Human rights and social development: A journey we walk together

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Human rights are now a regular feature in the agenda of global politics. Often the nature of rights or the actual claims of violations are contested, neglected or even denied. Violations can have immediate implications for peoples’ survival, such as imprisonment, gender-based violence, the death penalty and violent persecution, while other violations of human rights have implications for how people preserve their human dignity and exercise their freedom, such as statelessness, discrimination, religious persecution and freedom of expression. The road to meaningful and impactful action on human rights is a journey for all of us. Ultimately, human rights are about access to livelihoods and environments that sustain life within a context where people can live with the freedoms of beliefs, identity, relationships and justice to reach their full potential creatively. This endeavour has intricate mixes and layers. Fundamentally, many of these rights are part of our daily life, taken-for-granted experiences, such as access to clean air and clean water, safe and adequate food, decent housing, education and health care. In many social development contexts, these fundamental rights are yet to be universally obtained. Human rights are influenced by the economic dominance of high-income countries which can subjugate low-income countries. Increased democratisation has allowed a more nuanced focus on the rights of citizens to live their lives free of persecution and discrimination. At a global level, rights such as freedom of movement and resources are inherently tied to the citizenship of specific privileged countries. This is part of global inequality. Human rights in the context of climate change present urgent challenges as to who is disproportionately affected by global warming, both in its effects and in the efforts to reduce emissions. The role of social development in climate change is increasingly critical to support fundamental changes in how we protect the global environment.
How do we bring these global considerations of human rights and social development to a local level of professional practice that provides relevance internationally? Social work has a major role to advocate for the ‘minority rights’ of the neglected, underprivileged, vanquished or victimised. Social work is often left to work with violators of human rights and even advocate for their rights to justice and fairness, when they themselves have failed to make these considerations for their victims. This can leave social work in an invidious position, and highlights the importance of creating change at the source of human rights violations. In the field of human rights, the identity and understanding of violators and benefactors are often left invisible. This requires not only confronting perpetrators, but also addressing the benefits or privileges gained by us at the expense of other people’s rights.

The need to address human rights violations across the globe is immense. Progress can be slow and arduous. It is unsurprising that this work could be viewed as difficult and hopeless. Despite the colossal task ahead, it is important to be reminded that past work has not been in vain. Progress in human rights has been obtained for women, children and people of colour in unprecedented ways across the last five decades or so. Social work has a critical role in facilitating the voices of oppressed people to be heard, understood, validated, empowered and acted upon. The achievement of human rights opens up new possibilities of change for the future that were once inconceivable.

It does require challenging work to understand, collaborate and transform the attitudes and behaviours of those who violate the rights of others, if for any reason to allow them to fulfil the right to be humane. As Steve Biko stated, ‘The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed’. It is hard to conceptualise social development without some intervention with both the oppressed and oppressor.

Social development initiatives are the start of the journey and human rights are the destination. There is a need for all people to build and develop the essential
mechanisms for protecting and improving human rights across the globe. This journal aims to present a critical evidence base for social work, social policy and community development to advance human rights through social development programming. In such a journey, our values, our clients and the working relationships will also be the emphases of our effort for interventions. Social work is a humble but noble profession. We have a rich history in doing so over many decades (Healy, 2008). Conferences in Italy and Canada this year are important events in bringing us together with this endeavour; we encourage further discussions and debates at these forums and look forward to seeing more contributions in the journal.

Let us walk together.

Reference