



Promoting Environmental Justice and Sustainability in Social Work: A Call for Curriculum Integration

Safiya R.* and Kavitha R.

Social Work Department, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India
safiya.ahmed1993@gmail.com

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 13th April 2024, revised 28th June 2024, accepted 30th October 2024

Abstract

Natural disasters cause displacement and can affect community infrastructure. The incidence of extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods is increasing, and a warmer climate will bring tougher, more frequent storms. States and cities are taking action to anticipate these events. They are establishing adaptation plans, circulating information that is accessible in the native languages of community members, and planning for the needs of particular communities, including people with disabilities who have specific service needs. Social workers are likely to encounter situations in everyday practice that are connected with climate change. This research paper emphasizes the importance of incorporating environmental justice and sustainability into social work education. Social workers play a crucial role in addressing the intersecting social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by vulnerable populations. However, the profession often fails to adequately prepare its practitioners to address these issues. By integrating environmental justice and sustainability principles into social work curricula, future social workers can better understand and address the root causes of environmental problems, advocate for policy changes, foster sustainable practices within their communities, and foster a commitment to contribute to sustainable solutions on an individual and systemic level. This paper explores the rationale for incorporating environmental justice and sustainability into social work education, identifies potential barriers and challenges, and provides recommendations for curriculum integration.

Keywords: Social Work, Environmental Justice, Sustainability, Curriculum Integration, Vulnerable Populations, Education, Green Social Work.

Introduction

Social workers are uniquely able to address the human consequences of environmental degradation and promote sustainable practices within their communities. However, traditional social work education has not fully acknowledged the intersection of social, economic, and environmental justice issues¹. As a result, social work programs must integrate environmental justice and sustainability into their curricula to equip future social workers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to tackle environmental challenges effectively.

Social workers play an essential role in advocating for and supporting marginalized populations who are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation. They possess the expertise to address the social and psychological repercussions of pollution, disasters, and other environmental injustices. Nevertheless, traditional social work education often lacks the necessary emphasis on environmental justice and sustainability.

The interconnectivity of social, economic, and environmental justice is undeniable. Environmental degradation perpetuates poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, while further exacerbating existing disparities. Moreover, environmental degradation's consequences, such as climate change and

resource depletion, affect individuals, families, and communities profoundly². These challenges require social workers to possess a comprehensive understanding of environmental issues and the skills to work towards sustainable solutions. This integration ensures that social workers are prepared to assess the environmental impacts on individuals and communities, identify environmental risks and vulnerabilities, and promote sustainable practices.

Moreover, integrating environmental justice and sustainability into social work through Green Social Work in curricula helps instill values of environmental stewardship and social responsibility among future social workers. This mindset is critical for advocating for policies and practices that promote sustainability and environmental justice. Social workers must recognize the importance of sustainable development and incorporate it into their practice as they work towards creating a just and equitable society for all.

Rationale for Integration

Intersectionality: Incorporating environmental justice and sustainability into social work curricula is crucial for future social workers to address complex environmental challenges. By developing an intersectional lens, future social workers can

understand and address the root causes of environmental disparities in marginalized communities. To work for advocating policy changes, community-centered interventions, and resource allocation that promote sustainability and environmental justice³. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and global exposure, students can engage in international advocacy and empower community members to participate in decision-making processes regarding environmental issues. By understanding and challenging the root causes of environmental disparities, social workers can play a significant role in creating more equitable and sustainable communities.

Advocacy and Policy Development: Dominelli, L.⁴ stated that social workers play a crucial role in advocating for environmental justice and sustainability policies. Curriculum integration can equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective advocacy by teaching them about the social, economic, and political factors contributing to environmental injustice, case studies on how environmental policies have disproportionately affected marginalized communities, and developing research, analytical, communication, and advocacy strategies. By integrating environmental justice and sustainability through Green Social Work into the social work curriculum, students can develop the knowledge, skills, and ethical understanding to engage in effective policy advocacy, contributing to promoting environmental justice and sustainability, thereby advancing social and environmental well-being for individuals and communities.

