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CLIMATE CHANGE: THREATS TO SOCIAL WELFARE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
REQUIRING SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

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Introduction

Climate change is one of the greatest cross-cutting issues of the twenty-first century. A review of the literature, however, indicates that the social work profession has given the problem little attention. In an attempt to address this gap, the following article frames the complex issue of climate change through a social development perspective to advocate for social work involvement. This is done by providing examples on how climate change poses a threat to survival needs, physical safety, and human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). To illustrate this point, it specifically looks at the impacts on a particularly vulnerable population: poor rural women and girls in developing nations.

While the business world may operate on a “bottom-line” basis, dictated by profitability, the social work field promotes the well-being of all individuals, particularly those who are marginalized and vulnerable (National Association of Social Workers, 1999). Social workers are called to enhance human wellbeing through the promotion of human rights and social justice. Yet, despite climate change’s threats, social work involvement seems to be lacking.

The paper begins with a brief explanation of social development theory, including key concepts and definitions. It then outlines the contributors to climate change, its consequences, and recommended actions for social work intervention. The recommendations include specific areas for global-, national-, and local-level intervention. Finally, suggestions for further research are provided.

As stated in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999), a fundamental aspect of social work is the “attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.” Additionally, it states that social workers engaging in policy work should promote legislation that ensures everyone’s access to basic

human needs. It affirms that all people should have equal access to resources. Work towards policy implementation and reform should reflect the fundamental principle of social work - promoting human rights and social justice. Based on this, it is paramount that the problems caused by climate change be tackled – and soon.

Social Development Perspective

The social development perspective is both multi-disciplinary and cross-sectional (Estes, 1994). Rooted in people-centered values, the framework encompasses the numerous forces and power structures which both influence and create societal conditions (Beverly & Sherraden 1995; Cox & Pawar, 2006). While the theory's main focus is given to economic and social variables, it also takes into account other influences (i.e., political, social, cultural, and ecological factors) relevant to the situation (Beverly & Sherraden, 1995; Estes, 1994; Midgley, 1995). Under this framework, intervention seeks to promote the well-being of all members of society through proactive intervention on the macro-, mezzo-, and micro-levels (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Midgley, 1995).

The social development perspective was embraced by the United Nations in the 1960s to address the multitude of factors that both influence and create conditions in developing nations (Midgley, 1995). In order to compensate for the unique situations in which it is applied, it is not guided by strict boundaries and definitions (Beverly & Sherraden, 1995). This allows the theory to have greater flexibility and be applied to a wider audience (Beverly & Sherraden, 1995).

This paper looks at the complex issue of climate change through an amalgamation of key social development principles, as defined by Estes (1994), Cox & Pawar (2006), Beverly & Sherraden (1995) and Midgley (1995). In order to fully address the many issues and needed

intervention, the paper has identified three areas in which analysis will be conducted: multidimensional, social welfare, and multilevel proactive intervention.

Multidimensional Analysis

This section recognizes the large number of variables which create and perpetuate existing conditions (e.g., climate change). Furthermore, it assumes that these variables do not operate independently. Instead, it seeks to determine the relationship between them. In this section, seemingly fragmented variables are melded together to form a holistic analysis on the macro level (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Midgley, 1995). In this way, the paper frames the forces which have created climate change, providing the reader with an overview of the ecological, scientific, economic, and political forces surrounding the topic.

Social Welfare Analysis

One of the guiding principles of a social development framework is that all individuals have the opportunity to meet their needs and live in an environment that enables them to prosper (Beverly & Sherraden, 1995; Midgley, 1995). While the specific needs vary by culture and community being addressed, the driving theme is the promotion of human rights and wellbeing (Beverly & Sherraden, 1995; Cox & Pawar, 2006).

For purposes of this paper, “social welfare” has been defined according to the guiding principles of the 1999 NASW Code of Ethics, as well as Midgley’s (1995) usage of the term. Thus, social welfare has been conceptualized as an individual’s ability to fully access: survival needs, physical safety, and human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Anything which hinders or denies access to one or more of the above-mentioned variables is, therefore, a threat to social welfare.

In addition to looking at how climate change impacts social welfare, this section looks at its implications for social justice, defined as the equal distribution of benefits and burdens to all members of society (Dominelli, 2013). By examining some of the impacts the phenomenon has on poor rural women in developing nations, this section makes the case that climate change qualifies as a concern for the social work profession.

