Empowerment in Action:
#SWLeadAdvocateChampion

Tricia B. Bent-Goodley

The 2018 Social Work Month theme was "Social Workers: Leaders. Advocates. Champions." I would like to encourage social workers to adopt this theme for the entire 2018 year. Indeed, social workers are providing leadership, serving as advocates, and championing important issues to affect people within their communities, the nation, and beyond. It is important for the profession to embody these roles. Empowerment in action is occurring across communities, and social workers are very much engaged in and leading the charge. Social workers serve populations across the spectrum, providing care regardless of income and influence. The commitment to serve vulnerable populations has been long-standing in the profession. It is important to reflect on the profession's continued commitment to this population and the role that social workers play as agents of empowerment in providing leadership, serving as advocates, and championing issues that matter to the diverse populations we serve.

EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION FOR THE VULNERABLE

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2017a) *Code of Ethics* states that "social workers should act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups" (p. 30). This statement means that social workers have an ethical responsibility to support those who are most vulnerable to being hurt by rules, policies, and practices that can be harmful. Vulnerability has often been aligned with "harm, need, dependency, care and exploitation" (Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, 2014, p. 1). Yet, it can also be viewed as "contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat" (Mackenzie et al., 2014, p. 6), which is "exacerbated by the personal,

social, political, or environmental situation of individuals or social groups" (p. 7). Vulnerability can be based on biological, emotional, sociopolitical, or environmental influences (Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Thus, social workers cannot view vulnerability in isolation. In fact, to understand vulnerability one must understand systemic influences, life circumstances and events, traumatic experiences, and chronic life conditions (Gitterman, 2014). Experiencing vulnerability should not be viewed as pathological or a state of weakness; instead, it is important to recognize the resilience and self-empowerment of these populations. There have been examples of this in recent months. In the earlier part of 2018, a medical doctor was found guilty of sexually assaulting nearly 160 female gymnasts and over 100 additional women and girls during a period of at least 20 years (Associated Press, 2018). Many did not believe these women and girls despite their reports. It was hard for some to imagine the victimization of these women and girls at the top of their sport and in such high-profile positions. Somehow, their visibility was aligned with not being vulnerable. Yet, they were a population that was vulnerable, and their situation was exacerbated by the silence and inaction of those who received their reports and did nothing. At the sentencing portion of the trial, these women offered compelling victim impact statements that allowed them to use their voice and reclaim their power even as they continue the process of healing and pursuit of justice (Associated Press, 2018).

In October 2017, the issue of sexual harassment came to the forefront in the #MeToo movement, with women and men sharing their experiences with sexual harassment (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Sweetland Edwards, n.d.). The movement highlighted the pervasiveness of this problem as people of all walks of life shared their stories of being sexually harassed or assaulted in the workplace. It is known that "females

ages 18 to 24 had the highest rate of rape and sexual assault victimizations compared to females in all other age groups" (Sinozich & Langton, 2014), but there seemed to be less recognition that this issue persisted into the workplace. Through the #MeToo movement, more women began to share their stories, using their voices to create a charge for change, for which they were acknowledged as "Silence Breakers" (Zacharek et al., n.d.) who helped women see not only their common vulnerability, but also their significant strength in addressing the issue of sexual harassment.

Discussions around immigration have also been prevalent in our current discourse. The vulnerability associated with immigration status in this nation is not new to social workers (Chang-Muy & Congress, 2015). Charity Organization Societies and Settlement Houses were in large order found to address the needs and perceptions of immigrant communities (Segal, 2015). The vulnerability of these communities has been present since the inception of our nation's history. Yet, some groups that were once among those vulnerable communities are now creating a social environment of vulnerability for Latino and black immigrants from countries that some view as undesirable. Wrought with stereotypical, discriminatory, and—as some consider—racist language, these biases and systemic changes heighten the vulnerability of these immigrant communities. NASW (2017b) took a firm stance to serve as champions for not only those affected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (better known as DACA), but also with respect to creating comprehensive immigration policy and changing the narrative around immigration in this country. This issue will continue to warrant social work's voice and leadership in the pursuit of social justice.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS: LEAD, ADVOCATE, CHAMPION

As social workers, we are called not only to understand the context of vulnerability, but to remember that with vulnerability come resourcefulness, courage, coping and recovery, and resiliency (Gitterman, 2014). This statement means that, no matter the vulnerability or the pain of an experience, the people we serve possess the resiliency to recover. The role of social workers is to understand the importance of the social environment, to value social relationships, and to use a value-driven approach (Miller et al., 2017) as we seek to lead, advocate, and champion the issues that matter in our communities.

As leaders, it is important to recognize that one cannot lead, advocate, or champion issues in isolation. It must be done in relationship with others. By building relationships, we foster the opportunity to expand our worldview and the thinking of others. Change comes from working together with those who have shared values and differing perspectives. We build understanding when we talk to people with different experiences from ourselves. Valuing social relationships means that we cannot work in silos professionally or in terms of the diverse voices that sit at the table of change. In doing so, social workers must seek to develop policies, programs, and systems that appreciate diversity and view these voices as an opportunity and not a threat to growth. To truly lead, we must value relationships.

As advocates, there must be a firm sense of the social environment and how it affects people differently. In understanding how different populations experience the same issues, we become keen on the context of vulnerability and resilience. With this knowledge of the person-in-environment approach, social workers help individuals and communities empower themselves. In doing this, we teach, support, and nurture skills that help groups acknowledge their strengths and develop a skill set to persevere regardless of our presence.

As champions, it is important to be professionally value-driven in our approach. Having a value-driven approach implies "renewed attention to the causes and consequences of poverty and social marginalization" (Miller et al., 2017, p. S246). This statement means that social workers are called to champion issues that may not be their own individual issue, but are rooted in the values of our profession. As a champion of an issue, we are using values of social work, such as justice, fairness, and equity, to support and guide our approach regardless of purview or specialization area. We do this through modeling as leaders, advocates, and champions in our own spheres of influence, community, and broader society.

CONCLUSION

Social work is no stranger to addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. As we continue to grow in our own pursuit of social justice, it is our historical stance to stand for and with those who are most in need. Being able to acknowledge the resilience of these populations, as we work with them to create social change, is an important contribution that we continue to make with individuals, communities,

and the broader society. Our collective focus should still rest on a timeless promise to stand with those who are most vulnerable to societal changes, political shifts, and economic challenges. **SW**

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Tricia B. Bent-Goodley, PhD, LICSW, is professor, School of Social Work, Howard University, 601 Howard Place, NW, Washington, DC 20059; e-mail: tbent-goodley@howard.edu.