Social work professional organizations. Initial steps for filling a gap

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Abstract

This article addresses a notable gap in social work literature by focusing on social work professional organizations (SWPOs), which play a crucial role in shaping the professional identity and collective actions of social workers. Despite their significance, SWPOs have been underexplored in academic research. This study argues for increased attention to SWPOs and takes initial steps towards developing a research framework grounded in theories of structuration, neo-institutionalism, and strategic relational approaches. The proposed framework positions SWPOs at the intersection of structure and agency, highlighting their potential influence on both social work(ers) and social policy. It acknowledges the importance of contexts and spatiotemporal conjunctures, defining three analytical levels, two fundamental action strategies, and their potential impacts. Additionally, the paper advocates for a 'glocal' comparative approach to address the diverse and evolving environments in which SWPOs operate. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for further research to advance the understanding of SWPOs.

Keywords: collective action; professional identity; social work professional organizations (SWPOs); social policy.

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Social work professional organizations: a gap in social work literature

The literature on professional organizations is extensive, yet there remains no consensus on their precise definition. Some studies omit a definition altogether, while others offer minimal and potentially ambiguous ones, such as Bucher and Stelling's (1969: 12) description of 'organisations dominated by professionals'. Merton's (1958: 50) well-known definition of a professional association as a 'voluntary association of practitioners who judge one another as professionally competent and who have banded together to perform social functions which they cannot perform in their separate capacity as individuals' is detailed but now appears somewhat outdated, particularly due to its functionalist underpinnings. More recently, neo-institutionalist scholars have conceptualized professional organizations in various ways, including as regulatory agencies (Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002), interest representation organizations (Parada, Nordqvist, and Gimeno 2010), and 'professional service firms' (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011). Benton et al. (2017) contribute to clarifying this diversity by distinguishing between professional associations, regulatory bodies, and trade unions, while excluding professional service firms.

In social work, the study of professional organizations has primarily focused on the functions, potentialities, or objectives of specific organizations within particular countries (Mazibuko and Gray 2004; Ananias and Lightfoot 2013; Jongman 2020), or on the various types and strategies of social workers' collective action (Healy and Meagher 2004). However, to date, no general definition of social work professional organizations (SWPOs) appears to exist. This article proposes a working definition of SWPOs as *formal or informal organizations that are significantly (partly or fully, directly or indirectly) self-governed by social workers and that do not provide direct services to the public*. This definition is based on three core characteristics:

1. Formation: The organization may be permanent or temporary, with varying levels of formalization and structuring, and may be established through either a bottom-up or top-down process.
2. Self-Government: The organization is self-governed by individual social workers, either partially (hybrid SWPO) or fully, directly or indirectly (second-level SWPO, that is, SWPO composed of other SWPOs).
3. Non-Provider Identity: The organization does not offer direct services to the public, distinguishing it clearly from 'professional service firms', which are highly specialized organizations providing clients with services.

This broad definition offers the advantage of serving as an 'umbrella' term (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008: 287), encompassing a wide range of SWPOs, from institution-like entities to informal, organizations of social workers. However, the broadness of this definition also suggests the need to develop a typology of SWPOs (see below).

The definition accommodates various current SWPOs, including international organizations composed of national SWPOs (e.g. IFSW), national networks (e.g. India Network of Professional Social Workers' Associations), professional associations (e.g. NASW in the USA), unions (e.g. Talentia in Finland), associations focused on social work education and/or research (e.g. Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Work) or highly specialized (e.g. German Association for Social Work in Healthcare), semi-formal social movement organizations (e.g. Social Work Action Network). The definition also accommodates informal groups of social workers pursuing specific objectives, such as promoting a campaign or providing mutual aid. SWPOs appear to exist globally, engage significant numbers of social workers, and in some cases, have a decades-long history. The importance of SWPOs appears to be evident, as practitioners worldwide readily acknowledge their role in social work regulation, ethics, education, and practice.

