

Episode 41 - Dr. Elisabeth Reichert: Social Work and Human Rights

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcast you can now rate and write a review of each episode of living proof to rate or write a review of a podcast. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on. Create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. Today's podcast features an interview with Dr. Elisabeth Reichert. Dr. Reichert is a professor of social work at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale where she has been a member of the faculty since 1994. Dr. Reichert is a former Fulbright scholar and has worked as a clinical social worker for the project against sexual abuse of Appalachian children.

[00:01:24] Dr. Reichert is a board member and editor of The Journal's Professional Development the International Journal of continuing social work education and reflections journal a professional helping Dr. Reichert has been a frequent presenter on issues of international child welfare child sexual abuse and adult survivors of sexual abuse and has written extensively on the subject of human rights for scholarly journals and has authored and edited several books on human rights including challenges in human rights and social work perspective understanding human rights and exercise workbook and social work and human rights. A foundation for policy and practice Dr.Reichert was interviewed by Dr. Diane Elze associate professor and director of the MSW program at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Hi I'm Diane Elze from the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and I'm privileged to be speaking with Dr. Elisabeth Reichert from Southern Illinois University Carbondale School of Social Work. Thank you for having me Diane. Why don't we start out by talking about how you became interested in scholarship around human rights. I have a degree from Germany in social work and the focus very much more on social justice and the study of prayer and how to integrate his concepts of Pedagogy of the oppressed into vulnerable populations. And I came to the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship to study social work. I became more involved in the clinical practice of social work but once I started academia tennis would wrestle at that time she was the dean at Adelphi University asked me to join at a symposium a Human Rights Symposium at the false United Nations conference in Beijing China. And so I went to a non-governmental NGO preconference the Fourth United Nations Women's Conference in China in Beijing I wrote and I was just really really surprised and taken aback. About 30000 people from all over the world and we are talking about issues like poverty discrimination violence against women and violence and many many social issues. Yet I realize that social Voke had a very small role will be invisible as a profession and the theme of the conference also was to look at the world through the eyes of women. And the theme was also women's rights are human rights.

[00:04:05] I was just impressed by this incredible activism grassroots activism from women all over the world. There were some men there too but it was just incredible when they came I talked to them and they came from a Trans Siberian Railway or they came from some beyond from Chile Peru from every part of the world there are and representing non-governmental organizations advocating for the promotion of the well-being of human beings and especially women. And again it struck me that as a profession those are all topics but we talk about as social workers and there was this and this ability so that was to me kind of a really powerful and eye opening experience. And then I came back and I started to look at teaching the human rights perspective and that's how I've basically got involved. I want to come back to that you know teaching young rights

perspectives and and in social work and to talk about social justice and we don't talk about human rights as much. So could we maybe start out by. Could you define human rights and what you mean by human rights human rights. There are several definitions about United Nations definition this human has the right to the basic needs based on being human and then the Universal Declaration spells set out which is the beginning of the official human rights movement in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its 30 articles. But that's also to be seen just beginning because many many conventions and declarations and covenants have been passed since that time and some have become law.

[00:05:54] You can use the United Nations definition as everybody has basic human rights just being based on being human and those basic human rights are reflected in the declaration are human rights and those rights go beyond political and civil rights. But they talk about social rights and economic and cultural. Yes. And so what explains in the United States the social workers professions focus on social justice rather than on human rights. And how would having a human rights perspective in which the social work profession and social work education or human rights take social justice just filled all of that. You see we have already a tremendous grass roots movement out worldwide constantly defining issues and children's rights and women's five people disability older people indigenous people many many of those topics are being constantly discussed to energy always then negotiated then brought to the United Nations we have a whole infrastructure or grass root movements and organizations out there already discussing those topics and how to make them into declaration and conventions which then if they become ratified become law the Social Justice is more like an academic term it's more limited. Whoever defines it and as social economic justice which you know that human rights also includes. It's just a more comprehensive look way of looking at it it takes it through. Now in Europe the International Association of Social Work incorporates a human rights perspective doesn't it. Oh I was just in Europe I came back and it's very very. I know you on the screen she has a master's degree program in Berlin on a human rights and social work. But also it's not like every university has a strong teaching curricula. It's also similar like here at the beginning phases of getting started and taking taking it on.

