The experiences of social service users in the towns of Cerdanyola and Ripollet (Barcelona); a qualitative study on the role of social work in the right to adequate housing

Ripollet-Cerdanyola Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH)[1]

Abstract

This research shows us various perceptions and experiences of individuals facing housing issues when it comes to the professional support they have received from social workers within the social services system. It does so specifically for the towns of Cerdanyola del Vallès and Ripollet (Barcelona).

A qualitative research project has been proposed. To this end, we have worked alongside users of the social services system experiencing housing problems who are part of the Ripollet-Cerdanyola Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) collective.

This empirical project has allowed us to become acquainted with both the negative and the positive practices experienced by these individuals from social workers in offices within the social services system.

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Proposals for improving the role performed by these professionals have also been set out within the perspective of critical social work.

Keywords: Social work, code of ethics of social work, human rights, right to adequate housing.

> "Be aware, hunger cannot wait. One who is hungry must be fed.
> Teaching them to fish comes afterwards.
> But above all, they must know that the river is theirs".
> Pere Casaldàliga

1. Introduction

This research has been drafted by the Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH collective rather than individual authors. We are presenting this work after a reflective exercise of challenge, coherence and collective responsibility in conjunction with our assembly. Our core focus is that the parties affected by social problems should form part of the solution (Martínez and Montenegro, 2014). This research is developed within the critical framework of scientific output, rejecting the hegemonic, hierarchical model of academia. In our view, the conventional model of science, which makes a distinction between researcher and object of study, constitutes an oppressive mechanism that helps to maintain the hegemonic foundations of the world that oppresses us (Haraway, 1995). We conduct science while engaging in politics. We are reclaiming the question of what is researched, how, why, for what purpose and by whom (Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH, 2021).

Our research is structured in two parts: the theoretical framework, in sections 2 and 3, and the empirical study, which covers sections 4 to 7. In the first part, we set out a description of the socio-economic situation that exists in Spain; in the second, we offer a review of the practice of social work and housing policies. We then detail the objectives and methodology that will lead to the results, which we then discuss before setting out the conclusions.

2. Definition of the object of study – problem statement

We live in a socio-economic context rooted in a heteropatriarchal, androcentric, ableist, xenophobic, aporophobic and militarised capitalist system (Velasco, 2012) that fails to prioritise people's wellbeing and instead focuses on concentrating profits in the hands of a few.

The latest data compiled by the Spanish National Statistics Institute shows that the percentage of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Spain stands at 26.5% (De Jesús, 2024). Having paid employment is no longer an indication that a person is free from the risk of poverty; indeed, Spain is one of the European countries with the highest rate of working poor (Bayona, 2023). Similarly, the gap between rich and poor is getting larger, and the richest 10% of the Spanish population hold more than half of the total wealth. In addition to increased housing and rental costs (having witnessed a rise of 52% over the past five years), these

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injustices mean that a significant share of the population have serious difficulties in accessing or maintaining their housing (Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH, 2021).

According to data from the General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ) and compiled by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), between 2008 and late 2022 more than 1,110,000 evictions took place in Spain overall (PAH, 2023).

The issue of housing in Spain is a complex, multi-faceted one (González and Manjón, 2023). In the wake of the triumph of the fascist military coup, housing policy was understood "as the commencement of a long, complicated process which, starting from a situation of extreme shortage, ended up leading to the creation of a genuine housing market embedded within the mechanisms of consumer markets" (Betrán, 2002, p. 28).

In 1957, the Francoist dictatorship established the Ministry of Housing, presided over by José Luis Arrese, famous for his phrase "We want a country of proprietors, not proletarians" (Betrán, 2002, p. 28). From the outset, the Francoist dictatorship sought to transform the largest number of workers into homeowners. "Making every worker a homeowner was an explicit goal of Francoist social policy, with the clear aim of reducing social tensions" (Betrán, 2002, p. 29). The rationale for devising this housing policy was the fact that long-term debt compelled workers into exhibiting a submissive, non-conflictive attitude in their jobs.

After the dictator's death, housing policy was based on unprecedented capitalist extremes. A huge growth in developed land took place (Betrán, 2002).

During the 2000s, Spain underwent an unprecedented real estate boom, driven by easy access to mortgages and growing demand for housing. This boom led to sharply rising prices and widespread building of new properties, many of which remained vacant or unsold (Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid, 2021).

In 2009, the whole real estate bubble that had been growing for years burst. The situation that the working classes experienced (and are still enduring today) was dramatic. That same year, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) created the legal concept of Real Estate Investment Trusts (SOCIMIs), already operating in countries such as France or the United States. However, the first legislative reform did not fully satisfy the financial sector. The regulation governing SOCIMIs was different to those of other countries because it did not include a corporate tax exemption. Many major investors could not benefit from it in the way they wished, so no SOCIMI was set up in those years. Subsequently, in 2012, the governing Popular Party (PP) changed the SOCIMI regime, following the guidelines imposed by the financial system. This reform enabled them to no longer pay taxes on profits obtained from renting their properties. Translated into real numbers, companies like the real estate firm Colonial were able to avoid paying the public treasury more than one hundred million euros

in corporate tax by being transformed into a SOCIMI (Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid, 2021).

