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Exploring the history of social work as a human rights profession

● Lynne M. Healy

2008 marks the 80th anniversary of the first International Conference of Social Work, a meeting that gave birth to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and to the predecessor organization of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). It also marks the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN). It is therefore an opportune time to examine the historical links between social work and human rights. Twenty years have passed since the IFSW declared that social work was and always has been a human rights profession (IFSW, 1988). Yet the profession is not widely regarded as a leader within the larger global human rights movement. This article traces the historical involvement of the profession of social work in international human rights and the validity of its claim to be a human rights profession. It concludes with a brief analysis of the reasons for the limited external recognition of the profession's roles in human rights and recommendations to strengthen its impact and visibility.

Defining human rights

The introduction to the IFSW policy paper states: 'social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession, having as its

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● Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

basic tenet the intrinsic value of every human being and as one of its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures, which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity' (IFSW, 1988). Publication of this document launched a series of human rights initiatives by IFSW and, to a lesser but still significant extent, the IASSW.

Before continuing the analysis of the profession's claims as a human rights profession, human rights will be defined. At the most basic level, human rights are those rights that belong to all just because we are human. Although more expansive definitions are attractive, such as Ife's focus on the human rights elements of processes as well as outcomes (2001), for 60 years the field of human rights has been defined by the provisions of the UDHR, adopted by the UN in 1948. There were earlier expressions of human rights in policies of the League of Nations and antecedents in religions and political movements, but the 1948 declaration is almost universally viewed as the watershed for human rights.

Three 'generations' of rights were delineated in this landmark treaty (Wronka, 1995). These are: first-generation rights consisting of civil and political rights; second-generation rights, including economic, social and cultural rights; and third-generation rights, those rights that belong to and require the cooperation of people across the globe, including the right to peace, to a clean environment, to a system of fair trade, etc. These rights have been elaborated in subsequent covenants detailing the first- and second-generation rights and in conventions addressing the special human rights claims of particularly oppressed groups. Among the most important treaties are: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989); and the recently adopted Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

While many aspects of the treaties – including those that deal with large macro issues of peace, self-determination and freedom – apply to social work, Articles 22 and 25 of the UDHR are particularly relevant as these spell out important social and economic rights to basic needs and services. Article 22 reads: 'Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and

in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality' (UN, 1948). Article 25 expands on this in areas important to social work: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control' (UN, 1948).

The extensive rights spelled out in the UDHR are claimed to be interdependent and indivisible. However, considerably more attention has been given to first-generation rights by world leaders – especially those in the West – and by groups such as Amnesty International. Although at different times and in various parts of the world social work has been involved in all three generations of human rights, the profession is particularly interested in second-generation rights and in the rights guaranteed to special populations.

Assessing social work's contributions to human rights

Tracing the history of social work's involvement in human rights involves many strands of investigation. These include expressions in official documents indicating the compatibility of the profession's mission and values with human rights; the contribution of social work leaders to human rights causes; official professional representation and action on human rights; and social work involvement in critical incidents or major human rights movements. The last two are interrelated and perhaps should not be separated. However, there seem to be two ways of examining professional action: one is to ask what social work has done in the field of human rights, while the other is to examine what the profession was doing or saying during critical moments in the human rights movement. Research for this article included an examination of the published proceedings and programs of the International Conference of Social Work, a review of contents of selected journals from the period of the drafting and adoption of the UDHR, and biographies of social work leaders. Brief summaries of evidence from these streams of investigation follow.

Compatibility of mission and values

The congruence of official statements of social work values with human rights is uncontestable. Many authors have pointed out this fit

between social work values and human rights. Gore of India linked social work to the UDHR in his speech to the 1968 International Conference on Social Welfare: 'the relevance of the Declaration for social work lies mainly in the fact that it unequivocally recognizes the worth and dignity of the person ... Social work proceeds from the same basic assumption that every human individual is worthy in himself, independent of his material or social condition' (1969: 57). The worth and dignity of all people is universally recognized in social work's codes of ethics. As expressed in the most recent statement of international ethical principles, 'Social work is based on the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this' (IFSW/IASSW, 2004: 4.1). While many more statements and codes could be quoted here, it is safe to conclude that at the abstract level of mission and values, social work is indeed a human rights profession.

