Dutch Association of Municipalities to create a brochure on the meaning of human rights for municipalities (Teitler et al. 2012). The Dutch national human rights institution (NHRI) has also emphasized the importance of applying human rights at the local level by developing a tool for this purpose (Netherlands Institute for Human Rights 2014).

Although these developments demonstrate a growing interest for human rights at the local level, this does not mean that applying human rights is by now common practice for municipalities in the Netherlands. There is still hesitance among local actors to refer

explicitly to human rights as these tend to be understood in terms of extreme situations in foreign countries (Oomen and van den Berg 2014: 181–2). Application of human rights at the local level is also hampered by a lack of knowledge about human rights among the general public (Oomen 2013a: 64–5). This can be attributed in part to the absence of human rights education in the formal curriculum (Oomen 2013b: 293). Prior to even developing means of applying human rights to local issues, actors may need to convince others that human rights are at all relevant to the Dutch situation. The following sections analyse whether and how the emergence of human rights in the social work field can play a role in addressing this challenge.

Methodology and methods

The case study that investigates the potential role of social work in human rights localization is an exploratory study of an emerging practice in the Netherlands. Background interviews were held from February to April 2016 with 11 key stakeholders to determine the scope and character of the emerging interest in human rights within the social work field. The respondents were identified through snowball sampling. Six interviews were conducted in person and five interviews were carried out over the phone. The respondents consisted of two social work educators from two different schools of social work, three policy officers from two municipalities, five managers or advisers from four different social work organizations and one representative of the professional association for social workers. The data gathered from these background interviews provided some of the information for the description of the emergence of human rights in the social work field. No citations from these interviews are used in the article.

Based on the background interviews eight persons were selected for an in-depth interview between April 2016 and March 2017. Six of these respondents had also been subjects of the background interview and two additional respondents were identified at two schools of social work. The background interviews indicated that human rights are currently not explicitly used by social workers in the field. As the aim of the research was to explore the growing interest for the use of human rights by social workers in the Netherlands, the choice was made to select respondents based on their affinity with the social work profession and an interest in applying human rights. Six of the respondents previously worked as social workers in the Netherlands.

The respondents consisted of four social work educators (social work educator 1–4) from four schools of social work, three managers or advisers of social work organizations (social work manager 1–3), and one representative of the professional association for social workers. A choice was made to interview four social work educators because the background interviews had established that a large part of the emerging practice was originating from within schools of social work. Interviews were semi-structured, using a topic list to guide the conversation. All eight interviews were held in person, recorded and transcribed. An initial coding took place based on the topics from the topic list. Further coding was carried out based on common and significant themes in the interviews. The data from the semi-structured interviews was used to identify the reasons why human rights have gained attention in the social work field and to determine the ways in which social work actors envisage the application of human rights by social workers. All citations in the article are taken from these interviews.

As the research was taking place a working group of social work educators was set up to discuss options for including human rights in the social work curriculum. The researchers attended five meetings of this working group from April 2016 to March 2017. Participatory observation in the meetings provided insight on how social work educators were discussing the potential of human rights for their students and social workers. The researchers participated in the meetings and notes were taken of the discussions held.

The findings of the research have some limitations. Since no practising social workers were interviewed, the article presents the views of actors working with or educating social workers. In addition seven out of eight respondents for the semi-structured interviews work in the central-western Netherlands, thus creating a regional limitation. The members of the working group of social work educators are from all over the Netherlands and also included Belgian members, creating a somewhat broader scope of study. As mentioned, the choice was made to focus on social work actors already interested in human rights. This creates a bias in the selection of respondents, as all those interviewed supported the idea of including human rights in social work practice.

Social work in the Netherlands as a human rights profession

The emerging interest for human rights in the social work field is closely linked to recent developments in the Dutch welfare sector, which have had a significant influence on the professional position of social workers. Before determining the roles that social workers may play in human rights localization this section first explains the position of social workers in the Netherlands and the way in which human rights have (re-)emerged in the Dutch social work field over recent years.

