Social Work With Migrants and Refugees: Challenges, Best Practices, and Future Directions

Editorial

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This special issue of *Advances in Social Work* focuses on current challenges and best practices with migrants and refugees, in an increasingly difficult global context. Over the past decade, forced migration and displacement reached record numbers, while complex geopolitical, economic, and environmental factors contributed to escalating current challenges. International human rights and migration laws provide a framework too narrow and too limited for these recent developments. Political pressure and a growing identity crisis add to the xenophobia and climate of fear, in which security has in some cases become the primary rationale underpinning rapidly changing migration policies. Social work as a profession – in education and practice – has an important (if largely unfulfilled) role to play in advancing the human rights of migrants and refugees. In this commentary, we outline the macro contexts that shape social work practice with migrants and refugees, highlighting the great potential for social work to do much more to advance the rights and interests of those fleeing conflict, economic or natural disasters, or other upheavals.

Setting the Stage: Global Context of a Governance Crisis on Migration and Refugees

Over the past 10 years, the public discourse on migration in general and forced migration in particular was shaped by the ongoing armed conflict in Syria, the postwar volatile situation in Afghanistan and Iraq; famine, increased poverty and armed conflicts in several regions in Africa (e.g., South Sudan, Eritrea, and Yemen); civil unrest, drug wars, and violence in Central and South America; and large magnitude natural disasters throughout the world. These events led to a sharp increase in forced migration, with 68.5 million people being counted as forced migrants at the end of 2017 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017). Of these, a total of 40 million were internally displaced people (IDPs) and afforded limited international protection and 28.5 million had crossed nation-state borders seeking refuge, either as refugees (25.4 million) or as asylum seekers (3.1 million). Political reconfigurations of nationality or citizenship also have contributed to an increased number of stateless people, who are either internally displaced or migrants. They navigate between the interstices of a nation-state system that fails to recognize their rights claims and makes them invisible and extremely vulnerable. One example is the most recent change in the Dominican constitution following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the decision to apply changes retroactively, to 1929, rendering an estimated 250,000 people stateless, or, as Amnesty International report noted, "ghost citizens" (Amnesty International, 2015).

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Within this global migration context, many national governments revised migration policies– but instead of aiming to increase protection for the forced migrants, they added layers of restrictions. Moreover, exclusionary asylum policies have become increasingly shaped by discretionary national political decisions rather than norms of international humanitarian and human rights standards (Greider, 2017). The quotas for resettlements dropped significantly, leading to a 54% drop in resettlement requests by UNHCR in 2017 compared to 2016. Increasingly restrictive immigration policies continue to threaten resettlement programs as an option for refugees. With over half of all the displaced people globally being children, and an increasing number of children traveling alone, the effects of current population movements caused by forced migration carry long-term implications. In 2017 alone 173,800 children were either unaccompanied or separated from adults (UNHCR, 2018).

Two significant larger migration movements, from Syria and other countries in the Middle East and Africa to Europe; and from Central and South America into the United States and Canada have led to increasingly politicized and polarizing national responses in Europe and North America. In 2015, these large movements created what was framed in the political discourse as a "migration crisis" with over 1 million people aiming to find refuge within the European Union (EU). As this is a global crisis of governance, to which nation states either had no appropriate response or responded through ad hoc and often unjust policies, the United Nations became an important forum for attempting to establish a substantive global response. These efforts were symbolically initiated by the New York Summit (September 19, 2016) which aimed to establish forced migration as a global issue and discuss potential global strategies to address it. An immediate product of the summit, the New York Declaration (United Nations, 2016) created a framework for future deliberations. Two distinct strategies were to be developed as part of this framework: one focusing on safe and regular migration and the protection of migrants within specific legal definitions of "regularity" (Global Compact on Safe and Regular Migration), and the second one focusing on refugees and asylum seekers (Global Compact on Refugees) (Hansen, 2018).

Yet, despite the swift response at a global level, several major challenges remain: there is little to no cohesion or agreement between countries on a global response on migration; the New York Declaration has no legally binding power; and these frameworks do not explicitly align with human rights principles, aiming to limit access to protections rather than recognize and protect the rights of *all* migrants.

Anti-Immigrant Attitudes and a Rise in Nationalism and Xenophobia

The main reason for these challenges emanates from national and regional political reactions to large-scale forced migration (Polakow-Suransky, 2017). In 2015, the waves of refugees fleeing the Syrian War and other regional conflicts seeking refuge in Europe elicited a significant commitment to provide refuge in EU member countries. Germany made the boldest political move, by announcing that they would take in 1 million refugees and work to provide relief and safety for incoming migrants. Yet, shortly after Germany's statement, throughout the European Union a new rhetoric emerged, marked by xenophobia and strong anti-immigrant attitudes. This sentiment of "backlash" fed into rising nationalist

movements throughout Europe (Polakaw-Suransky, 2017).

