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Under the delusive wings of the welfare state: engagement in the policy process among social work faculty members in Sweden

Under den bedrägliga välfärdsstatens beskydd: Engagemang i socialpolitiska aktiviteter bland undervisande personal vid socionomutbildningar i Sverige

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ABSTRACT

Sweden is known for its well-developed welfare state and a large public sector, yet the role of social work academics in formulating and reforming social policy is still fairly unknown. This study aimed to investigate Swedish social work faculty members' engagement in social policy processes. To what extent and in what activities of social policy engagement had they been involved? How did they perceive their impact on policy makers and their role in the social policy process? An online survey was administered to all social work faculty members in the 17 social work schools in Sweden ($n = 283$, response rate 44%). The results show that the overall engagement in policy-related issues was low. In a previous comparison between 12 countries, faculty members in Sweden and China reported the lowest engagement. For 18 out of 20 activities listed, only between 1 and 8 percent had frequently been involved. Between 44 and 92 percent answered that they never had participated in these activities. The background to this low engagement and the implications for students' knowledge, interest and future engagement in policy processes as means to address social justice and human rights as part of their professional social work practice are discussed.

Sammanfattning

Sverige är känt som en välfärdsstat med en stor offentlig sektor. I vilken mån lärare och forskare inom socialt arbete är engagerade i socialpolitiska frågor är dock relativt outforskat. Syftet med den här studien var att undersöka i vilken mån anställda inom socionomutbildningen i Sverige var engagerade i socialpolitiska frågor. I vilken omfattning och inom vilka aktiviteter hade man deltagit? Hur beskrev de sin påverkan på beslutsfattare och sin roll i socialpolitiska frågor? En webbenkät sändes ut till all undervisande personal vid de 17 lärosäten där socionomprogrammet gavs ($n = 283$, svarsfrekvens 44%). Resultatet visade att engagemanget i socialpolitiska frågor bland de svarande var lågt. I den jämförelse som tidigare gjordes mellan lärare vid socionomutbildningarna i 12 länder var de svenska universitetsanställda tillsammans med de kinesiska de som beskrev det lägsta engagemanget i

KEYWORDS
Social policy; social work academics; social justice; human rights; professional social work

SOCIALPOLITIK
lärare socionomprogrammet; social rättvisa; mänskliga rättigheter; professionellt socialt arbete

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dessa frågor. Avseende 18 av de 20 aktiviteterna uppgav mellan 1 och 8 procent av respondenterna att man ofta varit engagerad. Mellan 44 och 92 procent svarade att de aldrig deltagit i dessa aktiviteter. Bakgrunden till det låga engagemanget och dess betydelse för socionomstudenters kunskap, intresse och framtida engagemang i socialpolitiska frågor som en väg att inkludera social rättvisa och mänskliga rättigheter i sitt professionella sociala arbete diskuteras.

Introduction

Social justice and human rights are key issues for social work. Both professional organisations and researchers hold that these issues should be addressed in all social work practice, research and education. Social workers are expected to engage in social reforms and policy practices in order to generate societal changes that improve the situation for vulnerable individuals, groups and communities (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Hare, 2004; IFSW, 2014; Marsh, 2005; Salonen, 2014).

As Sweden is known for its well-developed welfare state with many professional social workers (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2009; Pettersson, 2011), the engagement in these issues could be expected to be well-established among social work professionals and academics. However, previous research indicates that their engagement in policy practices seems to be fairly low (Dahlstedt & Lalander, 2018; Thorén & Salonen, 2013). This raises the question of the extent to which social work academics involved in teaching are engaged in formulating and reforming social policy. Considering that they are in a unique position to influence the next generation of social workers in developing knowledge of and an engagement in social policy issues at an early stage, it is of interest to explore how social work faculty members perceive of their own professional role in the policy process and how they regard their responsibilities to increase future social workers' interest and motivation for engaging in these issues.

The aim of the study was to investigate the engagement in social policy processes among faculty members involved in social work education in Sweden. More specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions: (a) To what extent and in what activities of social policy engagement had the faculty members been involved? (b) How did the faculty members perceive their impact on policy makers and advocacy organisations as well as their role in the social policy process? (c) How did they regard their responsibilities and opportunities for engagement in different social policy activities?

