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Weaving Human Rights in Social Work Practice to Address the Roots of Poverty

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Abstract

Poverty is rooted in the the socio-economic, political and cultural system of the Philippines. Poverty as structural violence is embedded in the system and in the process, continuously violates a wide range of human rights of the Filipinos, from political and civil rights to economic, social, and cultural rights. Social Work, as a profession, has usually paid more attention to human needs than to human rights. With the recognition that at the very core of its existence are conflicts over how competing social-political-economic groups, forces, and classes define, interpret and respond to human needs, the profession has become a contested and highly politicized practice that includes human rights work. With the persistence and gravity of human rights violations, it is imperative for social workers to fully operationalise human rights as a professional value and principle in their practice. This is a path that will contribute to unravelling and addressing the roots of poverty, and engaging in emancipatory, transformative Social Work.

Keywords: poverty, human rights, transformative, Social Work

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> "Social work exists to serve people in need. If it serves other classes who have other purposes, it becomes too dishonest to be capable of other theoretical or practical development."
>
> Bertha Reynolds, 1946

Introduction

The Philippines is one country in Asia whose history reflects a catalogue of human rights violations. The current situation may be likened to "a theatre for the violations of human rights in its totality i.e., economic, social, cultural, civil, and political" (Gutto, 1993), and which now includes the violation of its collective and sovereign rights as a nation.

Indeed, it is a continuing narrative of exploitation and oppression where the Filipino people are systematically separated from its means of production, the social fabric that binds the masses are persistently destroyed, abandoned by the state, chained to poverty hence further condemned to live miserable lives and robbed of its collective identity.

Human rights violations innately occur in a society whose members are divided into classes. For example, when a minority (i.e. through the State) overrules the majority (i.e. the masses) the democratic rights of the majority tend to be violated with the State becoming the defender of the minority. The State being a coercive instrument of the ruling class has a wide arsenal to institutionalize domination. From the laws (legitimizing anti-people and unsustainable development paradigms) and the penal systems to the military and police organizations which are all capable of suppressing dissent and resistance in the name of law and order.

Conversely, our collective past is also a historical narrative of people's resistance. People's history has taught us that oppression and exploitation always breed resistance. The continuing relevance of Social Work practice with its cherished core principles of social justice and human rights and its potential transformative character, can significantly help in creating a new people's history sans any forms of exploitation and oppression.

With the recognition that Social Work is not a neutral profession and that the Human Rights terrain is a contested arena, this paper proposes some basic considerations into gradually weaving human rights in Social Work practice with the end view of decisively addressing the roots of the problem of the Filipino people. It will also attempt to describe the parameters of transformative Social Work in the struggle for the people's wellbeing as part of the people's movement.

Philippine Political Economy: Planning Misery and Institutionalizing Violence

Misery and violence in our society have been part of our national landscape since its colonization up to its neo-colonial transformation. They are so pervasive that they have numbed our senses and, in the process, have dehumanized us. Yet, making the individual less human is not natural but an aberration, to say the least.

Galtung's Typologies of violence

Johan Galtung, considered as the Father of Peace Studies, defined violence as an "avoidable impairment of the fundamental human needs or the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible" (Galtung, 1993). The operative word here is "avoidable" and Galtung offers this example: "if a personal died from tuberculosis in the eighteenth century it would be hard to conceive of this as violence since it might have been quite unavoidable, but if he dies from it today, despite all the medical resources in the world, then violence is present" (Ho, 2007).

Galtung also developed a three-pronged typology of violence that represents how a confluence of *malleable* factors merge in particular cultural/historical moments to shape the conditions for the promotion of violence. To understand the crucial distinction between these types of violence (HDS, 2018), we look into their differences and how these operate concretely:

- **Direct or personal violence** represents behaviors that serve to threaten life itself and/or to diminish one's capacity to meet basic human needs. Examples include killing, maiming, bullying, sexual assault, and emotional manipulation.

