

Career transitions

Kirsty Ayakwah: Hello, and welcome to Season Three of *The Social Work Community* podcast, where we aim to connect you directly with the social workers and the issues affecting the sector.

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the senior careers editor at Community Care, and in this episode we speak to two social workers that started their careers in a different profession altogether. Meet Monisola Osibogun and Pam Shodeinde. Both are social workers in children's services, who started their careers in law. We find out why they transitioned from law to social work, what core skills they've been able to take from the profession into social work, and what keeps them in the sector.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I wanted to start by inviting you both to tell us a bit more about you, so your role and what you do. [0:00:55.6]

Pam Shodeinde: Yeah, so my name is Pam Shodeinde and I'm currently a frontline social work practitioner currently in the East Midlands area. I've been...it's been five years now. It's gone really quick but yeah, it's been five years since I qualified. And I'm currently working with children and families and it's been sweet but challenging. That's the best way to describe it. So that's me.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Great overview. Thanks, Pam. And congratulations on the five years. [0:01:30.2]

Pam Shodeinde: Thank you!

Kirsty Ayakwah: Monisola, tell us a bit more about you. [0:01:35.1]

Monisola Osibogun: Yes. My name is Monisola Osibogun. Okay, I'm a social worker, working as a social worker. And I've been in the field for maybe a little bit over two years now. And it's been incredibly rewarding, I must say. It can be challenging as well. But I work with the family support team, so working with children who are on child-in-need plans, child protection plans on the way to LAK – LAK meaning looked-after children.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thank you so much. Now, I know one thing that ties you both together is you've got backgrounds in law. So I'm really interested to find out how that started, first of all, and then how you transitioned into social work. So Pam, tell us about that journey in law first. [0:02:25.3]

Pam Shodeinde: So I came as a student, international student to the UK, and I did my law degree. So I had every intention to be a lawyer. I finished my law degree and my LLB law, as it was called back then, or is still called. I

completed that and then I went on to do law school. While I was at law school I didn't like it. It was like a lightbulb moment that this isn't what I think I want to do, 'cause then you get a real picture of what life is going to be like as a solicitor.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

So just to interrupt, what was it about it that you envisaged and how different was it when you actually started to do the job? [0:03:04.4]

Pam Shodeinde:

I think at the time it just gave me an insight into what the day-to-day life was going to be like as a solicitor. And I think we were told quite realistically how hard it was to get a training contract as well. So I don't know, it just didn't resonate with me at the time, or maybe it was where I was at that time in my life and I just didn't feel that I wanted to do the law school, I wanted to do my legal practice course at that time. I didn't leave law altogether. I took a break, got married, had kids and then I went back to do a Master's in law, in human rights. 'Cause at the time I was still very much maybe exploring looking at other options and how I can branch out into law but I wanted it to be something that would work for me and something that aligned with my values. So that's why I decided to do human rights law.

So I went back and I did...it was a really, really lovely experience. I loved that particular course. And so whilst I was doing it I went on an internship where I worked with refugees, and whilst I was there it gave me a really good outlook into what life was like beyond my day-to-day life, if that makes sense, working with very vulnerable children, working with families who were destitute, had nowhere to live. So we had to liaise...so part of my role was liaising with the Home Office about funding and – 'cause it was a charity that I was working for at the time – and we had social workers that would come to volunteer their time at the refugee council. And so I got talking with one of them and I was kind of sharing my journey into law and then she was like, 'Mm, you could think about being a social worker.' And I was like, 'Okay, that's actually something I've never really thought about.'

And yeah, so that's how the journey into social work started. And I think for me, I was quite resolved at that point that...because I think one of my dreams as well was either...I think I'd given up on being a solicitor. That definitely was something that I didn't want to do. So I was looking at all my other options. And one of the things I was thinking about was if I did my human rights law then maybe I can then go on to work for the United Nations or, you know, some type of international body or something. So that's kind of where I was kind of seeing myself going. But I think having seen how these social workers would come in and how they interacted with the families and the children...and I remember particularly there was this woman who was pregnant, and how this social worker...so how she helped support her and...it was just so beautiful to see, and I was like, 'This is what I want to do.' And yeah, that's how I started and that's how I transitioned.

