



Bridging Divides: A Review of Community-Based Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Societies Through a Social Work Perspective

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Abstract: Conflict-affected societies face complex challenges that extend beyond the cessation of hostilities to include deep-seated social fragmentation, trauma, and structural inequality. While traditional peacebuilding has often prioritized top-down political agreements, there is a growing consensus on the necessity of community-based, bottom-up approaches. This review paper examines the intersection of social work practice and community-based peacebuilding. It synthesizes existing literature to explore how social work theories, ethics, and methodologies contribute to conflict transformation. Key themes include the role of social workers in psychosocial support, mediation, and structural advocacy, as well as the ethical dilemmas inherent in practicing within volatile environments. The review concludes that social work offers a unique "person-in-environment" framework essential for sustainable peace, though gaps remain in empirical evidence and decolonized practice models.

Keywords: *Social Work, Community-Based Peacebuilding, Conflict-Affected Societies, Trauma-Informed Care, Social Justice, Restorative Justice.*

1. Introduction

Conflict remains one of the most significant barriers to human development and well-being globally. In the aftermath of war or during protracted conflict, communities suffer not only physical destruction but also the erosion of social capital, trust, and collective identity. Traditional peacebuilding efforts have historically focused on "high-level" diplomacy, disarmament, and security sector reform. However, scholars and practitioners increasingly

argue that sustainable peace requires transformation at the community level (Paul & Press, 1997).

Social work, a profession mandated by principles of social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility, is uniquely positioned to contribute to this grassroots peacebuilding. Despite this potential, the explicit integration of social work into peacebuilding literature has often been marginalized, with the field frequently subsumed under humanitarian aid or clinical psychology.

This paper reviews the current body of knowledge regarding community-based peacebuilding through a social work lens. It aims to: (1) delineate the theoretical convergence between social work and peacebuilding; (2) identify key intervention strategies employed by social workers in conflict zones; and (3) analyze the ethical and practical challenges faced in these contexts.

2. Theoretical Convergence: Social Work and Peacebuilding

The alignment between social work and peacebuilding is rooted in shared theoretical frameworks. Three primary theories dominate the literature regarding this intersection.

2.1. Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is foundational to social work. In conflict settings, violence is viewed not merely as an individual act but as a disruption across micro (family), mezzo (community), and macro (societal/political) systems (Ife, 2012). Peacebuilding, therefore, requires interventions that restore functioning at all levels. Literature suggests that social workers excel at navigating these intersections, addressing individual trauma while simultaneously advocating for policy changes that reduce structural violence.

2.2. Human Rights and Social Justice

The Global Definition of Social Work (2014) explicitly centers human rights. Peacebuilding is increasingly defined not just as the absence of war (negative peace) but as the presence of justice and equity (positive peace) (Galtung, 1969). Review articles indicate that social workers contribute to positive peace by addressing the root causes of conflict, such as resource distribution, discrimination, and exclusion, thereby aligning peacebuilding with social development.

2.3. The Strengths Perspective

Conflict-affected populations are often portrayed from a deficit perspective (as victims or traumatized subjects). The social work strengths perspective challenges this by viewing communities as holders of resilience and resources (Saleebey, 1996). Peacebuilding literature

supports this, noting that sustainable solutions must be owned by the community. Social workers facilitate this by identifying local leaders, cultural coping mechanisms, and existing support networks to drive the peace process.

3. Core Social Work Interventions in Peacebuilding

The literature categorizes social work contributions to community peacebuilding into three primary domains: psychosocial support, conflict resolution facilitation, and structural advocacy.

3.1. *Psychosocial Support and Trauma Healing*

Unresolved trauma is a significant driver of cyclical violence. Social workers provide trauma-informed care that goes beyond clinical therapy to include community healing rituals and group support. Studies from post-genocide Rwanda and post-war Bosnia highlight the role of social workers in facilitating group narratives that allow for collective grieving without inciting further hatred (Sommers, 2001). The review indicates that when psychosocial support is community-based rather than clinic-based, it reduces stigma and fosters social cohesion.