Furthermore, in 2012, the PP set up the Society for the Management of Assets stemming from Bank Restructuring (SAREB), which purchased the toxic assets of Spanish banks with the intention of selling and speculating with them. Control of SAREB falls to private banks, but the debts taken on by SAREB are held by the Spanish state. It is important to note that the key person behind this operation – the erstwhile Minister of Economy Luis de Guindos – is now the Vice-President of the European Central Bank (Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid, 2021).

As we can see, the right to adequate housing has never been a factor in the housing policies enacted by the various governments managing the State. This is shown in the statistics, which indicate that the State only owns 1.3% of social housing, far below the EU average of 15% (Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid, 2021). The current housing situation in Spain is not a natural phenomenon; rather, it is the upshot of the public policies described in this section, which have taken shape since the triumph of the fascist coup.

If we compare these housing policies to those that operate in other European countries, Cores et al. (2016) show us that:

- In the United Kingdom, particularly in cities such as London, the housing situation bears parallels to that of Spain with a shortage of affordable housing. Property speculation has also been a significant factor in the British market, with both national and international investors contributing to the rise in prices. Additionally, the lack of available land for development has restricted the ability to build new homes, exacerbating the issue. However, the UK has a more stable and developed rental market, with a significant proportion of the population preferring to rent instead of buying. Nonetheless, rental prices have also risen substantially in the past few years, most notably in London.
- Germany exhibits major differences in its approach to housing compared to Spain as it has a more stable rental market and a higher proportion of renters compared to homeowners. This is partly due to an entrenched rental culture and more robust housing policies that promote rental affordability and stability. Although Germany has witnessed an increase in rental prices in cities such as Berlin, the government has implemented measures to restrict excessive rental increases and to protect tenants. Additionally, the country benefits from wider availability of social housing compared to Spain.
- France stands out on account of its more interventionist housing policies when compared to Spain. The French government has brought in measures to regulate the rental market and protect tenants, including rent controls and eviction bans under certain circumstances. While France faces similar challenges to other

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European countries in terms of affordable housing shortages, its more progressive housing policies have helped to mitigate some of these issues. Even so, major cities such as Paris still face significant challenges regarding access to housing and high prices.

The neoliberalism of Spanish housing policies is reflected in the biographies of thousands of people who have suffered breaches of their right to adequate housing in the form of evictions, utility cuts, tenancy at sufferance, homelessness, family reunifications, substandard housing and severe difficulties in paying rent, affecting all social and generational layers of the population.

Fortunately, there are small examples of best practices in Catalan cities, such as the Municipal Housing Plan, which seeks to broaden the supply of social housing and improve the living conditions of city residents through the promotion of social housing, affordable rental policies, inclusive urban regeneration and the use of public land for affordable housing (Arias et al., 2021). However, these measures still fall short in tackling the housing problem (Save the Children, 2023).

In view of this situation, the research set out here aims to understand the experiences of individuals facing housing problems in their interactions with the professional support provided by social workers in the social services system (SSS) in the towns of Cerdanyola del Vallès and Ripollet. For these purposes, the SSS is deemed to be an institutional and political structure which, within a given society, is responsible for managing and providing a host of resources and services intended to meet the needs of individuals and communities within its geographical area. From the perspective of critical social work (Agüero and Martínez, 2020), it is acknowledged that this system operates within a broader context of power relations, socio-economic structures and public policies that replicate and perpetuate inequality and social exclusion. Consequently, the SSS runs the risk of serving as an instrument for social regulation and control aiming to reduce social conflict while perpetuating the structural conditions that replicate social injustices and inequalities.

In order to conduct the research mentioned, an analysis has been carried out on the perceptions of various individuals who have been users of the SSS in the towns of Ripollet and Cerdanyola del Vallès. Specifically, these individuals have not seen their right to adequate housing duly acknowledged and they are members of social movements advocating for this right.

3. State of affairs

3.1. Contextualisation of social work in relation to housing needs

Social work is essential when it comes to championing the right to housing for the individuals it serves because it plays a crucial role in connecting people with the resources available through basic social services. More than simply being a roof over one's head, housing constitutes a fundamental aspect of human wellbeing that encompasses physical security as well as emotional and social stability (García and Martínez, 2018). Accordingly, housing difficulties can profoundly impact mental and physical health, family cohesion and community integration. In areas such as Cerdanyola del Vallès and Ripollet, the SSS acts as a cornerstone of support for individuals whose right to housing is not recognised. These services are provided with resources and programmes designed to comprehensively address housing needs. From providing advice and guidance to offering temporary housing and mediating with landlords, social workers play a multifaceted role in seeking effective, sustainable solutions for affected individuals and families. Additionally, they cooperate with specialised services, such as local housing offices, to advocate for the right to adequate housing.

