

# Placing Human Rights at the Center of the Social Work Profession

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Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home- so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. (Eleanor Roosevelt, as cited in National Coordinating Committee for UDHR50, 1998).

## Introduction

On an international level, the social work profession places great importance upon the concept of human rights. The International Federation of Social Workers policy paper 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). This link between the social work profession and human rights appears natural. Specific goals of the profession aim to help others obtain needed information, services, and resources to fulfill their needs. Social workers promote equality of economic, social and political opportunity.

When viewing the goals of the social work profession and specific human rights as embodied in the Universal Declaration and related documents, the strong connection between the profession and human rights becomes clear. However, in contrast to the international social work community, social workers in the United States have only begun to recognize the close tie between social work and human rights.

The reluctance of social workers in the United States to join their international counterparts in promoting human rights appears to be the result of three primary factors: (a) a focus in the United States on social justice instead of human rights; (b) the inclination of U.S. social workers to view human rights as only political rights; and (c) a more local view of the world by U.S. social workers. The reluctance to promote human rights does not mean U.S. social workers are less competent than their international counterparts. However, because human rights occupy a

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central role in the social work profession, social workers in the United States could benefit from a better understanding of human rights and the relationship of those rights to the profession.

### What is the Social Work Profession?

To recognize the strong bond between the social work profession and human rights, a crucial first step involves analysis of the profession. What does a social worker do? What are the goals and philosophy of the profession?

The basic foundation of social work practice is that of meeting human needs and developing human potential and resources. Social workers aim to prevent or alleviate individual, group and community problems, and to improve the quality of life for all (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000). Frequently social work practice is directed toward the fulfillment of human needs within environments that will not or cannot sustain them. In these circumstances, social workers must understand economic, social, cultural and political barriers that inhibit the fulfillment of human needs. Social workers frequently find themselves in potential alliance with those who are excluded from obtaining basic human needs by these barriers (Roche & Dewees, forthcoming).

Social work originates from humanitarian and democratic ideals. Historically, the profession has challenged inequities among individuals and groups and, today, a core value of the profession is to challenge injustices and oppression (NASW, 1996). The profession maintains a dual focus on both the individual and his or her environment, realizing that an individual's environment generally plays a key role in the fulfillment of an individual's needs (Compton & Galaway, 1989; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 1993). Social work occupies a unique position among professions because not only do social workers attempt to assist individuals, but they also attempt to bring about change on a broader, more global level (Goldstein, 1992).

Clearly, the social work profession exists to help individuals meet basic needs and to bring about positive social change in society as a whole. This focus on the dignity of human worth creates a natural affinity or bond to the concept of human rights.

### What are Human Rights?

Too often, the phrase "human rights" gets tossed around like a verbal football, as if everyone automatically knows what human rights mean and can instinctively play the game without any practice. In reality, understanding human rights takes a lot more effort than simply referring to countries like China, Cuba or Iraq and their obvious human rights violations. Human rights include a wide variety of concepts and cover many areas of basic, human needs.

While no single definition could possibly cover the entire gamut of what human rights involve, the idea of human rights can generally be defined as those rights, which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to fully develop and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. They are based on

mankind's increasing demand for a life in which the inherent dignity and worth of each human being will receive respect and protection. (United Nations, 1987)

People from different backgrounds readily endorse the concept of human rights, which refer to those rights that every human being possesses and is entitled to enjoy simply by virtue of being human (Ife, 2001).

The starting point in understanding human rights lies within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most nations, including the United States, have approved this 1948 document, which lists specific human rights. The declaration is not legally binding on any country that approves the declaration (see, for example, Nwulu, 2000). Yet, at a minimum, approval of the declaration by a country indicates a commitment to satisfying the specified 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 U.S. 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).