Multilevel Proactive Intervention Analysis

Multilevel proactive intervention calls for planned and deliberate intervention on local, national, and international levels (Midgley, 1995). Using a social development framework, these interventions should look to rectify both the causes of social welfare abuses and social justice violations, as well as address their root causes. Furthermore, those who help mitigate today's problems should also prepare for future ones, avoiding them, if possible (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Estes, 1994).

Based on current conditions and the principles embodied in the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers have a moral and ethical responsibility to counter the negative effects of climate change. Mitigation and adaptation strategies are effective ways for the profession to get involved. The article then lists suggestions for local, national, and international involvement.

Multidimensional Analysis

The following section discusses some of the major forces that both create and exacerbate climate change. The reasons given are not all-inclusive, nor does this section cover the myriad variables at play. This overview is meant simply to provide a holistic understanding of how these macro-level forces are interconnected.

Today's average global temperature is about 0.8°C warmer than during the pre-industrial era (Davenport, 2014). This planetary warming has led to ecological changes such as extreme weather events including: flooding, drought desertification, rising sea levels, higher temperatures, locally lower temperatures, extended heat and/or cold, the retreat of glaciers, and the rapid softening of the permafrost. It is predicted that such events will increase in frequency and intensity as long as the world's global mean temperature continues to rise at the rapid pace seen over the past century (Cuomo, 2011; Gillis, 2013; Gillis, 2014; Parikh, 2009).

The scientific community has posed explanations for these ecological shifts. The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (a committee which includes hundreds of scientists worldwide) reports that there's a 95%-to-100% chance that the planetary warming seen over recent decades is directly related to human activity (Gillis, 2013). Primarily, this is caused by human-generated greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, deforestation and land degradation compromise the earth's ability to absorb excess carbon dioxide, one of the most toxic greenhouse gases (Cuomo, 2011; Gillis, 2013; UN General Assembly, 2009). Carbon dioxide traps the sun's heat, thus leading to an ever-warming planet (Davenport, 2014).

As explained by the scientific community, these conditions are not caused by nature, itself. Looking at the human activities that produce these greenhouse gases, two leading sources are identified: the burning of fossil fuels to produce energy and the entire industrial sector, itself (Cuomo, 2011; Dominelli, 2013). Multidimensional analyses have determined that the ultimate culprit for climate change is free-market capitalism.

In today's global economy, a "bottom-line" approach - with an over-emphasis on short-term economic gain - has led to practices that are not environmentally sustainable (Hourcade & Shukla, 2013). This bottom-line way of thinking has led to the extraction and burning of fossil

fuels, particularly coals – the highest CO₂ emitting energy source (Cuomo 2011; Davenport, 2014). Furthermore, such an approach degrades or outright consumes natural resources with little consideration given to environmental impacts (Askin & Mason, 2013; Smith, 2013). This has both led-to and perpetuated climate change (Dominelli, 2011).

The devastating impacts of CO₂ emissions have been known since 1896, when Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius first reported it (Dominelli, 2011). A report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in March, 2014, found that “decades of foot-dragging by political leaders had propelled humanity into a critical situation, with greenhouse emissions rising faster than ever” (Gillis, 2014).

Despite this evidence, “business-as-usual” continues at an alarming pace. In China, for example, a new coal-fired power plant is opened every few days in order to support the country’s drive towards industrialization (Dominelli, 2011). In the United States, politicians with strong ties to the coal and oil industries, continue to fight policies that would curb CO₂ emissions (Davenport, 2014). Placing profit above all other concerns is responsible for such obstructionism (Askin & Mason, 2013; Hourcade & Shukla, 2013).

Social-Welfare

Ecological shifts associated with climate change are predicted to both create both new and exacerbate existing social welfare violations. For a multitude of reasons, the brunt of these negative impacts is likely to fall on the world’s poorest regions (Cuomo, 2011; Development Solutions Network, 2013; Dominelli, 2011). To highlight how climate change affects social welfare, this article examines the impact of climate change on the following four areas:

- Food Security,

- Migration and Human Conflict,
- Disease, and
- Disaster.

In order to demonstrate how climate change is also a social justice issue, the article discusses the implications of these negative impacts from the perspective of poor women and girls who live in rural areas of developing nations. Based on the literature, these individuals are considered “high risk” when it comes to the effects of climate change.