The practice of social work in the field of housing is shrouded in its holistic, person-centred approach (Juan, 2011). Social workers not only address immediate housing needs, they also strive to understand the structural causes behind the shortage of housing. Beyond direct support, social workers play a significant role in promoting social change and raising awareness about housing issues. Through community engagement, they seek to highlight the importance of housing as a fundamental human right and mobilise resources to address the housing crisis we see all around us (Ander-Egg, 1985).

3.2. Praxis of social work in the social services system

Social Work and the SSS play a vital role when it comes to housing by addressing the needs and challenges faced by individuals in relation to their housing situations (Juan, 2011). The praxis of social work within the SSS involves a combination of direct activities with service users, coordination of services, advocacy for social rights and participation in the development of social policies and programmes. According to Domínguez and García (2016), a number of the duties they fulfil relate to:

- Access to housing. Social workers and the SSS work to ensure that individuals and families have access to suitable, affordable housing. This involves understanding the financial, social and health-related circumstances that may affect a person's ability to find and maintain suitable housing. Additionally, they provide personalised advice and guidance on available resources

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for accessing housing, such as social housing programmes and rental benefits.

- Prevention of homelessness. This may include negotiating with landlords, finding temporary or emergency housing solutions, and referring individuals for cover under housing programmes to prevent evictions and removals.
- Promotion of social inclusion. This focuses on addressing structural and social barriers that contribute to exclusion and marginalisation in accessing housing. To achieve this, social workers foster participation and empowerment of individuals and communities in decision-making processes related to housing issues, promoting the voice and leadership of affected individuals to advocate for progressive housing policies and legislative measures that protect their rights.

Nevertheless, it is important to be cautious and not conflate social work with the SSS. Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that operates in various settings, one of which is the SSS. Equating social work with the SSS jeopardises the former at the hands of the latter. The relationship between the two is hierarchical, as the institution holds more power than the profession (Ariño and Velasco, 2017).

The professionalisation of social work within the SSS has led many professionals to approach their work from the perspective of individual responsibility. In other words, they blame individuals for their problems, attributing them to poor decision-making (García and Martínez, 2018). Service users experiencing these situations feel guilty and responsible for their issues, which they cannot resolve on their own, as these are social problems (Ariño and Velasco, 2017). Such approaches have turned professionals into overseers of the system who seek to correct and punish disruptive behaviours, thereby perpetuating the system shaping them (Chambon, 2001). The literature on this topic in the work *Foucault y el Trabajo Social* (2001) shows that where police presence is absent, the social worker appears to homogenise, inform and sanction those who do not conform to the standardised model of a citizen. Accordingly, the various pathologies identified by social workers serve to distinguish individuals deemed legitimate recipients of support from those who made mistakes and are responsible for their situation (Chambon, 2001).

3.3. Social work from a political and ethical standpoint

In 2014, in Melbourne, the Board of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Social Workers shared the following global definition of social work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the

empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (Lima, 2016, p. 144).

Politics and the neoliberal capitalist economic system are intrinsically linked. The data presented throughout this document are a direct consequence of power relations and inequalities in our society. Public policies have been and continue to be geared to protecting capitalist interests and profits (García and Rendueles, 2017).

As Pastora Filigrana illustrates in her book *El pueblo gitano contra el sistema mundo. Reflexiones desde una militancia feminista y anticapitalista* (2020), the neoliberal capitalist system has become a civilisation system that imposes a singular model of existing, living and viewing the world onto our society, naturalising hierarchies among people based on their location and their bodies (purchasing power, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc.).

Social work is not immune to this naturalisation of the capitalist system (Ariño and Velasco, 2017). Consequently, its praxis in the sphere of housing is often far removed from the historical-political context in which the profession is immersed (Vivero, 2017), proving incapable of analysing the structures of oppression/privilege that organise and hierarchise the world, and failing to understand how these impact professional practice.

Far from a well-positioned, critically reflective stance, the approach to the profession adopted by many SSS workers is neglecting the development of critical consciousness among social workers and the people they work with, which is fundamental to the relationship between social work and housing needs, as discussed earlier. As a result, professionalising and technified logics in working with individuals facing housing issues are perpetuated, posing the risk of establishing professional relationships based on total disconnection and distance between social workers and their service users in the field of housing (García et al., 2017).

In contrast, the support provided by social movements advocating for the right to adequate housing in Spain has been exemplary. These movements, such as the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and various housing and tenants' unions, emerged in response to the housing crisis and the lack of affordable housing in many cities (Cochrane and López, 2018; García and Martínez, 2018).

