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READINESS OF SOCIAL  
WORKERS TOWARDS  
EXISTING CHALLENGES  
IN CHILD WELFARE  
PRACTICE

RESEARCH REPORT



OPEN SOCIETY GEORGIA FOUNDATION  
ფონდი ღია საზოგადოება საქართველო

2017

Published with the financial support of the Open Society Georgia Foundation. The views, opinions and statements expressed by the authors and those providing comments are theirs only and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foundation. Therefore, the Open Society Georgia Foundation is not responsible for the content of the information material.

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## RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

There have been many changes in the context of social work practice since it was introduced and established as a profession in Georgia. The first social workers that entered the field came from various disciplines with different educational backgrounds. Academic programs in social work only became available in 2000. In parallel with the development of academic programs in social work, the number of social workers employed at various state organizations has been increasing. However, child welfare still remains the major subfield of social work in the country. The number of social workers working with children and families remains high compared to caseworkers and practitioners employed in other subfields of the profession.

Despite the fact that there have been many developments in the field and an increasing num-

ber of academically trained social workers enter the workforce annually, skills and competences of these workers are often criticized and questioned by major employers. Up to date, there have been no studies conducted that explore the issue and assess the readiness of social workers for the practice of social work professionally in Georgia.

This study aims to fill the gap and explore perceptions of social workers, social work program students, professors of social work academic programs, and major employers about the preparedness and readiness of social workers for child welfare practice. The study will also look at the role academic programs in social work play in meeting the current needs of the field and preparing the well-trained workforce for current social work practice in Georgia.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTION

The present research focuses on the readiness of social workers for child welfare practice in the Republic of Georgia. The main objectives of the study is to evaluate and analyze the following:

1. Provide an overview and analyze job descriptions and responsibilities of social workers working in child welfare in Georgia.
2. Evaluate existing social work academic programs in Georgia, particularly the curriculum and the compliance with the practical needs of the field of social work.
3. Shed light on existing issues in child welfare system and initiate the dialogue among stakeholders (the representatives of social work academic programs, the State Social Service Agency administrators, professional organizations and experts)

Research was conducted during the period of March – June 2016. Interviews were held with social workers employed at state and local non-profit child welfare organizations, senior social workers and other representatives of the Social Service Agency (SSA), professors/instructors and final year students of e social work academic programs (Bach-

elor and Master's of Arts). In addition, this report provides a short historical overview of the development of social work in Georgia and a brief description of the curriculums of social work academic programs as well as the job descriptions of social workers in child welfare.

### Research Methodology

The present study aimed to explore the issue from different perspectives, therefore a “mixed” (quantitative, qualitative) method of data collection was used to supplement various data sources.

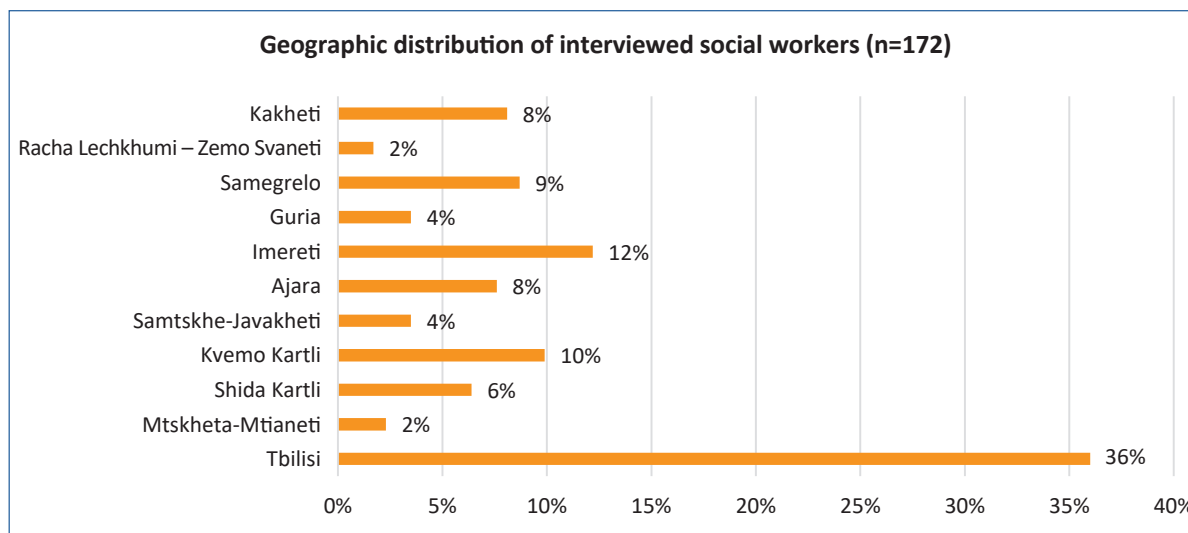
### Study population

In total, 172 randomly selected social workers working in child welfare were interviewed via telephone surveys. Out of 172, 154 were statutory social workers (N=239, CI=4.72). The majority of interviewed social workers (90.1%) were employees of the state agency (SSA), 5.2% – of local and 4.7% of international child welfare organizations. The majority of the participants (94.8%) were women.

The age distribution was the following: 20-24: 7%, 25-29: 18% 30-34: 14% 35-39: 17.4% 40-44: 16.3% 45-49: 9.9% above 50: 16.9%.

Participants of the study were selected from over the country however, 36% of social workers interviewed were employed in the capital city, Tbilisi.

**Graph 1: Distribution of respondents according by regions**



The majority of the interviewed social workers (67%) have been employed in child welfare for more than 5 years

**Table 1: Distribution of social workers by years of experience**

WORK EXPERIENCE IN CHILD WELFARE	QUANTITY	%
Up to 1 year	15	9%
2-3 years	24	14%
4-5 years	17	10%
5 and more	116	67%
Total	172	100%

In addition to telephone survey with practitioner social workers, focus groups were conducted with the students of Tbilisi State University (TSU) and Ilia Chavchavadze State University (ISU) Bachelor's (1 group – final/graduating students) and Masters' (1 group) programs, professors/lecturers of the same programs (1 group), Senior social workers (1 group) and representatives (1 group) of SSA. Due to the busy schedule, some of the professors/lecturers and the representatives of SSA were unable to participate in focus groups; therefore face-to-face in-depth interviews (5 interviews) were held to collect additional data from them.

### Instruments

The instrument for the survey was developed/adopted through the project using standardized (Grant, Sheridan 7 Webb, 2016) as a basis. The questionnaire was pilot tested prior to actual data collection (the final version of the survey is attached to the report – Annex 1). The survey included 32 close-ended questions on demographics, education, practice including field placement, working experience in child welfare, social workers' perceptions about their own qualification and readiness for current social work practice etc. Social workers' perceptions and attitudes (24 questions) were ex-

explored through close ended-questions with a 5 point rating scales as well as open-ended questions that were coded and analyzed accordingly. Job descriptions of social workers and description of academic programs were used as a guide to make survey and focus group/in-depth interview questions more reflective of current developments and issues of the social work field. Even though some topics covered in qualitative and quantitative parts of the study overlapped, the study did not aim to cross-validate data; mixed method of data collection was utilized to supplement data from various sources.

### **Data collection**

Job descriptions of social workers working at state and local/non-for-profit child welfare organizations were requested from organizations via emails. As a result, there were six documents received in total; one from state (Social Service Agency) and five from local/non-profit organizations. A short overview of all job descriptions received is presented in this report. Information regarding social work academic programs was obtained from university websites.

The data from social workers were collected via telephone interviews. All respondents were social workers currently employed in child welfare. The contact list of social workers was obtained through their employers. The respondents were randomly selected from the list. Interviews were conducted

by well-trained interviewers who were familiar with survey questions and interviewing techniques. Each phone interview lasted for 30 minutes.

The focus groups were conducted in various settings: at the office of Georgian Association (GASW), at SSA and at neutral settings for students. The guides for all in-depth interviews and focus groups were prepared in advance and all interviews were recorded. The facilitators were project employees with experience in qualitative research data collection. The process was monitored through observation and cross-checking with respondents.

### **Data analysis**

The statistical package “IBM SPSS 20” was used for data management and analysis to produce estimates and standard errors calculations. The analyses were conducted with the confidence level for statistical significance set to 95 per cent. The analyses consisted of series Pearson’s chi square tests to test association between categorical variables; independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVAs to test associations between categorical and numerical variables.

### **Timeline**

Data collection took place from April – June, 2016.

## **SOCIAL WORK FIELD DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA**

The first social workers appeared in Georgia in 1999. Child welfare reform, which focused on the closure of big social institutions and the enforcement of child adoption law enacted in the same year had made it necessary to establish the profession of social work. The first social workers involved in the deinstitutionalization process were representatives of different professions and education who obtained the basic knowledge of social work with the help of international experts (invited trainers from British charity organization “Every child”) (Shatberashvili, 2011). Academic programs in social work became available only in 2000, when

The Open Society Institute initiated establishment of the International Social Work Master’s Fellowship Program. Annually, the program provided full scholarships to 1-3 students to study social work at leading universities in the United States (Shatberashvili, 2011).

The Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW) was established in 2004 by graduate students of the International Social Work Master’s Fellowship Program. It has played a vital role in the development of social work as a profession in Georgia. The GASW is a professional union of social workers advocating for: the importance of the social work

profession, prioritizing current and recurring social problems, and ensuring social workers' engagement in given processes.<sup>1</sup>

The GASW pioneered the professional development of social work in Georgia. It defined the profession as follows: "Social work is a profession, which ensures the improvement of the social functioning of individuals, groups and communities and aims to create an environment, that enables individuals, groups and the communities to reach their full potential" (The principles of social work practice, 2010). Furthermore, the GASW initiated and developed regulatory documents and manuals for the social work profession such as: Social Work Code of Ethics (2006), the Principles of Social Work Practice (2006), The Principles of Social Work Practice for Social Workers in Child Welfare (2010), Social Work and Social Advocacy – Social Workers Advocating for Social rights (2011).

It is worth mentioning that the GASW was actively involved in the development of the first social work bachelor's program at Tbilisi State University (TSU) and master's program at Ilia State University (ISU). TSU's Social Work Masters was launched in 2008. Since then, social work programs at both TSU and ISU have been preparing approximately 50 bachelor or master program graduates annually (TSU, 2013; Ilia State University, 2014).

In parallel with the development of social work academic programs, the number of social workers employed at various state organizations has been increasing since 2010. Besides child welfare, social workers have been hired in various other fields. Social workers are now employed at the Penitentiary and Probation Systems which is part of the Ministry of Corrections and the Crime Prevention Center within the Ministry of Justice. Furthermore, the significance of social workers engagement in reforming ongoing social problems has been growing as well. For instance, SSA social workers, who were initially hired as professional supporters of the deinstitutionalization process, currently are actively involved in cases with children of domestic violence, people with disabilities, and the elderly, among others.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite the fact that access to social work education and the number social workers employed at state agencies has grown significantly, employers still question the qualifications as well as the readiness of social workers for field work (Shatberashvili, 2011; Namitcheishvili, 2014). One of the key problems that employers have identified is the lack of practical skills and preparedness to deal with uncommon stressful environments<sup>3</sup> (Shatberashvili, 2011).

