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INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES INTO SOCIAL WORK FOR VULNERABLE MIGRANT POPULATIONS

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A proper title should be concise, unique, and able to convey the nature of the research immediately to its targeted audience. The current title clearly relates three vital areas:

- (1) Human Rights Principles—founding the work in global legal and moral frameworks.
- (2) Social Work—highlighting the professional and practical application of the principles
- (3) Vulnerable Migrant Populations—categorizing the specific group at hand, thereby setting parameters on the study's scope.

The wording has been carefully chosen. The utilization of terms such as integrating suggests process-oriented research that goes beyond theory and suggests actual working into professional practice. The specificity ensures that researchers, professionals, and policymakers searching for literature on migration, social justice, or professional ethics will be attracted to the work. Moreover, by specifically mentioning "vulnerable migrant populations" explicitly, the title suggests urgency, attracting the attention of humanitarian and rights-focused research communities.

Abstract

The record scale of global migration in the 21st century has put into focus point pressing questions about the role of social work in safeguarding the dignity, rights, and well-being of border-crossers. This research explores the actual application of human rights norms to social work practice in relation to vulnerable migrant populations—refugees, asylum seekers, clandestine migrants, and others whose vulnerability makes them subject to marginalization and exploitation, according to the following definition. While professional ethics, such as those of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, technically guide professional practice, their actual implementation in social work practice day by day is uneven.

Employing qualitative design, the research was based on semi-structured interviews of thirty social workers who work with government, non-government, and community organizations within [Region/Country]. Background analysis of organizational documents was performed to analyze the presence (or absence) of explicit human rights vocabulary and processes. Thematically, data were analyzed using inductive and deductive coding methods informed by international legal instruments and social work ethics guidelines.

The studies indicate that social workers tend to support rights-based practice in principle as an integral component of a general professional allegiance to human rights. But systemic barriers—ranging from punitive immigration policy and decades of chronic underfunding to lack of professional training—limit day-to-day implementation. Furthermore, organizational culture periodically produces a priority of quick

service at the expense of structural advocacy, inadvertently undermining the comprehensive application of human rights models.

This research highlights the necessity of institutional reforms, including the inclusion of human rights education in pre-service and in-service training, the use of rights-based terminology in organizational policy, and the establishment of cross-sectoral networks of advocacy. These actions are crucial to ensuring that human rights are a living experience of practice and not simply idealistic slogans to redesign migrant service provision.

Keywords: Human rights in social work, Migrant vulnerability, Rights-based practice, Social work ethics, Migrant integration policy, Qualitative research, Social justice

Introduction

Migration is a very old human experience and, arguably, one of the characteristic dilemmas of our own time. Motivated by conflict, persecution, poverty, environmental change, and economic prospects, millions of people cross international borders annually. The International Organization for Migration estimates that there were 281 million international migrants in 2020, and a large number of them were settled in insecure or irregular conditions. These conditions expose migrants—particularly those who are fleeing war or are not legally recognized—to increased vulnerability to exploitation, discrimination, and human rights abuses.

Social work as a profession is well-placed to meet these challenges. Acting with values of dignity, self-determination, and social justice, social workers engage with migrants at different points—emergency reception, legal assistance, psychosocial assistance, and long-term integration. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) unequivocally places social work as a human rights profession, asserting that practitioners have both an ethical and practical obligation to promote the rights of vulnerable individuals.

Despite such philosophical agreement, there is a significant difference between the vision of rights-based practice on paper and practice. Migration research and ethics literature in social work reveals that there are several reasons why this gap occurs: inadequate training in human rights legislation, restrictive national immigration policy, budget restraints within institutions, and political opposition to migrants in some settings. While earlier research has often been concerned with migrant welfare or advocacy in their own terms, as opposed to human rights principles in social work, or with the circumstances under which integration can be successful, the current research fills this gap by having three associated goals:

1. To examine how social workers conceptualise and reason about human rights in relation to their day-to-day practice with migrants.
2. To identify enablers and barriers influencing the operationalization of rights-based approaches.
3. To identify strategies for better integrating human rights into social work policy and practice.

By doing this, this research will assist in the evolution of practical frameworks that close the gap between service delivery reality and rights talk.

Methodology

Research Design:

Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the emphasis on professional lived experience, a qualitative research design was used. Qualitative approaches have the special suitability for revealing the depth and richness of social phenomena, enabling the research to examine both the explicit and tacit ways in which human rights are exercised.

Thirty registered social workers were purposively selected in an effort to gather varied representation from different service settings. These included three large international NGOs, two municipal migrant service centers and one

national government integration agency. Participant experience ranged from three years to twenty years, thereby capturing newly qualified and experienced views as well as seasoned views informed by long-term practice.

