

Social Work and the Refugee Crisis

In 2020, 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced. This was the highest number of displaced people ever recorded. (World Economic Forum, 2021). Due to climate related implications, the refugee crisis could become the greatest humanitarian crisis of this generation. Due to ongoing conflicts, the increasing severity of climate related consequences and other socioeconomic and political factors, the refugee crisis is expected to progressively worsen. (World Economic Forum, 2019). If an irreversible and catastrophic climate tipping point is reached in the coming decades, it is unlikely that any nation on earth will be untouched by the refugee crisis. Increasingly, social workers will need to advocate for proper mitigation of the refugee crisis in the form of policy change. To respect the dignity and worth of all persons, social workers should resist any policy or institution implying that the lives of foreign people are less valuable than the citizens of their country.

Social service professionals and policy makers should recognize that racism prevents the alleviation of suffering experienced by displaced people and impedes the formation of preventative policies intended to decrease displacement. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has also committed to being an anti-racist organization. (NASW, 2022). Considering social work ethical principles and other commitments made by social work organizations such as the NASW, social workers must take a radical stance against anti-refugee/anti-migrant policies and institutions.

The refugee crisis cannot be separated from racism. Although not all refugees are racialized, there is an undeniable connection between anti-refugee policies and xenophobia, anti-multiculturalism, anti-blackness and racism. When President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine,

world leaders were clearly and openly more willing to accept Ukrainian refugees than they were to accept refugees from countries predominantly populated by people of color.

These are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans... These people are intelligent. They are educated people... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists. In other words, there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees. (Miller, 2022).

Blatantly racist comments such as this remark by Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov demonstrate the open xenophobia perpetrated by European leaders in response to the refugee crisis. World Leaders' lack of action in response to the refugee crisis can also in part be attributed to a lack of concern for black and brown lives.

It is important that social workers not only understand the injustice of institutions such as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, but also that they actively resist these institutions. This resistance can take different forms, and there is work to be done on macro, micro, and mezzo levels. Additionally, as this resistance is already occurring across America and around the world, social workers should analyze the effectiveness of specific efforts that are already occurring. Connecting with agencies doing this type of advocacy work and learning about refugee/migrant rights advocacy campaigns that have been successful thus far could inform future advocacy efforts. In addition to this, social work scholars should consider researching effective strategies to advocate for the rights of refugees/migrants. As refugees waiting to find settlement cannot vote or protest in favor of policies that would save their lives,

refugee rights campaigns might need to take different approaches than campaigns that focus on vulnerable groups who are citizens. Social workers should also consider existing research that focuses on strategies to reach and effectively serve undocumented people. Working to create and maintain safe spaces for undocumented people to receive health care and social services without fear of being reported or deported is an act of resistance. Some other examples of resistance include providing assistance to undocumented people, creating organizations that help undocumented people, protesting at the sites of anti-refugee/anti-migrant facilities, banning ICE officers from the premise of certain spaces, and advocating for transformative policies. This list does not encompass all work that should be done by social workers to mitigate the suffering of displaced people. Agencies that provide services to refugees are also important but are not performing any type of resistance if they are not challenging certain laws, pushing to create policies that benefit refugees/migrants, or refusing to report undocumented people.

Displaced people making the difficult decision to enter other countries illegally rather than putting themselves and their families in danger is an act of desperate survival- not injustice. Disregarding the lives of vulnerable foreign people by denying them asylum and consistently deporting them to their death is the horrific and unquestionably an act of injustice. It is not an exaggeration to use the term “deport to death”. According to the Human Rights Watch, between 2013 and 2019, more than 200 El Salvadorians were killed or seriously abused after being deported. (Acevedo & Kaplan, 2020).

There are constant stories about tragedies and injustices occurring in the world today. As there are so many issues to focus on, it becomes easy to dismiss blatant human rights violations and acts of abuse perpetrated by government agencies. As ICE has been horribly mistreating

people for decades, even activists who believe in justice for all people have become desensitized and unsurprised by their inhumane practices. Social workers need to be constantly imagining and advocating for a more just world and refusing to accept injustices as they are.

One of the fundamental purposes of ICE is to police undocumented people and in many cases, prevent asylum seekers from finding safety in America. For this reason, ICE is in need of deep transformative change. For ICE to become a just agency, necessary radical change should result in something that is unrecognizable from the current state of ICE. In other words, ICE as it exists needs to be abolished and replaced by a completely different agency with mostly different objectives. For this type of change to take place, social workers will need to engage in persistent and extensive advocacy.

Slavery was not reformed into a system of voluntary labor for pay. Although slavery was abolished, the function of farming and producing certain goods was replaced by paid, voluntary labor. This does not imply that capitalism is ethical, or that paid labor is always just and fair. However, even unethical labor is not slavery. A major function of ICE is to control movement across borders, abuse people who are waiting to apply for asylum, and find and deport undocumented people. Far too often, people are deported to their death. As mentioned, most of ICE's functions should not exist at all. However, certain functions such as efforts to reduce human trafficking need to continue. As ICE has caused unimaginable harm to vulnerable people for decades, any effort to reduce human trafficking should be the responsibility of a separate institution.

Not every social worker needs to be involved in advocating for the rights of refugees and migrants. However, as this issue is predicted to be significantly exacerbated by the climate crisis, social workers should act proactively and advocate for policies that protect vulnerable people in

case an irreversible climate tipping point wreaks havoc on all of humanity. Additionally, social workers should recognize that there are still opportunities to prevent an irreversible climate tipping point. Climate mitigation is an indirect preventative approach to the refugee crisis that macro level social workers should prioritize in their advocacy.

This paper has stated and implied that social workers have an ethical obligation to oppose anti-refugee/anti-migrant policies and agencies. In a hypothetical world where accepting refugees had negative economic consequences, social workers would still be obligated to respect the dignity and worth of every person and thus support the resettlement of refugees. Luckily, numerous studies conducted in several nations have proven that refugee resettlement is economically beneficial. ("Refugees in Canada", 2023). In many G7 nations, there are politicians, voting citizens, policy makers, and other authority figures who do not value the lives of displaced people or respect the dignity and worth of every person. In this case, making an appeal to the economic benefits of accepting refugees can garner support for policies that support and accept refugees. It is important that social workers think outside of their ethical principles and garner support among people with different priorities. If the majority of people in power truly respected the dignity and worth of every person, agencies such as ICE would not exist. Therefore, social workers can be internally motivated to protect vulnerable populations, while still making arguments to benefit the economy.

From a utilitarian standpoint, making economic arguments in favor refugee resettlement with an intention of fostering transformative change is not contracting the social work code of ethics to respect the dignity and worth of all people. Although there is growing criticism of capitalism among social workers, working within the system can be more realistic than working against it.

In conclusion, social workers should actively oppose anti-migrant and anti-refugee policies and institutions. This type of advocacy will increasingly become more relevant in the coming decades. Social workers should be working toward and envisioning a world that is just for all people. In this work, social workers must take radical stances against certain institutions in America and other nations around the world.

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