The Role of Social Work in Climate Change

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Abstract

Social work is a profession that has long advocated to advance the rights of vulnerable populations, reduce systemic inequities and promote long-term social change. However, the profession is missing the opportunity to explicitly equip social work students and those in the field with an understanding of the connection between climate change and injustice. Around the world, climate refugees are forced to migrate following unpredictable environmental disasters, communities suffer at the hands of environmental racism. Additionally, rising globalization contributes to the economic and ecological exploitation of developing nations. Social workers have an ethical obligation to work towards environmental justice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social workers can provide therapeutic support to individuals displaced by climate disaster, join with and mobilize local citizens in policy advocacy efforts, and act as a link between legislators and those directly impacted by climate change by holding government officials accountable for prioritizing climate action. Environmental justice must also be an indispensable dimension of the social work profession to truly advance long-term social change. This paper will examine the ways in which social workers can support those impacted by climate change at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Introduction

Climate change is defined as the “change of climate attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere” (Montanya & Valera, 2016, as cited in Benevolenze & DeRigne, 2019). This activity mainly occurs on a large scale in agriculture, transportation, and industrial sectors, industries that increase greenhouse gas, leading to higher global temperatures, precipitation, and sea levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014, as cited in Dwyer, 2020). Research by IPCC has shown that these changes contribute directly to environmental disasters that affect vulnerable populations like floods, drought, heatwaves, and hurricanes. The climate crisis has implications on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in societies across the world.

Environmental disaster resulting from climate change has drastically increased climate-based migration and thus, biopsychosocial risk factors for those displaced, including food and water insecurity (Mishra et al., 2009; Parsons & Nielsen, 2020). Social disruption associated with disaster-induced displacement also significantly impacts an individual's well-being, health and safety on the micro level, decreasing their ability to contribute to meaningful community change (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019). On the mezzo level, climate change destroys infrastructure and economic opportunity (Mishra et al., 2009; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2015, as cited in Torres & Casey, 2017). Social inequities like racism and other forms of oppression decrease community access to resources in the aftermath of climate disasters (Torres & Casey, 2017). On the macro level, globalization upholds practices that substantially aggravate the climate crisis (Dwyer, 2020; Mishra et al., 2009; Paravisini-Gebert, 2021). Affluent nations like the United States refuse to acknowledge this connection, turning away those affected by the crises it perpetuates (Lancet, 2020; Danewid, 2017, as cited in Adlam, 2020).

Communities have historically banded together in the face of climate change and disaster through grassroots efforts designed to empower citizens towards activism. Social workers can play an essential role in helping communities affected by environmental disasters advocate for their rights and needs to both prevent and respond to climate disasters. Moreover, social work professionals have the duty to integrate principles of environmental justice into their practice with individuals and communities to advocate for more equitable social systems for their clients and the broader community. This paper will examine the intersections between social work and climate change, specifically investigating how the profession can support climate migrants in micro practice settings, mezzo change at the community level, and macro-based policy advocacy to mitigate the effects of globalization.

The Micro Level: Climate Migrant

It is estimated that by 2050 the world will host up to one billion climate refugees due to displacement associated with climate change (United Nations, 2019, as cited in Adlam, 2020; Rigaud et al., 2018, as cited in Koubi et al., 2021; Geislet & Currens, 2017, as cited in Parsons & Nielsen, 2020). Climate refugees, also referred to as climate or environmental migrants, are those who have been forced to leave their country due to adverse environmental conditions yet are guaranteed no international protections (Dwyer, 2020). The number of climate migrants is three times higher than the number of individuals displaced worldwide over the last decade due to violence (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2019, as cited in Koubi et al., 2020), revealing that this is a social justice issue necessitating attention from the social work profession.

Vulnerability has been described by Benevolenza and DeRigne (2019) as the process of undergoing hardship as a result of encountering prejudice, discrimination, and stigma. Climate disaster disproportionately affects the world's most vulnerable groups including women, children, people of color, and those living in poverty (Warner, 2010, as cited in Koubi et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2009; Dodman et al., 2010; Dwyer, 2020). Alarmingly, most individuals who are forced to migrate after climate disasters are those living in low-income countries who have contributed very little to the causes of climate change (Dwyer, 2020). Displacement is a multi-causal phenomenon given that individuals with more privilege, determined by characteristics such as income and race, can often stay in place while those with less privilege are forced to move (Koubi et al., 2021; Parsons & Nielsen, 2020; Kaelin, 2019).