Even the most liberal EU member countries increasingly defined migration policies within a securitization framework. This led to an externalization of borders to ensure control and limit access, not only in Europe, but also in Australia and the United States, pushing immigration control into international territories (Peterie, 2018). Among the European nations, most restrictive immigration policies were pursued by Hungary (infamously closing its borders in 2015 and criminalizing support for asylum seekers and migrants in 2018). These actions in turn triggered similar anti-immigrant responses in Poland and Serbia and were followed by more restrictive border control imposed (temporarily) by Germany and Austria (European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, 2018), with Italy and other EU countries aiming to follow suit (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

Noteworthy, the closed borders and restrictive policies prevalent throughout Europe, Australia and the United States, has motivated other countries to provide an alternative response and work on sustainable solutions for migrants and refugees. Canada, under the lead of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, introduced a new strategy on immigration in 2016, aiming to increase support through welcoming refugees and allocating funds for better integration in the Canadian society as well as through regional and local supports in the fight against ISIS and local governmental oppression (Trudeau, 2016). France, through the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), and working closely with UNHCR, adopted an innovative approach to preventing smuggling and perilous journeys of forced migrants to and throughout Europe, by vetting asylum seekers on African soil and expediting resettlement into France (Brice, 2018).

In this context, it is important to note that in Europe and the United States, civil society actors are deeply engaged in challenging anti-immigrant sentiments and working with international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to protect migrants. Yet there is a need for better collaboration between the volunteers and the NGOs, and for an increased focus in preparing a qualified workforce to effectively work with asylum seekers. Social workers are not as deeply engaged as they should be in governmental levels of response or within local or international humanitarian non-governmental organizations. This special issue aims to address some of these gaps by increasing awareness among social work educators, scholars, and practitioners of the complex migration issues we face today and pointing to areas of research and practice requiring further attention.

Radical "Restrictionism" in the United States

The United States has long touted its record for resettling refugees and welcoming immigrants through a range of programs (U.S. Department of State, Refugee Admissions, n.d.). Yet that "history" has always been mixed – reflecting moments of heightened xenophobia or opposition to accepting immigrant or refugee groups (Haines, 2010; Zolberg, 2006). Immigration has always been a deeply political process; during the Cold War the United States prioritized accepting refugees who were from the Soviet Union or other Eastern Bloc states. Refugees from Southeast Asia and Iraq, for example, were accepted only in the face of strong political pressure to address the consequences of U.S-

led war (Harding & Libal, 2012).

Throughout U.S. history, immigration and refugee policies have swung between restriction and relative access, reflecting White House and/or Congressional priorities. As guest editors, we recognized as we issued the call for papers in 2017 that opposition to immigration and refugee resettlement had gained a strong ally in President Donald Trump and that support for immigrants and refugees had few visible champions in Congress. While restrictionism is a global phenomenon, its manifestation in the United States under the Trump administration represents one of the most radical shifts; unfortunately the administration's decision to severely limit refugee resettlement encourages other governments to implement exclusionary policies.

As of June 2018, the current administration has moved to effectively close borders, limiting access to immigration and refugee resettlement from several countries including North Korea, Venezuala, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. This restriction systematically refuses to provide timely due process rights to refugees claiming asylum at U.S. borders; enforcing a "zero tolerance" policy that separated parents and guardians from children at the U.S.-Mexico border, and later detained families together; and increasingly criminalizing undocumented migrants and subjecting them to inhumane treatment during detention and deporting migrants without observing laws protecting due process rights (Blitzer, 2018; Pierce, Bolter, & Selee, 2018). The Attorney General, Jeffrey Sessions, has reinterpreted established standards for grounds for asylum in the United States, including gender-based violence and gang violence (Blitzer, 2018). Immigration and Customs Enforcement has ramped up targeting of businesses and communities where undocumented migrants live and work, detaining and deporting record numbers of migrants who have not committed crimes. A new interpretation of the "public charge doctrine" promises to punish immigrants without permanent residence for accessing benefits they have a legal right to use (Shear & Baumgaertner, 2018). And, notably, under the White House leadership, admissions have been cut in the refugee resettlement program to historic lows (International Crisis Group, 2018). These policies must be taken within a broader shift that celebrates "U.S. exceptionalism," including the decision by the Trump administration to withdraw from the Paris Accord, the negotiation of the Global Compacts, and, more recently, its membership in the Human Rights Council at the United Nations.