From the interviews with respondents it became clear that human rights have been absent from the social work field in the Netherlands for many years. Social work was professionalized in the Netherlands with the emergence of the welfare state in the 1950s. In the 1960s emancipatory social work became the norm. As a consequence paternalism and unsolicited aid became taboo and social workers were encouraged to act *with* instead of *for* disadvantaged people (Dam et al. 2016: 7). Three respondents who were active as social workers during the 1970s indicated that this approach contained elements of human rights and social workers were more politically engaged during this time. This disappeared during the 1980s when professionalism, efficiency and market thinking were encouraged (ibid: 8). Social workers were expected to meet targets and social work became focused on the implementation of municipal policies. As one respondent stated:

Municipalities had no interest in politically engaged social work ... signals from professionals that people were being left behind weakened, and pressure from municipalities increased to such an extent that social workers no longer dared to be critical. (Social work manager 1)

The current interest in human rights among social work actors in the Netherlands has developed over the last few years. The emergence of human rights within the social work profession started with individual social work educators initiating human rights courses at different schools of social work. This became part of a larger movement when social work educators from the Netherlands and Belgium organized themselves into a working group to discuss ways to integrate human rights into social work curricula. The manifesto that this working group published in May 2016 further increased the awareness of human rights among social work educators (Hartman et al. 2016). At the time of writing a plan has been

developed to follow up on the manifesto. While the interest for human rights among social work educators was growing, other actors in the social work field also started paying more attention to human rights. Managers at a centre for social development began to think how human rights could become a moral compass for social workers, policy advisors at a municipality had the idea that human rights might serve as a tool for moral judgment, and the professional association for social workers started raising questions about issues of privacy in the social work field (background interviews with social work actors). At the same time publications on human rights and social work began to appear in *Sozio*, a professional journal (Dijkstra 2017; Karbouniaris and Steenmeijer 2015; Lochtenberg 2015a, 2015b; Lochtenberg and Maarsen 2015). Though the developments in the field are exploratory and fragmented, the efforts of the social work educators may lead to integration of human rights in social work practice.

Several factors combined have influenced the emergence of human rights in the Dutch social work field. Respondents were asked what they believed had caused the growth in attention for human rights among social work actors. From the interviews five different factors can be identified that prompted more interest in human rights: the decentralizations and austerity measures in the social domain; the redevelopment of social work education; the establishment of the Dutch NHRI; the ratification by the Netherlands of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); and the recent refugee crisis.

All respondents made reference to the decentralizations and austerity measures in the social domain as a reason for more interest in human rights (see also Lochtenberg 2015a; Lochtenberg and Maarsen 2015). From 2015 onwards municipalities have become responsible for youth care, labour participation, and care for the chronically sick and elderly. These decentralizations were coupled with austerity measures. As a consequence, municipalities have made changes in the organization of social support, directly influencing the daily practice of social workers. Six respondents found that both benefits and disadvantages of these changes have led to attention for human rights. On the one hand, social workers have gained more freedom in how they choose to carry out their work as municipalities are starting to let go of standard protocols and are stimulating customized approaches. As a result social workers have begun to look for other norms to guide their practice. On the other hand, budgets for social work are smaller and there is more dependence on volunteers (social work educator 3). Social workers therefore feel the need to legitimize their profession and human rights serve as a useful argument. In the words of one respondent, human rights can be a 'retort to legitimize your existence' (social work manager 1).

The redevelopment of social work education is a response to the changes in the social work field and also originated from a need to strengthen the profession. Nationally, the professional competencies required of social workers have been rewritten along three domains: community work, youth work, and social work in health care (Vereniging Hogescholen 2017). Educational institutions have therefore begun to combine different streams of 'social work' education into one social work bachelor with three specializations. The social work educators among the respondents, who previously initiated human rights courses at their schools, regard these developments as an opportunity to better integrate human rights into the curriculum (see also Dijkstra 2017). In this way human rights have become part of a larger movement for professionalization in the social work field.

