

Mental Health Act 2017 and Psychiatric Social Work Practice

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The Mental Healthcare Act 2017^[1] is an ambitious and progressive step in many ways. The Act guarantees to every person with mental illness, the right to access mental healthcare and treatment from the government. This right includes affordable, good quality, and easy access to facilities such as minimum mental health services. However, implementation will be a key challenge due to the lack of infrastructure and resources available in the country for the treatment of mental illness. The problem is aggravated due to the shortage of mental health care professionals - psychiatrist, psychologists, psychiatric social workers and psychiatric nurses.

Psychiatric Social Work is an integral part of a multidisciplinary team in treatment and rehabilitation of persons with mental illness or persons with psychosocial problems. However, professionally qualified psychiatric social workers are very limited in our country like other mental health professionals.^[2]


The Mental Health Act 2017^[1] defines various mental health professional which included "psychiatric social worker" means a person having a post-graduate degree in Social Work and a Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work obtained after completion of a full time course of two years which includes supervised clinical training from any University recognised by the University Grants Commission established under the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 or such recognised qualifications, as may be prescribed.

However, since the inception to till the current academic year i.e. 2016-17 the eligibility criteria for Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work (PSW) course is master of arts in either Sociology or Social Work in many pioneer institutions like Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP), Ranchi, Ranchi

Institute of Neuro-Psychiatry & Allied Sciences (RINPAS), Ranchi and various upcoming intuitions where this course was started under centre of excellence scheme^[3] like Institute of Psychiatry, Kolkata, Government Medical College and Hospital, Chandigarh, Pt. B.D. Sharma, PGIMS, Rohtak etc. few private institutions like JSS Medical College, Mysore. So, substantially a good number of Psychiatric Social Workers are having a master degree in Sociology with Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work.

The Mental Healthcare Act 2017^[1] empowers the government to set-up Central Mental Health Authority at national-level and State Mental Health Authority in every State. Every mental health institute and mental health practitioners including clinical psychologists, psychiatric nurses and psychiatric social workers will have to be registered with this Authority. The Central Authority shall publish the list of registered mental health professionals under clause (d) of sub-section (1) of section 43 and the State Authority shall publish the list of registered mental health professionals under clause (d) of sub-section (1) of section 55. This particular provision is expected to be interpreted in a very wider sense and might be the prerequisite to take part in the various function of mental health care as specified by the act. Psychiatric Social Workers are having a master of arts in Sociology with Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Work might be excluded if in this rule/regulation will not consider them equivalent to those who have a master degree in Social Work and having Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Worker. Subsequently, they will be discriminated on this ground in the various recruitments and also in the execution of various duties as specified in the act.

It must be taken into consideration that various professionals (Psychiatric Social Workers) as a clinician (PSW) and

Access the article online	
Website: www.pswjournal.org	Quick Response Code
DOI: 10.29120/IJPSW.2017.v8.i2.87	

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How to Cite this article:

Sahu KK. Mental Health Act 2017 and Psychiatric Social Work Practice. Indian J Psy Socl Work 2017;8(2):1-2.

faculties in the field of mental health /mental hospitals/ general hospitals psychiatric units both in government and Non- Government Sectors, both on regular basis as well as on contractual basis.

There is a huge shortage of Psychiatric Social Workers in the country which is affecting negatively to the care, treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with mental illness and also widens the huge (50-70 percent) treatment gap of for mental healthcare.

Though in the same definition after given this is mentioned: "..... or such recognised qualifications, as may be prescribed". This has given the scope to consider those Psychiatric Social Workers who have already acquired a master degree in Sociology and having Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Workers as equivalent to those who have

a master degree in Social Work and having Master of Philosophy in Psychiatric Social Worker. So, a desperate expectation from the psychiatric social workers (PSW) that the Central Mental Health Authority at national-level and State Mental Health Authorities and other law implementation agencies will do justice and not deprived them of their right of continue to be a mental health professional and contribute towards the mental health care.

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