Holistic Approach: Social workers take a holistic approach, considering the interconnections between social, economic, and environmental aspects of people's lives. Integrating environmental justice and sustainability into the curriculum equips social workers with the knowledge and skills to address the needs of their clients and communities effectively. This ensures that they can promote social justice and environmental well-being.

Barriers and Challenges

Obstacles: Green Social Work along with environmental justice and sustainability are not widely understood or integrated into social work education and practice⁵. This is due to a lack of resources, resistance to change, power dynamics, and structural barriers. Overcoming these obstacles requires creating awareness, promoting diversity and inclusion, advocating for policy changes, and integrating these issues into all aspects of social work education and practice.

Competing Priorities: Social work programs need to incorporate more environmental justice and sustainability content in their curriculum. This requires a comprehensive analysis of course syllabi, textbooks, and assignments, as well as collaboration with various stakeholders within the social work community⁶. A strategic plan should be developed to

integrate environmental justice and sustainability content into the curriculum, including faculty development and practical experience through tailored field placements. Partnerships with departments like environmental studies, public health, and urban planning are also crucial. Curriculum evaluation and improvement are ongoing processes for effective teaching⁷.

Recommendations for Curriculum Integration

To address these limitations, a comprehensive framework for integrating environmental justice and sustainability principles into social work education is necessary. This framework can be implemented across various courses, fostering a holistic understanding of the social and environmental dimensions of human well-being. Here are some potential areas of integration:

Integration within Core Courses: Integrating environmental justice and sustainability principles into core social work courses can ensure that students are exposed to these concepts throughout their education.

Integration within Core Course:(on Green Social Work) To infuse environmental justice, sustainability, and green social work concepts throughout existing courses on social policy, human rights, community organizing, and social work ethics⁸.

Key Framework: To introduce core principles of environmental justice like equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, meaningful community participation in environmental decision-making, and the right to a healthy environment. To explore concepts like ecological balance, intergenerational equity, and sustainable development models aligned with social justice principles of sustainability.

Skill Development: By equipping students with tools to assess the environmental factors impacting clients' well-being, such as exposure to pollution or lack of access to green spaces. Use of community engagement skills by developing students' skills in facilitating community participation in environmental decision-making processes and fostering collaboration with environmental justice organizations. Introducing policy advocacy skills by training students to advocate for policies that promote environmental justice and sustainable practices at local, state, and federal levels⁹.

Research Opportunities: Encouraging students to undertake research projects or theses on environmental justice, sustainability, and green social work topics can help build a strong knowledge base in this field and further promote the integration of these principles into social work education. Faculty members can support students in identifying research questions, selecting appropriate methodologies, and finding resources for their projects.

Professional Development: Social work programs should offer faculty and staff ongoing professional development on

environmental justice and sustainability. This enables instructors to integrate these principles into their teaching and mentorship of students.

Critical Reflection and Intersectionality: To encourage students to critically examine the historical and ongoing environmental injustices faced by marginalized communities and the role of social work in addressing them. By highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental justice with issues of race, class, and gender.

Elective Specializations: Social work programs can offer elective specializations or concentrations in environmental justice and sustainability for students who wish to gain in-depth knowledge and skills.

Collaborate with other departments: Encourage collaboration with other departments to create interdisciplinary courses and projects for a comprehensive understanding of environmental justice and sustainability issues. These courses would explore topics such as the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations, strategies for tackling environmental racism, and the role of social workers in advocating for sustainable and just policies and practices¹⁰.

Guest lectures and workshops: Invite speakers from diverse backgrounds, including environmental activists, policymakers, and researchers, to give lectures and workshops on environmental justice and sustainability. This will expose students to different perspectives and provide insights into real-world challenges and solutions.

