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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

Linking themes relating to rural and environmental social work: Towards integrated knowledge development

ABSTRACT

The social work literature attests the profession's transformative role in advancing environmental sustainability by shaping human interaction with the natural world and empowering individuals and communities to enact meaningful change to promote sustainable development. It does this through its attention to related issues concerning environmental justice, poverty, racism, sustainability, sustainable development and vulnerable populations. By highlighting problems in social work knowledge development around issues relating to the environment and examining recent reviews of related literature, this paper aims to show that a clearer picture on social work's environmental engagement would emerge from consideration of linking themes integrating disparate strands of social work research and scholarship, especially those concerning environmentally-related issues and rural populations. It suggests linking themes to achieve more integrated knowledge development on environmental and rural social work.

Ever since Marlow and van Rooyen's (2001) groundbreaking paper, I have followed the development of environmental social work and, over the years, I have perceived the overlap between various areas of my research, such as Indigenous and decolonised social work, spirituality, the environment, and social and sustainable development (Gray, 2016, 2020, 2025; Gray et al., 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2017). My enduring interest in international comparative social work, indigenisation and culturally relevant education and practice began with my first book *Developmental Social Work in South Africa* (Gray, 1998). The first international text *Indigenous Social Work* (Gray et al., 2008) examined Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work scholarship highlighting the centrality of local cultures, beliefs, values and practices to decolonised, culturally relevant practice. Supported by a growing interest in spirituality and ecological awareness in international social work, this book, together with subsequent volumes on decolonising and environmental social work, interrogated trends, issues, and debates in Indigenous and environmental social work knowledge, theory, practice, education and research (Gray et al., 2008, 2013a, 2013b). *Environmental Social Work* (Gray et al., 2013b) followed a co-edited special issue of the *International Journal of Social Welfare* on environmental social work (Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012). It examined evolving themes of environmental social work ethics, education and practice. Collectively, this work reflects the diversity of perspectives in international social work seeking decolonising methodologies and the shared struggle to devise culturally relevant interventions. My most recent research on rural social work with my co-author (Meng & Gray, 2025a, 2025b) has crystallised the connections between these various strands of scholarship and led to the concerns addressed in this conceptual paper. They are that:

1. Knowledge development around issues relating to the environment in social work is problematic because: (i) it tends to develop knowledge in discrete streams without seeing the inter-relationship between different aspects of knowledge vis-à-vis the environment; and (ii) it draws on knowledge sources that skew findings;
2. This has been detrimental to rural social work because writers on environmental-related issues fail to see the connections to rural populations and this leads to a continued undervaluing of rural practice.

Since our earlier in-depth examination of the expanding literature on rural social work and professional practice in rural environs revealed a relative lack of engagement with sustainable development and environmental concerns, we have to look beyond this body of academic research and scholarship to support our second argument above (Meng & Gray, 2025b). By beginning with an examination of reviews of related issues, such as environmental and green social work, sustainability and sustainable development, and environmental or ecological justice, we want to highlight constant claims directly relevant to rural social work. These reviews show that vulnerable populations are most affected by environmental hazards, climate change, weather-sensitive events and natural disasters. Since the most vulnerable populations live in rural areas and, conversely, rural areas contain large populations of vulnerable people, by implication this means rural environs are much under-acknowledged or misrecognised practice contexts. This applies particularly to social work research and scholarship on natural disasters, a great deal of which concerns the Sichuan and Wenchuan earthquakes that devastated areas of China as well as the Indian Ocean tsunami that caused widespread

destruction and loss of life across multiple countries bordering the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. All these cataclysmic events required wide-scale rural interventions.

To clarify our central purpose, while the literature on rural social work shows a lack of contributions on raising awareness of environmental issues affecting rural individuals and communities and enhancing sustainable development, the literature on the environment fails to acknowledge how much this impact concerns rural populations. Put these two bodies of work together and you see that social work *is* fostering environmental awareness and promoting sustainable practices in rural areas. So, by building on earlier reviews of environmental social work, we are hoping not only to draw attention to the plight of rural communities vis-à-vis environmental events and impacts, but also to highlight problems in knowledge development in social work and in particular its focus on discrete streams or subject areas and the sources of knowledge included in reviews.

