

Protest and Social Justice: Reflections on the 2016 Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development

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Introduction



The 2016 Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development was held June 27-30 in Seoul, South Korea. This year's conference theme was "Promoting the Dignity and Worth of People." The conference was attended by more than 2,500 people from over 200 countries.

In addition to attending and learning from the conference, I was fortunate to spend some time exploring Seoul with a South Korean social worker who completed her MSW at Michigan. During this time I had the opportunity to learn about several social advocacy movements that are currently active in South Korea.

In this poster, I highlight three of these movements – one of which involved a group of protesters that strategically used SWSD to draw attention to their cause – and examine the role of protest in the mission of social work.

Protest at SWSD

During the opening plenary of SWSD 2016 a group of South Korean disability activists called the Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination (SADD) group rushed the stage as South Korean Health and Welfare Minister Chung Chin-Youb spoke. The SADD protesters were quickly and forcibly removed by security guards. The Minister resumed speaking – as though nothing had happened – while security guards continued to violently remove protestors. One woman who uses a wheelchair was knocked out of her wheelchair during the security guards' violent response. Four guards carried her out of the auditorium by her wrists and ankles as she screamed, and then set her down on the floor in the hallway. Her chair was dragged out separately by other guards.



Disability Activists on the Stage at SWSD 2016 disrupt South Korean health and welfare minister Chung Chin-Youb's speech

Photo by Ruth Hardy <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/jun/27/disabled-protesters-social-work-conference-seoul>

Protest at SWSD 2016 (cont.)

After the minister finished, the presidents of the three global social work organizations that organize the conference spoke about social work's global agenda. They did not acknowledge the protest until someone in the audience shouted out, observing that the protesters were demanding dignity – the theme of SWSD 2016 – and asking for a response from the presidents. The president of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), Ruth Stark, responded by acknowledging that all people want dignity. Her brief comment, however, was widely critiqued in private conversations among conference participants who disliked that her statement could be interpreted to suggest that protest at a social work conference was somehow inappropriate and/or that protest was not the "best" way for people to seek change.

The SADD activists were protesting South Korea's disability rating system and obligatory provider system which rate a person's disabilities on a six-point scale and thereby determine what benefits and services that person can access and where they can access them (<https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/jun/28/disabled-activists-condemn-treatment-social-work-conference>; <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/jun/27/disabled-protesters-social-work-conference-seoul>).

With the support of the IFSW, on the second day of the conference the SADD activists returned with banners protesting the violence they faced the day before. SADD held a press conference asking social workers attending the conference to make statements denouncing the repression by conference and government security and staff, and pledging support to the SADD protesters. SADD also demanded an apology from the Minister of Health and Welfare.



SADD holds a press conference at SWSD

In response to the SADD protest a group of social workers issued a Dear Colleague letter asking the SWSD Conference Secretariat for an apology to SADD, for the Organizing Committee to request that the Minister of Health and Welfare meet with the SADD activists, and for future SWSD Organizing Committees to include groups that advocate for service users and service providers (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BJ0kFytLsoz51oRG0CAE3uoljqlR_bf8JH18hfZC_k/edit).

On the last day of SWSD, SADD activists were invited to speak.

Protest in the Fish Market

Some fish and seafood vendors at Noryangjin, Korea's largest fish market, are protesting the efforts to relocate them to a new market recently built next door. The red and yellow vests worn by vendors and the ribbons hanging from the lights signal their dissent. Many vendors do not want to move to the new market because they will have to pay 150% higher rent to sell there. They also say that moving the market is destroying the history of Noryangjin and is yet another example of gentrification in Seoul.



Vendors at Noryangjin wear vests and hang ribbons to protest the proposed relocation to a new market space

Protest and the Mission of Social Work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) includes in its global definition of the social work profession, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people..."

Because liberation is rarely just given to oppressed peoples – rather it must be fought for, protest is a key tool for seeking social justice. In her keynote address, Silvana Martinez, Latin American and Caribbean regional IFSW president, asked: "Can we speak about social work without speaking about power, about politics, about those who hold power?" Martinez argued that social work must not fall into the trap of only providing supportive services without also advocating and pushing for radical social change. Drawing on Latin American decolonial theorists, Martinez argued convincingly that supportive services without movements for social justice actually serve to preserve the status quo by obfuscating the root causes of the injustice.

Protest is an integral part of effective social justice movements that seek radical change, and as such, protest is an integral part of the social work profession. As social workers, we should not imagine the limit of our workplaces as our office doors. Our work is also out in the world, crossing borders between organizations, systems, places, and issues.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
– Martin Luther King Jr.,
Letter from Birmingham Jail – April 16, 1963

Protest on the Street



Information boards and a memorial altar for the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster that killed 304 people, mostly students.



A protest and memorial for the 304 people killed when the Sewol ferry sank on April 16, 2014 continues into its third year in the center of Seoul. Activists were handing out yellow memorial ribbons and collecting signatures on the petition below:

Nationwide petition calling for 1) an end to government obstruction of the investigation into the Sewol ferry disaster, 2) the guarantee of a complete and thorough investigation, and 3) the amendment of the Sewol Special Law

Our demands :

1. An end to the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries' interference with the investigation of the Special Investigation Committee and punishment of responsible parties.
1. The guarantee of a complete criminal investigation and the activation of a special prosecutor to investigate entities such as the Blue House and the National Intelligence Service.
1. The guarantee that the people's right to information will be respected in the hearing process (hearings held at the National Assembly, nationwide live-streaming of hearings).
1. The guarantee that remaining missing persons will be recovered as soon as possible, that the Sewol will be retrieved whole, and that the retrieval will be followed by a detailed and complete examination of the ship.
1. An amendment to the Special Law guaranteeing the Committee its 18 month investigation period and that it is provided with sufficient funding.

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