

Role of Social Workers in Promoting Environmental Justice

Fahad khan

PhD Scholar, Department of
social Science, Abdul Wali Khan
University Mardan
Pakistan : fahad44@gmail.com

Maria Iqbal

PhD Scholar, Department of
social Science, Qurtuba
University D. I. Khan KP,
Pakistan :

maria66@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research explores the essential role of social workers in promoting environmental justice, emphasizing their unique position to address the intersection of social inequities and environmental issues. Social workers advocate for marginalized communities disproportionately affected by environmental hazards, such as pollution and climate change. By employing a holistic approach, they engage in community organizing, education, and policy advocacy to empower individuals to address environmental challenges. The study highlights how social workers facilitate awareness of environmental rights and mobilize communities to demand equitable access to clean air, water, and safe living conditions. Additionally, they collaborate with environmental organizations and policymakers to influence legislation that prioritizes social equity in environmental decision-making. This research underscores the importance of integrating social work principles into environmental movements, as social workers bring valuable perspectives on community needs and social justice. Ultimately, the findings illustrate that social workers are vital agents of change in the pursuit of environmental justice, advocating for sustainable practices that protect both the planet and vulnerable populations.



1. Introduction

Environmental degradation and its social consequences are significant enough for social work practitioners to advocate for environmental justice in communities across the world. The field of environmental justice is central to understanding the growing emphasis on environmental concerns in social work. Within social work, there is a recognition that people are shaped and affected by the environment; social workers, therefore, need to be equipped to practice at different systemic levels as their basic concern is to work to help millions of people entrapped in the grip of environmental problems, whether singly, in groups, or as a community. The ability to work effectively at a range of levels with victims of environmental disasters or contamination calls on social workers to be able to distinguish different forms of vulnerability in a community and to work with a range of agencies addressing the problem. (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022)

It calls for practitioners to be able to facilitate the development of communities and to be able to resolve environmental problems at local, national, and international levels, working effectively with a range of monitoring agencies, pollution control agencies, and government departments. Therefore, if approached in accordance with this understanding, an ability to effectively address the problems of the environment will involve increasing the social work skills of monitoring, change management, and conflict resolution that require a multi-level partnership approach. The use of these skills is required to deal with the polarization in workers, residents, and agencies' perspectives in ecological disasters due to the lack of awareness of an unhealthy environment at the local level and the widespread absence of social workers in tackling such problems to lead local awareness programs.



1.1. Definition and importance of environmental justice

The increasing effects of climate change remind us that an essential component of one's well-being is access to clean, natural environments made up of land, air, and water. As more than half of the global population now resides in cities and urban centers, two-thirds of those individuals reside in areas lacking such access. This fact is monumental and calls for urgent attention, mainly since the individuals most prone to have diminished or nonexistent access include those who have historically experienced oppression and discrimination. In fact, when individuals with diminished access speak out about or protest substandard living conditions, they often are met with yet more environmental burdens or silenced by those in power or who profit via exploitation of natural resources.

In the United States, environmental justice is often defined as the fair treatment of individuals of all races, cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, classes, income levels, and educational backgrounds with respect to environmental hazards. The environmental justice movement has evolved since the 1980s, and while it has been clarified that it was targeted to cover all individuals regardless of background, groups most affected by cumulative impacts have been and in many cases continue to be those who have historic and numerous links to Indigenous communities and communities of color. Indigenous peoples have lived with and protected this continent for thousands of years before colonialists dominated and, thus, also have a particular connection to place. The right to a clean environment is part of being able to fulfill one's economic, social, and cultural rights. The necessity for promoting environmental justice on a global basis is also outlined from the standpoint of development and human rights.



