

Viewing Human Rights and Social Work through an International Perspective

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Most social workers graduating from universities in the United States will undoubtedly seek work within this country. Only a few will qualify and actively seek positions with the United Nations or other organizations that engage in international social work.

The question arises then as to whether social workers need to consider social issues and concerns with an international perspective? If yes, then why? As this article will explain, the social work profession is a human rights profession. While the infusion of human rights into local social work policies and practices does not necessarily require knowledge about policies and practices in other countries, a true embrace of human rights does require looking beyond local circumstances.

Social Work and Human Rights

The social work profession places great importance upon the concept of human rights (Ife, 2001; Staub-Bernasconi, 1998). The International Federation of Social Workers states that "social workers respect the basic human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration" (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000). The achievement of human rights for all people is a fundamental prerequisite for a caring world. Social workers believe that attainment of basic human rights requires positive action by individuals, communities, nations and international groups, as well as a clear duty not to inhibit those rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights contemplates international cooperation and knowledge sharing as a means of realiz-

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ing human rights for everyone (United Nations, 1948). By recognizing the international aspect of human rights, social workers can establish connections to international counterparts and frequently gain important knowledge about common social work issues. The primary code of ethics for U. S. social workers recognizes the importance of viewing social issues involving human rights within a global, as well as local, context:

Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support and expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and *promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people* [emphasis added]. (NASW, 1996, p. 27)

As a human rights profession, social work focuses on both the individual (or group) and the individual's environment with the acknowledgement that environment plays a key role in the fulfillment of an individual's needs (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Kirst-Ashman & Hull 1993; van Wormer, 1997; Germain & Gitterman, 1996). To assist individuals, social workers need to look beyond immediate circumstances of the individuals and consider the broader, more global level (Goldstein, 1992). This dual focus, individual and community, national and global, distinguishes social work from other helping professions, like psychology and nursing. Those professions also address individual issues but generally do not have a mandate to challenge environmental impediments in resolving those issues.

The U.S. social work code of ethics embodies human rights principles and does so with the intent that social workers will become familiar with human rights in a global context. Infusing human rights into the social work profession requires the understanding that human rights must apply to all individuals, wherever they live. To view human rights solely within a local prism contradicts the very foundation of human rights.

Defining Human Rights

As a term, human rights conjure up all types of meanings. However, the starting point for defining human rights must be the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, a document brought into being by the United Nations in 1948. Every country now belonging to the United Nations has agreed to accept the Universal Declaration as its own code of conduct, although, in this respect, promises do not always translate into actual adherence to human rights.

The Universal Declaration contains three distinct sets or generations of human rights. The first set or generation lists political and individual freedoms that are similar to what Americans view as human rights. The right to a fair trial, freedom of speech and religion, freedom of movement and assembly and guarantees against discrimination, slavery and torture fall within these political and civil human rights (United Nations, 1948, Articles 2-15). However, the Universal Declaration goes further in defining human rights. A second category of human rights contains economic, social and cultural rights that aim to ensure everyone a fruitful standard of living based on the resources of that country (United Nations, 1948, Articles 16-27).

A third and final set of human rights involves collective rights among nations. Under the Universal Declaration, everyone "is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms" listed in the declaration can be fully realized (United Nations, 1948, Articles 28-30). Essentially promotion of collective human rights requires intergovernmental cooperation on world issues like economic development and environmental protection. One group or country should not dictate conditions to another group when these conditions would inhibit the growth or prosperity of the other group. Industrialized countries should not take advantage of less economically developed countries by exploiting resources (Reichert, 2001).

In view of the actual meaning of human rights, it becomes clear that human rights do not exist in a vacuum or simply within a particular country. When considering human rights, it matters what occurs in other countries because human rights do not stop at the borders of individual countries. Policies in one country frequently impact on the environment in other countries. Just as it matters in the United States how social work policies and practices impact on indigenous individuals and groups, it also matters how, in a global sense, wealthy countries like the United States interact with less economically developed countries.

