

Anti-Racist Social Work: Transformative Change to Promote Climate Justice and Racial Equity

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Abstract:

The Chinese philosopher, Confucius once said, “the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.” In the context of the ongoing global climate crisis, and the recent global health pandemic due to COVID-19, we often speak of “risk factors” that put people at greater risk for harm and even death, but these should more specifically be called “factors of oppression.”¹ When we name these factors of oppression, we recognize and validate their existence, and do not let the realities be relegated to mere buzzwords or euphemisms. Oppression is a constant reality of unrelenting, daily life struggle for equity and inclusion for many people, such as those who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, Trans, Immigrant, Gay, Jewish, and Muslim folx. Oppression isn’t transient, it has been intentionally ingrained into every sphere and system of our lives by an array of “ism’s” based on white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and reinforced by neo-liberalism and capitalism.² Our work as social workers must disrupt these systems in order to truly transform the world. We are called to work that is anti-racist³; such work is the only way to create sustainable, structural changes that promote climate justice and racial equity.

Keywords: social work | anti-racist work | North Carolina | environmental justice

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Anti-Racist Social Work: Transformative Change to Promote Climate Justice and Racial Equity

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The Chinese philosopher, Confucius once said, “the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.” In the context of the ongoing global climate crisis, and the recent global health pandemic due to COVID-19, we often speak of “risk factors” that put people at greater risk for harm and even death, but these should more specifically be called “factors of oppression.”¹ When we name these factors of oppression, we recognize and validate their existence, and do not let the realities be relegated to mere buzzwords or euphemisms. Oppression is a constant reality of unrelenting, daily life struggle for equity and inclusion for many people, such as those who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, Trans, Immigrant, Gay, Jewish, and Muslim folx. Oppression isn’t transient, it has been intentionally ingrained into every sphere and system of our lives by an array of “ism’s” based on white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and reinforced by neo-liberalism and capitalism.² Our work as social workers must disrupt these systems in order to truly transform the world. We are called to work that is anti-racist³; such work is the only way to create sustainable, structural changes that promote climate justice and racial equity.

In the context of the climate crisis, many of these factors of oppression are specific to environmental racism. Environmental injustice is understood to be the unfair burden from the environmental crisis and environmental degradation, as well as the unequal access to the benefits of the environment. These injustices are often based on racial inequity and other factors of oppression.⁴ For example, injustices in the residential separation between white people and people of color (POC) is environmental racism as many neighborhood environments for POC create health disparities, leading to greater disease and health problems for POC.⁵ Environmental racism increases the risk of developing asthma, and studies have shown that Non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanic Blacks are historically more likely than their white counterparts to need to seek treatment for asthma.⁶ Additionally, several research studies have demonstrated the connection between air pollution and premature death. A 2016 study concluded that individuals who received Medicaid benefits, in areas that were predominantly Black were at higher risk for premature death due to air pollution particles called PM2.5, that causes smog.⁷

Around the world and here in NC, social workers are doing anti-racist work as they create community and structural changes and redress the harm of ongoing, daily oppression from environmental racism. For example, UNC Charlotte social work professor, Dr. Sonya Richardson, has recently been appointed by the Governor to serve on the Andrea Harris Social, Economic, Environmental and Health Equity Task Force. This task force was established due to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color, and will specifically be working to “identify best practices to create economic stability, eliminate health disparities, and achieve environmental justice in North Carolina.”⁸ Additionally, one of the authors of this article, Harmony Chavis, BSW, serves as a fellow for the Southeast Climate & Energy Network (SCEN). The work of the SCEN is to serve as a hub for climate organizations to come together, leverage their collective skill sets, and act as a structural support system for capacity building efforts. For a global example: in India, social workers are working on a climate justice project for solar lamps for

IFSW Climate Justice Program



students enduring factors of oppression.⁹ These lamps are made locally by a women’s entrepreneurial business, and the project provides multiple benefits. It not only provides solar light for students to be able to study in the evenings when it is dark, thus enhancing educational outcomes, but also promotes health and well-being through the use of solar powered light versus dangerous, toxic, and expensive kerosene lamps. For more examples of social workers, from around the world, transforming the world by addressing climate justice and racial equity, or on ways you can become involved, see the IFSW Climate Justice Program.¹⁰ ●

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