Inversely, some individuals may become trapped in place because of environmental disaster (Hunter et al., 2015, as cited in Torres & Casey, 2017; Black et al., 2013, as cited in Clark & Bettini, 2017). Research has shown that economically marginalized individuals, people of color, those with disabilities, and the elderly have less opportunity to migrate due to a lack of resources stemming from discrimination (Brodie et al., 2006, as cited in Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019; Parsons & Nielsen, 2020). Displacement also decreases access to basic health and economic means like employment and healthcare, aggravating adverse mental health outcomes on the micro level (Fussell & Lowe, 2014, as cited in Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019; Borges et al., 2007; Goldman et al., 2014; Cantor-Graae & Pedersen, 2013, as cited in Torres & Casey, 2017). As the frequency and intensity of climate disasters rise, so too do widespread mental and physical health inequities. This is a psychosocial issue that demands collective attention and action from the social work field.

Social Work Implications at the Micro Level

Social workers can provide support to those displaced by climate disasters through professional services like therapy and case management. Social work programs at the university level should consider requiring courses or substantial material on ways that professionals can support climate migrants and recognize how the climate crisis leads to further marginalization of vulnerable groups. For example, research has shown that heat waves across the United States are associated with higher mortality rates for elderly, Black populations (Khatana et al., 2022). When social work students graduate and pursue work in the field, they must be poised to see this type of phenomenon not as a coincidence or tragic result of an unmanageable environmental condition but as an injustice necessitating action when conducting client assessments, providing treatment, and ensuring long-term success for individuals and families.

The Mezzo Level: Environmental Racism and Justice

Environmental justice aims to address the inequitable impacts of climate change on oppressed populations (Dominelli, 2012, as cited in Suppa, 2019). It includes the principles of equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits, recognition of local cultural traditions, and acknowledgment of a community's complete ability to make effective decisions. Environmental justice acknowledges the junctions between climate change and social vulnerabilities like race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, and encourages advocates to integrate its principles when developing social interventions. For example, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, individuals still living in New Orleans, Louisiana experienced neglect by the government and aid organizations as well as increased instances of police violence (Hamilton et al., 2012, as cited in Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019). These injustices affected predominately Black women with low incomes and occurred on top of already inadequate economic circumstances and institutionalized oppression. The environmental justice perspective acknowledges this marginalization with the understanding that the intersecting identities of being poor, Black, and a woman made this population more vulnerable to the hurricane and its social consequences.

In the United States, the fight against environmental racism has been underway since the 1980s, with the environmental justice movement drawing attention to dangerous conditions in predominately urban, poor areas (Chavez et al., 1987; Bullard, 2005, as cited in Suppa et al., 2019). The movement asserts that safety should not be based upon social class but is a basic human right. Any organized response to climate change must consider the role that systemic injustice has on those affected by environmental disasters by holistically addressing a community's ecological, economic, and social conditions (McAdam, 2012, as cited in Dwyer, 2020; Kaelin, 2019; Torres & Casey, 2017; Suppa et al., 2019). Without these elements, efforts to improve resilience against disaster may further displace vulnerable communities. Suppa and colleagues (2019) argue that most climate movements exclude awareness of social injustices, decreasing their effectiveness in creating long-term change. For instance, securing sustainable housing in the United States and other wealthy nations depends largely upon social class, preventing many marginalized groups from accessing safer and more economically sustainable housing conditions.

Exploited and marginalized communities have long been able to adapt to living with scarce resources and thus, understand their capabilities better than any outside entity could (Norman, 2017). Therefore, they should be completely involved in drafting policies that affect them (Kaelin, 2019). The Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines Incorporated (HPFPI) is one grassroots association working to increase the rights of those impacted by environmental disasters (Dodman et al., 2010). HPFPI organizes communities throughout the Philippines to lobby for affordable housing, improved economic conditions, and emancipation from poverty to prevent and respond to climate change. HPFPI members engage in collective action and mutual aid to expand access to resources that the government is unwilling to offer. Movements like HPFPI have long advocated for environmental and social justice, which go hand in hand, by promoting the sharing of knowledge and resources, revealing that community activism is a powerful force for change (Dodman et al., 2010).

Social Work Implications at the Mezzo Level

Social workers can play a more prominent role in advancing opportunities for communities to engage in advocacy to build long-term social capital. Communities should be empowered to implement solutions to climate change based on their unique beliefs, traditions, and needs. Social workers can promote this empowerment by mobilizing communities, calling attention to their protective factors and values, encouraging solidarity, and helping citizens prepare for political action (Dodman et al., 2010). Working towards environmental justice must be an ethical priority for social work professionals since climate change disrupts the lives of all individuals, particularly the most vulnerable. Since social workers aim to reduce structural inequalities and advance justice for the most vulnerable members of society, environmental justice should be an indispensable dimension of the profession.