The context

Social work academia

Social work academia in Sweden is an established area with 17 social work programmes at both universities and university colleges. More than 600 people are employed as teachers and researchers within social work faculties in Sweden (Thorén & Tham, 2017). Social work is a standardised 3.5-year programme (210 ECTS) with pre-defined learning outcomes and leads to a bachelor's degree in social work (SFS 2017:857). The programme contains a variety of courses including sociology, social law, research methods, field placement as well as social policy courses. The different programmes have some discretion to decide about the course content, but most programmes offer social policy courses equivalent to between 7.5 and 15 ECTS.

Social work as a professional area began to develop in the early twentieth century in Sweden. At this time, a number of social work organisations sought to develop social reforms in areas like housing, child protection and income support. The most influential organisation was the Central Organisation for Social Work (Centralförbundet för socialt arbete, CSA), which also was the major actor behind the first school that educated social workers in the 1920s. Social work became a formal professional degree in the 1960s, and in the late 1970s, social work was upgraded to an academic subject and an academic degree that was integrated with the university system.

The policy-making process and the role of social work academics

From an international perspective, Sweden has a welfare system with several social protection systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, in the last few decades there have been signs of re-formulations of the welfare state with signs of retrenchment, fragmentation, and marketisation (Kallio et al., 2015; Meagher & Szebehely, 2013). Despite the signs of welfare state changes, this development is still not much debated among most social work academics in Sweden. It is rather unknown what role social work academics have with regards to social policy formulation and reforms. It has however been shown that professional social workers are not very active as policy actors in the Swedish welfare state (Thorén & Salonen, 2013).

Besides research and teaching, academics working within the university system are expected to be involved in third stream activities, i.e. public and scientific outreach to inform the public about their research and their findings. This task is regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) and can therefore be considered as part of the academic professional role. Despite this clear ambition in legislation, it is difficult to know to what extent academics perform this task in practice. To add to this, compared to many other countries in the Western world, there is no formal academic discipline of social policy in Sweden and no specific education for working with social policy issues. This means that the number of researchers who engage in social policy processes in a social work context is limited.

Possibilities for social work academics to engage in research

Research in Sweden is mainly funded through external funds that faculty members apply for in tough competition. Usually less than 10 percent of the applications to one of the largest funders, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE), are approved. This means that many academics spend a lot of time and effort on writing research applications without getting funding. In most of the universities, usually 20–30 percent of the working time of lecturers is supposed to be devoted to research, but there has for many years been an ongoing debate about the fact that in reality, teaching and administration take up a part or most of this time. A report from the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers (SULF, 2018) shows that 525 of 735 professors who responded to a questionnaire on how their working time was spent stated that 40 percent or less of their working time could be spent on research an 4 out of 10 stated that they spent between 10 and 30 percent of their working time on research.

Materials and methods

The international study

The present study was part of an international comparative study in which the same questionnaire was collected among 1551 social work academics in 12 countries (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017). The overall aim was to identify the extent and characteristics of social work academics' policy engagement in different countries and to identify the motivational, facilitative and opportunity factors that are associated with their engagement. As the data from the twelve included countries differ with regards to the sample sizes and response rates, and due to the difficulties in the translation of some of the concepts between countries, caution is needed when comparing the results from different countries (see Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017; Thorén & Tham, 2017).

Nevertheless, in comparison with the other countries, the Swedish respondents' overall engagement (on a scale covering 20 policy-related activities) was among the lowest, and only the scholars from China reported lower engagement. The low engagement of the Swedish academics compared to the samples from the other countries was also reflected in other aspects of engagement in the policy process, for example in terms of placing a social problem on the agenda, suggesting policy alternatives, and formulating social policy (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017). They also perceived influencing

the way the general public thinks about how to deal with social problems, assisting policymakers, and influencing the formulation of social policy (social policy role) as less important parts of their roles as social work scholars compared to the scholars from the eleven other countries included in the study. For more detailed information about the cross-national study, see Gal and Weiss-Gal (2017).

The present study

An online survey was administered to all social work faculty members who were involved in teaching social work students in the 17 social work programmes in Sweden. This included adjunct faculty, PhD students, researchers, lecturers, associate professors and full professors.

The instrument

Engagement in policy practice was measured by a 20-item scale developed by Gal and Weiss-Gal (2017). The *perceived personal role as a social work scholar* was measured by a fifteen-item scale that builds on Burawoy's (2005) four types of academic role (public, policy, professional and critical) and adds a fifth type of role specific to academics in social work, namely development of social work practice. *Perceived impact on policy makers and advocacy organisations* was measured by a six-item scale adapted from existing scales (Cherney et al., 2012; Knott & Wildavsky, 1980; Landry et al., 2001). It explored the extent to which the respondents perceived that policy makers and advocacy organisations utilised their research or recommendations in policy formulation.