The main reason why this group shoulders the majority of climate change’s burden is that this segment of society makes up the largest segment of the world’s poor (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013; *UN Women Watch*, 2009). Primarily, this is the result of female oppression in many traditions and cultures (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; *Women’s Environment and Development Organization*, 2008). Additionally, lower educational attainment, second-rate social status, and a lack of social mobility make this group highly vulnerable to climate change (Parikh, 2009; *Women’s Environment and Development Organization*, 2008).

This article does not attempt to cover all the hardships faced by this population. Additionally, it does not touch on the negative impacts faced by other groups such as those in urban areas or in developed nations. Instead, it focuses on the plight of women and girls in order to document the greatest violations of social welfare and social justice, thereby strengthening the argument for social work intervention.

Food Security

Increases in global mean temperatures affect food security in several different ways, including the availability of and access-to life-giving sustenance. According to the Development

Solutions Network (2013), those areas which already suffer most from poverty and hunger are also most vulnerable to further food insecurity as a result of climate change.

Food insecurity directly impacts social welfare by threatening life-sustaining resources. A review of the evidence suggests that women, however, are more vulnerable as a result of the secondary consequences of food shortages. One particular example is that food insecurity may pose barriers to education for girls in rural areas of developing nations. Scientific evidence suggests that if current trends continue unabated, a two-degree centigrade increase in global mean temperatures could be reached within a generation. In some areas of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, for example, as much as a one-degree centigrade increase will likely decrease crop yields by 10%. Compounding this problem is the expectation that the population in these areas may increase by 30% by the year 2050. Rising populations and decreasing crop yields will increase the region's already existing hunger and malnutrition (The Development Solutions Network, 2013). Additionally, decreased crop yields lead to financial strain in many homes that depend on farming income (Cuomo, 2011; Women's Environment and Development Organization, 2008).

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), everyone is entitled to a free and compulsory primary education. Yet, a 2011 UNICEF report states that 121 million school-aged children are being deprived of this. The most common causes were reported to be poverty, hunger, and malnutrition (Jomaa, McDonnell, & Probart, 2011).

This education-based human rights violation becomes a social injustice due to the fact that not all children are impacted equally. Of the 121 million children affected, two-thirds are girls in rural areas (Jomaa, McDonnell, & Probart, 2011). Across developing nations, traditional gender norms are often cited as the cause for this gender gap. When extra work is needed within

the home, female children bear the brunt. On the other hand, financial resources to pay for school expenses (e.g., enrollment fees, uniforms, books, etc.) go primarily to male children. (Ghana, 2012; Lambert, Perrino, & Barreras, 2012). Those unable to attend school reduce their chances of rising out of poverty. Such perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; *Women's Environment and Development Organization*, 2008).

Given the causes, trends, and predicted impacts of climate change on food security, it is likely that girls will increasingly face roadblocks to education access. Such being the case, this unequal distribution of burden follows these girls throughout their lives.

Migration and Human Conflict

One of the leading reasons why individuals leave their homeland is that the areas lack natural resources. With climate change threatening the availability of the resources essential to social welfare, many will be forced to leave their home in order to survive (*UN General Assembly*, 2009). These individuals are often referred to as 'climate change refugees' (Dominelli, 2011).

One of the many problems faced by climate change refugees is the inability to claim asylum. Guidelines and definitions in the 1951 *Geneva Convention on Refugees* do not apply to individuals who are forced to leave their homes due to the impacts of climate change. As a result, these individuals have no legal standing or protection. This is further complicated by the fact that they are likely to face violence and discrimination in the areas they flee to (Dominelli, 2011). During times of shortage, those with access to coveted resources have an increased need to protect them (Skillington, 2012). Historically, this has led to violence (*UN General Assembly*, 2009). As the scope and intensity of climate change continues, instances of hunger-based

migration and violence are expected to increase (Skillington, 2012; *UN General Assembly*, 2009).

Climate change is linked to changes in rainfall patterns, faster rates of evaporation and glacial melting – all leading to water insecurity (Parikh, 2009). As a result of climate change, and the water-related crises it creates, the *International Alert* has identified 46 countries/nation states that have a high risk of violent conflict. In addition to these areas, another 1.2 billion more lives are expected to be impacted by various forms of political instability, resulting directly from climate change (Skillington, 2012). Officials from the *Ministry of Defense, Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, and *NATO* have asserted that:

“Threats to international security are most likely to emerge where governance capacity at the state level is overstretched and unable to manage the physical impacts of climate change. Where this occurs, civil unrest, inter-communal violence, mass migration, breakdown of trade, state failure and international instability become increasingly probable” (Skillington, 2012, p. 137).