PROBLEMS WITH KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

Regarding knowledge sources, any review of the literature that excluded the *Indian Journal of Social Work* would miss research and scholarship on the Indian Ocean tsunami, or the *China Journal of Social Work* would miss work on the Sichuan and Wenchuan earthquakes. Likewise, excluding African journals misses important scholarship on frequent weather-related disasters on this vast continent. Gray's (2025) comprehensive review of key themes in the African environmental social work literature showed the importance of including publications such as the *African Journal of Social Work*, the *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, and the *Journal of Social Work in Developing Societies* to gain an African perspective on the environment. As the review by Krings et al. (2020) showed, including largely US journals would find a preponderance of literature on Hurricane Katrina. This would apply to any review that used ranked social work journals as an inclusion/exclusion criterion. Thus, if we really want to paint an accurate picture of social work vis-à-vis the environment and its multiple themes, we would have to use an extensive journal list such as that compiled by Morgenshtern et al. (2023). Any review focused on JCR-listed journals would miss journals that contain informative articles relating to social work and the environment. Likewise, the exclusion of dedicated journals like *Rural Society* and *Contemporary Rural Social Work* would miss valuable scholarship on rural social work. Meng and Gray (2025b) searched JCR-listed journals (n=90) and found that the main publishers of articles on rural social work were the *British Journal of Social* Work (n=17), *International Social Work* (n=14), *Australian Social Work* (n=9), *Journal of Social Service Research* (n=6), and the South African *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* journal (n=6). Krings et al. (2020) drew on the journal list (n=90) compiled by Perron et al. (2017) and found the following:

- Top journals for publishing environmental social work scholarship were the *Indian Journal of Social Work* (n=52), *International Social Work* (n=45) and *Social Development Issues* (n=44), constituting 35% of the articles found (n=497);

- Distribution of place-based research revealed that the top three countries yielding 77% of the articles were the United States (n=164), India (n=68) and China (n=30), followed by Australia (n=14) and South Africa (n=10);
- Main environmental social work topics are shown in Table 1.

Against this backdrop, our central argument is: even though the environmental social work literature suggests a strong link between social work, the environment, environmental justice, sustainability and sustainable development, it does not necessarily highlight that a disproportionately high rate of poverty, natural disasters and environmental degradation occur mainly in rural areas, where they threaten livelihoods, food security and household incomes. Our aim is to appeal to the social work community to consider research and knowledge development relating to climate change, natural disasters, sustainable development and environmental degradation affecting rural populations as advancing not only environmental but also rural social work theory and practice.

Empirical literature on environmental social work: Building on prior reviews

As well as the lack of attention to environmental justice in the rural social work literature, there have been ongoing claims as to the paucity of empirical studies on environmental social work in the social work literature generally, with most examining social work scholarship rather than developing and testing personal and social interventions, and researching the impact of environmental sustainability issues on clients and professional practice (Bexell et al., 2019; Krings et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Nyanhunda, 2021). Many promoted environmental social work as a new, though much-neglected, professional paradigm (e.g., Boetto, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2015; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).

The review by Beltrán et al. (2016) of articles published in social work journals between 1990 and 2016 explored environmental "impacts on marginalised communities, presence of environmental justice in social work literature, and opportunities for integrating environmental justice into social works' mandated disciplinary competencies" (p. 493). They found that race and class were primary factors associated with environmental inequities and injustice.

The scoping review by Mason et al. (2017) of publications from 1985 onwards (n=112) found a lack of rigorous outcomes-focused research; articles were mainly conceptual calls to action for social work to contribute to broader environmental change, though later Krings et al. (2020) would contradict this and attribute the differences in findings to search parameters and knowledge sources.

The review by Bexell et al. (2019) of international social work literature, including dissertations, white papers, journal articles and editorials published between 2010 and 2015 (n=71), found that social work research and scholarship did not prioritise issues relating to environmental degradation and sustainability and the profession was thus "failing to make a substantial contribution to mitigating environmental degradation's growing threat to human health, well-being and survival" (p. 869).

In their broad review of peer-reviewed articles relating to environmental issues published between 1991 and 2015 (n=497), Krings et al. (2020) described environmental social work as

an increasingly "distinct disciplinary subfield [of scholarship] … that develops, organises, and disseminates knowledge necessary to effectively address environmental concerns" (p. 276). Importantly, they found it difficult to discern whether the increase in publications on environmental social work related to a rise in demand for knowledge and whether this aligned with trends in practice and policy, although their findings suggested that knowledge grew to inform the implementation of priorities emphasised by international and national professional bodies. There remained, however, a need for empirical research to support policy directives and anecdotal claims relating to practice across the conceptual domains they identified, shown in Table 1.

