
Social Work Is a Human Rights Profession

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As defined by the International Federation of Social Workers, social work is a human rights profession. This is explicitly stated in the professional codes of ethics in many nations. However, the most recent version of the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* continues to exclude any mention of human rights, fitting in with the history of U.S. exceptionalism on this subject. Social workers around the world have a long history of working for the achievement of human rights, including an explicit grounding of practice in human rights principles: human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability. Utilizing these principles, U.S. social workers can move from the deficit model of the needs-based approach to competently contextualizing individual issues in their larger human rights framework. In this way, social work can address larger social problems and make way for the concurrent achievement of human rights. This article explains these principles and provides a case example of how to apply them in practice.

KEY WORDS: *Code of Ethics; human rights; social work practice; social work profession*

The involvement of social workers working toward the fulfillment of human rights is long and extensive, but whether it is explicitly referred to as human rights work varies across time and nations. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) stated in its definition of *social work* that “principles of social justice, *human rights*, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work” (IFSW, 2014, para. 2, emphasis added), thus making it evident that the international community of social workers is quite clear that the work we do is human rights work. “Advocating and upholding human rights and social justice is the motivation and justification for social work” (IFSW, 2014, para. 9). However, within the United States, recognition of social work as human rights work is much less common. Despite the addition of human rights to social work educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) in 2008 (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008), social work practice standards have not kept pace.

In 2017, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) released a major update to its code of ethics. Most revisions focus on emerging ethical issues raised by technology as well as updating wording (for example, using “ability” rather than “disability”) (Barsky, 2017), but the code still does not include human rights explicitly. The preamble states that “the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human

well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people” thus highlighting a focus on needs as opposed to rights (NASW, 2017, p. 1). The NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics* goes as far as listing the respect for “the inherent dignity and worth of the person” (p. 5), a fundamental principle of human rights, as one of the six core values and ethical principles in social work but falls short of directly referencing human rights anywhere in the code. Sister social work organizations in countries such as Canada, Australia, Britain, Russia, Japan, and South Korea all include human rights in their codes of ethics (Androff, 2016), and others in the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania include human rights among their objectives. For example, the Preamble to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005) *Code of Ethics* states, “Social workers are committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations” (p. 3). The Nigerian Association of Social Workers (n.d.) lists among their professional objectives the aim “to ensure that the dignity and rights of human beings are upheld in all human interactions” (para. 7).

Given the threatened erosion of human rights in the United States, it is vital that U.S. social workers join their colleagues around the world in understanding their role in the promotion of human rights and viewing the populations with whom we work not from a needs-based standpoint,

with clients as passive recipients of charity, but rather from a rights-based standpoint of facilitating the receipt of benefits to which individuals and groups are entitled. This article explains these core principles, and how to apply the rights-based approach to social work practice, including a case example.

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

Social workers must first understand what exactly is meant by human rights. Although human rights have a very long history, the document on which current practice is based is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR). Prompted by the atrocities of World War II and adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the UDHR establishes the rights to which all peoples are entitled regardless of nationality, race, religion, sex, political opinion, or any other potential category of difference. These rights are universal (they apply to all people) and indivisible (they are inseparable from each other and all are necessary). The UDHR has 30 articles that outline these rights: political, civil, social, economic, cultural, and collective. The 25th article has particular relevance for social work as many services provided by social workers, including safety net services and beyond, can be seen as rights to which the populations we work with are entitled:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (United Nations, 1948, para. 33)

Declarations are not binding in international law, but debate during the Cold War about the importance of political and civil rights (led by the United States and western Europe) versus economic, social, and cultural rights (led by the USSR, China, and affiliated countries) led to the splitting of these rights into two covenants, despite the indivisibility of rights. The United States ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1992, but it has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. After the UDHR, a succession of conventions has followed, further elucidating rights to particularly oppressed groups (see Table 1). Of these, the United States has ratified only the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention Against Torture in addition to ICCPR. The United States is the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

SOCIAL WORKERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

It may be argued that the history of social work can be traced back centuries to the organized efforts (often motivated by religious or humanitarian ideals) within society to assist those marginalized by the cultural, economic, and social factors imposed by society. In response to the social, economic, and cultural dislocations of the late 19th century and offering an alternative approach to Social Darwinism, social work was formally organized as a profession in the early 20th century. Social work offered a rational response to social problems that called for both social reform and individual guidance stemming from the Settlement House and Charity Organization Society movements. Professionalization developed first in the Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom, and

Table 1: Core United Nations Human Rights Instruments

Document	Introduced	Entered into Force
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	1966	1969
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	1979	1981
Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	1984	1987
Convention on the Rights of the Child	1989	1990
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	1990	2003
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	2006	2008
International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	2006	2010

Germany, then quickly spread to Latin America and also countries of the British Commonwealth (Healy, 2008).

