Greetings from Dr. James Midgley

Celebrating a century of international social work: Issues and Debates

Social work colleagues with an interest in international social work will know that the first professional school outside of Europe and North America was established in Santiago, Chile in 1925. Since then, more professional schools have been established in the country and social work education has spread throughout Latin America as well. As Chilean social workers celebrate the school's centenary, I am greatly honoured to participate in this special issue of the journal *Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social* and to celebrate your achievements over the last century. I know my colleagues at Berkeley will join me in congratulating you and all social work practitioners, educators and administrators in Chile on reaching this important milestone.

I am grateful to the journal's editors for inviting me to reflect on the profession's international accomplishments during this time. Although I am not qualified to comment on trends in social work in Chile, I am sure others contributing to this special issue will address this topic. But there can be no doubt that social workers in Chile have made a major contribution to international social work. In particular, their resistance to the military dictatorship during the 1970s and in subsequent years inspired many of us. Also, many of us who attended the conference of the International Association of Schools of Social Work in Santiago in 2006 were moved by the speech given by former president Michelle Bachelet who spoke warmly of her close association with social workers during her earlier practice as a medical doctor.

The past century has seen momentous changes. Some of them have caused great harm to millions of people but others have significantly improved their lives. It was during this century that the first nuclear weapons were detonated with devastating results but also when smallpox was eradicated, and many other killer diseases including Covid-19 were brought under control. Because of improvements in both public and curative health, life expectancy during the last century has soared, infant mortality has fallen and never in human history have so many people lived such long and satisfying lives. On the other hand, climate change and environmental disasters have negatively affected millions of people, but many governments have been slow to act. Another major change over the last century is the rapid increase in mass migration which has fostered cultural pluralism

in many societies. The last century has also seen major geopolitical changes with the emergence of new centres of power. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the decline of the British and other European empires fostered the emergence of the United States as the world's dominant economic and military power, but it has in turn been challenged by the rise of China and other countries in the Global South. The adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights ushered in a new era of international law which sought to maintain peace and promote respect for all, but which has sadly been undermined in recent years as a number of governments have blatantly violated the very treaties they acceded to.

The social work profession has been affected by these and other social changes. Although some social workers may think that the momentous times in which we live have little to do with their professional lives, it is an inescapable fact that we are all affected by international events. Today, social workers all over the world invoke the concepts of social and human rights in their daily practice, believing that everyone has a right to live a decent life and to have access to core social services. Social workers have also reacted to particular problems like HIV-AIDS and have played a major role in responding to this pandemic. They have also been involved with international social movements campaigning against oppression and discrimination and today, antiracism and gender equality feature prominently among the profession's commitments.

Many issues facing social work in different countries have been debated at the international level and they now feature prominently in debates at international conferences and in social work's academic and professional literature. Although there have been different responses to these issues, they have enriched the profession's understanding of its global role and scope. They have also been instrumental in improving social work practice. On the other hand, some of these issues have not been resolved resulting in ambiguity and even confusion which does not enhance the profession's standing. These deserve further discussion.

One of the first and arguably most important concerns the question of what is social work? Although most professional schools and textbooks offer formal definitions, there is considerable variation internationally about what social work involves. While some definitions stress social work's role in solving people's personal problems, others emphasise the way it addresses social needs at the community level. Others highlight its preventive function and yet others claim that social work is primarily committed to ending oppression and bringing about progressive social change.

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In an attempt to formulate a universally valid definition of social work, a meeting of delegates to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work(IASSW) held in Melbourne Australia in 2014 adopted a definition which states that social work promotes "social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people". This definition is very different from those that focus on problem solving for individuals and their families like the one offered by Barker (2013) which states that social work is "the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable to this goal."

It is admittedly very challenging to incorporate a multiplicity of definitions as well as practice activities within one all-encompassing definition. Social workers have engaged in many different types of practice over the years and often, these are easily recognisable. For example, I note in my book *Social Welfare for a Global Era* (2017) that most social workers are engaged in direct practice with families and children and often they do so in statutory settings or in non-profit and faith-based agencies. On the other hand, it is well-known that many social workers in the United States have embraced private psychotherapeutic practice while this is not the case in most other countries. Some other examples of the diversity of social work practice include nontraditional interventions like outreach programs to street children in Latin American cities, rural community development projects in Africa, youth focused community interventions in Europe and social work in childcare centres in Asia.