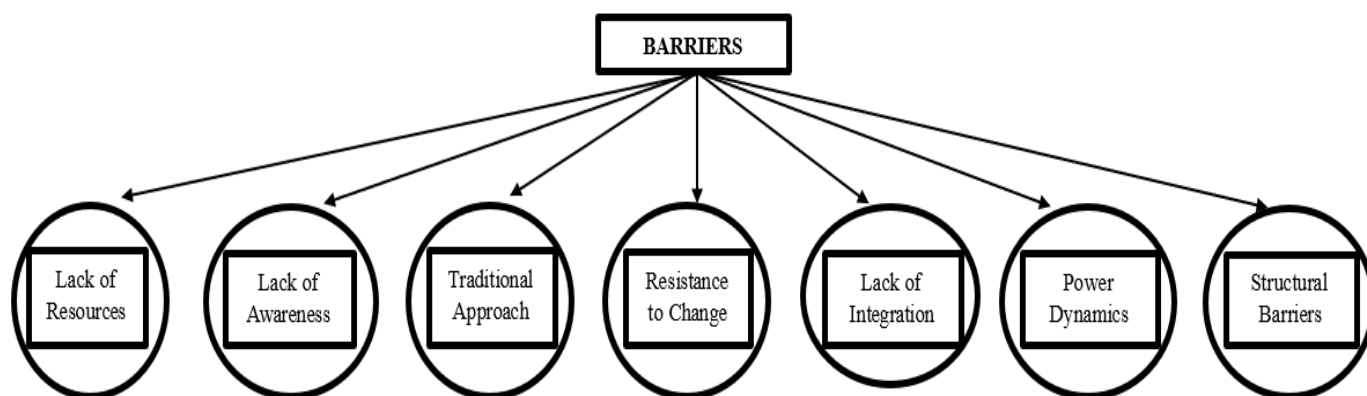


Figure-1: By Authors - Barriers to incorporating Environmental Justice and Sustainability into social work curricula.

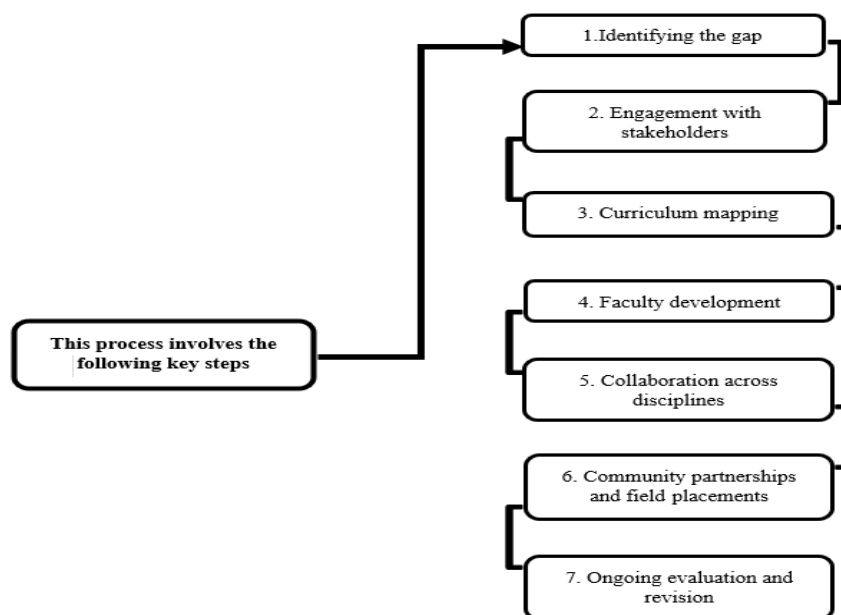


Figure-2: The process involved in prioritizing Environmental Justice and Sustainability.