## SOCIAL WORK ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

As mentioned during the focus group discussion with the representatives of academia the social problems that were prevalent in the country and the need for social reforms appeared to be a prerequisite for starting academic programs in social work. TSU's social work bachelor's program was launched 2006 was established according to the standards of International Federation of Social Workers as part of the Sociology Department. The program received professional support from the representatives of UK and Slovenia universities. In the same year, the social work master's program was started at ISU, which was supported by invited US experts. Professional and financial support was

<sup>1</sup> <http://gasw.org/index.php/ka/about/goal-strategies>

provided by the Open Society Academic Fellowship Program.

In response to child welfare reforms in the country, the main focus of the first academic programs was directed to the same field. Experts from partner universities did not recommend offering various specialization at the initial stage of the program development. Consequently, the aim of the program was to provide basic knowledge of social work and prepare generalist social workers for

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hr.gov.ge/geo/%E1%83%95%E1%83%90%E1%83%99%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%90/jobs/georgia/1162>

<sup>3</sup> <http://gasw.org/index.php/ka/publications/researchs/116-2016-08-11-19-30-11>

child welfare and other social welfare developing fields. The main goal of the program was to provide balanced knowledge of theory and practice.

“... Most important was to keep the balance between theory and practice.”

## TBILISI STATE UNIVERSITY (TSU)

### Bachelor's Program

Tbilisi State University official website<sup>4</sup> states the aim of the social work bachelor's program is “to generate students' competence and define the sphere of employability as well as prepare students as “highly professional social workers”, who will use acquired knowledge to “improve social conditions of the citizens of Georgia, their families and groups”. The main goals of the program are:

1. Introduction of theoretical principles of social work profession;
2. Development of the standards of social work competence and training of highly professional practitioner social workers;
3. Integration of professional and academic standards into practice and guarantee continuous education of social workers;
4. Preparation of highly qualified social workers, who will be able to improve the quality of social protection of the population;
5. Promotion of the profession of practitioner social worker. (*Bachelor Education Program of Social Work (TSU) Annex N7*).

The bachelor's program is divided into 6 modules/courses. In order to graduate, a student must complete 240 credits\* in no more than 4 years. The list of the program modules/courses and subjects:

1. **Faculty (Basic) required courses/modules** – 20 credits. Compulsory subjects for the faculty (Statistics, Research Methods and English Language).
2. **Faculty (Basic) elective courses** – 5 credits. A student chooses at least 1 course out of 6 proposed courses (*Anthropology; Applied Economics; Conflict, Gender and Peacebuilding; Academic Writing; The History of European and Euro Atlantic Integration and Logics*).
3. **Faculty elective Introductory Courses** – 20 credits. A student must complete 4 introductory courses (*Introduction to Social Work; Social*

*Geography; Political Science; Sociology; International Relations; Introduction to Journalism and Mass Communication*).

4. **Required Courses for Social Work Program** – 90 credits (*Introduction to Social Work; Principles of Social Work General Practice; Working with Individuals and Families; Working with groups; Working with Organizations and communities; Human behavior in Social Environment (1 and 2); Cultural variety and Social Work; Social Work Research Methods (1 and 2); Research and evidence-based practice; Legal Aspects of Social Work; Social Welfare Policy; Introduction to Social Work Practice (1 and 2); Social Work Practice with individuals and families (3 and 4); Social Work Practice with groups and communities (5 and 6)*)

5. **Social Work specialization elective courses** – 20 credits. A student can choose social work specialization courses from the proposed list: *Contemporary Social Problems (1 and 2); Social Work and Children Protection from Violence and Neglect; International Social Welfare; Mental Health Policy; Social Work Practice with trafficking victims; Domestic violence; Legal and Social perspective of the problem; Early childhood development; Social Work with patients with chronic or life-threatening diseases; Social Work with patients infected with HIV, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; The principles of Clinical Social Work; Social work with clients with substance; Social work practice and social policy with people with disabilities; Social work and media; The principles of social gerontology; Key principles and services of inclusive education; Social space and urban development; Sexuality and early parenthood; International perspective; Minority perspective; Risks of children outside of family care in respect with reproductive health and addictive behaviors; Social researches: theory, methodology,*



*practice; English Language for Social Workers (1 and 2); Interpersonal communication.*

6. **Bachelor's thesis (Compulsory)** – 10 credits – final thesis for bachelor's program is compulsory for all students.

## Master's Program (TSU)

Students must hold bachelor's degree in any field and successfully pass general master's and so-

cial work exam in order to enroll in master's program in social work. (*Social Work Masters Education program (TSU) annex N8*).

Students must complete 120 credits for completing the master's program: 40 credits in required courses (Social Work courses which must be completed during I and II semesters), 35 credits of elective courses (students have possibility to choose 6-7 courses out of 16 proposed courses). Elective courses are offered based on students' interests (the list of subjects is given on pages 13-15).

# ILIA STATE UNIVERSITY (ISU)

## Master's Program

In order to enroll in master's program at Ilia State University, a student must:

Pass general master's exam<sup>4</sup> and university interview (Annex 9.1.). To get a master's degree a student must complete 120 credits divided as follows: required courses – 90 credits; required elective courses – 12 credits; Master's thesis – 18 credits; (Annex 9.2.)

The social work program is a part of the department of arts and sciences<sup>5</sup>. The aim of the program is: to prepare leading professionals; to prepare students for in-depth and general practice and programming; to prepare leading social workers with critical thinking; acquire in-depth knowledge and develop professional skills (*Detailed description of social work academic master's program (TSU) Annex N 9.1; List of Social Work academic master's program subjects, annex N 9.2*).

The program is divided into 4 semesters. To graduate students must complete 120 credits. The

compulsory part of the program consists of theory courses (66 credits) and seminars (24 credits). Seminars include lecture courses in different fields of practice. e.g. homelessness, reproductive health, drug abuse, domestic violence and etc. One semester field placement at SSA is compulsory for all students.

**Required/Elective courses** – (12 credits) provided in field of practice and practice methods.

### **Main trends of field of practice:**

1. Social work with children and their families
2. Policies, service and, practice
3. Criminal Law Justice System
4. Mental health
5. Drug Addiction
6. Palliative care (chronic and life-threatening diseases)

### **Practice methods:**

1. Clinical work – cognitive, group, and behavior therapy
2. Research
3. Research qualitative methods – cultural anthropology research methods, practical methods and, statistical analysis
4. Program development (fundraising, grant and project proposal writing)

<sup>4</sup> The criteria for the entry exams for MSW at Ilia State University: <https://iliauni.edu.ge/study/magistratura-214/migeba-magistraturashi>

<sup>5</sup> Ilia State University: [www.iliauni.edu.ge](http://www.iliauni.edu.ge); Social Work Master Program: <http://iliauni.edu.ge/ge/iliauni/AcademicDepartments/mecnierebata-da-xelovnebis-fakulteti-269/programebi-303/mecnierebata-da-xelovnebis-fakulteti-samagistro-programebi/socialuri-samushao>

**Table 2: Full list of master program subjects at TSU and ISU.**

<b>REQUIRED SUBJECTS (TSU)</b>	<b>TSU</b>	<b>ISU</b>
In-depth practice of Social Work (I and II)	10	
Human behavior in social environment (I, II)	10	
Social Work and Social Policy (TSU) Social Welfare Policy	10	6
Research Methods (I,II)	10	6
Principles of Social Work Theory and Practice		6
Social Work research Project		6
Evaluation of Social Programs' Development		6
Theory and Practice of Social Work with Families and Children		6
Current Issues in Developmental Psychology		6
Applied Social Statistics		6
Academic Writing		6
<b>ELECTIVE SUBJECTS (TSU) REQUIRED ELECTIVE (ISU)</b>		
Social Advocacy (ISU required)	5	6
Social Work and Child Welfare	5	
Social Work with children and their families: policy, service and practice		6
Clinical Gerontology	5	
Social Work practice with social groups (communities) and organizations: macro practice	5	6
Social Work with people with disabilities	5	
Social Work in Health Care System	5	
Mental Health Policy	5	
EU social policy	5	
Cultural competence and social work	5	
Social Service State Policy and Practice in fight against trafficking	5	
International Social Work	5	
Social Work with clients with substance abuse	5	
Social Work with patients with chronic or life-threatening diseases and their family members		6
Prevent drug addiction		6
Mental disorders and social work (1,2)	10	6

Social Work and Juvenile Justice	5	
Social Work in Criminal Law	5	6
Specialized English language in Social Work field		
<b>REQUIRED/ELECTIVE PRACTICE METHOD COURSES (ISU)</b>		
Group psychotherapy and group process		6
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy		6
Applied Behavior Analysis		6
SPSS		6
Cultural Anthropology: Theory and Research		6
Action Research		6
Fundraising and project writing		6
<b>COMPULSORY PRACTICE /DISSERTATION</b>		
Social Work Practice	15	
Social Work Practice Seminar I (general)		6
Social Work Practice Seminar II (homelessness, social housing)		6
Social Work Practice Seminar III (reproductive health and rights, drug abuse effects)		6
Social Work Practice Seminar IV (domestic violence: legal and social perspective of problem) (general)		6
Master's thesis /Dissertation	30	18

## CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES OF SOCIAL WORK ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

The students, as well as the representatives of academic programs discussed existing challenges in the social work academic programs. As the students stated, the shortcomings of the program became apparent in the beginning of the course. Students found it difficult to choose courses and credits due to the lack of available information for the completion of social work program. One of the suggestions made by students was to appoint a course coordinator/tutor, who would assist them in planning their coursework and set them to a right direction:

*"...On the first year, I did not know what [course] to choose. For instance, I had chosen courses, which I was supposed to take in my fourth year."*

*"... for example, lawyers have a list, where all courses are listed according to the level of difficulty"*

Students also mentioned the inflexibility of a schedule and a limited number of available courses offered in the social work program, which, in their opinion, significantly hinders the learning process:

*"...if you do not take other courses [from other disciplines], courses in social work program are not sufficient for 240 credits".*

Apart from having a limited choice of subjects, it was the schedule that made it hard for students to choose the courses according to their preference, since often the courses overlap.

*"...Important courses often overlap in time. If a lecturer is changed, the whole schedule is altered. Besides teaching, the lecturers have other jobs and courses are scheduled based on their availability."*

The representatives of both universities pointed to the limited number of courses available in the BA and MSW programs. However, due to a busy work schedule of the teaching staff employed at other jobs rather than the university as well as the scarce resources within the university were underscored as the main challenge:

*"There is no support, no resources and people cannot devote all of their time to the*

*university, because all of them have other full-time jobs too..."*

*"...To work full time in academia? Why not? – it is possible to work on new stuff for each session, if you teach a few courses and have enough time; or even not to have teach for one semester and work on publications/research but here we have no possibility like this."*

Low academic salary was highlighted as one of the reasons why professors/lecturers work part-time at the university and why they are less motivated to work on the development of new courses:

*"We are really so busy ... thinking about and devising new courses will be in fact an extra burden on our shoulders ..."*

The busy schedule of the academic staff, lack of feedback received from them and almost no or very little time for consultations were noted by the students as well:

*"...These people are professionals, but they are so busy, that cannot pay enough attention to us."*

While speaking about the program quality, academics emphasized issues related to adjunct/ contract lecturers. They expressed common dissatisfaction over those professors/lecturers, who are not social workers by profession but teach social work courses. They believed that adjuncts with non-social work related qualifications teaching social work courses lowers the quality of the program:

*"...Bachelor's programs went through accreditation process and [it] was somehow related to the [social work] introductory course... Also, having a doctoral degree became very important... and I think that it was connected with this change."*

Students noted that courses at the introductory level, which were taught by professors who are social workers by profession, greatly influenced their decision to choose social work as their major. Individual, family, and groups cases that had been introduced and discussed at the introductory course of social work turned out to have a strong

influence on those who were indecisive about their career plans.

