

THE MARGINALIZED VOICE: HOW DOES NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE RESHAPE THE PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN ARMENIA?

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Abstract: This article examines the marginalization of social workers' voices within the context of Armenia's recent social protection reforms. Utilizing the theoretical lens of political social work, the study explores how the introduction of integrated case management and new family vulnerability assessment systems impacts professional practice. Drawing on critical, structural, and radical traditions, the analysis suggests that while reforms aim for administrative efficiency and activation through employment, they often rely on neoliberal logic that prioritizes algorithmic indicators over nuanced professional judgment. The article identifies significant systemic risks, including the individualization of poverty, the reduction of professional autonomy, and the rise of a "silent compliance" culture. Ultimately, the paper argues that for social work to remain an instrument of social justice, it must reclaim its political dimension, ensuring that the lived realities of vulnerable populations are not lost to bureaucratic digitalization.

Keywords: *political social work, professional autonomy, neoliberal governance, case management, vulnerability assessment, individualization of poverty, social justice.*

Theoretical Framework and Definitions

In professional literature, various definitions of political social work exist. According to Reisch, political social work emerges as a response to trends that restrict social work to micro-level interventions, distancing it from the social change agenda (Reisch, 2013). From this perspective, social work is interpreted not merely as the provision of aid or services, but as a political practice operating constantly within the field of social contradictions and inequalities.

Among Armenian authors, N. Geghamyan and M. Yarmaloyan consider the political social work as a branch of social work focused on protecting social justice,



equality, and human rights through social and political processes (Geghamyan, Yarmaloyan, 2025).

Authors Gal and Weiss-Gal define political social work as the purposeful involvement of social workers in the processes of formulation, modification, evaluation, and public discussion of social policy. This involvement presupposes not only knowledge of social policy but also a value-based and moral stance rooted in the principle of social justice (Gal, Weiss-Gal, 2015).

A review of professional literature shows that political social work developed in response to criticisms that social work had been narrowed down to individual interventions, losing its structural and political vision (Mullaly, 2007).

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theoretically grounded policy analysis to examine the transformation of social work practice within the context of recent social protection reforms in Armenia. Drawing on the framework of political social work, the research integrates critical, structural, and radical theoretical perspectives to interpret policy developments and their implications for professional autonomy. The analysis is based on a review of legislative documents, policy reports, and international comparative literature, combined with a conceptual examination of key reform components, including vulnerability assessment system and case management methodology. Rather than relying on primary empirical data, the study adopts an interpretive approach aimed at identifying underlying governance logics, institutional dynamics, and potential systemic risks. This methodology enables a critical exploration of how neoliberal policy frameworks and digitalization processes reshape both the practice and the epistemological foundations of social work.

The Critique of “Political Neutrality”

A core issue in political social work is the critique of "political neutrality." In many countries, including Armenia, social workers are expected to be "non-political," which is presented as a prerequisite for professionalism and objectivity. However, some theorists argue that neutrality in social work is not only impossible but dangerous, as it legitimizes the existing social order (Ferguson, 2008).

Banks notes that a social worker's silence on political issues is often driven not by value-based agreement, but by institutional pressure and fear of professional risks. This silence becomes structural, reproduced through organizational regulations, accountability mechanisms, and managerial culture (Banks, 2012).

In the Armenian context, this discourse manifests in specific ways. Social workers often operate within state systems where criticism of policy may be perceived as "unreliability" or "disloyalty" toward the system. Consequently, a culture of self-censorship develops, where professionals consciously avoid political speech even when their practical experience testifies to the harmful consequences of political decisions. From this viewpoint, the social worker's voice acts as a "mediated voice," linking the lived reality of vulnerable groups with political discourse. When that voice is absent, policy loses its social sensitivity.

The depoliticization of social work is often justified by ideas of professionalism and objectivity. However, several authors argue that neutrality itself is a political stance that facilitates the reproduction of existing power relations (Reisch, 2013; Ferguson, 2008). This position is based on the idea that social work can never be value-neutral, as the social worker operates within the framework of resource distribution, social control, and power dynamics (Gal, Weiss-Gal, 2015). It follows that the social worker is not just a supportive professional, but a practical implementer of policy who, through daily decisions, participates in the reproduction of either social justice or inequality.

Neoliberalism and Case Management in Comparative and Armenian Contexts

The development of political social work theory since the 1990s has been closely linked to the rise of neoliberal transformations in welfare governance. As noted by Michael Reisch, these transformations have reoriented social policy toward activation, conditionality, and the individualization of responsibility (Reisch, 2013). Within this framework, social assistance is no longer conceived as a social right but as a temporary, behaviorally conditioned support mechanism aimed at labor market integration. Case management methodologies have expanded precisely within this paradigm, functioning simultaneously as tools of coordination and instruments of supervision.

International experience demonstrates that such reforms, while often increasing administrative efficiency, also tend to intensify bureaucratic control over both beneficiaries and professionals. In the United States, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act institutionalized workfare principles by linking benefits to employability. In the United Kingdom, integrated service models such as the “Sure Start” initiative embedded case management within coordinated child welfare systems (United Kingdom Government, 2003–2012).