Nevertheless, the literature on SWPOs remains limited. A *Web of Science* and manual search by the author in May 2023 shows that of about 1,000 publications since 1970 with 'professional organization/association' in the title, only seventeen focus on social work. Expanding the query to abstracts yields about 7,500 publications, with just 112 related to social work (0.015%). The general literature on professional organizations has seen steady growth since the 1990s, with a notable increase in the last fifteen years, whereas the trend in social work studies has been slower, more recent, and non-linear. Furthermore, existing studies on SWPOs are largely focused on single countries (e.g. the USA, India, Greece, UK, Australia, South Africa, Philippines) and specific organizations, with the exception of Guidi (2020), who compared Italy and Spain. Consequently, the study of SWPOs has thus far been episodic, country-specific, and lacking a comprehensive theoretical framework.

This article seeks to address this gap by arguing for greater attention to SWPOs within social work and social policy studies. It will then outline the initial conceptual and analytical framework for a research approach to SWPOs.

Why SWPOs deserve more attention

A foundational argument for why SWPOs merit increased scholarly attention stems from classic sociological contributions (Van Kleeck and Romeyn Taylor 1922; Merton 1958) that emphasize the organizational

nature of social work. These works reiterate an enduring sociological principle: 'people create organizations when they cannot achieve their goals by working alone … Formal organizations arise when achieving goals requires the joint, sustained, and coordinated efforts of many people' (Haveman and Wetts 2019: 2). Contrary to individualistic views of society and action, organization is essential in social work, as the actions of a social worker must be coordinated with those of others to achieve enduring results. Organization is thus the fundamental tool for accomplishing this. While this may seem an ahistorical sociological axiom, in complex societies, coordination among individuals becomes increasingly challenging, heightening the need for stable, and specialized organizations (Haveman and Wetts 2019). Consequently, social work literature must engage with the study of organizations.

Building on this premise, the sociology of professions, social policy, and social work disciplines offer two primary arguments:

A. *SWPOs play a systemic and multifaceted role for social workers.*
B. *Recent evolutions in the Welfare State have amplified the importance of SWPOs.*

(A) The main approaches within the sociology of professions provide insight into the significance of SWPOs. The 'attributes' approach, dominant from the 1930s to the 1960s and rooted in early twentieth-century British sociology, viewed professions as a 'hopeful sign of a new altruism' (Freidson 1988: 28). This approach, which was primarily descriptive and focused on specific occupational groups, aimed to identify characteristics that distinguish a profession from other occupations (Scott 2008: 220; Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008: 282). For social work, Greenwood (1957) identified five core traits of a profession: (1) a systematic body of knowledge shaping professional skills; (2) recognized professional authority (i.e. monopoly of technical judgement); (3) community sanction (i.e. public endorsement of the profession's powers); (4) a regulatory code of ethics to protect the public; and (5) a professional culture (values, norms, symbols) developed through interactions among practitioners within formal and informal organizations. Within this approach, SWPOs deserve a specific attention because they may have a crucial role for the attributes of professional social work. For example, these organizations contribute to shaping social work professional culture, and they bind the professionals to a code of ethics they design and issue for the benefit of the public.

In contrast, the 'power' approach, which emerged in the 1960s and remained influential until recently (Freidson 1988: 28–30; Scott 2008: 220–221; Muzio et al. 2013: 701), adopts a critical and historical perspective. This approach examines how occupations establish and maintain dominance in practice areas when faced with challenges to their status

from competing interests (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008: 282). Each occupation is assumed to have a 'professional project', attempting to convert its cognitive resources (e.g. expertise) into a secure and institutionalized system of social and financial rewards (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011: 391). This often involves striving for a 'monopoly of practice' (Freidson 1988: 64), full control over the supply of expert labour ('occupational closure'), and regulation of practitioners' behaviour. In this context, professions are seen as competing in a dynamic arena, leading to ongoing 'jurisdictional disputes' (Abbott 1988: 2). Within the 'power' approach, SWPOs are crucial as they serve as key collective actors in advancing the 'professional project' of social work:

> The professional association is the most obvious manifestation of formal organisation among professions… It is one key to understanding how the power of a profession can be organised and directed… it is the major formal means by which the interests of its members are expressed collectively and focused politically (Freidson 1988: 186).

