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Article

Bayanihan during the COVID-19 pandemic: Grounding in community organizing and social movement praxis toward transformative social work

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Abstract
This article analyzes ways to transition toward transformative social work by drawing from the historical, social, political, and economic contexts of Filipino migrant workers and their organizing praxis during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper provides an overview of how the inequitable impacts on migrant and racialized populations by systems shaped around neoliberalism and racial capitalism only intensified the vulnerable conditions that Filipino migrants faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. Mutual aid networks burgeoned as a response to systemic failures and the need for communities themselves to provide basic needs, combat isolation, and advocate for systemic change. These networks build from existing forms of solidarity and support that communities often excluded from dominant discourses already have in place. These communities continually revitalize forms of collective action through cultural and local knowledge systems and histories of resistance, such as the Filipino notion of *Bayanihan*. The authors critically reflect on their participation in two mutual aid and community organizing initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic drawing from Filipino epistemologies of *Bayanihan* and research on mutual aid, critical social work, community organizing, and social movements. Through these reflections, the authors unveil some of the practices and epistemological orientations that may help guide the profession toward its transformation by learning from community organizing and social movement praxis.

Keywords
Bayanihan, COVID-19 pandemic, community organizing, migration, transformative social work

Résumé
Cet article analyse les moyens de soutenir le caractère transnational et à long terme du mouvement social du travail social en s’inspirant des contextes historiques, sociaux, politiques et économiques des travailleurs et travailleuses migrants philippins et de leurs pratiques d’organisation pendant et après la pandémie de COVID-19. Cet article donne un aperçu de la façon dont les impacts inéquitables sur les populations migrantes et racisées des

systèmes façonnés par le néolibéralisme et le capitalisme racial n'ont fait qu'intensifier les conditions de vulnérabilité auxquelles les migrants et migrantes philippins ont été confrontés pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 au Canada. Les réseaux d'entraide se sont développés en réponse aux échecs du système et à la nécessité pour les communautés elles-mêmes de répondre aux besoins de base, de lutter contre l'isolement et de plaider en faveur d'un changement systémique. Ces réseaux s'appuient sur les formes existantes de solidarité et de soutien que les communautés souvent exclues des discours dominants ont déjà mises en place. Ces communautés revitalisent continuellement les formes d'action collective par le biais de systèmes de connaissances culturelles et locales et d'histoires de résistance, telles que la notion philippine de *Bayanihan*. Cet article ne cherche pas à fournir une solution totalisante pour transformer le travail social, mais à dévoiler certaines pratiques et orientations épistémologiques qui peuvent aider à guider la profession vers sa transformation en apprenant de la praxis des mouvements sociaux.

Mots clés
Bayanihan, pandémie de COVID-19, organisation communautaire, migration, travail social transformateur

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic laid open the long-standing cracks and faults of the current immigration, health, and social welfare systems, further marginalizing temporary foreign workers and those without full migration status. This was particularly true for individuals working in jobs which can have commonly unsafe and unprotected work conditions, such as meat-processing plants, warehouses, cleaning and domestic work, truck driving, and long-term care homes. Even as they were lauded as heroes and essential workers holding indispensable jobs during the pandemic, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes grew (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). Essential migrant workers were exposed to disproportionate coronavirus outbreaks, experienced exacerbated fear and abuse due to precarious immigration status and had limited access to rights and services (Alcaraz et al., 2022; Istiko et al., 2022; Sheilds & Abu Alrob, 2020; Suva et al., 2022).

In particular, the Filipino community experienced multiple layers of precarity and exposures to COVID-19 during the pandemic as many of its community members are essential workers and hold precarious immigration status which disqualifies them from or limits access to services (Alcaraz et al., 2021; Colting-Stol, 2022). One of the main resources to fill this exclusion and undervaluing in governmental support and social service systems is to rely on grassroots community organizations (Cleveland et al., 2020). These groups acknowledged and heeded the dire need of fellow community members by providing tangible

and intangible assistance through pooling resources from the community (Alcaraz et al., 2022; Colting-Stol, 2022).

The authors, both social workers, were involved in community-based efforts, commonly considered as mutual aid networks, in two Canadian cities: Montréal, Quebec, and Calgary, Alberta. These networks gathered local initiatives to fill-in the gaps left by discriminatory social services and embedded in broader systems of oppression. Mutual aid efforts included provision of hygiene kits, food hampers, masks, resource navigation, referrals to other services, and emotional support, among other forms of support and community-building (Alcaraz et al., 2022; Colting-Stol, 2022). Through the collaboration and participation of local community members, issues and resources were identified and acted upon to the extent that can be addressed on a community-level, albeit in some ways limited.

This paper re-visits the organization and theorizing of mutual aid in relation to social work. While mutual aid is a concept that aims to build mobilization and solidarity, the authors consider how these forms of organizing and community care already exist in many cultural epistemologies, such as the Filipino cultural notion of *bayanihan*. *Bayanihan*, a Filipino Tagalog term from the root word "bayani" (English translation: hero), means a voluntary collective endeavour that has service and compassion towards others at its core (Solis, 2023). Filipinos have already practiced transformative social work before the influence and dominance of Western frameworks and colonial modernity (Ealdama, 2012). Subjugated under these dominant colonial frameworks, forms of organizing and solidarity based in the notion of *bayanihan*, among other actions of mutual support, resistance and liberation, persist in the Philippines in social and community work and carry across to diaspora contexts. Through community organizing experiences, frameworks and research, the authors analyze how the framing and actions of these case examples of mutual aid networks can advance transformative social work praxis. The article situates this community organizing in the historical and socio-political context of Filipinos migrating abroad.