While it would be difficult to formulate a definition of social work that reflects these very different forms of practice, there are general principles which apply to all types of social work. In my book I suggest that these include direct face-to-face interventions by professionally trained personnel and a reliance on key values and principles. Hugman (2010) takes a similar view and urges a 'pluralist and inclusive' approach, which recognises and celebrates the different forms of practice social workers engage in within the framework of a core set of skills, knowledge and values. It should also be noted that other well-established professions like engineering and medicine also find application in different types of practice but because of a common professional training and commitment to key values and principles, these professions are readily recognisable. Although mechanical engineering is very different from chemical engineering, both are a part of the engineering profession. Similarly, very different types of medical practice ranging from neurosurgery to dermatology are encompassed within one well-recognised profession.

However, for this interpretation to be realised in practice, social workers should accept social work's practice diversity and desist from confronting those who hold different positions. Unfortunately, this diversity has created tensions within the profession which reflect the passionate beliefs that many social workers hold about their own preferences. There has been a long-standing discord between those who believe that social work should be guided by Freudian psychoanalysis and those who are inspired by critical theory and believe that social work should engage in an unstinting struggle against patriarchy, racism and other manifestations of oppression. While reasoned and temperate disagreements are entirely legitimate, they have sometimes boiled over into intemperate and often personal recriminations. These disputes do not promote professional unity or indeed foster an acceptance of the notion that social work has core principles and values that apply to all forms of practice.

Because social work evolved in societies with very different cultural, economic and social conditions, it is important that the diversity of professional practice around the world be recognised. Sadly, this has not always been the case. In the years following the Second World War, when social work spread very rapidly to the newly independent nation states of the Global South, it was generally assumed that social workers in the developing countries should replicate the social work knowledge and practice skills established in the metropolitan countries. Often, the new schools of social work and professional associations that emerged in the Global South adopted what subsequently turned out to be inappropriate academic curricula and practice approaches. However, at the time, the replication of Western social work in the Global South was thought to be appropriate and even desirable since Western ideas and practices were somehow believed to be 'superior' and worthy of emulation.

It was only later that some social work writers recognised that this trend reflected the persistence of what President Kwame Nkruma of Ghana called 'neocolonialism' and that it needed to be critically assessed and addressed. At this time, writers like Khinduka (1971) and Shawkley (1972) published important articles on the topic which questioned the widespread adoption of Western social work knowledge and skills in the Global South. In addition, some social work writers proposed that new forms of engagement should be introduced to reflect the needs and circumstances of different societies. I myself (1981) argued for greater *pragmatism* and *indigenization* while Walton and El-Nassr (1988) urged the *authentization* of practice so that social work in the Global South would reflect the social, cultural, economic and political characteristics of these societies. Since then, the issue has been widely debated in the profession's literature. As an edited collection by Gray and her colleagues (2008) reveals, the case for developing culturally rooted forms of practice has been widely accepted. Today, calls for the decolonisation of social work are commonplace.

On the other hand, the diffusion of inappropriate knowledge and practice approaches continues in some parts of the world. Although there is far greater awareness of the need for appropriate cross-cultural transfers, Gray and Coates (2010) reveal that the curricula of schools of social work in many developing countries still rely extensively on Western models. In addition, some writers like Huang and Zhang (2008) argue that this is not a problem since social workers everywhere will benefit from international transfers. Also, they aver that social workers everywhere are capable of adapting innovations to fit their own needs. They also contend that cultures are dynamic and readily absorb and adapt new ideas and practices. As the debate continues, it is likely that international exchanges between social workers will be more sensitive to these issues and that a syncretic adaptation of different approaches will emerge. Hopefully, Huang and Zhang's (2008) contention that adaptation and judicious replication can bring positive benefits will be realised. However, this should also involve the adoption of knowledge and skills from the Global South in the metropolitan countries. Fortunately, there are instances of this already happening.

Another issue facing the profession concerns public recognition and professional status. Since social work first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, great efforts have been made to secure professional status and in addition to creating schools for the training of social workers, professional associations have been established in both the national and international levels to secure recognition and lobby for salaries and decent working conditions. These efforts have been quite successful and today social work education is well-established, and numerous professional associations have emerged. In addition, social workers in some countries have secured statutory recognition through licensure, registration and title protection. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that social work has achieved the same professional status as medicine, engineering, and law and instead it is sometimes referred to as a semi-profession similar to teaching, nursing and librarianship. Many social workers also complain that their salaries are relatively low and that they are accorded little public recognition for their work. This problem has been exacerbated by the international diffusion of neoliberal ideology which has resulted in the adoption of managerialism and cost reduction as well as retrenchment to the social services which have all negatively affected social work and the other helping professions.