Although these two approaches are often viewed as rivals, they can be seen as complementary—a point already noted by Abbott (1988: 6–7)—and can be integrated into new, comprehensive theoretical frameworks (Scott 2008: 221). Importantly, these approaches enable us to conceptualize SWPOs' relevance in two interrelated directions (as observed by Freidson 1988: 186–197): *inwardly* towards social workers, where SWPOs act as normative (ethical codes) and cultural-cognitive (professional culture) agents, and *outwardly* towards regulatory agencies, particularly the State, where SWPOs serve as policy actors.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing effort to reframe the study of professions from a neo-institutionalist perspective, viewing each profession as an institution in its own right, providing order and structure to specialized knowledge. This is achieved through combined action across three domains: *regulative* (i.e. the profession rules, monitors, and sanctions practitioners' activities), *cultural-cognitive* (i.e. it provides professionals with shared frameworks and symbolic representations that guide behaviour), and *normative* (i.e. it prescribes 'appropriate' conducts) (Scott 2008: 222; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 152). Neo-institutionalist scholars also emphasize the interconnectedness of professions, organizations, and institutions, noting that professionals now hold influential positions within major contemporary organizations and exert significant influence across organizational fields (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011; Suddaby and Viale 2011; Muzio, Brock, and Suddaby 2013). Consequently, professionals should be recognized for their 'wider role in building and transforming political, social, and economic institutions' (Muzio, Brock, and Suddaby 2013: 705), and ultimately as 'the most influential, contemporary crafters of institutions' (Scott 2008: 223).

The neo-institutionalist perspective thus reaffirms and reframes the cognitive, regulative, and normative roles of SWPOs. Moreover, it suggests that SWPOs' policy action extends beyond occupational closure, recognizing their broader potential as 'policy activists' (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008: 287). This approach also invites exploration of SWPOs' significance within the organizational field of social work and social policy.

In summary, the sociology of professions supports the argument that SWPOs deserve particular attention because they:

1. Contribute to defining the fundamental attributes of social work and institutionalizing it as a profession;
2. Operate both inwardly (towards social workers) and outwardly (in the policy arena);
3. Provide social workers with opportunities to influence their institutional environments and organizational fields.

While these arguments hold general validity, they can be further developed concerning the specific institutional environments in which social workers operate.

(B) Social workers operate within a complex web of relationships, organizations, policies, and rights, which they inherit and shape. This environment—corresponding to the evolving context of the Welfare State in several countries—has been the backdrop for the development and recognition of social work as a profession over the past century. Today, social workers are a key professional group within the Welfare State and social assistance, operating in public and private (often nonprofit) organizations primarily tasked with implementing social policies (McDonald 2006; Gal and Weiss-Gal 2022).

Since the 1980s, the Welfare State has undergone numerous reform cycles. Research has shown that workfare-oriented, market-driven, and managerialist measures have 're-written the foundational conditions upon which social work as a set of practices developed over the 20th century' (McDonald 2006: 4), adversely affecting both professionals and service users (Jones 2001; Healy 2002; Baines 2004; Kessl 2009; Rogowski 2011). The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies further exacerbated this trend (Karagkounis 2017; Pentaraki 2017, 2019; Pastor Seller, Verde Diego, and Lima Fernandez 2021). In essence, the transformations of the Welfare State over the past thirty years (macro-level change→) have reshaped and undermined social service organizations (→meso-level change→), placing unprecedented and unsustainable responsibilities on social workers (→micro-level change). Unsurprisingly, social workers have reported increasing levels of stress (Fenton 2015; Mänttäri-van der Kuip 2016; Ravalier 2019).