Social workers as human rights leaders

In the early 20th century, almost 50 years before the UDHR, the founders of the social work profession were involved in the significant human rights movements of their day. Jane Addams, born in the USA and a local and international activist, is a stellar example, as she exerted leadership in all three generations of human rights as later defined in the UDHR. According to a brief biography, she 'was at the forefront of the struggles for women's suffrage, immigrant education, health care, children's rights, housing, peace, and progressive education' (Schugurensky, 2005). She helped to organize a number of national and international human rights organizations that endure today, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Her leadership in third-generation rights was recognized when she was granted the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize. Joining Jane Addams in these international human rights movements was another US social work pioneer, Sophonisba Breckinridge, who was treasurer of the Women's Peace party in 1915 and participated in the women's peace delegation to The Hague in 1915. She was particularly active in international child welfare movements of the 1920s and 1930s and promoted rights and humane treatment for offenders through participation in the International Penal and Prison Congress (Branscombe, 1948). As a delegate to many international and pan-American meetings, Breckinridge promoted: 'maintenance of peace, problems of international law; political and civil rights of women, and social problems' (Branscombe, 1948: 440). Both Julia Lathrop and Grace

Abbott (also colleagues of Addams in the USA) served on League of Nations human rights committees, with Grace Abbott leading efforts of the League Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children and serving as the first US delegate to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Abbott, 1947).

Eglantyne Jebb of the UK moved from her early charity organization society experiences to become a pioneer of children's rights. She wrote the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1923, adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 as the Declaration of Geneva (Healy, 2008). Alice Salomon, founder of social work and social work education in Germany and first president of the IASSW, championed women's rights, wrote her doctoral dissertation on unequal wages of men and women and was a leader in the International Women's Council before turning to leadership of the IASSW. She also worked in movements for peace and disarmament in the early 20th century (Lees, 2004).

Bertha Reynolds lent her voice to the call for the preservation of civil rights in what she called a period of war hysteria in the USA in 1940. She closed an address to the US National Conference of Social Work with the call: 'We will join hands with every honest fighter for peace and human rights and "we shall not be moved"' (Reynolds, 1940: 11). Her comments and those of Edith Abbott, who in 1927 called for social work involvement in research and policy on migration because of its impact on 'large questions of public policy, involving issues of national prosperity and human rights', indicate that social workers were familiar with human rights concepts and used human rights language long before the UDHR (Abbott, 1927: 258).

It is more difficult to assess the impact of more recent leaders but professional social workers have been present in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the US civil rights movement, and movements for rights for the poor, among others. Whitney Young, for example, was head of the USA-based Urban League and provided significant leadership in the drive for civil rights for African Americans. Sattareh Farman Farmaian, founder of social work in Iran, actively worked for the rights of women, families and children (Farman Farmaian and Munker, 1992). Many South African social workers were part of the anti-apartheid struggle, including Shirley Gunn and Ellen Khuzwayo (also spelled Kuzwayo). Gunn was imprisoned for her activism, falsely charged with bombing a building in Johannesburg; IFSW actively advocated for her release from prison. Khuzwayo was one of the first black South Africans to earn a social work degree and battled apartheid through the YWCA and other movements. After her death, a government minister said: 'As General Secretary of the

Transvaal branch of the YWCA, Khuzwayo was at the forefront of the struggle for human rights' (Jordan, 2006). Both women continued their human rights activism after the end of apartheid. Gunn has been a strong advocate for justice for the victims of the apartheid regime.

Human rights movements are interdisciplinary. Therefore significant contributions by social workers may not always be recognized as connected to the profession. One illustration is the experience of Sybil Francis of Jamaica, former head of the Social Welfare Training Centre and a leader in the IASSW and ICSW. She was a delegate to the UN, representing newly independent Jamaica in the 1960s (pers. comm., Sybil Francis, 24 April 1997). There she served as a member of the third committee working on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Her delegation also proposed that 1968 be designated as the International Human Rights Year, and Francis feels considerable pride about these efforts. Yet her social work identification was probably not evident to the public in these ventures.