I didn't transition straight away. When I finished my LLM I then took some time out because obviously I'd just had children and I just wanted to be more present at the time as a parent. But when I was ready, I'd done quite a lot of volunteering work with some looked-after children and some care-leavers as well, and then I did some

mentoring work. So around that time was mainly just community work that I was doing but more volunteering. And then finally transitioned properly into social work in 2017.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay. So what was that time period between when you were training as a lawyer, decided it wasn't for you, took a break? So how many years are we talking about? [0:06:34.0]

Pam Shodeinde: Oh, quite a long time. So I left in 2008. I did my legal practice course, or started it, in 2008. I left in 2008 and I took, I think, altogether four years. 'Cause I went back in 2012 back to do my Master's in law in 2012.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay. And then your decision to become a social worker came...what year was that? [0:07:00.1]

Pam Shodeinde: I put my application in in 2016. I think I deferred and then went back in 2017.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay. Thank you, Pam. So Monisola, how similar or different was your experience and where you started in law? [0:07:14.2]

Monisola Osibogun: Yeah. I think my story is quite similar to Pam's. I think the difference is I just went onto practice. So I came to the UK as a student. I went to do a foundation in law. I was so determined to study law. I had my first degree in law. I went on to do a Master's in corporate governance, LLM in law as well. Then I proceeded to law school. Finished from law school then went ahead to have a career I loved for ten years as a barrister.

So I started out working with a top-tier law firm, a very prestigious one, and working with high-net-worth clients and also with well-known organisations. I did that for four years. Then I proceeded to work as an in-house lawyer with an asset management company, and I was there for about a year and I did a bit more compliance, regulatory, working with them to support regulatory compliance and vetting agreements, basically.

Then there was a day I was driving home. I love to listen to the radio. So I think there was a topic about sexual abuse, and it was one of those shows whereby you get people to call into the show to talk about what they've heard. And literally I could hear people – some people, not all – were really attacking the victim like, you know, 'She was dressing in a very provocative manner,' you know, maybe probably, 'Why did you go there? Why were you drunk? Why were you out late at night? You made yourself available for this.' And so it's like shaming the victim and it's exonerating the perpetrator. And I think that really got to me just in time. I think that triggered something in me and that was when I made an application to the Ministry of Justice to become a prosecutor.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And this is in Nigeria? [0:09:15.4]

Monisola Osibogun: Yes. When I finished my Master's here, I finished LMM here, then I moved back to Nigeria. I went to the Nigerian law school. Then I started my career in law there.

I started working as a prosecutor in 2016. I did a lot of sexual offences cases and I think a lot of murder cases, [unclear – 0:09:39.0] financial offences, anyone you could think about. But my passion really, really was with the sexual abuse. And there was a victim who I was the prosecutor for the case, went to court, got judgement, and I was so delighted that, you know, she got judgement at last because it was something that took maybe, probably about three to four years to conclude. And when I spoke with the victim, you know, to hear the news about, you know, the judgement went in our favour, and she looked so sad. And I was like, 'Okay, I thought you wanted justice?' That was when I realised that justice is actually subjective and means different things to different people. And I said, you know, 'What would you have preferred to happen for you?' And she said, 'I just wanted them to acknowledge that he did that to me and for him to just say sorry. I don't want him to go to prison. I just want him to acknowledge because he lied throughout the whole trial,' which she found quite emotionally draining. Because you know, people in the society were already condemning her, you know, 'You went into his room. Why did you do this? Why did you do that?' And I realised that my role as a prosecutor ended there. I couldn't provide her with... I mean personally, in my professional capacity, could not provide her with the aftercare. The case has ended. Where does she go from here? But that would be something which can be done by therapists, which I'm not equipped to do. And I think that was when I started thinking seriously about doing something else whereby I can really work with people directly and make that impact. And I think that's where my journey into social work began.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Fantastic. You both have that strong reflection where it's related to people and their journeys and their emotions and being able to support them. I see that connection with the both of you.

So Monisola, just tell us about how that happened from that point where you decided, 'Actually, I need to maybe transition into another sphere where I can support people,' to becoming a social worker. [0:12:00.9]

Monisola Osibogun:

Yeah. So in 2019 I moved to England because I took a leave of absence from my role, and as a prosecutor then I came here saying to myself, 'Do I want to continue this or do I want to just do something different?' And as at that point, I just wanted something that would allow me to give back to the society, if you get what I mean. Because I had a near-death experience myself and I wanted to make an impact. It might be as little, but I just want to make sure I'm able to help people who are in difficult situations or who need me to support them and make their story, you know, turn around positively for them.

So in 2019 I came here and started thinking about what to do. Then in 2020 I consulted...and I think one of the people I actually spoke to was actually Pam, on this call!

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Oh wow!

