

FACT SHEET

Professionalizing Social Work in Malaysia: The Case for the Social Work Profession Bill

Social workers are the unsung heroes dedicated to helping others through crisis. They provide support and protection to the most vulnerable – your child, your parent, a neighbour, friend, even yourself – struggling in traumatic situations ranging from sexual abuse and domestic violence, to adjusting to life with a disability. Social workers also identify and prevent risks, work on reducing poverty, fighting discrimination, and challenging harmful norms, striving to create a better life for people in Malaysia.

Professionally-trained and qualified social workers are crucial in various settings, including child protection and adoption cases, at hospitals, prisons, and one-stop crisis centres. However, **the lack of regulation of social work in Malaysia hinders the potential of social workers to contribute effectively to society.**

The Heroes Among Us campaign, led by the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW) and UNICEF Malaysia, is calling for the enactment of the Social Work Profession Bill to acknowledge and support the vital role of social work, ensuring that Malaysians have access to the best social workers. According to Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, measures under the Bill include establishing a register for professional social workers and requirements for registration and certification of practice that will be supervised by a regulatory body.¹ This will pave the way for greater accountability and quality of social work, and better training and job opportunities for social workers across Malaysia.

Global definition of social work

“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.”
– The International Federation of Social Workers.

The vital role of the social worker

Social workers make life-changing, sometimes life-saving, decisions every day. They require in-depth knowledge on human behavior, social systems, laws and policies to assist clients in navigating complex structures like the court system, as well as providing psychosocial care and support. **When professionally delivered, the support of a social worker can get a life back on track.** But the work is complex, demanding and varied – from a simple meeting to assess someone’s needs to providing emergency interventions in situations of immediate danger and preventing violence from escalating.

Clients include:

- victims of domestic violence
- neglected and abused children
- persons with disabilities striving to live independently
- former drug users and young persons in conflict with the law who are hoping to rebuild their lives
- the elderly
- refugees
- other vulnerable people.

A need for trained social workers

Child abuse: The Social Welfare Department (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat) recorded **18,750 cases of child abuse** between 2020 and 2022.²



Persons with disabilities: **11.1% of adults and 4.7% of children** in Malaysia have a disability.⁴



Domestic violence: The Royal Malaysian Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia) reported **13,529 cases of domestic violence** between 2020 and 2022.³



Mental health crisis: HEAL, the Ministry of Health Mental health hotline, received **24,346 calls** from January to August 2023.⁵



1. Read the Ministry’s September 2023 statement here: <https://bit.ly/RUUPKS23>.
2. Ova, ‘18,750 Cases Of Child Abuse, 13,529 Cases Of Domestic Violence In Malaysia From 2020 To 2022’, Ova, Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy, 3 July 2023. Child abuse cases include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment, and parental absence.
3. Ibid.
4. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Ministry of Health Malaysia, National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019.
5. BERNAMA, ‘HEAL Line 1555 receives 24,346 calls as of August – Health DG’, *New Straits Times*, 10 September 2023.

Social workers in Malaysia: an essential presence

- Social workers are an essential presence in government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare (the lead department employing the majority of government social workers), hospitals, prisons and drug rehabilitation centres.

In 2022, 3,790 officers under the Department of Social Welfare practised social work in various sectors across the nation: ⁶

1,658 social welfare officers	1,661 probation officers	471 officers with anti-trafficking affairs
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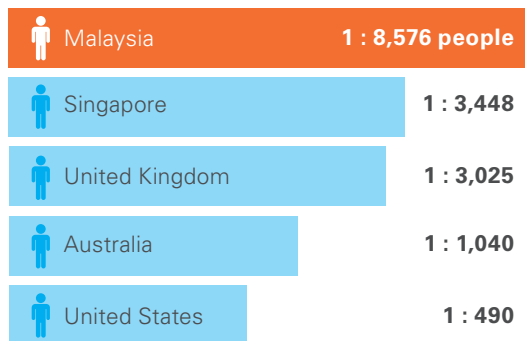
In 2018, around 236 officers were directly engaged as child protectors, while 183 probation officers focused on guiding children in conflict with the law.⁷

- Non-governmental social workers are employed within non-profit organizations, civil society groups, faith-based institutions and private sector organizations.
- Social work is an established academic discipline in eight public universities and four private institutions, offering diploma to PhD programmes. Due to lack of regulation, not all individuals working in the field of social work are professionally trained.
- Currently, there is no data on the total number of professionally-trained social workers serving vulnerable populations in Malaysia.
- The Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW) has championed professional social work for five decades, including actively providing training for social workers in government and civil society sectors. It is the only professional association for social workers, comprising social work educators and practitioners.

Three key challenges

1 Lack of regulation: Social work is unregulated in Malaysia, unlike in neighbouring ASEAN countries like the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.

2 Shortage of social workers: Malaysia has only one social worker for every 8,576 people⁸, far lower than other countries.



3 Limited public understanding of social work: Misconceptions prevail, with many Malaysians viewing social workers as charity volunteers. These misconceptions discourage service demand and investment in social work.

Strengthening social work: The Social Work Profession Bill

Tabling and adopting the Social Work Profession Bill is crucial as it will prescribe qualifications and competencies for effective social work and ensure the highest professional standards of social work in Malaysia. The Bill will:

For the public

- create awareness on what to expect as beneficiaries and clients of social workers
- enable the public to recognize professional social workers when seeking for assistance
- state clearly the professional standards and consequences for non-compliance, thus ensuring public safety

For social workers

- give professional status to social workers, and recognize social work as a valued profession
- provide professional training
- encourage appropriate remuneration and career advancement options

6. BERNAMA, 'Women's Ministry in final stages of drafting Social Work Profession Bill, says minister', *Malay Mail*, 15 March 2022.

7. UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *The Social Service Workforce in the East Asia and Pacific Region: Multi-Country Review*, UNICEF, Bangkok, 2019.

8. Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU), 2019.

The Social Work Profession Bill (initially known as the Social Workers' Bill) was first approved by the Cabinet in 2010. It awaits parliamentary action and is currently under review by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (read the Ministry's September 2023 statement here: <https://bit.ly/RUUPKS23>).

For more information, visit: <https://www.masw.org.my/heroes-among-us>