Introduction

Social Work Perspectives on Human Rights

ELISABETH REICHERT

Until recently the social work profession in the United States and other countries has been reluctant to integrate concepts of human rights within social work policies and practices. Although social work academics may give lip service to human rights as an important element of the social work curriculum, the reality often shows that social work has yet to fully embrace or acknowledge the significance of human rights within the profession.

One of the challenges within the social work profession, particularly in the United States, is to encourage the profession to give more than passing attention or an obligatory nod to human rights. A significant obstacle to overcoming that challenge is the lack of appropriate literature in this area. Most academic books on human rights have little to do with social work and usually shortchange discussion about economic, social, and cultural rights. Political and civil rights dominate the themes of those books, which clearly prompt social workers to question the relevance of human rights to their profession. Yet principles of economic, social, and cultural human rights permeate social work ethics, values, and principles. Therefore the objective of this book is to provide the social worker with provocative discussions to help understand the relevance of human rights to the profession.

This book, a human rights reader comprised of chapters written by educators and professionals from around the world, addresses the large gap
currently existing within social work literature. The various chapters focus on one primary theme: human rights within a social work context, with emphasis on economic, social, and cultural human rights, as these areas are most relevant to social workers today. The writings in this book reflect the diversity of the authors, whose backgrounds include experiences in many different parts of the world. Thus their views on economic, social, and cultural human rights issues are perceived from different angles, including that of Western versus non-Western nations. Questions the chapters address include the following:

- How does the social work profession integrate human rights into policies and practices?
- Can the notion of cultural relativism be reconciled with a universal concept of human rights?
- Do human rights truly promote economic and social development, or are they merely a tool of rich, Western societies in their effort to dominate less economically developed countries?
- How does gender relate to the realization of human rights?

While acknowledging the complexity of human rights issues, the authors’ goal is to make sense out of this complexity, and, in doing so, they necessarily challenge and confront the established thinking.

Issues

The authors address the following issues, among others, to introduce readers to specific, contemporary human rights issues within a social work context:

- Should political and civil human rights have greater priority than economic and social rights?
- Social work is a profession with the mission to help overcome injustices on a national and international level. Do wealthy nations have a duty to assist less economically developed countries?
- Cultural relativism generally refers to a culturally specific view of a particular issue. Within a human rights context, cultural relativism could be used to excuse the practice of a culturally specific theme
Introduction: Social Work Perspectives on Human Rights

even though this conflicts with human rights principles. Should cultural relativism excuse apparent human rights violations?

- What role does gender play in the practice of human rights?
- Should lower-income individuals be entitled to basic human rights, including health care?
- Can lawyers and social workers find a common cause in promoting human rights?

Chapter 1, my contribution to the volume, discusses how human rights provide the social work profession with a more global and contemporary set of guidelines that fall outside the overused category of “social justice.” I emphasize that human rights are never without controversy or tension, especially within the context of cultural relativism and universality.

Lena Dominelli writes, in chapter 2, that, in theory, both the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of School of Social Work stress the importance of integrating human rights into theory and practice. Social workers’ particular skills enable them to play a key role in ensuring that people everywhere enjoy their human rights. But to make the most of this expertise, the social work curriculum needs to provide a framework for acquiring the knowledge and skills that will assist in promoting human rights. Dominelli advocates that human rights emerge from their invisible status and become a subject explicitly covered in the academy and in practice.

The concept of “global distributive justice” is analyzed as a human right in chapter 3 by Joseph Wronka. This innovative and thought-provoking look at the encompassing problem of rich country versus poor country raises important issues for social workers everywhere. Should nations and individuals with more wealth address this inequality within the context of human rights? If this view prevails, would wealthier nations be more likely to recognize a global redistribution?

A hotly debated aspect of human rights is the relationship between culturally specific practices and universal principles. Jim Ife, in chapter 4, examines issues of universality versus cultural relativism and the tension between the two concepts. Universalism has led some to criticize human rights as part of a Western imperialist project. Ife believes that issues of universalism and cultural relativism require a careful and sophisticated analysis, that extreme views of these two positions are untenable. He also addresses shortfalls in a solely legalistic approach to human rights. The
law, he contends, cannot intervene in the private domain for anything more than the most blatant of abuses, such as child abuse or domestic violence. He stresses the importance of defining human rights from below and helping people to develop their own definitions of human rights.