Critical incidents and involvement in major human rights movements

In addition to looking at the actions of individual leaders, more official involvement of the social work profession may better reflect its standing as a human rights profession. Systematic examination of the full range of major movements of the 20th century is a project beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, a few observations can be made. Social work advocacy for peace continued in the late 1930s and up through 1940. A group of 75 national social work leaders in the USA signed a statement urging peace and stating that social workers 'consider the prevention of war to be of infinitely greater importance than such ministration after the event' (*Social Work Today*, 1940: 6). The statement, distributed to the press and to all members of the US Congress, also specifically urged preservation of all civil rights including the rights to free speech, free assembly and free press, that appeared to be in jeopardy due to military preparations for the Second World War.

The international professional organizations became involved in the anti-apartheid movement (in addition to many individual efforts). The IFSW and the IASSW were officially involved as pressure groups from the outside. The IFSW expelled South Africa from membership temporarily in 1970 and permanently in 1976 because of its racialized professional groups (pers. comm., Nigel Hall, 2 March 2008; IFSW, 2006). The IASSW instituted a set of conditions and inspections that had to be satisfied in order for South African schools to retain membership, but not without dissent within the IASSW membership, notably the Nordic schools.¹

The record of social work in the children's rights movement is strong, especially in the earlier years of the efforts to recognize children as worthy of rights and to challenge the abuses to which children were subjected in the workplace. Social work efforts to protect children have led to the establishment of government agencies and an array of laws and special services in many, if not most, countries. More recently, there has been social work involvement, although not leadership, in the efforts leading up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and more so to its implementation around the world.

The history of the gay rights movement is still unfolding. Here, social work has generally taken a bold stance, at least at the international level, in clearly stating in its ethical and policy statements that social workers support equal rights for all regardless of sexual orientation. Locally, social workers have taken lead roles in the struggle, although not all agree with the profession's position.

Social work reactions to the adoption of the UDHR

The search for social work discussions or other reactions to the adoption of the UDHR has revealed relatively little response. In two major US social work journals from the years 1946–50, *Social Casework* and *Social Service Review*, I found only one article, written by a political scientist, on the proposals for a UN human rights declaration and the ongoing work of the Commission on Human Rights (Merriam, 1947). The extensive commentary sections of the *Social Service Review* were full of news about the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the formation of UNICEF, but there was only one very brief mention of human rights ('The Human Rights Commission', *Social Service Review*, 1950). In *The Survey*, an early US social work periodical, an article entitled 'Human Rights' appeared in the February 1948 volume. This one-column article reported that the UN Commission on Human Rights had adopted a draft for a Convention on Human Rights. It summarized key points and gave the schedule for further consideration by UN bodies and referral to the General Assembly.

A review of the Proceedings of the International Conferences of Social Work from 1948 through the early 1950s yielded limited references to human rights. In 1948, the International Conference met in April in Atlantic City and New York. The meetings were closely linked to the Social Commission of the UN and featured presentations on the Social Commission, the International Children's Emergency Fund (now UNICEF), the ILO, the International Refugee Organization

and the World Health Organization. There was, however, no mention of human rights or the ongoing process of drafting the landmark declaration. The term 'rights' appears in the Proceedings only in a presentation on schools of social work in Brazil, when the speaker said that anyone preparing to be a social worker had to consider issues about the nature of a human being, his needs, and 'his rights and duties as a person' (Junqueira, 1948: 83).

The 1950 Conference, described by Kendall (1978) as the first real postwar conference, was held in Paris in July, just 19 months after the adoption of the UDHR. In the opening plenary address, Donald Howard (1950: 27) quoted the Charter of the UN, beginning with the phrase that peoples of the UN 'are determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person; to promote social progress and better standards of life, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples'. He continued: 'who, fifty years ago, would have believed that within a half century the nations of the world, through representatives to a General Assembly of the United Nations meeting in this very historic city (Paris) in which so much international history has been enacted, would agree upon an epoch-making Declaration of Human Rights?' (1950: 28). He then cited Articles 21 and 25 as particularly significant in terms of social well-being. Howard's speech indicates only that human rights were acknowledged at the world conference. Later, Billimoria of India concluded her speech with a call to action on human rights. She noted that the UN had not been able to agree on a scheme to implement the UDHR. 'To my mind better human relations can only accrue as a result of universal implementation of the charter of human rights. Let us muster all our resources, efforts and energy to usher in a world-order based on the charter of human rights' (1950: 266).

