

# Coronavirus and Ruby Princess crew in Australia: A call for increased macro level social work

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The COVID-19 crisis has not only put the world on hold but has also laid bare the inequalities and structural challenges that have always existed and persisted in our societies. The impact that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis has, and will continue to have, on our lives and the social work profession cannot be overstated. Whatever the unfolding details, crisis situations can present - and expand - opportunities for social workers to make meaningful change that acknowledges and works to build a less unequal society. This article looks at the Ruby Princess incident in Australia during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. It critically analyses the way some people were treated, supported, or denied access to treatment due to citizenship, nationality, or country of origin during the pandemic. While the Ruby Princess crew members on board have a humanitarian right to be cared for in Australia, they were treated as an added problem. The ways the government responded and treated them reveal ideological tensions and operational challenges, resulting in structural barriers, inhumane treatment and vulnerability for people denied of natural justice and duty of care. COVID-19 in Australia, together with the Ruby Princess incident, has shown gaps in understanding of social workers' role during a pandemic. The incident has significant implications from a human rights perspective in national and global policy responses to, and recovery from, pandemics. This article contributes to literature on the role of social workers during a pandemic and its aftermath, and on how social workers can bring their knowledge, theories and practice skills to pandemic preparedness and policy responses to pandemics. Drawing on media analysis and critical review of social work policy and practice responses to crises, it calls for increased macro level social work and promotion of well-being, justice and human rights. It argues that the challenges presented by COVID-19 can be opportunities for social work to reinvent itself as a human rights-based profession and promote effective practice. It suggests, therefore, that by engaging in advocacy, policy, and equity work, social workers can help address structural systems, which perpetuate inequities and barriers in society, and ensure a more 'equal, just, and inclusive' society during a pandemic and beyond.

**Key words:** *COVID-19; equity; human rights; pandemics; Ruby Princess crew members, social work*



## Introduction

It was, first reported, in Wuhan, a city in China, in December 2019, that a virus was spreading (Cao et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Before we could know what was happening, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), a new virus that caused acute respiratory problems, spread very rapidly, reaching Australia. Due to its rapid spread across the globe, the World Health Organization characterised it, officially, as a pandemic on 11 March, 2020. By a pandemic, COVID-19 is seen as “an epidemic occurring worldwide,” crossing international boundaries and affecting many people (Last, 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on everyone: “Families have been affected socially and economically, millions have lost their income, some have lost their homes” and loved ones (Lehmann, 2020), and some people have been denied of natural justice and duty of care due to their citizenship, nationality, or country of origin.

COVID-19 is a public health emergency of both national and international concern. The virus has not only put the world on hold but has also laid bare the inequalities and structural challenges that have always existed and persisted in our societies. The virus brought not only an urgent medical crisis but also exposed larger structural crises in our societies. It is now clear that COVID-19 is not just a public health crisis, but also an economic and social crisis. It is a health crisis with huge impact on social and economic welfare. It is also a welfare issue with huge impact on public health. It is a crisis like no other in modern human history, disrupting almost every aspect of our lives and society. We have not seen a crisis like this one that is so far-reaching, for over a century (Lehmann, 2020). It is the greatest challenging crisis of our lifetime we have ever faced as social workers. It is generating extraordinary challenges, requiring social workers to interrogate the present rigorously, learn from the crisis, envision the future boldly, and make meaningful change toward advancing and ensuring inclusive ethical policies.

While we, as social workers, are concerned about the impact that the COVID-19 crisis has — and will continue to have — on our lives, and on the lives of individuals, families, groups, and the community we work with, its impact on our personal and professional lives as social workers cannot be overstated. For sure, COVID-19 has radically changed the way we practice, and conceptualise the social work profession (Miller, 2020). It is also presenting and expanding opportunities for both the social work profession and practitioners in the field to make meaningful change that acknowledges and works to build a less unequal society.

