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Culture and Politics of Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan: Borderlands and Conflict Areas as Critical Spaces for International Social Work

Abstract

This paper sets out to discuss role of social work as an egalitarian profession in the terrorists affected Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Ex-FATA) in the north of Pakistan. The culture, politics and governance of FATA is different from rest of the Pakistan due to its centuries old tribal culture, clan dynamics and Jirga system for governance. Since 1979, FATA has been also militarized by local tribal warriors. Consequently, FATA became the focus of military operations by the law enforcement agencies of Pakistan. As a result of these political and governance dynamics, thousands of families in FATA have been internally displaced and lived in temporary camps established by the government of Pakistan. Being in these campus for years, families were traumatized and are suffering from numerous social, political, economic and psychological problems. Unfortunately, Pakistani social work has failed to protect human rights of the FATA communities despite of its origin dating back to 1954. We argue that lack of state and societal recognition for social work as a profession, is major reason for failure of social work in the FATA. The study concludes that border lands and conflict-ridden areas like that of FATA do provide opportunities to practice international social work that ensures power to the powerless in the Pakistani society.

Key words: FATA, social work profession, militancy, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan (officially the Islamic Republic of Pakistan) is a sovereign country in South Asia as a result of partition of British India in 1947. With a population exceeding 200 million people (Government of Pakistan, 2017), Pakistan is dominantly a patriarchal society; this patriarchal structure is more dominant in rural and tribal areas compared to urban areas where local cultural pluralistic practices dominate over national laws (Bari, 2000; Critelli & Willett, 2010).

The distinctive features of Pakistani state, military governance and FATA as border land between Pakistan and Afghanistan have implications both for the teaching of social work in Pakistan and South Asia and the continuing educational needs of social work graduates from the region. After the brief introductory section, the paper is divided into five sections. The second section discusses about FATA culture and politics and helps the reader to understand the unique border lands in conflict perspective. The third section offers a brief view of

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development of social work profession in Pakistan. The fourth section is about social work inertia. In the concluding section, we offer pathways to strengthen social work in FATA in particular and Pakistan in general.

Border lands, Conflict Areas and International Social Work:

The border lands are the geographical areas on the both side sides of the borders (Baud & van Schendel 1997). The presence of terrorism is a reflection of the serious problems in socio economic and moral values of a society (Ismail & Amjad, 2014). Similarly, when conflicts and sectarianism become a usual phenomenon, it shapes the approach of social work educators and practitioners accordingly for tackling the emerging socio-economic and psycho-social problems (Smyth & Campbell, 1996; Fay et al., 1999). Landau (1997) also noted that although social workers come across with serious crises in their every day job tasks, but working with victims of terrorism is quite different task.

Social workers in the conflict areas also experience diverse traumatic events which are extraordinarily threatening and cause stress to the clients (WHO, 1992) such as life threats, severe injuries, deeper sense of fear and terror (American Psychological Association, 1994). Likewise, Mmatali (2008) also pledges to social workers for actively playing political role in order to overcome and mitigate the underlying reasons of political conflict and social exclusion in Africa. There is a need for teaching and practicing political social work in Pakistan and other South Asian countries to bring the societal reforms and change (Nikku, 2010; Nikku & Rafique, 2018).

Oslon (2015) noted that in the USA, social workers are not only called upon for maintaining peace in the conflicted areas but also for impartial and objective reporting of the causes of the conflict. Coll et al., (2011) documented how the American social workers tried to understand and respect rules and regulations of military and comply with them while intervening in such situations. They found ways to meet the professional standards by keeping the laws of soil in the context. It is well recognized in the literature that social work is 'context bound profession' but social work practitioners are unified to its fundamental beliefs based on human rights and social justice (Gray & Fook, 2004). Social workers equipped with specific skills such as cultural competence and indigenization can better work in militarized areas (Oslon 2015). Based on the fact that FATA has tribal and *Pakhtoon* culture, social workers in Pakistan particularly and at international level generally, need to be well versed in the local culture for playing their professional role for the protection of human rights in the area (see Van Den & Crisp, 2004). *Pakhtoons* are typically traditionalists, conservatives and strongly attached to centuries old tribal culture. It has promoted male-dominated system in which women stay in veils, in the four walls, behind the curtains and at the backfoot (Yousafzai & Gohar, 2005).

Social workers are part of team of professionals for provision of care to the victims of the disasters (Dominelli, 2007). Taking Israel in point, social workers play an important role such as providing information and support to the families of the deceased and injured ones, using their skills such as building relationships, empathy and solacing the grieved families (Sweifach, LaPorte & Linzer, 2010).

FATA Culture and Politics: The Borderland in Conflict and Transition

FATA has exceptional history regarding not accepting a central government system and external rulers, be it British rulers before partition of subcontinent or current rulers of Pakistan. FATA tribes have 'segmentary politics' where despite their internal and mutual disputes, they stand united against outside rulers. Based on this long tradition jointly retaliating to the external elements, there has been no formal government in the FATA making it formidable obstacle to heavy-handed forms of governance imposed from the outside (Cole, 2009).