Awareness campaigns and advocacy: To provide avenues for students to educate their classmates, professors, and society at large about topics related to environmental justice and sustainability. This can be achieved through organizing awareness campaigns, panel discussions, or public lectures. To inspire and support students to become advocates for positive change and empower them to make a difference in their communities. Students can also get involved in policy advocacy initiatives at local, state, and federal levels¹¹. Curriculum integration is an ongoing process that requires continuous evaluation and adaptation to meet evolving societal needs and emerging environmental challenges.

Field Placement Opportunities: Social work students should have access to field placement options that focus on environmental justice and sustainability. This will provide them with real-world examples of how social work can contribute to addressing environmental challenges.

Collaborate with local environmental organizations: Reach out to local environmental groups, non-profits, and government agencies to create field placements for social work students. Opportunities may include grassroots advocacy efforts, policy development, community-based research projects and outreach programs, and environmental education. Students with opportunities to participate in sustainability initiatives within their local communities can help them develop a deeper understanding and practical application of these principles¹².

Provide placement, training, and support: Social work students in field placements centered on environmental justice and sustainability need proper training and support, including workshops on topics like community organizing, environmental policy, and ecological justice. Students can work directly with environmental justice issues and learn how social work can help address them. Consistent supervision and mentorship can help students navigate the challenges of this field¹³.

Case Study and Real-World Applications: Using case studies that showcase how environmental factors intersect with social issues faced by clients. And analyzing how social workers can advocate for environmental policies that promote social equity with community-based initiatives focused on environmental justice and sustainability.

Evaluation and reflection: Regular evaluations and reflection opportunities are essential for social work students involved in field placements related to environmental justice. This feedback and reflection process will help students develop a deeper understanding of the connections between social work, environmental justice, and sustainability.

Global Perspective: To explore the global dimensions of environmental issues and how social work can contribute to sustainable development efforts worldwide can be an effective tool for integration.

Conclusion

Promoting environmental justice and sustainability in social work through green social work is crucial for creating a more equitable and sustainable society. As climate change and environmental degradation continue to exacerbate social inequalities, social workers play a crucial role in addressing these interrelated issues. By integrating environmental justice and sustainability into social work curricula, future social workers can be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to address the complex environmental and social challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

This research paper emphasized the significance of curriculum integration in promoting environmental justice and sustainability in social work education. Through analyzing current trends and gaps in social work education, it has become apparent that there is a need for more comprehensive and interdisciplinary education on environmental justice and sustainability. By incorporating these topics into social work courses, students can better comprehend the complex intersections between social and environmental issues and develop innovative strategies to promote justice and sustainability.

Moreover, curriculum integration can also foster a greater sense of agency and empowerment among social work students. By providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to address environmental injustices and promote sustainability, social work educators can help cultivate a new generation of social workers who are better prepared to tackle environmental challenges.

Green social work provides social workers with a framework to address issues related to environmental justice, take into account the impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable communities, and advocate for policies that promote sustainability and fairness. By implementing a green social work approach, professionals can tackle the underlying causes of environmental injustices, confront systemic inequalities, and strive to create a more equitable and sustainable society.

By integrating principles of environmental justice and sustainability into social work education in core courses, offering elective specializations, and providing field placement opportunities that focus on environmental justice, social work programs can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences required to advocate for social and environmental justice. Collaboration with other departments, continuous professional development, and critical reflection on intersectionality are also essential components of this integration process. As social workers play a vital role in advocating for marginalized communities and addressing systemic inequities, a strong foundation in environmental justice and sustainability is necessary for creating positive change in society.

However, curriculum integration is only one part of the solution. Promoting environmental justice and sustainability in social work also requires transformative changes at the institutional and policy levels. Social work programs should prioritize the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty members with expertise in environmental justice and sustainability. Furthermore, social work organizations and accrediting bodies should develop guidelines and standards for integrating these topics into social work education. Therefore, promoting environmental justice and sustainability in social work is a collective responsibility.

