

INTERVIEW WITH DR. TATSURU AKIMOTO

Tatsuru Akimoto

(ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3299-9694>) is a Professor Emeritus at Japan Women's University, located in Tokyo, where he was Dean of the Faculty of Integrated Arts and Social Sciences. On the international stage, he holds a prominent position as Honorary Director of ARIISW and served as the Chair of the International Relations Committee of the Japanese Association of Schools of Social Work (JASSW) (2005-2010). In April 2024, during the SWSD2024 event, organised by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Council on Social Welfare, and the International Federation of Social Workers, in Panama, he was honoured with the Katherine Kendall Award Memorial Award for Distinguished Service in International Social Work Education.



In the interview, Dr Akimoto expressed his dissatisfaction with the dominance of WPSW in a manner that was both incisive and reflective of a situation that has developed over time. However, he also conveyed a message of hope for the future, lending his words a profound impact that resonated deeply, touching and inspiring the hearts of many.

THE NEW HORIZON OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Kana: Congratulations to Prof Akimoto! How did you feel about receiving the Katherine A. Kendall Memorial Award for Distinguished Service in International Social Work Education?

Dr. Akimoto: It was rather unexpected. I was more surprised when I heard that I would be nominated for the Katherine Kendall Award than when I received it.

It was unanticipated news because I tend to avoid 'awards', and I initially declined this one as usual. However, I accepted the nomination for two reasons. First, I did not want to harm the reputation of my colleagues whom I know and admire. They recommended me for the award based on my work. Second, there is considerable interest in 'social work' in Japan, but regrettably, there is scarce interest in the international aspect of social work. A Japanese social work academic leader who takes a keen interest in international affairs sincerely advised me to accept the nomination. She believed that this award would be a valuable opportunity to create global interest in Japanese social work and promote interest in international affairs.



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Kana: How did you gain interest in social work research?

Dr. Akimoto: It would be more straightforward to discuss this in terms of my personal history, as I have always been deeply interested in labour and the working classes.

I was drawn to the labour movement. However, my primary concern was with a specific segment of the working class, especially those positioned at the lowest strata of the social hierarchy. Moreover, I was profoundly interested in the lives of individual workers—their socioeconomic status and circumstances—rather than perceiving them as a collective entity.

Kana: There may be a definitional argument about ‘Who can be considered as workers’? For example, can the unemployed be regarded as ‘workers’?

Dr. Akimoto: Some may say, ‘They are not workers’; however, they were working until the day they lost their jobs. Another pertinent question is whether we can include people on the verge of employment who want to work but are unable to find the right opportunity. They belong to the working class. Even if they were working, they would face serious challenges. They may be the ‘working poor’. Some may experience low wage levels. Many workers have been injured at work, or have suffered from occupational diseases, and become old and impoverished. Child labor also exists in developed countries. I have been interested in the individual, workplace, family, and community lives of an overwhelming number of working people.

In the 1970s, the unemployment rate in Japan was fairly low, around 1 or 2%.

However, I was interested in unemployment and unemployment problems. I went to Detroit, where the unemployment rate was significantly high, and lived in a slum area there. In the city, one side of the main street was an all-White slum and the other side an all-Black slum. I was walking around those districts in the middle of winter at minus 20°C. It was an automobile town, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union was a strong influence. Social work is connected to labor issues. Coincidentally, several people introduced a particular person’s name Marian Mahaffey, a social work professor at Wayne State University who was also the president of NASW at the time. She was also the chairperson of the Detroit City Council. It was my first such encounter social work, and I learned much about social work.

After returning to Japan, I maintained my interest in ‘labor problems’ in American social work.

I returned to Detroit and continued my research again and also enrolled in the MSW Course. A few years later, I enrolled in a doctoral program. I didn’t have to join the program as such, but I was required to be affiliated with a university under the terms of the Fullbright scholarship I received.

Evidently, few Japanese professors had PhD degrees at that time.

There was a large group called Social Work in the World of Work, and at NASW’s annual seminars and other events, labor issues were one of the four focus areas, along with children and families, the elderly, and disabilities. I was conducting research on labor-related problems with American workers, but for me ‘whether they were American or Japanese workers made no difference in value’.