The establishment of an NHRI in the Netherlands in 2012 has also had influence. Within the social work field the NHRI has gained attention by organizing meetings and initiating conversations with relevant stakeholders. With four of the respondents, their interest

in human rights had been sparked or strengthened by an exchange with the NHRI. Similarly, the ratification of the CRPD by the Netherlands in 2016 was preceded by the creation of a large support base for the Convention among organizations working with persons with disabilities. Consequently, several years before the Convention was ratified it was already well known within the professional 'disabilities sector', united within a Coalition for Inclusion. Respondents frequently mentioned the relevance of the CRPD to the growing interest for human rights within the social work field (see also Karbouniaris and Steenmeijer 2015). A final reason for the increased attention to human rights by social workers identified by respondents is the large influx of refugees in Europe and the Netherlands in 2015 (see also Lochtenberg 2015b). The plight of refugees is easily linked to human rights, and social workers see a role for themselves in assisting this vulnerable group.

Although these different factors have all had an influence on the emergence of human rights in the social work field, no one cause can be singled out. It is relevant to note that for all respondents the attention to human rights had not been initiated by an outside actor. Both the background interviews and the in-depth interviews gave the impression that this emerging practice started with individuals acting of their own accord and is slowly growing into a movement of several actors working together. This could indicate that the development originates from within the social work field and was not introduced by other actors.

Social workers as actors in human rights localization in the Netherlands

In the previous section three possible roles were identified for social workers as actors in human rights localization. Social workers can act as *human rights translators* who influence the interpretation of human rights by creating links between global norms and local experiences. Another option is that social workers become *human rights advocates* who use human rights in combination with their professional knowledge to challenge issues encountered in daily work. A third possibility is that social workers as *human rights practitioners* focusing on human rights protection during their interactions with clients. Here these roles serve as the framework for analysis of the propositions made by respondents on how human rights can be applied by social workers in the Netherlands.

The role of *human rights translator* was not reflected in the interviews with individual respondents. It is therefore not clear from the interviews that social workers might play a role in clarifying the meaning of human rights at the local level as proposed by Ife (2012). The working group of social work educators did discuss the need for a 'social work perspective on human rights' instead of a 'human rights perspective on social work', expressing a desire to have social workers contribute to this new perspective on human rights. This is also repeated in the manifesto developed by the working group which states that 'social work should develop its own approach to human rights' instead of the legal or ethical approach to human rights (Hartman et al. 2016). However, the individual respondents focused on how social workers can use human rights and not necessarily how social workers can contribute to further interpretation of the human rights framework. In addition, no reference was made to social work interaction with the international system in order to influence the development of human rights norms with a social work perspective. The question is also whether this is realistic in the current Dutch context where human rights are only just gaining attention within social work. For social workers to contribute to human

rights localization by becoming *human rights translators* more cooperation with actors outside the social work field would be necessary for these translations to influence interpretation of human rights at the international level. However, the central ambition of this emerging practice in the Netherlands seems to be focused more on strengthening social work (education) and changing local situations than on becoming part of the broader human rights movement.

All respondents were of the opinion that social workers should learn to draw attention to human rights issues in their work in order to improve the situation for specific clients or for clients in general. This reflects the role of *human rights advocate* and is similar to the cause-based and case-based advocacy identified from the literature (Steen et al. 2017: 10–11; Reichert 2011: 199–212). However, seven respondents were hesitant in labelling this use of human rights as a form of advocacy by social workers. As two respondents stated, ‘social workers are not barricade jumpers’ (social work representative) and ‘I find activism too exaggerated, not everyone has it in them’ (social work educator 1). Instead, respondents preferred the term ‘human rights guardian’ which had appeared earlier in articles by social work actors in the Netherlands and Belgium (Eijkman 2017; Lichtenberg and Maarsen 2015; Reynaert and Nachtergaele 2015). As explained by one respondent, ‘a guardian is someone who stands in between activism and doing nothing. A guardian feels responsible for saying or doing something, but does not immediately stand on the barricade’ (social work educator 1). Instead of turning to advocacy social workers are expected to signal problems that they come across in their work:

As social worker you always stand in the front line, you work where certain problems occur. You can be one of the first who signals that social policy is not working out and what this means for certain groups in society. (Social work educator 4)