Artologik's Survey & Report online survey tool was used to collect the data. To increase the transferability and the validity of the study, a description (in Swedish) of some of the concepts used in the questionnaire was included. Questions that were difficult to transfer or not applicable to the Swedish context were excluded.

A total of 283 responses were received. The response rate varied between the different occupational categories and was 52 percent among lecturers ($n = 158$), 50 percent among professors ($n = 36$), 44 percent among PhD students ($n = 57$) but only 25 percent among adjunct faculty ($n = 25$). The overall response rate was 44 percent. The data was transferred to and analysed in SPSS (Version 24).

The study strictly followed ethical guidelines (The Swedish Research Council, 2017) and national laws (SFS 2003:460). The questionnaire did not involve any personal data that could identify the respondents.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the age of the respondents was distributed evenly. The majority were women and more than half of the respondents were lecturers.

Engagement in policy practice

As shown in Table 2, the level of involvement in policy-related issues among these social work academics seemed to be rather low. Only a few had frequently been engaged in any of the activities listed. For 18 of the 20 activities listed in the questionnaire, only between 1 and 8 percent had been involved frequently. The two activities with the highest involvement were press interviews and participation in a protest activity, in which 12 and 11 percent (respectively) of the respondents had frequently been involved. Worth noting is that for 19 of the 20 activities listed, around half or more of the respondents answered that they never had participated and for seven of the activities, 70 percent or more of the respondents answered that they never had participated.

More than 80 percent answered that they never had written a blog in a social network, organised a protest activity, chaired a policy-related committee, been a speaker at a demonstration, testified in a legislative committee or participated in an appeal to the courts.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Characteristics	Categories	*N*	(%)
Age (*n* = 238) (*M* = 50 years)	–30	11	5
	31–40	55	23
	41–50	79	33
	51–60	64	27
	60+	29	12
Gender (*n* = 276)	Male	167	39
	Female	209	61
Academic Rank/Position (*n* = 283)	Adjunct faculty	25	10
	PhD student	57	20
	Lecturer*	158	57
	Professor	36	13

*Lecturer includes assistant/associate professors, researchers, senior lecturers and postdocs.

Perceived impact on policy makers and advocacy organisations

As can be seen in Table 3, the respondents' perceived impact on policy makers and advocacy organisations was also fairly low. For example, around a quarter of the respondents answered that to the best of their knowledge, policy makers or advocacy organisations had never read their publications, cited them or drawn upon their recommendations. Similarly, only a few percent answered that these organisations extensively or very extensively had cited their publications or drawn upon their recommendations. However, close to a third of the respondents answered that they did not know the extent to which these organisations had read, cited, or drawn upon their publications.

Perceived impact on social policy on different levels

Regarding how the respondents assessed their influence or impact on social policy, a similar pattern emerges (Table 4). A third of the faculty members answered that they never had acted to influence social policy on a local or national level, while 5–6 percent answered that they frequently had done that. Around four out of ten assessed that they never have had an impact on social policy (on a local or national level), while 1–3 percent answered frequently. In other words, these results indicate that

Table 2. Engagement in different policy practice activities (*N* = 283).

	Mean (1–4*)	Never	Once/ A few times	Frequently
Press interviews	2.50	24%	64%	12%
Participated in protest activity	2.10	46%	43%	11%
Formulated a position paper	1.99	44%	49%	7%
Sent publications to policy makers	1.92	48%	48%	4%
Published an article in the press	1.88	53%	42%	5%
Participated in a coalition	1.87	55%	37%	8%
Advised policy makers	1.87	54%	40%	6%
Advised an advocacy organisation	1.86	53%	41%	6%
Assisted service users to organise	1.81	58%	36%	6%
Participated in a policy-related activity by social workers	1.81	56%	40%	4%
Worked with students to influence policy	1.75	61%	31%	8%
Served in a policy-related committee	1.74	60%	36%	4%
Advised a policy-related committee	1.74	56%	42%	2%
Analysed policy on behalf of policy makers or an advocacy organisation	1.51	70%	28%	2%
Wrote a blog in a social network	1.35	83%	12%	5%
Organised a protest activity	1.30	82%	16%	2%
Chaired a policy-related committee	1.21	88%	11%	1%
Been a speaker at a demonstration	1.20	88%	11%	1%
Testified in a legislative committee	1.15	91%	8%	1%
Participated in an appeal to the courts	1.15	92%	7%	1%

*1 = never, 2 = once, 3 = a few times, 4 = frequently.

