

HUMAN RIGHTS



– NOT JUST AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT

Where do human rights fit into day-to-day practice? **Nigel Hall**, Secretary of the International Federation of Social Workers' Human Rights Commission, says they are central – and gives some examples across the globe and close to home of where they are under threat

For many, the big day in December is the 25th. But there is also another significant date – Human Rights Day on 10 December.

Some social workers, grappling with the many issues of day-to-day practice, may well view human rights as something of an abstract, idealistic concept.

But the reality is that without a focus on human rights social work would not be social work. They are at the core of our profession, as seen in our global definition, which states: “Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.”

Social workers work with people, helping to solve their problems and meet their needs, which means our practice must reflect an appreciation of their human rights.

There are times when practitioners need support upholding that commitment. They may, for example, find themselves in danger from governments for supporting such rights. This year we have seen social workers put themselves at risk defending human rights in a number of countries, including Turkey and Palestine.

It's vital that as a profession we are aware of such issues. The International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) Human Rights Commission, together with the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW) Human Rights Committee, publishes statements and raises awareness about the profession's human rights heritage.

The IFSW Commission also has a brief to act on behalf of social workers in trouble with governments due to human rights activities.

Human rights can mean different things to different people. A good place to start is with IFSW's statement of ethical principles which states that social work is “based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this”.

“Worth and dignity” are the key words here. From an international perspective there are three important factors that impact on this. Firstly, civil and political rights; secondly, economic, social and cultural rights and thirdly, promoting sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development. The latter is the theme of the 2017 Global Agenda for social work and applying it in the UK reveals several areas of concern.

Post-Brexit climate of xenophobia

A sense of loss of traditional community values in the UK and concern about the country being “flooded” with migrants was apparent in the recent referendum. It led to an anti-immigrant campaign in the run-up to the Brexit decision. A climate of xenophobia now exists in many areas of the country, evidenced by the increase in hate crimes, including those expressing hostile sentiments or violent acts against EU citizens living in the UK. According to the National Council of Police Chiefs, there was a 60 per cent increase in hate crimes after the referendum compared to the same period a year before.

IFSW and BASW England have urged all those working and studying in the profession in the UK to uphold and maintain the professional standards, values and ethics of social work by actively challenging any acts of racism, xenophobia or hate crimes wherever they occur.

Displaced and refugee children

The United Nation's refugee agency reports that the number of displaced people worldwide is at its highest, reaching 65.3

million at the end of 2015 – surpassing even post-Second World War numbers. It's increasingly becoming an area of concern for social workers in the UK.

Despite initial reluctance to accept any migrants into the UK, an amendment by Labour peer Lord Dubs permitted a small number of unaccompanied refugee children entry. IFSW has helped highlight the issues and BASW members have demonstrated solidarity with refugees, including joining a march to Parliament Square.

A blog covering the migrant issue has been created by IFSW – see www.europeancourage.wordpress.com

Gender inequity, especially female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and 'honour' killings

Gender disparities are a major human rights concern across the globe, particularly concerning the rights of women and girls. There is concern that FGM continues as a practice in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Despite being illegal in the UK since 1985, figures for 2011 show nearly 140,000 women and girls were affected. Since 2003, anyone taking a child out of the UK to be cut faces 14 years in prison but there has yet to be a single conviction.

Forced marriage is another area of human rights concern. Child brides are made to drop out of school, have children before they're ready and are often subjected to a life of violence and abuse. Plan International estimates 41,000 children are forced into marriage every day and this also affects communities in the UK where the practice is illegal. In 2014 the Forced Marriage Unit – set up in 2005 to promote and enforce the Government's policy on the issue – gave advice or support to 1,267 cases, 79 per cent of which involved female victims. It probably only scratches the surface of the problem.

Gender inequity is also graphically illustrated by 'honour' killings that regularly occur in countries such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh but also affects British women who may face this if sent back to their home country. Such crimes are often triggered by women defying centuries-old patriarchal codes and daring to make their own choice about who they marry, or how they live their lives.

The recent case of Samia Shahid is an example. She was murdered by her family following a divorce from her first husband who had been selected for her and re-marriage to a man of her choice. More than

1,096 cases were reported to police last year, though the actual number of victims is likely to be far higher. Social workers need to work closely with local communities and the law enforcement authorities to counter this human rights abuse.

TTIP – environmental concerns

Local communities, environment and democracy are under threat from trade deals currently being negotiated behind closed doors. Trade deals like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (so-called TTIP between the EU and the USA), the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (between the EU and Canada) and the Trade in Services Agreement will have a big impact on councils because they could outlaw the ability of local authorities to support local businesses and further open up services to privatisation. Despite assurances this would not affect health and social care, it does threaten the NHS and social services because a proposed new Investment Court could grant foreign investors wide-ranging scope to sue governments for compensation for actions that threaten their future profits.

The main goal of TTIP is to remove regulatory barriers that restrict the profits of transnational corporations on both sides of the Atlantic. These barriers are in reality some of our most prized social standards and environmental regulations, such as labour rights, food safety rules, regulations on the use of toxic chemicals and even new banking safeguards introduced to prevent a repeat of the 2008 financial crisis.

It is also possible that law and regulations regarding the provision and quality of social services may be interpreted as restrictions on trade and undermined by this agreement.

The European Parliament passed a



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resolution earlier this year for public services to be fully excluded from trade agreements.

Together with 1,500 European counterparts, more than 35 UK councils have declared themselves TTIP free zones. It is important that a human rights approach is core to any agreements.

Air pollution and the environment

All people have an equal right to enjoy the social conditions that underpin health and to access services and other resources to promote health and deal with illness. An issue that is increasingly relevant is air pollution. Around two billion children live in areas where outdoor air pollution, caused by factors such as vehicle emissions, heavy use of fossil fuels, dust and burning of waste, exceeds minimum air quality guidelines set by the World Health Organisation. This leads to the deaths of around 600,000 children under five annually.

Social workers may not have much experience of engaging in environmental action but social work academic Lena Dominelli's concept of 'green social work' offers a way forward. It focuses on how responses to environmental crises must occur not only through service delivery but also by actively addressing socio-economic disparities including poverty, limited resources, austerity and connections between these and the lack of environmental rights.

A final message...

Promoting sustainable communities is, in essence, about respecting human rights and reducing social exclusion. It is important that social workers are active in achieving this throughout society, working closely with families, communities and civil society in a variety of areas that may even be new to social work. Through their national and international associations, this does also mean speaking up for those facing inequitable situations and human rights abuses, both in their own countries and across the globe.