These movements place pressure on governments and institutions to deliver policies and programmes that ensure universal access to adequate, affordable housing. They act as advocates for the rights of individuals affected by evictions and other forms of housing injustice. Moreover, they have provided wide-ranging emotional and community support to individuals facing housing difficulties. In their assemblies, they have promoted safe social spaces where those affected can share their experiences, receive solidarity and champion their rights through mutual support (Batlle

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and Subirats, 2019). Even today, these movements continue to offer legal advice and practical guidance to individuals facing housing issues. They work with people so they can understand their legal rights, organise themselves and mobilise to explore alternative resources and options to solve their housing problems. To this end, they use direct action and protest to bring about major social and economic transformations in terms of housing (Cochrane and López, 2018; Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH, 2021). In doing so, they have devised a practical, clear example of forums to promote social development and change, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of individuals, which are the cornerstones of social work (Lima, 2016).

4. Objectives

This study is based on the following research questions: What have the experiences and perceptions been among SSS users who are part of the Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH regarding the work carried out by SSS workers in these towns? What do SSS users think about the tasks performed by social workers? What should the practices of SSS workers consist of so they can be aligned with the values laid down in the social work code of ethics?

To answer these questions, the following research objectives have been set:

1. To describe the perceptions of SSS users affected by housing problems who are part of the Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH regarding the work carried out by SSS workers.
2. To draw up proposals for improvement based on the contributions provided by the study participants.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research approach

The research we are setting out has been conducted under the epistemological perspective of Donna Haraway's situated knowledges (1995), which deem knowledge as being contextual and positioned, rooted in the concrete and historically and geographically situated experiences of the people being studied.

This research is a qualitative study adopting an interpretive, descriptive stance. This research method aims to describe, explain, understand and interpret social reality and the individual and collective portrayal of it that people or groups create (Fernández et al., 2002). The experiences and collective constructions of reality by the participants are central to these investigations, as they are inseparable from the people researching them (Cepeda, 2006). Consequently, the research team conducted their work within the natural setting where the participants live their daily lives, needing a minimum period in the study setting to familiarise themselves with the context and the interactions taking place within it. The relationships established in this context must be direct, and events must

be understood globally and not predicted (Ceballos, 2009). This makes it possible to understand the subject of study in complex and varied contexts, gaining an acquaintance of reality through the portrayals of the subjects (Durán, 2014).

Lastly, to conduct the research, various ethical principles are considered which must form the basis for qualitative studies: informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, justice and equity, the principle of charitable action and respect for autonomy (Díaz and Moscoso, 2018).

5.2 Context and study participants

The group of participants consists of a total of 21 people affected by housing problems who are SSS users. They include 11 women and 10 men aged between 35 and 55. Their testimonies make it possible to provide a response to objectives 1 and 3.

In this research, the sampling has been intentional and opinion-based (Olabuénaga, 2012). Accordingly, the selection of participants was deliberate, considering the personal characteristics of each participant and specific facts from their life stories.

5.3 Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments used are interviews and focus groups. In this case, we conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group with SSS users from the PAH. The semi-structured interview conducted with people affected by housing problems consisted of 21 questions and the focus group script incorporated 10 questions.

5.4 Data analysis

The technique adopted to review the information was content analysis (Auxiliadora and Moraima, 2008; Porto and Ruíz, 2014), which unfolded in four specific steps (Cohen et al., 2007):
1. Identification of units of meaning.
2. Classification, categorisation and organisation of units of meaning.
3. Structuring of narratives to describe the content of the interview and focus group.
4. Interpretation of the data obtained.

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6. Results

The following table provides a response to objectives 1 and 2.

Table 1. Frequency among service users

Category	Frequency
Vision	12
Differences in treatment from the PAH and social services	21
Positive experiences	50
Negative experiences	111
Helplessness	5
Proposals for improvement	81

Source: compiled by the authors

Graph 1. Results from SSS users who are part of the Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH
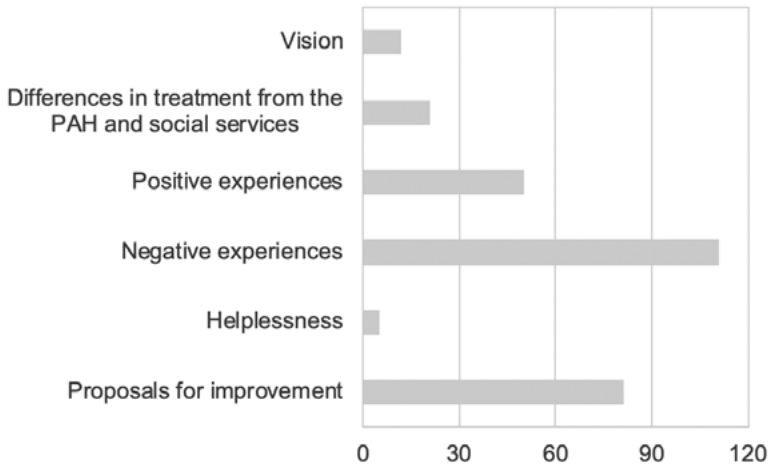
Source: compiled by the authors

The information compiled is structured into seven categories. The one most commonly cited was "Negative experiences". The category "Proposals for improvement" was the second most mentioned, although far behind the first one. On the other hand, the categories that featured least frequently were "Helplessness in the face of poor practices" and "University education".