Kana: What was your experience at the International Labour Organization (ILO). In the early 1990s, you served for two years as an ILO Specialist in Poverty Alleviation and Employment Promotion, conducting research on slums in Bangkok and other Asian cities. During that period, the United Nations predicted a population explosion in slums throughout the 21st century. What was your research proposal regarding the ‘disappearance of urban slums’?

Dr. Akimoto: I selected several Asian cities to study the slum shrinkage process. I was afraid that the precious data on the extinction of urban slums would dissipate. I believe that these data have been valuable to human beings. In the US, I was seen as a social work researcher, but in Japan, I was considered as a labor-related issue researcher. I taught labor sociology at Josai University while my American social work colleagues viewed my position at the ILO as international social work (policy advocacy).

Kana: What was your involvement in organisations within the field, and how did it unfold?

Dr. Akimoto: My contact with the social work community in Japan began in 1986 when I was invited to be part of the program committee of the International Conference of Social Work in Japan, which was organized by the three social work international organizations.

Later, I was invited to Japan Women's University and was assigned to a labor social work class and international social work. I was also involved in the Japan Association of Schools of Social Work, the predecessor of the current Japan Association for Social Work Education (JASWE). Its International Relations Committee recruited me as 'a contact person who could coordinate activities with social workers overseas'. I began attending various IASSW and APASWE meetings as Japan's representative.¹

The regional association's prominence considerably weakened around 2000 at the turn of the new millennium. I was called upon to help rebuild the APASWE by IASSW board.

Kana: Could you tell us what it was like to be labelled as an international social work specialist?

Dr. Akimoto: Through the above process, and the fact that I was studying about the US in the US, I gradually became recognized as a researcher specializing in 'international' social work. In other words, I was not particularly interested in constructing the concept of international social work from the beginning but was led in that direction without realizing it.

Kana: How did you perceive the reception of your lecture in Panama?

Dr. Akimoto: The Katherine Kendall Memorial Award Lecture on April 6, 2024 was given a passionate and lengthy ovation by the audience.

There is a strict global assumption that 'there is only one type of social work'. The current social work field is based on the assumption that there is only one form of social work, that is, the Western-rooted professional social work (WPSW), and there are several discussions about the decolonization and indigenization of social work as well as others. My viewpoint in the presentation may have been welcomed because I asserted that, 'No, there could be more than one type'.

People outside the Western world often say, 'No, this is the Western format', or 'It doesn't suit us'; however, we end up reverting to WPSW, which encompasses only one type. Is the dissatisfaction related to this topic building up? We insist on adapting, applying, and indigenizing WPSW in a patchwork manner. Therefore, this is not a proposal for a completely different concept.

The concept of 'Buddhist Social Work (BSW)' presented a completely new perspective: 'Social work does not have to be of only one type'.

Functional alternative

We are now at a stage where we are trying to expand social work to places outside Western world where it does not exist. However, it is not realistic to introduce social work in locations where it cannot be promoted. Even if social work were to be introduced in such locations, it would be difficult to convey and maintain the same quality of social work, given that it is based on the local area and culture. However, activities that fulfill the so-called social work needs in such areas must be implemented. Some activities must fulfill similar social functions. We named it as the 'functional alternatives'. Therefore, I think that the Panama lecture was well-received because I proposed the concept that 'social work ≠ WPSW' in my presentation.

Thus, these counterarguments are predictable. Probably 95% of people in the social work field today would not accept such a concept in the first place. If 'social work is an English term', then as long as we use English, we must follow the dictionary meaning about the concept of English (social work, which was born in the West, late 19th century; industrial revolution; professionalism) and avoid all other definitions. There is a lack of understanding of the first step regarding the language issue. My Panama lecture was based on this understanding of social work."

¹ Prof. Akimoto was first the national representative of Japan to the board in the IASSW. Later, he was elected to the Board Member At-large. In 2009, He ran for the presidency of the Asian Pacific Association for Social Work Education and was elected for two two-year terms.

Kana: What is international social work?

Dr. Akimoto: The theme of the lecture was ‘What is International Social Work (ISW)?’