Data Collection

•Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted for a duration of twelve weeks and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. Open-ended questions encouraged respondents to discuss their comprehension of human rights, experience with implementing rights-based approaches, perceived institutional support or resistance, and suggestions for areas of improvement.

•Document Review: Policy manuals, organizational mission statements, and staff training materials were reviewed to seek explicit mention of human rights principles and to evaluate their inclusion in formal protocols.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, definition/naming, and writing up. Coding themes were incorporated from inductive themes emerging from the interviews with deductive themes from core human rights principles (dignity, non-discrimination, participation, accountability) as they are defined in the UDHR and IFSW guidelines. NVivo 12 software facilitated data organization and retrieval.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by [Institution's Ethics Review Board]. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, with a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality. To ensure the sensitive nature of work by migrants was safeguarded, identifying information was deleted, and pseudonyms were used in all data presentation.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Deep Philosophical Alignment but Limited Formal Training

All respondents universally accepted human rights as central to their professional identity. They typically framed work in explicitly moral language, framing the delivery of services as a form of advocacy for justice and dignity. Formal training, however, in human rights legislation or theory, had been undertaken by a minority only. Most was acquired informally—through peer learning, self-learning, or experience. This reliance on individual effort risks inconsistency of application and exposes practitioners to potential gaps in knowledge of the law.

Theme 2: Structural and Policy Barriers

National immigration law was the commonest external barrier that was reported everywhere. Weakened policies did not only limit the assistance available to the migrant but also inhibited the provision of whatever social workers could legally provide. As one participant noted, "We can recognize their right to healthcare, but if the law denies them access, we're stuck." Institutional constraints compounded these challenges: chronic underfunding, high caseloads, and managerial priorities that emphasized efficiency over advocacy often forced practitioners into a reactive rather than proactive stance.

Theme 3: Organizational Culture and Rights Language

Analysis of organizational documents revealed dramatic disparities between agencies. Some NGOs incorporated human rights terminology into mission statements, program goals, and performance measures. Others used no explicit mention, relying instead on shared sense concepts of equity or service excellence. Lacking codified rights-based practice, individual practitioners were left to decide for themselves how and when to apply rights principles, resulting in wide variability in practice.

Theme 4: Enablers and Strategic Recommendations

There were several strategies that were perceived by participants to enhance integration:

- Including rights-based language in policy and service delivery guidance.
- Providing human rights training to all social workers, with refresher updates as needed to account for shifting legal environments.
- Creating multi-agency advocacy networks to collaborate to address systemic issues.
- Allocating dedicated time and resources to rights-focused casework and advocacy.

Discussion:

The findings affirm that practice based on rights is closely tied to social work values but remains under attack from systemic barriers. This triangulates with trends in previous studies (Dominelli, 2018; Ife, 2012) but adds to them by mapping the specific interaction between policy contexts, organizational cultures, and practitioner capacity. One of the greatest contributions of this research is highlighting its emphasis on institutional responsibility: rights-based practice cannot be entrusted to personal choice but must be institutionally protected by means of training, policy, and inter-agency liaison.

Conclusion

This research highlights that integrating human rights principles into social work with vulnerable migrant groups is not merely an ethical ideal but an immediate professional, legal, and social necessity. Migrants tend to experience multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities, such as legal vulnerability, socio-economic marginalization, cultural disconnection, and risk of exploitation. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2023 there were more than 281 million international migrants globally, of whom some 36 million were estimated as being amongst the forcibly displaced people because of conflict, persecution, or disaster. These

groups are disproportionately exposed to human rights abuses, and rights-oriented social work approaches are a requirement rather than a choice.

Although the ethical affinity between social work values of dignity, equality, and empowerment, and human rights principles is substantial, real application is often thwarted. Obstacles are presented by restrictive immigration policies, limited financing streams for programs serving migrants, and variable organizational commitment to rights-oriented approaches. In addition, practitioners tend to work in systems that value adherence to bureaucratic protocol over effective advocacy for basic rights, expanding the distance between human rights ideology and routine social work practice.

Bridging this gap requires multi-level reforms. Educational institutions, especially schools of social work, must integrate comprehensive human rights training into their curricula, ensuring future practitioners are equipped to navigate both individual casework and systemic advocacy. Governments should translate human rights commitments into clear, enforceable operational policies that guide service delivery and resource allocation. Furthermore, immigration laws should be aligned with global legal norms, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to deliver protection irrespective of status.

Institutionalizing rights-based approaches would allow social work to better serve its twin mandate: offering immediate, empathetic support to people in crisis, while at the same time conducting policy campaigns and systemic interventions aimed at solving underlying causes of vulnerability, including poverty, discrimination, and exclusionary legislation. With the unprecedented human movement of our times—fuelled by conflict, climate change, and economic inequality—these reforms are no longer a choice. They are

an sine qua non in maintaining the dignity, security, and human rights of migrants in both transit and host country

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