On an international level, treatment of less economically developed societies by wealthier ones inherently reflects a particular set of values. From a human rights perspective, the third category of human

rights, the collective or solidarity component, requires intergovernmental cooperation on world issues like economic, environmental and social development. Because social work is a human rights profession, this international perspective of human rights has great importance to social workers in the United States. To more specifically illustrate this aspect of human rights, the following case study will demonstrate the interrelated nature of human rights.

Case Study

One of the most severe health problems throughout the world concerns HIV/AIDS. Hardly any country remains untouched by this disease, although some countries have incurred greater exposure to HIV/AIDS than others have. African countries in particular have suffered the most from the HIV/AIDS crisis. Millions of Africans have died or live with the disease. A family might have lost family members and the providers are unable to care for her or his family because of the untreated illness. A child or adult having the disease might not be able to afford medical treatment or medicine to treat the disease. This personal tragedy affects the economic and cultural environment of many African societies.

Other than as an academic exercise, what importance does the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa have for social workers in the United States? Specific human rights provisions state that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which human rights can be fully realized (United Nations, 1948, Article 28). In other words, the entitlement to a social and international order in which human rights can be fully realized imposes obligations upon all countries, not just those affected by a crisis like that of HIV/AIDS. The United States, with its enormous economic and technological strength, is better positioned than most countries to help accomplish this goal.

In addition to a social and international order that promotes human rights, everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security through national effort and international co-operation, in accordance with the resources of each country (United Nations, 1948, Art. 22). The United States, with its greater resources, has a duty to cooperate with other countries in bringing about everyone's "social security" and "economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for "dignity" and "free development" of the personality (Art. 22). Of course, this does not require or justify the United States to unilaterally force change in countries that make no effort to satisfy human rights.

Cooperation with other countries is paramount.

How can the United States assist African countries in the HIV/AIDS crisis? Most countries of the world belong to the World Trade Organization. While the WTO may appear to bring order and stability to the global trading system, WTO rules can also violate human rights (Booker & Minter, 2001). Levinson (2001) also points directly to public health issues to illustrate this point.

Public health is a stark example. Diseases that are under control in the developed world cause millions of premature deaths in the developing world. One of the main reasons is a group of WTO patent protection laws that have had a substantial impact on the price of drugs within the developing world where people's need for drugs is great and their ability to pay is not. (p. 5)

WTO patent rules can benefit wealthy countries and punish developing countries. Under WTO rules, all WTO member states are required to grant at least twenty-year patent protection in all fields of technology, including drugs. These rules prevent countries from producing or importing low-cost generic copies of otherwise patented drugs. If a country violates those rules, then penalties could be imposed against the violating country (Levinson, 2001). With HIV/AIDS, where most cases are now in developing countries, especially those of Africa, the inability to afford drugs for treating HIV/AIDS literally becomes a life or death matter. However, if countries have insufficient funds to purchase high-cost patented drugs for treatment and may not produce or import generic substitutes without penalty, then most likely no treatment will occur. The result is a knowing complicity in the deaths of HIV/AIDS victims for the sake of protecting profits of Western drug companies that own the patents to HIV/AIDS drugs.

From a human rights position, the inventor of a drug is entitled to ownership protection (United Nations, 1948, Article 27, Section 2). However, the Universal Declaration also requires international cooperation in bringing social security to everyone. If a WTO rule prevents a country from treating citizens with HIV/AIDS drugs because of the inability to purchase patented drugs, should an exception exist that allows the country to produce or purchase generic drugs? Or should the companies owning the patents be required to either relinquish the patent or lower the cost of patented drugs in cases where many lives

are at stake? The response to that question possibly depends upon who defines the rules concerning international cooperation.