In this challenging context, social workers have not been passive. Over the past decade, literature has documented a wide range of reactions. Some reactions have involved social workers' personal sphere and the user-practitioner relationship (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Baines and Van Den Broek 2016; Grootegoed and Smith 2018; Olsson and Sundh 2019; Pentaraki 2019). Other responses have aimed to influence the organizations in which social workers operate. Most of these actions have been informal and motivational, while more structured and oppositional efforts to change social service organizations have been rarer, role-contingent, and often unsupported by the organization, thus demanding significant effort from social workers (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Astvik, Welander, and Hellgren 2021; Weiss-Gal et al. 2020; Guidi and Mordeglia 2024, under review). Macro-level mobilizations for better social policies have been sporadic, though they do exist (Gal and Weiss-Gal 2022). While adaptive responses have been criticized as palliative and ineffective in the medium to long term (Grootegoed and Smith 2018: 1944), since the early 2000s, scholars have repeatedly called for 'professional resistance' to counteract the neo-liberal restructuring of the Welfare State (Baines 2006; Ferguson and Lavalette 2006; Wallace and Pease 2011; Strier and Bershtling 2016; Feldman 2022; Balaz 2023; Timor-Shlevin, Hermans, and Roose 2023).

Careful consideration of social workers' actual capacity to resist Welfare State restructuring effectively suggests that SWPOs deserve greater attention. Social theory consistently demonstrates that individual agency is both situated and relational, emerging from a balance between enablement and constraint. Although there is always some scope for agency, contexts significantly shape opportunities for action (Cleaver 2007: 226–227). According to the literature, workfare-oriented, market-driven, and managerialist measures have reduced social workers' agency and professional dominance within social service organizations. Consequently, social workers' ability to resist these changes effectively appears generally limited today. In this context, it is crucial to discuss who the best actors are to influence Welfare policies, the appropriate scale for mobilization (e.g. local or national), and the conditions for a sustainable and successful 'resistance'. Expecting individual social workers to take on the responsibility and capability to enact systemic change within current institutional settings is likely unrealistic and maybe even unjust. As Mänttäri-van der Kuip (2016: 95) concludes in her study on moral distress:

> Organisational silence is created by powerful systemic forces, and holding an individual social worker responsible for breaking this silence can even be unreasonable … This is the challenge social welfare workers and their professional unions need collectively to take up.

Effectively influencing local and national welfare policies (macro-level impact) through the actions of social workers (micro-level action) seems to require sustained coordination among them (meso-level condition). In other words, social workers' efforts for policy change may have better opportunities for success when encouraged, shaped, and supported by organizations. Identifying the best organizational instruments for this task remains an open question. Social service organizations might be considered the most accessible option, as they are the primary workplaces of social workers, but they may not be the most effective. State social service organizations are deeply embedded within institutional governance structures and are largely shaped by workfare, marketization, and managerialism. Non-profit social service organizations may offer social workers more opportunities, but they may not be governed by social workers, and their advocacy activities appear today limited (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012; Ascoli and Ranci 2013; Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014; Alexander and Fernandez 2021). While social service organizations remain a key infrastructure for social work, today they primarily seem to be targets or arenas for social workers' policy engagement rather than collective actors capable of influencing social policies.