In these unprecedented times, social workers are in a unique position to give equity a particularly noticeable priority by promoting well-being, justice and human rights, and by advocating for inclusive policies that can address structural issues in society and other issues arising as a result of COVID-19. A concern with equity, as Amartya Sen (2020) explains, would lessen suffering, and offer new ideas to inspire us to promote human rights and build a less unequal society in the future. Thus, as social work academics and practitioners, who are

called upon to take responsibility and make moral choices, we believe it is important, in these unprecedented times, to recognise social work's long-standing commitment to social justice values and call social workers to become politically engaged and meaningfully embrace the profession's human rights potential (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020). This is because every time social work attempts to "present itself as a purely technical and politically neutral activity" suggesting that social workers 'just need to get on with job,' the profession stops "prioritising the well-being and human rights of the people we work with" (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis (2020, p. 7). This article, therefore, contributes to literature on the role of social workers during a pandemic and its aftermath, and on how social workers can bring their knowledge, theories and practice skills to pandemic preparedness and policy responses to pandemics.

Drawing on media analysis and critical review of social work policy and practice responses to crises, it calls for increased macro level social work based on the principles of interventions and advocacy, promotion of well-being, justice, and human rights to bring about systemic change. According to Reisch (2017):

Macro social work practice pushes the boundaries of the profession by fostering a "big picture" perspective that analyses people's issues "outside the box" and focuses on the prevention of problems — not merely their amelioration. It embodies social work's commitment to social justice and social change by promoting structural solutions to systemic inequalities and various forms of oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience...Macro social work is not "indirect practice." All social workers work with people within the context of communities and organisations that are affected by social policies (pp. 6-7).

Macro social work practice, therefore, is a collective and collaborative form of social work for — professional, organisational, community, social, and/or policy — change. As we continue to navigate through these difficult times, it argues that the challenges presented by COVID-19 can be opportunities for social work to reinvent itself as a human rights-based profession and promote effective practice. It suggests, therefore, that by engaging in advocacy, policy and equity work, social workers can help address structural systems, which perpetuate inequities and barriers in society, and ensure a more 'equal, just, and inclusive' society during a pandemic and beyond.

### **Social work as a human rights profession**

Social work is a profession focused on well-being, social justice, equity, and human rights. Central to social work are the "principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities," making it clear that the work social workers do is human rights work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014, para. 2). Social

workers advocate and uphold human rights and social justice (IFSW, 2014). Thus, by definition, social work is a human rights-based profession. In the professional codes of ethics in many nations, social workers are called to promote human dignity and ensure justice (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005; National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2017). Around the world, social workers continue to work for the achievement of human rights. Moreover, there is an explicit grounding of social work practice in human rights principles: human dignity, non-discrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability (Mapp et al., 2019).

As social workers, we are *ALL* needed in these are unprecedented times. We possess many important skills to help clients and communities access services. We are obligated to apply human rights to our practice (Androff, 2016), promote social justice, and to advocate and facilitate equality of outcomes (Carson & Kerr, 2017). Like professionals from different specialties, we are called to get involved in a crisis, stand up to injustice, and move towards the realisation of human rights, including identifying social work as a human rights profession (Mapp et al., 2019). We are not only needed to provide moral and instrumental support and therapy to help clients deal with anxiety, but also policy and advocacy to address client needs, systemic neglect, bias, racism, and other structural systems, which perpetuate inequalities in society. Our work, along the continuum of social work from micro to macro levels, will be crucial if we are to fulfil our professional obligations during this pandemic and beyond (Walter-McCabe, 2020).

Therefore, by sharing one case example, the Ruby Princess crew members' experience, the authors propose macro social work practice, particularly, if the social work profession is to realise its goal of social justice (Reisch, 2017) and commitment to realisation of human rights (Mapp et al., 2019). Indeed, COVID-19 in Australia, together with the Ruby Princess incident, has shown gaps in or understanding of macro social work, including the role of social workers during pandemic. The incident has significant implications from a human rights perspective in national and global policy responses to, and recovery from, pandemics. If social workers believe that their work is expected to promote justice in the world, then, ethically, they need to move from diagnosing ills and work toward the realisation of human rights (Mapp et al., 2019). It is only by moving towards a true rights-based approach to practice that social workers can help make real structural changes occur (Androff, 2016; Mapp et al., 2016).