Although efforts to address these challenges continue, some argue that the quest for professional status has diverted social work from its mission to address poverty and oppression. Instead of devoting considerable effort to improve social work's professional status, they contend that the tasks of eradicating poverty, reducing

inequality and abolishing injustice should be given top priority. They claim that these were the challenges that social work originally sought to address when it emerged in the nineteenth century; but by pursuing self-interest through professionalisation, social work has abandoned its true purpose. This argument is most frequently made by radical social workers who are critical of the profession's commitment to direct practice and its attempts to ameliorate the emotional and other social problems that families encounter. Instead, they believe that social workers should join with community activists, volunteers and progressive politicians to promote social justice. Since many of these progressive change agents are not professionally qualified, social work's quest for professional status is not only irrelevant but a hindrance. However, few social workers are persuaded by this criticism and most retain their commitment to enhance their professional status. Obviously, professional social work associations around the world also continue their efforts to improve educational and practice standards, and secure greater professional recognition for their members. This is also true of most social work academics.

On the other hand, many social workers, including myself, believe that the profession can combine a commitment to professionalism with a greater engagement with issues of social justice. This is compatible with my earlier argument that it is possible to encompass social work's diverse practice commitments within an all-encompassing professional framework. In its formative years, social work's founders were committed to this goal and despite differences and tensions, they forged a unitary model which incorporated direct casework practice with community-based activities as well as social activism. While Mary Richmond famously promoted direct casework, other founders like Jane Addams and Florence Kelley in the United States and Beatrice Webb in Britain engaged in activism and political lobbying in order to bring about progressive social change. Since then, the commitment to social justice has been prominent in academic circles where a significant number of social work scholars have argued for a greater engagement in activities that promote social change. Terms such as social change, empowerment, equality and social justice now pervade the profession's academic literature and feature prominently in social work curricula in many countries. These ideas have been echoed by many professional associations which often issue press releases and similar statements on social justice issues. However, this is not always the case, and there are many instances of how they failed to take a strong position against discrimination, oppression and injustice.

On the other hand, some social workers have taken a vigorous position on these issues. In South Africa where the country's official professional association failed to challenge the government's abhorrent *apartheid* policies, some social workers bravely

confronted the government and, as Patel (1992) reveals, an alternative grassroots movement of social workers providing welfare services to the oppressed majority emerged. There were similar developments in Chile where radical social workers who protested against injustice were brutally oppressed by the Pinochet regime. Fortunately, there is evidence that professional associations are now more willing today to oppose oppression. Recently the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) expressed the international profession's condemnation of the brutal killing and maiming of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza and the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people in the occupied West Bank. Also, by expressing its solidarity with Palestinian social workers, it encourages and heartens them in their important work.

These efforts can be augmented by forging closer links with those who hold political office and are able to exert power to both progressive causes. Many professional associations have sought to do so, and their lobbying has resulted in positive outcomes. However, it is even better when social workers themselves are elected office and there have been instances where some have secured influential positions. In the United States, a number of social workers have been elected to the Congress where they have served as influential Senators and members of the House of Representatives. One example, which I frequently cite, is Congresswoman Barbara Lee who is a graduate of the Berkeley School of Social Welfare and who represents the constituency in which I live in California. Over a long career in the United Congress, she has exerted considerable influence on the formulation of progressive social policies and of equal importance, is her resolute commitment to human rights. She famously cast the only opposing vote against the *Military Authorization Act* of 2002, which allowed President Bush to deploy the United States military without Congressional authorisation. Being the only member of Congress out of about 600 members to vote against this legislation, she received a great deal of abuse, hate mail and even death threats. Despite this she continued to campaign insidiously for social justice and after many years, has retired to much acclaim. It is through colleagues like her as well as progressive academics and practitioners, that the social work profession has institutionalised progressive attitudes and values and that most schools of social work today educate students on social justice issues. Ideals like gender equality, redistribution, antiracism and human rights now feature prominently in the curriculum. Irrespective of the fields of practice social workers may choose, or their preferences for different roles, they are more competent and committed because of efforts to achieve social justice.

I hope that this brief article has elucidated some of the issues and debates that have challenged the social work profession over the last hundred years. Although these

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debates may not have been resolved, they have informed and enriched the profession. They have also fostered a critical perspective that continuously questions and renews established views. It is likely that social work's growth over the next century will continue to debate critically important issues like these and also that new issues will emerge to foster an increasing awareness of the profession's commitments. Social workers in Chile and many other countries will undoubtedly contribute to these debates and so enhance the profession's international role. Again, many congratulations to our Chilean colleagues as they celebrate the founding of the country's first professional school of social work. May the next hundred years be just as successful.

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Author biography

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