The formative period of the profession is dominated by figures such as Jane Addams in the United States and Alice Salomon in Germany, both of whom intertwined struggles for the realization of human rights with the birthing of the social work profession (Healy, 2008). Addams helped to organize a number of national and international human rights organizations that continue to exist, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership in human rights (Healy, 2008). She was joined by other early social workers who led human rights efforts in the United States and abroad, such as Sophonisba Breckinridge, Grace and Edith Abbott, George Edmund Haynes, Thyra J. Edwards, and Bertha Capen Reynolds (Carlton-LaNey, 1999, 2001). In Germany, Alice Salomon fought for women's rights and is credited with the founding of social work in that country, and Eglantyne Jebb of the United Kingdom, whose experiences working for a charity organization society led her to write the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1923, adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 as the Declaration of Geneva (Healy, 2008).

The reaction to the UDHR was notably understated by social workers, and generally speaking at large (Healy, 2008; Robertson, 2002). At the same time that social, economic, and cultural rights were gaining support in the eastern bloc countries, social work as a profession was being banned in many of these countries. Social work's focus on reshaping individuals' intrinsic weaknesses were often viewed as conflicting with socialistic credence that freedom, equality, and well-being were derived from working in an egalitarian society (Driedger, 1995).

In the United States, casework emerged as the dominant form of professional practice by the 1920s, and although social work's main focus remained on working with impoverished children and families, it was rapidly expanding to other populations. As the scope of social work grew, clinical treatment took precedence over community work, advocacy, and social policy as a social work method (Lubove, 1969). Social work practice came to rely on the deficit model of practice or

a needs-based approach that extols professionals as the experts best able to determine the needs of the populations with whom they work, contradicting the principles of human rights.

By being gatekeepers to social benefits, social workers can privilege and exclude by using these benefits to modify behavior and as a means of collecting information on private individual and family matters. This power has been used to further oppression (Ife, 2012), and social workers have served as "handmaidens" to those who seek to preserve the status quo (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 512). Social workers were used to usher in totalitarian regimes in Europe leading up to and during World War II and as social agents gathering information on individual proclivities and networks for the Russian government beginning in 1918 (Gatenio Gabel, 2016). Enforcing behavior requirements for social benefits receipt in the United States has been interpreted as a means of protecting the status quo (Abramovitz, 1998; Alston, 2018; Bumiller, 2008). In the United States, where the not-for-profit sector remains larger compared with other countries, the majority of social workers continue to be employed by federal, state, or local governments or work under government contracts held by private contractors. This arrangement potentially increases the scope of social worker vulnerability to promoting the best interests of government rather than the rights of the populations they serve.

Human rights approaches call for the redistribution of privilege and power within a society, which social workers often resist. The gravitational pull to maintain the status quo was noted by Specht and Courtney (1994) in their book *Unfaithful Angels*, in which they claimed that social work as a profession has lost track of its traditional mission of promoting social health, social justice, and social cohesion and instead social workers have become agents of the state who focus on meeting the needs for professional status and remuneration by tending to the needs of lonely middle-class Americans in search of meaningful lives. The differences a rights-based approach are detailed in Table 2, explaining how the goals, motivations, focus of interventions, and so forth all must change when operating from the rights-based approach. The intervention is no longer focused on meeting the identified deficit within a person or group, but rather on changing structural inequalities that have resulted in some groups not being allowed access to their human

Table 2: Comparison of Charity, Needs, and Rights-Based Approaches to Social Issues