The Macro Level: Globalization

Wealthy governments worldwide have proved apathetic to the plight of climate migrants, refusing to grant refugee status or acknowledge the part they have historically played in the environmental destruction, colonization, and racism that contribute to climate change and displacement (Lancet, 2020; Danewid, 2017, as cited in Adlam, 2020). Some leaders of wealthy nations also spread the rhetoric that there is another place for climate refugees to go, viewing disaster-induced migration as separate from the policies wealthy corporations benefit from rather than inextricably linked to the systems of oppression they preserve (Baldwin & Bettini, 2017; Latour, 2018, as cited in Adlam, 2020). Some policy efforts aimed at managing climate migration have even defined climate refugees as national security threats (Thomas & Warner, 2019, as cited in Parsons & Nielsen, 2020). The United States has even attempted to justify immigration bans through the unfounded rationalization that an influx of migrants would pose a threat to the economic success of American citizens (Lim, 2021, as cited in Adlam, 2020). In response, activist Atiq Rahman declared, “if climate change makes our country uninhabitable, we will march with our wet feet into your living rooms” (Clark & Bettini, 2017, p. 38).

In addition to detrimental climate policies enacted by the world’s richest nations, research has found that 100 of the largest corporations contribute to over 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Katz, 2012; Lynch et al., 2004, as cited in Yeganeh, 2019). Through practices aimed to broaden globalization such as hiring international workers and paying them unfair wages, these companies often function within developing countries. These nations must then grapple with the implications of reducing environmental regulations to create more opportunities for their citizens (Abdul-Gafaru, as cited in Yeganeh, 2019). Economically exploited countries may also lack the ability to mitigate environmental degradation caused by globalization as the policies of wealthy industries often remain outside of their control (Paravisini-Gebert, 2021).

Indigenous communities have long led the fight against environmental injustice through activism tactics like alliance-building, lobbying politicians, and advancing public movements to promote climate action (Grossman et al., 2012, Ranco & Suagee, 2007, as cited in Norman, 2017). The Lummi Nation, for example, successfully stopped the development of the Gateway Pacific Terminal, which would have polluted their waterways through oil drilling, an action disconcertingly sanctioned by the Environmental Protection Agency ([EPA]; Norman, 2017). Government entities like the EPA have failed to intervene and establish protections for vulnerable groups like Indigenous populations in the face of rising globalization.

Social Work Implications at the Macro Level

Social workers can act as a link between legislators and the historically marginalized groups that they work with. Encouraging and equipping clients with the tools to engage in macro-level policy advocacy will promote their empowerment and self-sufficiency. Social workers may also choose to independently engage in policy advocacy to advance equitable social conditions and rebuilding efforts for those displaced by climate disaster (Suppa et al., 2019). Advocacy may also include examining ways to protect those impacted by globalization through policy changes aimed at reducing its reach. Finally, professionals can play a vital role in holding government officials responsible for addressing the causes and effects of climate change through political involvement.

Conclusion

Climate change and disaster threaten the safety of the world's most vulnerable populations (Mishra et al., 2009; Dodman et al., 2010; Dwyer, 2020). Climate refugees and those displaced by disaster face significant biopsychosocial risks (Vestal, 2017; Cepeda et al., 2010, as cited in Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019) that social workers can examine during micro-based assessment and treatment. Professionals can support mezzo-level community activism and empowerment by employing tenants of environmental justice (Dodman et al.; Kaelin, 2019; Thomas, 2017). At the macro-level, globalization exploits the economic landscapes of developing nations and contributes to climate change (Yeganeh, 2019; Dwyer, 2020; Mishra et al., 2009; Paravisini-Gebert, 2021). Social work professionals can support those most affected by disaster by acting as a link between governments and communities. Efforts toward policy advocacy will ultimately hold government officials accountable for protecting citizens after climate disasters and making changes that reduce the causes of climate change (Grossman et al., 2012, Ranco & Suagee, 2007, as cited in Norman, 2017). Climate change is a phenomenon that demands to be recognized as a reality that affects everyone and social workers are uniquely poised with knowledge of the ways in which inequality impacts vulnerable populations. The causes and effects of climate change should be integrated into this knowledge to support the micro, mezzo, and macro level work that social work professionals undertake to advocate for a more equitable world.

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