### **Ruby Princess and COVID-19 Outbreak in Australia**

Australia is among the most successful developed nations in the world in combatting the spread of COVID-19 (O'Sullivan, Rahamathulla & Pawar, 2020), avoiding the worst of the pandemic (Duckett & Stobart, 2020). Four factors have been important for Australia's success story: listening to experts, closure of borders and quarantines, rapid adoption of social physical distancing, and telehealth (Duckett & Stobart, 2020). However, one of Australia's failings is



the handling of the Ruby Princess cruise ship crew members. The first confirmed COVID-19 case in Australia was in late January 2020 (Department of Health, 2020). By 2 March, Australia confirmed cases of community transmission. On 24 March, the number of new infections peaked at around 400 (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). The Ruby Princess cruise ship, 288m long and 19 decks high, allowed to dock in Sydney, Australia on 19 March, 2020, is believed to be (Australia's biggest source of COVID-19 infections) responsible for hundreds of coronavirus cases across the country, and the deaths of 22 passengers (Harari, 2020; Moore, 2020; Noyes & Ward, 2020). With its 1542 cabins, 20-plus bars and restaurants, casino, cigar lounge, fitness centre, shops and medical centre, the 12-year-old Ruby Princess cruise ship is a self-contained floating city (Harari, 2020). The cruise ship disembarked with cases of COVID-19 (Cockburn, 2020a; Zhou, 2020a). Almost 2,700 passengers from the Ruby Princess were allowed to disembark before coronavirus tests were returned (Chung, 2020; Zhou, 2020b). Despite being tested for coronavirus, many of the passengers boarded planes, buses, and taxis, taking the virus with them, to return home to all parts of Australia (Alexander, Koslowski & Visentin, 2020; McNab, 2020). Almost 700 (one in every 10) cases of COVID-19 across Australia were linked to the Ruby Princess (Cockburn, 2020a; Zhou, 2020a), with Australian Capital Territory having the highest proportion of Ruby Princess cases overall. In Tasmania, there is a suggestion that a Ruby Princess passenger with a confirmed case of COVID-19 led to an outbreak of 114 cases in the state's North West (Cockburn, 2020a). The ship's passengers, or persons they had infected, accounted for one-quarter of Australia's COVID-19 deaths (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). While the cruise ship only travelled between New Zealand and Australia, many passengers were infected on board and contracted COVID-19 because some passengers, displaying flu-like symptoms were flown in from the US and UK before boarding the ship. On 3 July, the Australian state of New South Wales added 189 new historic COVID-19 cases reported in crew members on board the Ruby Princess ship to its tally (Department of Health, 2020).

Though we have witnessed recent floods, and bush fires, COVID-19 is undoubtedly a crisis we never have seen as social workers. The way in which some crew members from the Ruby Princess ship were treated, punished, or denied access to treatment due to citizenship, nationality or country of origin during this pandemic is a classic example of denial of human rights — a defining feature and ethical principle to which social work practices are held to account (IFSW, 2014). In their treatment, we see humanity divided, and how the welfare of every person on the Ruby Princess was not the priority of the government. While some rich white and elderly crew members were allowed to disembark and return to their countries via flights, some crew members of certain nationalities from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Peru, South Africa, and Sri Lanka were left totally in the dark. Not only they were not given the option to be tested, and quarantined in hotel rooms away from the source of contamination (McIlroy, 2020; Zhou, 2020c), they were also not allowed to disembark the COVID-19 stricken Ruby Princess cruise ship, and return to their home countries via flights. While the Ruby Princess crew members on board have a humanitarian right to be cared for in Australia, we think they were treated as an added problem during the COVID-19 pandemic (McIlroy, 2020).



Many of them, including those who serve cruise passengers, prepare the meals, make beds, and clean toilets, and meet every whim and fancy of the passengers were denied natural justice and duty of care. Their treatment was discriminatory, which may explain why they had limited agency and no voice.

As the ship was leaving Australia, on 23 April, 2020 after a month in Sydney, heading for Manila in the Philippines, the Ruby Princess crew members on board, about 500 from more than 20 different countries, feared for their health. They felt trapped and terrified of contracting the virus on the ship (Cockburn, 2020b). Many of them felt it was a death sentence to be left in the virus-hit cruise ship (McNab, 2020; Zhou, 2020c). What happened for the safety of these crew members? What made this happen? Was it because of fear of infection? Economic liability or resources issues? It was disheartening to see the crew members repatriated from Australia. In their repatriation, we see social work's failure to advocate and politically engage, but instead comply or at least acquiescence in acts of state violence and institutionalised oppression (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020). Luckily, on arrival in Manila, the crew members were given priority treatment because of their history — their ordeal and experiences in Australia, including the fact that ship was believed to be infested with the COVID virus (Fonbuena, 2020).