3.2. *Mediation and Dialogue*

Social workers often serve as neutral facilitators in community disputes. Unlike formal legal systems, which may be distrusted in post-conflict societies, social workers utilise restorative justice principles. This involves bringing victims and perpetrators (where safe and appropriate) into dialogue to acknowledge harm and rebuild relationships. Literature on Northern Ireland and Colombia suggests that social workers are effective in "micro-peace" processes—resolving local disputes over land or resources before they escalate into broader violence (Campbell, 2007).

3.3. *Reintegration and Social Inclusion*

The reintegration of ex-combatants, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is a critical phase of peacebuilding. Social workers provide case management and community integration programmes. Successful reintegration requires changing community attitudes as much as supporting the returnee. Research shows that social work interventions focusing on economic empowerment combined with community sensitization yield higher retention rates for ex-combatants than security-focused approaches alone.

3.4. *Advocacy and Structural Change*

Macro-social work involves policy advocacy. In conflict zones, this means documenting human rights abuses, advocating for the protection of civilians, and lobbying for

inclusive governance. The literature emphasises that social workers must move beyond "short-term" humanitarian relief to challenge the power dynamics that sustain conflict.

4. Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges

Practising social work in conflict-affected societies presents unique ethical complexities that differ from stable environments.

4.1. *Neutrality vs. Advocacy*

A central tension exists between the humanitarian principle of neutrality and the social work mandate to challenge oppression. If a social worker witnesses human rights violations, does maintaining neutrality to ensure access to the community complicitly support the oppressor? Literature suggests a shift towards "principled partiality," where social workers side with the vulnerable while maintaining professional boundaries (Wronka, 2017).

4.2. *Safety and Security*

The safety of the practitioner is a paramount concern. In many conflict zones, social workers are targeted because they are seen as agents of foreign influence or threats to local power structures. Reviews of practitioner safety indicate a lack of institutional support and security training within social work curricula, leaving many ill-prepared for high-risk environments.

4.3. *Cultural Competence and Imperialism*

There is a critique within the literature regarding the export of Western social work models to non-Western conflict zones. Imposing individualistic therapeutic models on collectivist societies can be ineffective or harmful. Decolonizing peacebuilding requires social workers to adapt methods to local cultural contexts, prioritizing indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms over imported frameworks.

5. Critical Gaps in the Literature

While the theoretical alignment is strong, this review identifies several gaps in the current knowledge base:

i. *Lack of Empirical Evidence*

Much of the literature is conceptual or based on anecdotal case studies. There is a scarcity of longitudinal, quantitative data measuring the specific impact of social work interventions on peace indicators (e.g., reduction in local violence rates).

ii. *Gender Dynamics*

While women are often central to community peacebuilding, the specific role of male social workers in engaging men and boys in violence prevention is under-researched.

iii. Interdisciplinary Collaboration

There is limited discussion on how social workers collaborate effectively with security forces, political diplomats, and military personnel without compromising ethical standards.

iv. Digital Peacebuilding

The role of social media and digital spaces in modern conflict is emerging, yet social work literature has scarcely addressed digital community organizing for peace.

6. Conclusion

Community-based peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies requires more than political treaties; it demands the reconstruction of the social fabric. This review affirms that social work provides an indispensable perspective in this endeavor. By utilizing a person-in-environment framework, social workers address the interplay between individual trauma and structural violence. They operate as healers, mediators, and advocates, fostering the local ownership necessary for sustainable peace.

However, for the profession to fully realize its potential in this domain, social work education must integrate conflict analysis and security training. Furthermore, the field must prioritize research that generates empirical evidence of efficacy and continues to decolonize practice models. As global conflict evolves, the social work commitment to human dignity and social justice remains a vital resource for building peace from the ground up.

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