Monisola Osibogun:

And you know, the energy and positivity about social work was absolutely brilliant. And I went to volunteer. So I will echo what Pam said earlier about, you know, volunteering, going out there to, you

know, to see things for yourself. So I volunteered. I volunteered with Red Cross. Then also during Covid I volunteered for the NHS whereby I was calling people, checking in on them just to know they are good. And then I just said, you know, one thing, 'I think I'm ready. I need to start something.'

So I enrolled for MSc in social work, and that's the start of how the journey began. And I've been loving it.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Fantastic. I love the fact that you two were on similar paths and were able to support each other. That's really great. [0:13:53.9]

Pam Shodeinde: Yeah. So Moni reached out to me, oh God, how many years ago now?

Monisola Osibogun: So we're talking about four years or five years ago.

Pam Shodeinde: About four years. And I was at the start of my career. I think I'd just finished my ASYE when she made contact with me. And I was very happy to support her because I could feel her energy. And I think that's a really important to make about becoming a social worker, because this is a job that...I don't think people come into social work – and I don't want to assume that people come into social work just because it's a job. I think you need to go beyond that, there needs to be that extra layer of something to keep you going, especially when things get difficult. And that was what I got a sense of when I spoke to Moni, and obviously gaining her view on her past experiences with work, being a prosecutor in Nigeria and her law career, I said, 'Yeah, I think you would definitely thrive in social work.'

So that was how we started. And yeah, she is where she is now and I'm really happy for her.

Kirsty Ayakwah: That's absolutely great. I wanted to explore those skills that you feel that you both have been able to transition and take from being in the law space into social work. [0:15:08.9]

Monisola Osibogun: I think for me it's...some big ones I will say is advocacy first, and communication. But I also had to learn and unlearn things on my journey because when it comes to advocacy I advocate from a criminal justice perspective. But with social work training I'm able to learn how to advocate from a social justice perspective. So those are the differences.

And also communication too as well. I recall when I was doing my 70-day placement and when I was asked to write my first letter to a family, and it was so legalistic, honestly! With a lot of big words. And I learnt with social work practice you must be able to connect with the people you're working with. So you need to understand where they are and be able to meet them there, to take them to where they want to be.

So I think communication and advocacy. Fantastic two skills I was able to transfer from my legal practice to social work.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. And Pam, what would you add to that or build on? [0:16:24.5]

Pam Shodeinde:

Definitely I agree. I think...for me it was slightly different because I didn't go into practice, in terms of I didn't practice law. It was more the learning. But I would say that from the learning, one of the things I would definitely say has helped me is working in a fast-paced environment. Because social work is very fast-paced and you have to be on your toes in terms of decision-making. You have to be able to make decisions very quickly, know how to navigate different...it's almost like you have so many windows open in your head. Practically that's how it is with social work. And doing that in my law degree I was able to have those skills and take them on.

In terms of when I was doing my volunteering role, I think one of the main skills I was able to harness would be empathy, being able to connect with people on a very human level. Sometimes we get caught up in that power dynamic. You know, you're going into a family. There's the rhetoric around who social workers are and what we represent. 'You're here to take my children.' You know, that's the first thing you get. But very quickly and – I'm not saying I'm perfect at it - but I'd say one of the things I'm learning and still learning to do is respecting where people are in their journeys and not being judgemental. Of course, we do come across extreme situations where children do have to be removed because it's not safe for them to be in that home environment, but it's still being respectful and understanding about how we go about that.

So I would say those things I've been able to learn throughout my social work journey, and I would say that it did start with me working in human rights, within that human rights environment.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

And that involved, based on our conversations before, incarcerated adults, mainly men? [0:18:19.4]

Pam Shodeinde:

Yeah. So one of the modules that I took was penal law, which explores different penal systems across different countries. I found that really interesting, and one of the things that actually I wanted to do, quite similar to Moni, was I had the opportunity to go to America to volunteer. So I had two options, either to go to America to work with Death Row inmates, which would have been a fantastic thing to do, and I still think about it every now and again, what an opportunity that would have been like. But I couldn't go at the time, as I said. You know, I'd just had a family. I had kids and I'd just got married and it was just not going to...it wasn't feasible. But it was quite an interesting module exploring all the different countries and obviously all the different penal codes and how they apply. And I was really intrigued – and still am, actually – about the death penalty. I'm very much against it, particularly in terms of how it impacts, in America, how it impacts on black males, and obviously the statistics there are quite overwhelming, the miscarriage of justice and how people sometimes have been put to death but new information surfaces that actually, you know, they were quite innocent of the crime. And I think there was even one quite recently where the evidence was quite clear that this person was innocent but the governor refused and, you know, the person eventually was put to death. So I'm very much against it but I'm still very, very intrigued by...I do listen to a lot of crime podcasts as well, still to this day!