The importance of the introductory course was underlined by child welfare social workers too via telephone surveys:

*"... At the university I studied the introduction [introductory course to social work]... I liked it and decided to choose the social work as my major ... "*

*"...At the university, I took the introduction [introductory course to social work] ... I learnt that it also had practical part and decided to choose the social work ..."*

The coincidence of personal and social work professional values appeared to be very important at making career choices. However, as students mentioned they were introduced to many new details about the social work profession through the introductory course. "Most easily employable degree" and "lack of professionals (growing job market)" were the two reasons that affected many students decision to join the social work program as well as child welfare social workers to enter the field:

*"I think that it is the most easily employable [degree/profession] in our country, among all other majors of social sciences"*

*"I was employed at the administrative of- fice and there was a lack of staff [social work- er]. I was told that I was promoted..."*

The distribution of other reasons for choosing the profession are as follows:

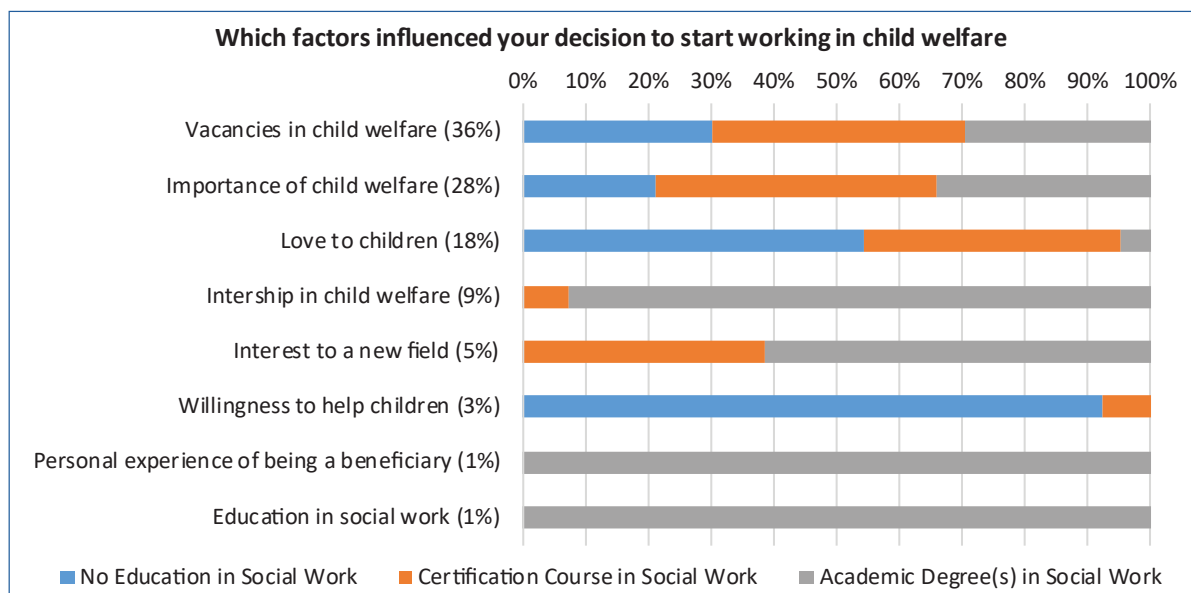
- 1) Available jobs (36%)
- 2) The importance of child welfare (28%)
- 3) Love for children (18%)

For social workers with academic degrees (31%), experience gained at field placements played the key role for entering social work field. Availability of jobs was another reason for the interest of the social work certificate program graduates (38%) as well as others from other fields (29%). Other factors were love (29%) and willingness to help children (29%).

Apart from the available jobs, the possibility to be the part of a new field development and being exposed to new experiences became important motivating factors for those who were employed in different fields before joining the social work:

*"My interest was caused by the fact that it was a new profession, something new was starting, it was a new stage for this system as well and a new experience."*

**Graph 2: Motivating factors to work in child welfare (n=171)**



Alongside with professors' busy schedule and lack of time for consultations, the students also talk-

ed about outdated course materials and the overlap of the course content across different classes:

*“all you learn in social work intro course keeps coming up in other courses.”*

The representatives of academia touched upon the lack of translated materials too. As it was noted, the university budget, which distributes funds to the departments, did not make it possible to translate or acquire new materials required for the program. Therefore, professors and lecturers had no choice but to use outdated materials translated years ago when the program was set up and launched:

*“...We were told that there was no funding... so translation of new material was impossible. I had a very good course material for Georgian context – it was the part of my dissertation and I did some research on poverty... there was no money and that was the only manual I had.”*

*“...We still use what was translated initially. We do not have any time to work on new course materials.”*

Due to insufficient or unavailable resources, lecturers often had to pay for some course related activities out of their own pocket. For example, organizing meetings with students and field placement agencies, printing course materials etc., were all paid for in part or in full by the lecturers.

The representatives of academia did not deny the fact that there was the overlap of the course content across different classes as well as across bachelor and master programs, however, they related the students' complaints to their low level of motivation and poor educational background. As they noted, MSW program is more analytical and that it is focused on the development of critical analysis and writing skills. The program covers relatively wider range of literature and a variety of topics, however, most students are reluctant to do the assigned readings:

*“The student must read different material which you suggest but they would say: I do not have time or that s/he does not speak English and s/he cannot read it – so what should I do? The way out here is to be exposed to contemporary information, read articles... by the way, university has an access to wonderful datasets (Geostar, Cambridge)...But who wants to read them?! I don't agree with*

*that complaint that bachelor and master programs are identical, only because students are not willing to read about current findings etc.”*

The academics identified the master's program students with a significantly low level of motivation. Part of the lecturers thought that that was a result of students' poor academic background and overall problems in the educational system of Georgia. But, some of them thought, that this problem concerns only the master's program students who are employed, as the challenges of balancing their academic responsibilities with their full-time jobs results in exhaustion, poor prioritization of academic needs, and lack of commitment to the program. According to them, low motivating and productivity level was connected with professional overwork and busy working schedule of students.

*“...The expectation is that this knowledge will be transplanted from somewhere else and they must not read it and if you send them somewhere at good university, I do not know what they will do, when they have 1500 pages to read per week”*

*“Bachelor students are highly motivated... It is impossible not to see that, with masters the situation is complicated, they do not read. They have busy working schedule, tough working days and when they come after 8-hour working day exhausted and you talk to them about the homework...they just do not have time for that...”*

Lack of time, as one of the most important reasons for their unproductivity, was confirmed by the students as well. As it was mentioned during the interviews, the majority of the MSW students had quite busy working conditions, which did not allow them enough time to perform well at the program:

*“I started working in this field [social work] and I am getting knowledge. Though, because of lack of time my academic performance decreased, I am not getting as good marks, as during previous semesters and as I ought to. ... but I am getting a practical knowledge even though for the theory classes I could not make high quality presentations, because I did not work on it for a long time...”*

It turned out that busy working schedule and lack of time was not the only reason why students are not prepared for lectures. Course materials for many subjects were available only in English, which required much time, resources, and enough knowledge of English language to read and understand provided material.

*"...there were many subjects, where it was necessary to translate material from English, 20-30 pages per lecture. It is really difficult to work on it, when you know only conversational English"*

Alongside with other difficulties, the students also mentioned other problems connected with the curriculum. Even though mostly students confirmed the importance and the close connection of the theoretical material and practical work, they also noted that the theoretical material which was provided during social work programs did not fit the Georgian environment. Often students could not easily apply the theoretical knowledge to typical Georgian cases and work environment.

*"We study such things at the university which is not applicable for Georgian reality"*

*"We studied the theories about families and children, which is focused on family engagement. In our reality it happens vice versa, when you try to help they can tell you: who are you? Why you are interfering? ... There is nothing said about it [during lectures]..."*

The academics did not agree with students' opinion about theories being inapplicable to practical application in Georgia. In their opinion, theoretical background was one of the most important parts of the social work profession, which gave a possibility to manage cases effectively in practice. According to them, thorough knowledge of theory is what makes a professional social worker different from non-professional one and signifies the importance of social worker's profession.

*"If you do not want to learn theories, do not enroll at the university, go to the vocational college and if you do not want it, just go... this is what makes the academia and the science stronger, you will complete a training course and study the methods and you are not effective at all, if you do not study the*

*theory..."*

*"The profession is regressing and social work now has no other function than to fill the documents and issue vouchers, because the people do not understand their profession correctly."*

However, they confirmed the fact, that the reality, in which the social workers were working in Georgia, was very stressful and required fast decision making, which was extremely difficult for social workers with no practical experience:

*"...they do not have a possibility to apply it [theoretical knowledge] while working, especially if they work at social service agency, they say: well you taught us in this way, but we do not have time there for that... They are so overloaded, that they do not have a possibility to make discussions as during lectures... these kids are not ready to work in a fast way and with quality, as I see ... because one thing is when you ask them to write a case on the basis of the quiz and they have time to think, nobody asks them to make fast decisions and another thing is to be in a working environment... That's why I can't say if they are ready to apply acquired knowledge to the activities they are requested to perform. "*

Alongside students' motivation and educational background, the lecturers and professors also spoke about administrative issues of the programs. It was mentioned that some courses, for example, Introduction to Social Work and the Principles of General Practice, were attended by large groups (up to 90 students), which also influenced the quality of courses.

*"I absolutely changed the format to have many practical exercise and make them follow whole process of case management. Then you must provide them with additional exercises, extra time must be taken into consideration for that."*

*"it [lack of administrative support] really influences the quality of the material, what kind of fresh information you as a lecturer can provide... you do not have enough time and possibilities to show and do what you really want to do and as it should be".*



The students, as well as the representatives of academia, spoke about program evaluation and feedback. The students were sure that their feedback about lecturers and courses have a formal character and did not change anything, except several cases when one or two lecturers took into consideration their opinions during planning the next semester:

*"...so many times I wrote that we did not like this lecturer and asked to get rid of him/her, but nothing has changed. I think nobody reads it, it's only formal..."*

*"...there was a case when a lecturer took into consideration what we had written and he planned next semester according to our recommendations, but it is so rare"*

The representatives of academia confirmed that students' feedback about educational or administrative processes did not have a systematic character.

*"I received it [feedback] only twice, when I was teaching the introduction, I did not get anything during practice courses"*

But as one of the representatives of academia, who was involved in the process of students' feedback on lecturers/professors, noted that even in case of negative feedback, the university and/or department did not have the additional resources to apply ameliorative measures and work on improving the quality, or even use temporary measures.

*"They were writing some terrible things, but what can you do?... The university is not a punitive organization to fire a person. Before you do that, you must help a person to improve the weak sides, send them to training courses, help them to change teaching methods and etc. But we do not have sufficient resources..."*

## FIELD PLACEMENTS AND RELATED ISSUES

As the list of social work bachelor and master's programs of TSU and ISU display (table 2), social work field placement is compulsory for both programs. In order to pursue Bachelor's or Master's degree in Social Work, students are required to gain practical experience in one of the assigned organizations and receive necessary credits. Field placement provides students with opportunity to acquire an experience prior to their employment in social work field. Due to the fact that employers often complain about the professional competences of social workers, the issues related to field placements were discussed with students, as well as with the academics.

