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Migrant Rights in an Era of Globalization

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Global economic policies have augmented profits for a few people, while exacerbating inequalities for large segments of the world's population. These growing inequalities reach U.S. cities in the form of unauthorized migration, as uprooted farmers and dislocated workers migrate as a survival strategy. Similar to other periods of history in which immigrants have been subjected to social and economic injustice, the social work profession is called to live up to its mission and values and advocate for new policies that honor our tradition as a country of immigrants and uphold the profession's commitment to family unity, community well-being, and human rights.

KEYWORDS immigration, settlement house movement, social work, globalization

The dynamics of globalization present new challenges to the social work profession in every sphere in ways that are striking and severe. At the conference *Migrants Rights in an Era of Globalization: The Mexico-U.S. Case*, that the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration organized in May 2011, panelists discussed the complexity of global macrolevel systems that affect the decision of Mexicans to migrate and the rights of Mexican migrants in the United States of America. This article discusses the economic, social, and political themes articulated by the panels as well as the implications that this era of globalization presents to the social work profession.

Global economic policies have augmented profits for a few people, while exacerbating inequalities for large segments of the world's population. At its core this new economic order is primarily structured to seek higher

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profits and lower wages. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the manufacturing sector in the United States relocated their production to poor countries to lower the cost of labor. As a result of free trade agreements, borders have become more flexible for capital and commodities, but more rigid for workers. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) enacted in 1994 allowed large amounts of U.S. corn to flow into the Mexican market causing thousands of farmers to go bankrupt. These small farmers could not compete with the U.S. agricultural products sold in the Mexican market at prices lower than their cost of production due to the highly subsidized U.S. agricultural industry.

As a consequence of NAFTA, uprooted farmers and dislocated workers in Mexico began to see migration to the United States as a survival strategy. Inequalities resulting from globalization reach U.S. cities in the form of unauthorized migration. Without a solid understanding of globalization as the root of migration, social workers might be influenced by the current debate that dehumanizes and criminalizes immigrants for crossing the border without authorization due to lack of legal channels to enter the country to work to help their families survive. The high levels of xenophobia in the current political environment have poisoned the national debate on immigration and have prevented our society from developing sound and long-lasting solutions to the problem of unauthorized immigration. Similarly to other periods of history in which immigrants have been subjected to social and economic injustice, the social work profession is called to live up to its mission and values and engage in advocacy for new policies that honor our tradition as a country of immigrants and uphold the profession's commitment to family unity, community well-being, and human rights.

In the late 1880s, the settlement house movement, begun by Jane Addams in immigrant neighborhoods in Chicago and part of the national Progressive Era reform, provided needed services for immigrants but also advocated for change in the deplorable housing and sanitary conditions in immigrant neighborhoods. This generation of social workers was more inclined to approach immigrants not as objects but as subjects of social change. "Although Addams and her cohorts often initiated reforms, the immigrants played an active role too, assisting in information gathering and its communication to their neighbors" (Blum, 2011, para. 2). The organizing efforts of settlement house workers resulted in policy victories that improved immigrant living conditions by establishing city services, parks for children, branch libraries, and better waste collection and disposal (Blum, 2011). "As settlement residents learned more about their communities, they proposed changes in local government and lobbied for state and federal legislation on social and economic problems" (Wade, 2004, para. 4). This rich history of activism for social justice for immigrants is a legacy that the profession can build on to address the contemporary problems. Globalization challenges the profession to redefine and reclaim itself as social work beyond

borders. Some of the theories that support social work practice and the ethical principles that guide the social work profession and equip practitioners to work in this reformulated broader context are discussed below. The ecological systems theory offers a conceptual framework that helps understand the problems that stem from the interaction of the person with his or her environment. Considering the hostile environments that immigrants face in the United States from the negative terms of the national immigration debate and the poor portrayal of immigrants in the media, systems theory is an effective tool to understand the impact of the interaction between this population and the police, schools, churches, and other systems. Ecological systems and other theories that social workers use when working with immigrants, “must allow for problems of dysfunctioning to be lodged in the transactions, lack of fit, opportunities and limitations among the individual and the various levels of environment that make up his /her social system, rather than in individual pathology” (Compton & Gallaway, 1989, p. 124). Systems theory can help social workers understand that depression, anxiety, and substance abuse might be directly related to the high levels of stress that immigrants experience when interacting with the social systems that discriminate against them or that threaten to separate their families because of immigration status. When working with immigrant communities, social workers need to consider that to help their clients they have to become advocates for reforming the immigration system that makes immigrants emotionally vulnerable or subjects them to exploitation and abuses in our society.

