

## SOCIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE

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*Social workers begin their professional careers in graduate school. In preparation, students need to educate themselves with regard to relevant social and political issues. The NASW Code of Ethics stresses the profession's ethical obligation to actively work on behalf of the goals of social justice and social change. Graduate social work programs fall short of preparing students for the progressive role the profession requires. Social workers are uniquely positioned to converge various fields relevant to social change. Furthermore, social work is a political activity, as it either serves the status quo or the concerns of client populations. Students are required to reconcile the ethics of the profession and their graduate training through engaging in political and social action.*

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### **A Call To Action**

Social work students are the future of the profession; we are the ones who are to effect change in society, creating a more fair and just world. Social work students, however, are ill-equipped to carry out this duty. Curricula highlighting social injustice and its effects, illustrated through our clients' lives, fail to generate action and dialogue on social work school campuses. This political apathy runs counter to the philosophy of social work. Social structures need to be changed to remedy social ills through direct action. Social work students must turn beliefs and convictions into actions.

### **The Social Work Code of Ethics Requires Involvement**

Social work students have not been sufficiently engaged in social action and discussion. One recent event on campus at Columbia University, billed as a discussion on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, was attended by approximately ten social work students. What could have been an opportunity for social work students to inform themselves on issues of global, political, and social importance was, instead, a demonstration of the student body's apathy toward learning about events outside their immediate practice focus. Many social work students are poorly informed about local, national, and international causes and their interconnections. Social work students should

realize that there is more to social work than what is being taught in graduate schools.

Social work students have an obligation to engage in social change; it is our fundamental role in society, and mandated by the profession. Social justice is one of the core ethical principles of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. This professional code requires us to act socially and politically to guarantee all people the rights to equity and social justice (NASW, 1999).

### **Educational Standards Exclude Social Change**

Social work students prepare to enter a professional career, and like all professions, social work has its own educational training (Flexner, 1915). A comparison of the Code of Ethics to the educational standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2003) reveals interesting discrepancies. Social work schools are not educating their students for future careers as change leaders, as the CSWE merely requires that ethics and social justice be infused into the curriculum of graduate programs (CSWE). An ethical mission of our profession has been relegated to a non-essential component of our educational requirements.

Graduate social work education chooses to emphasize certain professional areas over others; it is clear that involvement in social and political justice has not been recognized as an important area for knowledge development (Sarri & Meyer, 1992). There is little evidence that the current social work curriculum is designed to foster critical social thinking and action. Students seldom engage in politically oriented dialogue. In fact, most students and professors take great measures to ensure that discussions are politically sanitized, with students rarely expressing any strong opinions on issues of poverty, racism, classism, or ethics. Social workers today have relinquished their roles as social critics and reformers, representing a serious concern for the profession (Sarri & Meyer).

The social work profession has a long history of active political engagement, representing a threat to the status quo. Many interested parties would hope the newer generations of the profession would abandon this commitment. In fact, Brill (2001) warned of the widening gap between ethics and practice. Students are called upon to bridge this gap, which requires more attention and critical thinking to our practice than ever before.

Social workers have a unique perspective to offer the political and social change debates. As a profession, social work draws upon and connects many fields, including political science, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Social workers perform many duties and operate in many spheres. Unfortunately, social work schools may not be doing enough to create professionals suited for the inter-disciplinary work required of social workers.

Social work schools may be training students to take a professional role in the existing structure of society instead of fostering critical thinking and training to create a new and better social structure (Sarri & Meyer, 1992).

### **Social Work Is Political**

Feminists have argued for decades that the personal is political. Social workers are positioned, unlike any other group of professionals, to connect personal issues to their social, political, and economic roots (Long, 2002). Social workers must challenge the status quo by advocating for change to address the structural, economic, and systemic problems from which clients suffer.

Social justice can be achieved through direct efforts to reform social policy. Social work students should be involved in social advocacy on behalf of their client populations. The criteria by which we measure the success of social action must be the change achieved for the deprived communities in which we serve (Figueira-McDonough, 1993).

Furthermore, many scholars have argued that social work is, a priori, a political endeavor (Abramovitz, 1993; Long, 2002; Freire, 1990). The unifying theme of social work, regardless of the unit of analysis (client interventions, advocacy, community organizing, and policy reform), is amelioration of a social problem. To claim that social work is neutral is to support the existing social structure and ideology and exempt these from diligent scrutiny. Long stated that “a decision to act apolitically is a decision to support the status quo” (p. 57). It could be further argued that social workers actually contribute to this status quo by placating the disenfranchised instead of mobilizing them and creating change. Apolitical social work absolves the rest of society from action, allowing problems to linger unchallenged. Abramovitz argued that social workers need to be educated for change to ensure that the profession does not become an agent of the status quo.

### **The Emerging Professional’s Responsibility to be Informed**

Freire (1990) stated, “social workers are conditioned by the structure of the society in which they live, in which they are formed. Social workers uncover and make explicit a certain dream about social relations, which is a political dream” (p. 5). The structure of society has changed drastically in the last twenty years. Much social progress has been undone through effective political marketing, shifting attention away from domestic and social issues.

Schools of social work need to sustain an environment where divergent opinions can be expressed, and students need to take initiative to educate themselves about relevant and timely political and social issues. A fundamental problem in the political and social arenas in the United States today

is the lack of discourse. Citizens are not questioning the political system in the diligent manner that was espoused by this country's fore founders. The proliferation of social problems in the most recent decades is testimony that many have been victimized by the political system, directly or indirectly. If social workers do not actively work for social and political change on behalf of the most vulnerable populations, who will? If the current generation of social workers fails to embrace the profession's ethical obligation to achieve social justice, will the profession's mission evolve to support, instead of oppose, a socially conservative and oppressive political environment?

Writing in 1953, social worker Charlotte Towle asserted, "we live in a period of scientific enlightenment and of great technical achievement which, if intelligently used, could render the life of all peoples more satisfactory than even before" (p. 1). Social work students must not rely on graduate school curricula to provide all the essential training to accomplish this. The mission and ethics of the profession require a willingness to actively confront social and political injustice on behalf of our client populations. Young professionals preparing to enter practice must realize the political nature of their work and reconcile it with the political and social reality they would like to develop.

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