References

- Teixeira, S., & Krings, A. (2015). Sustainable social work: An environmental justice framework for social work education. *Social Work Education*, 34(5), 513-527.
- Kikstra, J. S., Nicholls, Z. R., Smith, C. J., Lewis, J., Lamboll, R. D., Byers, E., ... & Riahi, K. (2022). The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report WGIII climate assessment of mitigation pathways: from emissions to global temperatures. *Geoscientific Model Development*, 15(24), 9075-9109.
- Beltrán, R., Hacker, A., & Begun, S. (2016). Environmental justice is a social justice issue: Incorporating environmental justice into social work practice curricula. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(4), 493-502.
- Dominelli, L. (2013). Environmental justice at the heart of social work practice: Greening the profession. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22(4), 431-439.
- Wu, H., & Greig, M. (2022). Adaptability, interdisciplinarity, engageability: Critical reflections on green social work teaching and training. In *Healthcare* (Vol. 10, No. 7, p. 1245). MDPI.
- Melekis, K., & Woodhouse, V. (2015). Transforming social work curricula: Institutional supports for promoting sustainability. *Social Work Education*, 34(5), 573-585.
- Pillai, V. K., & Gupta, R. (2013). The greening of social work.
- Papadimitriou, E. (2020). The social worker as a green profession. *Social Cohesion and Development*, 15(2), 139-152.
- Zsóka, Á., Szerényi, Z. M., Széchy, A., & Kocsis, T. (2013). Greening due to environmental education? Environmental knowledge, attitudes, consumer behavior and everyday pro-environmental activities of Hungarian high school and university students. *Journal of cleaner production*, 48, 126-138.
- Rambaree, K. (2020). Environmental social work: Implications for accelerating the implementation of sustainable development in social work curricula. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 21(3), 557-574.
- Chiles, R. M., Ard, K., Teixeira-Poit, S., Flora, C., Williams, R., & Grady, C. (2022). Empowering students to confront environmental injustice: Dialogue, theory, empathy, and partnership. *SN Social Sciences*, 2(12), 255.
- Schmitz, C. L., Stinson, C. H., & James, C. D. (2010). Community and environmental sustainability: Collaboration and interdisciplinary education. *Critical Social Work*, 11(3).
- Nesmith, A., & Smyth, N. (2018). Environmental justice and social work education: Social workers' professional perspectives. In *Environmental Justice* (pp. 30-47). Routledge.
- Agyeman, J., & Crouch, C. (2004). The contribution of environmental justice to sustainability in higher education. In *Higher education and the challenge of sustainability: Problematics, promise, and practice* (pp. 113-130). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Ajaps, S. (2023). Deconstructing the constraints of justice-based environmental sustainability in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(5), 1024-1038.
- Decker Sparks, J. L., Combs, K. M., & Yu, J. (2019). Social work students' perspective on environmental justice: Gaps and challenges for preparing students. *Journal of Community Practice*, 27(3-4), 476-486.
- Drolet, J., Wu, H., Taylor, M., & Dennehy, A. (2018). Social work and sustainable social development: Teaching and learning strategies for 'green social work' curriculum. In *Environmental Justice* (pp. 74-89). Routledge.
- Jones, P. (2018). Greening social work education: Transforming the curriculum in pursuit of eco-social justice. In *The Routledge handbook of green social work* (pp. 558-568). Routledge.
- Naranjo, N. R. (2020). Environmental issues and social work education. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2), 447-463.
- Sepúlveda Hernández, E. (2023). Socio-environmental conflicts and the path to greater environmental justice: interpretations by social work educators. *Social Work Education*, 1-19.
- Strayer, S. E. (2020). Environmental Justice in Social Work Education: Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. Widener University.
- Strayer, S., Joseph, R., & Stoeffler, S. W. (2023). Predictors of integration of environmental justice in social work education: a cross-sectional study of faculty in the United States. *Social work education*, 42(1), 94-111.