The fatalities linked to the Ruby Princess are indicative of COVID-19's ease of spread and deadly effect on older people (Noyes & Ward, 2020). Older Australians, over 70, are epidemiologically most at-risk and vulnerable to COVID-19. Older Australians, 65+ age group, have died more than younger Australians, 0–15-year age group (Department of Health, 2020; Noyes & Ward, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2020). The Commonwealth, state, and territorial governments have responded to the virus outbreak through stringent guidelines, restrictions, quarantines, lockdowns, and physical distancing. As part of the efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19, citizens and residents returning to Australian states and territories from overseas and hotspot areas are required to enter 14 days of quarantine in hotel accommodation under the supervision of police and public health authorities (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). As restrictions were gradually lifted in May and June 2020, Australia, especially the state of Victoria, has witnessed a sudden increase in the number of new COVID-19 infections. Community transmission is a growing concern (Dunstan, 2020).

The special inquiry into how the Ruby Princess disembarked in Sydney concluded on 17 July, 2020. Preliminary findings suggest that distractions and mistakes led to a catastrophic COVID-19 cluster (Zhou, 2020a). In his closing address, Richard Beasley SC, the counsel assisting the inquiry, said "NSW Health had made a serious mistake in not fully updating an arrival form that was handed to passengers on 18 March, the day before the ship docked in Sydney for the last time" (Zhou, 2020a). While we wait for the final report and recommendations of the special commission of inquiry into the Ruby Princess to be made available, it is important to recognise



that in the context of the Ruby Princess, there is great opportunity to learn and understand the role social workers can play in promoting human rights during and beyond pandemic.

The plight of the hundreds of crew members left on board the COVID-19-riddled Ruby Princess and made to return with the ship to its port of origin calls for increased macro level social work, and to recognise and reflect on the role of social workers during and beyond pandemic. While it is doable, technically speaking, to return the ship to its port of origin [where the company's headquarters are], the question is, what if a crew member suddenly needs heavy medical care and they are in the middle of nowhere? The Ruby Princess crew members experience provides opportunity for Australian social workers to apply human rights to their practice for the promotion of well-being, justice, and human rights. While a needs-based approach is important, the experience of the Ruby Princess crew members calls for social workers to utilise social justice and human rights principles to competently contextualise individual issues in their larger human rights framework (Mapp et al., 2020; Reisch, 2017). In this way, social work in Australia can address social problems; keep track of its role and mission of promoting social health, justice and human rights during and beyond pandemic.

### **Role of social workers during and beyond pandemic**

The social work profession is over 100 years old in Australia. It is a key profession in our health and human services. Social workers are professionals whose principal function is to promote human rights and social justice (IFSW, 2014), and maintain or enhance the well-being of individuals, families and communities by protecting their interests in the myriad of social and political contexts that require professional intervention from individual and family work to public advocacy and political lobbying (Hughes & Wearing, 2017). While our health care workers have been an essential component of responding to the COVID-19 crisis, the necessary role that social workers can and must play during crises such as COVID-19 and in its aftermath and recovery phases has not been clearly outlined (Petruzzi et al., 2020).

Driven by a deep commitment to promote social justice and achieve human rights, social workers sit in a unique position during crises such as the current public health crisis – COVID-19. Social workers have always worked to assist and enhance the well-being of local communities, groups, families and individuals who are disadvantaged and most vulnerable in times of crisis by defining, shaping, or altering their attributes. It is social work's values and, in particular, its commitment to social justice which sets it apart from other professions (Hughes & Wearing, 2017). According to Bisman (2004 as cited in Hughes & Wearing, 2017):

Without this emphasis on social justice, there is little if any need for social work or social workers... In practice, social workers draw from the same knowledge base in human behaviour and social systems as do psychiatrists and city planners...The application of knowledge and skills towards moral



ends imbues the profession with meaning and defines the role of the social worker in society (p. 10).

For many social workers, equality and fairness are very important, which is, in a way, a testament to the overarching human rights role of social workers. As a human rights-based profession, social workers are committed to upholding and promoting human rights. In Australia, social workers remain empowered to work side-by-side with people, especially those most vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalised, including victims of domestic and family violence in our community, and in promotion of human rights and social justice. In these unprecedented times, social workers have continued to work on multiple fronts to offer emotional and mental health support and therapy to individuals, families and communities effected by COVID-19 pandemic to help them deal with anxiety and ensure access to available resources for health, welfare, recreation, housing, employment, and other services.