Table 1: **Areas covered in the review by Krings et al. (2020)**

Topic areas	No. (%)
Natural disasters or environmental crises mostly relating to Hurricane Katrina (n=42), the Indian Ocean Tsunami (n=26), and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake (n=22) constituting 20% of the articles overall	174 (35.0)
Natural resources, including land, water, and fossil fuels	110 (22.1)
Food (in)security or food (in)justice	75 (15.1)
Sustainable development, technologies, or policies	64 (12.9)
Animals, human–animal, or human-environmental relationships	55 (11.1)
Climate change, global warming, or environmental degradation	51 (10.3)
Ecospirituality or ecocentric values	45 (9.10)
Industrial pollution, toxins, or environmental hazards	40 (8.00)
Sustainable practices (e.g. reduction of environmental footprint, and recycling)	15 (3.00)
Conservation, access to nature, wildlife, green spaces	9 (1.80)

Source: Krings et al., 2020, p. 184.

The scoping review by Boetto et al. (2021) of social work literature relating to preparedness for natural disasters published between 2000 and 2019 (n=39) found most articles came from the USA, Australia, or Aotearoa New Zealand and almost half concerned marginalised groups, including older adults, people with disabilities and children. Their analysis revealed a recurring theme regarding the need to "foreground preparedness in social work and disaster practice along with recommendations that preparedness be more consistently enacted as an ongoing, localised, dynamic, and dialogic process to better respond to a diverse range of community needs" (Boetto et al., 2021, p. 1623). They advocated the use of transformative, ecosocial approaches to enhance the profession's contributions to disaster practice, equity and justice and to challenge dominant social work discourses that perpetuate oppressive modernist, positivist, managerial, and patriarchal assumptions and practices.

Harms et al.'s (2022) scoping review found 38 articles reporting on empirical research about social work and natural disasters published between 2000 and 2018. The aim of their study was to understand the extent, range and nature of social work research activity following natural

disasters and its implications for future research and practice. Their analysis revealed key themes relating to interventions. These were: psychosocial care, aid work and community work; the effects of disasters on people and mediators of these effects; social work education and challenges in disaster relief; and measuring disaster-related mental health outcomes. They identified the need for research on practice to promote positive recovery following natural disasters.

The systematic review by Wu et al. (2022) of social work contributions to environmental justice and sustainability in rural agricultural communities (n=174) searched databases – Web of Science Core Collection, ProQuest, Social Work Abstract, Social Services Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts – that produced research mainly from the Global North. They attributed this to most social work scholars residing in Canada, the United States and Australia, claiming the Global North was at the frontline of social work research and practice. Studies in their review also covered "international communities" (Wu et al., 2022, p. 5), including China, Mexico, Brazil, Iran, India and West Africa. Finding growing attention paid to rural social work, Wu et al. (2022) perceived less clarity on the way in which social workers were responding to the effects of global climate change in rural contexts. Thus, it neglected the nature of the rural contexts in which most related interventions took place "to address environmental justice and sustainability … climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, [and] … building resilient and sustainable rural communities" (Wu et al., 2022, p. 1). They found that social work practice has not engaged environmental justice and sustainability in rural contexts, despite the climate change-induced disasters and other catastrophic events that disproportionately affected farmers, with loss of livestock and displacement of people in rural communities frequently the outcome. The challenge was the shortfall in social work knowledge of and for practice, and need for knowledge synthesis that addressed "the unique characteristics of rural life" (Wu et al., 2022, p. 2). They offered insights into the experiences, practices and objectives of rural social workers in relation to climate change. Significant themes were the ways in which gender, age, and race limited access to social work services and climate-related disaster response support in rural settings.