	Charity-Based	Needs-Based	Rights-Based
Goals	Assistance to deserving and disadvantaged individuals or populations to relieve immediate suffering	Fulfilling an identified deficit in individuals or community through additional resources for marginalized and disadvantaged groups	Realization of human rights that will lead to the equitable allocation of resources and power
Motivation	Religious or moral imperative of rich or endowed to help the less fortunate who are deserving of assistance	To help those deemed in need of help so as to promote well-being of societal members	Legal obligation to entitlements
Accountability	May be accountable to private organization	Generally accountable to those who identified the need and developed the intervention	Governments and global bodies such as the donor community, intergovernmental organizations, international NGOs, and transnational corporations
Process	Philanthropic with emphasis on donor	Expert identification of need, its dimensions, and strategy for meeting need within political negotiation; affected population is the object of interventions	Political with a focus on participatory process in which individuals and groups are empowered to claim their rights
Power relationships	Preserves status quo	Largely maintain existing structure, change might be incremental	Must change
Target population of efforts	Individuals and populations worthy of assistance	Disadvantaged individuals or populations	All members of society with an emphasis on marginalized populations
Emphasis	On donor's benevolent actions	On meeting needs	On the realization of human rights
Interventions respond to	Immediate manifestation of problems	Symptomatic deficits and may address structural causes	Fundamental structural causes while providing alleviation from symptomatic manifestations

Source: Shirley Gatenio Gabel, *Rights-Based Approaches to Social Policy*, published in 2016 by Springer, reproduced with permission of Springer Nature Customer Service Center GmbH.

rights (Gatenio Gabel, 2016). This needs-based focus has led some such as Murdach (2011) to question whether social work truly is a human rights profession, but mindfully adopting a human rights approach can bring social work back to its core principles. In the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, Wronka (2013) described human rights as being “at the heart of social work” (para. 1).

The decade since the addition of human rights to EPAS has seen an exponential growth of activity in the area including the creation of the Committee of Human Rights within CSWE as well as the *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* and the publication of works detailing how to teach human rights (Gatenio Gabel & Mapp, in press; Libal, Berthold, Thomas, & Healy, 2014) and how

to apply human rights to social work practice (see, for example, Androff, 2016; McPherson, 2015).

HUMAN RIGHTS–BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Despite the shared history, ethics, and professional commitments, human rights are an underused tool in social work practice. Lawyers dominate many human rights settings, which reinforces popular perceptions of human rights as primarily comprising civil and political rights and as not relevant to social work. It is therefore necessary to illustrate how the profession of social work can translate its rhetorical commitment to human rights into practice.

Rights-based approaches offer a model for social workers to apply human rights to their practice (Androff, 2016). As the United Nations has mainstreamed human rights throughout its programs, fields such as international development and public health have popularized rights-based approaches. There is an international consensus that human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability represent core principles of human rights (Baderin & McCorquodale, 2007); taken together they form a framework for a rights-based approach to social work practice. These human rights-based principles can be applied across social work programs, policies, organizations, and fields, from clinical (Berthold, 2015) to community practice (Libal & Harding, 2015) to policy (Gatenio Gabel, 2016). These five principles are congruent with social work professional ethics and can strengthen social work's ethical commitments. Albrithen and Androff's (2014) analysis of the NASW *Code of Ethics* and the UDHR found that each of the UDHR's 30 articles were aligned with social work's ethical values (see their article for a detailed table connecting the NASW code and the UDHR).

Human Dignity

Rights-based approaches respect the fundamental dignity and worth of each person, consistent with social work ethics. Human dignity, as a rights-based principle for social work practice, carries implications for how practitioners conceive of and engage with people. Respecting people's human dignity means respecting their self-determination—appreciating, trusting, and empowering their ability to make decision for themselves. It also means viewing people as fully human, complete with strengths, capabilities, potential, and rights. People who are seen to be needy or broken are objectified and therefore dehumanized. This type of dehumanization is often the basis on which social workers engage with people, such as policy or program eligibility requirements that categorize beneficiaries or recipients. To respect people's human dignity, social workers must combat dehumanization, a product of stigmatization and scapegoating. Social workers can protect people's human dignity by promoting the rehumanization of people who have been stigmatized and discriminated against.