The authors draw from theories of neoliberalism in social welfare (Finley & Esposito, 2012; Hyslop, 2012, 2018; Morley, 2016; Spolander et al., 2014) and critical race, refugee, and migration studies (Ellis, 2015; Thobani, 2007) to provide the backdrop for the conditions requiring the formations of grassroots and community organizing and longer-term movement-building. This paper contends that neoliberal racial capitalism continued to perpetuate and deepen the precarity of Filipino migrant workers during, and even after, the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. In Canada and the United States, racial capitalism is the nefarious convergence between racism that devalues Indigenous, Black, and racialized bodies and the capitalist demand for cheap and expendable labour to fill essential labour needs (Nasol & Francisco-Menchavez, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). This paper explores how mutual aid theorizing and practice can be utilized to support the need for migrant grassroots organizing and mobilization to counter the exploitation of Filipino labour in Canada and challenge histories of colonial nation-building and global capitalist expansion with which social work is complicit.

While seeking to uphold ethics of human dignity and justice (IFSW, 2014), social workers in Canada and elsewhere grapple with the reality of a profession shaped by logics and practices of paternalism, charity, and neoliberal austerity measures (Finley & Esposito, 2012; Izlar, 2019; Lorenzetti, 2013; Spolander et al., 2014), as well as white supremacy,

colonialism and settler colonialism (Elkassem & Murry-Lichtman, 2022; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Lee & Ferrer, 2014). These dominant models promote individual adjustments, minor accommodations and even punishment toward those who are "clients" accessing systems through the appropriation of the terms of self-empowerment and self-determination (Lorenzetti, 2013). Bold social change and collective action from a wide range of community members deconstructing and upending systems of oppression, power, and domination are pushed to the wayside (Hyslop, 2012, 2018; Izlar, 2019; Lorenzetti, 2013).

In contrast, social movements and grassroots networks have a long history of organizing to resist systems of oppression and exclusion. Migrant justice movements challenge exploitative and precarious working and living conditions tied to globalization, international migration management, border enforcement, surveillance, criminalization, and the conditions of displacement (Black et al., 2020; Choudry et al., 2012; Choudry & Thomas, 2013; Jeffries & Ridgley, 2020; MWAC, 2020; Tungohan, 2017, 2023). Recent studies explore case examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic galvanized local communities to address short-term needs and longer-term systemic changes through models of mutual aid. These models are outside of state-led systems of support, with several scholars calling for more rigorous and focused study on its conceptualization and practices (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022; Spade, 2020). Racialized and migrant communities created mutual aid networks to respond to the needs of their communities (Colting-Stol, 2022; Colting-Stol et al., 2020; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021). At the same time, these mutual aid theorizing and practices run the risk of a slippage toward charity, neoliberal-philanthropy, and performative colonial-based models, which would further entrench hierarchical and exclusionary forms of social welfare provision that social movements seek to transform.

Amid such community-wide crises deeply impacting those most strategically undervalued and excluded in state-sanctioned systems of governance and social welfare, the authors question whether social workers draw from models of mutual aid alongside community organizing to support longer-term and radical systemic change needed. When many of our social welfare systems and roles within them may pit systemic changes against the dominance of shorter-term or medicalized approaches (Lee & Johnstone, 2023), what are some actionable ways forward drawing from lessons and strategies of organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The paper seeks to add to the body of social work knowledge and practice that bridges community organizing and social movements with direct practice and advances critical pedagogy in social work education (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Lee & Johnstone, 2023; Morley, 2016; Morley et al., 2020; Mullaly, 2002; Pino, 2022). The authors primarily ask, in what ways can these collective models of caring, at the local level, contribute to the building and development of a social movement character of social work and move away from a charitable system that perpetuates individualism, neoliberal racial capitalism, and colonial logics?

Neoliberal racial capitalism and the injustices faced by Filipinos during the COVID-19 pandemic

Studies among Filipino migrant workers have started analyzing the conditions and impacts of exploitative work conditions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic at a global scale, such as a lack of access to labour rights and health and safety standards and protections through their roles as home care workers (Nasol & Francisco-Menchavez, 2021). Studies conducted with Filipino domestic workers in Asia and Europe (Vilog & Piocos III, 2021) and with Vancouver-based domestic and sea-based workers (Banta & Pratt, 2022), show how neoliberalism exacerbated the detrimental impacts of the pandemic.

Neoliberal ideology posits that progress is based on individual responsibility, economic freedom, competition, consumption, and market outcomes (Gill, 2021). Neoliberalism, which first gained political prominence in the United Kingdom, upholds the principle of diminishing state control and accountability towards public and social services through deregulation and privatization of public services (Spolander et al., 2014). This ideology anticipates that lesser government intervention would translate to economic gains that can eventually benefit those marginalized from society. However, its historical application shows that it further accentuates social inequality in many countries (Spolander et al., 2014).

These neoliberal logics have contributed to Canada's extensive record of atrocious exploitation of racialized populations owing to its relentless pursuit for profit (Henaway, 2023; Thobani, 2007). Racial capitalism justifies the systemic and systematic relegation of low-paying, difficult, and dangerous jobs on racialized bodies (Rodriguez, 2022; Wispelwey et al., 2023). Established through the atrocities of slavery and enforcement of feudalism, capitalism from its inception was never colour-neutral and was founded on racial inequities and subjugation (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021; Neilson & Peters, 2020). Neoliberal and global capitalist migration regimes are mired with exploitation to maximize profits through outsourcing cheap labour to largely racialized communities originating from Global South countries to fill what are considered disposable and dirty jobs in the receiving countries (Alcaraz et al., 2021; Henaway, 2023; McClure et al., 2020).