[00:08:04] I think what's different so generally when you look at industrialized countries versus the U.S. that the U.S. puts a strong promotion on political and civil rights it really falls short that social and economic rights which you know of course issues like health care education the kind of discrimination in education is really a big issue. But the International Federation of Social Work and their policy statement clearly says the Human Rights profession in their code of ethics it says the Human Rights profession and also the basis for our profession is like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the Convention of the rights of the Child the Convention against all forms of discrimination against women. This is our basis for our profession. So it's internationally conceptualized that our human rights profession the NSW and the recent policy statement makes much stronger reference to human rights and the new iPad say we need to teach human rights so we are moving in that direction and that's very exciting. So how do you bring the human rights perspective into your classroom. That's my challenge. When I entered and I came back from Beijing I thought how do I teach you that I was looking and there was very little teaching material that was the little blue book from the United Nations and the International Association of School of Social Work that had a book out on how to teach. Then Cho Wong kind cedis would read so they had written about it. And in Australia.

[00:09:34] So I had to make my kid to come become a life human rights is not a boring legalistic concept and maybe that's why it's also been a hindrance for social work to integrate it into us. They think it's too legalistic you know but it's not so how do I make it exciting and so I just started to come up with creative ways students become active participants instead of just reading about documents. Human rights is not the study about the documents in human rights you do have to have a good foundation off the history the documents the controversy the basic concepts of human rights

versus universality versus cultural relativism which means like you know often countries get criticized for what everybody has a right to culture and how could we say you have to everybody has to be the same the rest gets criticized to be very interesting and say we are calling the shots and telling maybe a culture or a developing country how to live their lives. However if you look at cultural relativism means that it's important that every culture has strength and culture has a lot of beauty but there are also limits to cultural like if. If a country would say it's okay to beat women because of our cultures say that's just not acceptable anymore. So just to say cultural B we value culture culture has limits and the limits of human rights are violated. So so culture is not called Blanche to say my culture says I can beat women black and blue because it's us Sesto in whatever religious documents. That's not acceptable anymore. So it is challenging cultural and using the human rights principle.

[00:11:22] So you have to understand basic concepts about universality versus cultural relativism understand the indivisibility of human rights like they come in three different sense the political civil rights like freedom of speech religion non-discrimination to process that the political rights the social economic rights my housing food shelter social services and then the field generation that the world we are in all of this together that needs to be international cooperation. We have to work together. No country can say I'm going to do my own thing. I'm going to pollute the environment and not sign any treaties. That's not acceptable. So you have to understand those concepts you have to understand critical thinking to because human rights have been kind of used in the old strange ways to justify means we have to understand that human rights have been used in the past as a political tool. So it's really just studying the concepts the history using power analysis for instance back to cultural relativism. If a country says speeding wife is OK then you have to analyze who has the boys and their you know who whose voices are being heard in that culture. And it's really all about empowering the ones who don't have the voices and who have been left out and who have you know that using the example of fat women who have been in that case battled women who were speaking that this is OK. I mean in this country 100 years ago that was okay too and we still have society there that's OK but the human rights clearly says you cannot use culture to justify human rights violations. What about social practice. If students were teaching students this knowledge based around human rights and what would it mean for their practice. What would social practice look like if it was being practiced with the human rights perspective.