While social workers are playing key roles to navigate and respond locally to the social and economic challenges related to the conditions of the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, we think they still need to be supported better at the national level to deliver during normal and extraordinary times (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2020). We believe also that unprecedented times call for increased macro level social work intervention and promotion of well-being, justice and human rights.

COVID-19 has exposed great inequality in human rights protection, as seen, especially, from the experience of the Ruby Princess crew members who were denied natural justice and duty of care. In addition, we see, now, visibly the devastating effects of job losses, isolation, inequality, and increases in family and domestic violence, which are undermining entitlements, reducing rights, and removing safeguards (BASW, 2020). While a downturn in the economy is compounding experiences for those already dealing with mental health problems and homelessness, some people, especially those marked as different, are being differentially treated and denied of natural justice and duty of care due to their citizenship, nationality or country of origin during this pandemic (McIlroy, 2020).

As the COVID-19 cases continue to increase, we have confidence in the capacity of social workers to holistically resolve problems through social intervention. The work of social workers, along the continuum of social work from micro to macro levels, will be crucial if social workers are to fulfil their professional obligations (Walter-McCabe, 2020). Therefore, for social workers to be effective agents of change in this pandemic and its aftermath (and in subsequent pandemic planning), they not only need to be able to work directly with, and on individuals, families, and communities, but they also need to be able to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and its impact through educating the community. They need also to be able – and willing – to provide accurate information to help people navigate the current situation and understand disease prevention recommendations (Petruzzi et al., 2020). As Herrero (2012, as



cited in Exploring Your Mind, 2020) explains, social workers in emergency situations should be willing to: (a) provide information about opportunities available to people; (b) motivate people to have access to those opportunities and support they need; (c) help victims find resources to manage their feelings and emotions; (d) help people learn new ways to face their problems by showing them how to think about their new situation in different ways; (e) help victims recover their psychological equilibrium; (f) process the event with those affected so that they can move on with their lives; (g) establish or facilitate communication between people in crisis; and (h) help individuals or families have a clear understanding of the situation. It is also important that social workers offer skills and resources that will restore the individual's homeostasis or normal patterns of functioning with their surroundings (Petruzzi et al., 2020).

Indeed, social workers are critical, and have crucial role to play, in times - and in the aftermath - of disasters, emergencies, and crises. In addition to helping people adapt to their new situation by providing moral and instrumental support, there is also a need for increased macro level social work (Walter-McCabe, 2020). Social workers need to be able – and willing – to contribute to policy and advocacy to address client needs, systematic neglect, bias, racism (and other isms), and structural inequalities in society (Nissen, 2020). As social workers, we should not only operate as frontline workers or at the interpersonal levels, but also contribute to policy and advocacy. These roles align with Petruzzi et al.'s (2020) downstream, midstream, and upstream social work interventions. They argue that social workers need to address pandemic challenges with downstream interventions such as accessible clinical care, midstream interventions such as community resources, and upstream interventions such as policy changes. While providing clinical care and community resources, social workers can also play a role in advocating for state, local, and federal policy changes (Petruzzi et al., 2020).

The current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a growing need for macro social work advocacy. It is disheartening that while macro social work interventions committed to the universal advocacy against all oppressions are increasingly critical, macro social work practice has become a marginalised subfield in social work profession (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020; Reisch, 2017). However, it is crucial to underscore that macro social workers can play essential roles in transforming private troubles into public issues and in translating awareness of these private issues into concrete policy changes, which interventions at the individual, family and group levels cannot (Reisch, 2017, p. 6).

During this pandemic, we have seen people denied of natural justice, a rise in racial and discriminatory treatment, and an increasing inequality in Australia. While this is happening in a developed country like Australia, we can certainly imagine the plight of people in other developing countries. It is vital, then, to continue our work of advocacy at the state, local, and federal levels to ensure systemic changes and that this public health emergency does not allow further human rights abuses and reduction of people's basic rights and entitlements. Using our social work theories, models, and advocacy, we need to work strategically to promote human



rights in practical ways including through (a) active advocacy; (b) use of legal and policy knowledge; and (c) enabling people to voice their own needs and views (Dominelli, 2020).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Globally, this pandemic will have a huge social and economic impact on the lives of people, especially for people who are least able to protect themselves, such as vulnerable persons living in poverty situations, older persons, and persons with disabilities, youth, and indigenous peoples (United Nations, 2020). Also, migrants, refugees, displaced persons, and persons identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ), and ethnic minorities from low socio-economic backgrounds stand to suffer disproportionately both from COVID-19 and its aftermath — due to lockdowns, marginalisation, exclusion, discrimination, homophobia, xenophobia, or unemployment (United Nations, 2020).

