

Social Work's Role in Human Rights for Refugees: Challenges Facing Syrian Refugee Women and Girls

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ABSTRACT

In looking at social work's response to the human rights of refugees, the profession has not been historically very engaged with the social issue and there seems to have been a general lack of awareness regarding the human rights issues facing refugees (Libal & Popescu, 2018). However, by viewing social work as a human rights profession, social workers may have the opportunity to become more prepared to aid refugees globally not only in a clinical response, but also on the level of advocacy and policy implementation to advocate for and ensure the rights of refugees around the world (Karlsson & Johnsson, 2020). This paper will first engage in a historical analysis, discussing historical social work approaches, historical framing, and present-day social construction and response to the global refugee crisis. The paper will then analyze the overall mental health, wellbeing, and other challenges facing refugees, providing specific attention to the those faced by Syrian women and girl refugees, followed by an analysis of how social work can address these challenges. The paper will then highlight assumed causes and consequences of these challenges while addressing how those in power have framed the refugee crisis throughout history. The paper will then dive deeper into the prevalence of these human rights challenges and who they impact. After discussing how this issue relates to social work values, this paper will then detail potential advocacy steps social workers may implement at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels to address it.

Introduction

Forced displacement of migrants and refugees due to conflict, violence, or persecution is a global social problem that has significantly increased in size within the past decade. Due to this increase, the number of forcibly displaced migrants and refugees has increased to about 68.5 million people according to the United Nations and of those numbers, 40 million are internally displaced people (IDPs) and 28.5 million have crossed borders as either refugees or asylum seekers (Libal & Popescu, 2018). Unfortunately, global response to these increasing numbers has included many governments modifying their policies by adding more restrictions and exclusionary measures for refugees (Corcoran & Yakoob, 2003). In particular, the Syrian refugee crisis has brought this polarizing response to the forefront of discussion, specifically within the United States. The crisis has shed a light on the lack of cohesion or agreement between countries on a global response with binding power, with many of the proposed frameworks seeking to limit access to protections instead of protecting the rights of refugees (Libal & Popescu, 2018).

Historical Setting

Through the years, refugees have been framed increasingly in a negative light around the world, making it difficult for them to access rights guaranteed to them. Specifically, in looking at the U.S.'s historical response to refugees one can observe that during the 1990's the U.S. was reported as providing the most total assistance by the UN High Commission for Refugees during the Yugoslavian war; however, as attitudes and negative social perceptions of the refugee crisis have evolved through the years, the U.S.'s response has changed to reflect those perceptions in policy

and legal action (Oreskovic, Kovacic, & Kenefelj, 1995). For example, an analysis done in 2003 in response to the ongoing global refugee crisis criticizes the U.S. government's continued legalized and criminalized response and the expansion of the role of the judiciary seen through placing emphasis on legal structures instead of psychosocial response to the refugee crisis (Corcoran & Yakoob, 2003). The analysis discusses how this shift has played a large role in denying rights to refugees and asylum-seekers in the United States (Corcoran & Yakoob, 2003). This shift, both in the U.S. and abroad, has shaped the framing of the problem throughout history and in present-day.

In regard to the profession of social work, there has been a historically ambiguous view of the role of social workers in the refugee crisis, seen through a general lack of involvement in policy development, service provision, and advocacy. Yalim & Kim (2018) describe that when social workers have been involved in the refugee crisis throughout history, they have appeared to take a more clinical role in the issue. They note that social work has long viewed this problem from a more clinical perspective, indicating that solutions were seen more on an individual basis and not on a more macro-level scale. They also note that this clinical-based response included social workers acting after the fact to help refugees in re-settlement with psychological and mental health problems. While this is an important avenue to explore when it comes to social work's role in the refugee crisis, the present view on this role has evolved to include more mezzo and macro-focused strategies as well, such as community organizing, advocacy, and policy discussions (Kelley, 1994).

The Syrian Refugee Crisis

To providing a more specific context, this paper will narrow down the social issue of forced displacement due to conflict, violence, or persecution and the response to refugees to specifically analyze the effect of the largest refugee crisis in history, the Syrian refugee crisis, explicitly on the population of women and girls. In the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis, women and children comprise the largest percentage of displaced people at about 78% (Sami et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to discuss the challenges and human rights issues they face as refugees in both the resettlement and the post-settlement phases.