The Duterte administration's on-going War Against Drug is a case of a direct or personal violence where the actor(s) and object(s) of violence are readily identifiable. In this brutal war, the *actors* are the police force (both those in uniform and the so-called police vigilantes) and the *objects* are the poor becoming victims via planted evidences, being tortured and/or even killed. In the Marawi Siege, thousands died and more than 300,000 Maranaos within and around Marawi City were forced to evacuate (Garcia, 2017). In this case, the actors were the pilots of the Philippine Air Force (PAF) and the ground troops of the Philippine Army (PA) while the objects were the residents living in the commercial district of Marawi City.

- **Cultural Violence** represents the existence of prevailing or prominent social norms that make direct and structural violence seem "natural", "right" or "at least acceptable". Two cases in point would be the belief that Filipinos are ignorant and intellectually inferior to Americans which gave legitimacy for American colonialism in the country, and the assertion that the reason why poor people remain poor is because they are lazy. Understanding cultural violence helps explain how prominent beliefs can become so embedded in a given culture that they function as absolute and inevitable, and are reproduced uncritically across generations.

Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, and even feel, right or at least not wrong (Galtung, 1990). The psychological mechanism would be *internalization* (Galtung, 1990). The study of cultural violence highlights the way in which the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and rendered acceptable in society

(Galtung, 1990). One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/ right or at least to yellow/acceptable (Galtung, 1990). The Philippine government's propaganda of killing drug pushers and addicts to justify the preservation of the youth and the survival of the country is an example of internalization.

Another way is making reality *opaque* so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent (Galtung, 1990). Ambisyon Natin 2040, the neoliberal Medium Term Development Plan of the current administration, claims that the Plan is anchored on the Filipino's belief and value system of *malasakit, pagbabago at patuloy na pag-unlad* (concern, change, and continuous development). But its anti-poor content is clearly proven in the implementation of the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Act and the high inflation rate of 6.4% (as of August, 2018). These two instances have already wreaked havoc on the lives of the Filipino people (Rivas, 2018).

- **Structural violence**, as opposed to personal or direct violence, is *indirect* in that there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure (Ho, 2007). The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances (Ho, 2007). These can be formal as in legal structures that enforce marginalization such as laws and programs that essentially renders a neo-colonial status of the country and that legitimatizes neoliberalism in the country since the 1970s.

The country's neo-colonial and semi-feudal character (which is investment led, export oriented, import dependent, and debt driven economy) were further reduced into a virtual death trap when it embraced neoliberalism. It was during the administration of President Fidel V. Ramos that neoliberalism was cemented through his Medium-term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) or more popularly known as "Philippines 2000" (Holden, 2012). But it was under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's term, a Georgetown

University-trained neoliberal economist, who was instrumental in implementing the neoliberal agenda in the Philippines (Holden, 2012).

Neoliberalism intimately linked and sustained the political- economic power of the country's oligarchs, the so-called modern *principalia* (Ortega, 2016). In recent decades, what has emerged is a potent market-oriented environment where the ruling elites are able to articulate a neoliberal form of nationalism and effectively reconsolidate their political-economic and cultural power through market logics (Ortega, 2016).

Over the years, government programs have been primarily compelled to enact fiscal policies on "structural adjustments," trade liberalization, increased foreign investment, and currency devaluation, with the goal of entangling the country into the volatile vortex of global finance, loans and credits (Bello, 2004).

The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were packaged with 'economic reforms' aimed at establishing market economies and hastening economic growth among indebted countries, regardless of costs and consequences (Cornwall & Eade, 2010). SAPs sought to "remove the government from the economy", thus, creating spaces for the expansion of private, transnational capital through corporate activities.

As States shed their functions of upholding social and economic justice and equity; the provision of physical, social, and financial infrastructures and services started to be farmed out to a variety of civil society and market actors (Cornwall & Eade, 2010). The SAPs further laid the foundation of neoliberal economies ruled by neoliberal states in countries like the Philippines. (Cornwall & Eade, 2010)

In the early years after the EDSA revolution of 1986, national invocations of "democracy" and "freedom" served as blockades against fears of cronyism, dictatorship, and centralization (Ortega, 2016). But it was also an ideal period to entrench neoliberal ideology, with its promise of "freedom" in market transactions and for propelling the recently emerged

"democracy" into its status as Newly Industrialized Country (NIC), similar to its neighboring East Asian economies (Ortega, 2016). This conflation of democracy, freedom, and global competitiveness served as the basis for an emerging national-neoliberal ideologue (Ortega, 2016).