The exploitation of racialized populations under global capitalism during the pandemic is connected to histories of colonization and of how the settler state of Canada constructs the notion of a national identity and worthy subject-citizen. The settler colony constructs the inclusion and exclusion of a worthy subject-citizen through racialization, cis-heteronormativity, ableism, and classism which shape immigration and border regimes and their associated institutions (Lee, 2018; Thobani, 2007). Authors argue that neoliberal logics embed contextual systems of domination wherein this "neoliberal racialized line continues to determine those deserving versus undeserving of entry into the colonial nation building project" (Lee & Ferrer, 2014, p. 13).

The many centuries of violent European occupation, dispossession, and colonization not only extinguished the lives of millions of Indigenous peoples but also brought deplorable poverty, political upheaval, fractured cultures, and social unrest that continue in colonized and semi-colonized countries even to this day (Hickel et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2019). This predicament precipitated the mass exodus of people from those labelled as "third world" countries, mostly populated by people of colour, towards the settler-imperial Global North

countries where whiteness is regarded as superior (Binagwaho et al., 2022; Hickel et al., 2021). The Philippines was thrusted into systemic poverty by its long-standing history of colonization and conquest by multiple colonizers who entrenched an economic structure heavily dependent on the export of agricultural products, mineral resources, and in the recent decades, migrant labour (Desai, 2016; Findley et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2010).

An emergence of critical Filipino scholarship has analyzed how the Philippine economy presently depends on migrant labour export, "brokering" citizens as commodities whose remittances pay back accumulated foreign debt due to these histories of colonialism, imperialism, and ongoing neoliberal policies (Rodriguez, 2010). During the Marcos era of the 1960s and 1970s, the Philippines had become heavily indebted to international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Lindio-McGovern, 2003). In response, President Marcos, Sr., enacted the labour export policy to "rectify" the effects of foreign indebtedness and impoverished national development, adding to the major shift in Filipino immigration to Canada in the 1980s (McElhinny et al., 2012). While different waves of Filipino professionals and their families came to Canada before the 1980s, Canada began to recruit masses of Filipino migrant workers through the reformed Foreign Domestic Program (later in the 1990s, the Live-In Caregiver Program [LCP]) and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP).

Scholars argue that migrant labour export has become an international migration management strategy in which governments and corporations maximize migrant remittances toward national development (Henaway, 2023; Rodriguez, 2010). These migration management schemes are contested as authors argue that they maintain foreign economic dependency, conditions of poverty in the out-sourcing country, and exploitation of migrant labourers and their families (Henaway, 2023; Rodriguez, 2010).

These labour export and migration regimes in Canada pigeon-holed the profiles of Filipinos toward lower paid, precarious jobs considered low-skilled or unprofessional, with varying degrees of precarity related to temporary immigration status in contrast to landed immigrants (Eric, 2012). Scholars also highlighted the racialized and gendered character of these labour migration schemes, especially in the domestic worker program (Guevarra, 2009; Tungohan, 2012). These historical, political, and economic conditions have continued to expand a working-class profile of Filipinos in Canada, most of whom are women and are considered de-skilled as they hold professional degrees and skills which are unrecognized in the Canadian education system and workforce (McElhinny et al., 2012).

Documentation from these migration programs in Canada show situations and conditions of abuse and maltreatment (Bhuyan et al., 2014; Pratt & Philippine Women Centre of B.C., 2012). Research about domestic workers shows that their exposure to abuse, exploitation, and coercion is directly related to the power dynamics between the employers and the workers which is enforced through the structure of the program (Bhuyan et al., 2018). Precarious immigration status can cause fear of deportation in seeking rights and protections, especially when their status is tied to the employer, further enabling conditions for employer coercion (Bhuyan et al., 2018). In addition, the live-in component can lead to over-work for minimal pay, coercion of movement and mobility, and limited access to food security (Bhuyan et al., 2018).

The transnational obligations to provide for their family members in the Philippines compelled Filipino migrant workers to continue to maintain employment during the pandemic even when they were sick or at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Some workers described themselves as "prisoners" when COVID-19 restrictions further tied them to their workplaces (Banta & Pratt, 2023). The risks of contracting and spreading COVID-19 that trapped domestic and sea-based workers in their workplaces highlighted the "unfree labour" and vulnerabilities of Filipino workers under temporary work permits (Banta & Pratt, 2023).

Rather than being stereotyped as victims and submissive subjects to the political and economic order, histories of domestic worker organizing has been documented from the 1970s to the present (Tungohan, 2012, 2017). Their efforts illustrate resistive responses to the daily realities of Filipino migrant and domestic workers impacted by gendered, classed, and racialized power relations between institutions and states at a transnational scale (Tungohan, 2012, 2017). In this global neoliberal political economy and under racial capitalism, reformist and state accommodation politics in Canada are thus limited in responding to the roles of sending and receiving states as well as other foreign governments in contributing to conditions of exclusion and oppression. Through multiple layers of indebtedness and historical colonial relations, racialized labour migration policies, employment industries and immigration contexts, an emergence of critical Filipino literature in North America emphasizes the roles of Filipinos and international migratory regimes in settler colonial projects as their global dispersion contributes to settlement in other colonial contexts (Coloma et al., 2012; Rodriguez, 2022). Despite an increase in documentation of their resistive, organizing, and lived experiences, these narratives continue to be understudied in the Canadian migration context. Furthermore, intersections with social work research, practice, and policies in how these groups navigate, access, and transform social welfare responses and possibilities is even less studied in Canada (Alcaraz et al., 2022).