The experience of COVID-19 is a wake-up call throughout Australia about the importance of social work profession. While the length and the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact is still not fully known, and the development of a vaccine could take at least several months, we still believe social workers are a necessary part of pandemic responses. Whatever the unfolding details of novel coronavirus might be, social workers are — and will be — central to the different phases and changes within this pandemic (BASW, 2020). Social workers are — and will be — the cornerstone to community support and well-being in the recovery and reconstruction phases of this pandemic. Individuals, families, and communities hardest hit by COVID-19 will need more support from social workers. Working closely with individuals, families and communities, social workers can help to improve lives, mitigate negative consequences of the pandemic and advocate for policies that are more inclusive.

It is important, therefore, to incorporate social workers at all levels of pandemic response. As social workers, we devote our time to making a difference in society and in people's lives. We have a commitment to social justice, human rights, and improving the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Social workers are not only needed to support community sustainability and recovery response, but also to assist with individual and community experiences of grief, anxiety, trauma, and confusion, and advocate for policy change to promote human rights and improve public health and safety (Petruzzi et al., 2020). In the face of any pandemic, social workers are vital and will be central during the recovery process. Not only that social workers can help, as individuals and communities try to rebuild and adapt to life after the current pandemic, but they can also support political and health care systems to better prepare for future public health crises by ensuring that people have access to basic needs such as income, food, housing, and health care (Petruzzi et al., 2020). They can also advocate for social justice and remain in solidarity with people, especially for those vulnerable groups who are marked as different, differentially treated, and denied of natural justice, and duty of care during a pandemic.



COVID-19 in Australia has not only shown the importance of health (O’Sullivan et al., 2020), but has exposed larger structural crises and challenges in the society. The impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns on people’s daily lives for years to come, including increasing discrimination, and structural challenges in society present a number of challenges for social workers to address. The mistreatment of Ruby Princess crew (McIlroy, 2020), for one, has significant implications for a human rights perspective. The ways the Australian government responded and treated the crew members reveal ideological tensions and operational challenges, resulting in structural barriers, inhumane treatment, and vulnerability. From a humanitarian point of view and Australia’s international standing as a maritime nation, Australia could have looked after these foreign nationals in its care (Cockburn, 2020b).

Apart from promoting public health, there is need for social workers to advocate for a more humanitarian approach by promoting inclusive, ethical policies to extend the duty of care to foreign nationals in national and global policy responses to, and recovery from, pandemics. Hence, the Ruby Princess incident in Australia presents great opportunity on how social workers can work to strategically effect policy changes and ensure the well-being and human rights of all during a worldwide pandemic.

Increasing macro level work of policy can provide a basis from which social workers can advocate for change that acknowledges universal human rights and works to minimise differential treatments and disparities in outcomes. While the AASW (2020) press response to COVID-19 was good, there is a need for a response related to the mistreatment of Ruby Princess crew members and the increasing differential treatment towards ethnic minorities and for mobilising the social work profession to raise these issues and bring public attention to the issues. After all, our professional values call us to “shine a light on the structural systems which perpetuate inequities and work hard to make changes to improve the overall public health of all communities during this pandemic and beyond” (Walter-McCabe, 2020, p. 70).

While social work in the time of COVID-19 environments of anxiety and uncertainty will challenge our conceptions of social work practice landscape, we believe there are important lessons to draw from the experience of the Ruby Princess crew members who were denied natural justice and duty of care. We think that as social workers, we would be remiss if we failed to use the lessons of this incident to advance policies that are more inclusive, just, and fairer. Such inclusive policies need to focus on people and communities and their comprehensive social development and security, respecting Australia’s cultural diversity and addressing systemic and other structural issues in society (O’Sullivan et al., 2020). Thus, we have an excellent opportunity, as social workers, to do something fundamentally better and set a new normal. By learning the lessons of the incident, and putting them into practice, our advocacy in ensuring justice, reducing inequality, and promoting human rights, can result in a better society after the pandemic.



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