[00:13:26] Well one on one hand you can look at the different ways of feminist practice how to really empower the voices of women who have been silenced. How do you see that in the kind of a practice model or the strength perspective that you look at the environment that somebody has overcome tremendous obstacles. And you said also the analysis of the environment and how the pilsners and looking at the strength the cultural competency can be it into the practice kind of models of direct practice you can use it if you would work as a target of a women's center that you also use it as an advocacy tool you collect to your NGO your social service agencies. All the data are connected back to the NASW all through the human. You feed your data back to the United Nations to the Human Rights Commission. Do not just leave the data and what you're seeing what's happening in your own community. You try to get it back more on a political level. For instance we could use that like many children don't have health care and use that back to reactivate activated that we could get the Convention on the Rights of the child maybe being discussed again because that's not ratified in the United States. And the only two countries who haven't ratified that. So the practice is what practice do you talk. You're talking about how you're talking or the clinical practice you're talking you know more if you can more administrative advocacy level but it is always about connecting. So you mentioned earlier that controversy around universality versus cultural relativism did you say more about that because that appears to be a big controversy in the area of human rights.

[00:15:09] Yeah they seem to be two sides. One universality which means that we have a set of

principles like ethical principles that apply to everyone no matter where she lives she or he lives. And those are basic human rights and human needs. The other extreme as that culture made say no. We have arranged marriages we do not like what's in the Universal Declaration like that you can pick your partner. So there are like two extremes like one set of ethical principles applies for every one and the other one we have cultural values and we cherish those and we don't want to be told from an outside or how to live our lives. So the thing is to really analyze you know what what issue are we talking about it. All cultures have values in the past. Looked at Nazi Germany the cultural value was very inhumane and horrific to towards tuition of all people how they were treated. There was a cultural norm and a cultural value and that had to be challenged in the United States in the south the racial politics that was also cultural and that culture had to be challenged. So it's really important to critically analyze that cultural and look at the history of the original and you analyze it and you can use a cultural norm analyze you can look at the declaration that the basic human rights. How does this particular cultural value those rights. And so you analyze the history you're analyzed how how does it fit with the human rights principles then you analyze who has the power to define the culture. And that's really really important. Who has the voices.

[00:16:58] I did some research and female genital mutilation in Sudan and in 1920 it was outlawed it was against the law to have this procedure. However the people really didn't care about the law and nobody enforced that law. So they just continued. Female genital mutilation. We see many movements grassroot movements in Africa and they're not very on movements their movements from the local communities and countries saying this is really extremely harmful to our girls and we want this practice stopped. And so they're having all sorts of interesting approaches. One is going to the village elders and sitting down with them and talking to them. And they also had some success. There was a realization coming from the elders that the ones who have the power to give the OK to the community to say let's stop that that's really not a good practice. So it's social though it really isn't the business of challenging cultural practices which are harmful and that's where I think social work really comes in the legal profession is more about writing up the legal concepts. And our job is more challenging cultural practices where people are who are left out who don't have power or who are excluded issue of poverty is a big issue and when we think about the poverty it's it's just really horrendous when we realized how many people live in poverty and trying to find a solution how to eradicate poverty worldwide as well as in the United States.

[00:18:37] And we want to analyze the policies we are going to analyze the voices of the people you know who has the power who can change how do those issues like poverty relate to human rights principles and then what advocacy model do we have in place and that's where we try to go from the grass roots to using the media to bring about changes to the United Nations. You know before you talked about female genital mutilation that was certainly an issue that was on my mind. And when we talk about human rights with our students the issue of female genital mutilation is one that students often bring up in trying to reconcile those principles of universality versus cultural relativism and the presence of an indigenous movement of people within a country working against female genital mutilation is important. When we analyze this there is such a presence and the presence of that kind of movement is important to our analysis. Now certainly of course here in the United States health care policy is on everybody's mind and and is health care. You know there's there's a difference of opinion about whether health care is a privilege versus health care is a human rights. And I think that the United States has been reluctant as a culture we're reluctant to frame our social issues as human rights issues poverty health disparities health care case the inequality of education. Right. So what is that reluctance. What explains that cultural reluctance that we have here in the U.S. to really embrace a human rights perspective. We see I think human rights violations as violations that other countries comment and we don't see our own inequities as human rights violations. That's a good point Diane.