As previously mentioned, the database of field placement agencies (40 agencies), including international, local, non-profit, and social service provider organizations, was set up in the process of the TSU social work program development process. As a result, the university uses the same dataset and transfers students to agencies presented in the given dataset.

As students reported, field placement experiences vary and strongly depend on assigned orga-

nization. However, issues brought up during focus group discussions are the following:

- Lack of organizations for field placements
- No choice while assigning the organizations
- Lack of readiness of organizations to accommodate students

While talking about field placements, students complained about not being involved in organizational issues as internship students, not having different assignments, and undefined role of internship students at field placement agencies:

*"They were asking me to do some administrative stuff, I did not even have my work station"*

*"I had nothing to do, they did not let me be involved..."*

Although, it should be mentioned that some students positively evaluated the relationship with the field placement supervisor or coordinator and underlined the significance of high quality internships as the key element for becoming a social work practitioner.

*"I had a good experience last year at SOS, that year was wonderful."*



*"I was at CCRT, a new project was starting and I got involved."*

*"I could always reach my coordinator when I needed."*

The social work faculty identified the following challenges regarding field placements:

1. Part of the agencies included in the general database are not familiar with or do not have sufficient knowledge about social work profession; as a result, there is a social work component at those agencies; therefore, students have to fill this gap by themselves and raise awareness about the social work professional at their placement organizations. Often times, "social workers" are identified as "social agents"<sup>6</sup>:

*"The awareness of this profession is a big problem. Students are still telling me, e.g. bachelor program students, that when they introduced the role of social worker [at the field placement agency], nobody knew it. They [agencies] are humiliating them, not only by the fact that they do not know [about the social work profession], but in general."*

2. Low quality of field placement component at agencies: the quality of field practicum component is low even at those organizations in which the social work component is developed. In most cases, theories that have been introduced at academic programs are irrelevant to practice existing at most of field practicum organizations. As one of the representatives noted:

*"Practice at those agencies is very poor... when you are talking about high standards and the gap between those standards and reality is too big, students are focused on self-survival, rather than understanding those standards."*

3. Students' role at field placement agencies: the role and involvement of students strongly vary across organizations and depend on organizational culture. Field placement supervisors have different attitudes about internship stu-

dents as well, which greatly influence relationships between students and their supervisors.

*"Some look at them as at extra luggage ... it [experience] varies and it's difficult to control the process. There were cases when different students had different experiences at same agencies."*

4. Professional supervision: Agencies with no professional social workers experience problem of professional supervision. Field placement supervisors are not experienced enough to assign particular tasks to students and provide necessary feedback:

*"There are cases, when field placement supervisors do not know what kind of tasks assign to students or what is social work in general"*

The academics tried to interfere in cases mentioned above and help field placement supervisors to understand and correctly utilize resources offered by social work internship students. Those steps turned out successful, but such initiatives could not become permanent:

*"I had a case, when I helped a field placement supervisor to figure out how to "use" internship students as an extra resource and how to supervise in general."*

They also mentioned about other attempts such as the trainings of field placement supervisors and occasional visits of representatives of academia at field placement agencies; however, in their opinion, none of them worked or appeared effective in a long run as the academics conducted such close monitoring of placement agencies for only one academic year.

5. Attitudes of the students with academic degree: there were cases, when students were considered as "dangerous" at field placement agencies. As mentioned, such incidents occurred at social service agencies, where most employed social workers did not hold academic degrees in social work. In order to avoid further complications, the Social Workers Association addressed the social agency with an official letter, in which it was clearly stated that the social work certificate course, which is completed by majority of social workers at the agency,

<sup>6</sup> Social Agents – professionals, not social workers, working in SSA to conduct socio-economic assessment of families for means-tested Target Assistance Program (TSA)

is equivalent of an academic degree in social work.

Changes regarding field placement that took place during the past two years were also outlined:

- Field placement duration at agencies not having the social work component would not exceed one semester;
- Students could stay at field placement agency with the social work component for one academic year;
- Internship period at one agency was reduced from one semester to 8 weeks;
- Field placement agreement and evaluation forms were developed; forms are used by field placements supervisors and representatives of academia (evaluation forms are based on 100% point calculation system and narrative evaluation questions).
- New evaluation (scale) system was developed for master students as well (ISU).

## Readiness for Field Work

As for students' readiness for existing challenges in child welfare and academic program's role in their preparation process, the representatives of academia believed that mostly the program prepared students to work with children, individuals and families, but also acknowledged existing shortcomings:

*"there are some shortcomings... they should be able to work as clinicians in child welfare but they are not ready for that, because we do not prepare them for that... because he/she must be a good clinician but not ready for that..."*

Readiness for social work practice was one of the questions that had been asked during the focus-group discussion with students. Students were asked to evaluate their knowledge and readiness for existing challenges in child welfare on a 10-point scale. The majority of students (9 out of 11) rated their skills with 7-8 points. Those who were at their final year demonstrated significantly higher level of self-confidence towards practical challenges compared to freshmen students.

*"I should note that when I started the program, in the beginning I was shocked, I was afraid of responsibilities, I did not know how to do all these things. After two semesters I realized that I learned many things and I was not afraid that much..."*

During the discussion regarding the programs' quality and the importance of students' readiness for social work field with the representatives of academia, the need for specializations in the program as well as at field placements was also addressed:

*"I think that they acquire good knowledge, but when you have 60 students in your group, it is hard to figure out how they would apply knowledge to needs, how ready they are for that".*

*"We cannot offer specializations that might be of their interest. For instance, the student who is interested in mental health...— it should be the way it is structured in western universities: they offer specializations in program linked to field practice. They obtain deeper knowledge of theory in that field and at the same time get their placements in mental health field. Consequently, after graduation, they are ready to work as social workers of a multidisciplinary group."*

The importance of specializations was mentioned by students as well. As they pointed out, there is a great need of specialization in clinical social work:

*"You cannot be an "expert" in everything. It would be a step forward if we had specializations. We would get better knowledge. Now, we are just trying to catch up with everything in four semesters"*

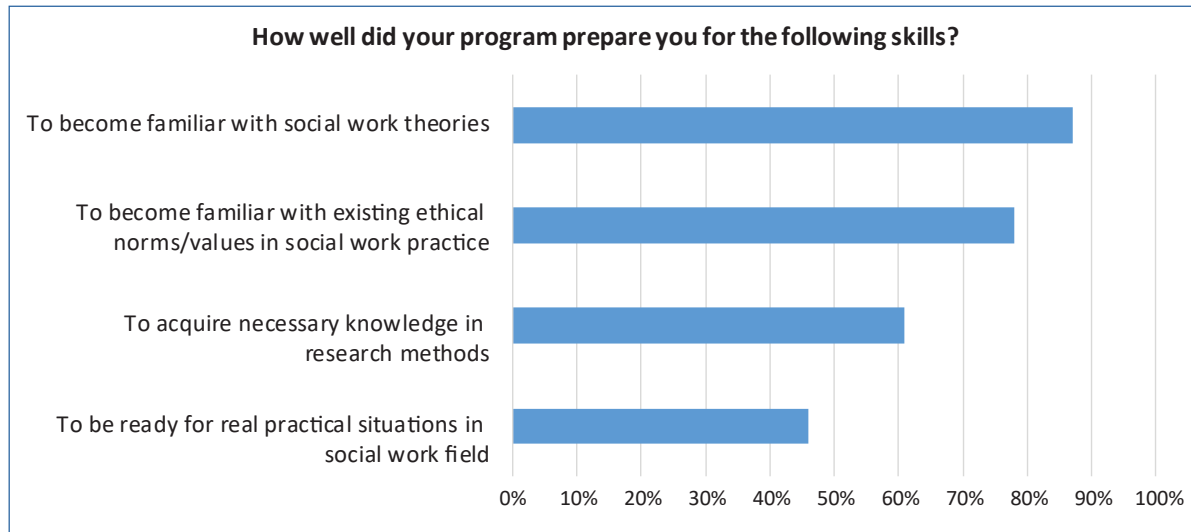
*"It would be good to have specializations, like in other schools abroad, which would prepare us for clinical practice"*

The effectiveness of academic programs in preparing social workers for real practical situations was also addressed during the telephone interviews with practitioners. As the results showed, among all interviewed social workers (N=172) only 46 of them hold academic degree in social work. 87% of them stated that academic program helped them to obtain knowledge about existing theories in the field;

however, only 46% of them think that academic programs were helpful for gaining knowledge required for practical situations in the field. In addition, the telephone survey addressed questions about gaining other necessary skills such as research methods skills and knowledge of ethical norms and values in

field of social work. Based on responses, 61% of respondents confirmed acquiring necessary skills for research methods while 78 % of them thought they gained a good knowledge of ethical norms and values of social work (Graph 3).

**Graph 3: How well did the program prepare you for the following skills? (n=46)**



## SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY AS THE FIELD PLACEMENT ORGANIZATION

Social Work Agency is one of the main field placement agencies among other social work internship organizations. Accordingly, field placement at SSA was one of the main focuses during the interviews and focus groups with the academics.

As professors/lecturers stated, the environment in which the majority of social workers have to work is stressful and nonprofessional, where the role of social worker is lost. Issues that have been emphasized were the following: low work standards, uncomfortable and inappropriate environment for working with beneficiaries, no transportation means, low salaries and etc. The violation of social work code of ethics and absence of unity and priorities in interior system of the SSA:

*“SSA is the biggest employer and we all know what is going on there, the role of social work is totally lost...obviously, there should be some changes...before they do not realize that with existing practice they are violating*

*code of ethics...they keep doing it without thinking”*

*“If rules and style of work would continue, I mean, the existing one at SSA, our kids will never be ready to work in such conditions, because the way they were taught to work with clients is absolutely different from the one at SSA. We will not change teaching style. We do not teach “Georgian social work”, how they must get adjusted to the situation there...”*

Despite the issues that exist at SSA, the representatives of the agency placed the blame on students’ lack of motivation:

*“All of the social workers at field placement I’ve met, only a few of them are really trying to be engaged, many of them just come and do nothing”*

*“It’s like...when you blame your teacher when you don’t know something, if you want*

*to learn, you will do it, both, at school and at the university. Maybe the fact is that SSA social workers are very busy and they cannot pay that much attention, nobody will teach you something forcefully, so they [students] lack motivation. If they try, they will get involved"*

Although, they acknowledged that social workers with academic degrees had relatively better writing skills compared to those who do not hold either a BA or MSW in social work:

*"Cases and plans written by them are perfect, usually, all possible resources that could be used in one particular case are well outlined... it's true that plans they develop could not be accomplished or may not be applicable to the real situation, but we must admit that they [students] write better, they lack skills, but when they start working and stay [at SSA], they become better and better".*

In the opinion of representatives of the agency, in order to introduce existing problems and challenges in Child Welfare to young social workers and guarantee their effective integration in the field, work experience at SSA and child welfare must be compulsory for all social worker students. The idea of increasing the duration of the practicum was also mentioned:

*"The agency should be a compulsory practicum place...they won't be able to have such a good experience anywhere else..."*

*"They should have only practicum during one semester and they must be assistants of social workers, they should be practitioners, always involved as social workers assistants, where it will be possible to delegate simple prevention cases... when they go through this, then they will understand whether or not they like this field and if they join the field, they will know how to manage and communicate better and will not face these challenges..."*

