Social and economic justice, human rights and peace: The challenge for social work in Canada and the USA

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The current context of economic globalization, increasing militarization of the society and armed conflicts, the retrenchment of the social welfare system and growing social and economic inequality between, and within, countries underscores the importance of an approach to social work practice based on social justice and human rights. In this article, we examine the concepts of social and economic justice and address some of the dilemmas and challenges facing social workers in both Canada and the USA as they promote the fulfilment of human needs and address human rights in exploitative situations. The concepts of social and economic justice and human rights are interconnected yet distinct. Social justice is defined in this article according to The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 2003: 404–5) as: ‘An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities.’

Economic justice is a narrower concept, referring to the standard of living that ideally should be equitable. All persons ought to have opportunities for meaningful work and an income that provides
them with adequate food, shelter and a level of living that contributes to good health. Whereas social and economic justice is a general term that relates to society in general, human rights is a term that, from the point of view of the people, refers to specific universal standards relevant to freedom and well-being, personal and collective rights (Reichert, 2003; van Wormer, 2004).

The basic underlying assumptions of this article are that the social work profession can be proud of its heritage as the only helping profession imbued with social justice as its fundamental value and concern and a long commitment to peace and human rights. The increasing militarization of society and the retrenchment in social welfare systems are occurring under pressures from the global market economy. The discrepancy between social work practice and social work values is greater in the USA than in Canada. A social change and human rights framework is essential for the social work profession in the service of its traditions and values.

**Historical developments and current context**

Social work emerged at the turn of the last century partly out of church-based charities that responded to the harsh conditions, the stresses and displacements associated with urbanization, industrialization and the large-scale influx of immigrants in both the USA and Canada. Early approaches incorporated aspects of moralism combined with the capitalist or work ethic to legitimate class differences and to blame many of the poor themselves as undeserving of aid. Another opposing aspect, influenced by the social gospel movement with socialist and feminist underpinnings, taught compassion and social equality. Social work leadership was provided in the areas of peace activism, and efforts to reduce poverty and to eliminate oppression against minorities, women and children.

The tension between the dual focus of social action and individual change has been evident throughout the history of social work practice. The profession has alternated between two seemingly opposing forces: a focus on personal troubles and a focus on public issues (Lundy, 2004; van Wormer, 2006). Shining through all the periods, as today, were vestiges of resistance when resistance was called for.

Social workers have a long history, for example, of opposing militarization and linking it with social injustice and social neglect. Jane Addams, a pacifist and a founding mother of social work, was a nationally recognized political and peace activist and a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. She
saw herself as an internationalist, a citizen of the world, and led the early 20th-century women’s peace movement. Klosterman and Stratton (2006) point out that Addams’s opposition to the First World War and her advocacy for peace were considered subversive and subsequently she was vilified in the media and placed under surveillance by the Department of Justice. It was not until 1931, when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, that her efforts to build peace were duly recognized. The Addams legacy has continued, as the profession maintains the link between issues of peace and social justice. Social workers, as Verschelden (1993) reminds us, have a moral responsibility to work towards a redirection in federal spending – away from militarism and globally towards the creation of a safe and just environment. ‘Promoting peace and social justice and resisting nuclear war are consistent with the central values of the social work profession, which stress self-determination, human rights, and social equity’ (Van Soest, 1995). If we are serious about our mandate to uphold human rights, social workers, both professionally and individually, must raise their voices against social injustice wherever it is occurring (Lundy, 1987, 2006).

Canada and the USA compared

In the early days of the profession, Canadian and US social work shared a common history. As Lundy (2004) indicates, social workers in both countries attended the same conferences, belonged to the same professional associations and subscribed to the same journals. Canadian social workers, however, incorporated both British and American influences in their agency practices and university programs. The US accrediting agency for schools of social work was responsible for the accreditation of Canadian schools as well until 1970 when the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASW) took over this function. After this development, the divergence of social work education in Canada and the USA intensified. While more attention was paid to structural forces in the development of individual problems north of the border, southward the thrust was more towards an emphasis on addressing people’s problem behaviors through skills training.

Historically, the major difference in the social ethos between the USA and Canada can be summed up in terms of social values of individualism and the ubiquitous moralism that transcends every issue in the USA, from welfare restrictions to attitudes toward homosexuality. Punitiveness is the negative side of the moralism...
which, as a legacy from the Puritans, has continued to dominate the American political ethos and inform the values by which human beings shape their lives (Grimsrud and Zehr, 2002).

