

# Social Justice in a Time of Austerity: Promoting the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

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# Aims of this Presentation

- What is the impact of austerity on asylum seekers and refugees?
- Why is it important for social work as a profession to uphold social justice and human rights for these two vulnerable groups?
- How do we get student social workers to question their ethics and values and instil a strong sense of social justice?

# Who is a Refugee?

According to International law:

‘A refugee is a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)

# Who is an Asylum Seeker?

- Someone who has fled persecution in their homeland, has arrived in another country, made themselves known to the authorities and exercised the legal right to apply for asylum

([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk))

- A person who has applied to be recognised as a refugee and is entitled to a fair determination of their claim

# Human Rights Act 1998

- Right to Life (Art 2)
- Right to Protection from Inhuman or Degrading Treatment, Punishment or Torture (Art 3)
- Right to Liberty and Security (Art 5)
- Article 6 – Right to a Fair Trial
- Right to respect for Private and Family Life (Art 8)

# The Impact of Austerity on Asylum Seekers and Refugees

- Reduced access to justice through the legal system – legal aid cuts
- Reduced expert support – lack of funding to refugee agencies, charities and community groups
- Impact of increased pressures on the wider population and social services departments

# Impact of Welfare Reform in Kent – Wider Population

Increasing number of:

- Rent arrears and homelessness
- Children with CP needs through in-migration from London boroughs
- Families using food banks
- Placement in temporary bed and breakfast

Stretched resources - impact on asylum seekers and refugees

('Update on the Evidence of the Impact in Kent', Nov 2013, accessed at <http://twileshare.com/bhdj>)

# Definition of Social Work/Workers

‘The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work’

(The International Federation of Social Workers, 2000)

# Activity for Starting Teaching Migration to Students

- Write down three ideas you have about asylum seekers and refugees.
- Keep this note private – you will not have to share what you write with the group

# Scaffolding Teaching Content

- Terminology and power of language
- Reality: facts and figures – ‘myth busting’
- Historical context to migration
- Current reality for asylum seekers and refugees, looking at complexity of the law and areas of social policy
- Examining the social work task and assessment and communication skills
- Exploring dilemmas for values and ethics and issues for specific vulnerable group
- Debates on integration, assimilation, citizenship and return

# Global Perspective

- UK is home to less than 2% of the world's refugees – out of 16 million worldwide (UNHCR)
- 80% of world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in refugee camps
- Africa and Asia host over 75% of world's refugees while Europe looks after just 14%
- In 2008, the UK ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the league of industrialised countries for the number of asylum applications per head of population

([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk), accessed 25/6/10)

# Areas of Social Policy

- The law: process and immigration status
- Housing
- Health
- Employment
- Education
- Detention
- Criminal Justice

# People with Multiple and Complex Vulnerabilities

- Lack of secure status
- Loss of culture
- Trauma and recovery
- Mental health needs
- Domestic violence
- Economic exploitation
- Family breakdown
- Social exclusion
- Hate crime

# Asylum Seekers: The Reality

- Not allowed to work for first 12 months of application
- Adverse media coverage has heightened local tensions and resentment
- Asylum seekers are no more likely to commit crimes than anyone else
- Asylum seekers are much more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators
- Immigration offices can detain asylum seekers, even if they have not committed a crime
- In time, refugees make a financial contribution to the UK according to research

‘All migration is courageous’

Discuss

(Hayes and Humphries, 2004, p12)

# Research Article:

Kohli, R. (2006), *The Sound of Silence: Listening to What Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children Say and Do Not Say*, *British Journal of Social Work* 36(5): 707-721

- Discusses: 'thick' and 'thin' stories; silence as a functional distrust to survive hostility; purposely constructed stories; lack of knowledge of ordinary details from past; and the dilemma of how much to look backwards in order to move forwards

# Dual Planning: Integration or Return?

- What do we know as practitioners?
- How is our perspective different from our service users?

‘How can it be assumed that refugees are returning ‘home’ when the very reason they left was that they did not feel ‘at home’ anymore?’

(Ghanem, 2003, p21)

# Findings from Systematic Review: Conditions on Return to Country of Origin

- ‘Repatriation is far from being the problem-free, joyous home-coming and final solution to refugee-hood, imagined’ (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008, p21)
- Damaging impact of being passive non-citizen in Europe for many years
- Psychological protection of expectation of eventual return

# Systematic Review on Conditions on Return to Country of Origin

- Homeland changed, particular vulnerability of returnees in post-conflict society - Sierra Leone: Hierarchy of shame (vol. return, enforced return, child soldiers, ex-combatants), mental ill health
- Need to understand context of return, e.g. Croatia – ethnic divisions emphasised, neighbours dislodging neighbours; Eritrea – common external enemy so warmer welcome)
- Transnational identities
- Bias in research and reporting

# Contentious Role of Social Workers

- Ascertaining eligibility for services
- Classifying customers into packages of care
- Evidence of social services trying to evade statutory responsibilities
- Working within the confines of government policies: internal policing of immigration
- Financially-led decision making

Social workers are often 'caught in the middle, between the individual and the state, the powerful and the excluded'

(Cree, 2008)

# The Importance of Film in Teaching

- Film 'Hamed' - return of a previous unaccompanied asylum-seeking child from Canterbury to Afghanistan (put on plane with no shoes on)
- Dispatches 'The Kids that Britain Doesn't Want' - example of Border Agency staff having keys to asylum seekers' homes
- Developing understanding and empathy – “my eyes have really been opened today, but now I just want to go home and watch a comedy” (MA student after session on migration)
- Links to resilience in practice

# Students' Evaluation of the Teaching of Migration

- Enlightening and values are questioned and reassessed
- Questioning the media as a valid information source
- Incredulity that adults and children are detained indefinitely in our country without committing a crime
- Not realised the complexity of the law and asylum process
- Unconfident to discuss migration in case seen as prejudiced
- Begin to see migration within its' global context

# Vision for Refugee Council, 2013-2016

- 'For those seeking asylum, we want fair and just decision-making;
- For those granted refuge, we want equality of opportunity to lead fulfilling lives;
- For those denied protection, we want understanding and humane treatment;
- For all refugees in the UK, we want respect and dignity'

# Refugee Council's Aims for 2013-2016 include:

- 'Ensuring that all refugees in the UK obtain the specialist and mainstream services and resources they need;
- Strengthening the influence and involvement of refugees in the shaping the decisions and processes that affect their lives'

(Refugee Council: Strategic Directions and Priorities 2013-2016)

# Key Message for the Social Work Profession

- Need to train an aware, resilient and powerful workforce ready to question procedural constraints
- Need for collaboration with the refugee agencies, community groups and experts in the field
- Need to pick up the gaps in services left by the reduced and redirected funding which is shrinking the refugee agencies

# Agencies with Expertise within the Refugee Sector

- Refugee Council
- Refugee Action
- Red Cross (Family tracing)
- ECRE (European Council for Refugees in Exile)
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees)
- Freedom from Torture
- Refugee Community Organisations
- Befriending and Mentoring Projects
- Refugee Legal Centre
- International Organisation for Migration

# Social Work and Social Justice

- Increasing transnational communities and displaced people
- Migration is a topic that needs to be high on the social work agenda, beyond the realms of the undeserving poor imagery of the media

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