While much of the Universal Declaration addresses political and individual freedoms similar to those contained in the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights, the Universal Declaration goes further defining necessary rights. Reading beyond the initial set of human rights in the document reveals another set of human rights that embody so-called positive rights. This set of rights attempts to ensure each resident of a country an adequate standard of living based on the resources of that country. Under this second set of human rights, 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." In addition, "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance" and everyone has the right to a free education at the elementary level. (United Nations, 1948, Articles 16-27)

While U.S. Americans applaud themselves for their strong commitment to the first set of human rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration, it is within the second group of human rights that U.S. Americans frequently come up short. Compared to many other countries, the United States fails to fulfill its obligation to promote positive human rights (Press, 2000; Reichert & McCormick, 1997). For instance, our failure to provide adequate health care for all expectant mothers and children violates the same Universal Declaration of Human Rights that U.S. political leaders continually use to denigrate China, Cuba, Iraq and other countries. The infant mortality rate, meaning the death of children in the first year of their lives, is higher in the United States than in any other industrialized country (Health Division of The Children's Defense Fund, 2000). And, within the United States itself, disparity in infant mortality rates exists among racial groups, with African-American infants suffering a mortality rate more than twice that of non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). While this poor ranking in infant mortality may not be entirely due to the lack of adequate health care, the failure of Americans to ensure health care to all residents

most likely plays a role.

A third and final set of human rights involves collective rights among nations. This set of rights is the least developed among the three types of human rights. Under the 1948 declaration, everyone "is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms" listed in the document can be fully realized (United Nations, 1948, Articles 28-30). Essentially, promotion of collective human rights requires intergovernmental cooperation on world issues, like environmental protection and economic development. One group of countries 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.

After the Universal Declaration, numerous other documents addressing specific areas of human rights have come into existence, including the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Convention Against Discrimination Against Women, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. However, the starting point for any contemporary human rights discussion remains the Universal Declaration.

The concept of human rights includes much more than freedom of speech, the right to freely vote, and other political guarantees. Human rights encompass a wide range of political, social and economic issues, and no country, not even the United States, is immune from human rights violations (Reichert & McCormick, 1998, p. 1).

### International Social Workers Lead U.S. Social Workers in Promoting Human Rights

On an international level, social workers have embraced the concept of human rights as a key component in their profession (Ife, 1999; 2001; Staub-Bernasconi, 1998). In the International Code of Ethics of the International Federation of Social Workers--particularly its policy statement--human rights have a strong standing. The International Federation of Social Workers policy statement states:

The social work profession, through historical and empirical evidence, is convinced that the achievement of human rights for all people is a fundamental prerequisite for a caring world. Social workers believe, that the 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. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000, p. 5).

To put into practice a wide range of human rights concepts, many countries enact specific laws to guarantee social and economic rights (Reichert & McCormick, 1997). These countries then rely upon the social work profession to carry out these guarantees of human rights.

Social workers outside the United States have clearly linked their profession to human rights. On the other hand, while social workers in the United States follow many of the concepts contained within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related human rights documents, they generally do not tie their profession to human rights. The U.S.-based National Association of Social Workers does not even mention the term human rights in its code of ethics (National

Association of Social Workers, 1996). Nor does the U.S. Council of Social Work Education refer to human rights, but instead, refers only to social justice (Council of Social Work Education, 1994). Social work literature and research that links human rights to the social work profession remains sparse in the United States.

Why has there been an absence of discussion by the social work profession in the United States concerning the concept of human rights? One reason U.S. social workers have lagged behind their international counterparts in linking human rights to the profession rests upon their adherence to social justice as a dominant theme in the profession. The promotion of social justice as the central theme in the profession originates from historical and philosophical theories that frequently appear confusing and outdated. For example, no clear definition of social justice even exists. Social work academics describe various types of social justice, with little explanation as which breed of social justice applies to the circumstances at hand (Tyson, 1995; Hartman, 1990). By focusing on social justice, U. S. social workers often believe they are also addressing human rights. However human rights encompasses a more comprehensive set of guidelines for social work practice.

Aside from using as its ideal an amorphous concept of social justice, the social work profession in the United States often equates human rights with constitutional and legal issues. An equating of human rights with purely legalistic notions sidesteps any apparent importance of human rights for the non-lawyer. The U.S. political tradition of liberal individualism, as reflected in early documents like the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, emphasizes individual political and civil rights (Roche & Dewees, forthcoming). At the same time, these documents reflect relative indifference to economic and social rights (Charlesworth, 1994). Civil and political rights (e.g., freedom of speech, press, and religion) are officially protected cornerstones of U.S. public policy, while economic, social and cultural components of human well being (e.g., food, shelter, health care, and cultural identity) tend to be relegated to individual initiative and personal achievement (Flowers, 1998). Social workers may discount the importance of human rights by viewing the U.S. Constitution and other basic documents as encompassing the entire gamut of human rights, making it unnecessary to explore the topic on its own. Therefore, when social workers in the United States encounter the term human rights, many tend to view those rights as only indirectly related to the social work profession.