Mutual aid organizing and social work

While the historical and systemic factors influence the conditions of migrant workers, this paper also considers how non-state actors and migrants have agency in their own conditions through resistance, decision-making (Ellis, 2015), and building their own structures and embodiment of collectivity, care, and activism (Tungohan, 2023). Social movements in this paper engage with politics that stem from "on-the-ground" grassroots organizing with transnational approaches and transformative action models toward fundamental social change, especially around migrant-led and migrant justice organizing (Choudry, 2019; Choudry et al., 2012; Tungohan, 2012, 2023). Through a radical social work lens, mutual aid may offer a framework for non-hierarchical, community-driven, and autonomous structures that challenge the production of a neoliberal model of a professionalized social work driven by individualism, responsibilization, and charity (Izlar, 2019).

While public, health, and social welfare systems continued to exclude and increase marginalization for migrant and racialized communities during the COVID pandemic, organized mutual aid by-and-for communities sprung up as a source of mobilization, response, and support (Black et al., 2020; Cleveland et al., 2020; Littman et al., 2022; Mould

et al., 2022). Attributed to biologist and social-anarchist Peter Kropotkin who saw mutual aid as essential to survival in times of crisis (Spade, 2020; Springer, 2020), mutual aid ranges from daily acts of service such as giving food and helping neighbours, to organized popular resistance.

Scholars cite challenges to the conceptual differences in the use of the term and risks of a co-optation of the concept toward only state-sanctioned reforms and charity (Mould et al., 2022; Spade, 2020). Overall, these acts are based in cooperation and solidarity beyond state-sanctioned regimes and policy reform. The models should serve to resist human and non-human values shaped around the tenets of capitalism: individualism, scarcity, and labour exchange and exploitation (Spade, 2020). Therefore, as opposed to charity, mutual aid acknowledges the oppressive systems as the root cause of the problem and utilizes solidarity-building and community-helping to mobilize the community for the community, known in Filipino epistemologies as *Bayanihan* (Solis, 2023).

Social work exists within a paradox where it both challenges and upholds inequities produced by neoliberalism. While mutual aid efforts can counteract some of the injustices that neoliberal policies have introduced into social work, the profession remains entangled in structures that reinforce these very injustices. Harris (2014) suggests that neoliberalism results in three key processes influencing social work and welfare globally: marketisation (markets should be expanded and are the most efficient); consumerisation (individuals are responsible for their own lives); and managerialization (services in the public or voluntary sectors should be shaped by management models from the private business sector) (p. 1-2). These processes create tensions for social workers who act as gatekeepers and administrators within welfare systems. As administrators of social services, they may unintentionally perpetuate barriers to access, disproportionately affecting racialized communities. To navigate these contradictions, social workers must critically examine how neoliberalism shapes social policies, recognize its role in deepening marginalization, and challenge the systemic inequities embedded within social welfare structures (Lorenzetti, 2013). A more transformative approach includes social workers and their institutions building on mutual aid networks through frameworks of community organizing and social movements, embedded in local cultural epistemologies such as *Bayanihan,* to combat forms of oppression at a global scale.

Authors' social locations

The first author is a mixed Filipina and second-generation settler to Canada with heritage in the Philippines in the Cordillera region, northern Luzon, and in the Netherlands. The author's family carries histories connected to land-based and agricultural protection and sustenance, forced migration, access to social welfare systems, and participation in social movements and organizing against systems of power and domination. She began community organizing through connecting issues of migrant rights of those facing precarious immigration status in Canada to the struggles of Indigenous self-determination for land at a global scale. Foreign-owned mining companies from countries such as Canada contribute to the displacement and violence against local communities in areas such as the Cordillera, Philippines, leading to

organized resistance and mass political struggle by the people for the people (Zoledziowsi & Gutierrez, 2020).

Prior to her move to Canada under the then live-in caregiver program, the second author was a land-rights and human rights defender in the Philippines. She grew up in a farming and remote village in Luzon's Southern Tagalog Region where she was exposed to unspeakable forms and impacts of poverty that are largely experienced by peasants and farmers in many parts of the Philippines. It was during her stay in Manila to complete a university education that she became involved in student issues which eventually led her to join the larger people's movement that links sectoral issues with the broader structural and societal problems. The manifold of threats and a dismal future brought by the worsening political and economic conditions in the Philippines ushered her decision to uproot herself and change her life course by embarking on a journey to Canada. Her experience of enforced precarity, inherent in the federal TFWP solidified her resolve to re-engage in community work and reach out to her fellow migrants. Her personal experience of discrimination and labour exploitation provided her the motivation not only to become a part of the migrant justice movement but to transition into becoming a social worker.

Case example: Kapit-Bisig Laban COVID Montréal

Objectives

Kapit-Bisig Laban COVID Montréal (English translation: linked arms in the struggle against COVID), which the first author co-developed and implemented, grew from organizations and grassroots groups serving the Filipino community, many of whom were involved in social movements under the banners of global migrant justice and national liberation in the Philippines. The Montréal chapter was a part of a national strategy across Canada to address the grave impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Filipino migrant and essential workers, including their families in Canada and in their homelands. The community organizations included two migrant worker non-profit organizations who conduct case work, organizing, and advocacy to and with migrant workers in Montréal and surrounding areas (Colting-Stol et al., 2022). The grassroots groups included a Filipino youth activist group, a Philippines solidarity rights group, an international Philippines rights group, and a Filipino parents' group. The overarching aim of the project was to conduct mutual aid efforts to meet material and emotional needs while strengthening grassroots organizing and advocacy efforts to combat migrant labour exploitation and the root causes of the labour export program (Colting-Stol et al., 2022).