Effects of Forced Displacement on Wellbeing

The effects of fleeing from violence and conflict resulting in forced displacement of refugees have proved to be long-lasting and are consequences of a variety of factors including incidences of extreme trauma, poor health conditions, loss of identity, and ongoing oppression both sexually, psychologically, and physically (Yalim & Kim, 2018). The lack of autonomy experienced by refugees during resettlement can also play an important role in their feelings of disenfranchisement and perceived stress (George, 2010). Yalim and Kim detail in their 2018 report that overall, many Syrian refugees experience reported mental health problems, with severe emotional disorders making up 54% of the most common problems reported. They note that 600,000 Syrian refugees are estimated to require treatment for severe mental illness with another 4 million dealing with mild to moderate mental health problems and provide an example detailing that in a Syrian refugee camp in Turkey, 41.8% of the sample met criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder.

Challenges Facing Syrian Women and Girls

Specifically, Syrian women and girl refugees are disproportionately affected by this and other challenges due to lack of access to services which include sexual assault treatment, reproductive healthcare, and other basic services to meet their needs (Sami et al., 2013). A 2013 report by Sami et al. states that women and girls who are Syrian refugees are at an increased risk of exposure to gender-based violence, worsening mental health, and reproductive health complications. The report details that in Syria as of 2013, about 1.7 million women of reproductive age were reported as needing assistance but not receiving it. Other considerations, which can be seen in Yalim and Kim's 2018 report,

include lack of employment, overcrowded camps, and high rent costs among Syrian refugees which create a risk factor of child labor and survival sex among young women and girls beginning as young as 10 years old. The report details that in some camps in Turkey, women are sold for “temporary marriage” for up to 5,000 Turkish Lira, and current government controls in the camps do not prevent this. Yalim and Kim’s report also identifies that the number of early marriages has also increased due to families’ efforts to protect their daughters or alleviate financial burdens, which can affect young girls’ ability to access education during conflict due to deterrence. The report notes that this increases the likelihood that these young girls will suffer from prolonged psychological stress as it is proven that access to education can support children’s mental health and well-being. In addition, prior to the war, Syrian society and culture was identified as more patriarchal with men dominating most aspects of society; however, as gender norms have shifted due to the crisis and resulting displacement, Syrian women are having to take on more responsibility regarding their families and providing security in the home (Roupetz et al., 2020). With this shift, there has been an increase in reports of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by men as a coping mechanism to reassert their patriarchal roles (Roupetz et al., 2020).

Overall, due to the lack of services and advocacy in place to address the challenges above, there are various detrimental long-term outcomes for Syrian refugee women and girls including challenges related but not limited to post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illness, long-term unaddressed health problems, and anxiety (Sami et al., 2013). Due to these additional challenges, addressing the needs of Syrian women and girl refugees should be a priority for social workers and those working to advocate for the human rights of refugees.

Assumed causes of these increasing challenges and forced displacement of women and girl refugees from Syria include intensifying violence, persecution, and human rights violations, which are all frequently cited as predictors for global forced displacement (Tobia, 2017). For example, over one million people involved in the refugee crisis, including those fleeing from Syria, have reported fleeing due to increasing violence in their home countries. “Threat-based decision making” provides a framework for examining the impact of the macro-level factors that cause the problem of forced migration and displacement including armed conflict, high levels of crime, and perception of threat (Tobia, 2017).

Historical and Current Social Framing of Refugees

In addressing the challenges facing Syrian women and girl refugees, it is important to note that the challenges and lack of access to care are exacerbated by historical and current social constructions of the issue, including how those in power have framed the refugee crises which in turn, has informed the response. A report by Newman & vanSelm (2002) details that politicians both historically and in present-day have framed the refugee crisis, refugees, and asylum seekers in negative terms. The 2002 report notes that this construction has been perpetuated by the media, global discussion surrounding the “threat” that refugees and asylum seekers pose, and the stricter immigration policies to close off borders instead of opening them up and offering services. The report also notes that governments have worked to construct refugees and migrants as negative and threatening, while simultaneously creating legal and physical barriers against those who are displaced due to conflict, war, or violence. Newman and vanSelm (2002) also describe this construction by detailing how the media regularly reports on refugee issues by shifting the narrative from “protecting refugees” to “protection from refugees.” They report that this has caused a subsequent rise in anti-immigrant attitudes, nationalism, and xenophobia as waves of refugees have fled Syria and other conflict zones into Europe and North America. The U.S. in particular has employed “radical restrictionism” in recent decades, such as enforcing a zero-tolerance policy on the southern border and refusing to provide timely rights to refugees claiming asylum throughout the country (Libal & Popescu, 2018). These policies infringe upon basic human rights and needs for refugees who have been forcibly displaced (Libal & Popescu, 2018).