The above narrative presents a reality where political power is held in the hands of a few, the central inequality that gives rise to structural violence. Here, the notion of structural violence applies directly because the power to decide over the distribution of resources is highly uneven (Ho, 2007).

In this sense, structural violence has exploitation as the centerpiece (Ho, 2007). It originates in the unequal distribution of power among actors and can further trace its origins to the human agency (Ho, 2007). This unequal distribution of power then systematically disadvantages those who do not hold as much, if any, power at all (Ho, 2007).

Poverty as a Structural Violence

Poverty creates conditions where the actual ability to meet one's fundamental human needs are obstructed. There are clear indicators where poverty effectively constitutes the violence that creates the disparity between actual and possible abilities to meet fundamental human needs (Ho, 2007).

In the human rights context, the disparity between the actual ability and the potential (or possible) ability to meet needs consists of a gap between the actual or *de facto* rights and the potential or *de jure* rights (Ho, 2007). *De jure* rights are those fundamental human rights that are enshrined in human rights laws. When these rights fail to be recognized or realized, in other words, when the *de facto* rights fall short of the *de jure* rights, violence is present (Ho, 2007). Crucial in making the transition from violence to human rights violations is the recognition that structural causes are responsible for such violations (Ho, 2007).

Structural violence, when applied to human rights, illuminates structural causes of human rights violations (Ho, 2007). It is the effect of structures that results in the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* rights (Ho, 2007).

Poverty consists of a systematic or structural denial of basic freedoms, to the extent that individuals are unable or lack the 'capability' to meet their basic needs (Ho, 2007). The denial of one's freedom implicates the denial of other freedoms, rendering the poor disproportionately vulnerable to a whole array of violations (Ho, 2007). Poverty not only means lack of money; it means a concomitant impairment of access to adequate healthcare, water, shelter, etc.

In terms of *de facto* and *de jure* rights**,** the poor clearly experiences a different *de facto* realization of human rights…those living in poverty, on balance, have less access to the kind of economic resources that are necessary for adequate healthcare, education and welfare services, which may in turn effect the degree to which they enjoy their civil and political rights (Ho, 2007).

Poverty, therefore, constitutes a structural violation of human rights. There are systemic reasons that explain why the poor bear a disproportionate burden of rights violations (Ho, 2007). Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect (Ho, 2007). Rather, they are symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm (Ho, 2007).

The Continuing Dilemma of Many Social Workers

In a highly stratified society like the Philippines, a buffer zone is created by the ruling class (Kivel, 2006). The ruling class has always wanted to prevent people at the bottom of the pyramid from organizing for power in order to maintain the power, control, and most importantly, wealth that they have accumulated (Kivel, 2006). To maintain the separation and

to prevent themselves from becoming the objects of people's anger, they have used legal, educational and professional systems to create a network of occupations, careers, and professionals to deal directly with the rest of the population (Kivel, 2006). These buffer zones comprise all occupations that carry out the agenda of the ruling class without requiring them to be present or visible (Kivel, 2006).

The buffer zone has three functions (Kivel, 2006). The first is "taking care" of people at the bottom of the pyramid. Conventional Social Work operates within existing social institutions to assist individuals to adjust and adapt to the status quo (Preston, et. al., 2014). The second function is keeping hope alive by distributing opportunities for a few people to become better off financially. Where economic inequality is high and growing, upward mobility between social classes has to be seen attainable – the message is "work hard and you'll be rewarded." If these messages permeate to the masses who do not enjoy much of the spoils, then they are more likely to tolerate the riches that the few enjoys within that society. The third and final function is to maintain the system by controlling those who want to make changes.

