

## **Book Review**

### **Out of the Shadows: The role of social workers in disasters**

Bartoli, Stratulis and Pierre (2022)

Out of the shadows takes the perspective of social work as the fifth emergency service and explores the critical yet undefined role of workers in disasters. Voices from the experiences of social workers and people directly impacted by disasters have been gathered to develop a powerful understanding of initial and longer-term needs. Inequality that underpins the impact of disasters is a theme threaded through the book, drawing from the editors' diverse experiences of direct social work practice and activism in relation to disasters.

There is a UK focus using examples from disasters in the last few decades to demonstrate individual and collective impact, highlighting the long-term legacy of disasters and their aftermath. The content will appeal to readers who are new to considering the concept of disasters and the associated responsibility of social work as a profession. Readers who want to refresh or recharge their knowledge and commitment to act will also gain from the book.

The volume is designed in a practical style with six chapters that merge an exploration of disasters, the shifting role of social work, stories from lived experiences and learning for the future. The book content is not an easy topic to consider however there is compassion and respect woven through the chapters for people affected by disasters, including those in responder roles. The book provides a helpful and concise introduction to what is meant by the term disaster drawing from International of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) definitions. Within these definitions, human welfare, vulnerability, risk and harm are integral, all key aspects widely recognised in terms of social work responsibility.

Published in association with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), England, there is a connection to resources and ongoing work in this context. The book takes a focus on England in terms of the specific experiences included and relationship to the Professional Capabilities Framework. The practical application of ideas from the book extend beyond this and there are reflective questions embedded to support learning from the text with practical links to further information and disaster activism.

The editors' introductory chapter sets the tone of commitment to social justice and sets the global context. Readers are reminded to consider intersectionality in terms of the impact of disasters on those who face multiple forms of oppression. A broad range of other contributors write from their experience, including academic and leadership perspectives; people, including social workers, who have been directly impacted by disasters; and social workers who have had varying roles in providing disaster support.

Academic and leadership perspectives are outlined by Professor Lena Dominelli and Professor Lucy Easthope who reflect on the COVID-19 2020 health pandemic and Grenfell Tower fire disaster respectively. These contributions show authenticity in respect of the experience, personal commitment and messages to inform collective action. There are excellent links to other relevant literature throughout which signpost readers who wish to explore further. Contributors who have been affected by disasters have been invited to use the format that they wish to convey their experiences. Voices in the form of narrative and poetry from disaster survivors and relatives of people who have been killed, convey strong messages about the nature of their experiences. Identification of the nature of assistance that has been received, lessons learned or implications for helping responses is a core aspect of these sections.

There are also poignant messages that underline the perpetuating inequality, legal and moral injustices, political responses and media portrayal of disasters and those affected, such as Margaret Aspinall's testimony in respect of her son James who was killed in the Hillsborough football stadium tragedy in 1989. Evidence from lived experiences stresses the humanitarian approach that is essential in both understanding and responding to those affected by disasters. Social work skills and knowledge are highlighted in the essence of what is involved in humanitarian protection, and collective activism that challenges inequality.

The role of social workers is explored from the different perspectives of contributors taking an individual and strategic view of what the profession can offer. Evidence about what has been effective is drawn together alongside practical learning points in the final sections of the book. There are also excellent connections to trauma-informed practice developments and core social work theory integrated in the discussion about social work responses. Although mentioned in the foreword and a concluding point in the book, there is limited focus on the role that social work may take in respect of the climate emergency.

More strategic recognition of and vision for social work in being part of a planned multi-disciplinary response is clearly recommended throughout the chapters. Individual stories all call for planning and readiness for emergency situations. Social work is presented as ideally equipped to respond to disasters but without cohesive strategy, planning and resources which limits the scope. Within this there is caution expressed about essential training and support for anyone taking a role in responding to disasters.

The book arrives at a time when reflection on disasters in the UK remains high on many agendas. The role of social workers in general is subject to perpetual ambiguity and scrutiny so establishing specific disaster response roles is a challenge. The title of the book and key

messages advocate to bring social work to the fore in visibility and recognition. Editors and contributors provide ideas across a broad spectrum which offer a place to shift thinking about the social work role and are a call to action for the profession.