A core concern that we share with a number of authors in this special issue is how to foster advocacy at local, national, and international levels that advances the human rights of migrants and refugees. The enforcement of "zero tolerance" – whether through policies to separate families as they enter the United States or to incarcerate families for indefinite periods without due process – has become a focus of advocacy and action in social work education and practice. One example of such work is demonstrated by advocacy taken on by Finno-Velasquez and the Center on Immigration and Child Welfare at New Mexico State University. The Center, working with colleagues across the country, has taken a lead role coordinating social work advocacy in the wake of "zero tolerance." Zayas' (2015) engaged scholarship on the experiences of children in mixed status families offers both empirical understanding of the impacts of unjust immigration policies and a model of effective advocacy at state and national levels. Commenting on a case filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, he recently stated "The separation of children from their

parents is universally regarded as one of the most unconscionable and harmful acts that any society or government can commit" (Myers, 2018).

National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in the U.S., issued a strong statement in the wake of ramping up "zero tolerance" and the policy to separate children from their parents or guardians at the U.S.-Mexico border. NASW stated that "The decision to separate children from their parents as soon as the parent crosses the border into the United States is both harmful and inexcusable. More concretely, the policy imperils the health and safety of immigrants. It is wholly un-American to weaponize children as a deterrence against immigration" (NASW, 2018). And, while this statement is an important step in staking a position vis-a-vis this unjust policy, it is time for a renewal of solidarity work in alliance with targeted groups of refugees and migrants in the United States. One place to start – a modest place that is only a first step – is to foster deeper understanding of current social work practice with (im)migrants and refugees.

Overview of the Organization and Contents of the Special Issue

The articles in this special issue address a range of concerns central to social work. As a collective they speak to the importance of integrating exemplars and approaches to social work practice on migration as a matter of advancing social justice and human rights. A majority of articles address social work practice in the United States, though a number of contributions address social work practice in other global contexts, including Sweden, Canada, Thailand, and Greece.

The first set of articles examine rights-based approaches to addressing structural inequalities facing newcomer immigrant communities in the United States. *Roth, Park and Grace* tackle the challenges of carrying out policy advocacy in a state that is not "welcoming" to immigrants, examining the indirect tactics of service providers in doing advocacy in the face of increasingly restrictive anti-immigrant policies in South Carolina. *Carillo and O'Grady* highlight the importance of community-based work from a structural and rights-based social work lens, focusing on labor rights and access to mental health services in the Chicago area.

The second section of this issue takes up themes of social work practice with children and youth. *Finno-Velasquez and Dettlaff* tackle the increasingly punitive U.S. government practice of separating immigrant children from families. They outline the critical role that social workers should play in leading efforts to respond to immigrant families' rights and needs, focusing especially on developing social work expertise; cross systems and cross-disciplinary collaborations; leveraging resources and supports; documentation and collection of data; and targeted advocacy. *Reynolds and Bacon* examine the role of schools in supporting integration of refugee children in the United States. Regarding schools as a primary driver of integration, the authors provide insights from a systematic review of literature on school-based programs to support refugee integration. They highlight the importance of successful programs being responsive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of refugee subpopulations; informed by the experiences of resettlement, including all stages of the migration process; "embedded in community" and "coordinated across multiple systems." *Pryce, Kelly, Lawinger, and Wildman* examine the role of a

Canadian conversation club for refugee youth in three locales in Ontario. Their evaluation demonstrates the promising practice of conversation clubs in increasing participants' sense of hope and belonging. Finally, *Evans, Diebold and Calvo* launch a call to action for social workers, in regards to the rights of, and protections provided to unaccompanied minors (UAM) in the United States. In light of the increasing numbers of UAMs, the authors identify available services for children in this category. They also highlight the gaps in services, and provide a list of recommendations for social workers aimed to address the gaps and improve practice.

A third group of articles focuses on health, mental health, and well-being of refugees. Drawing on findings from a larger qualitative study with Cambodian genocide survivors in the United States, *Berthold, Kong, Ostrander, and Fukuda* find that isolated elderly Cambodian survivors benefit from efforts to promote social connectedness and support networks. *Yalim and Kim* provide a review of the state of scholarship on mental health and psychosocial needs of Syrian refugees, while *Naseh, Potocky, Burke, and Stuart* provide the first systematic assessment of poverty and capabilities of Afghan refugees in Iran. In the latter study, the authors point to the limits of measuring poverty by income or monetary levels, given the fact that many Afghan refugees who could not be categorized as "poor" in Iran were still unable to meet basic needs.