This ‘signal function’ of social work is included in the Dutch social work professional profile drafted by the professional association for social work. According to the professional profile a social worker ‘signals developments and deficiencies in society or in institutions that affect his professional activities. He forms a reasoned opinion and speaks out about this’ (BPSW 2016: 17). In six of the interviews ‘signalling’ was repeatedly mentioned as an important task of social workers and directly linked to human rights. These respondents had different conceptions of what this ‘signal function’ based on human rights would look like in practice. Signalling human rights issues could mean standing up for the rights of an individual client, acting as an intermediary between clients and municipalities, supporting groups of clients with similar issues to stand up for their own rights, or attempting to influence policy. A recurring theme here was that human rights could serve as a language to be able to emphasize the gravity of the issue at hand. Respondents referred to human rights as ‘a universal language’ (social work manager 2), a language that ‘gives words to put forward other arguments’ (social work educator 2), and a way to make issues ‘more concrete than just your gut feeling that this is not going well’ (social work manager 1). When talking about the level at which social workers could signal human rights issues, respondents mostly referred to the social worker’s place of work, the municipality, or the professional association. If social workers were to apply human rights in such a way it would require them to identify underlying causes of an issue and which actors can be held responsible.

In order to be able to act as *human rights advocate*, or ‘human rights guardian’, respondents stressed the importance of social workers being able to recognize and connect their work to broader and more structural issues. As in the social work literature,

respondents related this to the divide between micro and macro practice (Androff 2016; Ife 2012). Six respondents regarded the human rights perspective as a necessary response to the general lack of awareness among social workers of the structural causes that underlie the challenges they encounter in their daily work. As one respondent indicated: social workers ‘invest a lot in working for a client but take the political context in which they work for granted’ (social work representative). Another respondent expressed concern that ‘if you [as social worker] only rely on your personal experience, you know too little’ (social work manager 3). Human rights were presented as a different way of looking at issues encountered by social workers. Three respondents explained this in terms of how poverty can be perceived as an individual matter or a societal concern. According to them there is a tendency among social workers in the Netherlands to view poverty as an individual problem: ‘if you are poor it is because there is something wrong with you’ (social work educator 4). From a human rights perspective poverty becomes an issue with structural causes, leading social workers to look for solutions beyond the personal circumstances of their clients. As such ‘human rights can help how we as social workers view society: is poverty really your own fault or is there another way of looking at it? Which [approach] fits social work better?’ (social work educator 2). If social workers were to adopt a human rights perspective this could place their work in a new light. It would mean the solution of a client’s problem is no longer only a question of changing their personal situation, but that systemic changes are necessary to solve the problem and prevent its occurrence in the future.

Another possible application of human rights by social workers proposed by respondents was to use human rights as a moral compass in daily practice. This is comparable to the role of *human rights practitioner* where social workers integrate human rights into clinical practice and case management with clients (Berthold 2015). Two respondents stressed that respecting human rights was already implicit in social work and that social workers work very hard for their clients. Four other respondents were more critical, stating that human rights could help improve the attitude of social workers who still viewed their work as a type of charity. When talking about how human rights might influence daily work, respondents mentioned respect for human dignity, equality and diversity. When asked what human rights issues social workers might encounter in the work setting, respondents referred to the protection of privacy and respect for physical integrity of institutionalized clients. Four respondents were of the opinion that human rights might help problematize these issues and clarify that human rights set certain boundaries. Social workers aware of this human rights dimension of their work would act consciously to ensure that their client’s rights are respected.

From the interviews with respondents it became increasingly clear that human rights application by social workers is still very much an emerging practice in the Netherlands. This can be underlined by the observation that respondents generally refrained from making conclusive remarks on how human rights would be used by social workers during their work. Respondents were keen to explore the different ways in which human rights could be relevant to social work, but were more careful in articulating what this would look like in practice. Respondents also expressed concern that human rights might remain too abstract for the practising social worker, which would create ‘a danger that it would be perceived as being separate from daily work’ (social work educator 1). A related obstacle mentioned by respondents was the possibility that social workers inspired by human rights might be met with resistance in the workplace. Respondents indicated that the organizational culture might not allow for a critical perspective or that human rights could be perceived as being too idealistic or theoretical for daily work. For this emerging practice to gain a stronger foothold in the social work field it will therefore be

necessary to create both a shared understanding of the relevance of human rights for Dutch social workers and concrete ideas on how human rights can be applied in the workplace.

