

# Advancing Human Rights in Social Work Education

EDITED BY

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*Alexandria, Virginia*

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Social workers are professionals who work toward similar goals embedded in the human rights perspective: mobilizing social capital and supporting and enhancing people's potential to work for their development, as well as intervening with the social systems to better respond to the needs and assist in securing the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged groups in our society (Nadkarni, 2009). Today there is growing demand for social workers to adopt the human rights approach, particularly with increasing social and economic inequalities, poverty, religious and civil conflicts, disasters, and displacements of large populations, in rapidly changing societies. The violation of human rights has been aggravated with the negative outcomes of globalization, privatization, and liberalization that focus more on expansion of trade and markets than enhancement of human well-being, particularly in countries that have been forced to reduce state investment in social sectors such as health, education, and the social service. Adoption of the human rights perspective in social work education to address these issues cannot be contested.

The human rights perspective in social work education and practice is a natural corollary to the very foundation of social work, which aims to uphold the dignity and worth of every human being. The profession of social work has embraced this perspective in its work with people who are disadvantaged, marginalized, vulnerable, and discriminated against due to factors that range from the social, political, and economic to cultural and religious issues. However, the perspective has not been consciously integrated as work against the violation of human rights in social work education except in the last two decades of

the profession, although there are many examples of social workers exemplified in this book who have been involved in civil and political rights, women's empowerment, labor rights, since the early part of the 1960s and 1970s.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on reviewing and strengthening the human rights perspective within social work education. It includes attention to clinical and community practice, research, programming, and social policy development at all levels of interventions. It is unique because it provides very practical models for developing curricula around human rights and translating them into field education.

Clearly articulated in Chapter 1 are the benefits for the readers: "diverse authors discuss how the powerful idea of human rights can inform and transform social work education, and ultimately, professional practice." The volume is a primer on human rights in social work education because it explains in clear details how social work has positioned itself in the context of work on human rights in the United States and several other countries. There is some level of analysis of reasons why, despite the importance of social workers working within the human rights contexts, there has been resistance to adequate integration of concepts and translating the perspective into practice, research, and social policy in the U.S. environment.

### **Human Rights in South Asia**

Among the South Asian countries, India is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and the other major human rights conventions and has shown some progress in implementing progressive laws such as the Right to Information and Right to Education Acts. Access to health care is also recognized as a right. Social workers in India have played leading roles in lobbying for land rights, forest rights for indigenous people, rights of people displaced by large dams, and many other issues. However, they have had to depend on a mass base of an empowered community, development practitioners, health and education activists, advocates, and other professionals to raise their voices against human rights violations and social injustices. Medha Patkar, a graduate of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, became a social activist and social reformer and has recently joined



a political party. She led the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement of *adivasis*,<sup>1</sup> farmers, environmentalists, and human rights activists against large dams being built across the Narmada River. This movement caught international attention, and the World Bank was forced to withdraw its funds to build the dam unless the government fulfilled certain conditions, which included lowering the dam's height and ensuring adequate rehabilitation measures for the displaced people. Patkar has been fighting for the rights of the tribal people and the slum dwellers, the poorest of the poor, for more than a decade.

Although human rights are proclaimed to be universal and indivisible, in practice social workers experience and need to deal with conflicting rights in society. A glaring example is that of women and girls having less access to the right to education within some groups that remain highly patriarchal and religious. Sexual and reproductive rights are also denied to them. The issue of not advocating for the use of condoms as the means of preventing HIV/AIDS conflicts with the individual's right for protection against a terminal disease.

Policies made in one country can also work against the rights of human beings in other countries. The glaring example here is of the Mexico City Policy (Gag Rule) introduced by President George Bush in January 2001 (I had firsthand experience of this because I was the secretary-general of the Family Planning Association of India, which received funds from the International Planned Parenthood Federation [IPPF]). The Gag Rule prohibited organizations that received U.S. funds from providing abortion information, services, and care and from working on these issues even if their national governments requested them to do so. The IPPF rejected the Gag Rule and, as a result, lost significant amounts of funding. The IPPF and its member organizations such as the Family Planning Association of India had to seek alternative funding for continuing their work in the field of sexual and reproductive health and safeguarding the health and rights of women (IPPF, 2013).

Thus, working on human rights issues at both the micro and macro levels assumes that social workers will learn to assert themselves and fight against unfair and unjust systems when required. This is a great challenge in teaching human rights in social work education, and this could be one of the reasons social work schools may be reluctant to introduce the human rights perspective

into the curricula because it often means working against the policies of the government. And university systems may not be ready to antagonize the state, especially if they depend on educational grants from the government or if they are public institutions.

India, like several other countries in the South Asian region, falls short of implementation of the human rights perspective, as is reported by the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Amnesty International, and other international and human rights organizations. The profession of social work also has not always been at the forefront on several such issues, although the scenario seems to be changing at least in India, where social work education is well-established and there is increasing awareness about viewing social work as a transformative discipline.

In India people's struggles for dignity and protection of their life and liberty continue. Sexual minorities came out in large numbers to demand their rights to be treated with dignity, to be accepted by the public health care system, and for change of laws such as the Indian Penal Code, which makes homosexuality an offence. Unfortunately, despite their efforts to appeal to the judiciary to decriminalize homosexuality in India, this was not accepted, and thus lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities continue to be discriminated against, incarcerated, and abused. The social work fraternity has played a major role in supporting the rights of LGBT communities.

Leading social workers have also been struggling for the rights of sex workers, including their rights to be treated as citizens, to practice their profession without fear and insecurity, and their right for shelter, sanitation, education for their children, and so on. On a more positive note, in the recent Supreme Court judgment in India, the *hijras* (transgender women in India) have been recognized as citizens (the so-called third gender) with rights to vote, health care, livelihood, and education. Disability and HIV/AIDS are other areas that have inspired social work educators and practitioners to fight for the rights of those affected to live with dignity and without discrimination. This has led to significant legislation such as the Persons With Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act (1995), which also covers the rights of persons living with mental illness. Social work educa-