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From the Guest Editors

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Contemporary Rural Social Work

Special Issue

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Guest Editors' Introduction

The practice of social work in North America is significantly different than its practice in other areas of the world. In the United States, it is estimated that clinical social workers make up 38-48% of the entire mental health workforce, leading all other professions such as psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage and family therapists, and advanced-practice psychiatric nurse practitioners (Heisler & Bagalman, 2015). A National Association of Social Workers workforce study found that 68% of all social workers claim that the focus of their practice is on the micro level (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008). This is simply not the reality of social work in a majority of countries. Micro-level social work practice requires a substantial amount of resources as well as a large, well-organized workforce that is seen as effective and legitimate by funding sources, such as insurance companies and governmental bodies. International social work is far more macro-focused, relying on the creative and innovative problem solving skills of its workers despite very limited resources. This is especially true when we consider international social work in a rural context.

Since much can be learned from social workers in other parts of the world, the purpose of this special issue is to highlight some of the social issues faced by rural communities in the global south and how they are being addressed. It is our hope that the journal's readership, particularly any social workers who may be interested in working internationally, will benefit from learning about the dynamics and challenges of rural contexts in the global south. This special issue was open to authors from all fields beyond the profession of social work to reflect the reality of social service work in these countries.

Social workers in the global north may have a difficult time contextualizing what is viewed as "social work practice" in the global south. It is important to note that generally social work varies from region to region and country to country (Pawar, 2014), especially when it comes to rural social work. But, it is possible to identify a few general trends in social work outside the global north. One major trend is the fight to gain legitimacy and identity as a field (Nikku, 2010; Pawar, 2014). This is the case even when the field itself has existed for many years, such as in Sri Lanka and India. Many times what is termed "social work practice" is carried out by graduates from alternative fields, such as political science and sociology. "Social work" is defined loosely to reflect any community or social development practice.

Even when the field itself is more or less established, workers seem to be involved in urban social issues. Many of the social work schools in the global south are in urban areas, with only a small number now starting in rural communities (Pawar, 2014). As Rwomire (2011) notes,

There seems to be a general recognition that social work has, in the past, treated only the most overt problems of urban destitution and maladjustment and that the

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profession has done little to promote the welfare of the majority of the population, especially where the vulnerable and rural people are concerned (para 39).

A third barrier preventing the establishment of the social work field as a legitimate profession, especially with a rural emphasis, is that many of the social work schools in the global south were developed with strong assistance or influence by the west and are only recognized as legitimate when they follow western models. Many practitioners are struggling to indigenize their field and develop models of practice appropriate to their countries (Chandraratna, 2008; Midgley, 1981, Nikku, 2010; Pawar, 2014; Rehmatullah, 2002; Singh, Gumz, & Crawley, 2011). Social work theories and intervention models from the western perspective are simply not feasible in most of these contexts. For instance, community engagement in rural contexts or at local levels in the global south requires more complex models than those available in the west. These models must address structural poverty, provision of basic necessities, and direct political engagement to combat corrupt, unstable, or ineffective political structures at national and local levels.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, many of the social work schools and the social work field generally are functioning without adequate resources. For example, there are very few sufficiently trained social workers to provide academic education and field supervision. Social work associations are scarce and often inadequate, and there is a general lack of associational infrastructure (Nikku, 2010). In addition, the remoteness, distance, and scant resources of rural social work contribute to the difficulty in social work becoming established as an organized and recognized field.

This all means that social work practice at local levels is conducted by both social work and non-social work professionals. In rural contexts, non-social work professionals tend to be more numerous, and community engagement will come from practitioners who are trained in different fields. The authors in this special issue reflect such professional diversity.

This special issue sheds light on some of the conditions found in rural global communities, from environmental issues, to socioeconomic disparities, to human rights concerns. The articles highlight the destitute conditions in the global south and how these conditions are viewed or addressed from human development and human rights perspectives with direct political engagement and community development approaches. This has strong implications for international rural social work, leaving the readership, hopefully, with a better understanding of how “social work practice” is conducted in the global south. Yet, it also begs the question, as Pawar (2014), very articulately posed:

The utter deprived conditions of local communities, oppression of people by community power structures, examples of community practice with political engagement and impactful community practice by other than professional social workers make one wonder, why are social workers and their profession so silent and inactive, notwithstanding values, principles, and commitment enshrined in their code of ethics? (p. 9)

Social work is a challenging profession no matter where it is practiced. Global social workers, and other professionals who work in overwhelming and adverse conditions to alleviate suffering by fighting oppression and injustice, can serve as an inspiration to us all.

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