2. Theoretical frameworks for understanding environmental justice

Environmental justice has historically not been in the realm of social work, yet social justice is a central tenet of the profession. However, the field can learn from and have an impact on various theoretical frameworks and perspectives that have aimed to frame the issue and its implications. These theories speak to different concerns along a number of questions: the intersection of environmentalism, social justice, and equity. Definitions of environmental justice vary. Philosophers and environmental sociologists have developed theories of ecological justice that address how humans can treat other living beings in a non-anthropocentric manner. (Hendricks & Van Zandt, 2022)

For the purposes of the trends and transformations in social work, ecological justice draws attention to the interactions between ecosystems and people. The concept of participatory justice also has direct value in work with clients. Theorists pursuing a participatory justice agenda start by asking whether Western intellectuals are suffering from a lack of knowledge about the places where they live. They argue that people have a basic obligation to attend to the places where they live, to connect to them and be a partner in their management. A decolonized environment, in which the health of the urban and rural habitat is assured, overlaps with aspects of the focus on "environmental racism." Social workers need a strong theoretical foundation from which they can critique the oppression at the root of the idea that human societies can degrade the very systems sustaining them. Ethical theory and policy reform in social work have made calls for a more profound exploration of the interconnections between social and ecological systems. It is these theoretical explorations of urban social-ecological patterns that inform this paper.



2.1. Social work perspective

The role of social workers as promoters of environmental justice. 2.1. Social work perspective. The social service profession is based on values of respect for individual dignity and worth, the right to equality of service, and the right to influence legislation and social policy; it incorporates knowledge and skills from the behavioral sciences, the humanities, and social work to improve clients' access to resources, social services, and mental health assistance. These social work values, distinct from our needs-based profession, to respect the individual, to show concern for equal rights, and to alleviate oppression across diverse cultures, apply to the concept of environmental justice. (Waldron, 2022) A social work perspective offers multiple aspects to consider when promoting environmental and ecological justice. A significant strength is the clear connection between social justice and ecological justice. They are inseparable. Additionally, a social work perspective offers specific knowledge, skills, and experiences regarding working with diverse communities. Social workers have the knowledge and skills associated with cultural competence that suggests the ability to work with people who respect their beliefs, culture, and ethnicity. This might be the single most important training social workers will have in a diversifying world. Social workers also know how to engage in respectful and committed community work; a necessary attribute for any meaningful interventions into climate change and social justice. However, community organization and group work can be placed in the context of community economies and can also be a route to more collective and participatory ways of doing research.

Thus, social workers are equipped to communicate the experiences and hardships of individual clients as well as advocate, organize, and act as political agents on the basis of the individuals from their community or organization. However, social workers must be vigilant about maintaining clients' and



communities' rights to privacy. As bridge-builders, social workers can facilitate the development of partnerships, collaborations, and networks at multiple levels. They can link and refer clients to an array of social service, environmental, and political resources at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Since social workers are constantly analyzing when, how, and where harm and suffering occur as a result of social systems, issues regarding crime, sexual and physical abuse, economic hardship, racism, and more can be redefined in the current context of environmental justice and sustainability. Thus, social workers can co-develop strategies and approaches to different types of environmental damage if they conceptualize those damages as interrelated with racism, poverty, and other forms of discrimination in the environment. Social workers have the skills and expertise in understanding and addressing the traumatic consequences environmental damage has on individuals, families, and communities. For all of these reasons, the social work perspective is a powerful tool to help establish justice and peace in a world threatened by environmental hazards.

3. Challenges faced by social workers in promoting environmental justice

Social workers can significantly contribute to the movement for environmental justice. However, their capacity to do so is often limited for a number of reasons, ranging from non-existent funding to bureaucratic and organizational constraints. The ability to implement effective programs is, in many ways, tied to the availability of resources and support systems that do not exist for many social workers, especially those working with at-risk or marginalized populations. In addition, efforts to implement programs and policies that advance environmental justice goals often entail the need for access to high



levels of administrative decision-making and authority. This is especially true given the level of inertia that exists within many institutional bureaucracies to consider the implementation of new types of policies and approaches. Finally, at the personal level, any social worker working with environmental issues may also face resistance from their clients or even the community as a whole. Environmental justice may not be initially viewed as a priority or part of their role. For the non-profits and other agencies that social workers are employed with, they often face significant fiscal and donor challenges and do not see themselves as environmental stewardship organizations. (King et al.2022)