Similarly, in Georgia, the introduction of a score-based vulnerability assessment system aimed to improve targeting but was later criticized for insufficiently capturing real social deprivation (Government of Georgia, 2006–2014).

Reforms in the Baltic States further revealed a tendency toward increased managerialism and the exclusion of vulnerable groups through rigid administrative criteria (Aidukaite, 2011).

In this broader context of neoliberal restructuring, Armenia has initiated a systemic transformation of its social protection system. Launched on March 17, 2025, in the Kotayk and Syunik regions, the pilot reform represents a decisive departure from the long-standing Proxy Means Test (PMT) system—commonly known as the “Paros” system—toward a hybrid model combining multidimensional poverty indicators with direct income accounting. For more than three decades, the PMT system relied on indirect proxies such as utility consumption or asset ownership, often producing “poverty traps,” whereby households avoided formal employment or improvements in living conditions to maintain eligibility (MLSA RA, 2026).

The new model seeks to address these distortions through a multidimensional framework structured around five key domains: basic needs, housing, education, labor, and health. A central innovation is the introduction of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI), calculated in relation to a minimum food basket (calculated at approximately 34,581 AMD per adult in 2025).

This shift reflects core principles of neoliberal governance, particularly the emphasis on activation, conditionality, and self-sufficiency, while redefining social assistance as a mechanism for labor market participation rather than long-term support. A defining feature of the reform is its reliance on algorithmic decision-making embedded within a unified digital platform. Through automated data integration from multiple state databases, the system significantly reduces administrative burden and limits discretionary manipulation. However, vulnerability is increasingly constructed through standardized quantitative indicators, whereby algorithmic outputs determine a household's eligibility profile. In this sense, social reality is translated into data categories, potentially narrowing the interpretive space for professional judgment and reinforcing what can be described as algorithmic governance.

Despite these technological advancements, the reform formally maintains the centrality of case management as a professional methodology. Rooted in the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), case management presupposes a holistic understanding of the individual within their social environment, emphasizing multidimensional assessment, resource mobilization, and coordinated intervention. From this perspective, employment constitutes only one component of social integration rather than a sufficient condition for overcoming vulnerability.

However, a structural tension emerges between the epistemological foundations of case management and the operational logic of the new assessment system. While professional practice requires contextualized, qualitative judgment, the system privileges standardized, quantifiable indicators—most notably employment status—as decisive criteria. This contradiction illustrates a broader dynamic identified in political social work: the dominance of administrative rationality over professional autonomy.

The reform further reflects an implicit narrowing of the concept of poverty. Although it formally incorporates multidimensional criteria, its operational logic risks privileging income-based and labor-related indicators. This stands in partial contradiction to the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen, which conceptualizes poverty as deprivation of capabilities rather than solely a lack of income (Sen, 1981). Consequently, critical dimensions such as care responsibilities, mental health conditions, and social exclusion may remain insufficiently visible within the system.

Within this evolving institutional framework, the role of the social worker undergoes significant transformation. No longer limited to administrative data collection, professionals are expected to perform complex functions of coordination, activation, and resilience-building. At the same time, they operate within a highly regulated digital environment that structures decision-making processes and constrains discretionary space. This places social workers at the intersection of bureaucratic accountability and ethical responsibility, intensifying the tension between compliance with system requirements and the defense of beneficiaries' rights.

Thus, the Armenian reform exemplifies a broader shift in welfare governance, where digitalization and neoliberal policy logics reshape not only service delivery mechanisms but also the professional identity and autonomy of social workers. The coexistence of algorithmic assessment and case management creates a hybrid model in which the promise of efficiency is accompanied by new forms of structural constraint.

Systemic Risks in the Armenian Context

The institutional consolidation of case management and the introduction of the new assessment system (RA, 2024) present several critical risks:

- **Restriction of Professional Discretion:** When assessment is based on algorithmized indicators, the social worker's role diminishes to a data collector. Lipsky's theory shows that strictly regulated systems reduce the "street-level" autonomy necessary for effective intervention (Lipsky, 1980).

- **Deepening of Managerialism:** Systems prioritize efficiency and accountability metrics over value-based social outcomes.
- **Individualization of Risk:** Poverty is treated as a behavioral failure, leaving structural factors like labor market limitations in the shadows.
- **Culture of Silent Compliance:** Professionals may abandon critical stances to adapt to procedural requirements.
- **Digital Control:** Data collection raises risks of privacy breaches and algorithmic discrimination against vulnerable groups.
- **Retreat of Community Work:** Focus shifts to reporting, reducing community activation and advocacy.
- **Deformation of Professional Identity:** Social workers transform into administrative agents of the system rather than defenders of rights.