In US social policy, there are two ideological strains that are in some ways at war with each other – the belief in individual rights and dignity, on the one hand, and the punitive tradition, on the other. While the ethos of individualism is revealed in weak government supports and lax gun control laws, the punitive ethos is revealed in the prevalence of the death penalty, harsh mandatory sentencing laws for drug users and dealers, denial of civil rights to gays and lesbians, and the exposure of inmates to violence including sexual abuse in the prisons. The absence of prevention measures such as universal health care and affordable substance-abuse treatment has set the USA apart from other industrialized countries including Canada. The seeming paradox of tough punishments in some areas and laissez-faire, devil-may-care policies in others can be explained in the light of the legacy of the past, namely the Calvinistic creed of the Puritan founders.¹

By any standard, in short, the USA is considered a highly punitive country. Although the crime rate has been dropping for years, media-generated horror stories have instilled fear and anger in the American public and led to a prison-industrial complex and incarceration rate unprecedented in the world. With an incarceration rate of 724 per 1000 residents, there are 7 million people in prison, on probation or on parole – one in every 31 persons. Black men are most highly represented in these numbers (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The paradigm of retributive justice which dominates the US criminal justice system is a recipe for the alienation of poor and minority populations who are caught in its grasp.

In Canada, the incarceration rate has declined as the community supervision rate has increased (Statistics Canada, 2006). Although highly criticized by US officials, Canada moved in the direction of the pragmatic harm-reduction model as practiced in much of western Europe. Rather than forbidding drug use, the focus of the harm reduction approach is on saving lives through monitoring and providing safe injection sites, needle-exchange programs and clean crack pipes to addicted individuals.

There is a marked contrast between the USA and Canada in developments in social welfare. Maude Barlow (2005) points out that Canadians rejected the values marked by individualism and the ideology of the survival of the fittest. After the Great Depression and the Second World War, Canadians viewed universal social
programs as a fundamental right of citizenship and considered that ‘all Canadians, regardless of socio-economic background, ethnicity, or where they lived, had a right to a good education, health care, and assistance for the elderly, the young, the poor, the unemployed, and the disabled’ (Barlow, 2005: 126). However, much has changed, particularly in the past 20 years, as social welfare programs and benefits have seen a steady erosion. In their recent report, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights highlighted Canada’s failure to provide for a large segment of the population. In 2004, 11.2 percent of the population was living in poverty. In particular, it was reported that the minimum wage and social assistance levels are too low to provide an adequate standard of living, unemployment benefits are too restrictive and not widely available and adequate child care services are lacking (Ottawa Citizen, 2006). Canada now has a child poverty rate of 16.5 percent, shamefully more than 14.4 percent in 1989, when the House of Commons passed a unanimous resolution to eliminate poverty (Tang, 2003).

Barlow (2005) offers a disturbing account of how the movement for economic and security integration of Canada and the USA is well under way. There is great pressure to harmonize the economy, social programs, and policies guiding environmental and natural resource concerns. Signed trade agreements such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and the proposed General Agreement on Trades and Services (GATS) provide the open doors to corporate privatization with no restrictions and thereby affect the economy, state-supported social programs and the environment. We can expect further harmonization with the increasing election of members of parliament who, as political conservatives, are supporters of militarization and the policy directions of the USA. Already monies are being shifted to law enforcement and prisons, while at the same time the emphasis is on getting tough on crime. Many of the new members of parliament are vehemently opposed to same-sex marriage, legalized abortion and federally supported programs such as day care.

By far the greatest supporter of increased militarization is the arms industry which has not been disappointed by recent decisions made by the US and Canadian leaders. The US military budget was expected to exceed $500bn in 2006 in addition to the $220bn for the occupation of Iraq (Barlow, 2005). This represents 48 percent of the world total and demonstrates how the US economy is mainly driven by defense spending (Burton, 2006). Since the events of 11 September 2001, Canada has been pressured by the USA to
support and participate in the American-led invasions in both Iraq and Afghanistan. With a military budget of $15bn, Canada’s spending is high by international comparisons and places it seventh-highest among the 26-member NATO alliance and 15th-highest in the world. The 2005 federal budget added an additional $2.8bn over five years to the military, and in the first Conservative budget $5.3bn was added (Staples, 2006).²

This vast allocation of funds to militarism has meant the transformation of healthy federal surpluses into deficits while the basic needs of many people go unmet. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the world saw on their living-room TV screens the depth of the divisions based on race and class in inner-city America and the lack of a competent response by the world’s military superpower. The extreme income disparity in the USA is reflected in their high score on the Gini index, a global measure of a nation’s relative inequality.³

National differences aside, the problems facing social workers transcend international boundaries. From the social welfare perspective, our economic and political interdependence is being manifested in common forces and common concerns. These problems, which stem from capitalism and the hegemony of the transnational corporations, are played out in virtually every country in the world as an ever widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, a declining standard of living for the masses and a weakening of the social safety net. Increasing social and economic injustice and the violation of human rights of people presents an immense challenge for social workers in both the USA and Canada.