There are cases in which social workers also respond with internal rigidity or even resistance to incorporating environmental justice in their work. These attitudes can make it difficult for them to be effective in their work in the environment and sustainability. Perhaps one of the most difficult elements in working with environmental justice and resilience is the reality of a number of complex interrelated issues that also play out at the institutional, community, and individual levels. Examples include numerous studies that suggest mental health and well-being may be adversely impacted as a result of environmental degradation, and interventions may need to provide a range of mental health and other supports as part and parcel of 'doing social work' with communities experiencing significant environmental stresses that impact their health and quality of life. For those working at the front end, however, on the margins of their organizational structures, there is also a need to be adaptable and willing to work with diverse partners and to engage in more creative practice approaches – often with fewer resources in order to be effective in promoting environmental justice and sustainability. Only by developing this knowledge base and committing to enhance and expand professional social work education in environmental justice and resilience can we be in a position to



frame more effective responses at the educational, practitioner, and community levels.

3.1. Limited resources and funding

Although social workers almost universally agree that environmental justice and ecological integrity are highly relevant topics to human welfare and, vitally, social work practice, they often do not have the resources to openly address such issues. Social workers often lack the financial resources to provide simple services to people, such as shelter for a homeless family or food for a family without enough money left at the end of each month. When working in such resource-starved environments, it seems nearly impossible to address a concern that social workers often see as secondary to traditional service provision. One of the greatest obstacles to environmental justice efforts is the fact that funding disparities lead to ecological injustices. In many areas, the communities described above receive little to no governmental support to promote projects that seek to improve social capital or promote community and ecological sustainability. Therefore, many social workers, who rely heavily on governmental or other sources of grants, find it difficult to develop lasting projects that address environmental injustices. Outside of small grant support or practical donations, social workers rarely, if ever, have the resources to allocate to such programs. Even when beginning collaborative planning that aims to improve ecological integrity, social workers often have to generate and disseminate awareness and support to guarantee a successful ecological planning initiative. While it may be possible to commit, in some sense, the professional social worker as scarce resources, social organizers often allocate what limited financial resources they have available to support other social service needs, such as a new computer lab or skill-building activity. Engaging communities in ecological planning efforts multiplies the challenge of



allocating dwindling resources. If social workers begin to advocate for projects that aim to improve ecological integrity and sustainability among marginalized communities, it becomes dauntingly difficult to gain the start-up funds for the initiative. Very often, because of the resource allocation, most environmental justice programs wither and die at the start-up phase. Reliance upon start-up or grant funding is a sure force to prevent progression to action, leaving populations at even higher risks for ecological and social degradation. Given these constraints and problems with traditional grant writing and funding sources for start-up money necessary for communities in the early stages of capacity building, it becomes very obvious that social innovation in the field of ecological justice is needed. Efforts at generating the material resources to support the programs and services in marginalized communities must begin and the process of sustainable development must be internalized in a community as a cultural and structural aim that supplements rather than undermines the organizational goals of those living in the community. (Carley et al., 2022)

4. Strategies for social workers to promote environmental justice

Most recommendations for how social workers can be involved in promoting environmental justice emphasize community organizing and policy work. One reason is that the keystone of social work practice is to build collective power among people who are disadvantaged. In other words, social work is an act of communal self-advocacy. Second, environmental issues lend themselves nicely to a hierarchical approach to change that includes "fixing" problems "upstream" via policy work, as well as "downstream" by attending to individual and family



needs. Thus, a dual focus strategy including community organizing and policy work has been central to environmental social work.