Ironically, when the threat of widespread anthrax attacks occurred in the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. government considered ways to economically obtain drugs to fight anthrax, including the circumventing of a patent on a key anthrax drug held by a German company. Yet, the U.S. government had not been so gracious in its position on allowing poorer countries the right to obtain cheap anti-HIV/AIDS drugs. Curiously, after September 11, 2001, the “United States and its allies finally gave in to Third World demands that poor countries facing epidemics such as AIDS should be allowed to sidestep international patent law so as to make or buy cheap generic drugs” (Ford, 2001, p. 10).

The social work code of ethics (NASW, 1996) states that the profession should promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people. Attention to human rights also requires social workers in the United States to address issues like HIV/AIDS in other countries. Social workers can present their views on these issues to legislators and make known their position from a human rights perspective.

The HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa and other countries does involve social workers in the United States. If the U.S. social work profession is truly a human rights profession, then attention to international social work issues must become a component of social work policy and practice.

Right to Development

Historically, there has been strong resistance to the idea of a collective right to development – the right of people in poorer countries to a fairer share of global wealth and resources (Whrnet-issues, 2001). The right to development means that wealthier countries, international development agencies and financial institutions are held accountable for the impact of poverty on human rights. Increasingly, the right to development is also understood to encompass the rights of people in poor and marginalized communities within developed countries.

Not providing medicine to treat a life-threatening disease clearly presents a human rights issue. Under the Universal Declaration, everyone is entitled to adequate health care and countries should work together to ensure this health care (United Nations, Article 25, Section 1). As discussed above, if a poor country cannot afford a medicine

patented in a wealthier country but could purchase a generic alternative manufactured locally, a human rights issue arises. Human rights principles clearly state that wealthier countries should assist less economically developed countries in realizing human rights specified in the Universal Declaration. The social work code of ethics also states that social workers should promote social justice for all. The HIV/AIDS crisis presents a vivid example of how social issues in other countries do matter to the social work profession in the United States.

The human right to development can also be illustrated in concrete terms by this fact: On September 11, 2001, the day terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, "more than 35,000 of the world's children died of starvation. A similar number have perished from hunger every day since then in developing countries" (Ford, 2001, p. 7). In an attempt to look for root causes of terrorism, wealthy countries cannot avoid examination of poverty and injustice in less developed countries. As stated by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in November 2001, "One illusion has been shattered on 11 September: that we can have the good life of the West, irrespective of the state of the rest of the world" (as cited in Ford, 2001, p. 7). Acknowledgment that a self-centered West can no longer ignore the rest of the world is at least a start in tackling human rights issues of the third generation.

Unless the haves of the world pay more attention to the have-nots, a system of "global apartheid" may be inevitable (Booker & Minter, 2001). Specifically, they use this phrase to refer to an:

international system of minority rule whose attributes include: differential access to basic human rights; wealth and power structured by race and place; structural racism, embedded in global economic processes, political institutions and cultural assumptions; and the international practice of double standards that assume inferior rights to be appropriate for certain 'others,' defined by location, origin, race or gender. (p. 11)

Seven of the most wealthy countries in the world have only 12 percent of the world's population, but use over 70 percent of its resources in cash terms and dominate all major decision-making bodies (Alexander, 1996). With this discrepancy in the distribution of resources, it is probably not a question of if, but when, voices of the have-nots become much louder. The danger of not seriously addressing human development issues lies in the consequences of this neglect: famine, disease,

violence, civil war, terrorism, and many other ills have roots within the global apartheid mentioned above.

Summary

Most social workers will probably not work outside their own country of origin. However, viewing social work as more than a domestic concern does matter to the profession. Social work is a human rights profession, which requires attention to issues in other countries and consideration of how those issues connect different countries and societies.

While this article has focused on an international perspective of human rights, viewing human rights as an international concept misses the point of human rights. Social workers should not distinguish between human rights in the United States and human rights elsewhere. The underlying significance of human rights transcends borders and cultures. Human rights belong to everyone, wherever they live.

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