Mainstream Social Work, especially in state welfare organizations, has only one solution to the suffering and problems of the described individuals and groups, namely, control and repression according to a top-down mono-mandate of help as control (Bernasconi, 2016). It perceives the individuals from a deficit stance, requiring service to help them adapt to the norms and practices of society. Furthermore, it tends to view social problem in a depoliticized way that emphasizes individual shortcomings, pathology and inadequacy (Campbell & Baikie, 2012). Interventions are aimed largely at the individual with little or no analysis or intent to challenge power, structures, social relations, culture, and economic forces (Campbell & Baikie, 2012).

Other strands of Social Work maintain that existing social institutions cannot adequately meet human needs and, instead, work towards fundamental structural transformation (George & Marlowe, 2005). Some advance the analysis that social structure is the core of social inequalities (George & Marlowe, 2005). Thus, social reform is considered not a part of social transformation unless it represents one step in a long-range strategy for more fundamental change (George & Marlowe, 2005).

These two different views have resulted to a phenomenon known as "dual loyalty conundrum" among social workers (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). On one hand, social workers have loyalty to service users, social movements and a code of ethics, which demands critical practice and on the other hand, social workers have or are expected to have loyalty to their employment agency (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). The danger is that too often social workers in practice almost unconsciously adopt benign mode of operating, which, on the surface, seem to provide examples of doing good works, but too often, such practice norms can reinforce oppression (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013).

Weaving Human Rights In Social Work Practice

There is an observation that Social Work has paid attention to human needs more than to human rights (Healy, 2016). The profession's focus on human needs shapes its conviction that the fundamental nature of these needs requires that they be met not as a matter of choice but as an imperative of basic justice (UNCHR, 1994). Hence, Social Work moves to a consideration of human rights as the other organizational principle for its professional practice (UNCHR, 1994).

The transition from *needs orientation* to *rights affirmation* has been made necessary because of tangible substantive needs that have to be met (UNCHR, 1994). A substantive

need can be translated into an equivalent positive right, and entitlement to the benefits of that right is sought from the State and beyond (UNCHR, 1994).

The Dialectical Relationship between Structures and Individuals

Understanding why human rights are not defined, realized or protected for many people requires an analysis of structural oppression or disadvantage ((Efi, 2008). This must be the basis of all human rights-based Social Work. Individual accounts of disadvantage, though an important part of a social worker's understanding of particular people and their problems, are insufficient to explain why women and children remain victims of violence, why indigenous people continues to suffer massive disadvantage, and why neoliberalism is affecting everybody, and so on (Efi, 2008).

A Strong Sense of History

Having a strong sense of history contributes to the integration of human rights in Social Work practice. The study of history can be seen as the study of the struggle for human rights, which gives extra immediacy to the human rights issues of the present (Efi, 2008). A historical perspective will also show that what may seem impossible today can become feasible tomorrow. It is increasingly clear that the existing global, social, political and ecological order is so blatantly unsustainable that the one thing of which we can be certain is that the future will not be a simple extension of the present (Efi, 2008).

The history of the human rights movement, including the struggle for the right to vote, the right to form a union, women's rights, the right to political self-determination, the right to education, the right to economic development and the right to clean environment, is part of humankind's history. In these contexts, history becomes very important for social workers who identify themselves as human rights workers, for it can become a central component of Social Work education (Efi, 2008).

Also, understanding history will help the social workers understand "rights" under a neoliberal framework. Human rights in the age of neoliberalism has been called a *powerless companion* – an apology for neoliberal capitalism. (Moyn, 2014) Neoliberalism and human rights share key ideological building blocks the most obvious of which is both commit to the prime significance of the individual, whose freedom matters more than collective endeavors (Moyn, 2014). Moreover, the relationship is essentially one of mutual reinforcement or even having a common identity, especially when rights of property and free enterprise are made keys to the enjoyment of other human goods since these allows the funding for other goods to materialize (Moyn, 2014).