In addition to dealing with the newly enforced social isolation and public health protocols, we were witnessing firsthand in our work and communities how governmental relief programs during the COVID-19 pandemic were neglecting essential migrant workers, their families, and other community members. This exclusion only worsened their isolation and impoverishment. Many of these workers were employed in essential sectors, including the TFWP, and often lived in intergenerational or group households. These living conditions, combined with their high rates of employment in precarious jobs, intensified the need for stronger grassroots organizing (Cleveland et al., 2020). Existing social welfare, health, and employment programs continued to fail to address the conditions of these communities.

Even though this was an emergency-based response, the objectives came from collective and cultural ethics of cooperation, mutual solidarity and collective action during and beyond times of crises which was already embedded in the service and community organizing models of the involved groups – an ethics of *Bayanihan*.

Organizing strategies

Through ongoing assessments of the situation of the communities the different groups were serving, the network designed efforts to meet basic needs and emotional support such as providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to essential workers, distributing baskets of food to reach those isolated, and providing mentorship to youth of migrant parents who were required to continue working while their children could not attend school. The network also created online and printed rights-based and translated governmental information related to employment and health standards in the workplace, the changing COVID-19 policies and protocols, and access to resources and financial programs. Through outreach and mutual sharing in online and in-person formats to inform the community organizing efforts, organizers and community members shared their struggles and these systemic failures, while strategizing about responses and building relations among each other. The community got to know each other's strengths, skills, resources, interests, and needs. Thus, the efforts sought to mobilize communities toward longer-term collective action while responding to meeting these priority needs and rights.

The network held regular meetings online with assigned coordinators to discuss and lead the ongoing work. Committees were also created with leaders to coordinate the various activities. The committees included finance (applying for and tracking financial contributions), deliveries and driving (gathering and delivering basic needs), and communications (creating communication and advocacy material for online and in-person platforms about employment rights and labour standards, and COVID-19 protocols and policies). As the network was receiving cases and then strategizing about the needed responses, such as cases of groups losing employment in contravention to employment rights, or the elderly requesting access to food deliveries, the network also created an online database to track the needs, assign people in charge of the case, and then complete follow-ups. To aid with providing this casework support, the group developed internal documents of resources and their emergency and regular services for referrals.

In one case, a family that had been accepted to arrive in Canada and had employment set-up prior to arrival found themselves having lost employment upon arrival and not able to access governmental support due to their lack of employment history in Canada and their newly arrived status. Other temporary migrant workers with their immigration statuses and livelihoods tied to their employers found themselves without work and with uncertain futures as their companies had to cease operations without clear direction on when they would re-open. Migrant workers shared the notion of double provision, in which they have a responsibility to provide for their families in the Philippines while learning and struggling to navigate and provide for a life in Canada. A pause or uncertainty of employment in Canada without access to governmental support due to their migrant worker temporary immigration status or to a lack of employment history in Canada was detrimental to their family in the Philippines and to their own ability to remain in Canada. Drawing on the collective

knowledge and experience of the network, organizing and advocacy initiatives were carried out from the "ground up" through community-based efforts. These initiatives focused on the priorities and resources of Filipino migrant and essential workers who were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lessons learned

Our network included organizations with long-standing histories and reputations in supporting migrant workers with precarious status and their families. One organization's charitable status allowed the network to access grants led by the city of Montréal and from the Canadian Red Cross. Another organization was able to create and share resources for outreach often used in their regular outreach programs. Their staff trained some of the younger organizers in outreach, who were then able to train and implement outreach with other youth community organizers. These partnerships enabled a range of expertise in workers' rights, translation, immigration rights, and grassroots movement-building. The network also received more flexible funding from a university's centre for social transformation. However, some of the emergency-based funding from the Red Cross and from the city included a marked ending with stringent guidelines on how the services should be provided. The short-term funding stipulations based on a crisis and charitable approach may have provided some basic relief in provision of resources and goods, but the community's definitions of the needs would have acted as a better indicator of their long-term nature. Nevertheless, the project was not driven by funding but by shared commitments and responsibilities to collective action and social transformation.

While Kapit-Bisig ended its operations within a year, the growth of this project was a part caring for each other in communities through mutuality and cooperation in times of crisis and beyond – of *Bayanihan*. One of the challenges of sustaining the social movement character of grassroots and community-led initiatives is the constrained conditions and priorities of those facing multiple overlapping barriers, including the need to support family either in the Philippines or newly arrived in Canada. Prioritizing broader movement-building in a time of crisis can be challenging, in addition to the multiple exclusions and a lack of access to basic needs, rights, and support at a global scale.

These networks and organizing efforts expose the cracks in social welfare access and governmental programs. By providing goods, services, support, and solidarity to challenge systems of oppression and displacement, they clearly show that a social-welfare-for-all is still a distant goal and requires a transformative approach. Various service providers, policymakers and even social movement actors must learn and build from these unheralded stories and experiences "on-the-ground" to move flexible and long-term resources toward them so they may define and conduct their own priorities, needs, strategies, and actions. What already exists and emerges in alterity to the dominant fractured and exclusionary systems of state-led support and care? How, and should, social work transform itself from these knowledges and actions without appropriating from communities' knowledges to simply reintegrate them into the existing orders of social control, exclusion, domination, and extraction?

