



# The Climate Crisis is a Human Rights Emergency

Susan Mapp<sup>1</sup> · Shirley Gatenio Gabel<sup>2</sup>

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On November 4, 2019, the Trump administration submitted its formal notice of the plan to withdraw the USA from the Paris Agreement to combat climate change, fulfilling a campaign promise on the earliest possible date. This action, in combination with their renewed support for fossil fuels and weakening of environmental standards, is expected to worsen the accelerating changes in the Earth's climate.

While all other countries reiterated their commitment to the agreement, it is far from clear that enough is being done. Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, stated that “Somber speeches by government officials at regular conferences are not leading to meaningful action,” (2019, p. 9) and that

Even under the best-case scenario, hundreds of millions will face food insecurity, forced migration, disease, and death. Climate change threatens the future of human rights and risks undoing the last fifty years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction... Addressing climate change will require a fundamental shift in the global economy, decoupling improvements in economic well-being from fossil fuel emissions (p.1).

These changes caused by a warming planet are not limited to rising temperatures but include temperature extremes at both ends of the spectrum, worsening natural disasters, drought, hunger, poverty, armed conflict, and migration. The number of natural disasters, including heat waves, hurricanes,

cyclones, floods, droughts, and wildfires, increased 46% between 2000 and 2018 (Fritz 2017; Watts et al. 2018). This resulted in over a million deaths as well as trillions of dollars in economic damages (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019). We are already seeing these impacts occur around the world, while the predictions grow even direr of the long-range impacts.

These changes not only people's physical well-being but also their emotional and psychological well-being. Those whom social workers serve will be disproportionately impacted, including women, children, the elderly, the impoverished, those with disabilities, and indigenous peoples. According to Alston's report, the vast majority of these impacts (75–80%) by those living in countries in the Global South, despite the fact that 50% of the carbon emissions were generated by the wealthiest 10% of people, while the poorest 50% of people have contributed only 10%. The 2018 resolution on climate change and human rights issued by the UN Human Rights Council stated

while these implications affect individuals and communities around the world, the adverse effects of climate change are felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status, national or social origin, birth or other status and disability (p.2).

The climate is impacting migration flows around the world as it fuels conflict over scarce resources and destroys livelihoods and homes. Some of these impacts can be seen in the first three articles in this issue that explore asylum issues among those from Central America as well as members of the LGBTQ community. As stated, climate change will impact traditionally marginalized communities the hardest. Other articles in this issue explore issues that impact members of the LGBTQ community and create this oppression, as well as examining the human rights crisis in Hong Kong.

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✉ Susan Mapp  
mapps@etown.edu

Shirley Gatenio Gabel  
gateniogabe@fordham.edu

<sup>1</sup> Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Fordham University, New York, NY, USA

Social workers must mobilize around the world to join the movement to radically change the course of our planet and mitigate these impacts on those we serve. As Alston notes, this will not be easy, but is necessary. We must examine our own levels and methods of consumption including what we eat, our methods of transportation, and fuel sources. However, this alone will not be enough and macro action is imperative. Those in the USA must push their government to remain in the Paris Accord, while those in all nations must lobby our governments to move past words to sufficient action. We must work to help traditionally oppressed communities to build resilience to the impacts of the changes on their lives. The time period in which we can change the course of the planet is quickly closing. The then Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, noted in 2012 that

The window of opportunity to prevent the effects of climate change from spiraling out of our control is closing... When future generations look upon the choices we made, let them not be forced to exclaim that we failed to act in time. Let them not have to suffer the consequences of the inability to answer the clarion call to act with conscientious foresight (“Doha meeting must take,” 2012, para. 14)

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