

The Role of Social Work Education to Address Environmental and Racial Injustice

Teaching Note

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Abstract

Social work is positioned to further environmental justice, and it is well established that environmental justice requires concrete development within curricula to ensure graduates have the tools to respond adequately to structural inequality exacerbated by the climate crisis. With a focus on the United States curricular guidelines and international calls to action, this case study discusses how Master of Social Work students in a large, public research university took steps to resolve a curricular gap and explored local and international environmental justice efforts. Building skills and knowledge around environmental racism, equitable climate solutions, ecofeminism, consumption behavior, and past social work responses to environmental disasters, this case study serves as a model for future student advocacy and curricular development.

Keywords: *Environmental justice; Racial justice; Education; Student advocacy*

Introduction

Environmental justice remains a critical component of social work emphasised in professional doctrines. For example, it is central to the 2022 International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) “The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World” policy paper (IFSW, 2022). The IFSW looks to each level of social work practice, recognising “social workers as key partners in this global action, with the role of engaging and working with communities as agents of change ... [and] [i]ntegrating the principles of a new eco-social world into social work education” (IFSW, 2022). Specifically in the United States, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states, “Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017, para. 1).

In the United States, historically oppressed racial populations, especially those living in poverty, face substantially more environmental hazards in daily life than wealthier, White individuals (Beltrán et al., 2016; Bullard et al., 2008; Pellow, 2018). Benjamin Chavez coined the term *environmental justice* in 1987 to describe Black and Latin people living in poverty residing by a source of toxic waste (Commission on Racial Justice, 1987). The Critical Environmental Justice framework expands environmental justice as a more inclusive concept beyond race, class, and gender to better interrogate environmental protection, power, and oppression (Pellow, 2018). Social work education can address the disproportionate, interlocking impact of environmental hazards and the systemic absence of environmental protections on marginalised racial and socioeconomic groups. Monitoring multilevel contexts and incorporating the diverse ways of knowing among the constituents, in collaboration with staff expertise, offers a more just and inclusive path forward (Austin, 2019). Approaching environmental justice education with an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens allows for building interventions that reduce, or eliminate, resource gaps among marginalised groups as they adjust to environmental impacts and injustices. Environmental justice education is advancing to varying degrees within social work higher education. Yet, future social workers can learn to elevate voices and operationalise multifaceted opportunities for leadership from outside dominant perspectives and groups to help overcome such historical and current inequities (Teixeira et al., 2019).

Over the last decade, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the United States social work accrediting body, has taken an increasingly active stance on the climate crisis and environmental justice (CSWE, 2022; Erickson, 2021). The Education Policy and Accreditation Standards mandate schools of social work to advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice (CSWE, 2022). These require students to “advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels; and engage in practices that advance social, racial, economic, and environmental justice for equal justice and the dismantling of structural racism and oppression” (p. 5). In 2019, CSWE convened a national task force to develop the *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice*, aligning with competencies and providing resources for social work programs on environmental justice. However, the Guide serves as a suggested resource rather than an accreditation requirement.

Moreover, only 8% of social work students report “enough” environmental issues in their coursework, and only 21% of students report exposure to environmental issues during their social work education (Miller & Hayward, 2014). In addition, social work students and practitioners reported feeling unprepared when facing clients experiencing environmental injustices due to few (and inconsistent) opportunities for training and education about environmental justice (Decker Sparks et al., 2019). After the inaugural Virtual Environmental Justice Social Work Conference in 2021, the authors committed to taking action. One author identifies as a first-generation Indo-Caribbean faculty member residing in Florida and has been impacted by hurricanes annually over the last 30 years. Another author is White and resides near New York City with its pervasive inequitable distribution of environmental harms and protections. She is a graduate-level instructor and director of an educational organization. After speaking together during the third author’s poster presentation, the trio decided to collaborate to dismantle hierarchies and emphasise the importance of including student needs in curricular decision-making.

Case study

In 2020, two Master of Social Work students (author Nicole Pearl and one other student) from the University of Missouri – Columbia, a large, public research university in the Midwest United States, were indirectly introduced to environmental justice in their “Foundations of Human Behavior” course through a brief discussion about climate refugees. The discussion inspired the students to explore the nexus of climate change and social justice further. However, their program did not offer such coursework at that time. Recognising this gap, the two students explored local and international environmental justice efforts and embarked upon a supported, independent study addressing topics including environmental racism, equitable climate solutions, ecofeminism, ethical consumption behaviour, and past social work responses to environmental disasters.