While community-based approaches to social work practice with refugees and immigrants is addressed throughout the special issue, the fourth set of articles spotlights a number of different community-based interventions to foster greater social inclusion and well- being among newcomers to the United States. *Dubus and Davis* focus on the importance of community health centers in providing services to refugees resettled in the United States. Presenting findings from interviews with 15 mental health workers in six New England states, the authors highlight three crucial elements of best practices with refugees in such centers: client engagement; collaboration with interpreters; cultural competence. *Deckert, Warren and Britton* maintain the focus on service providers, writing about the tension between the politics of migration at the state level, the increasing anti-immigrant sentiments, and community engagement in welcoming and supporting migrants. The authors focus on the perspectives of service providers on migrants' vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking, and highlight the need for an expanded definition of trafficking, increased cultural competency among service providers, and the importance of social networks in building communities that will support migrants. *McCleary and colleagues* introduce the readers to community-based approaches to dealing with refugee chemical dependency, proposing a framework for sustainable collaborations between refugees and health and social service providers to reduce chemical dependency. Pointing to the prevailing unidirectional practices with resettled refugees, the authors call for participatory practices that will lead to mutual learning and adaptation. The role of community involvement and peer support, and the importance of recognizing and building on refugees' capacity are further highlighted by *Block, Aizenman, Saad, Harrison, Sloan, Vecchio, and Wilson*. Presenting the findings of a program evaluation of a peer-support program adopted by the Jewish Family and Community Services, the authors talk about the effectiveness of the support group with Iraqi and Buthanese (ethnic Nepali) communities, particularly in increasing the refugees' autonomy and their ability to access

services. This section of articles concludes with ***Frost, Markham and Springer's*** article on creating effective health education programs for refugee communities. Based on a program evaluation of a community-based program for Burmese refugee women in Houston, TX, the authors stress the need for participatory, bottom-up approaches to health education; the engagement of community health workers in health education trainings (with an emphasis on the cultural fit and relevance of such trainings for refugee women); and the importance of incorporating a social work ecological model to frame health-focused interventions for women refugees.

The fifth group of articles spotlights the role of social workers and others working to support refugees and immigrants. Articles in this group provide insight into international work with refugees from Greece, Sweden, and Thailand with the common thread of social work roles and responsibilities in the migration context. ***Guskovict and Potocky*** present a case study of humanitarian staff working with the Danish Refugee Council in Greece. The authors emphasize the importance of training and education on the impact of stress on humanitarian workers, the contribution that social work professionals can make in assessing the impact of secondary trauma, working with humanitarian agencies to develop training on the main stressors and effective self-care techniques, and providing mental health care services to aid workers, normalizing the need for such services, and facilitating access throughout their work. ***Gustaffson and Johansson*** write about social work's ambivalence towards refugees and migrants in Sweden, and the impact of current asylum policies on reception practices. Making the distinction between ability (as affected by shifting migration policies and resources) and willingness (influenced by individual perceptions and biases, as well as personal experiences), the authors propose a shift from providing "minimum standard" services towards a "worthy reception" of asylum seekers and refugees. The article discusses the complexity of the reception structure in Sweden, and identifies three essential barriers to such a shift: the lack of attention to the essential needs of refugees; the lack of gender-sensitive practices (and an overall gender-sensitive framework); and the perception of "worthiness" of refugees amongst service providers. Keeping with the concept of "worthiness" and the tension between security and human rights and social work values, ***Tecle, Byrne, Schmit, Vogel-Ferguson, Mohamed, Mohamed, and Hunter*** write about the absence of a legal framework for asylum seekers and refugees in Thailand, and the lack of protection for urban refugees in Bangkok – particularly women and youth from Pakistan and Somalia. Using both refugee and service providers' voices to reflect on the challenges in accessing and providing services to refugees, the article highlights the need for collaborative work between different stakeholders and the importance of social work-led innovation in improving services.

One critical domain of social work research remains a "new frontier." ***Powers, Schmitz, Nsonwu, and Matthew*** examine climate change as a factor that pushes migrants to leave their homes and communities. They argue for the creation of "transdisciplinary, community-based response systems which are holistic, multi-pronged, and inclusive of migrants' voices and strengths" and point to the importance of storytelling as a methodology to highlight the voices of migrants and advocate for change. The approach suggested by the authors is one that could be heeded for many domains of social work practice, building on *testimonio* and witnessing methodologies being adapted and

pioneered by other practitioner-scholars (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2016).

Overall interest within social work has gained momentum in recent years, as is demonstrated by the number of initial submissions for this special issue and the interest of social work educators in participating in emerging networks working on migration issues. Yet, the current issue reveals several gaps in research focus and interest. Notable is that we received few submissions that addressed the differential and uneven global and local policies governing asylum requests and limited access to services for asylum seekers. Another gap within social work literature concerns examining immigration detention practices and the role of social work in addressing widespread human rights violations occurring in the United States, Australia, and sites throughout Europe and North Africa.

More research is sorely needed on a number of topics within social work practice globally. This includes developing a clearer understanding of where and to what extent trained social workers are contributing to programs within the migration sector, whether in terms of policy advocacy, community organizing, or direct practice as service providers working with immigrants and refugees. Developing new approaches to grappling with ethical dilemmas when participating in the implementation of unjust policies; pioneering responsive methods for social workers to engage in dialogue with varied stakeholders to address xenophobia, nationalism, restrictive migration policies; and promoting innovative practices for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees are all vitally needed.

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