Case example: Calgary's *Serve the People* project

The second author's community work prior to the pandemic was instrumental in shaping the predominantly Filipino grassroots initiative, the *Serve the People* project. The project was spearheaded by organizers and advocates from the Alberta Assembly of Social Workers (AASW) and Migrante Alberta. In relation to and similar with Montréal's Kapit-Bisig initiative, the *Serve the People* project was anchored to a larger migrant justice movement in Canada (and around the globe) that opposes all forms of oppression and supports the struggle for a genuine Philippine liberation. Funded by a city grant and sustained by generous contributions of many community members, the project was developed as an immediate response to the alarming condition and treatment of precarious migrant workers including those without immigration status. These workers, primarily employed in the food sector, i.e. meat plants, restaurants, and fast-food chains, face significant marginalization and vulnerability. As most of the workers typically live in cramped housing arrangements, are underpaid/overexploited, unable to bring their family members, and have restricted to no access to most social services, the pandemic severely compromised their already decreased capacity to respond.

The extended lockdowns and many other health restrictions enforced during the pandemic nullified the informal collective network that precarious workers had built and historically relied on. All these factors including the unpleasant media coverage that lay blame on migrant workers for spreading the virus cumulatively generated a project that aims to address the immediate need of the workers and dispel unfounded and downright racist myths. Founded in solidarity and collaboration, the project reverberated in the community. It was able to reach out to more than 100 households and around 300 individuals who received care packages on a weekly to biweekly basis for more than a year, without the requirement to submit bureaucratic paperwork to determine eligibility. Social workers and advocates who made regular deliveries to households in Calgary and surrounding areas (including Airdrie, High River, and Brooks) were reciprocated with lived stories from marginalized workers — stories not only of displacement and impoverishment but also of resilience, survival, and resistance. Weekly check-in meetings were facilitated virtually with precarious workers where they had the opportunity to connect with each other and share resources, strategies, issues, and challenges that they confronted.

Lessons learned

Even though this community initiative took place in a settler-imperial country that has been severely devoured by neoliberal thinking of self-reliance and personal responsibility, which views hardship as a personal failure and often takes the blame away from oppressive structures and systems in place (Finley & Esposito, 2012), the *Serve the People* initiative demonstrated that even in a societal system that extinguishes collectivity, social movements can still thrive. As a matter of fact, this project was only a fraction of the numerous and consistent mass mobilizations that the bigger migrant movement have been doing for many decades. This effort is a testament that with or without a stable source of funding or global hysteria, social movements will continue to be the people's expression of their capacity to effectively address their needs and surmount any challenges. At a time of global shutdown,

the project brought hope and connection critically needed at an unprecedented period of history which sustained many precarious migrants and their families throughout the pandemic. The collective experience and learnings obtained from the project brought everyone closer to the idea and concrete practice of collective work which, in due time, could contribute to the attainment of collective liberation.

Discussion

As a profession that developed out of capitalism's need for palliative measures to maintain its global hegemony (Hyslop, 2018), social work and social welfare have historically perpetuated logics and practices of colonialism. These practices are often accompanied by a dominant neoliberal system that excludes those considered as "others" in the construction of a desirable and worthy national citizen and identity (Lee & Ferrer, 2014). This creates cognitive-dissonance as social work grapples with contradictions and complicity as it claims to promote ethics and rhetoric of justice, empowerment and self-determination, while it also often upholds principles of dominant state-sanctioned ideologies and practices that reinforce neoliberal austerity, social control, paternalism, individualism, and charity models (Izlar, 2019). As social workers must navigate these deepening chasms in the profession, educators, professional associations, and social service providers require more guidance on pedagogical and practice-based interventions to move forward actions of radical systemic change alongside community organizations and social movements.

In this discussion, the authors examine ways to transform the social work profession by drawing on multiple sources. They use case examples from their mutual aid and community-based efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, insights from community organizing and social movement literature, social workers' roles in migrant justice, and historical and socio-political analyses of Filipino migration. These potentialities are explored through the issues, knowledge, places, and people that lead and generate radical ground-up organizing and transnational social movements on migrant justice.

A growing number of social work scholars, practitioners, and educators have been advocating for the urgent transformation of the profession to unsettle and fundamentally challenge its complacency in settler colonialism, racism, and white supremacy in Canada (Baskin, 2018; Blackstock, 2009; Elkassem & Murry-Lichtman, 2022; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Lee & Ferrer, 2014). Frameworks rooted in anti-racism and anti-colonialism challenge the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms and social service delivery that have harmed racialized communities and seek to rebuild social work through local and cultural knowledges of collectivism, healing, holistic care, strengths, and resistance (Baskin, 2018; Elkassem & Murry-Lichtman, 2022). As Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2019) discuss in advocating for the transformation of social work to be "unrecognizable" from its roots and current structures built to reinforce the settler-colonial project: "The focus on one-on-one case work, instead of anti-poverty work or community organizing can evade attempts to understand the problems Indigenous peoples are facing as the result of collective trauma that is rooted in the structures of settler colonialism" (p. 13). In Elkassem and Murry-Lichtman's (2022) proposal of an integrated critical race and anti-colonialism framework in social work,

a crucial path forward includes writing into history the truths of those colonized through local knowledge, cultural approaches, and their histories.

Prioritize community-led and community-centred social work practice

Western epistemologies that promote individualist ideals have a strong influence not only on the economic and political structures of countries in the Global South but also on the social work practices in the countries of those regions (Tusasiirwe, 2023). It is therefore essential for social workers to be willing to conduct enduring critical self-reflection to disengage themselves from reifying oppressive social structures that uphold neoliberal capitalism, white supremacy, cisnormativity, and heteropatriarchy which has implications on a global scale (Pino, 2022). Genuine radical and people-centred critical self-reflection in social work can be achieved through immersive and community-centred practice. This approach not only fosters awareness of the experiences and knowledge of marginalized groups or "subaltern" but also challenges the performative and segmented social work practices that disregard the fundamental role of interconnection and relationality (O'Brien et al., 2023; Pino, 2022).