Senior social workers, who were immediate supervisors of student social workers agreed with the statement too:

*"As for field placement in our organization, I believe this is the best place for a stu-*

*dent interested in social work ...technically it's not always possible to manage the internship process smoothly, but we are doing our best..."*

*"probably it [field placement] must be longer...it can take place after the graduation too...it must be like this: they will gain more experience and they will feel at ease...to be more precise, busy but very interesting job..."*

Social Service Agency representatives' idea to extend the duration of field placement was discussed with the representatives of the academia; they expressed different attitudes about the given suggestion:

*"...it seems more rational in some branches, where the field placement component is relatively developed, because students had different experiences; in some areas they [students] did not know what to do while others were really involved. I would say that it's possible at branches that are ready to receive and supervise students in an appropriate way. Having a free semester only for an internship sounds like a good idea as well. In general, it sounds great for some branches..."*

According to the representatives of the academia, suggestion about extending the field placement period made by the representatives of SSA cannot be accomplished at this point of time due to the fact that the universities are not yet ready for that. The faculty talked about other issues making field placements at SSA even more difficult:

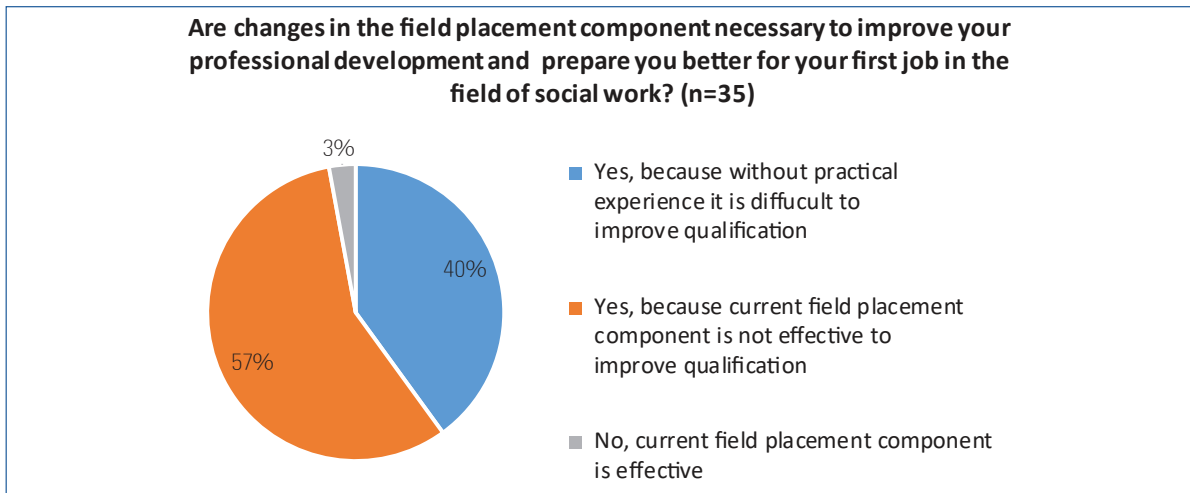
*"if existing rules and style of work that takes place at SSA would continue our kids would never be able to work in that environment, because the way they work with clients at SSA and the way we teach them are absolutely different from each other. But I don't think that we should change the style of teaching. We don't teach them Georgian Social Work and we don't teach them to get used to that fallacy. We teach them the way we were taught in the US... real social work. It does not make any difference whether we add one or five semesters, they[students] must not be ok with all of that and they should always take into considerations ethical principles and the*

background which social work is based on...it does not matter whether in the US or in Georgia. And until SSA would not understand that, there will always be complaints and concerns about graduates readiness for the field.”

The questions concerning the shortcomings of field practicum were also addressed by acting social workers with academic qualifications. According to surveys, 40% of social workers (n=35) who had their

internships while being students at a university, think that changes in university field placement are necessary to acquire an appropriate qualification for social work practice. 57% of interviewed social workers with academic degree point to the ineffectiveness of field placements while remaining 3% do not consider that the field placement component needs any changes (Graph 4)

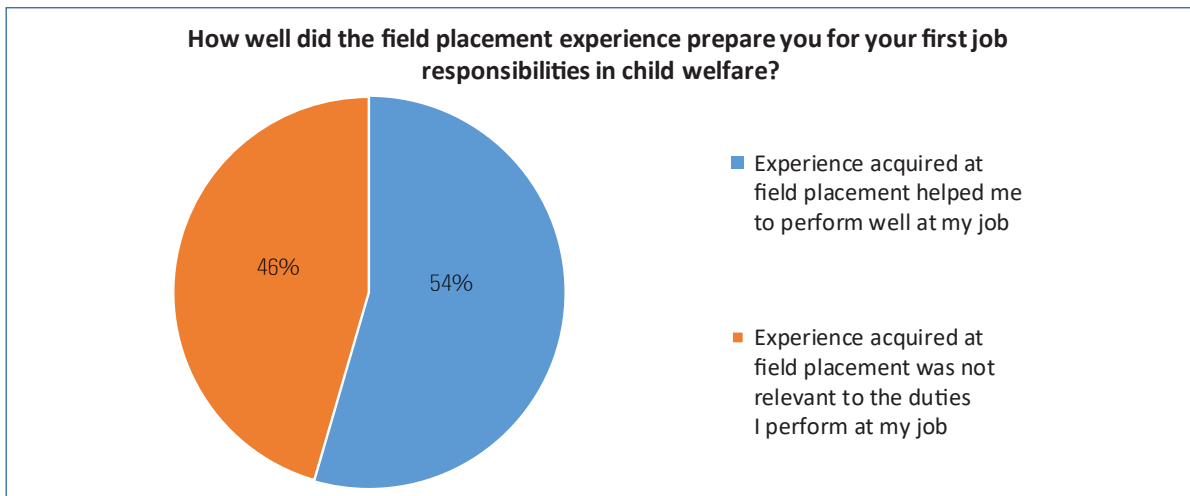
**Graph 4: Are changes in the field placement component necessary to improve your professional development and prepare you better for your first job in the field of social work?**



Attitudes regarding the efficiency of field placement experience for obtaining appropriate knowledge for a first job in social work field also varied. 54.5 % of practitioner social workers with academic degree (n=33) considered the experience gained at

field placements very helpful for first social work job responsibilities, while 45.5 % found their field placement experience irrelevant for performing work duties. (Graph 5)

**Graph 5: How well did the field placement experience prepare you for your first job responsibilities in child welfare? (n=35)**





### Social Service Agency as an employer

Currently, Guardianship-Custody and Social Programs Department at LEPL Social Service Agency (Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs) is responsible for Child Welfare in Georgia. According to the Statute of the agency, Social Service Agency is authorized to implement government programs in labor, health and social care field, as well as in Child Welfare. (Article 2):

1) Adoption of orphans and children outside of family care, foster care, coordination and management of guardianship and custody process, maintain a centralized databank of children available for adoption and adoptive parents, guarantee proper functioning of central and local guardianship and custody systems of Georgia, guarantee the functioning of central organization for guardianship and custody with the purpose of intercountry adoption. The agency works on the following issues in child welfare: adoption, alternative forms of care for children, child protection from violence, preventive measures for family assistance, children's rehabilitation/habilitation, early childhood development, provide homeless children with housing, emergency assistance to families with children under crisis<sup>7</sup>. Each of these programs is closely connected with adequate estimation of the needs of family and child by a social worker<sup>8 9 10 11 12</sup>.

According to recent data, the Health and Social Care of Georgia, namely Social Service Agency, within the Ministry of Labor, is Georgia's biggest employer of social workers (*Situational Analysis of Social Work, GASW, 2011, pages 9-10*). Currently, the number of social workers employed at SSA is 239 (Social Service Agency, 2016). As for their role at SSA, based on the provided job description we can outline the following:

A Senior Social worker is responsible to guarantee the coordination, professional supervision and work evaluation of social workers group employed at SSA. Senior social worker is also involved in developing social workers' skills, analyzes each case and prepares them for the regional council. At the same time, senior social worker is responsible to identify social workers' weak and strong sides and outline professional/educational needs in order to provide them with necessary knowledge and information in time.

A Senior social worker is also responsible to inform the management about the needs outlined in the agency. In addition, senior social worker informs social workers about professional trainings or other educational opportunities. The senior social worker is responsible for supporting social workers to deal with professional burn out and providing them with necessary instructions.

Required qualifications for senior social workers: post-graduate degree (no field defined), at least 2 years of experience in the social work field and a certificate in the principles of social work. Other requirements include leadership, decision-making, working well under pressure, writing, analytical skills, knowledge of world office programs, effective communication skills, team work, etc. As for postgraduate education (master's degree) in social work, it is listed as preferred qualification. According to the SSA job description, senior social worker's working hours are from 09:30 till 18:00 (8.5 hours).

Social workers responsibilities include: evaluating, planning, implementing necessary measures, and executing the custody process immediately after receiving an application until completion. The social worker is also responsible for guaranteeing the cooperation within the department as well as with other departments. Social workers are responsible for participating in the process of enrollment and disenrollment of beneficiaries into various organizations such as daily center, family type house, guardianship, community organizations, and centers for people with disabilities. Introduction of cases to the Regional Council for guardianship and custody after the approval of senior social worker's,

<sup>7</sup> [http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=43](http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=43)

<sup>8</sup> [http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01\\_GEO/KANONMDEBLO-BA/Sakanonmdeblo/36.pdf](http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01_GEO/KANONMDEBLO-BA/Sakanonmdeblo/36.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3394478>

<sup>10</sup> [http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=504](http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=504)

<sup>11</sup> [http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=613](http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=613)

<sup>12</sup> [http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=1104](http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=1104)

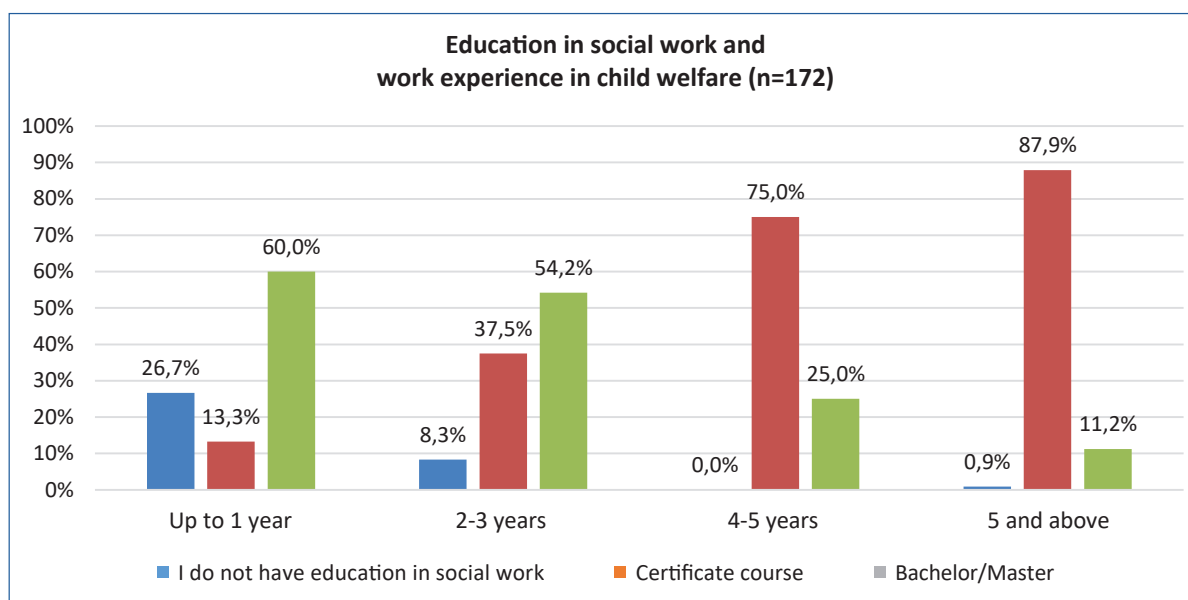
involvement in the discussion process, working on the plan of individual development, and upon necessity, to implement, locate, provide and monitor family assistance or replacing services, as well as to manage the processes of guardianship, family cases, adoption, and deinstitutionalization. Additional responsibilities include the organization of public events to raise public awareness about the social programs, advocacy process, etc.