People discuss International Social Work based on WPSW as a matter of course, but is it sufficient to merely refer to it as ‘international’? We should extend the discussion to international social work, where WPSW does not exist.

The proposal attempted to define ‘social work activities beyond the state borders and a certain way of looking at things’ (external perspective, multiple pairs of eyes). When social work is confined to national areas, there are two ways to ‘break the border’. The first is to connect with foreign countries as needed to solve problems and improve client services in the home country. In other words, ‘international’ social work is meant for and within the confines of the home country. The second is international social work as an external, independent entity that ventures outside the sovereign state. The former is considered ‘domestic social work’ because it is carried out for the benefit of social work in one’s own country, and only the latter is called ‘international social work’ in the research field.

If social work transcends national borders, it will continue to remain within the framework of social work. It is social work that transcends national sovereignty. In other words, and most importantly, social work always includes a part outside the sovereign state.”

Kana: How does the international definition of the social work review project relate to the beginning of Buddhist Social Work Research?

Dr. Akimoto: The definition-reviewing project was a topic that everyone had to be interested in². If the definition got revised once, all the textbooks would be affected. This would maintain the participants’ interest for at least four or five years. It can be said that there was an unintended confluence of activities to revise the international definition of social work, which had been advanced by the Latin American region, especially Brazil, and the reestablishment of regional federations in the Asia-Pacific region.

In APASWE’s process of reviewing the definition, a Vietnamese researcher commented as follows:

In a society in which Buddhism is ingrained in people’s lives, its role in social work is critical. Social work cannot function without an understanding of Buddhism’s elements, functions, and relationships. Buddhism can significantly contribute to this project, he asserted.

A Sri Lankan NGO leader proposed educating Sri Lankan monks about WPSW in a ‘functional alternative’ research project organized by APASWE and the Social Work Research Institute Asia Center for Welfare in Society, Japan College of Social Work. Buddhism is a functional alternative for social work. In its very first preparative meeting, however, participants argued that Buddhism has been practicing the key function of WPSW for 2,500 years. I claimed that WPSW is a functional alternative to Buddhist activities.

Buddhist social work emerged not from research on Buddhism and social work but rather from the discussion of revising the definition of social work.

Kana: What is the concept of Buddhist social work?

Dr. Akimoto: The concept of ‘Buddhist social work’ was introduced at the 2015 International Forum, commemorating the 50th anniversary of Shukutoku University’s founding and the 50th anniversary of the founder of Shukutoku University, Ven. Ryoshin Hasegawa’s passing. The success of this forum was based on the findings of a five-country research project on Buddhism and social work in Asia conducted in 2013 and 2014.

² During his presidency at APASWE, Prof. Akimoto spearheaded the project of reviewing the International Definition of Social Work (2001). The Latin American region, initiated by Brazil, was active in revising the international definition after 10 years. However, the world leaders at the time were not initially positive about this review. In the following time period, Prof. Akimoto became the president with the mission to rebuild APASWE. His strategic approach to rebuilding APASWE focused on international joint research projects that would stimulate intellectual interest. He began by unifying national associations from all over Asia to collaborate on a project to review the international definition of social work.

After the international forum, scholars, Buddhist monks, and NGO leaders from Buddhist-majority Asian countries began conducting further research on Buddhist social work. Their efforts led to swift results, one of which was the ABC model.

The term “Buddhist social work” is used in three different ways:

- A. WPSW conducted by Buddhist temples, monks, and laypeople;
- B. Adapted or indigenized WPSW with a Buddhist component; and
- C. Indigenous social work in the sense that it is not WPSW but embedded in Buddhism, i.e. Buddhist-rooted social work.

BSW, including its definition, of course, is still in its infancy. It needs considerable work so that it matches the richness of WPSW’s findings.

□ Interview conceded Ms. Kana Matsuo (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5162-0555>), Senior Researcher at Asian Research Institute for International Social Work – Japan in October 9, 2024. His lecture manuscript is available online from the ARIISW website: Asian News: Katherine Kendall Award Lecture by Dr. Tatsuru Akimoto, ARIISW Honorary Director, <https://www.shukutoku.ac.jp/news/nid00004146.html> (cited on June 2024).