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The role of neoliberalism in silencing social work in a genocide: Silence and resistance

Jemma Moody-Pugh¹ and Paul Dodemaide²

ABSTRACT

International social work is guided by values of social justice and human rights and bound by our national and international codes of ethics while we, individually and collectively, espouse our commitment to these values as well as to decolonisation, the neoliberal agenda has been eroding our radical and political traditions. We are seeing this play out in social work's institutional silence and complicity in the Israeli genocide against the Palestinian people. This paper explores the authors' own experiences, social positioning and efforts to decolonise our practice while reflecting on our roles in the pro-Palestinian movement in Australia. We ultimately address: What is the role of educators and social workers in a time of genocide? We explore the silence within our peak bodies and governments and offer reflections on our involvement in collective movements that have sprung out of this silence. We observe how peaceful protest and non-hierarchical professional collectives are showing us a path towards decolonisation led by Palestinian and First Nations peers. We see these acts of resistance as hope for social work's commitment to social justice which challenges the neoliberal agenda of current social work practice and education.

Keywords: Social work education, neoliberalism, social justice, decolonisation

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the continuing custodians of the lands that we live and work on, the lands of the Wurundjeri and Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nation. We recognise the rich practices of teaching and learning, knowing and being that have taken place on these lands for tens of thousands of years. We offer our deep respect and gratitude for these traditions. We recognise their ongoing resistance and struggle against oppression and colonisation. Sovereignty has never been ceded. From the river to the sea, this was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

Positionality Statements

We acknowledge our own positioning and privileges as White, Euro-Australian social

work practitioners and educators living and working on stolen land.

Jemma Moody-Pugh

I grew up in New South Wales, Australia on beautiful Gumbaynggirr Country. My family history includes British and French roots with strong ties to colonialism. My paternal grandfather was British, born in Pakistan when it was British India. He later spent time in the British military leading troops in northern Myanmar (formerly, Burma) during World War 2. On my mother's side, my ancestors arrived in Australia as convicts and free settlers over five generations ago. These stories shaped my identity growing up in a home where both my parents were actively advocating for the rights of Aboriginal

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people in our area. I recall regularly attending protests and handing out “yes” cards for the 1999 Republic Referendum. As an adult, I lived abroad for many years and recently returned to Australia where I have felt some questioning and discomfort in this resettling on stolen land.

Paul Dodemaide

I am descended from settler colonial ancestors here in “Australia” growing up and living on Wadawarrung country. On my father’s side the Dodemaides first arrived in the mid-1800s and established themselves in agricultural industry settling land around Victoria on unceded land. I grew up in the education system that lauded Captain Cook and ignored any notion of modern First Nations people, survival nor any recognition of the true history of this country. My learning and efforts to decolonise my own mind have only begun.

Introduction

With the shift towards neoliberal influences in western social work practice and education, the field has turned away from our radical and politicised roots towards more individualised ways of working. This individualism is deeply at odds with our social justice values including our commitment to decolonisation. This has barely been more evident than in the silence in the face of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. While social work’s history both in Australia (e.g., Noble, 2023) and internationally (e.g., Kuhlmann, 2023) has been imbued with silence and complicity in times of humanitarian crises, the present-day silence from many peak bodies and institutions to the ethnic cleansing and genocide in Palestine (Segal, 2025; Young, 2024) demands deep reflections and a reimagining of social work.

The International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW, 2018) *Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles* emphasises our professional commitment to social justice.

They emphasise our responsibility for “challenging discrimination and institutional oppression ... challenging unjust policies and practices... [and] building solidarity”. We view these principles not merely as guiding statements but ethical mandates. In the face of genocide, we would expect to see calls for justice, a ceasefire, and outrage at the media and politicians’ complicity in a deeply racist narrative. We would expect to see a commitment to walking alongside our Palestinian peers and colleagues to demand the end of the occupation of the Palestinian territories and freedom and liberation for the Palestinian people. Instead, we have seen only silence or worse, e.g., one-sided calls for solidarity and empathy limited to US Jewish students (Rubin, 2025).