In the face of human conflict and political instability, the world’s poorest women are susceptible to far greater social welfare violations in comparison to their male counterparts. During periods of unrest, the risk of violence against women, sexual assault, and sex trafficking dramatically increase (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; *Women’s Environment and Development Organization*, 2008). This threat is amplified by the lack of social, economic, and decision-making power perpetuated by male-favored cultural norms and customs in many of these areas (Cuomo, 2012; Parikh, 2009).

Disease

Climate change is expected to worsen the deadly diseases that are currently widespread in developing nations. Population movements, in particular, increase the spread and occurrence of disease, particularly when sanitation facilities are non-existent (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013). Diarrheal diseases, including cholera, often come from overuse of water supplies in densely populated areas, such as refugee camps. Contaminated water can lead to debilitating illness, dehydration, and death (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013; *UN General Assembly*, 2009).

In addition to poor sanitation (a leading cause of contaminated water supplies), ecological imbalances will make many environments more conducive to bacteria and vector-carrying arthropods (*UN General Assembly*, 2009). One example is the prediction that climate change will, in some instances, lead to an environment more conducive to mosquitoes, resulting in a larger number of these insects (Anstey, 2013; Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013). In turn, this will be accompanied by greater rates of vector-borne illnesses including malaria and dengue fever (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013).

Under these circumstances, social welfare is compromised - but not all suffer equally. Pregnant women are especially at high risk. Studies have shown that illnesses such as cholera, malaria, and dengue fever increase the risk of low birth weight, pregnancy complications, and fetal/maternal death (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013). In the case of vector-borne illnesses (i.e., malaria and dengue fever), some research has even indicated that hormone imbalances and increased body temperature during pregnancy attract mosquitoes, making it more likely that pregnant women will contract diseases (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013). In developing nations, this threat is exacerbated by poor access to medical care (*UN General Assembly*, 2009),

which is commonplace in many developing nations and refugee camps (Odland, Rylander & Sandanger, 2013).

While increased disease is a threat to the social welfare of all who are impacted, women's high level of vulnerability makes this a social justice issue. In particular, much of the risk falls on pregnant women. This is because they are particularly vulnerable to the debilitating consequences of disease.

Disaster

By definition, natural disasters are independent of human involvement. With the onset of human-caused climate change, however, the line between natural and human-caused disasters is blurring. The majority of the scientific community agrees that as temperatures rise, the occurrence and severity of disasters will increase. Furthermore, climate change-associated events including storms, extreme heat and cold, flooding, and droughts will increase the death toll from natural disasters, particularly for women, children, and the elderly (Dominelli, 2013).

Historical analysis confirms that during times of disaster, women suffer disproportionately, compared to other populations (Parikh, 2009). This qualifies natural disasters - worsened by climate change - as a social justice concern. Gender-based roles often contribute to women's vulnerability. Women are, for example, often discouraged from learning life-saving skills that could prevent premature death (*UN Women Watch*, 2009). For example, in some Latin American and Asian countries, women are not taught how to swim (*World Health Organization*, 2011). Such factors inhibit a woman's ability to survive during natural disasters.

Most domestic responsibilities are shouldered by women, including care for the sick, elderly, and children. Often times, this can restrict their mobility. Along with other family

pressures, this leads to women staying behind during natural disasters (*UN Women Watch*, 2009). Additionally, some social customs mandate permission and/or accompaniment of a male authority figure in order to leave the home. Such factors can inhibit women's ability to flee during disasters (*World Health Organization*, 2011). Some reports have even cited these reasons to help explain the large difference in death toll rates for men and women from the 1991 cyclone disaster in Bangladesh. Of the 140,000 deaths, 90% were women (*Women's Environment and Development Organization*, 2008).

During post-disaster reconstruction and recovery efforts, many women in developing nations face the same threats as do female climate change refugees, including violence, sexual assault, and sex trafficking (*Women's Environment and Development Organization*, 2008). Additionally, because so many poor rural women are illiterate, many of them are unable to get access to important information or services, when needed (Dominelli, 2013).

Multilevel Proactive Intervention

All the above examples demonstrate that climate change has a negative impact on social welfare. Additionally, the disproportionate share of the impact that falls on women qualifies this as a social injustice. Based on the NASW Code of Ethics (1999), this conclusion warrants social work intervention.