- Kirsty Ayakwah: But I can also see those intersections with the work that you probably do on a day-to-day basis. And I was quite interested in a couple of things you said. You talked about learning empathy, and I think I'd always envisaged that's something you can't learn – you either have it or you don't. But please correct me if I'm wrong. [0:20:14.4]
- Pam Shodeinde: I think for you to be a social worker you do have to have certain skills that are innate in you. But I think that your level of empathy increases or should increase. Because a lot of the time a lot of us are products of our environment. So you might not have been confronted with certain life challenges and so you can't relate. So I think that to some degree you need to be able to step away or step aside from yourself to be able to see other people in their lived experiences, to be able to support them effectively. So that's what I mean about learning empathy, because if I didn't have the experience I had, I would say I've been quite sheltered, in terms of my life experiences, you know? Just being able to up and go, you know, eat what I want, live in a house that's warm. You know, yeah, we do see these things on the news but you can't really relate to it in that sense. But seeing how people are so destitute, a woman who's eight months' pregnant, she'd had to stay in a hostel because, you know, she had no housing. She'd been raped in her country and found a way to come here. So it really opened my eyes to a different world that I wanted to be able to...how can I help, you know?
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Mm. And Monisola, you're nodding vigorously. [0:21:31.7]
- Monisola Osibogun: Yes. Yes, I'm nodding because I believe those skills, you may have them in you, but like Pam said, the more you work with people, the more you acquire more and understand the reason for why things are the way they are. And you become less judgemental in that situation. And if you asked me from a legal point of view before I transitioned into social work, I think I've changed slightly in my approach when I'm in court, when I was practising in minor courts. So everything that's going to go through the criminal courts that day, from the first case to the last case, I will kind of like handling everything. And I kind of, like, dictated how things will go. Well, you can't work like that as a social worker, no. It has to be all inclusive.
- One of the theories, approach that [unclear – 0:22:33.3] person-centred approach whereby you acknowledge people in respect of their own lived experience. And when you're making decisions, you make them to be part of that decision-making process. And like I've said before, as a social worker you have a rare privilege that different professions don't give you, which is people allowing you into their lives. This is taking you from the surface to the innermost, deepest bit of them. And I think it's a rare privilege. And I think, you know, as social workers we should not take that for granted. Because you can only imagine for yourself having someone you're just meeting for the first or second time asking you about your story, your life. And they make you feel so comfortable to start sharing that with them.
- So for me, empathy is something that grows. And the more exposed you are, the more you become empathetic. And more the empathetic you become, if it's well-managed then you'll see your resilience level also growing. Because if you don't manage your resilience levels then

it might affect your empathy. I think they kind of work hand-in-hand as well.

Pam Shodeinde:

Yeah. I definitely agree with that.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Wow, I've learnt a lot today. Thank you. I was going to also touch on things that I think you guys have in spades. So public speaking – you would have had to have done that in presentation work. And also navigating court work. I'm sure those things came maybe a little bit more naturally because you'd had that background than other social workers that hadn't had the law background? [0:24:14:5.]

Monisola Osibogun:

I would say for me, maybe probably speaking, you know, in public for example, in an open court whereby...because for criminal prosecution members of the public will attend the courts. You've got journalists in the court reporting your case about how that is going. So I think also being prim and proper. They teach you that. How to be approachable, how to speak, how to be considerate, how to present yourself, how to comport yourself. So for me, as a social worker as well, I believe I'm able to transfer that to my practice from being a lawyer to being a social worker. I don't think that for granted presentation approach, the way we communicate, the way we write to people, the way we talk in public. So with social work to a large extent you don't have a public and a private face. You have to carry on the way you're going to behave at work, you need to make sure you're doing the same at home. You can be telling people that it's not proper to mistreat children, not to protect children, then if you get home you can't be doing otherwise. So you have to make sure the standard is quite high. So you need to be ready to maintain that standard.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Absolutely. I do feel that people have a particular perception of law. You know, especially if you're of a certain community there are people who say if you're a lawyer, that's what they want their children to be. Now, it's interesting that a lot of the things you've both spoken about are qualities and expertise that you need when you're a social worker, but immediately we don't necessarily...or the public doesn't think of social work in the same way. What do you feel that we can do, or the sector can do, to create that sensibility in people? [0:26:06.2]

