



National Council of Women of New Zealand

Te Kaunihera Wahine o Aotearoa

Oral Submission to the Social Services and Community Committee on the Social Workers Registration Legislation Bill 297-1

By Dr Judy Whitcombe and Dr Gill Greer on 28 March 2018

Social Services and Community Committee

Chairperson: **Gareth Hughes**, Green List; Deputy: **Priyanca Radhakrishnan**, Labour List; **Darroch Ball**, NZ First List; **Judith Collins**, National Papakura; **Kris Faafoi**, Labour Mana; **Alfred Ngaro**, National List; **Greg O'Connor**, Labour Ohariu; **Maureen Pugh**, National List; **Louise Upston**, National Taupo.

Ata marie, Good morning, my name is Dr Judy Whitcombe and my colleague is Dr Gill Greer. We are members of the Parliamentary Watch Committee of the National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ).

The submission we present has been prepared from a background of policy decisions and previous submissions on related matters, which have been written following consultation with the members of our organisation.

We welcome the opportunity to convey our organisation's views to the Committee and wish to record NCWNZ's support of the proposed Bill – with some concerns.

NCWNZ has long advocated the registration of Social Workers. We made a submission on the 2001 Social Workers Registration Bill. And in 2012 the National Conference passed a Resolution which urged the Government to amend the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 to make the registration of Social Workers mandatory. The arrival of this Bill is timely. The importance of social work support in today's world was noted by many responses from our members.

The dominant motivation of this view among our members is the need to protect the vulnerable people with whom social workers interact. These are some examples of what our members said:

Those with a role of social work (no matter the title) will frequently be working with a group(s) of vulnerable people. The latter need to be protected.

It is a matter of protection for people when working in clients' homes.

We are concerned that the clients are protected, that all people working with families are monitored in some way.

It is paramount to protect the client and we see the compulsory registration of all those who undertake social work as assisting in this.

For our members, then, the ultimate test is whether or not the clients are being adequately protected.

Our submission focuses on:

Interpretation of a Social Worker (Clause 5) and Protecting the title of Social Worker (Clause 8).

The amendments to the 2003 Act add definitions of “restricted work” and “social worker”, with the definition of a practicing social worker being covered in Clause 8 in the proposed new section 6AAB.

As our submission states, it is the definition of Social Worker where our members had questions. There was confusion over exactly what a social worker is or does. For example, one member told of her concerns about a ‘colour therapist’ who she felt should not be allowed to practice as a social worker. The implication of this lack of clarity is that regulation of social workers cannot rely on the general public to know what the boundaries of social work are, or whether someone who is not called a social worker is actually doing social work.

There was also confusion around the term ‘restricted work’. We understand that this term is referring to other Acts which might define tasks that can only be done by a social worker, and if this Bill is passed that social worker would have to be registered. However, this also added to the lack of clarity for our members over what a social worker would or would not be allowed to do, because a list of ‘restricted work’ was not able to be provided. The implication of this lack of clarity is that regulation of social workers cannot rely on the general public to know what the boundaries of social work are, or whether someone who is not called a social worker is actually doing social work.

There was widespread support for a tiered structure within social work, with registered social workers supervising other types of workers with more focused roles, in the same way that enrolled nurses and health care assistants work under supervision of registered nurses. This is especially valuable when knowledge of a particular culture is required for the social work to be effective, so a lesser trained but culturally knowledgeable person working alongside a social worker could be useful.

As members have commented: At present anyone can call themselves a social worker. Only those registered can be Registered social workers in the future.

Concerns from members

Our submission Paragraph 3.4 notes that a number of members had concerns that only protecting the title of social worker could allow an employer to rename the role. Thus, there could be exploitation of social workers by employers refusing to call the role a 'social worker' in order to pay lower wages. Members noted that some organisations employ field workers and community workers to undertake the work of a social worker.

As one member stated:

To leave the determination in the hands of employers opens it up to exploitation by the employer and puts the community at risk. Exploitation, in terms of employing the person without the tertiary degree because they will be cheaper, and at risk, because you will then have an untrained person, not qualified, not registered and not called a social worker BUT doing social work tasks within a community.

One branch expressed concern that employers might determine a legitimate Social Work role or position as something less or inferior in order to pay less. The Bill needs to remove this ability from employers, and instead to reflect both the need for, and value of, professional qualifications and skill, as Social Work involves dealing with the most fragile and vulnerable members of society. Our members are not generally not comfortable with such decisions being left to the discretion of employers.

Conclusion

The bottom line for our members was that legislation needs to prioritise the protection of vulnerable people, that is those that are being helped by social workers. The purpose of registration is for the protection of clients. That is why there is unanimous support for mandatory registration of social workers and protecting the title of Social Worker.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of our organisation on this Bill

Questions and comments

Louise Upston: Thank you for the submission, the confusion over what is social work, and the definitions, highlights the challenges and needs for this Bill, if it's hard for the National Council of Women to handle this, it will be harder for those who need it.

Maureen Pugh: If you were here earlier you would have heard discussion about this. You talked about a tiered structure, would this in your view include volunteers?¹

Response from Dr Whitcombe: We can only respond in relation to NCW members' specific comments and this was not included, but we can go back and ask for opinions on this.

¹ This refers to the discussion with the previous submitters from Birthright, the CE, Heather Hayden, and two senior staff including one Social worker. The submission focussed on the difficulty of attracting and retaining social workers across the country because of the inability to pay at competitive levels, and the problems this creates for a national NGO with members across the country.

Chair: Gareth Hughes We notice that you have submitted before on this. We are pleased to have the input from National Council of Women again, and the continuity.

Note: the newly appointed Convenor for Social Issues, Sonja Randhawa, attended the hearing as part of her induction to the role.