The price of not raising social workers' pay

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READING the reports about raising the pay for social workers brought to my mind an incident from the late 1970s when I was a young social worker.

I had helped a mamasan or a madam in a brothel, in a case involving child protection.

When she found out I was then paid the princely sum of $625 a month as a social worker, she said sympathetically that I was to call her any time when I needed help.

Financially, I suppose.

Social workers do not choose their vocation for monetary gains. This is not to say they should be paid a pittance.

But for many of us, the thing that makes our day, that brings a smile to our faces, is the implicit nature of the work. The "reward" - call it satisfying moments - comes when a case results in a happy outcome.

Say we strive to reconcile children who had to be removed from their parents' care because of abuse and neglect. We smile when the family heals and smiles again.

Priceless too is the toothless grin that brightens the wrinkled face of an elderly woman formerly neglected, when we help her find shelter and care.

When young people hurting and in pain come to confide in us and want to change, we are humbled by that trust and energised by their hope. And yet we must remain tough as nails when it comes to protecting victims of violence and hard-headed as any businessman in seeking rehabilitation programmes.

This little ditty I came across sums up the situation of social workers:

A woman knocked at the heavenly gate,
Her face was scarred and old.
She stood before the Man of Fate
For admission to the fold.
"What have you done," St Peter asked,
"To gain admission here?"
"I've been a social worker, sir,
For many and many a year."
The pearly gates swung open wide.
St Peter touched the bell.
"Come in and choose your harp," he said.
"You've had your share of hell."

Do social workers deserve competitive wages?
Let me answer that elliptically.

While social workers do take intrinsic joy in their work, we also take risks - day in and day out - not dissimilar to that of the police, including, say, working with abusers and people who may turn violent unexpectedly.

Social work is a profession, and the work social workers do far outstrips what volunteers do.

It is true both perform some similar tasks, such as visiting distressed families and connecting them to help. But the social worker carries out a whole range of other "interventions" like working holistically with people and communities in a sustained way.

For example, a social worker may assess the complexity of a case, determining and executing a course of intervention and engaging the client or the community and significant others in a process that places a premium on "ownership" of the results.

All this takes time and effort.

Social work is about looking for strengths in people, and bringing resources or making systems respond better to the needs of individuals. In instances where
there is neglect, omission, avoidance and complexity, the social worker's code of conduct requires that he acts to protect the vulnerable in society.

Unlike the doctor who draws on medicine, surgery and implants, the social worker's main tool of intervention is the fostering of a professional relationship that helps the person or community being helped gain motivation for change.

It is a science, drawing on social science theory that says that human behaviours are affected and changed through relationships and not just by money thrown at a problem.

It is also an art as the process of working with others requires the social work activities to be highly adaptable, flexible and personalised. We are trained in a body of knowledge, equipped with a set of skills and subscribe to a code of conduct and ethics.

Social workers must be able to operate like a helicopter, with a capability to delve deep to address an issue and individual cases, and yet transcend the individual cases to see trends and patterns to advocate changes in processes and systems to make them more responsive to those they serve.

Social workers’ collective knowledge, insights and skills add value to policy formulation in addressing structural and systemic concerns.

In social work, we believe that we help people to help themselves, and then they will want to pay it forward to help others, as humans are wired to reciprocate.

Social work believes in the benefits of mutual support, even among people who may be disadvantaged or ill.

To help people stop smoking or gambling, or to prevent abuse, we need to involve family, friends, and even friends of friends.

To reduce poverty, we should focus not merely on monetary transfers or even technical training; we should help the poor form new relationships with other members of society.

So what is social work worth?

It is certainly worth more than the every cent we get now.

As Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam urged the social service sector to pay competitive wages, we need to realise today's salary levels of various social service professionals lag that of their peers in other sectors.

The competitive salary that social workers ought to be paid is one that is commensurate with the outcomes and the impact they create out of the depth of their knowledge and skills. It should recognise the personal risk many social
workers undertake when they work in difficult situations where they intervene to protect vulnerable persons, work with involuntary clients and intervene to bridge systems and citizen users.

Understanding what a social worker does, the astute interventions that he makes, and how he closes the gap among the needs in society will win anyone's vote for a competitive wage.

The Government has led by example, in ensuring that more than half of the social workers and social service professionals are paid the competitive wage. The call now is for employers to respond likewise, having understood what social workers do.

The reason for not paying a competitive wage cannot be that donors are unwilling to pay.

Donors have the interest of vulnerable people, the victims of family violence or neglect and the prevention of social ills at heart.

If they understand what social workers do, they will be glad to know their funds have enabled the helping and healing work done by these social service professionals.

Social workers can only be more relevant in an increasingly more complex world.

The question should not be whether we can afford to pay social workers a competitive wage, but whether we can afford not to, and leave social issues and social injustice to fester, and rob people and communities of the knowledge, skills and values that social workers can contribute.

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