Table 3. Perceived impact on policy makers and advocacy organisations (*N* = 284).

	Mean (1–5)	Never	2	3	4	Extensively/ Very extensively	Do not know
To the best of your knowledge how often have:							
policy makers read your publications	1.86	22%	25%	15%	7%	3%	29%
policy makers cited your publications	1.52	33%	19%	12%	5%	1%	30%
policy makers drawn upon your recommendations	1.61	30%	20%	13%	7%	0%	29%
advocacy organisations cited your publications	2.06	21%	17%	17%	12%	3%	30%
advocacy organisations drawn upon your recommendations	1.91	25%	16%	15%	8%	4%	32%

the social work academics did not perceive that their work as social work scholars plays any significant part in influencing social policy, neither at local nor at national levels.

Perceived role as social work faculty member

While we so far have seen that the Swedish social work academics assessed both their impact on social policy and their own actions to influence social policy as low, many of them perceived that the responsibility to participate in different parts of the social policy process was part of their role as social work scholars (Table 5). For example, between 72 and 82 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their personal role as social work academics included influencing social work practice, developing knowledge that will contribute to social work and influencing the way social workers perceive service users' problems (*social work practice role)* and that their role was to develop knowledge intended for academics, enhance knowledge that contributes to a scientific discussion and engage in theoretical development (*professional role*). However, their *policy role* was viewed least prominent as only between 51 and 63 percent agreed that their role as social work academics included influencing the way the general public thinks about how to handle social problems, assisting policy makers dealing with social problems, influencing the formulation of social policy and developing knowledge that will contribute to social policy. A fifth of the respondents answered that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that their role as social work academics included assisting policy makers in handling social problems, and a quarter that it was to influence the formulation of social policy.

Perceived policy resources

Lastly, the respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they perceived that they had resources to influence social policy. As can be seen in Table 6, their responses were more positive compared to those regarding their engagement in the social policy process. However, no more than between 31 and 59 percent chose the response alternatives 4 and 5 (the scale ranged from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a large extent). Their knowledge to influence social policy was perceived as highest followed by motivation, commitment and skills. Self-efficacy was ranked lower than the other competencies. Between one in ten and one in five of them answered 'to a large extent' for any of these questions.

Table 4. Perceived impact on social policy on different levels (*N* = 283).

	Mean (1–5)	Never	2	3	4	Frequently
During your career as a faculty member in social work, have you acted to:						
influence social (welfare) policy on the *national* level	2.11	34%	20%	26%	14%	5%
influence social (welfare) policy on the *local* level	2.17	34%	20%	23%	17%	6%
To what degree do you assess that:						
you have had an impact on *national* social (welfare) policy	1.65	45%	32%	13%	10%	1%
you have had an impact on *local* social (welfare) policy	1.78	40%	31%	18%	9%	3%

Table 5. Perceived role as social work faculty member ($N = 283$).

	Mean (1–5)	Strongly disagree	2	3	4	Strongly agree
1. Social work practice role						
As a social work faculty member my role is to:						
influence social work practice	3.83	2%	7%	16%	30%	43%
develop knowledge that will contribute to social work	4.03	3%	4%	12%	26%	56%
influence the way social workers will perceive service users' problems	3.86	2%	7%	17%	26%	48%
2. Professional role						
As a social work faculty member my role is to:						
develop knowledge intended for academics	3.83	2%	6%	19%	26%	46%
enhance knowledge that contributes to a scientific discussion	4.01	3%	2%	14%	29%	53%
engage in theoretical development	3.82	2%	7%	16%	30%	44%
3. Critical role						
As a social work faculty member my role is to:						
enhance academics' understanding of the social factors influencing individual distress	3.68	2%	9%	21%	27%	40%
develop knowledge that will contribute to the furthering of critical social thinking among academics	3.91	3%	7%	11%	31%	49%
enhance academics' consciousness of power relations in society	3.79	1%	7%	21%	33%	38%
4. Public role						
As a social work faculty member my role is to:						
develop knowledge that will contribute to the general public	3.61	1%	11%	21%	33%	34%
influence the way social problems are perceived by the general public	3.43	4%	11%	25%	33%	27%
5. Policy role						
As a social work faculty member my role is to:						
influence the way that the general public thinks about how to deal with social problems	3.51	1%	13%	23%	33%	30%
assist policy makers dealing with social problems	3.19	5%	16%	28%	30%	21%
influence the formulation of social (welfare) policy	3.30	5%	16%	24%	29%	27%
develop knowledge that will contribute to social (welfare) policy	3.54	3%	10%	24%	32%	31%

Table 6. Perceived resources to influence social policy ($N = 283$).