Living in a neoliberal context means accepting or submitting to that bundle of rights necessary for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005). We live in a society in which the inalienable rights of individuals (and corporations are defined as individuals before the law) to private property and the profit rate outdo any other notion of inalienable rights you can think of (Harvey, 2005). Defenders of neoliberalism argue that these "bundle of rights" encourages "bourgeois virtues" – including individual responsibility and liability; independence from state interference, equality of opportunity in the market and before the law; rewards for initiatives and entrepreneurial endeavor; care for oneself and ones' own; and an open marketplace that allows for wide-ranging freedoms of choice of both contract and exchange (Harvey, 2005).

If people are not aware of the historical and contextual nature of human rights and that human rights only become realizable by the struggles of people experiencing real instances of domination, then human rights can all too easily be used as symbolic legitimizers for instruments of that very domination (Stammer, 1999).

Uncompromising in Upholding What is Right

Poverty is fundamentally wrong. When Social Work practice confronts and work to eliminate poverty, this becomes essentially a moral activity, as it is based on values and concepts of what is right and wrong (Ife, 2008). One characteristic of the human rights discourse is that the value of human rights is strongly and passionately felt. Framing values in terms of human rights provides a more powerful base for action than mere abstract "armchair" of moral reasoning (Ife, 2008). With such lens, the social worker is able to think through issues of morality; more importantly be able to collaborate with those whom he/she has contact (Ife, 2008). It is in the social worker's capacity to engage other actors in moral decision-making that the social worker's effectiveness as a human rights worker can be judged (Ife, 2008).

The Passion of an Incorrigible Optimist

Human rights-based Social work is not simply a case of careful and sterile "thinking through" of moral issues (Ife, 2008). It is driven not only by careful analysis but by the passion to make the world a better place, addressing injustice and oppression, and a commitment for change (Ife, 2008). Times past has been witnessed to how human rights have been valued even to the point where people die for it; they cannot be classified simply as mere academic or philosophical problem (Ife, 2008).

Social workers need not feel guilty about being passionate for the cause of human rights, or being outraged by the continued violation of human rights in the course of their practice (Ife, 2008). The task of the social worker is not to deny these feelings but, to channel them into effective action that will make a difference (Ife, 2008). Often, it is by maintaining their rage and their vision of a better world, that social workers are able to keep working despite oppressive and dehumanizing structures (Ife, 2008).

Human rights are products of social interaction and struggle, they are not self-evident, pre-existing and immutable. They are, like legal rights and other culturally enforceable norms, developed and created in and by society out of past experiences and the desire to improve on quality of life and harmony in society (Gutto, 1993).

The Dialectical Relationship between Personal and Political

Most Social Work agencies mandated to provide personal services tend not to engage in macro-level intervention and similarly, agencies that focus on social change tend not to include the provision of personal service as part of their mandate (George & Marlowe, 2005). This dichotomy has served to reinforce the separation of the personal and the political in both the broader society and in Social Work practice (George & Marlowe, 2005).

However, the link between the personal and the political is central to Social Work: understanding the personal in terms of the political, understanding the political in terms of the personal, and acting to bring about change at both levels (Ife, 2008).

Within a human rights framework, human rights also need to be understood as both personal and political (Ife, 2008). They are personal because they affect personal wellbeing, security, survival, and self-actualization (Ife, 2008). They are political because human rights are about power and its distribution, about how power is constructed and enacted, about who has and should have the rights to exercise power, and in what circumstances. They must be understood in both contexts, and one can be an effective human rights worker if one can work with both the personal and political (Ife, 2008).

Because this link is central to Social Work, social workers are well equipped to be human rights workers (Ife, 2008). In practice, this means that social workers must always articulate the political aspects of the personal and vice versa (Ife, 2008). The person who is poor, for example, must be understood both at the personal level for the implications of self-

esteem and of income insecurity, and also at the political levels for the reasons of unemployment, the structure of the labor market, the impact of neoliberalism, labor commodification, and so on (Ife, 2008).

Linking the personal and the political is itself a radical act .It is a slap to the face of the dominant social and political order which seeks to divide the two, to see people's personal lives and concern as "no concern of the state." and to see politics as something that is engaged in only by a minority of people who are politically active, and which need not be the concern of the majority (Ife, 2008).