Nondiscrimination

Rights-based social work practice should also be actively nondiscriminatory and should prevent discrimination on the basis of any category of difference. Nondiscrimination also means acknowledging the contemporary legacies of historical trauma from human rights violations. Practitioners should strive to include historically excluded populations. However, nondiscrimination is not only about inclusion, it also requires social workers to practice in a culturally appropriate manner. For social work practice to be nondiscriminatory, it should also be nonhierarchical. Instead of creating and reinforcing disparities between practitioners and those whom social workers would help, nondiscriminatory practice should seek to minimize hierarchical structures to promote relationships that are more equal.

Participation

The principle of participation is central to rights-based social work practice. Participation has been identified as a human right, and therefore promoting and protecting people's right to participate is a goal of international human rights law, conventions, and documents. People have, as part of their human rights, the right to participate in the decisions that affect their welfare. People's ability to participate in programs and policies is also a principle of rights-based approaches. Having a voice and influencing decisions is a powerful tool for people to achieve the rest of their human rights. Ensuring people's equitable participation in institutions and structures requires social workers to incorporate community development and capacity building in their practice. The human right to participation does not mean giving marginalized people a token voice, but rather creating opportunities for increased access to power. Such empowerment can result in a participation that is authentic and a strong foundation for human rights.

Transparency

Transparency means that social work practice should be trustworthy, evidence-based, and reflective. In the field of development, transparency has become synonymous with anti-corruption. Social work organizations, policies, and even budgets should be transparent and free of corruption to generate trust with individuals and communities and to maximize effectiveness of programs and services. Transparency in social work practice also

refers to the use of research and evidence for assessment, evaluation, and monitoring. Assessment is typically an initial step of social work practice, and research is a critical tool for determining the effectiveness of interventions. In rights-based approaches it includes assessing and documenting human rights violations. Social work research can develop and monitor rights-based indicators, the findings of which should be widely disseminated and publicized. Transparency also means that practitioners should be self-reflective, reflecting on their practice, relationships, and actions.

Accountability

Accountability is the rights-based principle related to macro practice models such as advocacy and raising awareness. Community organizing and activism can be used to hold the perpetrators of human rights violations accountable and advocating for those responsible for human rights—the duty-bearers—to take action to protect rights. This requires political awareness and engagement from social work practitioners. In addition, practitioners should work to promote justice, access to the rule of law, and the strengthening of democratic institutions and norms as part of a larger culture that respects and promotes human rights. This includes access to redress mechanisms when benefits have been denied or curtailed. Social workers should also raise awareness about the nature of human rights and human rights violations. Such community education efforts can reinforce the interdependence of everyone's human rights, that each of us is accountable for protecting each other's human rights.

Righting the Code of Ethics

The *Code of Ethics* can be strengthened to be more explicitly rights-based. For example, the first ethical value is that of service: "Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems" (NASW, 2017, p. 5). This statement reflects a hierarchical view of social work practice that can be disempowering to the people whom social workers seek to help. In contrast, a rights-based approach to social work sees people as deserving of fundamental rights on the basis of their inherent humanity, not due to their neediness or deficit. A rights-based ethical value statement would read instead, "Social workers' primary goal is to realize people's human rights."

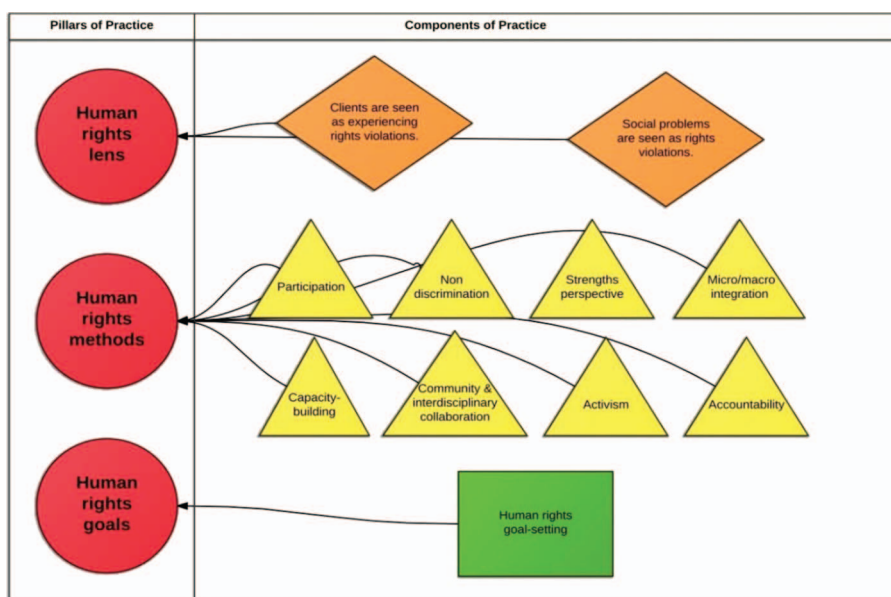
PUTTING PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

