

Reclaiming Social Work's Human Rights Commitments in Restrictive Political Climates

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Abstract

Across multiple national contexts, social work education and practice are facing growing political constraints on equity-oriented, race-conscious, and justice-focused work. In the United States, a wave of race-based and anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation has significantly restricted how social workers are trained, how institutions may speak about inequality, and how structural injustice can be addressed within publicly funded systems. These developments raise a critical question for the profession: should social work retreat from DEI frameworks in response to political pressure, or reaffirm its core values even when they are contested?

This presentation uses recent U.S. legislation as a case study to examine broader implications for the future of social work as a human rights profession. It argues that what is often labeled as “DEI work” is not an optional or ideological add-on, but an expression of social work's foundational commitments to human dignity, self-determination, social justice, and the protection of marginalized groups. When equity-centered practice is constrained, the profession risks narrowing its ethical scope and weakening its advocacy role.

Drawing on historical and contemporary examples from social movements, community organizing, and rights-based practice, the presentation situates current debates within social work's longer tradition of resistance to exclusionary policies and institutional harm. It highlights practical strategies social workers are using to sustain justice-centered education and advocacy in restrictive environments, including reframing equity work through human rights language, embedding structural analysis into policy and field education, and elevating community-based knowledge as legitimate expertise.

Rather than offering a prescriptive solution, this presentation invites international dialogue on how social work can remain ethically grounded amid political backlash. By engaging the tensions between compliance, resistance, and professional responsibility, it calls on social workers globally to reflect on how—and whether—the profession can uphold its human rights mandate without abandoning the very populations it is meant to serve.