Solving the problems caused by climate change will not occur without assistance from the social work community. Instead, there must be a strong and unrelenting effort in order to rectify it (Midgley, 1995). In regard to the issues surrounding climate change, this means that the "business as usual" model will continue unchecked unless some form of deliberate and strategic intervention is made (Cuomo, 2012; Dominelli, 2011).

While there are many ways to address the issues surrounding climate change, some form of action will be necessary. The most obvious ones can be categorized in one of two ways: mitigation or adaptation. Though these approaches are fundamentally different, both promote social welfare and protect against social injustice.

Mitigation efforts mainly focus on curbing climate change at the source: humans and the greenhouse gasses they produce. This approach has been adopted by individuals and institutions, alike. Many local, state, and national entities throughout the world have done so, as well (Anstey, 2013; Haigh, 2011). Much of the progress in this area has come as a result of the efforts of the United Nations, the scientific community, and grassroots movements (Dominelli, 2011; Gillis, 2013; Knox, 2009).

Climate change adaptation efforts, on the other hand, address the *consequences* of climate change. This approach looks at climate change as a social problem and then addresses its negative impacts (Anstey, 2013). Adaptation intervention includes methods such as aid, drought-resistant crops, and disaster prevention strategies.

Areas for Social Work Intervention

Neglecting the social costs that are associated with climate change is a mistake. A *New York Times* article referred to a recent *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* report saying “Throughout the 21st century, climate change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and create new poverty traps” (Gillis, 2014)

As previously mentioned, social workers should employ a variety of mitigation and adaptation strategies to combat climate change. Under a social development perspective,

intervention must be applied to all dimensions of the problem (Midgley, 1995). Based on the research done for this article, the author offers the following suggestions for social work involvement/

Global Level:

At the international level, social workers can work to amend international policies in an attempt to address the needs of climate change refugees. One of these areas includes working to add provisions to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Wording in the convention does not offer protection to climate change refugees. Given the scientific predictions and lack of progress curbing greenhouse gas emissions, work in this area could help address both social welfare and social justice issues.

National Level:

On the national level, social workers can engage in community organizing to help forward mitigation strategies. One of these areas includes helping promote carbon tax legislation (which requires industries to pay fees for CO₂ emissions). This has been considered one of the best approaches to addressing carbon emissions (Hsu, 2011). This is particularly important for the United States to implement because the nation is one of the top carbon emitters in the world. Such legislation has been proposed by both Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. But their carbon tax proposals have failed to pass Congress (Davenport, 2014).

In the United States, there are many grassroots groups which work to support such legislation. Social workers offer a unique value-based perspective to help provide advocacy and support. Furthermore, social workers can engage in community organizing and help develop partnerships and strategies among them in order to strengthen their work. .

Local Level:

Given today's conditions, climate change will continue to threaten the social welfare of people around the world - particularly those in developing nations. Social workers can get involved by working to strengthen community resolve in areas which are expected to be impacted by climate change. An example of this was taken on by the CARE-Bangladesh and their Bangladesh Urban Disaster Mitigation Project. The program worked on an array of prevention and relief strategies including warnings for predicted floods to the raising or relocating of homes (Victoria, 2001).

By helping establish strong social networks and infrastructure, residents can be better prepared to handle the negative consequences of climate change (Dominelli, 2013). Additionally, social workers should pay particular attention to vulnerable, oppressed, and at-risk populations (NASW, 1999) in the community when engaging in this proactive work.

Other ways social workers can get involved include:

- Education, awareness, and consciousness building;
- Advocating for policy initiatives that reward climate change mitigation, green technology and sustainable development;
- Working in conjunction with individuals and organizations that help achieve carbon neutrality;
- Participating in post-disaster reconstruction and recovery efforts.

Conclusion

Climate change is a threat to social welfare by jeopardizing survival needs, individual safety, access to opportunities to thrive and develop, and receiving the basic human rights as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). By placing an unequal burden on poor rural women and girls in developing nations, climate change also qualifies as social justice transgression. Thus, the issue qualifies as a concern for social workers.

This article has sought to set a foundation for further research in this critical area. Such research should investigate which areas (i.e., global-, national-, or community-based) are in most need of social work intervention. Because the profession is based on the promotion of human wellbeing (a variable lacking in much of the climate change debate), researchers should look into which areas could benefit the most from this unique value-based perspective. Additionally, the lack of relevant literature suggests that professionals may not understand how climate change qualifies as a social work concern. Further research should investigate how social workers view the relationship between climate change and the profession.

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