[00:20:57] And I think one area is that the human rights that United States focus on human rights

has been the political and civil rights and the social and economic rights actually have fallen wayside. You can even go back and research how universal declaration how that came into being in 1948. Eleanor Roosevelt was the chair of the commission to write the Declaration of Human Rights there are 60 member states at that time former colonies at that time many colonial life countries were not at the table their real countries on the table as South Africa Lebanon the Soviet bloc Western Europe Germany was not on Latin America the United States and so much of the debates on issues like the need socio economic rights and we need political rights. And it's very interesting to hear the debates. There are already clashes between Soviet bloc and the United States the United States to the Soviets. You have your clocks and you need to provide the political rights that Soviets had. But look at you how you treat African-Americans. Shame on you America. So there was a lot of going back and forth and the Latin American had a strong push towards we have to provide social and economic rights to prevent social unrest. We had several survivors of the Holocaust sitting drafting the Declaration. So that controversy wasn't new and that the United States was not so much taken by the social and economic rights and that just continued even after the Cold War. And and I think the theme that developed in your perception in the United States said human rights are quote just political and civil rights and they don't include economic and social rights. So I think that comes out the thinking that social economic might stay there not really right. They just could be considered seen as prevalences.

[00:22:56] So I think that explains a little bit their reluctance maybe it also lack of understanding really what that is said by human rights education is really really important without understanding it we can really have a little meaning of human rights that cannot be accessed. We cannot make use of them we cannot. People don't know about them and that's why we have that debate today. I think if for instance the United States has not signed the Convention on social and economic rights has signed it but not ratified it. If it had ratified it we would have health care for instance would be right and we haven't signed have we the Convention on the Rights of the child. We have signed it but not ratified it never ratified. Then it becomes law and ratifying means you need two thirds of the Congress to vote for it. Just like the Convention against all forms of discrimination has been signed. But at that time I know Jesse Helms at that time he said he would make sure it would collect dust and never be discussed in the Congress so it's really important for us as social workers to understand the history understand the documents understand the discussion so be back on the table and heading our boys field. And also speaking and having a voice again because we work with clients. We see what's happening and how people experience them. Many of the have nots experience the rule and we are not really on the discussion table and that's what I'd like to see us move forward to really understand and understand the controversies and find ways to pass voices on the table.

[00:24:35] In listening to your talk I mean human rights is really a very it's very much an evolving and dynamic concept how we think about human rights has changed over time. Women's rights as human rights is much more present now in that discussion yes. Yes that's also came out of a grassroots kind of movement. Women's rights are human rights because in 1948 the concept of women's rights or human rights didn't really exist it was extensive grassroots movement and organizations that in one of the big United Nations movements in Vienna in 1993 eventually was voted in that women's rights are human rights. And then the follow up conference was in 95 in Beijing that women's rights are human rights. And look at the systematic discrimination against women all over the world in all different areas. And so we communicate. And you know if you pick a topic like education and girls of poverty you can pick any topic that is already and you can start in your community and you can go global with that in communication and learning from each other. And what we can do. We also can learn a lot from me too although I think the United Nations conference I found out many it was a wonderful networking tool. Women all over the world are discussing you know how do you approach for instance domestic ones. How do you work in your community. How do you look the media. How do you work with government. One of the other

controversies you know we talk about universality versus cultural relativism. One of the other controversies around human rights is that folks alleged it's the very Western concept. Could you talk a little about that.

[00:26:13] Diane that's a very good question and I hear that a lot of the criticism you know human rights is so based on male perspective and again you examine history and when you look at history human rights actually you can go back to 3000 years ago to the philosophies and different religions and so but let's just look at the Enlightenment period in Europe like the French Revolution for instance there was oh my gosh she fought for women's rights at the French Revolution and after the revolution was over she was beheaded. Women had to wait another over two hundred years to have women's rights are human rights. However the French Revolution did provide for white men freedom of speech freedom of religion and things like that and laid off a lot of those concepts were brought into the U.S. Constitution. So the whole enlightenment period free speech due process freedom of religion later the industrialized revolution bringing the social and economic rights they also came from the Europe from the period of industrialization. So those concepts that did develop from the rest of the Enlightenment period. However today you can to a person from Malaysia Singapore some beyond where the principles of the human rights are seen as nothing Western anymore the right to speak of the right to not to be discriminated right to due process. Those are not considered today anymore as best concept. They are really embraced by the whole world knows how bad news. We really cherish and we have to half as well as economic and social rights have minimum standards of food shelter housing education those are minimum standards to live in dignity.