These "subaltern" ways of being and knowing are essential for shaping collective action, solidarity, and community support and care, forming a foundation for resistance within social work (Pino, 2022). For example, migrant workers have long practiced community care and mutual aid despite oppressive systems that seek to minimize, control, or suppress their capacity for abundance and self-organized support structures (Tungohan, 2023). Prior to colonization, Filipino epistemologies and ontologies, or ways of knowing and being, flourished through community support and collective action (Ealdama, 2012). These socio-cultural experiences are captured in *bayanihan* and *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (treating each other as an extension of oneself) which exemplifies the culture of care and a spirit of unity and cooperation in decolonial Filipino practices (Solis, 2023). Tungohan (2023) extends research focused primarily on political forms of organizing to recognize how migrant care workers embody ways of being and knowing based in relationships of care and accountability to construct "communities of care" (Franscisco-Menchavez, 2018 as cited in Tungohan, 2023, p. 3). Migrant care workers survive, resist, and transform beyond the constraints of these programs and stereotypes that may suggest narratives of only submissiveness or victimization (Tungohan, 2023). Collective action recognizes that the movements are led by those facing the issues directly building from their own cultural and local knowledges of care, support, resources, and resistance (Tungohan, 2023).

Choudry et al.'s (2012) framework for community organizing includes an analysis of conflict and power to inform the direct action or intervention. This analysis includes political and economic structures and how they influence inequities, existing knowledge of the community around rights and capacities to collectivize their struggles, and the power relations in the specific cases. Social workers are often in roles in which they become acutely aware of the material and emotional conditions of the communities they are serving. They can bring this analysis to community organizing strategies with critical reflection on how people understand their own experience and accountability in terms of power relations, including social workers' own social positions and access to resources.

Community organizing models in migrant justice movements are transnational in scope, implicate a range of immigration and social welfare systems, and depend on the context of

employment policies and standards in a region (Rodriguez, 2022). Mobilizing communities as well as allies in solidarity is necessary to ensure these unheralded realities are rendered visible to create a broader and wider movement of people in their localities that can tackle these various systems at a global scale (Choudry et al., 2012). By building on the tradition of *bayanihan* and returning to cultural epistemologies that challenge the dominance of Western and individualistic practices, social workers may pursue collectivist and communal belonging and foster greater community resilience and solidarity to add to lasting social change. Social workers involved in, or teaching about, community organizing can advocate for the recognition and resourcing of social movements as key actors in shaping services and supports that respond to both local and global conditions. In doing so, they contribute to redefining the epistemological and ontological foundations of social welfare.

Hence, community-led and community-centred social work practice involves building relations with the community and knowing their short-term and long-term priorities. In these cases of mutual aid community responses, the two authors were involved in building coalitions based on existing knowledge and networks with a variety of organizations who had been working in migrant justice and delivery of material and emotional support in different capacities. Social workers through their roles in community development often have capabilities to bring together stakeholders in targeted, flexible and localized approaches, wherein the people most affected are at the centre of defining the priorities, needs, and responses. Recognizing that these initiatives were limited and temporary in scope, while building from existing systems of local and cultural knowledge and forms of organizing among the community, these emergency-based community responses were brought together by a combination of multiple factors: the disappointments with the inadequacy of government responses, a recognition of the alarming conditions of many community members, and the capacity of the community to come together in times of need.

To build mutual aid from a community-centred approach, social workers can organize and facilitate community meetings that provide a space for members to share their needs, strengths, and ideas for collective discussion and action. These gatherings can help identify emerging issues and mutual aid opportunities such as shared childcare, food pantries, or resource sharing and allow community members to collaboratively tackle issues and address problems. Social workers often bring with them crucial skills in conflict resolution, active listening, and group facilitation that help ensure community meetings are inclusive, respectful, and productive. Social workers can also help build mutual aid networks to support the local people's movement by participating in and conducting events to tackle and oppose policies and practices that threaten people's rights and welfare and identifying resources within the community (e.g., housing, food, transportation, childcare) to connect those who need help with those who can provide it. This can involve setting up informal systems of support where people can easily reach out to ask for and/or offer support.

Expanding on these shorter-term emergency responses, social workers can continue to support or lead facilitating education, advocacy, and mobilization initiatives through their work environments and across sectors with other service providers and organizational leadership. They can advocate with the coalition established through the mutual aid initiative to influence their local, provincial, or federal politicians on the enduring precarity and systemic issues faced by migrant workers and those with precarious immigration status

resulting in marginalization from services and support. Social workers in community development, advocacy, or accompaniment can have a particular role in gathering documentation and developing advocacy and campaign plans. However, the voices of other direct practice roles will also be able to add their input and draw from cases of those most affected by exclusion to support mobilization and organizing initiatives.

Integrate longer-term organizing, systemic and transnational analyses into mutual aid initiatives

The previously mentioned mutual aid initiatives in two major Canadian cities show a main commonality of the presence of a social or political movement that funnelled local approaches of mutual aid to larger collective resistance. This approach acknowledges the oppressive systems as the root cause of the problem and utilizes solidarity-building and community-helping of *bayanihan* to mobilize the community for the community (Solis, 2023). To ensure that social and community workers expand their awareness of larger social contexts and continue to pursue both short and long term commitments for systems change, a social movement can help resist these mutual aid efforts from turning up as band-aid and spur-of-the-moment actions that are detached from larger struggles for social change (Choudry et al., 2012; Fisher & Shragge, 2017). Social workers can engage with communities to explore how mutual aid, initially developed as an emergency response, may transition into or be integrated with models of community organizing and social movements. As trust is built and resources are mobilized, community members can collectively analyze and critically reflect on the broader systems that necessitate advocacy, long-term structural change and sustained "ground-up" commitment (Choudry et al., 2012).

In the realm of social work, the mutual aid and community organizing frameworks from a migrant justice perspective offer valuable contributions to anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches. These frameworks emphasize the transnational dimensions of displacement and exclusion fostering solidarity and social movements across borders. Transnationalism, as articulated by Rodriguez (2019), encompasses the complex and ongoing effects of migration and globalization on the displacement of Filipinos globally. It highlights how migrants across generations, despite being geographically dispersed, continue to remain connected with their homelands through a range of emotional, symbolic, physical, material, or political forms (Rodriguez, 2019). Transnationalism in social movements refers to the forged solidarity beyond nations-states, recognizing the role of global capitalist expansion in perpetuating the racialized exploitation and displacement of largely Global South communities, which could inform migrant justice organizing (Rodriguez, 2019). This displacement and resettlement can reinforce the harms of settler-colonial projects. In constructing and educating about community-centred practices focused on migrant justice and mutual aid, social workers must recognize how the Canadian nation-state maintains a hierarchical settler society through forms of neoliberal and discriminatory legislation and discourse in immigration and border regimes which construct who is a "worthy" citizen (Alcaraz et al., 2021; Lee, 2018; Thobani, 2007). Social workers occupying roles in service provision, research, and education must recognize and resist the logics of inclusion and exclusion that sustain settler colonial nation-building. To advance to a more transformative epistemological framework in social welfare,

social workers must oppose these unjust systems that are upheld through racialized labour exploitation.

Migrant justice movements and allied organizations led by migrants and through organized groups, such as the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, the Migrant Rights Network and the Migrants Resource Centre Canada in Toronto, the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montréal, and Migrante Canada have long articulated their movements' campaigns and collective action for rights, justice, and social transformation. Based on rising documentation of these conditions, these campaigns often include the following calls to action, while recognizing the broader systems of oppression that require more than reformist strategies for change. In building collaborations toward mutual aid networks that draw from a community organizing framework, social workers should consider how such grassroots groups, community organizations and their knowledge, case work, and campaigns are integrated into direct practice from a longer-term transformative approach, including through awareness, education, and mobilization.

Regularization programs and sanctuary cities/provinces

Canada's reliance on disposable and racialized labour, constituted in its TFWP, demonstrate how race and capital connive to ensure maximum profit with the least possible cost and resistance from workers, predominantly from the Global South, enabling conditions of exploitation and coercion (Hanley & Wen, 2016; Henaway, 2023; Landry et al., 2021; Salami et al., 2015). Campaigns contend that migrant workers, regardless of their country of origin, must arrive in Canada with full and permanent immigration status particularly if they are filling labour positions that are essential, and indispensable, to Canadian society (Migrant Rights Network, 2024). A permanent immigration status would provide workers and their families access to basic services essential to maintain their health and wellbeing and gain some leverage to advocate for better wages, living conditions, and improved workplace conditions and safety (Alcaraz et al, 2021; Bhuyan & Valmadrid, 2018; Landry et al., 2021; Luciano & Foster, 2020).

In local municipalities and provinces, social workers must push for public services to allow precarious workers, including those with expired immigration status, access to key services such as health care and supported housing. Advocating for sanctuary designations can be a useful framing for social workers in their workplaces and cities to ensure access without fear of being reported based on immigration status (Jeffries & Ridgely, 2020). The model also connects local struggles to broader migrant justice efforts that challenge border enforcement and criminalization which reinforces the settler colonial nation and subjugates racialized and Indigenous peoples (Jeffries & Ridgely, 2020).

Recognition of foreign credentials

While permanent residency will decrease vulnerabilities and provide social and economic benefits to workers (Bhuyan & Valmadrid, 2018), it will not completely resolve the issue of racial capitalism. The continued non-recognition of foreign credentials contributes to the stark pay difference between racialized and white people, which contributes to Canada's disturbing "racialization of poverty" (Block & Galabuzi, 2011, p. 15). The restrictions established by employers requiring Canadian experience and the lack or poor recognition of

education obtained from predominantly racialized countries hamper full economic and social participation of immigrants (Okafor & Kalu, 2024). Social workers must challenge these racist practices and advocate for respect and full recognition of education and experience of racialized immigrants regardless of where they were obtained. As mentioned, these strategies continue to link to the broader root causes of neoliberal racial capitalism while organizing around the knowledges and experiences of migrants in their everyday and global conditions.

Conclusion

Research on the TFWP has documented inhumane living conditions, restricted access to essential services, including health care, and the eradication of workers' rights and, to some extent, basic human rights. These findings demonstrate Canada's role in upholding global racial capitalism, which accentuates the concentration of capital to the Global North at the expense and detriment of racialized workers from the Global South (Basok et al, 2014; Landry et al., 2021; Nasol & Francisco-Menchavez, 2021; Rodriguez, 2022; Shantz, 2015). There is a need for social work to learn from transnational social movements to understand and challenge global political economies imbricated in the management of migration, displacement of communities, and exploitation of migrants and racialized communities.

Social work practitioners, educators, and researchers can unveil the precarity of migrant workers and their exclusion in social welfare as tied to global neoliberal racial capitalism and colonial histories, structures, and relations. National and international social work associations and educational institutions can support the deprofessionalization and deinstitutionalization of social work toward models of mutual aid, solidarity, and transformative action (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Social workers can re-root in epistemological and ethical frameworks that stem from the "ground-up" and from anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches as led by those most impacted by systems of oppression. The contours of social welfare may be shaped, defined, and governed by communities for communities and consider the accountabilities and responsibilities of undoing social work's complicity in settler colonial, neoliberal, and capitalist practices.

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