

Welcome address to the opening of the 7th social work congress in Slovenia

I am so pleased to be with you here in Moravske Toplice as you consider the theme of the Congress, Humanism and Ethics in Social Work¹.

Throughout my professional life, I have been privileged to experience international contexts related to my work as a social work educator. These invaluable and life changing experiences have convinced me time and time again of the importance of social work's role in global affairs and of our opportunity to not only serve but to create a legacy of who we are, what we are about, and how we make a difference in the lives of human beings globally based in the constructs of Universal Human Rights and Social Justice.

Has there ever been a more urgent time for global social work than now? On September 24, 2019, the now former President of the United States of America stood before the United Nations General Assembly, and declared:

The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors and honor the differences that make each country special and unique. (UN Archives)².

Although globalism has definite downsides, the nationalistic agenda espoused by the former president and growing numbers of other leaders around the world, some here in South and Eastern Europe, makes us shudder as we reflect on the similarities of what was happening in Continental Europe in the 1930's. Let's be clear, this nationalism is a direct affront to the humanism and ethics of social work – the theme of this conference.

It does not protect immigrants, the disabled, the LGBTQ community, women's reproductive choices, free trade, the environment or address the existential threat of global climate warming. Moreover, it ignores and even

¹ Dr. Julia Watkins je bila profesorica socialnega dela na Univerzi v Mainu v ZDA. V letih 1993–2003 je bila predsednica Ameriške univerze v Bulgariji (AUBG). Po vrnitvi v ZDA je bila med letoma 2003 in 2012 izvršna direktorica Nacionalnega sveta za izobraževanje v socialnem delu (Council on Social Work Education) v Alexandrii, Virginia, ki je nacionalna organizacija za akreditacijo programov socialnega dela v državi. Po upokojitvi je bila zakladnica v Mednarodni zvezi šol za socialno delo (IASSW) in je sodelovala s Skladom za odprto družbo. Skupaj z dr. Barbaro Shank je soustanoviteljica Southeast European Academic Women's Leadership Initiative in predsednica Fundacije Julie in Dennisa Watkinsa.

² The following day, September 25, the US House of Representatives opened an impeachment inquiry against this president for, most simply put, abuse of power. The Senate of the United States conducted a trial that resulted in acquittal.

exacerbates racial discrimination, religious and sexual violence. Its corruption is endemic and its lawlessness knows no boundaries. It does not respect its neighbors nor does it honor difference. The multilateralism we have supported and cultivated for the past 70 years is replaced by every nation for itself. It exposes a populism of exclusion and nations isolated from the fabric of humanism we social workers embrace.

Let's assume and be very clear that each nation is governed by its own unique rules, regulations, norms and cultural as well as historical and geopolitical understandings. In important ways, it is this uniqueness that shapes social work practice, for example, the relationship of social work to the state differs in Slovenia, Bulgaria, or the US. Recognition of uniqueness only heightens our responsibility to understand the context within which the purpose of social work is carried out – to be culturally competent, to exercise cultural humility. I agree. That, however, is not enough.

Why then, or how, is it even possible to talk about international social work? What is missing when we ignore the global perspective? Conveniently, and appropriately, we have used the framework of World Social Work Day (WSWD) each March to convey and discuss the elements unique to our own contexts. But we also use WSWD to unmask and emphasize something more universal, the global parameters of social work, something beyond the unique aspects of a specific culture. That is, its universal values, the humanism and the ethical base of the Congress theme.

Most of you, I assume, are familiar with the Global Agenda, jointly constructed by three international organizations (IFSW, ICSD, and IASSW) and used as a unifying mechanism for social work, social work education and social development over the past 8–10 years. To refresh our memories, its unifying pillars are: a.) promoting social and economic equalities; b.) promoting the dignity and worth of peoples; c.) working toward environmental sustainability; and d.) strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.

In addition, we can extract from these unifiers, several additional dimensions – dimensions without geographical boundaries – service, integrity and the value of education for professional competence. And always, we must underscore our adherence to the principles and accompanying actions for Universal Human Rights, Social Justice and Social Inclusion.

What purpose does international or universal serve? Is the point even important in this day of rising nationalism, populism and oppression? Of course it is. More so than at any time in the recent past.

With eloquence, the late Katherine A. Kendall, a noted internationalist and long serving secretary general of the IASSW, addressed this matter in a small, 1998 publication of the IASSW³. She describes our future as professionals, “bound by shared values and by methods that are still being forged

³ Katherine A. Kendall (1910–2010) je bila ena od ameriških pionirk socialnega dela, poučevala je socialno delo in bila prva sekretarka na področju izobraževanja v ameriškem nacionalnem Svetu za izobraževanje v socialnem delu (*Council of Social Work Education*) (uredniška opomba).

and tested, we work toward common goals of human betterment and social justice.”⁴ And finally, Katherine summed it up:

If we have a commitment to an idea that is larger than our own school, our own locality, our own country and region, we can make internationalism work for the improvement of social work education and practice, and contribute to a better future for the generations that succeed us.

Again, in her words, “therein lies the dream ... a sense of international solidarity.”

This is what I believe. It is the globalism I would seek; the universality of professional social work. I hope that in the deliberations today and tomorrow, we might use this belief as a guidepost to the future of social work humanism and ethics in a world order experiencing unimaginable stress from those nationalists who would want a very different future from the one we envision and stand for in solidarity.

This, I believe, is our legacy and our reason to embrace not only our unique cultural constructs but our shared vision for a socially just and inclusive world order!

Julia Watkins

⁴ Vsi citati Katherine Kendall so iz publikacije: Kendall, K. A. (1998). IASSW: the First Fifty Years 1928-1978. IASSW, April 1998. str. 25.