[00:27:59] And that's not a rest on concept anymore but I do understand when people say you know it came out of the best and therefore we are hesitant about it even the creation of the Declaration their best as I said earlier 60 member states and all the countries who were at that time still colonialists were not on the negotiation table. So it is important that we really study some historical aspects and also study the contemporary aspects. But I think to say it's a Western concept today does not bring justice to the concept. What they are today by listening to the voices from all over the people is it's not a luxury to be able to speak and to have minimum standards. That argument I think really holds up anymore because it does seem that many grassroots movements in many countries have been involved with the UN effort around creating these documents and there's multiple documents multiple conventions. So sometimes you know people think that the United Nations rights they write the conventions but they write it after getting tremendous input from the grassroots. Sometimes my students think it's United Nations they sit and they bite but it's really important to understand that it's the grassroots who is feeding the United Nations and that's why we have to have a place on the table to bring and have our input. And I think that is the challenge of social work to create a space on that table that we are there to and being part of the discussion on a different topic. You're very involved in organizing study abroad programs that focus on human rights for social workers and educators. Could you talk a little about that and tell us what you're doing.

[00:29:53] I've done it for many years and I change it. And the current program I do is looking at a human rights and social work and one part I integrate concepts of what we talked about earlier I was looking at the history I think a historical analysis is really important. And so I look at the beginning of the Universal Declaration in 1948. Aid is a direct result of World War Two. Einstein once said road war 3 would be fought the sticks and stone. The world knew we cannot afford another war. That would be the end of humankind. So that document came out in the society of prevention of war. So when I take the students in Munich they stay in Munich Germany. I take them to a concentration camp and I tell them this is how it ends. What is it we have to do to prevent and murderous us it stalled. And then we go to known Barak nonbiased now Human Rights city called by the NASCO. It's really interesting because it had a very dark part of history during Hitler. But it's

not a human rights city so we go and we look into active historical museum and it starts in 1918 1918 World War One was over and after that Germany had one of the most progressive democracies in the world. Women could vote. It was very very progressive on all levels.

[00:31:17] But then the Great Depression hit and the world market crashed and there was horrendous social conditions and unemployment and that kind of fed into the race of faces and that entire act of Mrs. shows you really how that happened and it also shows how you know ideas he didn't start with how how did he start. Not only Hitler. The whole there were more people than him. How did they start to manipulate people. How did that he grabbed power. How did he change law. How did did the teachers teach in school and how did the musicians present their ideology. You see every fabric of society came and mesh and how gradually it happened so rapidly back gradually. So my point is really to help students see how does it happen because we have to stop very early to speak up. At the end it's much harder to speak up. So we learn about the development of the history and the museum and swift checks and speech at the Nuremberg trial where he said you know it is important to provide to due process we want to show the world that that world called. And we want to have a process. We don't just shoot people and say you know you do not get to process. This is what we do. We put you on trial and we have this out in the open. It's really a powerful speech. And that ties it into the concept of the International Criminal Court which basically Monbulk started the United States started that yet today the United States is not a member of the International Criminal Court. Then we go literally to the back to the courthouse where the trial happened. The people there tell us that's actually just a movie out the last detachment of non-violent in the 50s and it is actually 99 percent accurate.

