

Social Work Action Network – International

Statement on Trans Oppression, Solidarity and Social Work

Faced with a series of profound interlocking crises – the Covid pandemic, climate change, the threat of economic slump – ruling classes across the globe are resorting to their time-honoured tactic of scapegoating oppressed groups to divert attention from the problems thrown up by the failures of neoliberal capitalism.

Since the launch of the ‘War on Terror’ following the 9/11 attacks, the main victims of that scapegoating have been Moslem communities across the globe with Islamophobia used to divide and rule working-class people suffering the fall-out from these crises. Increasingly, however, it is LGBT+ communities which are the object of demonisation. In Indonesia, two gay men were publicly flogged by police in January 2021 after a vigilante mob allegedly found them having sex and handed them over to the authorities. In Hungary Victor Orban’s far right government has passed a law banning any depiction of homosexuality in school sex education, films and advertisements. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is reported to have said that he would rather have a gay son killed in a car crash than live with a man at his side. In Greece, only during 2020 in 30-out of the 107 recorded incidents of racist attacks- the victims were LGBTQI+ individuals (Racist Violence Recording Network, 2021). And in the UK, LGBT+ people have described ‘a climate of fear’ with physical attacks on gay people and hate crime increasing year on year (*Guardian*, 30 August, 2021).

A significant part of the LGBT+ community – trans people - has become a particular target for demonisation and abuse. One of Donald Trump’s first actions following his election as US President in 2016 was to impose a ban on trans people serving in the armed forces. In Brazil in 2020, 175 trans people were killed, an increase of 41% on the previous year which makes the country the world leader in this shameful ranking. In the UK, opponents of trans rights have been successful in delaying changes to the Gender Reform Act which would have allowed trans people to transition without undergoing lengthy medicalised and psychiatric procedures. Their campaign has been based on the denial of the reality of gender identity and/or on the portrayal of trans women as sexual predators.

As groups of social workers from around the globe affiliated to the Social Work Action Network- International (SWAN-I), we reject this view of trans people as both false and stigmatising.

Gender identity is a lived reality which does not always correspond to the sex assigned at birth. The denial of that reality by family and society is one important factor behind the very high levels of mental distress experienced by many trans people. But only one factor. For as numerous research reports have shown, trans people are oppressed and discriminated against in every sphere of life. For example, when analysing hate crimes against the LGBTI+ population in Argentina during the year 2020, we find that 84% of the victims of this type of crimes correspond to trans women (transvestie, transsexuals and transgender people) while the remaining percentage corresponds to cis-gay men and lesbians, among others (LGBT Argentinian Federation, 2021).

Stonewall, the leading LGBT+ organisation in the UK, for example, reports that:

More than four in five (83 per cent) trans young people have experienced name-calling or verbal abuse; three in five (60 per cent) have experienced threats and intimidation; and more than a third (35 per cent) of trans young people have experienced physical assault (Stonewall, 2017)

This is, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Trans people (and especially working-class trans people and people of colour) experience discrimination within education systems, in employment, in accessing housing and in escaping domestic abuse. (Faye, 2021). Moreover, trans people who are migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees often experience large-scale human rights violations. In many cases, they are not granted refuge nor can they access social rights under equal conditions. They experience sexual, physical and psychological violence in their country of origin, during their journey to the reception country and during the asylum process, which could be characterized as a non-gender/ sexuality-sensitive system. Often they lack access to legal and social support and face isolation and marginalization (Tschalaer, 2020)

Challenging the oppression and discrimination experienced by trans people – and of oppressed groups in general – should be a core element of good social work practice.

For us in SWAN-I that means:

National and international social work organisations should be actively challenging false information and stigmatising stereotypes of trans people through their research, publications, conferences and other forums. Trans rights are human rights. The IFSW position statement *Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression* is a good example of the kind of response required.

Social Work Education: Issues of sexual orientation and gender identity should be part of social work qualifying and post-qualifying education and training, with trans people involved both in the preparation and presentation not only of modules but of the entire curriculum. Hatred and discrimination towards LGBT + people should be addressed throughout courses and the violation of trans rights should be clearly referred to as a violation of human rights and included in the teaching of ethics. Also, it is very important for trainee social workers to learn to address social issues intersectionally and to be able to link discrimination against LGBT+ people with other forms of discrimination as well as poverty and inequality.

Social care services: There are many examples of trans people being discriminated against within health and social care services. Services such as youth services and residential care settings should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of trans people.

Social Work Practice: In-service training should be organised to ensure that practising social workers are aware of the issues faced by trans people and how they can best be supported. The social work profession cannot be indifferent to the struggles of LGTBI + groups in their respective countries. Developing strategic alliances that increase the profile of these struggles and strengthen the rights of those involved should be an essential goal of social work.

In conclusion, trans people, including trans social workers, social work educators and service users experience many of the same problems as do non-trans people who use social work services. Homelessness, domestic violence, gender-based discrimination, poverty, cuts to services, and over-medicalised mental health services are some of the problems, which intertwine and reinforce different and multiple systems of oppression and social structures. Thus, social workers should try to incorporate an intersectional approach in everyday practice. A social work profession that actively campaigns and fights around all these issues is an important way of supporting not only trans people but also all those struggling to survive under a neoliberal capitalism which promotes spurious family values and the pursuit of profit over human rights.

References

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