Background

Palestine has seen the rise and fall of empires for millennia, and remains home to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. While there was steady Jewish settler migration to Palestine during British rule over Palestine (1918-1947), support for Zionism and the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine, increased following the Holocaust in World War 2. In 1947, the United Nations partitioned Palestine, separating the land into Jewish and Arab states. The new Israeli forces went on to ethnically cleanse 750,000 Palestinian people from their homes in 1948. The system of apartheid has been met with continued Palestinian armed struggle for liberation, equality, and self-determination, including the most recent breaking of the siege of the Gaza strip on October 7, 2023 (Lavalette, 2023).

Since October 7, Israel’s ethnic cleansing of Palestine has escalated dramatically, with recent conservative estimates that between October 7, 2023 and July 23, 2025 there were at least 59,219 Palestinian deaths and 143,045 Palestinians were injured (OCHA, 2025). Additionally, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has reported that more than 17,000 children have been killed and 33,000 injured in Gaza over 21 months since October

7 (UNICEF, 2025). This ethnic cleansing has been further escalated by a complete blockade of food, medical supplies, and humanitarian aid into Gaza, resulting in a man-made famine. On May 12, 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification reported that the entire population of Gaza is “at critical risk of famine” including “470,000 people (22 percent of the population) in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5), over a million people (54 percent) in Emergency (IPC Phase 4)”.

The experiences of the Palestinian people cannot be understood without the context of colonisation. Colonisation refers to the erasure of Indigenous people, language, and culture from their land, through violent dispossession. Enabling the Israeli settler colonial project is the backing of the USA, UK and other colonial powers, including Australia. The primacy of western imperialism sees the diminishing of social justice and human rights for Palestinians (Sultany, 2022). In fact, the neoliberal and conservative approaches to increasing spending and partnering with Israeli weapons manufacturing companies such as Elbit systems (Longbottom, 2024) is favoured while we witness a decrease in spending on humanitarian aid for those in desperate need including UNWRA (Lazzarini, 2024). This neoliberal and conservative position has continued its hegemonic expansion into the academic and institutional environments, exacerbating what Suslovic et al. (2024) referred to as social work’s silence through the genocide.

Our approach

This paper explores the authors’ own experiences, social positioning, and efforts to decolonise our practice while reflecting on our roles in the pro-Palestinian movement in Australia. Like thousands of social workers in Australia, and internationally, we have witnessed widespread silence from the peak bodies, unions, and institutions, that purport to represent the profession and its values (Young, 2024). We present and discuss this silence and inaction, alongside the actions of

social workers within collective movements that have sprung out of this silence.

Ultimately, we address, what is the role of educators and social workers in a time of genocide?

Silence

Like many organisations and institutions, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has made public and unequivocal statements in support of Ukraine (AASW, 2022). Further to this, the AASW in 2024 reasserted their commitment to decolonising social work, calling this “not just a moral imperative – it is a professional and ethical obligation”. However, they have made no such statements in support of Palestine. Those standing in support of Palestine face concerted efforts from lobby groups to silence them, yet there is simply no evidence-based justification for Israel’s ethnic cleansing, genocide and war crimes, nor their destruction of entire healthcare, education, legal, and social infrastructures. The persistent narrative around Palestine and Gaza fails, or worse refuses, to locate the issue within the settler colonial context and continues to perpetuate a convenient and neoliberal and ethnosupremacist discourse, allowing social workers and institutions to eschew our responsibility, and indeed ethical obligation, to move towards decolonisation.

A few key groups of social workers and educators internationally have called for a ceasefire and action in the face of genocide including Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne et al., 2023; Chong-Nee, 2024) and Ireland (Gieran, 2024). The widespread destruction of Palestinian civil society in Gaza at the hands of the Israeli government, including the genocidal campaign of killing of its people marks a “truly pivotal moment in the history of our relationship with the Middle East” (Ballantyne, 2025, np). We find hope in the action of some social work bodies globally, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (2024) joined the call of the Irish Association of Social Workers (Geiran, 2024) to pressure the

International Federation of Social Workers to make a statement to call for an immediate ceasefire, solidarity with the Palestinian people and immediate humanitarian aid access, release of all hostages. We also acknowledge the BASW and SWU's statements in May 2024 as a fresh ground invasion of Rafah was imminent, they called on the UK Government to work towards an immediate and permanent ceasefire, unimpeded access to aid in Gaza, the return of Palestinians to their homes, return of Israeli hostages, and for the UK to stop arming the war on Gaza (BASW, 2024).