Unfortunately, this call went unheeded for several decades. The Proceedings from 1952 and 1954, for example, show that the work of the International Conference was segmented into working groups focused on specific service areas or populations (children and youth, services for families, the physically handicapped, etc.). No doubt this focused social work's attention away from the more political and economic themes of global human rights. An exception was the 1968 International Conference of Social Work, with the theme 'Social Welfare and Human Rights', held in the UN International Year of Human Rights. The conference featured keynote papers on human rights and extensive discussions on various aspects of the topic. Each of the usual thematic working groups mentioned above integrated a rights perspective into the discussions. Recent writings have largely ignored this significant conference.

Recent official professional representation and action on the international scene

More recently, professional involvement in human rights action and scholarship has intensified, and has resulted in the publication of a number of books on human rights and social work (Ife, 2001; Reichert, 2003, 2007; Wronka, 2008). Publication of a manual on human rights and social work in the early 1990s by the UN, in collaboration with IFSW and IASSW, was a major accomplishment. The manual, *Human Rights and Social Work*, states: 'More than many professions, social work educators and practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for human rights. They accept the premise that human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, and that the full realization of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights' (UN, 1994: 5). The document continues: 'Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice... Advocacy of such rights must therefore be an integral part of social work, even if in countries living under authoritarian regimes such advocacy can have serious consequences for social work professionals' (UN, 1994: 5). IFSW has also issued a manual on children's rights (2002).

The values and principles expressed in the IFSW policy statement on human rights – adopted in 1988 and revised in 1996 – and the UN manual have been underscored in all recent documents issued by IFSW and IASSW, especially the International Definition of Social Work adopted in 2000, and the Statement of Ethical Principles adopted in 2004. The International Definition of Social Work includes the phrase: 'Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (IFSW/IASSW, 2000). The 2004 ethics document cites the definition and lists seven human rights treaties as 'particularly relevant to social work practice and action' (IFSW/IASSW, 2004: 3).

IFSW also formed a Human Rights Commission in 1988 to advocate on behalf of persecuted social workers. The commission became directly involved with the East Timor situation, for example, and has advocated for a number of individual social workers who were victims of human rights abuses or harassed for their humanitarian work. Since 1988 cases of social workers in Grenada, South Africa, Malaysia, Guatemala, Colombia, Israel, the USA, Chile, and more have been addressed. The commission also issues statements to governments on other human rights violations. The location of the headquarters of the IFSW in Geneva from 1975 to 1992 enhanced its participation in human rights issues through the UN.²

This analysis has focused on efforts at the international level. National organizations have their own records of human rights initiatives and some have issued human rights policy statements. The US National Association of Social Workers, for example, adopted a policy statement on human rights in 1996, called the 'International Policy on Human Rights' (NASW, 2003). Its predecessor, the American Association of Social Workers, presented a proposed platform on civil rights in social work to its 1949 Delegate Conference that read, in part: 'All social workers should have as a major concern those broad human rights and civil liberties that are the birthright of every individual' (American Association of Social Workers, 1949: 53). In many countries, social work has been significantly involved in the implementation of human rights treaties, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Jamaica, for example, governmental and non-governmental (NGO) efforts led by social workers have furthered the rights of children through rewriting policy, conducting public education and outreach, and developing new services and supports for children in need. Although beyond the scope of this article, research is needed to explore the human rights efforts of national social work organizations.

Summary and conclusions

The record indicates that social work was extensively involved in human rights in its formative years and can claim important areas of leadership especially before the UDHR. From 1945 to the 1980s there are instances of involvement and awareness, but little official international leadership. While lack of visibility in the 1970s may be explained by limited involvement in international affairs, this was not true in the 1940s and 1950s. Rather, during this time, social work focused on postwar relief and reconstruction and on efforts to spread social work education and training to new areas (Kendall, 1978). Beginning with the IFSW policy statement in 1988, official professional involvement in human rights has grown. In spite of this, external recognition of social work contributions remains limited.

Many explanations for social work's low visibility in the global human rights movement could be advanced. These include emphasis on social and economic rights, rather than civil and political rights that command more public attention; focus on vulnerable and socially excluded groups; preference for the case approach rather than macro issues; strict observance of confidentiality impeding use of cases to serve the wider cause; a focus on needs rather than rights; and the lack

of sustained global leadership on human rights by the organizations that represent the profession. Each of these suggests avenues for further work by the profession to strengthen its human rights presence.