[00:33:02] And you hear all the details about the trial and it was very messy but the Americans took a strong stance of having this year having due process and having this this this trial so the Americans were really Aledo at that time and in providing concepts of due process and not just shooting people. So after that we have discussions with European counterparts. We have I have worked with colleagues in Germany in the of Kolberg and with the Human Rights Center. They are to be discussed you know what you've seen today and what you think the current human rights issues are today. It's also important to connect it back to the past in the here and now. What do you think the United States the human rights history issues are and how are we dealing that's past abuses. So it's really important to all of us make the connection and go back and forth you don't want to just stay in the past you always have to connected back into the current situation and then also revisit one of the survivors of the wind blows the head a small resistance movement the student group movement of Sophie shole as the students to watch the movie The Last Day of Sophie shoulder and then Sophie Szold was the leader of the student movement she spoke they spoke out and they distributed flyers in Munich and in the early 40s against Hitler somebody painted on her. And the whole group was discovered. So she was put to trial and she was asked if she was Hitler she would go free. And she refused to endorse him and they shot him.

[00:34:34] And one of the survivors of the group he is still alive pantsula just Neila he's now about 84 years old so we speak to him. So the power to speak out. You see that's also the lesson the students will do that it's important to speak out. And we had people who spoke out it's just human rights also does involve taking risks and speaking out. So we have this side so I get a kind of witness of his time. I think that's really powerful to see that. So how do you see students coming back from that experience challenge. As I said we want to capture the society from different angles. We go to the museum and look at the last hundred years of the development in Europe or Germany through an arts perspective and be open to art through telling the stories of the whole two wars and social conditions and the change of values. How is that being expressed through art and the visit an agency also overlooks Fujio. They've worked with children who've been traumatized by war. They have refugees in Germany many of them come from Iraq and Afghanistan and have horrendous journeys to get there. And Germany often they don't get a visa for work visa for a long time. But

anyway this agency looks to hard and empowerment. They have all this and social workers working to help children Tell Their Stories Through Art. And they are very connected to the cities. They have also a community kind of exhibitions and the city supports that very much that centime supports that agency. So the human rights perspective through art. And we had several other agencies I could go on and on but it's all of us. How is social good practice.

[00:36:21] You know how do you integrate the human rights perspective into your practice. We do the same visiting an HIV AIDS agency that do fantastic work. They have for older people they have apartments and they do a lot of educational projects. They have their own kitchen and they have a cafe. Run their own café it's very popular to have delicious food we eat there all the time and they're very connected to the politicians. They get a lot of support because they do a lot of outreach community programs and so that's it's interesting to see the micro level how the support and counselling but also on the larger level how they work on the political scheme for the city of Munich it's it's it's very supportive of that program and they get quite a bit of funding to help people with HIV AIDS. They tell me we need more international content in our social work class. And I think it's so important we can't afford to be so isolated to Grafton give us this kind of just harder for us to travel. But it's essential today and I think you know the issue is going to Europe is like here you have a similar country industrialized countries yet you have in Western Europe the social nets are so much more extensive like it's not it could never be a debate in Germany. Scale yes or no. My European colleagues tell me it's immoral to think that millions of people have no healthcare and we cannot imagine that. And so I just want students to have a different claims.

[00:37:46] You know this is society with great infrastructure and social nets and to see a different society. And I don't mean to say they don't have problems they have other types of problems too and there's one to learn from us for instance the lack of integration of Turkish immigrants. I think it's a big problem. I don't want to say that everything is wonderful they are under no. They have also it's a problem for us it's more to learn from each other. I also have students come from Europe and they want to learn about all sorts of issues in the U.S. It's just to create a communal learning experience. That's all it's not to say this is bad. It's just be open and the same I think for the whole topic you asked earlier about how should we go here in our profession with human rights just be open and embrace the ruling just like we tell our students have here we are serious about it that we want our students to have us that we have to keep having that for ourselves. Well thank you so much it's very inspirational to talk with you. Thanks you surprised that it was successful. You've been listening to Dr. Elisabeth Reichert Associate Professor of Social Work at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale the state's human rights and social work. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about we are our history our programs and what you do we invite you to visit our website and www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.