In a late moment of hope for the international profession, IFSW censured the Israeli Union of Social Workers for not promoting peace and nonviolence, as is required of IFSW members, following confirmation that social workers and social work students were undertaking active combat roles in Gaza (IFSW, 2025). However, they did not address the gravity of what is occurring, nor the experience of Palestinian social workers (Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists [PUSWP], 2025).

Further, while Palestinian doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and social workers are being massacred, held hostage, tortured, raped and killed, there has been silence within the peak bodies and health services in Australia. In Victoria, the Health Minister has attended and sponsored the Accelerate Redesign Collaborate: Asia Pacific Summit in Melbourne, organised by the Sheba Medical Centre (ARC APAC Summit, 2025), in a clearly pro-Israel stance, while simultaneously reportedly banning pro-Palestinian symbols in Victorian Health services (Hill, 2025).

In Australia and around the world, students on university campuses have been targeted for standing in solidarity with Palestine. Social workers and educators have largely stood by in silence as students experienced bullying and intimidation during the student encampments and recently

received letters threatening disciplinary action. Worse still, two recent US-based social work publications offer particularly concerning commentaries which conflate those speaking out against the genocide as being pro-Hamas (Rubin, 2025), and attempt to position those opposed to the genocide of Palestinians as ignoring or supporting the rape of young Israeli women (Moshe-Grodofsky & Ranz, 2025). These narratives function as diversions, as smoke screens for the core issue of an ongoing, livestreamed genocide and the historical context in which the devastation is playing out. Both Rubin (2025) and Moshe-Grodofsky and Ranz (2025) are silent about the settler colonial state of Israel and the ethnic cleansing and genocide that has been occurring in Palestine since post-World War 1 and escalated in 1948. Furthermore, they also remain silent on the torture of Palestinian men, women and children that continues unabated in Israeli torture camps, e.g., Sde Tieman (Sharon, 2024).

In another move to suppress criticism of Israel, Universities Australia (UA) has adopted a definition of antisemitism which attempts to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism. The Jewish Council of Australia (JCA) has rejected the UA definition, citing its dangerous misrepresentation that Zionism and the pursuit of Jewish nationalism is central to Judaism (JCA, 2025). Though it remains to be seen how this will be applied, it limits freedom of expression and distract from the genocide and ethnic cleansing being perpetrated by Israel. As social work educators, we believe that this definition seeks to suppress dialogue and discussion around Palestine. Most concerning is the risk for social work not to be able to engage with a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler, 1999) which is at the heart of social work practice and education to nurture critical thinking and debate. Social work institutions must allow for rich dialogue and the social work profession is mandated to speak out against suppression, even if it is uncomfortable.



Resistance

Despite the widespread silence and efforts to suppress, we have witnessed collective practices of resistance upholding a commitment to social justice and human rights. Protests, student encampments and professional collectives have emerged out of governments', universities', and social work's institutional silences. This resistance is centred in solidarity, challenging harmful and oppressive state practices, and represents a rejection of settler colonialism. We have observed in these acts of resistance a functioning example of hooks' "love ethic" (2000). hooks describes love as being underpinned by the belief that, "everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (2000, p. 87). While explicitly calling for Palestinians' right to freedom and liberation, there has also been a deeply felt sense of love between activists at these events. Care for one another, generosity of spirit, protection of the young and old, all demonstrate to us a commitment to love in action. These protests have been led by Palestinian people, while our role has been to walk alongside in solidarity. This is an important aspect in the work of social justice.

Both authors have been active members of professional collectives including Australian Social Workers for Palestine, Mental Health

Practitioners for Free Palestine and the Anti-Racist Social Work Collective. These groups of practitioners, academics and students are led by Palestinian and First Nations peoples and offer social work examples of decolonisation in action. The collectives are non-hierarchical and enable a forum to



come together through conversation and storytelling. They are sites for learning and re-learning about colonisation and oppression in Australia and abroad, where knowledge is shared, discussed and debated. They have also become spaces for mutual aid, calling on communities to share resources in service and care for one another. These collectives, evolving out of the silence from more mainstream structures engage in social and direct action to create change. The IFSW (2018) highlighted our role to “build networks of solidarity to work toward transformational change and inclusive and responsible societies”. In our experiences, these collectives are places of solidarity directly working towards such transformational change.