It is fair to conclude that social workers have usually paid more attention to human needs than to human rights. As noted above, at the time of the drafting and adoption of the UDHR, the profession was quite involved and interested in international developments, but its attention was focused on the initiation of child welfare programs under the emerging UNICEF and the extensive relief programs ongoing in Europe and China. This is but one instance in which the profession focused on emergency, action-oriented human needs efforts, leaving human rights policy to others. Another example comes from the USA, where in 1947 the American Association of Social Workers adopted a platform statement for its delegate conference that foreshadows Article 25 of the UDHR, adopted more than a year and a half later. The social work statement, however, uses the word 'need' rather than 'right': 'All people everywhere need organized provisions to ensure opportunities for employment and a stable income, to safeguard their home, to promote mental and physical health and adequate education and to provide opportunities for religious expression' (AASW, 1947: 32).

Needs and rights are often juxtaposed, as if promoting one is somehow incompatible or less important than the other. Social work might instead reframe this interpretation in several ways. Articles 22 and 25 of the UDHR are clearly based on human needs. The rights that are identified are the basic human needs for survival and development. Social work can also capitalize on and promote its identity as an action profession. Except perhaps for the professors, social workers are not given to spending their time expounding on philosophy but rather engage in actions to solve problems and yes, meet needs. Could we not argue that social workers are the front-line human rights workers in implementation of Article 25 and key provisions of the ICESCR, CEDAW and CRC?

As social work looks to the future, the profession has an opportunity to assert its human rights focus more clearly. The strong compatibility of the profession's mission and values with human rights suggests a natural linkage. Human rights provide the profession with a clear direction for a presence at the international level, while also bridging local and national issues with global concerns.

In the human rights field, the social work profession has several important strengths and can make significant contributions to human rights movements. First, social workers truly understand the concept

of the indivisibility of rights. They see in their everyday practice that civil rights without adequate food, shelter and health care do little to enhance human well-being. They also realize that the suppression of civil and political rights harms even the well-fed. And, as Alice Salomon observed, most social workers understand that war annihilates everything that social work stands for (Lees, 2004). With its dual commitment to cultural diversity and respect for the rights of individuals, social work may also offer special wisdom to the thorny debate over universalism and cultural relativism in human rights (Healy, 2007). Finally, action orientation is perhaps the greatest social work strength and one that can make important contributions to human rights. Social workers take action; they engage in securing human rights for individuals and communities. What is missing, perhaps, is a consciousness of the activities of social work as human rights practice and of ways to build on individual case solutions to influence policy change.

The global human rights agenda is huge and shows no signs of diminishing. It is imperative that IASSW, ICSW and IFSW increase their impact on human rights in order to fulfill the historic and current mission of the social work and associated social welfare professions. As Gore put it in 1968, 'social work will gain in depth and richness if its linkage with human rights can be rediscovered and respecified' (1969: 56). Hopefully, in 2028 a 100-year review of the professional organizations will reveal that the profession has indeed respecified and strengthened its human rights commitment and accomplishments.

Notes

1. The IFSW expelled South Africa from membership in 1970, but readmitted it to provisional membership in 1972. However, South Africa was again expelled in 1976 and as of early 2008 is not a member of the IFSW. IASSW began investigating the situation in the South African schools in the 1970s. Several times, motions to suspend the Joint Universities Committee (the South African coordinating body) and its member schools were made, but defeated. As noted, instead the South African schools had to submit periodic reports documenting their efforts towards racial inclusion and an anti-apartheid stance. In 1988 the issue came to a head at the General Meeting in Vienna. The Nordic Committee on Schools of Social Work withdrew from the IASSW after a final unsuccessful attempt to suspend the South African schools at the Vienna Assembly and follow-up board meetings. It should be noted that UNESCO reviewed the IASSW approach and gave its approval by admitting the IASSW to category-B consultative status in 1992 (UNESCO, 1992a, 1992b). Following negotiations after the end of apartheid, the Nordic schools rejoined the IASSW.
2. Andrew and Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol, IFSW Secretary General and Associate Secretary General from 1975 to 1992, contributed substantially to UN activities (IFSW, 2006). Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol remains active as IFSW main representative at the UN in Geneva. In the 1980s she was a member of the NGO drafting group

for the CRC and was the IFSW representative to the NGO Advisory Panel for the UN Study on Violence Against Children (pers. comm., Nigel Hall, 24 February 1988; IFSW, 2006).

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