The main requirements for social worker's position are: postgraduate education (field not defined) and at least 2 years of experience of working with children or vulnerable groups. Other required skills are identical to senior social worker's position requirements and involve all above mentioned skills and competencies. Postgraduate education in social work as well as the certificate in the principles of

social work are included in preferred qualifications' list. Social worker's working hours are the same as senior social worker's: 09:30-18:00 (8.5 hours).

According to SSA, social workers with academic degrees in social work are employed mostly in Tbilisi and work together with other social workers with postgraduate qualifications in other fields, but with many years of experience in social work field. According to them, these individuals are professionals who joined the social work field before the academic programs in social work were launched. Though, according to a given study, some social workers lacked academic degrees in social work. As the study results show, 26.7% of participants have only one year of working experience in child welfare, while 8.3% possess a 2-3 year of full-time working experience. (Graph 6)

**Graph 6: Degree in Social Work and working experience in Child Welfare (n=172)**



It should be mentioned that according to SSA representatives, during the last year, social workers without an academic degree in social work were hired only outside Tbilisi. Data gathered for the purpose of the current study confirms the given information: number of hired social workers without academic degree in social work: Shida Kartli -1, Kvemo Kartli-1, Guria – 1, Imereti – 1.

Research data also clearly shows, that only 22.8% of interviewed Child Welfare social workers have higher education (bachelor, master) in social

work, 73.1% have completed Social work certificate course<sup>13</sup>, and remaining 4.1% do not have any education in social work field.

Based on research goals, one of the main topics while talking with main employer of social workers was the importance of education in social work field.

As it was noted during the discussion of focus group with senior social workers of SSA, education

<sup>13</sup> social work certificate program implemented for many years at TSU and once at Batumi State University

in social work field significantly influences the quality of work performed by a social worker. The difference between qualified and non-qualified social worker is especially obvious on first stages of work:

*"Before acquiring some experience, if you are not qualified it is immediately obvious... because it is very difficult for someone from a different field to have same social worker's skills as for someone with academic degree. It's impossible to have those skills when they lack training..."*

Despite differences between qualified and unqualified personnel, senior social workers considered the personal motivation was the key:

*"Initially there are these differences and then skills come into practice...still I think that it depends on how eager the person is to do something. Those who are motivated do additional readings as well..."*

Also, the significance of professional trainings was also noted and in their opinion such social workers were distinguished with professional skills:

*"if we talk about those [social workers] who were hired years ago, there were lots of trainings before, so many that when you check these writings, you will not find any difference, so qualified are they..."*

Time management was an important skill that distinguished experienced social workers from new ones, even if they had academic degrees in social work.

*"Well, a qualified but inexperienced social worker can not make decisions as quickly and effectively as an experienced social worker without academic qualification...despite their degrees..."*

Consequently, in the opinion of senior social workers, while distributing the cases much attention was paid to social workers' experience, skills and strong sides, rather than their academic qualifications.

*"We work on many, I would say too many directions. This identified the social workers who effectively manage all cases. There are some who especially excel at a specific field. Some are good at courts, others perform well in different things. Consequently, we often*

*take into consideration their experience and skills..."*

*"Because we are not specialized, I want them [social workers] to get experience in all directions and I pay much attention to experience while assigning the cases."*

The representatives of Guardianship and Social Programs department refer to the importance of experience in social work practice rather than education when reallocating the cases. As it turned out, professional education was regarded to be even more significant in the regions where social workers with academic degrees (bachelor, master) were not available:

*"...Reallocation is performed in different ways. Tbilisi pays much attention to this; there is a wide choice and experience rather than education is of great significance. Education is not a priority; much depends on skills as well..."*

However, frequently the same pattern of reallocation was not used due to a great number of cases:

*"They are so much loaded that it does not make any importance ... [education, experience]"*

*"Fresh "blood" is very important. The one who studied 4 years and can write well. The old and new staff support one another, but then because of the routine they are in, they may forget a lot of things. ..."*

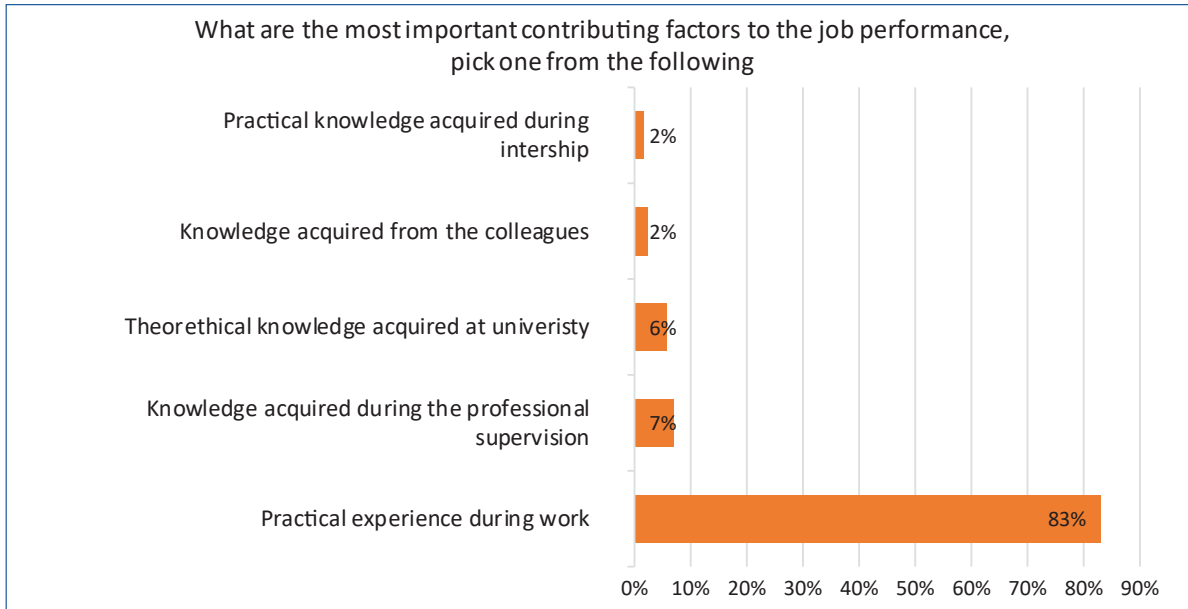
Social Service Agency personnel underlined the importance of communication skills in the field of social work and admit young/novice social workers lack them:

*"... [This young social worker] finds it difficult to communicate. They are not fit to the environment. They need to develop their communication skills..."*

During interviewing practicing social workers, the advantage of job experience compared with academic qualifications was also pointed out. 83% of interviewed social workers thought that practical experience acquired at the work place, was significantly more important than theoretical knowledge acquired at university. (Graph 7)



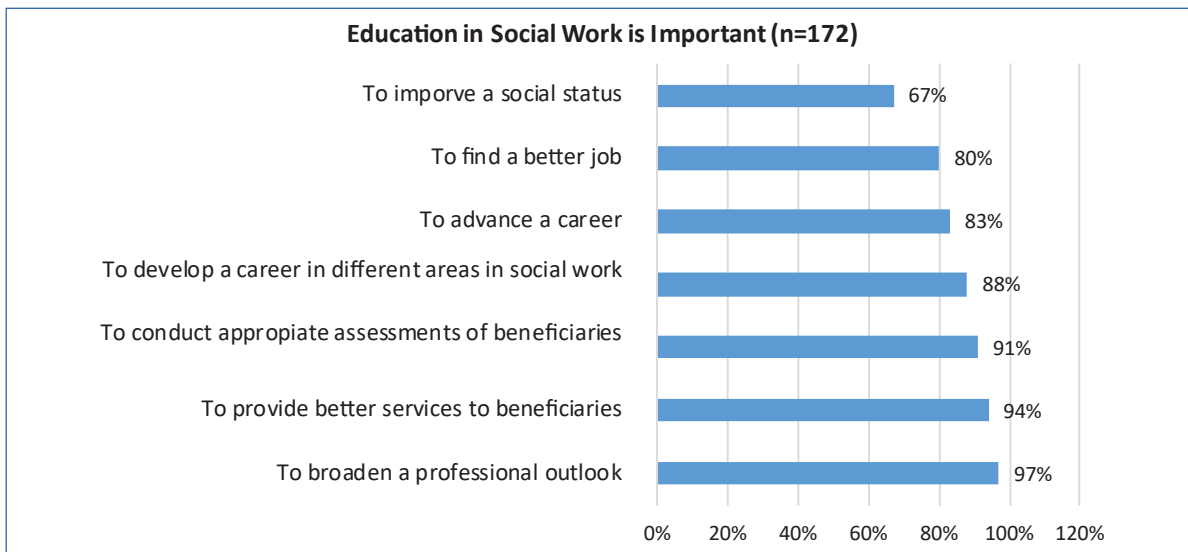
**Graph 7: Important contributing factors to job performance (n=172)**



Despite the fact, that the majority of social workers preferred work experience, 97% of the interviewed practitioner social workers consider that education in the field of social work was essential to deepen professional knowledge, whereas 94% believed that it is the academic degree in this field that ensures better assistance to beneficiaries and 91%

believed that education in this field was a necessary basis to adequately estimate the situation and the needs of the beneficiaries. Some other factors were also mentioned: importance to advance a career in social work in different directions (88%), career development (83%), and upgrade social status (67%) (Graph 8)

**Graph 8: The importance of education in the field of social work (n=172)**



During the interviews practitioner social workers were asked to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. According to the data analysis, social workers with academic degrees in social work

had a different comfort level in their professional relationships with colleagues. 97% of respondents report that their relationship with colleagues is pleasant and comfortable. Based on data analysis,

social workers with academic degree show higher level of comfort while working with their colleagues compared to their coworkers with non-academic degree in the field  $F(2,170)=3.86$ ,  $p=0.023$ ,  $R^2=.039$ .

It is worth mentioning that more than a half of respondents (55%) found it difficult to speak about their own as well their colleagues' competencies and strengths. Their comfort level in assessing their own or their colleagues' competencies and strengths was not different between social workers with an academic degree and those without.

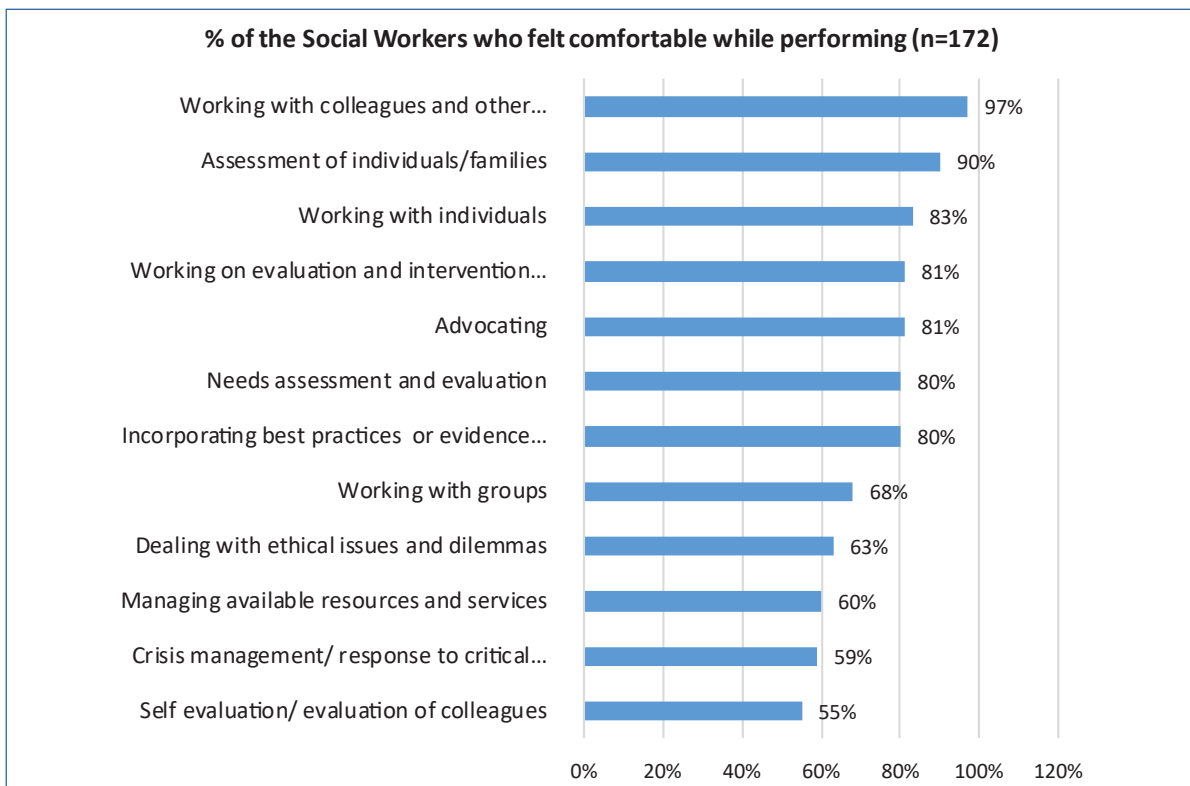
The survey also covered questions about social work skills and competencies and asked about the comfort level to utilize those skills in their everyday practice. According to study findings, some skills and competencies were utilized relatively better by workers with academic degree in social work compared with those with no academic degree in the field.

- Differences at revising and implementing individual development plan: means (using Fisher's LSD Post-Hoc Test) were used to identify statistical significant difference between social workers with academic degree in social work and the rest. As the data indicated, social workers with-

out any academic training felt less comfortable than practitioners with degree  $-.864$  ( $p=.02$ ). There was no statistically significant difference between social workers with certification and with no academic degrees ( $.517$ ,  $p=.14$ ) (using Fisher's LSD Post-Hoc Test)

- Social workers with academic degree in the field felt more comfortable to "work with groups" in comparison to other colleagues with no degree in social work ( $1.917$ ,  $p=.005$ ). There was statistical difference between social workers with academic degree and certification course ( $-.079$ ,  $p=.817$ ). (Fisher's LSD Post-Hoc Test)
- Social workers with academic degree in the field, graduates of the social work certificate program and those with no qualification in the field felt differently about working with individuals and families to make informed decision. Social workers with no academic degree in the field were least comfortable ( $.317$ ,  $p=.049$ ). There was no statistically significant difference between certification holders and academically trained social workers ( $-0.016$ ,  $p=.83$ ) (Fisher's LSD Post-Hoc Test).

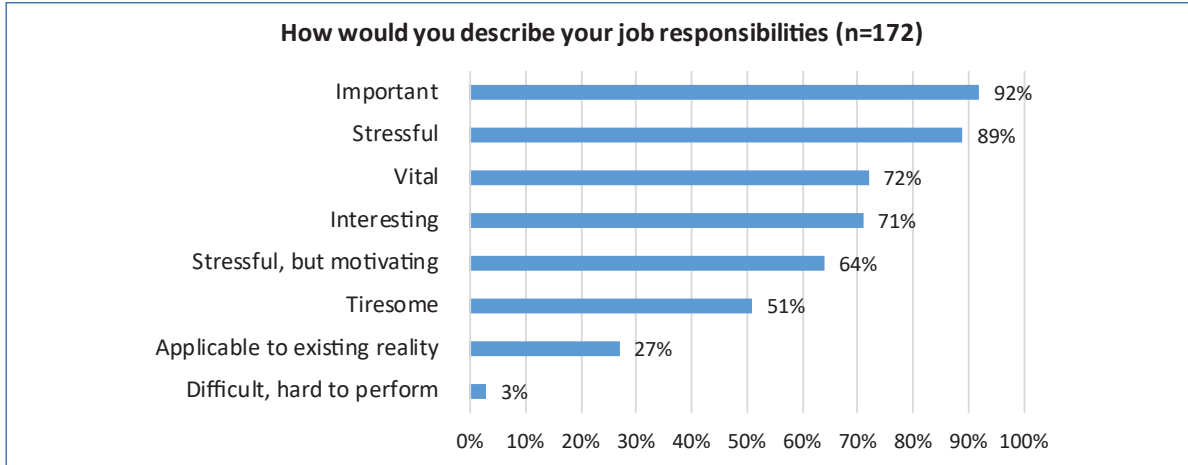
**Graph 9: Indicators of social work practice skills**



At the end of the survey, practitioners had a possibility to describe their work accountabilities by one word. The majority noted that their work is important (92%), at the same time – vital (72%), at the

same time, they say that it is stressful (89%) and tiresome (51%). Only 27% of the respondents think that their work responsibilities are in accordance with reality and existing challenges in the field. (Graph 10)

**Graph 10: Evaluation of job responsibilities**



The questions about strengthening the supervision component in the field of social work were answered by the representatives of the social agency and practitioner social workers. The representatives of the social agency confirmed the need and the importance of strengthening the supervision component, nowadays functioning only on a formal basis because of a lack of resources:

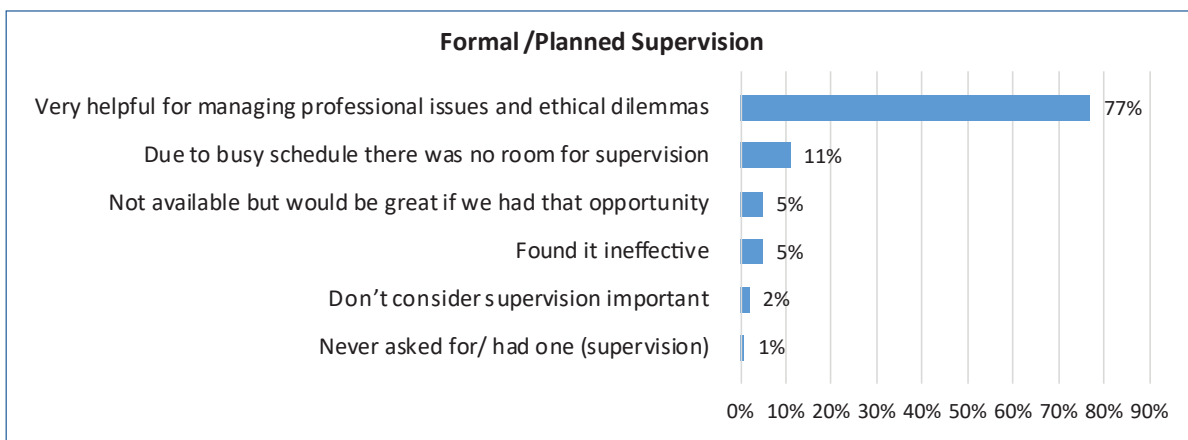
*“...It is impossible to do all that with our resources, because it is a mere formality and we are really sorry for that... but we are wasting too much time on following the procedures. We have to keep records of ev-*

*erything...” (Administrative office of Social Service Agency)*

*“...Still it is necessary to supervise, but the purpose of supervision remains only on paper, because we do not have time to improve and the problem stays the same and appears again and again. Thus, we do not have a possibility to respond, you only write and they read...” (Administrative office of Social Service Agency)*

During the interviews, the practitioner social workers identified supervision as one of the aspects that most supports the working process, but the effectiveness of supervision was confirmed only by ⅓ (77%) of respondents. (graph 11).

**Graph 11: Formal/planned supervision (n=172)**



During the interviews with Senior Social workers some other general or professional difficulties were also outlined:

*“The main problem is the ignorance of the society of the word ‘welfare’ in some cases exaggerated expectations and demands from social workers...”*

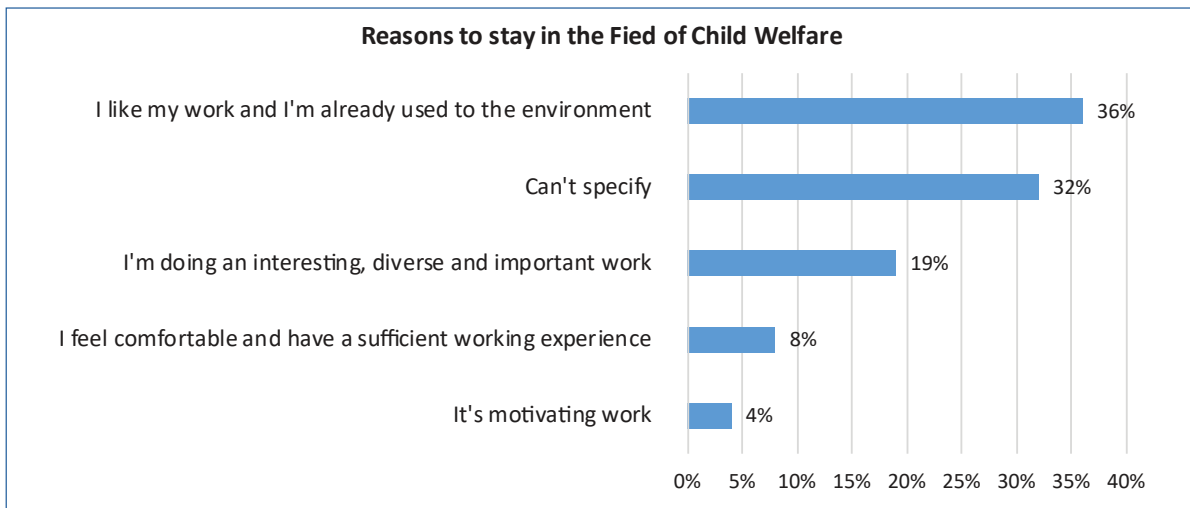
*“Working with other agencies is also difficult: sometimes the police show no support... there are cases when they help, but sometimes they act contrary to social workers. There are many difficulties at schools as well: I mean schools referral. They would not inform us about anything before, but now they started doing it and inform us about everything. However, they are limited to information only and they do not have any planned activities, what they can do, but of course they have some tools ...”*

*“They do not come to us straight from medical institutions, they contact others: journalists, police, but not us...we get information from journalists, while their obligation is to contact us beforehand...”*

The problem of the outflow of experienced and trained personnel from the field was also mentioned. As it turns out from the discussion of senior social workers, finding new staff as an everyday issue.