Below we set out the foremost aspects of each category.

Vision

When it comes to vision, i.e., the way in which social workers are viewed, the research participants talk about the lack of empathy and humanity.

> They have no empathy or compassion. They don't care. When we were evicted, no one showed up here (P12).

> When someone is dehumanised, they feel anything but a person (P11).

These circumstances are directly linked to a lack of vocation and professionalism in their work.

> You can tell when people are concerned about others or when they're merely there for the wages. In other words, if you're only in this profession for the money you're no good, because you won't deliver any results. You need to be there to help people. They simply go to warm their chair and get paid at the end of the month… and when a difficult situation arises, they just pass the buck among the various administrations until it becomes so confusing you end up committing suicide (P8).

Differences in treatment from the PAH and social services

Similarly, they also speak about differences in the treatment people receive in the PAH compared to the SSS.

> The difference is that in the PAH they seek solutions through actions, while social services are all talk. There is a battle for a common cause – which unites people and encourages empathy. With social services, they are still bureaucrats, and they are not going to advocate for your rights or empower you (P5).

> Humanity and closeness are the significant differences between the PAH and social services (P12).

The participants also mention that they encounter difficulties, particularly with the SSS centre in town 2, when it comes to having colleagues from the PAH accompanying them to social services, despite the individual experiencing the housing problem being fully in agreement to have someone from the PAH go with them.

> Sometimes colleagues have gone to interviews and have been barred entry under the pretext of data protection and the affected person's privacy. As I told them, it's not about privacy. No, what you want is to catch the person alone and crush them, because if the person brings you there, it's because they are comfortable with their private information being known (P16).

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What is more, they also reveal that the work carried out by social workers for individuals changes when they are accompanied by someone from the PAH, underscoring the fact that when an individual is escorted, the work is much more professional than if they had turned up alone.

> When they are escorted, they no longer bring up the person's dirty laundry to throw in their face. And if they do, the person feels supported to turn the situation around and redirect it. This support tends to be provided for those attending centre 2. At centre 1, it has not been as necessary. But when it has, it has been done as well (P18).

Positive experiences

At various points in the interviews, positive experiences within the SSS were detailed. The highest frequency of this category was found in the interviews conducted with individuals attending centre 1.

> My social worker was a very kind person, explained things to you clearly and spoke to you nicely. She treats everyone with care (P15).

> In some areas, they have become grounded and are aware of the reality, that poverty exists and that there are people who will end up on the street (P20).

> I should also point out that not everything done at centre 2 is bad and nor is it the case that everything done at centre 1 is good. It is probably a case of it being 70% good at centre 1 and only 20% at centre 2, but we cannot simply discard everything (P21).

It has also been positively noted that social workers allow members of the PAH to accompany individuals with housing problems during their appointments.

> I feel a lot of trust with her, and I can be accompanied by someone from the PAH or people from outside who help me translate (P4).

Nevertheless, many of these positive assessments stemmed from a care-related practice of social work, associated with the processing of financial assistance or food packages.

> Cáritas help us with food (P9).

> I am very happy with the care received; they even gave me two shopping trolleys a month so I could eat at home (P2).

Negative experiences

The category of negative experiences with social workers from the SSS was the most frequently cited in the interviews and focus group,

especially among those attending centre 2. Most negative assessments of practices mentioned by participants relate to aspects such as personal treatment, institutional operations and the effectiveness of outcomes, etc.

Practices related to personal treatment involved judging and criminalising individuals for the situations they were experiencing.

> I felt very bad, adversely affected. I came out of there with depression, always feeling that I was being judged and as if I had to constantly defend myself against accusations of deceit (P11).

> We had a meeting with social services and the PAH, and they had a report on me and started attacking me from all sides. I came out of there feeling powerless, crying. Instead of helping us, they were crushing me, saying I didn't work because I didn't want to and that I had to leave my house. I felt terrible... you go there and feel like you want to die. It's no wonder many people commit suicide (P7).

Also in relation with the treatment received, the establishment of hierarchical relationships and people being treated like children are highly common aspects.

> It seems as if the money they have is their own and they give you as little as possible... they give it to you as if they are doing you a huge favour (P12).

> I called to thank them for a Decathlon voucher and the social worker said, "That was a nice surprise, huh?" Honestly, it feels like they treat you like a child and you have to keep quiet and put up with it (P6).

The participants in the interviews also mentioned threats and pressure.

> They are threatening me over my children, saying that if they are not okay, they cannot stay with me, but while we were in a thirty-square-foot room, they did not help with anything (P6).