The human rights practice in social work framework provides a concrete model for putting these rights-based principles into practice (McPherson, 2015). It allows practitioners, educators, and researchers to identify, practice, and teach human rights practice in social work. The framework asks social workers to see through a rights-based lens, follow human rights methods, and aim for human rights goals (see Figure 1). It uses a rights-based approach in shifting the focus of social work from human needs to human rights and requires social workers to make political and social diagnoses instead of (or possibly in addition to) medical or psychiatric ones. According to McPherson (2015), "it requires that clients be brought into partnership with social workers in search of solutions to their problems; and it insists that social workers engage in political struggles alongside their clients" (p. 107).

The first pillar of rights-based social work practice is the human rights lens. Scholars agree that looking through the human rights lens changes the way we see (Gruskin, Bogecho, & Ferguson, 2010; Mapp, 2014; Uvin, 2004). Through the human rights lens, social workers see both clients' rights and their needs, view clients as rights-holders rather than charity-seekers, and focus on human rights violations rather than individual pathologies. As conceptualized in McPherson's framework, the lens has two components: the first sees clients as experiencing human rights violations; and the other reframes social problems—like homelessness, poverty, and lack of access to medical care—as human rights violations. By focusing on clients' rights in addition to their needs, the human rights lens is an orientation to social work practice that promotes human dignity and social change (McPherson, Siebert, & Siebert, 2017). As Uvin wrote, "A human rights lens implies a process of looking at root causes and policies of exclusion and discrimination, [so] advocacy seems a logical consequence" (Uvin, 2004, p. 143).

It is important for rights-based social workers to see through the human rights lens as they are conceptualizing a case as it is essential to successful assessment. Social workers take a rights-based approach when they take stock of their clients' access to their human rights. To do this, a social worker can ask clients to assess their access to the rights delineated in the UDHR (United Nations,

Figure 1: Human Rights Practice in Social Work Framework



Source: Jane McPherson, Carl F. Siebert, and Darcy Clay Siebert, “Measuring Rights-Based Perspectives: A Validation of the Human Rights Lens in Social Work Scale,” *Journal of the Society for Social Work Research*, 8(2), 233–257 (2017). doi:10.1086/692017. Reprinted with permission.

1948). In addition to the social rights contained in Article 25 (food, housing, basic income, and medical care, among others), the UDHR also asserts rights to employment, education, and non-discrimination. By adding a rights-based assessment to their toolbox, social workers situate their clients’ concerns within the larger context of their access to their human rights and ground clients’ “symptoms” in the injustice they experience (McPherson, 2016).

This assessment also leads naturally to the third pillar of the framework, human rights goals. How problems are assessed directly affects the way that goals are articulated. Rights-related goals are lofty. For example, when hungry clients seek social work services, they are often provided with a meal or a referral to a food bank. This addresses the immediate problem, but may not actually help them access their *right* to food. A community’s right to food is only met when the local government guarantees access to nutritious food for all. One example of providing food as a human right can be seen in school systems (for example, New York City) that provide all students with a high-quality, free lunch regardless of income (Brown & Bilski,

2017) rather than stigmatizing those whose family income is low enough to qualify them for food assistance. This provision of equal quality services to all removes stigma and guarantees a right to food for students in those districts. Drawing on this example, one rights-based goal that a social worker could set would be the nonstigmatizing, nondiscriminatory availability of food in local schools. Rights-based goals lead social workers to make advocacy a part of their practice.

