



## **Profiles in Social Work**

Episode 40 – Sly Sarkisova

**Intro** - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at [www.socialwork.utoronto.ca](http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca) We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

### **Profile – Sly Sarkisova**

My name is Sly Sarkisova. I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty Of Social Work in 2010.

Originally I was very interested in conflict and human relationships. I did an undergrad In Psychology with a Minor in Criminology. And then as I was looking for work I came across the mental health field, a forensic setting; the lockdown facility for folks with mental health issues that were diverted from the criminal justice system. Folks that would end up being charged with crimes who were found not guilty based on having a mental illness, and soon after that realized that even though I had a Psych degree and wasn't calling myself a social worker, that I was doing a lot of social work.

My time at the faculty, I was really looking for a space to tease out the issues that I was working with in practice: systemic issues that people were facing, barriers to accessing resources. I was in the social justice and diversity stream. That was useful, very useful for me, particularly in a couple of the courses a very good space to flesh out some of those issues that are ever present in our work; systemic racism or ableism or classism. We talk the talk around social justice, we talk about equity, we talk about increasing access, and that's a very theoretical thing. So I was really engaged with my professors and my colleagues around making that very practical.



The most important experience I had in my practicum setting was understanding how to navigate a system that you didn't quite particularly gel with. I was very excited to go to this organization and I spent about a month and a half there, but my philosophy on how to practice was completely oppositional to the organizational structure. So I had to figure out how to navigate that to keep myself safe and to get myself out of there with the least impact in the most tactful way. So it just boils down to your personal values. My personal values around how to talk to people, how to communicate with people, were much different than what the organization had in place.

I've learned this time and time again that when you come in with a different perspective, with a different idea of how things should work, people who are already invested aren't necessarily eager to receive that information or to put it to action. And so you have to figure out how you're gonna make it work at all.

Currently I work at a health centre. It's a family health team divided into different clinics. There's physicians and nurses, counsellors, and there is a LGBT clinic, there's a newcomer clinic for new Canadians, and there is an urban health clinic which focuses on folks dealing with mental health issues and possibly substance use or addictions and who are usually underhoused – so they don't have proper homes. I'm part of the urban health team. I'm a counsellor there. And I work a lot with folks who have ongoing mental health issues. Things like depression, anxiety, basically dealing with your inner life, your inner world, and how you relate to other people and your environment. I work with folks who are experiencing challenges around managing their feelings, managing their memories of things that have happened to them and/or may be still happening, who may be coping or functioning by using substances, who also may be transgender identified or queer identified, who also may be dealing with other issues like chronic pain and definitely issues around my access to food and proper housing and things like that.

A typical client on my caseload would be like a fifty year-old Caucasian male who is living in a very risky housing situation where it's supposed to be cheaper housing for them and it's supposed to be something they can maintain but it's very unsafe, there's rampant drug use in their building or drug dealing, there's rampant violence. And these are men that I work with typically are straight, they typically worked for a number of years doing manual labour of some kind or working in construction. Most often they had some hurtful or traumatic experience or abusive experience in their early youth or childhood that disrupted or ended their relationship with their parents, either through the parent being neglectful or the parent suddenly dying; so some traumatic early event that then led them into using substances and then spiralling around that for many years. So



I'm catching folks after a long period of time of them trying to cope with an early loss of some kind.