> They set me a work plan that I had to stick to fully for them to say they could help me. They told me that if I didn't do what was in the work plan, I would forfeit everything they were going to give me. They impose rules and regulations, and if you don't stick to them, they screw you over (P1).

Xenophobic and sexist situations were also reported.

> A number of colleagues have been asked why they don't go back to their country with their family, after being told they would live better there on 150 euros than here (A3).

> When I went to social services with women, they would ask where their husband was, why he wasn't supporting her, why she didn't go with him. They don't ask men these questions, but they do ask women (A4).

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Participants referred to situations where they complain about a lack of professional ethics, for instance, when their confidentiality is not respected.

> The social worker tells the social services director everything she has noted down, and then in meetings with the PAH they use this to have a dig at you in front of your colleagues (P7).

> On the odd occasion, the social services director would be present in appointments. She would sit there listening to you, as if you'd committed a crime (P8).

The sanctioning role of professionals was also an aspect mentioned in several of the practices reported.

> You go there to tell them your problems, to open up, to explain everything that is happening to you, the problems you have… they write everything down and it seems like they're studying your life. They put everything down on paper and then use everything you've told them against you. They extract information with a friendly face and then attack you, as if they were listing your faults. You have to watch your words very carefully so they don't use them against you later (P7).

One participant even pointed out that in one of the SSS centres there have been illegalities in the professional practice of some social workers.

> The social worker assigned to me at centre 2 is not registered and is working as a social worker, which is illegal (P11).

Another commonly reported malpractice is that social workers evade their responsibilities by encouraging affected individuals to register in another town. These situations mostly occurred at centre 2.

> At centre 2, the social workers always wanted to drive people out of town. They wanted me to leave the country because I am foreign. On several occasions my social worker asked why I didn't go to London with my wife. It's as if they don't want to help anyone; they want to drive people out of town to avoid doing their work (P11).

> They offered me a chance to stay in a castle with my family, but it was outside the town of course. So, you leave this area and register in the new one and they immediately forget you. One less problem (P6).

Furthermore, people whose papers are not in order experience many issues when it comes to getting social workers to offer them professional support.

> We were told that since we did not have papers, they could not help us (P9).

> They do not help people who do not have papers, who are the ones most in need of housing assistance because they cannot rent, work or anything (P11).

What is more, many of the interviews recounted experiences where the alternatives offered by the SSS did not uphold the right to adequate housing.

> They wanted to give me and my family two separate bedrooms, even in different houses, when we were about to lose our home (P15).

> They assigned me a social worker and things went badly with her. The only option she gave me was a bedroom. Tomorrow I turn 53. I cannot see myself having just a room at my age. My belongings won't fit in a room. My social worker even told me that they were just items and that I could get rid of them. Of course, they're my things, not hers (P12).

When it comes to the efficiency of outcomes of the work carried out, the participants reported that the professionals they engaged with were not suitably prepared for working on issues relating to housing and individuals' rights.

> During the pandemic, I had no electricity, was using candles, getting information from the radio… in short, the hardships of a squatter… luckily, a friend told me to call this number and ask to have the electricity reconnected, and within three days it was done, whereas the social services had no idea, could not or would not do anything (P8).

> There was a housing grant that no one from social services told me about. I had to find out through the CAI and then go back to social services for them to give it to me (P5).

The participants also referred to experiences where the information or advice given to them did not help to solve the difficult situations they found themselves in.

> I needed the vulnerable family report and they didn't want to give it to me. I then went accompanied by the PAH and they did finally give me the document; on my own, they would not give it to me (P13).

> Once I told them I was really hungry and the lady just told me to plant tomatoes… Another time, they signed me up for a workshop on how to make use of food, and I thought I would learn how to preserve items or something like that, but the course turned out to be about how to fry and eat potato peelings (P8).

When it comes to the institutional operation of social services, the SSS management at centre 2 exhibited many examples of cases where the free practice of social work is not permitted.

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> Centre 2 is a bunker. They have poor organisation there; things are not being done properly because there is a lady who dictates how work should be done, who says how things should be done. I don't know if they have an internal protocol or something, but that's how they do it (P7).

> Once, the director of social services caused us a big mess. She had a friend at Banco Sabadell, which was the bank that wanted to take over the block where we lived. She wanted us to sign a paper agreeing to leave the flat in exchange for help with the first three months' rent in a new home. Thankfully, the PAH saw the paper and told us not to sign anything (P1).

Helplessness in the face of negative experiences

Throughout the interviews, and in the focus group also, participants spoke about how they feel helpless in the face of the negative experiences they have encountered within the SSS. They stated that they are unable to report these to the Official Association of Social Work of Catalonia. They have a hard time trying to prove these potential violations of their rights.

> This needs to be recorded; you need to get an appointment and record everything they say. That would be a bombshell; people would realise what is going on inside… This way, they would find out whether these people are doing their job properly, if they are providing a good service to people and there would be evidence of what is happening in centre 2 (P7).