Turning to issues of global development, James Midgley points out, in chapter 5, that economic development brings prosperity to only a segment of the world population and that a sizable proportion of the rural population continues to live in poverty. According to Midgley, social development theory and practice have not systematically incorporated human rights, and he shows how various human rights instruments relevant to social development can be used to promote a rights-base approach to social work. By acceding to a human rights treaty, government programs dealing with education, health, nutrition, maternal well-being, and shelter are no longer discretionary but have a force of law. Despite the proverbial claim than economic, social, and cultural rights cannot legally be enforced, Midgley cites examples of the successful use of legal means to redress economic and social human rights. Known as public interest litigation, these cases are often pursued by human rights advocacy organizations working together with nongovernmental organizations engaged in social development.

Examining a topic closer to the economic and social human rights issues of the United States, authors Mary Bricker-Jenkins, Carrie Young, and Cheri Honkala, in chapter 5, describe the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, which began in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia with a group of mothers on welfare meeting in a church basement to talk about how they would feed themselves and their children, given recent cuts in welfare and medical assistance. The group learned about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and taught others about it, and now relies on it as an organizing tool. The authors also describe the community-based roots of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC). The activism of the organizations involved in this campaign illustrate why social workers need to understand and study economic and social human rights. Without such knowledge, they lack an important tool in dealing with societal challenges of poverty and economic deprivation.

The author of chapter 7, Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, examines the prevalent view that, for historical and philosophical reasons, political and civil rights take priority over economic, social, and cultural rights. Part of this neglect can be traced to U.S. and European policies favoring civil and political rights over economic and social rights. Human rights are indivisible,
however, and the realization of these rights suffers without full recognition of economic and social rights.

Janice Wood Wetzel, the author of chapter 8, examines women’s rights as human rights from many different angles: women’s economic rights; their rights to health, protection against violence, and reproductive health; and HIV/AIDS and the law. She stresses the importance of a psychological analysis of women’s universal oppression, as confirmed, for instance, in Amnesty International’s conclusion that women suffer more violations of human rights than any other group worldwide, both in times of war and through traditional practices excused by culture. Wood Wetzel also argues that social justice and human rights as abstract aspirations are deficient. Human rights must be infused throughout the social work curriculum in a way that makes their implementation real. The principles must be embedded in every course of study and be central to every aspect of professional education.

In chapter 9 Katherine van Wormer examines the status of women in prison and views their circumstances in terms of human rights violations, highlighting incidents of rape, revenge, deprivation, forced nudity, pregnancies in a closed system, and forced abortions. These practices come to light in the United States in lawsuits described by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Van Wormer links women’s conditions in prison to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, which states that “everyone has the rights to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being [of the individual].” She concludes that human rights violations in prison result from the prison system, as individual jails are poorly equipped to deal with major societal problems such as drug addiction and mental illnesses. Thus the remedy must include input from outside the prison system. Van Wormer also cautions against treating women prisoners like their male counterparts: dealing with women and men in the same way is a violation of womanhood and, in many cases, motherhood.

Rosemary Link, in chapter 10, focuses on the lives and development of children in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Link explains and connects the Convention to social work practice and demonstrates the usefulness of this policy in addressing issues of child well-being. She examines the tension between children’s rights and family rights, and questions the commitment of human services in the U.S. to the rights of children, given that almost every country, except the United States, has accepted the Convention as part of its legal structure.
Link believes that social workers should educate themselves in the goals and expectations of international policy instruments; alert their social work organizations and agencies to the implementation requirements; and question practices that do not meet human rights principles.

In his forward-thinking chapter, Brij Mohan incites the social work profession to focus on its potential in dealing with human tragedies. As Mohan states in chapter 11, “Social work, a quintessential human rights approach to most of the human-made tragedies, may well re-equip itself . . . if its smorgasbord is focused on universal, indivisible, and inalienable areas of the evolving structure of human rights.” Although optimistic about achieving that goal, Mohan tempers that optimism by referring to his own writings about the realpolitik of the social work profession.

The book concludes with Robert McCormick’s examination, in chapter 12, of human rights from both the legal and social work perspectives. After exploring the different approaches taken by lawyers and social workers, he suggests that lawyers and social workers could better promote human rights by actively working together. Although their roles may differ, both share the common goal of promoting economic, social, and cultural human rights.

These chapters, taken together, expose social workers to the challenges, and rewards, of integrating contemporary human rights into their social work practices.
Challenges in Human Rights