The lawless and highly militarized area with its complicated geographical location and based on geo political links of FATA with Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are different conspiracy theories about it and the area remains in the global limelight because of presence of terrorism and conflicting situation on both sides of Pak-Afghan border (Nawaz, 2009).

Militancy, Talibanization and War on Terrorism

After the invasion of former USSR into Afghanistan in 1979, more than three million war affected Afghan population entered and took shelter into Pakistan Afghanistan bordering areas mainly in FATA. During cold war between USA and USSR, both migrant Afghanis and FATA people were trained militarily to encounter Russian forces in Afghanistan. As a result of long and effective resistance, Afghanistan compelled former USSR with no option except withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan in 1989. After the departure of USSR troops, Afghanistan was left to the local warriors who started fighting with each other for establishing and strengthening their hold/occupation on maximum territory (see Girardet, 2012). Resultantly more than 3 million Afghan refugees crossed the border to take refuge FATA and surroundings, with about 1.5million still residing there (UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2015). This resulted into emergence of Talibanization in Afghanistan and its adjacent areas in Pakistan especially, the FATA (Dibb, 2010; Grau & Gress 2002).

After USA attack on Afghanistan after terrorist attack in 2001, once again thousands of local and international militants fled to FATA and found it a safe haven for their militant activities (Johnson & Mason 2008). Pakistan has paid heavy cost in term of human and economic loss in this war on terror; this damage includes death of 35,000 masses and 3500 LEAs personnel. Besides, three million residents of the FATA were internally displaced because of destruction of infrastructure, end to economic activities and increased unemployment. Resultantly, Pakistan is facing ever worst fiscal deficit and socio-economic turmoil of its history due to war on terror (Ismail & Amjad, 2014).

A series of military operations undertook by the Pakistani military in FATA in the last two decades costed thousands of human lives and threatened the social fabric of the area but finally the state was successful in cleansing the area from local and foreigner militants to some extent (Javaid, 2015). Pakistan launched *Zarb e Azab* in 2014 which was a full-scale military operation against local and foreign militants in FATA. After cleaning the FATA region from militants, IPDs have started returning to their native areas with fewer material resources given by government as a rehabilitation grant. But the displaced families were still facing hardships in rehabilitation especially in terms of rebuilding their livelihoods for which intervention of professional social workers are required. It reflects that human rights profession of social work is still not responding to these humanitarian needs in terrorism affected FATA.

Social Work Profession in Pakistan

Social work, claiming to be a global profession, is struggling for its legitimate identity in the Pakistan despite its teaching and practice of more than six decades. Although commencement of social work profession date back to early 1950s in the Pakistan but so far, it is not recognized as full-fledged profession by ordinary people and other professionals alike who define social work as merely a charity activity (Rehmatullah 2002; Graham, Al-Krenawi & Zaidi (2007). In many educational and service-based departments, social workers are hired, they are rendering their services but without the title of 'social workers'.

By 1980s, social work was being taught only at Master level in about six universities including University of Peshawar (which is located in the KPK province adjacent to FATA) producing about 300 professional social workers every year. There are more 100,000 registered NGOs serving in the Pakistan (Naviwalla, 2010). The NGOs are offering a range of services from advocacy and awareness regarding social problems such lack of health, education, sanitation, and livelihood opportunities and provision of micro finance loan and imparting skills to the needy. However, none of NGOs is engaged with serving social workers either educators or practitioners in term of directly strengthening the social work profession.

By 2015, about 15 universities were offering social work at bachelor, master and very few PhD while there are about 60,000 registered NGOs in the country. The evidence shows that despite of existence of professional social work for more than 60 years, it failed to respond to societal needs particularly in terrorism affected FATA.

There is need to discourage imported teaching methodologies and replace them with a localized model (Rehmatullah, 2002), she kept on saying that very little literature has been produced locally for teaching, which is why so far, in case of many primary methods of social work, same curriculum is being taught which was in 1954. There are number of factors behind this state of affairs regarding status quo in term of developing indigenous social work literature and curriculum. The major responsibility lies with the social work academia who rarely made efforts to produce indigenous literature on the subject. As a matter of fact, despite its commencement in 1954, social work as a discipline largely remained ignored and was limited to only few institutions located in the big cities. In addition, there was nearly no trend to document knowledge and experience on the part of social work academia in the country who simply relied on imported knowledge mainly from western countries (Rehmatullah, 2002: 177). This practice is continuously going on till the day. Ali and Rafi (2013) argued that social work in the modern era (in a country like Pakistan) should not be limited to charity work, but it is the systematic and objective task performed for the social well-being of individuals, groups and communities.