Social justice, human rights and the social work profession

In 1996, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) clarified its goals in a rewriting of the Code of Ethics and the focus of the profession was expanded to include helping vulnerable and oppressed people; emphasizing respect for ethnic diversity in the USA and globally; and promoting social justice and social change. The addition of Section 6, The Social Worker’s Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society, included a global awareness. As stated in Standard 6.1 (Social Welfare):

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment
of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

And with special relevance to this text, Standard 6.02 (Public Participation) stated: ‘Social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions.’ A serious omission, however, was the exclusion of any direct reference to human rights.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is weak in the area of social action or international concerns but strong on human rights. Consistent with the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) Code of Ethics, the CASW emphasizes the social work commitment to human rights in the Code’s preamble and urges that ‘social workers uphold the human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights’. Value 2 states that social workers should promote social development and environmental management. The latter is a unique reference to care for the natural environment and sustainability not found in comparable ethical codes, to our knowledge. But what is missing from both national codes of ethics, is any mention of a peace mission or any directive to the effect that social workers must work towards peace within and among nations.

As Lundy (2004) indicates, however, social workers occupy a contradictory role in society in as much as the society in which we live is uncommitted to the social welfare of its people. The political and economic context is based not on social justice but on exploitation and inequality. Social workers have often found themselves torn between the values instilled in them in schools of social work and the realities of trying to help clients against an increasingly lean and mean social system. Although Colton sees social justice and social work as integrally linked, he cautions that ‘the relationship between the two is decidedly uneasy, fraught with tension, contradiction and conflict at both the ideological, conceptual and theoretical levels as well the levels of policy and practice’ (Colton, 2002: 659). If, as we have argued, social workers have a responsibility to advocate for human rights and social justice and to question exploitative structures, we can begin by addressing the urgent need for economic security, social equality and better social services and programs. In holding the state accountable for the social protection of the population and the human rights standards, as codified in international law, the effectiveness of the social work mission will be enhanced.
The dilemma facing North American social work, according to Slavin (2002), is how to provide professionalized services when the resources and the requirements for the provision of services are being steadily downgraded. A major issue is privatization, one of the hallmarks of the global market’s cost-saving policies. Traditionally, in the social welfare state, social services have been provided directly by the government. In today’s competitive market economy, performance is quantified, case loads have risen, and agencies are expected to do more with less. Services are subcontracted out to private firms that save money by hiring unqualified human services workers. The results are particularly damaging to vulnerable populations such as Aboriginal peoples and recent immigrants (Slavin, 2002).

The social work profession the world over is concerned with the devastating effects of poverty, hunger, war and terrorism, militarism, environmental despoliation, preventable disease, homelessness, inequality, injustice and violence. If militarism could be tackled alone, many of the other problems facing the world would be significantly diminished. The film-maker Avi Lewis (2005), in an address to the Canadian Centre for Social Policy Alternatives, estimated that the US funding for Iraq alone would pay for the health insurance for 103 million children, 3 million new teachers, or 1.5 million new housing units. The US government was condemned for violating basic human rights in the war against terrorism that included holding an unknown number of detainees without charges in Guantanamo Bay and the inhumane treatment of prisoners (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Individual Muslims face increased interrogation, discrimination and threats to their safety.4

Adopting a human rights perspective


The fact that economic rights are even included along with political and civil rights under the rubric of human rights may come as a surprise to many Americans because, as Gil (1998) informs us, the Bill of Rights of the US constitution guarantees civil and political
rights only. The UN UDHR, in contrast, provides for civil and political rights supplementary to comprehensive economic and social rights. However, none of the UN human rights documents include specific mention of sexual orientation in order to ensure that gay, lesbian and bisexual persons have the same rights and are not discriminated against. The IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) consider it essential that social work educators and practitioners be totally committed to the promotion and protection of human rights (IFSW, 2000). The majority of the national member associations of IFSW (for example, Australia, Canada, the UK, Denmark, France and Turkey) include a reference to human rights in their Codes of Ethics. The USA has not yet done so, but as an active member of IFSW can be expected to do so in the future. (See www.ifsw.org to compare the various Codes and Appendix C to read the IFSW Code of Ethics.)

Individuals alone may not always be capable of overcoming the inequalities and discrimination they may face. Adopting a human rights perspective can help social workers more readily identify structural difficulties in planning appropriate interventions (Reichert, 2003). For example, viewing shelter and food as human rights rather than simply as human needs draws our attention to the political nature of poverty and the necessity of addressing structural inequalities and injustices while providing available resources. Similarly, Witkin (1998) recommended using a human rights lens to address social problems such as violence against women. Rather than viewing such violence as a relationship or psychological issue, social workers can reframe the anti-woman attacks from a human rights perspective. Such reframing, as Witkin suggests, brings the force of international law to bear on governments that allow for such violence and encourages the development of resources such as shelters for abuse victims.