In this context, SWPOs deserve more attention as they may represent a crucial collective resource for affecting social policies. The prominence of SWPOs in shaping and coordinating collective professional action aimed at influencing policy appears to have increased over the past 15 years. This trend appeared noticeable in some Southern European countries during the austerity period (Ioakimidis, Santos, and Herrero 2014; Pentaraki 2015; Guidi 2020), where social workers re-enacted their own professional belonging, renewed their professional associations and mobilized against austerity policies. Similarly, the significance of professional organizations as instruments for collective mobilization among social workers has been highlighted in case studies of campaigns in the fields of health and education policies in Australia, the USA, and the UK (Talbot and McMillin 2014; Mendes et al. 2015; Moth and Lavalette 2019). This evidence suggests that SWPOs deserve attention in the post-Welfare restructuring context, as they may constitute one of the most effective collective instruments for elaborating, defending and promoting social work values. SWPOs offer social workers unique opportunities for collective professional action aimed at influencing Welfare policies.

Towards an approach to studying SWPOs

The preceding discussion underscores the importance of giving greater attention to SWPOs. It also lays the groundwork for a potential research approach, which I will outline in its initial form.

Conceptualizing SWPOs' agency

SWPOs occupy a distinctive position in contemporary social work. Employing the terminology of structuration theories (Elliott 2020), SWPOs can be viewed as situated at the intersection of 'structure' and 'agency' in social work. They operate between the processes of institutional recognition, regulation, and development of social work, and the day-to-day practice of social workers. Unlike other organizations within the social work field (e.g. social service organizations), SWPOs can be regarded as typical professional collective actors, sufficiently detached yet closely aligned with professional practice. This allows them to accommodate the peculiar characteristics of social work practice (e.g. areas, workplaces) and to express—and partially construct—collective professional identity (Pedersen and Dobbin 1997; Melucci 2013). Governed by social workers, SWPOs are expected to be grounded in social work values and shaped by the priorities of practitioners who experience the challenges of the professional practice. This is a crucial, although not the only, foundation which enables SWPOs to exert regulative, cultural-cognitive, and normative influence on professionals and to act in the public sphere on behalf of both social workers and service users.

SWPOs' agency can be analysed within a strategic relational framework (Jessop 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2012) consistent with historical institutionalism (Mahoney 2000; Capoccia 2016) and the multi-level nature of contemporary social policy and social work. Within this framework, SWPOs are seen as strategic actors that engage in a complex array of activities aimed at influencing the social work and social policy fields to which they belong. These fields (see Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9 for a definition) are densely populated by individual and collective actors (e.g. government ministries, SWPOs, universities, social service and civil society organizations, social workers, and users), who interact directly or indirectly. These interactions are strategic, with each actor seeking to achieve its own goals, and asymmetrically structured, reflecting differing levels of power among actors. Through their historical and iterative evolution, these interactions shape and reshape the field.

However, SWPOs face significant internal and external limitations. Like all actors, SWPOs are 'never unitary, never fully aware of the conditions of strategic action, never fully equipped to realize their preferred strategies' (Jessop 2001: 1225). Their knowledge, cognitive capacity, and resources are always limited to some extent. Moreover, the existence, characteristics, and actions of SWPOs are heavily influenced by the field they inhabit. In many countries, the social work and social policy fields are shaped by formal regulations and social norms, offering actors varying degrees of opportunity and constraint based on their position. SWPOs often operate in fields that reward actions reinforcing existing structures and may face opposition from more central actors, such as the

State (see Jessop 2001: 1223–25). Nonetheless, SWPOs retain the capacity to influence the field because institutions 'do not fully and precisely determine the course of action' and 'often embody structural contradictions' (Jessop 2001: 1225–26).

Spatiotemporal conjunctures are crucial to SWPOs' actions. The characteristics and strategies of SWPOs at any given time are likely shaped by their own history, the history of the field, and the current state of the field—whether 'stable', 'emerging', or 'destabilised' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 298–305). SWPOs' history is influential: in selecting strategies, SWPOs draw on 'individual, collective, or organizational learning capacities and on the 'experiences' resulting from the pursuit of different strategies and tactics in different conjunctures' (Jessop 2001: 1224). Their strategies are also informed by their understanding of the current conjuncture and their 'feel for the game' (Jessop 2001: 1224). The fields of social work and social policy are structured along a long-term historical trajectory, where 'critical junctures' alternate with path-dependent regulations. SWPOs often have greater opportunities to influence the field during 'critical junctures', though these opportunities are partly shaped by the preceding structure of the field. Therefore, studying SWPOs' actions may require a historical perspective that moves back and forth in time.