Pam Shodeinde:

I think that definitely has to be a different approach in how the media portrays social workers. I think that there's a very negative connotation around the profession. 'Cause the only time social work is ever spoken about is when something's gone wrong or something's happened. It's a very task-centred, heavily task-centred profession 'cause you're having to juggle quite a lot, and you need to be able to manage a lot of different things at the same time. So that in itself makes social workers quite, I would say, quite special beings because on average you're working with about 20-odd families and you're having to meet deadlines, you're having to organise meetings. Sometimes you've got court cases that, you know, are...it's a lot that you're doing. And you know, I think beyond what the media says or thinks about the profession, social workers are very special people, you know, that do very special work. They really do genuinely change lives, and I think that needs to be spoken about a lot more than what we think about social work.

Back to your question about whether or not public speaking has been better, I would say I think so because it's part of the training that we have to go through. So it's definitely helped my public speaking and even my writing as well. I feel like going through that training as a lawyer or, you know, doing law, there's a very high level of expectation on how you should write as a lawyer-in-training. So I think yeah, definitely I feel like it's definitely helped me in that area.

Communication as well, really important. Being professional.

Monisola Osibogun:

I think what we like to hang onto as well is having a legal background also helps you multitask in the sense that, you know, you have things just being dropped on you at work as a lawyer. When I trained to become a social worker and I started working as a social worker, I've got colleagues who are like, 'Aren't you overwhelmed with all this work you're doing?' I'm like, 'Okay, this is still a lot better than law!' You know? So it teaches you, you know, not to say being a social worker is not hard enough. It is hard. You're dealing with emotions, you're dealing with writing, you're dealing with a lot of things at the same time. But to me, I think the legal background just gave me...is like a cushion that made me balance quite well because it's something that I've been exposed to for, you know, ten years prior to becoming a social worker. So I think multitasking is, I think is one of the...

And I think being able to critically analyse things as well, because you do that, like when you have a written submission you need to put forward to court, and when it comes to writing statements to courts, that comes quite easily to me, compared to maybe, probably someone who has not, you know, trained as a lawyer. So it's because it's something that I've done for a very long time. So bringing that into social work practice does make that quite easy for me to manage.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

So I guess anyone out there who's listening who maybe has a law background or is thinking of a second job or a second career, maybe they could consider social work. [0:29:3.6]

Pam Shodeinde:

Yeah, yeah. Definitely. It's a worthy profession.

Monisola Osibogun:

I would also say that they should make sure they do their research very well. Make sure you know the positives, the challenges there. And I can tell you it's rewarding. But the challenge is there. Go for conferences, go and network, talk to people who have worked in there area. They're able to guide. When I started thinking about, you know, social work I spoke with Pam and a few other people as well. I attended meetings whereby there were other social workers there. And I was able to make an informed decision before going into it. So I think it's better to get the advice first, do your research first so that you're able to make an informed decision.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

And I like that about both of you. Of your own volition you went out there, you looked for work experience, you were driven to find out for yourself before making that decision. So that's really positive.

Just lastly, what's next for you both in terms of your career progression? [0:30:£5.4]

Pam Shodeinde: Well, for me I'm currently in the phase of starting my practice education course. 'Cause again, that's the next level of support for me. I'm very passionate about supporting students. So I just want to take that to the next level now.

And possibly go independent at some point, be an independent social worker. I think that would definitely be the next steps for me.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And you, Monisola? [0:30:56.7]

Monisola Osibogun: For me, I still plan to do more of the frontline for some time because like I always tell people, I think it's the bread and butter of social work. If you know that, then you can fly as high as you want to fly.

But I think that one I'm actually looking at eventually is to do more policy, things that can make our work easier. Because it's not about working hard, it's about working smart. And one of the reasons why we've got gap and retention issues is because of the workload. It's how can we manage this whereby we're still delivering fantastic services to the people we work with, at the same time making people have that work-life balance too as well, because most people are leaving the profession because of work-life balance. But we want institutions whereby it's rewarding, yes, but also a work-life balance for them.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Very laudable. So we've got to keep our eyes peeled on both of you, an ISW and also working in policy. Okay. [0:32:02.0]

Pam Shodeinde: Yeah, definitely.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Well, thank you so, so much for sharing this insight.

Pam Shodeinde: Thank you. Thank you very much. It's been...

Monisola Osibogun: Thank you for having us.

Pam Shodeinde: ...yeah, absolutely.

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