To mitigate these risks, several steps are necessary: legal anchoring of professional discretion, development of independent supervision, participation of the professional community in policy-making, strict data protection mechanisms, and strengthening the critical components of political social work in educational curricula.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- The transformation of the social protection system in Armenia illustrates that contemporary welfare reforms cannot be understood solely as technical or administrative adjustments. Rather, they constitute deeply political processes that redefine the boundaries of professional autonomy, reshape institutional power relations, and influence how social problems themselves are constructed and addressed. The introduction of hybrid vulnerability assessment system and case management methodologies reflects a broader global shift toward neoliberal governance, where activation, conditionality, and digitalization become central organizing principles of social policy.
- While the Armenian reform seeks to overcome the inefficiencies and distortions of the previous system, it simultaneously introduces new forms of structural constraint. The increasing reliance on algorithmic decision-making reconfigures the epistemological foundations of social work by privileging standardized, quantifiable indicators over contextual, relational knowledge. In this environment, vulnerability risks being reduced to measurable data points, potentially obscuring the complex, multidimensional realities of poverty and social exclusion.
- At the same time, the institutionalization of case management formally reaffirms the importance of individualized, holistic intervention. However, as this article has demonstrated, the coexistence of algorithmic governance and professional

practice produces a fundamental tension. Social workers are positioned between competing logics: on the one hand, the demands of bureaucratic accountability and procedural compliance; on the other, the ethical imperative to advocate for social justice and respond to the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. This tension not only affects every day professional practice but also contributes to the emergence of a “silent compliance” culture, where critical voices are subdued within increasingly regulated systems.

- These developments raise broader questions about the future of social work as a profession. If professional discretion is progressively constrained and decision-making is externalized to digital systems, the role of the social worker risks being reduced to that of an administrative intermediary. Such a transformation would undermine the foundational principles of social work, including its commitment to human dignity, social justice, and structural change. In this sense, the marginalization of the social worker’s voice is not merely a professional issue but a societal concern, as it weakens the capacity of social policy to remain responsive to real human needs.
- However, the findings of this study also point to potential pathways for rebalancing the system. Strengthening the legal and institutional guarantees of professional autonomy, ensuring meaningful participation of social workers in policy design and evaluation, and embedding critical perspectives within professional education are essential steps toward preserving the integrity of social work. Equally important is the development of governance models that recognize the complementary roles of technology and human judgment, rather than positioning them in opposition.
- Ultimately, the Armenian case reflects a broader global challenge: how to reconcile efficiency-driven, data-oriented governance with the inherently relational and value-based nature of social work. Addressing this challenge requires a renewed commitment to the principles of political social work, where professional practice is understood not as neutral service delivery but as an active engagement with issues of power, inequality, and social transformation. Reclaiming this political dimension is essential to ensure that social work remains not only an instrument of policy implementation but also a critical voice advocating for a more just and inclusive society.

In light of these findings, several key recommendations can be proposed:

Legal and Institutional Safeguards for Professional Autonomy. It is essential to formally recognize and protect the discretionary role of social workers within the legal framework governing social assistance. Clear provisions should ensure that algorithmic assessments serve as supportive tools rather than binding decisions, allowing professionals to override or contextualize system-generated outcomes when necessary.

Integration of Professional Judgment into Digital Systems. Digital platforms should be designed to incorporate qualitative inputs and narrative assessments, enabling social workers to document complex social realities that cannot be captured through quantitative indicators alone. This would support a more balanced model of decision-making that combines technological efficiency with professional expertise.

Strengthening Participatory Policy-Making Mechanisms. Social workers should be actively involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social protection

reforms. Institutionalized feedback mechanisms can help ensure that policy development remains grounded in frontline experience and reflects the needs of vulnerable populations.

Development of Independent Supervision and Ethical Oversight. The establishment of independent supervision structures is crucial for supporting reflective practice, safeguarding professional ethics, and mitigating the pressures of managerialism. Such mechanisms can also provide a safe space for critical discussion and reduce the prevalence of self-censorship among practitioners.

Enhancement of Data Protection and Algorithmic Transparency. Given the increasing reliance on integrated databases and automated decision-making, robust data protection frameworks must be ensured. Transparency in algorithmic criteria and decision-making processes is necessary to prevent discrimination, protect privacy, and maintain public trust in the system.

Reinforcement of Critical and Political Dimensions in Social Work Education. Educational programs in social work should place greater emphasis on critical theory, policy analysis, and advocacy skills. Strengthening the political dimension of professional training will better equip future social workers to navigate complex governance environments and to engage actively in social change processes.

Rebalancing Activation Policies with Social Justice Principles. While employment-oriented activation remains an important policy goal, it should not become the sole criterion for assessing vulnerability. Policies must account for structural barriers, unpaid care work, health conditions, and other factors that influence individuals' capacity for social participation.

In conclusion, the Armenian reform reflects a broader global challenge: how to reconcile efficiency-driven, data-oriented governance with the inherently relational and value-based nature of social work. Addressing this challenge requires not only technical adjustments but a reassertion of the principles of political social work, as articulated by scholars such as Michael Reisch and Ilan Weiss-Gal. Reclaiming the political dimension of social work is essential to ensure that the profession remains not merely an instrument of policy implementation, but a critical actor in advancing social justice, amplifying marginalized voices, and shaping more inclusive and humane social policies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.