> We once reported a social worker from centre 2 to the Official Association of Social Work of Catalonia but nothing happened. No one did anything even though we reported the poor work she was doing (P11).

Proposals for improvement

This is another frequently recurring category. There are various proposals for improvement, some of which are linked to the relationship of support and accompaniment that should be established with the individuals they work with. This process should be carried out with humanity and empathy for the situations that people with housing problems are experiencing.

> They need to stop blaming people for their situation; they cannot continue to criminalise poverty (P18).

> They should treat people with humanity, because inside there are just papers and more papers, account numbers, certificates for this and that, and the damn bureaucracy is pointless (P8).

Furthermore, participants in the study highlighted the need for social workers to advocate for human rights.

> We need them to advocate for our rights, especially the right to adequate housing as stated in the Constitution and Human Rights conventions. I do not want to share a flat and have my life confined to one room; I want a decent, adequate home, nothing over the top (P12).

Aside from mentioning the need to advocate for human rights, in the interviews there is also talk about the need to always process resources for those people who are specifically entitled to them.

> It is important to abide by the laws that exist and process the emergency housing applications when the criteria are met (P11).

Other proposals are related to the education provided to social workers. This training should aim to raise awareness among future professionals about the context in which they will work, both human and legal.

> They need to study subjects relating to humanity, about how to help society and people, and how not to judge those who are in vulnerable situations (P11).

> They need to know more about laws (P9).

In addition to this training, it is necessary to refresh the knowledge acquired.

> When they do not know something, they should go out and ask someone who is informed and knowledgeable on the subject (P10).

There are also training proposals relating to the responsibility of university teaching staff to prevent certain individuals from being able to practise as social workers.

> It should be a vocational job, but it is not; many people go into it because they think it is a secure job. The family you have to work with comes before your financial stability (P16).

> When I studied emergency healthcare, there were people who fainted just from watching videos of accidents; but the professor made it clear that they could not study that (P19).

Participants also speak about essential changes needed within the leadership of the SSS to ensure these services function properly, especially aimed at centre 2.

> For starters, the coordinator has to go (P12).

Participants state that social work professionals need to perform their duties independently and carry them out as prescribed by their code

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of ethics. Professional improvements are proposed when it comes to the independence the profession should have from the political parties in power and the individuals who assume the responsibility for management of the SSS.

> A social worker should be independent from her boss (A3).

> Regardless of the government in office, social workers should be professionals and side with the people (A4).

However, the group of participants is aware that sometimes the work carried out by social workers is influenced by the working conditions they experience in their jobs, highlighting the lack of staff and resources available.

> More professionals are needed and they need to be provided with more resources (A3).

Other institutional proposals related to the above aspects mentioned deal with the role of the Official Association of Social Work of Catalonia. In this case, there is agreement that this organisation should support social workers when they face external pressures that prevent them from performing their duties unhindered.

> They also need the support and back up from the professional sector in which they work (P19).

> Without really knowing them, it sometimes seems that those in charge of the sector are a bit like hippies… they say, well, that's life, it's what we've got so let's just do what we can. It's not like the shipyard union, who rally round in order to demand more resources or do what's necessary to exert pressure and achieve what they want (P17).

Lastly, many of these proposals for improvement are focussed on the relationship of coordination and mutual work that must exist between social workers and social movements, as they both have the common goal of advocating for people's rights. Participants also mention the importance of social workers attending the evictions of the individuals they are working to support.

> The relationship between the PAH and social services should be one of cooperation; they ultimately have the same goal: the wellbeing of people and the right to adequate housing (P1).

To achieve this, they point to the need for social workers to gain a more familiar insight of how the social movement operates in its assemblies, whilst also gaining a better acquaintance of the situation that exists in the city.

I believe that if they got more involved, everything would work much better; everyone's role would be easier and it would even improve the PAH itself (P14).

7. Discussion and conclusions

This research has successfully addressed the objectives set out through the results obtained. Numerous and diverse voices from renowned social workers all over the glove advocate for a clear ethical and political stance in social work, which we have attempted to highlight in this article (Agüero and Martínez, 2020).

Following the analysis of the results, we can conclude that the participants have used the social services system due to financial problems stemming from the capitalist structure in place and the absence of a social housing policy in Spain. State measures aimed at defending the interests and privileges of the status quo have resulted in these individuals not having their right to decent housing acknowledged (García and Rendueles, 2017).

When attending the offices of social workers, these individuals have had several experiences, although those related to aspects covered by the code of ethics of social work, such as malpractice (Consejo General de Trabajo Social, 2012), are the most frequently mentioned in this research.

The examples set out illustrate the way in which individuals who have housing problems have been made to feel like criminals and have felt judged by social work professionals. This means that the deployment of social work operates in lockstep with the capitalist system, placing responsibility on individuals for the situations they are experiencing and imposing upon social service users the requirement to exist, live their lives and perceive the world according to a single model (Filigrana, 2020).