The other example would be folks who may be trans identified and helping them manage the reactions that they're getting to them being open about their trans identities, in terms of their relationships with their family, their job, or their schooling, or what have you. They may also have early experiences of hurt or trauma or violence or ongoing experiences of violence. Trans folks have to make their way through relationships and systems that don't acknowledge their existence. When you fill out a form of any kind, let's say a medical form or school form, and they ask you what sex you are, the most common answers are male or female. Just by that very question, trans people are erased. A lot of coming out as a trans person is asserting yourself, asserting your identity, asserting yourself as someone that exists, and that should be respected according to your gender preferences. And then there's the hurt and disruption and possibly rejection that can happen with family members who aren't willing or able to accept someone as being trans or perhaps lovers or older friend networks who have seen this person live a particular way and now are having to deal with the person changing in what they perceive to be very drastic way. Trans women face a lot of discrimination and barriers around finding work because they're judged to higher standards around how they present in the world than say a trans male person who passes as a man. Any of the issues that any average person would face would probably be amplified for folks who are visibly trans or who are out as trans. It's not to say that a lot of trans people don't have wonderful supportive friends, family, but there are definitely some serious issues of emotional violence that trans people face as well as physical violence, threats of physical violence in their everyday life.

Folks that come in are seeing a doctor, and the person might be interested in having a safe space to talk about the stresses in their life. So then they would get referred to me. I do clinical counselling. To really center their own strengths and to help them validate their experiences as much as possible. A lot of issues that they have are because they've taken in all this negative messaging and it's living in their person. So helping them offload that, take that off their body, bring them, reframe their understanding of their own experiences in ways that are the most validating.

A lot of it is talking with folks about what is depression? What is anxiety? What does that look like for you? When you think about depression you think about feeling very sad or in a state of grief that is longer than a few days. But that doesn't cover the huge range of experiences that people have. So helping folks understand that depression happens for a reason and their depression is not who they are as a person. How to separate



themselves and their identity from that so they don't feel that they are defective as a person. Talking about how depression is something that maybe you live with for various reasons and we'll talk through those reasons. And then helping them become more aware of what is happening physically and mentally for them so that they can identify it and take steps to cope with it in different ways.

It's very difficult to witness people struggle so much. If you're open, which you should be, in providing a safe space and listening, providing empathy, you can't help but absorb all of the suffering that people are experiencing. And sometimes because major elements of their everyday life, like their housing situation or their financial situation, won't drastically change in the time that you see them, sometimes it feels like you're helping people suffer better. So that wears on the spirit. It's very difficult to maintain your own sense of hopefulness when there's very large structural barriers that people are dealing with.

You have to be tenacious in pursuing your own wellness and your own happiness. You have to ruthlessly create room and space for positive things in your life. I play music every now and then. I'm not a serious musician by any stretch of the imagination. I use it as something that gets me completely out of my analytical brain and just into spirit. Things that involve moving my body I particularly enjoy. Building a tight community around me of friends and spending time low key with them. You have to really, really centre those things in your life. And you can't leave them as an afterthought because your wellness suffers.

You have a very privileged position of witnessing folks go through emotions and experiences that they would not necessarily share with anyone. Or have never shared with anyone. And helping them move through the depths of their experiences and their sorrow and to find their joy within themselves, you are with them, you are a partner with them in that experience and that is very rare, and it's very moving. It's just really lovely when you're working with someone and over a period of time you might not think that you've provided anything concrete for them in terms of moving forward, but then they'll say to you, "If I haven't found you, if I hadn't been coming here, I don't think I'd be here."

For me being a social worker means caring about people and trying to be of use to them in terms of the problems that they face and being true to your own personal values. We have a great sense of humour, a lot of us. We can see through a lot of tragedy and find hope within tragic circumstances and I think that that's a gift. When folks go on to social work, just having more of an idea within yourself of what moves you, what issues really move you. Who do you want to be working with? Why is it meaningful to you? What is it



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that you feel is not just in the world and what do you want to do about it? The biggest thing that I take away from my program experience is that the classrooms and the faculty were amazing. And your relationships with your peers will carry forward once you leave here, and then you'll still be working with them, you'll still be strategizing with them. Just pay attention to those opportunities is really important.

We can stay true to our values. We can use our voices. You can find ways of building relationships that are moving the organization forward in ways that they actually would be excited about - that you're invested in something proactive that they can actually do, and try and do it all the time.

**Outro** - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.utoronto.ca](http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca)