

Editorial

Social justice in action: Showcasing the work of doctoral students in social work (Part 2)

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After the successful publication of the first issue of this two-part series of the special issue “Social justice in action: Showcasing the work of doctoral students in social work”, we are pleased to introduce this second part containing seven manuscripts.

As outlined in Part 1, this special issue aims to spotlight the innovative and meaningful work of emerging scholars in social work who actively contribute to reflecting on social justice in diverse and evolving ways. By focusing on future experts, it seeks to highlight perspectives and approaches that respond to today’s shifting sociopolitical, economic, and cultural landscapes such as the inequitable impacts of climate change on women, girls (Alston, 2013; Ngcamu, 2023), and Indigenous communities (Fayazi et al., 2020), technology as a mechanism for disrupting or exacerbating exclusion (Stephens, 2024). They also encompass the aggravation of socioeconomic inequality (Patel et al., 2020) and racial disparities (Komeiha et al., 2025; Tai et al., 2021) resulting from responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the overall challenges of advancing social justice within a broader socioeconomic and political climate shaped by capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalization (Guèvremont, 2024; Silver, 2014).

Over recent decades, these forces have led to major social and political shifts, including a reduced role of the state and weakened social and health services. As a result, social justice has suffered, and various populations’ socioeconomic needs have reached unprecedented levels. For example, the systemic attacks on discourses of equity, diversity, inclusion and decolonization (EDID) coupled with states clawing back hard-earned rights (e.g., reproductive rights) speak to some of these challenges (Hodge et al., 2024; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Today’s emerging social work scholars, practitioners, educators, and policymakers are grappling with the consequences of these developments by re-centering the justice mission that defines social work as a profession.

Indeed, heightened awareness of the commitments outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, combined with social work’s responsibility to advance social justice, calls on the profession to confront challenges directly, name disingenuous actors, and work toward a transformative and forward-moving agenda. Innovative solutions led by individuals, families,

groups, and communities, and supported by social work, can help build a more equitable society where all can thrive.

Social work doctoral students, as future experts across multiple domains (academia, politics, practice, education), play a central role in shaping that future. To propel forward a knowledge base from this new generation of emerging scholars, social work doctoral students from across Canada and internationally were invited to contribute to this special issue, with submissions that showcase social justice principles in various fields. This issue challenges future social work experts to go beyond traditional social work's knowledge base and help drive real-world transformation. Simultaneously, this requires established actors in the field of social work to share the space and engage in rethinking their practices. This in turn encourages a shared commitment to social justice across macro, mezzo, and micro levels and emphasizes the types of actions social workers at all levels of practice can take to promote and facilitate equity, inclusion, and the rights of marginalized and minoritized communities.

Addressing the broad and complex nature of social injustices requires diverse and multifaceted solutions. The authors featured in this second issue meet this challenge by advancing innovative practices, creative approaches, and fresh perspectives that share the common goal of fair change. The collection of manuscripts featured in this issue aim to inspire and inform current and future practitioners, researchers, and educators committed to advancing social justice through education, community action, and direct practice. The following contributions help raise awareness about a range of pressing issues, such as advancing brave, critical spaces in social work doctoral pedagogy, illuminating and disrupting the harsh realities faced by Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, resisting epistemic oppression in mental health systems, advancing the rights of older people in acute care, asserting legitimacy as a Black feminist scholar, resisting transgender marginalization in India through community research, and doctoral students' reflections on reimagining social work. Together, the works presented in this issue offer pathways to challenge the dominant structures in a variety of contexts and practice spaces. These contributions emphasize the importance of centering care, trust, openness, ethics, and community as forms of resistance and transformation. The suggested reading order highlights how change begins with social work pedagogy, the special issue starting with a paper on an innovative doctoral seminar on social justice pedagogy. The issue then moves to examine injustice and advocacy in different systems, and finally broadens to show the global reach of these issues. The concluding paper brings together the voices of doctoral students, who, through a roundtable paper, discuss social justice change in social work and engage with the various manuscripts included in the special issue.

Written by authors Amilah Baksh, Alison K. Parnell, Shoshana Pollack, Maxxine Rattner, and Andrew Tibbetts, the first paper titled "Harms and possibilities: Social work doctoral students reflect on social justice pedagogy" offers a thought-provoking reflection on the authors' experiences in a doctoral seminar on social justice pedagogy, and the impact it had on their academic and personal journeys. The manuscript highlights how intersecting identities shape classroom dynamics and the tensions that can emerge as a result. The authors offer recommendations for creating classroom spaces that are inclusive of minoritized and

historically oppressed identities. They emphasize the importance of the social justice classroom being a brave space, one that fosters engagement, open dialogue, care, relationality, and creativity.

In the second paper titled “Epistemic oppression and sites of resistance in mental health systems,” author Anjali Upadhyya-O’Brien offers a critical analysis of epistemic oppression in mental health – how it operates, its harmful impacts on individuals with mental health issues, particularly racialized people, and the various ways it can be resisted. Through this analysis, the author shares personal reflections from her experience as a social worker in mental health, describing how she witnessed epistemic oppression firsthand and the challenges it posed in her practice. The manuscript traces this form of oppression to the positivist biomedical model, showing how it remains embedded in mental health systems and has roots in colonial histories, including the period when Europeans brought enslaved people to the Caribbean. The author explores critical strategies for resistance, including the potential of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. However, she also points to the limitations of these efforts when they remain surface-level and fail to challenge or transform the status quo.

Written by authors Xueping Ma and Tamara Sussman, the third paper, titled “Social work practice with older persons in acute care settings: A narrative review of social workers’ role as advocates for older persons’ rights”, presents findings from a literature review of 26 studies on social work practice in acute care settings with older persons. Using a rights-based framework, the authors illuminate that advocacy which centers the voices of older people, is infrequently exercised within this health care setting due to the dominant discourses which prioritize efficiency and risk management. They purport recommendations to re-centre advocacy as a critical practice in acute care.

Titled “Des paradoxes et périls du statut “*outsider-intégré·e*” : réflexions d’une travailleuse sociale féministe Noire sur la fabrique de la légitimité”, the fourth paper of this issue is written by Kharoll-Ann Souffrant. Using an autoethnographic approach, the author reflects on her positionality as a Black woman conducting research on Black feminist sexual violence activism. Her “outsider-within” status is shaped by her experiences across academic, activist, community, and media spaces, as a Black woman born to immigrant parents and the first in her family to attend university. The paper draws connections between the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, exposing how Black feminists are often marginalized within sexual violence activism. Through her own story, and the concepts of “class transplant” and “epistemic deference”, the author critically examines how certain theories – particularly standpoint theories used in antiracist and feminist spaces – can unintentionally reproduce injustice.

The fifth paper, “Experiences of refugees: Understanding challenges of Eritrean refugees, Alemwach site, Ethiopia,” is written by Jibril Dawude Hassen and Kamal Khatiwada. The authors examine the experiences of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, highlighting the daily struggles they endure in refugee camps through a qualitative study. Findings from interviews, observations, and documentation reveal that refugees in these camps face severe restrictions on movement, lack the right to work, experience precarious relationships with host communities, endure significant security risks, and are frequently victims of crime. This paper underscores the

urgent need for enhanced psychological, administrative, and socioeconomic support to improve the safety and security of Eritrean refugees and foster a more stable environment for them.

Written by Lydia Pandian and Elizabeth Grigg, the sixth paper “Reflecting on community-based research with the transgender community in South India” presents the use of street theatre as a tool for resistance and awareness. Through a community-based action research approach and Freirean pedagogy, the authors offer a reflective narrative on the lived realities of the transgender community in India, particularly in Chennai, and the development of a street theatre performance within this community. The manuscript traces the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic history of the transgender community, including the rights granted and taken away, and their experiences of exclusion, violence, and injustice. The authors show how street theatre can serve as a form of decolonial resistance, enabling the transgender community to raise awareness about their realities, challenges, and struggles.

The last paper offers a discussion between co-authors Johanne Thomson-Sweeny, Chloé Souesme, Amanda Keller, Christina Tortorelli, and Jolene Heida. The paper, titled “Doctoral student voices on justice, ethics, and change: A roundtable article on reimagining social work” is rooted in their leadership roles within the Canadian Social Work Doctoral Student Network’s (CSWDSN) annual conference. This paper offers a rich and layered reflection on the state of social justice in social work education and practice. Drawing from their diverse institutional, academic, and personal experiences, the authors engage in a collective dialogue, structured around three guiding questions, that interrogates the discipline’s historical legacies, current innovations, and future possibilities. Interwoven throughout the conversation are references to other manuscripts in the special issue, creating a connective thread between the authors’ perspectives and the special issue.

The guest editorial team wishes to reiterate its acknowledgement of the forward-thinking group of students who founded the (CSWDSN). The Network offers a space for doctoral students in social work to connect, collaborate, and innovate. Since its inaugural year in 2022 at the University of British Columbia, the Network has spearheaded a conference that continues to grow, with annual gatherings held each year since. The co-chairs of the first edition of the annual conference were Connie Bird and Anne Seymour. The second edition of the annual conference took place in 2023 at the University of Calgary, in Alberta, and was chaired by Christina Tortorelli and Beck Gower. The third edition took place at the University of Montreal (UdeM), in Quebec, in 2024, and was a tri-university collaboration between UdeM, McGill University, and the University of Quebec at Montreal. The conference was co-chaired by Johanne Thomson-Sweeny, Amanda Keller, and Chloé Souesme. The fourth edition of the conference was held in May 2025, as part of a tri-university collaboration between the University of Toronto, York University, and McMaster University. It was co-chaired by Rasnat Chowdhury, Yahan Yang, Adrienne Young, Kamilah Clayton, Anjali Upadhya-O’Brien, Kusum Bhatta, and Rochelle Maurice. Members of the network can now look ahead to the fifth edition of the conference, scheduled to take place in Ottawa in 2026 and co-chaired by Noëlle Buzohera (University of Ottawa) and Jacqueline Rousseau (Carleton University).

In this second part of the special issue, we acknowledge the continued efforts of the editorial team in bringing the project to completion. Following the initial announcement, Johanne, as the PhD student lead, coordinated key aspects of the editorial workflow, from reviewer engagement to author communications and feedback management. Student editorial team members contributed according to their availability and expertise, offering input on manuscript fit, participating in the review process, and by helping with the refinement of the editorial and its translation. Faculty collaborators provided mentorship throughout, offering guidance on editorial decisions, refining feedback, and supporting the editorial's development and translation. This collective effort reflects the collaborative spirit at the heart of the CSWDSN.

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