The results obtained reveal that social work professionals are viewed as authority figures exercising power over the people they work with (Falla et al., 2011).

Other negative experiences described relate to the indiscernible nature of social conflict (García et al., 2017) and the sanctioning of what are considered disruptive behaviours (Ariño and Velasco, 2017). Social workers have become family police (Chambon, 2001) who try to homogenise the people they work with (Epstein, 2001). Those who do not meet the obligations imposed are punished with the withdrawal of benefits, coercion to register in other towns, demotion on public housing lists and so on (Ripollet-Cerdanyola PAH, 2021).

In addition, there are several instances where SSS users have been prevented from being accompanied by the PAH. This constitutes malpractice that once again violates the basic principles of dignity and freedom; as well as the general principles of social justice, recognition of rights, autonomy and self-determination of the individual, which should prevail

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within the practice carried out by social workers (Consejo General de Trabajo Social, 2012).

It is important to recognise that all these situations violate the code of ethics of social work and may be reported to the Official Association of Social Work of Catalonia. However, participants find it difficult to file these complaints and demonstrate that their rights have been infringed.

Nevertheless, positive experiences in the SSS have also been documented, particularly in centre 1. Such experiences have been reported when it comes to the humane treatment and the excellent professional competence exhibited by social workers. Participants considered it a positive experience when social workers were well-informed and were able to convey this knowledge effectively, particularly concerning housing issues.

However, a number of these positive experiences recorded in the interviews and the focus group were associated with a care-related approach to social work. A care-related financial grant is essential to enable many people to have the chance to turn their lives around (Marchioni, 2004). Even so, focussing solely on the care-based approach helps to replicate the social structures that shape reality, labelling individuals according to narrowly defined circumstances such as age, years of contributions, family type, etc. (Arrabalí et al., 2017; García et al., 2017).

All of the proposals for improvement linked to the work carried out by social workers are directly associated with critical social work (Agüero and Martínez, 2020). To cultivate this type of professional, appropriate academic education is necessary to train future social workers for the proper delivery of their profession. University education should foster critical reflection and the professional and personal commitment of students, aligning them with the oppressed against a system that does not respect their rights (Epstein, 2001; Ona, 2017). Human rights and the code of ethics of social work must be integrated into this training (Cubillos, 2017). This would create professionals who aim to highlight social conflicts, aligning themselves with human lives rather than with capital (De Robertis, 2003, 2009; Escartín and Velasco, 2017).

Social workers within the SSS (and other professional settings generally) should reflect on who they form their alliances and commitments with (Gentes de Baladre, 2010): whether it is the community they are working with and should be serving or the neoliberal capitalist system and institution in which they operate (Ahmed, 2005; Velasco, 2012). In this regard, drawing on Cristina De Robertis (2009), it is highly likely that social work will occasionally need to navigate the boundaries of legality in order to push back against the interests imposed by the institution they work for. One example of a best practice along these lines is that social workers in Greece (Ioakimidis, 2021) refused to work alongside tax collectors to identify families who had not paid a new electricity tax enacted by the Greek government. Not only did they refuse to act as enforcers of surveillance and control but also joined and worked in coordination with the social movement that emerged to oppose these taxes.

Given everything that has been discussed about the experiences of the participants in the SSS, it is evident that cooperation with groups engaged in anti-capitalist political struggles is crucial for social work and its code of ethics (García and Velasco, 2017; Marchioni et al., 2018).

Accordingly, we can speak of an ethical and political stance in social work alongside those with whom it works, striving for the equitable distribution of capital, power, property and care (García and Velasco, 2017). Social work professionals can therefore practise anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist and decolonial social work, in other words, social work that pushes back against this system that destroys our lives and the world we live in (Ariño and Velasco, 2017).

We hope that this research will help bring about transformations in the practice and advocacy of social work as a channel to ensure the right to adequate housing for all individuals. From our humble position as a collective, we aim to be a voice for all those oppressed people who are not acknowledged as having this right. We name and remember them so we can say that we do this for the rural labourer and the factory worker. For the dreamer and the revolutionary activist. For the caregiver, the healthcare worker and the one who cleans stairs. For those killed on the beach of Tarajal and those who perished in the Mediterranean. For those who prioritise principles over interests. For the young people of Altsasu, for Alfon, for Patricia Heras, for Guillem Agulló, for the Zaragoza six and the young people of Pego. For the comrades of Pandora and Piñata. For all the activists who put their bodies on the line to prevent evictions. For those who stand up to fascism. For those who gave everything and are now in a grave. For Palestine. For the strikes of the working class. For the teachers and professors. For the poor and the disinherited. For those who sleep in an immigration detention centre. For the girls who clean. For our elders. We write for them; we fight for them. We want bread; but we also want roses. A collective response remains essential.

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