Adopting a Partisan Lens

Adopting a human rights perspective is to take a position that has certain ideological consequences (Ife, 2008). Human rights-based Social Work is inevitably political-social work. It is committing a social worker to an ideological position that incorporates at least some degree of collectivism and a strong sense for the public sector (Ife, 2008).

Many formulations of Social Work are still constructed within an apolitical context, with the assumption that social workers may occupy a full range of ideological positions, or indeed may have no articulated political position at all (Ife, 2008). If at all there is a political position, it is usually identified with mainstream Social Work practice that exalts individualism and a pure reliance on the free market that is completely incompatible with the human rights-based practice (Ife, 2008).

A human rights perspective categorically rejects this. If it is about power relations, then it is certainly political (Ife, 2008). Human rights workers are political workers, and human rights, in the broad sense, require a political commitment (Ife, 2008). Politics and ideological critique, therefore, needs to be part and parcel of Social Work practice (Ife, 2008).

In the era of neoliberalism, Social Work has become increasingly depoliticized and individualized (George & Marlowe, 2005). The professionalization of Social Work has been charged with leading mainstream Social Work away from the integration of social justice toward individualized treatment (George & Marlowe, 2005). Furthermore, the deafening silence of the leaders of the profession's long established and accredited national organization on issues affecting the Filipino people has also become worrisome.

The conventional Social Work's "acquiescence" to the status quo should be stopped (Preston, et. al., 2014). By being ahistorical and apolitical, we risk contributing to, rather than resisting, a neoliberal agenda. Our practice and education should be framed by understanding of power, social structures, collectivism, and resistance (Preston, et. al., 2014). Social work must be understood as more than a repair company for the amelioration of negative social and economic consequences (Stark, 2008).

Transformative Social Work As Part of Building the People's Movement

It is not enough to weave human rights into the Social Work profession. As a frontline profession, unity and rhythm with people-based movements is imperative for political and social transformation. This is necessary for it is only through a movement that people can build their organizational strength, secure tangible victories and gradually realize their legitimate and strategic interests.

While any tangible victories (whether it is economic or political) by the people are actually building blocks in nurturing their political power, a vibrant and fighting political movement will provide the direction for any tactical engagement.

Without clarifying the organic relationship between tactical engagements and strategic objectives to the masses, and by limiting ourselves to specific economic and political issues only, we make them focus on the pursuit of rights which can easily be

snatched away from them because they would not have secured the necessary political power to defend and expand the rights they have won (Gutto, 1993). The strong anti-dictatorship movement during the Marcos regime is seen as a major contribution to the political isolation of the dictatorship and eventual downfall.

Similarly under President Duterte's regime, social workers using a transformative lens have the task of helping the people realize that, without their participation, the struggle for upholding and defending human rights and democracy is unattainable. The tasks at hand are not simple. They are painstaking work that requires organizing, mobilizing and broadening the political awareness of the marginalized sectors.

The logic of transformative Social Work is not the logic of the market and profit. Its progressive discourse and practice have "the potential to flame the resistance against neoliberalism", including, of course, the resistance against Pres. Duterte's administration. Mainstream Social Work education is split on the one hand, casework for social care and community work for social change and, on the other, a centered generalist model of intervention that is rooted in an eclectic knowledge based on systems theory arising from a perspective that is status quo- oriented (George & Marlowe, 2005).

Social Work believes that social relations are enacted by human beings and may generate the ongoing oppression of many groups and individuals (Baines, 2011). That they are enacted by people, means that these oppressive relationships can also be changed by the people themselves (Baines, 2011). Using the term "social relations" underscores that these relations are organized and operated by people and can be arrested or reorganized by them. They are wholly social relations, not inevitable conditions of modern life or one we cannot change (Baines, 2011).