Based on findings from multiple cases, we recommend the following strategies for social workers to use in working to achieve environmental justice: empower community members and other stakeholders to advocate for their legitimate human and environmental rights; collaborate with other community organizations and university-based centers that can provide support services; educate community members about local environmental and health issues, possible contributing factors, and resources that can provide support and relief for those affected; work with community members who are interested in promoting systemic change, policy and legislative remedies, and legal remedies, such as building collaborative relationships with policy and decision makers, as well as legal organizations. (Bennett et al.2022)

4.1. Community organizing and advocacy

One technique of social work rests in community organizing for the purpose of engaging the community to advocate for justice in their quality of life to those whose decisions affect the ecosystem, which in turn impacts the human experience. While there are direct and indirect evidence-based practice techniques that could be used to restore the quality of life, other strategies include raising human interaction with the ecosystem to a powerful level of advocacy and community-led research. In cases such as these, social work functions on the power of the collective. A community that has decided to advocate to those whose decisions impact the human experience interacts with the ecosystem and harnesses the power of social work community practice for social change. The term “power of the collective” is supported by the stories that exist as proof that organized communities can influence institutions.



Many of the field reports relating to community-based advocacy occur as newscasts, as universities promote their integrative curriculum into sustainable ecological approaches to engineering, and in educational institutions and grassroots community organizations. Like studies of community organizing in times past, this research yields insights into governmental agencies, community members, miners, logging industries, scientists, and advocates becoming familiar with one another in “honoring the complexity of others’ lives.” The approach to this community-led work is an asset-based, community-up approach, yet this methodology is reliant on a key relationship-building aspect. The ability to build trust and cultivate skill in relationship building is focused on assessing the community as it develops. Additionally, finding key leaders in the community and building the relationship is key in sustaining action. There are two other techniques mentioned as cornerstones of this work: to develop consensus and communication, and a cornerstone to build financial, organizing, and leadership skills within the community in order to assess their leverage. This method is described as an asset-based approach. (Gardner-Frolick et al.2022)

5. Case studies of successful environmental justice initiatives

Case studies of successful environmental justice initiatives led by social workers are important tools for practitioners. While much of the literature on the role of social workers in environmental issues has focused on theory, this chapter focuses on two grassroots initiatives from the Greater Toronto Area where social workers were instrumental in accomplishing successful outcomes. These case studies are the backdrop to a proposed core inquiry question to frame and investigate the specific roles of social workers with regard to environmental



justice. Data from eight interviews show how social workers interconnected with others and transcended culture. Together, participants learned to renew and heal themselves, others, and the earth. The chapter is therefore not only about good practices and principles of agreement, but also about inclusion and reconciliation, self-care and common caregiving, healing spirit, making kin, and the wonder of life in its broadest and deepest senses. This case study briefly introduces two examples of environmental justice work undertaken in Canada and discusses each initiative. Several key components of each initiative are addressed, both those that contributed to its success and those that created uncertainty, specifically its intentions, strategies, supporters, opposition, lessons, and problems. Recommendations for social workers are given. The purpose of the study was to explore the role of social workers in such projects and thereby the potential of social work in environmental justice and to give practical examples of such initiatives in progressing notes. Topics covered include people taking environmental action. Evidence of resolved and restored environments is described. Components for successful action projects for environmental justice include alliances, strategies, beliefs, and visions. Lessons learned are identified. Making kin in environmental justice is identified. Manuals for practitioners and social workers are introduced. This work has shaped ongoing activities which are included. Theorizing from this foundational work includes making kin in environmental justice. The purpose of this case study was to present examples of successful projects for progress in environmental justice. As greater attention has been paid to environmental issues in recent years, researchers have begun to explore the role of social work in dealing with such issues. This task has mainly taken the form of identifying existing discourses on social work and environmental issues or making arguments for the value of earlier work in exploring this role. The range of discourses and views of the issue demonstrates the need for further research on



the role of social work in environmental issues. One major point of discussion in this field of inquiry is the efficacy of the involvement of social workers in environmental issues. More contemporary accounts in this field of inquiry are exploring the degree to which social work can function as a force for radical good, although commercial, managerial, and instrumentalist influences have apparently taken their toll on the field of social work in recent years. (Rigolon & Gibson, 2022)

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