Another factor inhibiting U.S. social workers from embracing human rights lies in the international concept of human rights. Social workers in the United States have shown themselves to be rather myopic in their worldview (Sanders & Pedersen, 1984), which possibly contributes to their reluctance to embrace human rights to the extent of their international counterparts (Reichert, 1998b). Human rights is an international concept, one that transcends national boundaries. Therefore, unless U.S. social workers adopt a more worldly outlook, they most likely will continue to view human rights as a foreign concept.

Not all social workers in the United States ignore the strong link between human rights and their profession. Colleagues have expressed the need to establish social work as a human rights profession and integrate human rights in social work teaching, research and practice (Mayadas & Elliot, 1997; Witkin, 1993).

Social work educators have developed a teaching model for Teaching Human Rights to social work students (Roche & Dewees, forthcoming), while others have infused human rights into social work policy (Wronka, 1998). Social work literature also exists on connecting women's rights to human rights (Roche, 1996; Reichert, 1996; 1998a; Wetzel, 1993) and impugning the Welfare Act of 1996 as a violation of immigrants' human rights (Reichert & Mc Cormick, 1998). However, these voices in the social work profession are few. Usually human rights concepts are simply merged into the vague, but ubiquitous, classification of social and economic justice.

International social workers have embraced the concept of human rights much more than social workers in the United States. By focusing on social justice, equating human rights solely with political rights, and maintaining a myopic worldview, U.S. social workers do not realize the obvious and natural connection between human rights and their profession.

### Achieving Greater Understanding and Enhancing Effectiveness

The social work profession in the United States could enhance its attainment of goals by encouraging the study of human rights. A foundation in human rights would provide a much clearer framework and structure with which to connect the profession to economic, political and social aims. Human rights relate to specific issues that can more readily be applied to a social work situation than the often confusing notion of social or economic justice, which tend to bog down in needs-based theories.

Human rights elevate discussion and practices beyond the needs of an individual to the rights of an individual. In the field of human rights, governments are accountable to their residents and have cultural, economic, political and social obligations. For instance, the government of every country would undoubtedly recognize that each of its residents needs adequate health care. However, while the vast majority of industrialized countries legally guarantee health care to each of its residents, the United States does not. Yet, under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United States has approved, the United States should be obligated to provide health care to every legal resident.

Of additional importance to social workers in the area of human rights is the concrete connection between the individual and the broader spectrum of society. As an example, human rights does not view women battering as a problem of a particular individual. Instead, human rights defines women battering as a structural and political problem. A woman has a human right not to be battered, regardless of cultural norms or other accepted practices allowing or justifying the battering (Bunch, 1991). This classification of domestic violence into a human rights issue communicates to victims of domestic violence that they are human beings entitled to protection and not simply "sick" and in need of treatment (Witkin, 1998). Reframing a social problem like domestic violence into a human rights issue also creates an international context in which to combat domestic violence. International pressure may induce governments to actively try to prevent domestic violence, knowing that to do otherwise can result in allegations of violating human rights.

Of course, the field of human rights is not without controversy. One objection to the concept of human rights lies in the view that industrialized countries control

the direction of human rights. In fact, countries may differ in the importance they place in various rights. Also developing countries might see the U.S. type of free speech as much less important than economic progress. However, as a general statement the vast majority of countries approving the Universal Declaration have reached agreement on what constitutes a human right. While enforcement or interpretation of those rights can sometimes vary, the concept of human rights has achieved universal importance.

### Conclusion

Social workers in the U.S. could learn from their international colleagues and embrace the Human Rights concept. The social work profession has a natural affinity to human rights. An understanding of human rights would provide an effective structure with which to connect the profession to political and social goals. The current emphasis on social justice frequently leads to a focus on needs rather than actual rights to economic and other necessities. Human rights also require governmental accountability to citizens and residents, a key aspect often missing in social justice theories. By recognizing the importance of human rights, U.S. social workers can only enhance their profession.

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