Social workers also need tools to achieve their goals. There are eight social work methods identified in McPherson’s human rights practice in social work framework: participation, nondiscrimination, strengths perspective, micro–macro integration; capacity building, community and interdisciplinary collaboration, activism, and accountability. Three principles—participation, nondiscrimination, and accountability—appear by name, and the other methods are chosen to encourage social workers in their justice-focused practice.

A strengths perspective requires social workers to focus on the skills, strengths, and capacities of clients and their communities (Saleebey, 1996). The strengths-based approach furthers the human

rights principles of equality and nondiscrimination because it is empowering and nonpathologizing, and its importance is emphasized by many social work voices in the rights-based literature (Ife, 2012; Lundy, 2011; Mapp, 2014). A strengths-based approach alone, however, falls short of empowering individuals to claim their rights within a universal, normative framework that goes beyond social work (Gatenio Gabel, 2016).

Micro/macro integration is practice grounded in the realization that “social problems require complex and sustained intervention at all levels of social work practice” (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014, p. 91). Human rights practice frames problems as personal as well as structural, and thus requires intervention in both the individual (micro) and social (macro) arenas. Certainly, human rights work can be done on both the micro and macro levels, but a true rights-based approach to social work practice requires intervention at both levels.

Capacity building requires skill building and means that social workers must move beyond services—what professionals do for clients—and help clients and communities to develop the skills to participate in changing unjust personal and political situations. Rights-based social workers should seek to build their clients’ skills to enable them to take part in successful political—and also personal—action.

Community and interdisciplinary collaboration allows professional and social alliances to form that cross the professional, economic, and community boundaries for the purpose of advancing social and political change (Gruskin et al., 2010). These collaborations include community members, professionals from many disciplines, advocates, community leaders, and government officials. Community and interdisciplinary collaboration also means that each social worker need not possess the universe of knowledge and skills: Professionals and community members must use their skills in concert to achieve their mutual goals.

Activism means that professionals join with their clients and communities in the struggles that affect all our lives. Some U.S. social workers may worry that joining political actions alongside their clients is somehow unprofessional. However, NASW’s *Code of Ethics* (section 6.04) asserts that advocacy is part of the ethical duty of a social worker.

As previously noted, the human rights principles of transparency and accountability require that

social work services be delivered in a trustworthy, ethically minded, and reflective manner. In this framework, reflective practice is a key strategy that social workers should use in both practice and supervision to ensure that clients’ rights are truly being protected and promoted, and that social work practices are not complicit in violating clients’ rights or ignoring those violations. Accountability requires that social workers reflect on their own privilege and judgments, especially when engaging across race, class, and culture.

The following section illustrates an application of the rights-based approach. In 2017, Philip Alston, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, made an official 15-day visit to the United States to evaluate “the extent to which the Government’s policies and programs relating to extreme poverty are consistent with its human rights obligations” and reported that approximately 40 million U.S. residents live in poverty, including 18.5 million who live in “extreme poverty,” and 5.3 million who “live in Third World conditions of absolute poverty” (Alston, 2018, p. 3). The Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative (SRBWI) was among the many groups that gave testimony during Alston’s visit: “On nearly every social indicator of well-being, from income and earning to obesity and food security, Black women, girls, and children in the rural South rank low or last” (SRBWI, 2015, p. 8), and the following case study was developed based on issues they identified in their testimony.

Rhonda, a new mother, is a rural black woman living in poverty, meeting with a social worker, Beth, at the local health department. Very likely Rhonda has experienced racial and poverty-related discrimination, but may not have understood herself to have a right to nondiscrimination. Thus, a rights-based assessment requires education and is in itself a capacity-building intervention for clients to learn about their rights. The rights-based social worker will engage in advocacy and activism aimed at changing unjust systems. When social workers put human rights principles into practice, they prompt changes in social work’s basic approach and shift practice away from purely clinically focused, diagnostic-based models.

Beth conducts an assessment with Rhonda that includes standard demographics such as age, family structure, and health. However, Beth also assesses Rhonda’s access to her human rights. For example,

her decision to become a mother may have been affected by her lack of access to medical care, including safe abortion or contraceptives. She may be unable to find work in an environment where there are few jobs offering a living wage available, especially in the absence of good-quality, affordable child care. Her lack of access to dental care, which has led to a disfiguring dental profile, may further diminish her access to employment. Beth also asks if these violations are common with her family and community members. This approach destigmatizes Rhonda's concerns and promotes her human dignity, part of the rights-based approach. It also leads to questions about how the lack of access to these rights (Article 25) can be addressed, through both micro-level methods, such as referrals, and macro-level methods including advocacy to change health care policy.