Discussion

Despite increased calls to decolonise social work education and practice across many global regions (e.g., Tusasiirwe, 2023), Palestine remains a taboo topic in the western social work discourse (e.g., Hill & Plitnick, 2021). Decolonisation involves handing back what was taken. Tuck and Yang assert that decolonisation:

... in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically. (2012, p. 7)

In the Palestinian context, social workers must champion the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948 which:

Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under

principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.

We have observed the disjunct between the prevailing decolonising narrative in social work education and practice, and the profound silence toward continuing settler colonialism internationally. Within social work practice and education in Australia, we continue to observe individual acts towards decolonising through acknowledgements of country and moves to decolonise individual units in universities. The current individualised discourse used around decolonisation is a new conservative trope, reducing the process of decolonisation to a bureaucratic virtue signalling task list, a metaphor, devoid of genuine action. As Tuck and Yang asserted, “When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (2012, p. 7). The social work profession’s and institution’s silence around the ongoing genocide in Palestine erodes their purported decolonising position. What is missing is genuine, collective accountability to decolonial commitments.

Social workers must stand together as advocates and activists, to uphold the principles and values of social justice, and to ensure the dignity and rights of all people, including Palestinians. We must all demand that UN Conventions and International Human Rights and Laws be upheld, this includes the inalienable Palestinian rights of return, of self-determination, and the right to live free from settler colonialism.

Social work has lost its grounding in community, activism and politics. However, as the AASW (2022) suggested in their support for Ukraine, “There are things we can do, even when confronted by geopolitical actions of this magnitude.” When we turn towards the acts of resistance that have sprung out of the silence around

Palestine, we can see a practice deeply grounded in a love ethic (hooks, 2000). The role of love in social work is needed to challenge the neoliberal agenda that has taken hold in our profession. Love offers us the possibility to turn towards each other and, indeed, to return to our more collective, radical and politicised roots. Maylea, while arguing for the end of social work, asserts that “a toothless, depoliticised social work serves the agenda of the right, providing an ineffective cover for inequality while failing to address it” (2022, p. 774). This argument for a re-politicising of social work is also being called by others including Zufferey (2024) who asserted that in this re-politicising is the possibility of “radical hope”. We believe that the resistance we have observed and participated in offers us exactly this, a path forward, grounded in social justice and love.

Conclusion

The demonstrated silence has been devastating to the heart and soul of social work. Who are we as social workers if we do not speak up for human rights and social justice for Palestinian people? However, the resistance that has arisen offers some hope for our profession. We do not purport to hold the answer to what it means for non-Indigenous practitioners and educators to decolonise, however, we suggest that in turning towards these examples of love and radical hope, we may move closer to decolonising our practice, not simply as individuals but as a collective profession. This, however, requires us to stand up and speak out against genocide, in Australia, in Palestine, and elsewhere around the world. It is only in these collective actions that we can uphold our social justice mandate.

We recognise social work as a global profession, deeply situated in an international context. Anything short of drastic and radical change will only perpetuate the colonial status quo. Ultimately, to paraphrase Linda Briskman

(2016), social workers have two choices, to collude with the settler colonial projects perpetrating genocide against First Nations peoples globally or resist and embrace a genuine commitment to decolonisation and social work grounded in love and guided by our First Nations peers. Social work must genuinely centre First Nations’ voices and experiences in Australia and around the world, including Palestine, aligning our actions with respect for all people, human rights, and social justice. Without such change, our professional agencies and educational institutions risk the lives of people they would purport to serve, as well as rendering themselves redundant.

We endorse the recent call to action put to the IFSW (PUSWP, 2025) and have adapted it for this context. We call on all social workers to:

- Acknowledge the genocide and forced displacement are violations of international law
- Advocate for the protection of social workers in Palestine
- Stand against systems of oppression in pursuit of justice, peace, and human dignity
- Talk about the suffering and steadfastness of Palestinians including social workers, and support them to resist the occupation

We call for truth telling and deep listening within social work. We urge our peak bodies to speak out against the genocide, as they have called out injustice and suffering in Ukraine. We urge our fellow practitioners and educators to come together in community, grounded in love, to enact our social justice mandate. For there is no social justice when there is a code of silence within social work.

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