	Mean	Not at all	2	3	4	To a large extent
Knowledge	**3.62**	1%	16%	24%	37%	22%
Motivation	**3.52**	3%	13%	30%	35%	18%
Commitment	**3.39**	3%	16%	36%	27%	17%
Skills	**3.34**	4%	20%	31%	29%	16%
Self-efficacy	**3.09**	5%	21%	43%	20%	11%

Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the engagement in social policy processes among faculty members involved in social work education in Sweden. The main results show that the level of engagement among the faculty members who responded to the questionnaire was considerably low. In addition, they perceived that their academic work only had limited impact on social policy and saw their professional role as dedicated more towards social work practice than influencing social policy. At the same time, more than half regarded themselves as responsible for participating in different parts of the social policy process, although their resources to engage in these activities were perceived to be lower.

How can the low engagement in policy processes among these social work academics be understood, considering that social justice, human rights and social policy reforms are regarded as main goals for social work? It has been underlined in previous research that an important task for social work is to engage in social reforms and policy practices in order to generate societal changes that improve the situation for vulnerable individuals, groups and communities (Byers, 2014; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Hoefer, 2006; Jansson, 2013; Marston & McDonald, 2012; Sjöberg & Turunen,

2018). In addition, the Swedish National Code of Ethics for Social Work (Akademikerförbundet SSR, [The Union for Professionals], 2018) states that social workers should focus on social justice and human rights and that a social policy engagement is part of their profession.

Even though previous national studies indicate that engagement in policy practices and macro-level policy work among Swedish social workers seems to be relatively limited (Dahlstedt & Lalander, 2018; Thorén & Salonen, 2013), the low level of engagement among these Swedish faculty members emerging in the present study is surprising as social work scholars could be expected to take on a more prominent role in policy work. That they together with Chinese social work faculty members showed the lowest engagement in policy practice in the international study among social work faculty members in 12 countries (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017; Thorén & Tham, 2017) is a result that is difficult to interpret. These results are even more surprising when taking into consideration that Sweden is known for having a well-developed welfare state and well-educated social workers (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2009) who would be expected to have the capacity and knowledge to engage in policy practices to work towards societal change and social reforms.

Under the delusive wings of the welfare state?

As finding explanations for this low level of engagement is a complex and challenging task that goes beyond the scope of this study, the following discussion is tentative and raises new questions. One possible explanation could be that there might be hindering factors in the working conditions of social work academics that make it difficult to engage in policy practices, even if the knowledge and motivation often seem to be there (SULF, 2018). Another possible reason could be that social work academics in the rather well-developed Swedish welfare state may not have felt prompted to engage in social policy because the welfare infrastructure has been functioning well (see also Thorén & Salonen, 2013). A third possible contributive factor to the low engagement in policy practice among these academics might be that social work in Sweden to a large extent is focused on casework (Sjöberg & Turunen, 2018). This leads to a situation where both academics and social workers are occupied with social work practice methods concerning individuals or families on a micro level rather than questions about social policy on a macro level in general (see Thorén & Salonen, 2013 for a more detailed discussion). Furthermore, in social work education in Sweden, social policy courses are regularly welfare state focused while less attention seems to be given to policy practice related skills.

One question that emerges from the present study is: Should general social policy issues and engagement therein be underlined more in Swedish social work education, and if so, how? When considering the broader social context and the changes in society that have been taking place over the past decades, it seems as though the answer should be yes. As in many other countries, the situation in Sweden today is not the same as it was a few decades ago. There have been many signs of increasing marginalisation and segregation (Evertsson & Magnusson, 2014; Ferrarini et al., 2013; Galloway et al., 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2016; National Board of Health and Welfare, 2010; OECD, 2014). Signs of a re-formulation of the welfare state characterised by retrenchment, fragmentation, and marketisation have also been described (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Kallio et al., 2015; Meagher & Szebehely, 2013). Growing long-term unemployment, income inequality, segregation and less coverage from social security schemes have also been reported (Bäckman & Nelson, 2017; Cingano, 2014; Cowell et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, preparing social work students to work with social policy reforms and social change on the local and national levels seems important.