The human rights value base, as articulated in various legal documents, parallels the values of our profession, and social workers in the USA, following the path of the international social work community, are only on the threshold of this realization. NASW (2003: 211) has taken a decisive step towards moving the profession forward by endorsing a human rights framework for social work and in defining human rights as transcending ‘civil and political customs, in consideration of the basic life-sustaining needs of all human beings, without distinction’.

The starting point in understanding human rights lies within the UDHR approved by most countries, including the USA and
Canada. One serious flaw in obtaining justice in the USA under the auspices of the UDHR is the fact that the USA has ratified only that portion of the document that is consistent with the US constitution, in other words, the recognition of political and civil rights.

As a global profession, social work is concerned with economic and social rights as well as with civil rights. When people are hungry, they are less likely to be concerned with their personal liberties and participation in the democratic process. Internationally, social work can be expected increasingly to look to human rights documents such as the UDHR as a blueprint for policy practice. The standard is there. Consider Article 25, for example:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, and housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

The fact that these rights are included nowhere in the US constitution (but in many European constitutions) has hindered the American people in their claims to basic social and economic benefits including affordable health care. NASW (2003) strongly promotes the US ratification of the UDHR in its entirety and of other critical UN treaties.

Watkinson (2001), writing from a Canadian perspective, argues that the inclusion of human rights documents and legal decisions arising from them are an essential part of social work education. Human rights laws, moreover, as Watkinson indicates, ‘provide a valuable theoretical and practical base for assisting in social change’ (2001: 271). Because Canada was a signatory (unlike the USA) to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Political Rights, social workers in that country can use the document as a touchstone by which to examine social policy and to hold the government accountable. All the provinces in Canada as well as the federal government, in fact, have human rights legislation that is administered by a Human Rights Commission. For Canadian social workers, as Watkinson argues, human rights laws can be a valuable tool for advocacy for social and economic justice in the era of globalization. However, as Teeple (2004: 22) notes, human rights ‘remain abstractions unless people have the means to realize them and live in a system in which they are realized’.

The adoption of a human rights framework is increasingly relevant today given the realities of the global market that reinforces
structures of disadvantage ‘through blatantly undemocratic processes which result in benefits for the few rather than the many’ (Ife, 2001: 202).

**Concluding thoughts**

Professional social work ethics and values require competence in policy advocacy and social change strategies, as well as a radical approach to individual, family and group practice. United under the banner of a human rights framework, social workers, in collaboration with other allies, can be a vital force in advancing a social and economic justice agenda. Within the context of rapid globalization and social change, the traditional polarized divisions of individual and community social work, of the domestic and the international, no longer apply.

The challenge for social workers is to understand the political dimensions of social work practice and the links between the local and the global within a social justice, human rights-oriented framework of practice. But understanding is only the first step, for as Reisch and Andrews (2002: 231) remind us: ‘The test of social work’s commitment to its underlying values lies in the willingness to struggle on, on an often mundane day-to-day basis, to translate these values into deeds, as our professional forebears did individually and collectively.’

**Notes**

1. The early Puritans were religious dissenters who were regarded as strange and fanatical in their day. Their creed was built on a strong work ethic and strict punishments for sloth and lust. The Puritans were weak on compassion and the tolerance of dissent.

2. The world military expenditure is estimated at US$1.118trn ($2.1m per minute), an increase of 34 percent since 1996. This is occurring in the context of unprecedented poverty, environmental devastation and the military destruction of lives and property (Burton, 2006).

3. The Gini index, a common measure of inequality, ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 100 (perfect inequality). The score for the USA at 40.8 indicates a disturbing level of inequality that is far greater than that in Sweden (25.0), Canada (31.1) and the Russian Federation (31.0), and is also greater than that of the UK (36.0) (Human Development Report, 2005). It is not surprising to find that, although the USA is a wealthy country, there are marked class, racial and ethnic health disparities among the population. This is compounded by the fact that it is the only country of wealth that does not have a universal health care system.

4. Take, for example, the case of Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen detained during a stopover at New York’s JFK airport in September 2002 and deported to Syria.
where he was imprisoned and tortured for one year. These actions were based on inaccurate information forwarded by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) that claimed Arar had ties to Al Qaeda. Four years later, the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar exonerated him of any link to terrorism.

5. It was not until 1996 that the Canadian Human Rights Act was amended to include sexual orientation. It now reads: ‘For all purposes of this Act, the prohibited grounds of discrimination are race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted’ (Canadian Human Rights Act, 1996: s1).

References


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