The ethical principles of the social work profession, reflected in the mission of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), provide a strong foundation to work beyond borders and to be an effective advocate for immigrant rights. The *Code of Ethics* states that, “the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of the people who are vulnerable, oppressed and live in poverty” (NASW, 2008, para. 1). This mission is not only inspirational but is also a mandate for social workers to oppose recent state laws that criminalize immigrants and the people who might help them. After Arizona passed the anti-immigrant bill SB 1070 in April 2010, at least 24 states introduced similar bills within a year, with these coercive laws having now passed in Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama (Wessler, 2011). Albeit punitive and mean spirited, part of the reason these states are introducing legislation to manage immigration is because the U.S. Congress has failed to pass laws to reform the immigration system. Some of the provisions in these bills represent a threat to social work practitioners. For example, they make it a crime to transport or assist individuals who are in the country without authorization. But can it be expected that social workers will ask clients for their immigration status to decide whether to assist them? These provisions are against the

mission of the profession and hurt the relationship between the practitioner and the client. However those who refuse to ask about immigration status take the risk of being charged for violating the state's law.

To prevent taking a paternalistic approach toward immigrant clients, it is also important that social workers become familiar with the systems and community assets that support immigrants' well-being. Panelists at the University of Chicago April symposium included academics and immigrant leaders who emphasized that Mexican immigrants are highly organized. There are approximately 3,000 Mexican mutual aid associations in 25 states (Somerville, Durana, & Terrazas, 2008). Originally, these groups emerged with the support of the Mexican government through its consulates in the United States. The main purpose of these organizations is to raise funds for development projects in their towns of origin as well as provide opportunities for migrants to come together, network, and to help migrants integrate into their new environment (Somerville et al., 2008).

Home town associations (HTA) are civically engaged in their places of origin, but traditionally their involvement was limited in the United States. Their focus, however, started shifting in 2006 when they became key leaders in the massive immigrant rights marches. In 2006, millions of people marched in cities across the country to stop a bill that had passed in the House of Representatives from becoming a law. This bill was known as the Sensenbrenner Bill named after its sponsor in the House. If this bill had passed, it would have made the mere presence of unauthorized immigrants a criminal offense. Although this bill was defeated at the federal level, some of the Sensenbrenner legislative poison pills are part of the provisions in the anti-immigrant bills in many states.

The marches stopped the Sensenbrenner Bill but did not achieve one of the major goals: to give undocumented immigrants the opportunity to obtain legal residence with a path to citizenship. Organizing the marches became a platform for the leaders of Mexican HTAs to become more involved in U.S. politics and policy debates. They became more visible in local politics, and other organizations and politicians recognized their capacity to mobilize their communities. In addition to the 2006 mobilizations, HTAs participated in citizenship and voter registration campaigns to build political power for the 2008 elections. However, their civic engagement decreased significantly by the end of 2008 due to limited resources, internal disagreements, and competing priorities. Volunteers who usually work full-time jobs direct the HTAs, and they support the operations and activities of the organizations through fund-raising events and personal donations. For the majority of its members, the main focus of the HTAs continues to be improving their home country communities and organizing social events—hosting dinners, dances, and other events where people can socialize. Continuing the high level of activism on behalf of immigration reform became daunting for many HTAs and with the economic downturn of 2008, more HTAs went back to working

on development projects for their hometowns and on mutual aid for themselves in the United States. Nonetheless, some of the HTA's leaders continue to play a strong organizing role to promote the rights of immigrants and demand reforms in the immigration system. A panelist from the April symposium pointed out that the low civic participation of Mexican immigrants in the United States stemmed from a lack of prior political engagement back home where they had few political rights and because they had even fewer when they arrived in the United States. Nonetheless, it is strategic to invest and partner with the large network of HTAs to accelerate the process of engaging immigrants in civic life. The entry point to civic engagement might be to affect microsystems such as organizing to better neighborhood schools, improve housing conditions, and make their communities safer. Social workers need to be familiar with these networks to refer and connect their immigrant clients, support their civic engagement process, and partner in immigrant rights advocacy efforts.

The integration of immigrants into the social and political fabric of their new communities is a process that needs society's support. The current widespread anti-immigrant sentiment across the United States promotes isolation rather than integration. Federal programs that demand that local police carry out immigration enforcement functions erode the relationship between immigrant residents and the police, thus compromising community safety. Immigrants are afraid to contact the police to report crimes for fear of deportation. Anti-immigrant bills and ordinances continue to propagate in state legislatures and city councils that intend to criminalize immigrants and to take away the citizenship rights of U.S. children born to undocumented immigrants.

Understanding globalization and the push factors that force Mexicans to leave their towns and families behind helps us realize that migration does not start at the U.S.–Mexican border. Its roots emanate from global economic policies that increase poverty and inequalities for a large sector of the Mexican population, who are then forced to migrate north. As in other times in history, social workers are called to organize and advocate for justice for immigrants. This includes advocating to reform the obsolete immigration system, organize against the state laws that criminalize immigrants, support the leadership and civic engagement of immigrants, and promote dialogue between old residents and newcomers. Social workers have the theoretical framework and ethical principles to face new challenges and engage in changing the course of history in the United States. The profession stands on the shoulders of giants such as the cohort that bravely forged the settlement house movement. Finding a solution to the problems that globalization creates for migrants is an opportunity for the social work profession to write another great chapter in the history of the struggles for social justice in the United States.

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