A recent study among social workers in child welfare services indicates that while their working conditions had deteriorated between 2003 ($n = 309$) and 2014 ($n = 349$), on an overall level, the deterioration was most significant in the socioeconomically most disadvantaged areas. This indicates that the opportunity to receive support might be the lowest in areas where the need is the greatest (Tham, 2018). Apart from the importance of national measures targeting social and economic

injustice and segregation, these results can also be seen as an indication of a need for social work practices that focus on social change and social reform in these areas. It has been argued that focusing on individual needs of people in poverty never can replace reforms that improve their collective socio-economic status (Marston & McDonald, 2012; Webb, 2010). In addition, an important role for social work can be to create structures and practices in which social reforms strategically unfold (Boone et al., 2019; Roose et al., 2012; Schiettecat et al., 2015).

There are several other major developments contributing to changes in the context in which social work is carried out today. One significant change over recent years is that Sweden currently is experiencing the largest refugee influx in modern times, and integration of newly arrived migrants is an area in which many social workers are engaged. In politics, this is a heatedly debated topic involving conflicts and several policy re-formulations. Another emerging issue is the privatisation and marketisation of social work. Although Sweden still has fewer private or non-profit social service agencies compared to other welfare states, the private sector is growing. Traditional municipal social services are increasingly contracted out to private providers and social services are experiencing a marketisation through various forms of New Public Management strategies (Hartman, 2011; Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Lauri, 2019; Meagher & Szebehely, 2013; Sallnäs & Wiklund, 2018).

How does the social work profession in Sweden respond to these developments, then? In terms of influencing social policy processes and reforms, social workers do not seem to be particularly regular or active actors (Thorén & Salonen, 2013), even though social workers and social work organisations have been described as active actors in Swedish policy formulation processes in earlier years (Pettersson, 2011). The most influential professional interest organisations are unions that organise social workers (e.g. Akademikerförbundet SSR [The Union for Professionals] and Vision). However, these organisations focus mainly on social workers' own working conditions and pay less attention to macro level socio-economic questions.

Social work is facing many challenges: welfare state retrenchments, increasing social inequality, segregation and discrimination as well as diminishing human rights, to name but a few. These challenges could be seen as all the more reason to increase social workers' and social work academics' engagement in policy practices. International studies on academics' engagement in the social policy sphere show that social work academics underline the importance for them to provide both society and policy makers with research-based knowledge and advice and that societal change often requires some sort of social policy action (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Reisch, 2016). Nevertheless, the trend seems to be moving towards the opposite, namely that macro-level policy practices are becoming more marginalised in social work instead of moving to the forefront and core of social work practice.

Conclusion

As we have shown, there seems to be a gap between how these Swedish social work faculty members regard their professional responsibilities and the practical actions they report having taken. Even though we do not know the reasons at present, their low involvement in policy practices may have significant implications for the promotion of social justice and human rights. The current developments in the social work landscape in Sweden bring questions of policy practices to the fore and underline the importance of working with policy reforms to improve the living conditions of those who are marginalised today, aiming for social justice and equal human rights in the long run. In this context, policy-related activities among social work academics can be seen as crucial. That the level of engagement in social policy activities among the Swedish social work academics who responded to this survey was so low can therefore be seen as worrying.

Perhaps it is time to re-assess the current conditions in Sweden and realise that the wings of the (former) welfare state no longer shelter the citizens in the same way as they used to. Is it possible to create a new era of engagement in social policy practices and social reforms in both academia and social work practice?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Pia Tham is an Associate Professor at the University of Gävle, Sweden. Her research interests and publications concern the working conditions of social workers, social work education and the transition from university studies to working in the profession. She is currently involved in research projects on how working conditions for social workers in child welfare have developed over the past decade, how they could be improved and how professional expertise in social work develops.

Katarina Thorén is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University, Sweden. She received her Ph D. from the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago in 2008. Her main research interests include social policy and policy implementation, policy practice in social work and comparative welfare state research with a focus on unemployment and activation policies in social work organisations. She is currently involved in a research project studying the organisation and practical social work with unaccompanied refugee minors.

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