Social Work Inertia

The biggest reason for the inertia is the lack of professional recognition of social workers serving in different government departments and NGOs, because social work profession in Pakistan is seeking for its identity as full-scale profession despite its history of more than six decades. Pakistani social work is yet to find its place among other established professions. After passing more than half a century, the quote comes true. Social workers are serving in a number of public and private agencies in Pakistan and have made realized their talent and skills in variety of ways, their efforts are recognized, and roles are accepted but on individual basis not as person having been trained for a particular profession called social work.

Social Work Curriculum

Social Work curriculum offered by different Pakistani higher education institutions is still influenced by the western models and theories. It has not been revised regularly in the wake of emerging societal needs such as working with migrants, refugees, terrorism affected individuals and families and natural disasters. Social work curriculum is not as per market needs and requirements; that is why social work departments are producing general practitioners rather than specialized social workers having specific skills and training for working in complex area like FATA. Rehmatullah (2002) argued that there is an urgent need to discourage imported teaching methodologies and replace them with localized models in Pakistan. She further argued that very little literature has been produced locally for teaching. Pakistani social workers have continued dependency on using and teaching western literature and models which is not concurrent with local cultural values and socio-economic conditions. There is a need for reforms in how social work education curriculum is developed and being taught in Pakistan.

Disconnect between Class Room (theory) and Field Practice

There is huge difference gap between class room teachings and social work practice in the field. Since social work educators heavily depend on imported literature on social work, therefore, social work graduates feel confused in implementation of social work concepts taught in the class room. It results into inefficacy and inability of social work graduates to perform their role in complex environment like FATA. In addition, lack of appropriate skills on the part of social workers to intervene or work with families that are affected by ongoing terrorism activities followed by LEAs mainly the Pakistan army.

FATA is facing militancy and war on terrorism more than one decade, but so far social workers have not designed any specific programme for equipping graduates with appropriate skills and needed training to work with war affected individuals and families. How to assess psycho-social and socio-economic needs and how to respond to them, is still not consideration/priority of social worker educators. Social workers in Pakistan need to equip themselves with specialized technical knowledge, specific skills and particular techniques for working with individuals and families victim of war/terrorism/militancy/extremism. Whereas IFSW (2000) recognizes the role of local knowledge and emphasizes the understanding of local and cultural context in relation to social work practice.

Lack of Leadership in Social Workers

As discussed earlier, social work profession in Pakistan is no more a new, it has more than six decades of education and practice in public and private sector. But so far, social workers are not visible on national level. There is no mention/coverage of professional social work on national electronic and print media. Similarly, there is no presence of social workers on public/discussion forums for presenting and pleading case of social workers. Social workers have no noteworthy role in power politics, hence they fail to influence social policy design at national level and in particular rehabilitation of re-construction of FATA.

Creating Opportunities and Abilities

There is lack of opportunities for Pakistani social workers to collaborate with colleagues from other countries to work in terrorism affected area, the reason for social work inertia further needs to be explored. There is no visible/viable networking of Pakistani social workers with their colleagues at global level for learning from their knowledge and experiences gained from working with terrorism affected areas/countries. Neither social workers have an overarching nor did indigenized model of social work for addressing domestic socio-economic problems, nor are connect with social work representative bodies/organizations such IFSW, ICSW and IASSW. Isolated welfare activities are being carried out on humanitarian grounds by few NGO/donors and some time the state but no integrated efforts to develop FATA are in place. These activities should be linked to social work models so that more impact can be achieved on the ground.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The merger of FATA into KPK province of Pakistan calls for immediate attention of social workers both at national and international level. In this paper, we have shown how FATA as a borderland is being used by different stakeholders to meet their own agendas and the role for international social work actors. The social work profession in Pakistan has a history of more than six decades and witnessed the society's changes and challenges but not able to respond to it due to its lack of capacity neither in resisting the powerful or mobilizing the masses. Over the years, social work has become a source of employment rather a vocation and a profession with power to bring positive changes.

Recognizing worth, dignity and uniqueness of each individual, social work can play a crucial role in ensuring justice and human rights for all irrespective of ethnicity, class and political affiliation. To make this happen, the social work academia and practitioners have to reflect their strengths and limitations and apply social action strategies not only as teaching units but bring positive changes in the Pakistani society which is deeply divided and facing number of socio economic challenges. Graham, Al-Krenawi and Zaidi (2007) noted that social

work profession can be an effective tool for motivation and participation of citizens in cultural context of Pakistan. Social work profession in Pakistan needs self-reflection to find out its strengths, limits and identity issues. It should align with colleagues from other countries to learn best practices and be able to modify and use in the context of Pakistan. The curriculum and teaching should be revised by integrating concepts like human rights, political economy, and politics of policy. To make this happen, formation of a national association of social workers and redesign the values and code of ethics of the profession is very much needed.

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