

Book Review: Gabel, Shirley. *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Justice in Social Work Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. xvi + 212 pages. Hardcover, \$51.77.

In *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Justice in Social Work Practice*, Shirley Gatenio Gabel, Professor of Social Work and Mary Ann Quaranta Chair for Social Justice for Children at Fordham University, makes a clear and timely argument: social work must be explicitly reframed as a human rights profession. She insists that justice should be understood not simply as meeting needs or addressing deficits, but as the realization of rights—civil, social, economic, cultural, and environmental. This reorientation places dignity, participation, non-discrimination, transparency, and accountability at the center of practice.

The book follows a logical progression. The opening chapters revisit the ethical foundations of the profession—drawing on NASW principles of dignity and self-determination—while weighing cultural relativism against the universality of human rights. Chapters three to five trace the genealogy of human rights, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the ICCPR and ICESCR, highlighting U.S. “exceptionalism” in treaty ratification. Middle chapters explore identity, privilege, and power through social identity theory, positionality, and intersectionality, before engaging theories of justice from Rawls, Nozick, and restorative traditions. Later sections apply a rights-based lens to social, economic, and environmental justice, culminating in a practical framework: diagnose rights deficits, analyze intersecting harm, and design remedies across micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The conclusion issues a call for social work to embrace its role as a defender of rights.

The book advances two core claims. First, justice is best understood as the practical realization of human rights. Second, a rights-based approach (RBA) should supplant needs-based or clinical paradigms, which often individualize problems or frame them as pathology. By

situating practice within the global rights framework, Gabel connects professional ethics to concrete tools for accountability. This shift allows practitioners to see hunger, housing insecurity, or environmental toxicity not merely as misfortunes but as violations of rights, requiring systemic remedies rather than discretionary charity.

The book succeeds in three dimensions. First, it weaves history, law, ethics, and practice into an accessible narrative. Gabel grounds abstract principles in real cases such as the Flint water crisis, racial disparities in COVID-19 outcomes, and over-policing. These examples move beyond illustration; they model how practitioners can move from diagnosing rights deficits to designing remedies. Second, the book reframes familiar social problems. Hunger and homelessness are no longer policy “issues” but rights violations, shifting the conversation toward entitlements, accountability, and institutional obligation. Third, the practice framework is pragmatic. The three-step method aligns with the ecological person-in-environment perspective, giving clinicians, organizers, and policy advocates a shared structure for action. The environmental justice chapter—covering eco-grief, Indigenous stewardship, and community resilience—is particularly powerful, while reflection prompts make the book highly teachable in graduate classrooms.

As with any wide-ranging book, trade-offs are evident. The first concerns global scope. While the analysis is strongest in U.S. contexts, it engages less with Global South experiences where courts and movements have made social rights justiciable. Landmark cases from Latin America, South Asia, or Southern Africa—such as court-ordered remedies for health or housing—would have broadened the book’s comparative reach. Even short “case boxes” from Bogotá, Delhi, or Johannesburg could have offered useful strategies for practitioners facing U.S. exceptionalism.

Second, operationalization under resource constraints deserves more attention. The three-step model is clear, but many practitioners work in environments of austerity and managerialism. Additional tools—sample rights-claim letters, scripts for reframing eligibility interviews, or templates for documenting equity in case notes—would help practitioners translate theory into daily habits. A section on risk management, addressing retaliation or legal exposure when asserting rights, would also strengthen the guidance.

Third, measurement tools could be more localized. The book draws on national statistics, but practitioners often need neighborhood-level or organizational metrics. A short “how-to” on building local rights indicators—such as disaggregated access rates, complaint-to-remedy ratios, or participatory audit checklists—would bridge the gap between principle and practice. A simple logic model mapping inputs, processes, and outcomes to rights principles would also support replication and evaluation.

This work builds on and advances an important scholarly conversation. It echoes Jim Ife’s call to ground social work in human rights while offering a more practice-ready framework.¹ It extends Lena Dominelli’s green social work agenda by weaving environmental justice into a broader rights paradigm.² And it resonates with critical histories that trace social work’s oscillation between reform and control.³ Where Gabel makes her distinctive contribution is in architecture: she braids social, economic, and environmental justice into a single, actionable framework, complete with diagnostic and design steps.

A Human Rights-Based Approach to Justice in Social Work Practice is incisive, timely, and deeply relevant. It re-centers social work on dignity, equity, and accountability, and provides practitioners with a usable blueprint for integrating rights into daily practice. While further operational detail and global comparative examples would enrich its reach, the book succeeds in

bridging ethics, law, and practice into a coherent rights-first paradigm. It will be indispensable for graduate seminars, agency leadership teams, and anyone committed to aligning social services with the universal promise of human rights.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Ife, Jim, *Human Rights and Social Work: Towards Rights-Based Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

² Dominelli, Lena, *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

³ Abramovitz, Mimi, *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000; Reisch, Michael, and Janice Andrews, *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2002.