The spatial dimensions of analysing SWPOs' actions are similarly complex. Given that social work is and will be shaped by national and sub-national contexts (McDonald 2006), it is reasonable to conduct analyses at these levels. However, over the past two decades, social work has increasingly been recognized as a profession with a growing, though still developing, global reach (Ife 2001; Weiss 2005; Bartley and Beddoe 2018), rooted in shared values and principles such as universalism, human rights, and social justice (Gray and Fook 2004; Trygged 2010; Katiuzhinsky and Okech 2014). International SWPOs have played a key role in this process, particularly through documents (IASSW-IFSW 2014, 2018, 2020) that have influenced social work at national and sub-national level (see, for example, McNabb and Connolly 2019; Sarhan et al. 2022). As a well-established trend in social policy studies also suggests (Kazepov 2010), SWPOs' actions, and the fields in which they operate, should therefore be studied from a multi-level perspective. This does not diminish the continued relevance of the national scale but rather acknowledges the growing significance of sub- and supra-national processes for analysing SWPOs. Considering both the established local nature and the growing global reach of social work, studying SWPOs' actions from a comparative 'glocal' perspective (Robertson 1994) could be both appropriate and fruitful today. This perspective involves comparing different social work contexts and SWPO characteristics, not only based on national peculiarities but also recognizing that national SWPOs

may adopt common globally shaped values and discourses to influence social work and social policy within their specific contexts.

Characteristics, actions, and impacts of SWPOs: an initial analytical framework

The framework outlined above provides a basis for analysing the characteristics, actions, and impacts of SWPOs in relation to their contexts and spatiotemporal conjunctures. Further considerations can support this analysis.

Three analytical levels for studying SWPOs

Consistent with classical organizational theory (Blau 1957), SWPOs can be analysed as complex entities that interact with a variety of actors across three interconnected levels: micro, meso, and macro.

At the micro-level, the analysis can focus on intra-organizational features, including historical, structural, cultural, and relational aspects, all of which should be examined with regard to context and specific conjunctures. Micro-level analyses can provide insights into the fundamental characteristics of the organization and facilitate the development of an evidence-based, cross-country typology of SWPOs. Additionally, these analyses can help interpret SWPOs from the members' perspective and capture critical intra-organizational dynamics. Previous studies highlight the value of SWPOs for members in terms of collective identity, protection, and professional development (Payne 2002: 972; Healy and Meagher 2004; Pentaraki 2015: 147). However, low membership and active participation, along with limited resources, have been identified as significant challenges for SWPOs (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008: 287; Mendes et al. 2015: 528; Pentaraki 2015: 149). On the other hand, studies on the intra-organizational dynamics of SWPOs are lacking, although the literature suggests these dynamics are crucial for formulating and implementing SWPOs' strategies (Vigfússon, Jóhannsdóttir, and Ólafsson 2021).

At the meso-level, analysis can concentrate on inter-organizational relationships—how an SWPO interacts with other organizations (e.g. other professional, social service, civil society, and service-user organizations, universities) within the field. A SWPO may interact with other organizations based on different premises, first and foremost by approaching them as partners/allies or counterparts/targets. Inter-organizational relationships can be episodic or stable, formal or informal, collaborative, competitive, or conflictual. Building alliances with other organizations has been shown to be essential for achieving both professional goals (e.g. establishing a generalist SWPO in a country) and broader policy outcomes

(e.g. opposing welfare retrenchments) (Payne 2002; Mazibuko and Gray 2004; Guidi 2020). However, limited collaborative networking, especially with service-user organizations, has been identified as a weakness of SWPOs (Mendes et al. 2015: 528; Guidi 2020).