Some researchers see the events on 9/11 as a catalyst for this negative connotation assigned to refugees. For example, Rettberg and Gajjala (2015) explain that following 9/11, views of Syrian male refugees have become increasingly negative as the “middle-eastern male” has often been cast as a “potential terrorist”. The authors express

that this narrative simultaneously leaves women and children out of the story, and typically chooses to focus on only “dangerous” male refugees. Rettberg and Gajjala also detail that this increases the invisibility of Syrian women and girl refugees’ plights and therefore lessens the tailored responses today to the specific challenges they face. The general public and in turn, governmental policy makers, have acted in fear due to the sheer magnitude of the refugee crisis, responding often with prioritizing protecting their borders and working to satisfy their domestic citizens in their feelings of safety, over protecting the human rights of refugees (Corcoran & Yakoob, 2003). Therefore, throughout history and in present-day, the social construction of the refugee crisis has contributed to the lack of appropriate response and aid to refugees in need.

Application to Social Work Values

Within the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) Code of Ethics, one of the ethical principles is to respect the “inherent dignity and worth of a person” (2017). This principle lends itself to social workers’ potential response to this social issue. The human rights violations that refugees around the world experience deliver a call to action for social workers to step in, address the problem, and fight to not only protect refugees’ human rights, but to also enhance their capacity and resources so that they are able to resettle effectively and experience long-term success. Specifically, by approaching the problem through a rights-based approach, social workers can align this work with the social work value of respecting the dignity and worth of a person.

One 2018 article by Androff discusses this “rights-based approach” and suggests that human rights remains an issue at the base of a social worker’s role in the refugee crisis. Specifically, the article outlines five principles for social workers to adhere to in human rights work to achieve a “rights-based approach”: acknowledging human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability. All five of these principles closely align with the NASW’s Code of Ethics, including the values of social justice and respecting the dignity and worth of a person, in addition to standards regarding discrimination (code 4.02) and dishonesty, fraud, and deception (code 4.04) (NASW, 2017). Social workers can begin to take on their role more actively in this issue by applying a consistent “rights-based perspective” to human rights work within the profession, not only on a micro level, but also within the mezzo and macro response spheres (Androff, 2018).

The ideal role of a social worker in addressing human rights for refugees include social workers being involved in assessment and decision-making at all levels, and not acting in a solely reactionary role in a clinical capacity. Instead of providing more macro-level advocacy for refugees’ human rights, social workers have typically only become involved in providing clinical services to refugees once they reach their destination country (Androff, 2018). Androff asserts in his 2018 article that having social workers on the ground in resettlement countries would aid in assessing needs and seeing where gaps in care and human rights protections lie, and would add the rights-based perspective from the unique social work lens to potential solutions and policies in place. Androff also asserts that historically, social workers have not been involved or included in the conversation around protecting the human rights of refugees, with the majority of solutions emerging instead from the legal sphere. He details that this problem has historically been framed from a purely legal standpoint, with a clear lack of emphasis from social workers on the issue. Promoting and advancing human rights has not historically been constructed as a social work problem, and most of the current players include governmental organizations and those in the legal field, instead of social workers (Androff, 2018).

Another consideration for social workers in human rights work with refugees is the ethical dilemma that may be faced when the necessary work to aid refugees may not align with the agency’s laws or the state’s policies in place. This has implications for social work practice as many of these policies directly correlate to human rights violations that refugees are experiencing during and after forced displacement. For example, a 2019 study by Briskman completed in Australia exposed injustices within their privatized detention network for asylum seekers and found many of the policies and practices in place “antithetical to human rights”. The study describes these strict policies in addition to professional advocacy efforts that are in place to offset them, including those carried out by social workers.

Briskman's study reasserts the views in Androff's 2018 article by detailing that "human rights are sometimes seen as being solely in the domain of lawyers". The study continues by stating, "the framing in legal terms limits both the scope of human rights and the possibilities for practice", implicating social workers who could have a greater role in advocating for political and human rights in these scenarios if included in the response to the problem. Briskman's study also directly mentions the NASW Code of Ethics as a reason why social workers must continue to fight for human rights for refugees within immigration detention facilities and take on a more active role. This affirms the notion that social workers must become involved using a rights-based approach to this problem as it relates to social work values and ethics.