Rhonda determines that she wants the intervention to focus on employment. Beth educates Rhonda about the changing economy in which jobs have been lost in the rural South. This helps Rhonda understand how her problems may stem from—or be exacerbated by—larger structures and by political decisions that could be made differently, rather than individual weakness. Beth helps Rhonda consider her options, promoting participation. Beth also invites her to join a community group that is working together to address issues such as the lack of good jobs and child care—part of the micro-macro integration. Beth participates in this group and helps members understand how to access health care; she also advocates with the group to policymakers for solutions to common issues, including employment, thus engaging in advocacy and activism aimed at changing unjust systems. They are currently working on developing local entrepreneurship programs focused on agriculture and textile manufacturing.

Beth's use of the rights-based approach helps Rhonda to understand that her struggles do not stem from individual weakness, but rather that there is a larger system blocking access to her human rights. She is an active agent in crafting a response, moving her from a passive recipient of charity to an empowered change agent for herself and others.

CONCLUSION

Although most current social work students receive some type of human rights education during

their educational training (Gatenio Gabel & Mapp, *in press*), U.S. social workers tend not to identify themselves as human rights workers. The absence of human rights language in the NASW *Code of Ethics* reflects, at least in part, the conflict-ridden relationship to human rights and rights-based practice in the United States.

Speaking up for the rights of individuals and communities has been an integral part of social work practice since the emergence of the profession at the turn of the 20th century (Specht & Courtney, 1994). The core concept of person-in-environment distinguishes social work from other helping professions and reinforces the importance of context in social work practice. However, social work practice is driven by political, social, cultural, and economic factors, and the interventions that social workers use are often those that yield the outcomes sought by those with position and power (Abramovitz, 1998). Far from its original intent, social work in many ways has evolved into a conservative profession. Its overreliance on clinical approaches rather than advocacy and societal change has reinforced this direction toward the conservative. This shift is reflected in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, the reindividualization and depoliticization of social work practice (Reisch & Jani, 2012).

The depoliticization of the social work profession is troubling because whereas social work once stood as a champion of reform, it now risks becoming an aid to the ushering in of neoliberal policies and structures. Instead, social workers should stand up to injustice and promote human rights, including identifying social work as a human rights profession. Greater attention should be placed on community-based practice frameworks and research, which would require social work education programs to orient their curriculum to such a stance and train field work supervisors at agencies to conceptualize their work to address human rights issues in this manner. A rights-based approach offers a way to bridge the divide between macro and micro practice while calling for programs and policies that value the respect and dignity of all its members.

Numerous articles have appeared in the *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* and other social work journals demonstrating ways that social workers around the world have used rights-based approaches to bring a new perspective and reforms

to social issues in areas such as incarceration, exclusion of people with disabilities, health and mental health issues, women's rights, and economic inequality. Although the concepts supporting rights-based practice have been developed in social work and related fields, the challenge of implementing them into practice remains formidable in part because current practitioners and supervisors of social work interns have not been trained using rights-based approaches. Social work curricula today have been infused with human rights training, but students are unlikely to be trained in the field using rights-based approaches (Gatenio Gabel & Mapp, in press). Just as CSWE's EPAS transformed social work curricula to include human rights, NASW's *Code of Ethics*' explicit reference to human rights would help transition social work practice to a human rights-based approach.

Social work must move from diagnosing ills toward the realization of human rights. This is an aspirational goal, one never perfectly achieved, but one social work must strive toward. This article outlines basic principles of the rights-based approach and how to put them into practice. However, it is essential that those adopting a rights-based approach ensure that it is not done in name only. The rights-based approach is a substantive paradigm shift that must permeate all aspects of practice. If social workers believe that their work is expected to promote justice in the world, then they work to move their agencies forward. The shifts that moved social work toward a narrow micro focus occurred over the course of a century. The changes outlined here will not happen overnight, but ethically we must do so. It is only with this full shift to a true rights-based approach that real structural change will occur. **SW**

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