At the macro-level, analysis can focus on the relationships that SWPOs have with policymakers at local, national, and international levels. This corresponds largely to the study of SWPOs' policy actions within the political-institutional sphere (see below). Although these interactions are often highly formalized, some of the most influential exchanges with policymakers may occur through informal networks (Kenis and Schneider 1991).

Action strategies and impacts of SWPOs

The preceding arguments allow for a general hypothesis regarding the types of strategies SWPOs employ to influence the social work and social policy fields. While SWPOs likely integrate the different activities they carry out, inward and outward strategies can serve as general reference points.

Inward strategy. The inward strategy targets social workers as its primary audience. Inward activities may have a strictly professional focus (e.g. providing resources that shape social work practice—*professional inward activities*) or a broader purpose (e.g. equipping social workers with other resources—*organizational inward activities*). Examples of professional inward activities include development of social work ethics (e.g. codes of ethics), training (e.g. directly provided or recognized training activities), guidance on methods (e.g. technical guidelines for practice, professional advice), and disciplinary activities (e.g. sanctions for professional misconduct). Organizational inward activities might include supporting professionals' rights (e.g. legal protection, information), financial assistance (e.g. grants), and fostering connections among social workers (e.g. welcome meetings with new members).

The inward strategy can have both direct and indirect impacts. SWPOs' inward activities are expected to shape key aspects of social work practice, thereby influencing professionals' lives, the relationships between social workers and service users, and ultimately the services people receive. Using the 'policy cycle' as a reference (Klammer, Leiber, and Leitner 2019), SWPOs are expected to impact policy implementation by affecting social work practice. Furthermore, SWPOs' inward activities may provide social workers with the cognitive and material resources needed to influence their working organizations and social policies in alignment with social work values. In the terms of Gal and Weiss-Gal (2022: 102–119), SWPOs may contribute to social workers' 'motivation' to engage with policy beyond the implementation phase.

Outward (or policy) strategy. The outward (or policy) strategy primarily targets other organizations and policymakers. This strategy involves

activities aimed at influencing the ideas, preferences, discourse, and decisions of key actors within the political-institutional system (e.g. members of parliament) or other organizations relevant to social work and social policy (e.g. universities, social service organizations, media outlets).

SWPOs may employ institutional or non-institutional actions (e.g. campaigns) in their policy strategy. They may act as the representative body for social workers, engaging in activities that do not require the direct involvement of social workers ('policy engagement by proxy', as per Gal and Weiss-Gal 2022: 34), or they may function as 'recruitment networks' and political entrepreneurs, mobilizing social workers similarly to social movement organizations (Gal and Weiss-Gal 2022: 34). SWPOs can operate as individual players or form coalitions with other actors, particularly collective ones (e.g. advocacy organizations). SWPOs may also pursue an indirect path to policy action by providing social workers with resources to influence policymaking (see above).

SWPOs' actions within the political-institutional sphere have the potential to impact the social work and social policy fields by affecting agenda-setting processes, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Klammer, Leiber, and Leitner 2019). However, it is important to recognize that SWPOs may prioritize different goals, such as explicitly advocating for social justice or implicitly promoting the interests of social workers, who are expected to advance social justice. As a result, SWPOs may contribute to the production of mainly public or categorical goods, with an impact on the field which can be deciphered only in relation to specific contexts and spatiotemporal conjunctures (Mendes et al. 2015, Guidi 2020). SWPOs' actions on organizational policies may have a more limited systemic impact due to their meso-level nature. However, at this level, SWPOs can still influence the organizational culture of social workers' workplaces, thereby facilitating social workers' policy engagement (Gal and Weiss-Gal 2022: 81–101).

SWPOs are thus expected to have the potential to influence all stages and processes of the 'policy cycle' through activities that shape the actions of key decision-makers in the field, as well as by influencing social workers' professional practice, which in turn affects service users, social service organizations, and policymakers.