It is noteworthy to look into Baines' discourse (2011, 2012), articulating similar core themes as follows:

- Social Work is a Contested and Highly Politicized Practice

Using this definition, everything is political despite the relatively widespread sentiment that most of everyday life is completely apolitical. For the holders of power, social problems are conventionally understood to be results of individual difficulties and poor decision-making rather than unequal distribution of power, resources and affirming identities. They seek solutions by tinkering with the existing social system, applying managerial techniques to most or all social questions, or encouraging individuals to seek medical or psychological interventions for the problems they experience.

As we try to bridge practice and social activism, it is important to ask who benefits from the way things operate at any given point in time, who can help make the changes we want, how we can help ourselves and others see the many ways in which issues are political, and how multiple strands of power are operating in any given scenario.

At the very core of Social Work's existence are conflicts amongst competing social-political groups, forces, and classes over defining needs and how to interpret and meet them.

- Social Work is Not a Neutral, Caring Profession But an Active Political Process

There is no "politics-free-zone" nor are there ways to avoid power and politics in Social Work, especially when we are trying to meet clients' needs in the context of increasingly pro-market, corporatized society and injustice at the local levels. Every action we undertake is political and ultimately about power, resources, and who has the right and opportunity to feel positive about themselves, their identities, and their futures.

- Social Work's Theoretical and Practical Development Must be based on the Struggles and Needs of those who are Oppressed and Marginalized

Social Work knowledge and practice need to be grounded in the lives of those we serve, assessed in relation to critical approaches in order to ensure that we are building lasting change and not unintentionally reproducing various kinds of oppression.

- Social Justice-oriented Social Work Assists Individuals while Simultaneously Seeking to Transform Society

The problem is not with providing social services; the problem comes when all our time and energy is diverted toward social services to the detriment of long-term social change (Kivel, 2006). Rather than an exclusive emphasis on changing individuals, social justice-oriented Social Work assists individuals in meeting their needs, whenever possible, in a participatory and transformative ways, and simultaneously focuses in challenging and transforming those forces within society that benefit from and perpetuate inequity and oppression.

Placing the masses in the center of the struggle for comprehensive human rights and popular democracy is problematic. The masses are not born with some special genes of human rights and popular democracy. It is the place they occupy in society, as it exists today, that makes the masses the potential force for reorganizing society. This dictates organization, mobilization, and broadening of political awareness among the popular classes. This in itself can only be won through struggle (Gutto, 1993).

Conclusion

The exploitative and oppressive relations inherent in Philippine society create a dominant narrative where our Social Work practice is located. Understanding the relationship between the socially powerful (the ruling class) and the disenfranchised (the poor, deprived, and the oppressed) will always generate a critique that is connected with class structure and economic division.

Structural inequality and oppression are the contexts within which the social workers practice their professions, but if they do not deliberately seek to be part of the solution, their practice will inevitably become part of the problem (Ife, 2008). All social workers must therefore incorporate multi-dimensional analysis of structural disadvantage. This must be at the forefront of Social Work thinking, at whatever level of practice (Ife, 2008).

The question on the causes of social problems, how to address the causes and how to prevent them, are central to the development of a strand of Social Work emerging from a people's movement and aimed at fundamentally transforming the political, economic, social and cultural factors underlying and generating inequality and injustice (Baines, 2012).

The necessity of a people's movement collides against authoritarianism and the neoliberal logic. The promotion and fulfillment of the human right to health, education, housing, and work cannot be a result of transactions in the market. This calls for the creation and re-strengthening of the real human rights movement. The State will only officially guarantee the rights of the people as enshrined in every constitution but it is only the people that can truly guarantee that their fundamental, democratic, and sovereign rights are respected.

The operating system and the character of the State taught us "that the struggle for human rights emanates, is contested and resolved within the relations of contending classes. The struggle for human rights cannot be fully understood and tenaciously fought for the interests of the oppressed outside of class struggle.... [For human rights] "are products of social interactions and struggle." (Gutto, 1993)

Truly, human rights in Social Work can also be a tool for emancipation and liberation. "People's individual and collective initiatives and struggles for their rights do not consider themselves confined to the existing international instruments and local laws"…. The people

consider they have the inherent right, and potential power, of creating and extending the frontiers of rights on the basis of the life experiences." (Gutto, 1993)

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