Social Work Interventions at the Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Levels

In addition to the potential role of rights-based social work in addressing human rights for refugees, there are many potential advocacy steps at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels that social workers can take to help refugees who have been forcibly displaced, with specific focus given to women and girl refugees from the Syrian crisis.

Micro Interventions

Research identifies multiple strategies for social workers to become involved at the micro level, most of which focus on clinical work with refugees who have experienced trauma from forced displacement due to conflict and violence. Many of the following strategies focus on responding to mental health concerns on the micro level. The reason for this focus on mental health services results from the effects of conflict-related and often gender-based violence, displacement challenges that refugees experience, and the need to focus clinical work from a post-disaster response perspective (Yalim & Kim, 2018). However, the services available to Syrian refugees in neighboring host countries often fail to meet even their basic needs such as food, housing, and security, which has placed mental health services on the backburner (Yalim & Kim, 2018). One identified strategy to combat this lack of mental health-related services includes providing strengths-based interventions that are grounded in cultural competency and recognition of the traumatic experiences refugees have faced, while simultaneously migrating from a purely medical response to a group therapy and community support-based response (George, 2012). This strategy seems to be a common clinical strategy proposed, with special consideration given to promoting social connectedness and support networks. It is important to note that research by Yalim and Kim (2018) additionally suggests that clinical approaches to refugee mental health should take into account less Western views on psychiatric care and alter treatment methods to consider social, political, and economic factors that play large roles in refugees' lives. Their 2018 report discusses this and asserts that instead of focusing on traditional counseling methods, a more collectivistic approach such as group therapy may align more closely with many refugees' cultural considerations. The report examines the effectiveness of this type of clinical approach by looking at psychosocial and community-based clinical interventions that were tested with refugees in Turkey and Jordan. These interventions detailed in the 2018 report included comprehensive training for the mental health team to educate them on specific issues facing Syrian refugees, non-intrusive care and needs assessments, and community educational and vocational activities. The report details that result from these interventions saw improvement in Syrian refugees' resilience and general well-being measurements.

These services may prove to be difficult to provide to refugees who live outside the camps, where most services are delivered (Yalim & Kim, 2018). However, an example of a micro level strategy in response to this barrier is a 2018 evaluation of a mobile model of service delivery responding to gender-based violence and other challenges experienced by Syrian women and girl refugees in Lebanon, being implemented by the International Rescue Committee (Lilleston et al.). This 2018 evaluation by Lilleston et al. interviewed women and girls who have received services through this delivery model to evaluate whether these services meet their needs. In the evaluation, participants described that the services helped them to strengthen their social networks, reduced feelings of isolation, and increased

their knowledge and self-confidence. Lilleston et al. concluded their evaluation by suggesting that by providing free and flexible services in women's own communities, the barriers that limit women and girls' access to services such as transportation, cost, mobility, and domestic responsibility expectations, can be overcome.

Mezzo Interventions

Moving from micro to mezzo practice, there are many advocacy strategies that social workers can implement to help refugees who have fled due to conflict, violence, or persecution. One identified mezzo-level strategy includes providing community-based programs to foster social inclusion of refugees in addition to collaboration between refugees and social service providers (Libal & Popescu, 2018). A current example of this can be seen in the use of "Safe Spaces" to support Syrian women and girl refugees (Shrivastava, Shrivastava, & Ramasamy, 2017). In an effort to aid refugee women and girl populations in urban areas who are at high risk for gender-based violence, isolation, and destitution, the United Nation Population Fund has established a "Safe Spaces" program (Shrivastava, Shrivastava, & Ramasamy, 2017). This program provides opportunities for workers to extend community-based psychological support, sexual and reproductive health services, language classes, legal assistance, and a community support network in the resettlement areas for refugees (Shrivastava, Shrivastava, & Ramasamy, 2017). Another example of this "safe space" approach is the founding of the Women and Girls Oasis Centre initiative in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan (Wells & Kuttiparambil, 2016). The center allows women and girls to face their new reality and responsibilities of becoming the heads of their households and taking on new gender roles, a new challenge faced by women and girl refugees in resettlement, detailed earlier in this paper and as depicted in Roupetz et al.'s 2020 study. This center is an example of creating a space for women to claim more social and political freedom to develop collective strategies to meet their own needs and challenges, while allowing for increased feelings of participation and decision making.