Practitioner Social workers also answered the question about the possibility to leave the field. Despite stressful and tiresome working responsibilities, 45% of the interviewed social workers do not plan to leave the field. 36% of them think that they are suited to the situation and they feel quite comfortable. The remaining 1/3 (32%) cannot provide a valid reason to stay in the field. (Graph 12)

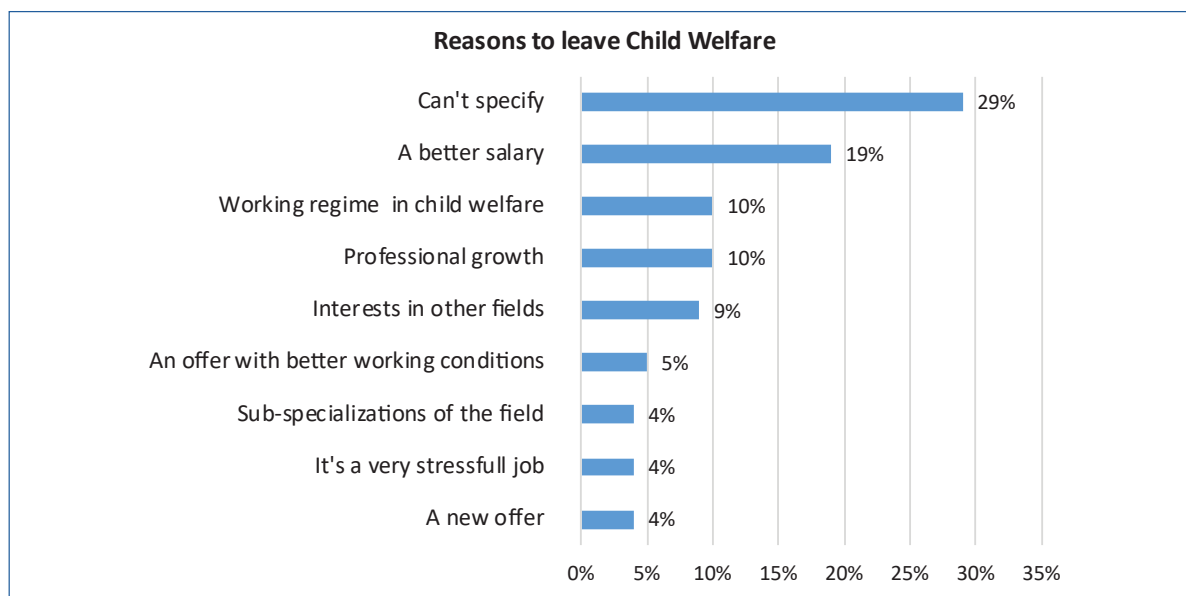
**Graph 12: Reasons to stay in child welfare (n=77)**



Despite the fact that 45% of the respondents felt comfortable in the field and do not plan to leave it, 55% of the interviewed practitioners were ready to leave the field when they have the opportunity.

Data clearly showed that 29% of respondents, who wished to leave the field, could not state a concrete reason, 19% thought that higher income was their main motivating factor. (Graph 13)

**Graph 13: Reasons to leave child welfare (n=95)**



## SOCIAL WORKERS AT LOCAL AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

In the framework of the research we evaluated job responsibilities of social workers employed at the following local and not-for-profit child welfare organizations: “First step Georgia”<sup>14</sup>, Society “Biliki”<sup>15</sup>, World Vision Georgian Office<sup>16</sup>, SOS Children’s village Georgia<sup>17</sup> and Caritas Georgia<sup>18</sup>.

Based on social worker job descriptions provided by non-profit local organizations, we can summarize the following:

- 1) Specific educational requirements for the position of a social worker were represented only in Society “Biliki” work requirements, indicating that a social worker should have university education. The job descriptions of other four organizations did not indicate education requirements for social workers.
- 2) Upgrading qualification during the work pro-

cess with the help of professional training and readiness to develop professional skills, knowledge and experience, were indicated only in SOS Children Village and “Family Strengthening” project requirements. According to regulations of “First Step Georgia”, a social worker was responsible for attending at least two 1-week trainings annually.

- 3) All five organizations included the following skills in their job descriptions: computer skills, management, social, communication skills, strategic thinking, team and independent work abilities, sense of responsibility, etc.
- 4) Working hours of a social worker varied according to organizations: “First Step Georgia – 20 hours a week (maximum 60 beneficiaries); Georgian Caritas – Full time (no hours defined); Society “Biliki” – Part time – 4 hours per day, 5 days a week/20 hours;
- 5) Ethical issues were indicated only in SOS children’s village program and Family Strengthening project job descriptions, which states in detail what principles a (1) social worker has to adhere to while working (2) with beneficiaries (3) and colleagues.

<sup>14</sup> First step Georgia – <http://www.firststepgeorgia.org>

<sup>15</sup> Society Biliki – <http://www.biliki.ge/index.php/kage>

<sup>16</sup> World Vision Georgia – <http://www.wvi.org/georgia>

<sup>17</sup> SOS Children’s Villages Georgia – <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.ge>

<sup>18</sup> Caritas Georgia – <http://caritas.ge>

- 6) As for the supervision and professional meetings, the job description from “First Step Georgia” states – (1) social worker should attend the meeting organized by a coordinator once a month, which probably means providing professional consultations, also (2) attending discussing a beneficiary case once a week (Monday) upon necessity and (3) attending parents’ meeting once a month;
- 7) The responsibilities of a social worker were common for all five organizations. According to a job description: social worker should be in charge of contacting beneficiaries, visiting, providing services, administrative issues, case management and intervention planning. Social advocacy of a social worker was signified only by “First step Georgia” and Society “Bili-ki”.

## DISCUSSION

The research findings showed that only a part of social workers employed in child welfare hold an academic degree in social work. Only 22% of practitioners hold an academic degree in social work, the majority were Social Work Certificate Course graduates (72%). Among practitioners in the field were the people who had no academic degrees in the field of social work, but their number compared to the other two groups was relatively lower and they were employed in different regions of Georgia.

According to the social worker’s job description obtained from different organizations in the framework of the research, in most cases, the academic degrees in social work field were not a prerequisite for the entire field including the State agencies.

The representatives from the field of child welfare did not emphasize the importance of academic degree in social work. Similar attitude was displayed while interviewing practitioner social workers employed in the field. The majority of them (80-97%) considered work experience the main reason for the success.

However, while evaluating working competencies of social workers, we identified significant differences between social workers with academic qualifications and Social Certificate Course Graduate social workers, in regard to working on individual development plans and working with groups. It seems that despite the existing consideration in the field, when preference was given to experience generally, while education factor turned out to be an important to ensure better performance of social worker’s competencies.

To strengthen the role of social work, the representatives of the academia underlined the importance of a prerequisite of a specific academic degree in social work. In their opinion, theoretical knowledge was what distinguished a professional from a non-professional social worker.

Despite the difficulties mentioned during the evaluation of social work academic programs (TSU, ISU), the representatives of the academy thought that university programs could provide students with high quality knowledge of social work.

Existing difficulties and the shortcomings of academic programs were also mentioned by the students. The major concerns were the materials, resources, and the theories which seemed irrelevant to social workers in Georgia, also considering the limited choices of subjects and the overloaded schedule of the professors. Despite these challenges, students still positively estimated their future social work competency, which was greatly connected with the acquired knowledge and skills during university programs.

Besides the challenges in the academic field, practical challenges also faced practitioners of child welfare social work. More precisely, 89% of research participant social workers thought that their job was very stressful, 55% were ready to leave the field, and those who planned to stay in the field, 45% named familiar and accustomed environment to the main reason for their choice. The importance of the child welfare field was a reason to stay in the field for only 19% of the respondents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For educational programs in social work:

- ❑ ***Periodically revised and enriched teaching materials with examples from Georgian practice***

We found out that students lack a variety of learning materials. This is particularly true for the case when students are unable to fit theory and evidence based practice to the Georgian context.
- ❑ ***Integrate various techniques/skills (how to work with individuals and groups, how to consult, manage critical situations, etc.) oriented subjects in the curriculum***

As the research has confirmed, the majority of social workers, including those with academic degrees in this field, do not possess enough practical skills of dealing not only with individual clients but also groups and families; They also need to be equipped with skills to manage critical situations.
- ❑ ***Assign special hours for academic staff to provide necessary consultations with students***

Most of the students emphasized that professors have busy schedule, whereas students do need to meet them regularly. Such meetings would enable them to discuss the projects and identify the needs of students' professional development and possibilities.
- ❑ ***Lead an introductory course by a social worker holding an academic degree in social work***

Obviously, the introductory course has a significant importance when choosing a profession. Therefore, it is important that an instructor with relevant qualification and experience should teach it.
- ❑ ***Make the compulsory internship period in the field of child welfare, particularly in Social Service Agency, at least one semester long***

The interviews with the social workers and the management of child welfare field revealed that this field is in great need of the professionals who apart from theoretical knowledge, are quite familiar with the field and possess relevant practical skills of working under pressure in a stressful environment.
- ❑ ***Strengthen the monitoring over internship site(s)***

Support students and the head of internship programs provided by University faculty is of the utmost importance in order to ensure adequate planning and implementation of the program (identify the students' expectations, roles, learning objectives, etc.), as well as evaluation of the achieved results.

## To the Social Service Agency:

□ ***Develop job descriptions (specializations) for the social workers employed at child welfare field and defining their workload standards***

Every party involved in the process of interviewing, including the representatives of social service agency have mentioned that no specialization of the field has ever taken place. Consequently, social workers work not only with the issues related to the child welfare field, but also have to perform a number of roles in relationship to other target groups. This, however, prevents them from developing specific skills and gaining particular experience, which in return is a measure of increasing work quality.

□ ***Create working conditions and establishing/strengthening the agency as a competitive institute employing social workers***

Despite the fact that the child welfare field is the main employer for social workers, other fields also reveal increased interest in employing qualified social workers. This somehow encourages outflow of qualified and experienced staff from the field of child welfare. Tough and irregular working hours, low salary and uncomfortable working environment, as well as lack of professional supervision and support, also facilitate poor performance.

□ ***Strengthen an institute of professional supervision***

Social worker practitioners have confirmed the necessity of professional supervising when dealing with both regular and critical/difficult cases. However, the existing practices regarding supervising does not allow this. All this significantly decreases the quality of the work performed and also hinders professional growth of social workers.

□ ***Provide On-the-job training of social workers (Training Issues: Assisting/consulting families and groups; Developing and implementing individual plans; working with groups, managing critical cases, etc.)***

Data analysis showed that despite formal education, social workers employed in the field of the child welfare do need on-the-job trainings to thoroughly overcome the existing difficulties and perform the job at a high level.

□ ***Improve internship conditions for students/interns***

Social workers have admitted that it was the experience they gained during the internship period that was critical in helping them in deciding to stay in the profession. Relatively speaking, the more satisfied (those who value the knowledge obtained) apprentices we have, the more that will be willing to stay. The agency, on the other hand, will be able to employ the staff that is familiar with the field and the regulations because it takes much time and additional resources to study them.



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