Conclusion

In order to determine in what ways social workers can play a role in human rights localization it is necessary to identify possible links between social work and different actors encountered in human rights localization. In this article forms of human rights application by social workers are used to establish three potential roles of social workers in human rights localization: as *human rights translators*, *human rights advocates*, and *human rights practitioners*. These roles are then analysed in the context of the Netherlands where human rights are only just taking root at the local level.

One approach to human rights localization is that it is a process whereby local human rights application informs the development of global human rights norms. In this way local realities influence how human rights are interpreted at the global level. According to the literature on human rights localization a plethora of actors can take part in this translation process. Social work literature describes a similar role for social workers. When social workers act as *human rights translators* they play a role in clarifying the meaning of human rights in the lives of those people they work with at the local level. For these local human rights experiences to advance the development of global human rights, social workers would also need to connect with actors who have access to the global human rights system. Theoretically social workers have the potential to make a valuable contribution to human rights localization in this way, but this is not sufficiently apparent in the Dutch context. Although several social work actors in the Netherlands have expressed a desire to develop a social work perspective on human rights, this movement seems primarily focused on enhancement of the social work profession itself. The question is also whether it would be realistic for Dutch social workers to act as human rights translators, since they are only just starting to realize the relevance of human rights to their work. At the very least, cooperation with other actors in the human rights movement outside the social work field would be necessary for the daily practice of social workers in the Netherlands to influence the interpretation of human rights.

Different types of civil society actors are found to play a role in human rights localization by supporting the claims of rights holders at the local level through various means of advocacy. Although literature on human rights localization does not refer to social workers in this context, social work literature clearly considers that social workers could play a part as *human rights advocates*. The function of this role would be to recognize structural human rights problems in daily practice and to challenge these by assisting clients to claim their rights, lobby for change, or act as a whistle-blower. This possible role of social workers is recognized in the Netherlands, but social work actors tend to shy away from the term 'advocate' and prefer to label this role as 'human rights guardian'. Social workers acting as 'human rights guardians' would use human rights language to signal deficiencies in the workplace and address these issues at the municipal level or through the professional association. A prerequisite for this role is that social workers learn to identify structural causes of individual clients' problems and are able to frame these in terms of human rights. Since this is currently not the case in the Netherlands, the realization of this role is dependent on the professionalization movement that is currently under way in Dutch social work education and practice.

Even though various professionals are mentioned in human rights localization literature there is no consistency in what roles certain professions might play and there is no reference specifically to social workers. The social work literature posits that social workers may also contribute to human rights protection through their professional role. This would mean that social workers integrate human rights in their daily practice with individual clients. If social workers were to apply human rights in such a way this would make them *human rights practitioners*. This role is also reflected in the Netherlands. According to Dutch social work actors human rights could be used as a moral compass in the workplace. As such, social workers would take human rights principles such as non-discrimination and personal integrity into account in interaction with clients. Before this role can be considered part of human rights localization in the Netherlands this 'moral compass' based on human rights principles would need to be developed and widely implemented in social work practice.

Since human rights application by social workers is still an emerging practice in the Netherlands the identification of possible human rights roles for social workers is a first step. For these different roles to gain broader acceptance many more Dutch social workers would need to agree on the relevance of human rights for social work. A better understanding of what this could look like in practice would require additional research on possible roles of practising social workers in human rights localization.

Despite the fact that human rights practice in the Dutch social work field is still in its infancy, there is potential for this movement to have an effect on human rights localization in the Netherlands in a broader sense. In a country where human rights are still rarely a subject of discussion at the local level, any attention to human rights stands out. Moreover, if social workers were to signal the deficiencies they encounter in their daily work as human rights issues, this could send a clear message that human rights are significant to the Dutch situation, further aiding human rights localization in the Netherlands.

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