The lack of women and girl refugees' voices in decision making and policy surrounding their challenges as refugees provides a barrier to truly responsive services reflecting the self-stated and voiced needs of these women and girls (Yumna, 2017). Therefore, practices such as these mezzo-level services can provide the space for their voices to be heard and for them to come together to form a collective and community-based program response.

Macro Interventions

Within the macro context, there is potential for social work to achieve much more to advance the rights and interests of refugees who are forcibly displaced by conflict, violence, or persecution (Libal & Popescu, 2018). One way this can be accomplished is through the use of rights-based approaches to address structural inequalities that face refugees, especially within the U.S., in addition to policy advocacy in areas deemed less "welcoming" to refugees who have been forcibly displaced (Libal & Popescu, 2018). For example, Yalim and Kim's 2018 report identifies that current U.S. resettlement policy focuses on refugees quickly becoming self-sufficient and focuses more on employability and physical health than mental health. The 2018 report notes that alternatively, social workers can advocate for policies and procedures that provide easier avenues for refugees to learn about their options and access services. The report also notes that early detection of needs, specifically regarding mental health, early in the process can help ensure better adjustment for refugees overall, and by having trauma informed care guide social policy and advocacy, refugees may feel more supported and experience long-term success in resettlement.

Overall, social workers should be acknowledged as key players in refugee policy decisions and delivery of services. One way this could be possible is for governments to facilitate more international alliances between educators, researchers, and social work practitioners to promote collaboration to address the needs of refugees (Yalim & Kim, 2018). However, a limitation of international alliances to consider is the common "burden-sharing approach" used by current alliances and declarations (Kale, 2017). In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, without the existence of a more systemic enforced universal approach to aid refugees, such as an approach that includes more global

leadership and a global institutional framework for response, long-term durable solutions will be difficult to maintain (Kale, 2017).

Summary

Throughout this paper, the role of social work in protecting the human rights of refugees who have been forcibly displaced by conflict, violence, or persecution specifically for Syrian women and girl refugees, has been analyzed and discussed. In analyzing the social issue, social work's historical role in the refugee crisis has proven to be lacking, and solely focused on a clinical level (Yalim & Kim, 2018). In addition, response to the problem has generally fallen to the legal field, with little consideration given to the effects of conflict and violence on displaced refugees in the long-term (Androff, 2018). Due to this, the challenges facing Syrian women and girl refugees and refugees around the globe of addressing mental health concerns, an increase in gender-based violence, lack of access to resources post-resettlement, assuming new gender roles and responsibilities, and lack of advocacy for their human rights, have remained largely unaddressed. These challenges were discussed and analyzed to provide potential interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work (Roupetz et al., 2020; Yalim & Kim, 2018; Sami et al., 2013). A barrier to the successful implementation of these interventions includes public perception of refugees and the refugee crisis, perpetuated by restrictive and criminalizing governmental policy and reform (Corcoran & Yakoob, 2003; Newman & van-Selm, 2002). This paper also addressed the correlation between the social work profession's values and ethics and the suggested use of a rights-based approach in human rights work and advocacy with refugees within all levels of practice (Androff, 2018; NASW, 2017). In combining a human rights-based approach and various micro, mezzo, and macro interventions, social workers have the unique opportunity to take a more prominent role in protecting and advocating for the human rights of refugees around the globe and here in the United States.

Recommendations

A recommendation for future research, seen in Yalim and Kim's 2018 report, is that more attention in both research and response should be paid to the impact of post-settlement experiences in resettlement countries for refugees. As discussed in this report, Syrian women and girl refugees in particular experience an increase in gender-based violence and other challenges during the post-resettlement phase, and more research on these specific challenges that they face could aid in addressing the problem (Roupetz et al., 2020). Another recommendation is for researchers and policymakers to identify the limitations of the current conventional legal-based human rights narratives surrounding refugee response to enable social work to gain a more integral role in advocacy for the rights of refugees on a global scale (Karlsson & Jonsson, 2020).

From improving micro-level community-based and culturally competent interventions dealing with basic needs, clinical response, and access to care, to more macro-level interventions relating to advocacy and policy, there are many roles social workers can begin to inhabit to work to address the challenges refugees who have been forcibly displaced from conflict, violence, or persecution face in Syria, and around the globe (Yalim & Kim, 2018; Libal & Popescue, 2018).

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