For the independent study, students defined environmental justice as the achievement of “environmental equity for all groups within society through fair treatment and substantial involvement of people regardless of their racial and socioeconomic background in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Gebeyehu et al., 2019, p.1. Next, the students and faculty mentor gathered relevant literature for the identified topics and prepared questions for reflective journal entries. In the first of two papers, students outlined and critiqued social workers’ responses to a past environmental disaster. In the second paper, students identified disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis on a chosen population while exploring how social workers can address those impacts.

As their final project, students created a 20-minute webinar on the importance of social work’s involvement with environmental justice issues. The students created a webinar for the final project for the same reason they chose to create the independent study; to close a gap in environmental justice education at the university and to advocate for change. The webinar aimed to bring awareness to social workers’ responsibility to respond to environmental injustices and

provide specific suggestions for incorporating environmental justice topics into social work curriculum. To meet these aims, the webinar content outlined:

- 1) what environmental justice is;
- 2) barriers to past social work responses to environmental disasters;
- 3) intervention opportunities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice; and
- 4) strategies and examples for incorporating environmental justice topics into core social work curricula.

The webinar provided an environmental justice spotlight on East Saint Louis, which has a 98% Black population and one of the highest rates of childhood asthma, lead poisoning, unemployment, and toxic waste exposure in comparison to the White population in the United States (Kozol, 2012). Additionally, the webinar detailed social workers' responses to racial disparities in resettlement and return rates, job losses, and adverse impacts during and after Hurricanes Katrina, Irma, and Maria. Lastly, coupled with strategies for expanding the core curriculum to include environmental justice content, the webinar linked several additional resources, including media, workbooks containing classroom activities, key organisations, and an environmental justice reading list for global social workers and educators. The webinar was later disseminated to the university's social work faculty and staff.

Following the university's webinar dissemination, the Associate Director of the School of Social Work reported that it would guide an upcoming curriculum review. Furthermore, many School of Social Work faculty and staff members anecdotally committed to incorporating environmental justice topics into their classes, agreeing that there was no excuse for social workers' general absence from environmental justice conversations and advocacy efforts. These changes can benefit students' learning experience and the community by encouraging the implementation of equitable and racially just interventions in response to the devastating changes in our natural environment.

Future directions

All schools of social work should strive to incorporate elements of environmental justice, emphasising racial justice, in both foundational social work courses and advanced concentration courses. Clinical courses can emphasise clinical interventions and advocacy techniques to help clients manage the impacts of environmental racism. Macro-focused courses can emphasise policy initiatives, equitable community outreach interventions, and environmental justice policies within social service agencies. In an increasingly globalised world, the climate crisis's associated impacts on the inequitable distribution of protections and harm to the health and wellbeing of communities will continue to grow as concerns intersect with social work practice. Therefore, course development in environmentally minded social work grows future practitioner capacity across the professional spectrum to meet present and future environmental sustainability crises. For instance, social workers specialising in health, disaster recovery, and aged care will find themselves increasingly responding to issues relating to the climate crisis (Appleby et al., 2017).

By advocating alongside clients, fostering empowerment among community activists, and working in policy, social workers can increase sustainability while responding to unique environmental contexts (Schmitz et al., 2011). Future increases in social work education and cross-disciplinary collaboration can help the professional influence over a more equitable and environmentally just global society by expanding environmental justice social work courses through concerted efforts by students, faculty, institutions, and accrediting bodies.

Conclusion

Challenges from the climate crisis offer important directions for social work. However, for social work to maintain relevance, it must also adapt and be responsive to emerging global issues that will impact all aspects of society, from global to local (Appleby et al., 2017). Adding the Critical Environmental Justice framework in education and research can also support these aims (Pellow, 2018). We hope this case study of student-led activism emphasises the growing demand for environmental justice social work education. As a result, students can develop adequate knowledge and environmental justice-specific skill acquisition among the social workers that will deal with these multidimensional global inequalities and vulnerabilities throughout their careers.

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