

Position on Racism and Oppressive Practices within Social Work

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“We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.” -*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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The National Association of Social Workers is the largest professional member organization of Social Workers in the world. As a body, we too must ensure that in word and in deed, we remain committed to calling out and working to address oppression, racism, and marginalization in ourselves, our profession, our educational systems, communities, and places of employment.

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As an organization that works to address social disparities, advocate for justice, and values the dignity and worth of individuals, the New York City Chapter acknowledges that in order to effectively address these areas, we too must be willing to look inward and recognize how the Social Work profession has been both part of the larger system of help and harm.

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Over the past few years, months, and weeks, we have witnessed an outcry and reckoning with long held practices of institutional racism, oppression, and marginalization within our society and our own professional institutions. While being Social Workers does not absolve us of the fallacies of being human, it does call us to a higher standard of humanity. As Social Workers, we must be committed to following our Code of Ethics and being aware of the beliefs and messages we bring into our spaces. This is critical even when it may be better politically, socially, and economically to say, *‘this doesn’t happen in our house’*, and especially when it means we are uncomfortable and must look at ourselves unfavorably.

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While discomfoting to admit, we recognize that the Social Work profession and the society within which it was founded, was and remains laden with *isms* and white supremacy. There have been numerous publications and studies that address racism and the experience of marginalization that many encounter through contact with Social Work and other helping professions [1], [2]. There are also studies that address how minority communities and professionals experience harm and stigma from systems of help[3], and those that speak to the oppression and harmful experiences of racism that Social Workers and other professionals of color encounter within the field.[4] Furthermore, beyond our formal practice of research and study, anecdotally, we are keenly aware that the *isms* within our profession and society exist and “the disparities are glaring”[5].

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As a chapter, we have been asked why we don’t always respond immediately to incidents of oppression and the numerous injustices that occur daily. While we understand the confusion and perhaps frustration that may result among individuals based on personal perspectives and expectations, as your professional organization, we must hold ourselves to the same standards and values we purport. We must take time to gather information, view all sides of an issue, work to acknowledge biases, and most importantly, we must be introspective to ensure that we are speaking truth to power, through action.

NASW-NYC is committed to addressing social inequalities through a lens of Race, Diversity, and Intersectionality. We do this through ensuring that our committees adopt this frame and by being intentional in collaborating with our volunteer leadership and groups that specifically address racial and social inequalities in their

work. The Coalition on Race, Diversity, and Intersectionality (CRDI) [6] and our Social Workers of European Descent Against Racism (SWEDAR) sub-committee work to ensure that the chapter, and the over 6,000 NYC members that make up NASW-NYC, are aware of this frame and engage others in understanding and adopting an anti-oppressive framework. We commit ourselves to this work in the legislation that we support, such as the Racial Equity Assessment in Legislation (REAL) bill. This bill would require that the New York State Legislature create a mechanism by which all bills be viewed through a racial equity lens, identify state policies and actions that can work to achieve conditions of racial equity, search for interdepartmental gaps or inconsistencies, and identify any new laws, regulations, programs, services, and budget priorities that are needed to ensure and promote desired conditions of racial equity.

There is something that stirs in us when we feel unheard, the toll of invisibility is real. Our work and mission is to bring the invisible to light, to empower, to change systems, and to work towards justice wherever that may be. We must do and be better for the sake of those we serve, for our profession, and for our world. The New York City Chapter invites you to partner with us to continue this work through [joining NASW-NYC](#), lending your voice to our committees, supporting our [NYC Political Action for Candidate Election \(PACE\)](#), and through participating in our [NASW-NYC Round Table Discussions](#)

We stand committed to this work as we know that it is not enough that our hearts and thoughts go out to those impacted by racism and oppression. Whether it is our colleagues in training at NYU, our brothers and sisters who have immigrated seeking better lives and opportunities, or the many others in NYC and across this country whose lived experience represents marginalization, in the spirit of NASW and the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, we recommit ourselves to justice “for it isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

NASW-NYC Staff

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[1] Sakamoto, I., & Pitner, R. O. (2005). Use of critical consciousness in anti-oppressive social work practice: Disentangling power dynamics at personal and structural levels. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 35(4), 435-452.

[2] Abrams, L. S., & Moio, J. A. (2009). Critical race theory and the cultural competence dilemma in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(2), 245-261.

[3] Fook, J., & Pease, B. (Eds.). (2016). *Transforming social work practice: Postmodern critical perspectives*. Routledge

[4] Dominelli, L. (1989). An uncaring profession? An examination of racism in social work. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 15(3), 391-403.

[5] S. Dunlap-Frazier, (personal communication, January 29, 2019).

[6] Brooks-Harrison, C., and DeSuze, K. (2013, October). *Developing a Committee on Race, Diversity, and Intersectionality*. Presentation at the National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter Leadership Retreat, New York, New York.