Figure 1 represents the basic contours of the proposed approach with black thick arrows accounting for the outward strategy and the grey ones for the inward strategy.

Conclusions

This article takes initial steps to address a significant gap in social work research by focusing on SWPOs. It outlines why SWPOs deserve greater attention and proposes a preliminary framework for studying them. The
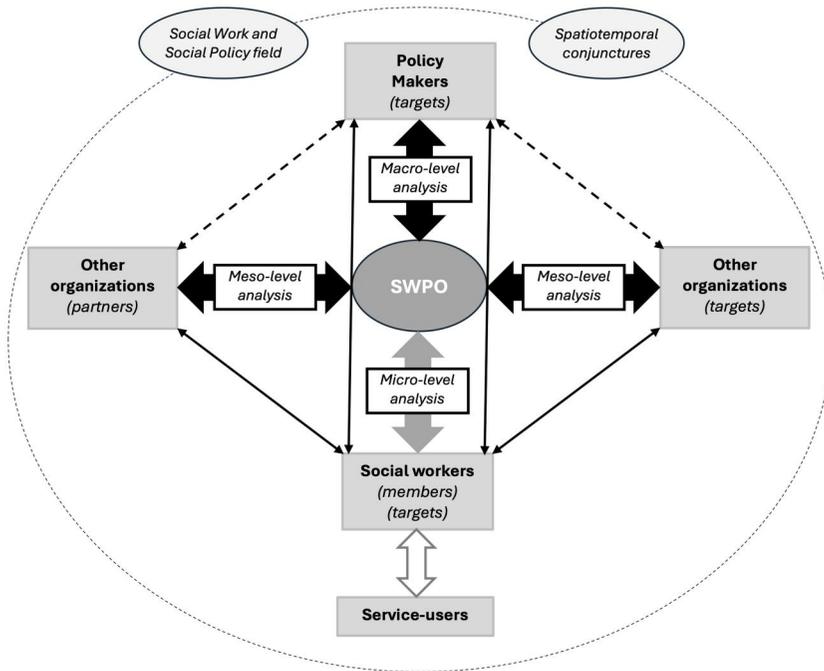
Figure 1. A research approach to study SWPOs.

framework suggests that SWPOs operate through both inward and outward strategies: internally, by influencing the professional and material aspects of social work practice, and externally, by advocating for social workers and social justice through policy engagement and institutional interaction. However, the full scope of their impact—whether positive or negative, and for whom—remains an open question.

While this framework is preliminary, it may provide a foundation for future research. Further theoretical work is needed to explore SWPOs' inward and outward activities across the three proposed analytical levels, to develop specific hypotheses regarding the relationships between their characteristics, strategies, and impacts, and to better understand the connections between SWPOs and their contexts. Empirical research will be particularly important in analysing the intra- and inter-organizational dynamics of SWPOs and in assessing their long-term impacts across different contexts. Given the diversity of social work environments and the increasing convergence of social work values and education globally, a 'glocal' comparative analysis, combined with an inter-professional perspective, offers promising avenues for future research.

Although this article represents an initial exploration of SWPOs, it contributes to an understanding of their relevance for SWPO leaders,

social workers, service users, and the research community. It highlights that SWPOs hold significant power and responsibility in shaping professional culture and social work practice, such as by establishing ethical guidelines, providing training, offering advice and protection to social workers, and fostering collaboration. In doing so, SWPOs make a meaningful difference in social work, potentially affecting the quality of services delivered to clients.

Service users likely benefit from strong and responsive SWPOs to receive high-quality services from social workers and to have allies in their fight for better services and policies. By engaging with policymakers, SWPOs have the opportunity to shape the structural conditions that impact both social workers and service users. This dual role—serving both the profession and service users—positions SWPOs as potential catalysts for change within the profession and in the broader fields of social services and social policy.

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