

Book Review

Reichert, E. (2003). *Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for Policy and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press. 250 pages plus appendices, \$24.50 paper, \$62.00 cloth.

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Elizabeth Reichert, Diplom Sozialarbeiterin (Manheim, Germany), MSSW, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She has extensive clinical experience in child welfare and has worked internationally in social development. Her teaching areas are child welfare practice, social policy, and international social work, including study abroad courses. She has authored numerous articles on human rights, international social work, and child welfare. This is her first book.

Human rights may well be one of the most central issues of the 21st Century. The human rights movement has its roots in works of philosophy, religion, political theory, the law, and activists throughout the centuries. The movement took on new meaning and a sense of urgency in the 20th Century. Confronting the horror of the Holocaust, in 1945 world leaders founded the United Nations, with its focus on peacekeeping and protecting human rights. Within three years, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, the new world body had created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Since that time, the UN, governmental, and non-governmental organizations worldwide have been developing a complex framework for assuring the implementation of the UDHR. Although in the United States the social work profession has not (with some exceptions) used the term *human rights*, much of the ordinary work that social workers do can be viewed as human rights work.

Dr. Reichert's purpose in writing this book is to promote knowledge of human rights among U.S. social workers, giving them an enhanced perspective on their roles as helping professionals and a new look at issues that are of central importance to the profession. Dr. Reichert points out that the global social work profession has embraced human rights as a guiding principle, whereas the U.S. profession has been slow to do so, focusing instead on social justice—a more limited concept, in her view.

The author does not specifically identify her intended audience, but she indicates that her book “does not pretend to be anything more than an elementary or beginning text on linking the social work profession to human rights” (p. 14). It could be used in an introductory social work course to establish the profession within a global human rights framework or at any level to give

students a fresh perspective on their profession. Any social worker with limited knowledge of human rights could benefit from this introductory work.

The book is divided into an introduction, eight chapters, and appendices that contain the full text of the three major United Nations human rights instruments: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with its Optional Protocol, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. In the first chapter, after a very brief summary of the historical roots of the human rights movement, including the role of social workers, the author introduces readers to the most important terminology used in human rights documents. In the next three chapters, she discusses the three major human rights instruments—their purposes, specific provisions, and the social work perspective on each. She also discusses the complex issues involved in creating and meaningfully implementing universal standards of human conduct in a diverse world. Throughout this analysis, she demonstrates how human rights guidelines might be used to determine approaches to recent global crises and to ethical challenges encountered by social workers. In Chapters 5 and 6, she focuses on vulnerable groups—women, children, persons with disabilities, gays and lesbians, older persons, and persons affected by racism. The author provides ample illustrations of how human rights documents address the rights of members of vulnerable populations. Issues such as child labor, capital punishment, foster care and adoption, trafficking in women and children, access to health care, slavery, and female genital mutilation are discussed as they affect vulnerable groups internationally and locally.

In Chapter 7, the author moves to a discussion of the third generation of human rights—the right to development and the need for international cooperation to assure that right for peoples in the developing world. Dr. Reichert provides a convincing argument that the social work profession has a responsibility to work towards a “fair and equitable global system” (p. 203). This requires an understanding of not only the needs and rights of peoples in the developing world but the roles and impacts of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The final chapter is devoted to applying the human rights perspective to social work policy and practice. The author challenges social workers to become aware of the many obstacles that stand in the way of assuring human rights to all. She demonstrates how major social work interventions (challenging oppression, empowerment, the strengths perspective, ethnic-sensitive practice, feminist practice, and cultural competence) all are tools to link social work with human rights. She then shows how the NASW Code of Ethics, although not using the term *human*

rights, has considerable overlap with human rights principles. Nine case studies, with integrative questions, test the reader's understanding of how human rights principles apply to work with client systems.

The author's major thesis is that, by educating themselves about human rights, social workers will enhance their understanding of the profession. Her point is well made. The reader will come to appreciate how the value base of the social work profession is grounded in principles common to those in the human rights movement and how, in their daily practice, social workers are advancing human rights—of their clients, communities, nation, and world. Having a sense of solidarity with others—in other fields of endeavor and in other countries—should help social workers to experience a sense of community with a social movement that is, perhaps, the best hope for our troubled world.

Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for Policy and Practice provides an excellent introduction to the concept of human rights and to the central UN human rights declarations and covenants. It does not provide a comprehensive history of the human rights movement, nor does it provide much discussion of the role of national governments and the extensive array of non-governmental organizations in advancing human rights. Other authors have done this. Although it stimulates the reader to consider how human rights principles might apply in practice situations, it does not attempt to adapt practice theory to incorporate a human rights framework. That task will be left for future authors.