Strayer and Stoeffler's (2024) systematic review of empirical articles published in English-language social work journals between 2015 and 2021 on the intersection of social work, environmental justice, poverty and racism located 27 peer-reviewed articles. They identified poverty and racism as two key elements overlooked in the social work literature on environmental justice and social workers' responsibility to diminish environmental risks for disproportionately impacted impoverished, minority and disadvantaged communities. They noted that historical discrimination had resulted in marginalised communities clustered around polluting industrial sites, busy highways and toxic waste dumps, or living in overcrowded contaminated housing with polluted air and unsafe water. To exacerbate these issues, these groups often lacked access to information about environmental hazards and safety issues as well as the resources to implement preventive or ameliorative measures. Additionally, they experienced stress from social and economic conditions, such as poverty, violence un- or under-employment, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare, education and income-generating opportunities, all of which exacerbated the effects of environmental hazards and resulted in their disproportionate impact that contributed to significant health disparities and

poor overall wellbeing. For these groups, environmental injustice was the culmination of environmental racism and "multiple environmental risks" (Strayer & Stoeffler, 2024, p. 82). As Strayer and Stoeffler (2024) observed, "people living in poverty are more likely to suffer the consequences of environmental injustice with few resources to adapt and respond" (p. 82). Their findings indicated the need for more research in all areas related to poverty and racism in social work. In this regard, Lizzi's (2020) study exemplified classism in social work practice through the example of white rural poverty in the USA. Given the preponderance of disproportionately impacted impoverished, minority and disadvantaged communities in rural areas, these findings have direct relevance for rural social work.

Importantly, these reviews centre environmental injustice in systemic failures to address poverty, classism and racism and other structural realities facing vulnerable populations (Beltrán et al., 2016; Bexell et al., 2019; Lizzi, 2020; Nyahunda, 2021; Piedra et al., 2020; Strayer & Stoeffler, 2024). Successive poverty alleviation and development goals have not been able to address the root causes of development failures, such as government corruption; ongoing conflict; rampant exploitation by large corporations that is destroying environments and mainly benefitting corrupt governments, while neglecting the needs of vulnerable people, especially in rural areas; poor governance; a lack of accountability, and so on. Environmental problems are thus felt most profoundly by neglected vulnerable populations marginalised by global initiatives, national ruling structures, and the general public. Hence, global and national initiatives for achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are hampered by development failures that continue to impact on vulnerable populations, who thus are most affected by environmental problems and not the other way around, as often seen in claims that environmental issues challenge sustainable development's potential to achieve the SDGs and end poverty (for example, Bhangyi, 2023). Ergo, neglected social/structural issues exacerbate environmental problems and their detrimental effects on vulnerable people (Holmes et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2018; Willett, 2019; Wu et al., 2022).

Meng and Gray's (2025b) scoping review – focused on rural social work literature published in JCR-ranked social work journals between 2009 and 2024 – found that much of the literature on the environment concentrated on climate-related disasters (Downey et al., 2023; Nyahunda, 2021, Nyahunda et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Rusconi & Boetto, 2024). They highlighted two key issues in the literature on rural social work and environmental justice:

1. *Neglected link to rural social work*: While articles on environmental justice noted the disproportionate impact of climate change on rural communities, they did not construe environmental interventions explicitly as an aspect of, or adding to knowledge on, *rural social work practice*;
2. *Rural social work's lack of engagement with environmental justice*: There was a general lack of reference to environmental justice in the articles on rural social work reviewed in their study.

These two issues are central to this paper's argument.

Neglected link to rural social work

Social work's global agenda repeatedly mentions the profession's obligation to engage in practices that advance human rights to promote social, racial, economic and environmental justice and sustainable development, though fails to emphasise that the greatest disadvantage arises in rural contexts. Meng and Gray (2025b) found scant evidence of interventions to promote environmental justice in rural communities and few articles that discussed the root causes of social and environmental injustice, poverty and racism (Frank et al., 2022; Lizzi, 2020). One reason that rural social workers have not engaged fully with issues of environmental justice and sustainability might be the lack of policy guidance and comprehensive knowledge documenting social work responses to climate change and environmental crises (Drolet et al., 2015; Nyahunda, 2021). Thus, "despite the clear links between social work and environmental challenges, such as climate change, the social work profession has been slow to recognise the interrelationship between the environment, and the social and economic aspects of sustainability" (Nyahunda, 2021, p. 123). Though the literature on environmental social work suggests a strong link between social work, the environment, environmental justice, sustainability and sustainable development, and notes that "the world's most poor, vulnerable, and oppressed people often live in the most degraded environments and have no control over resources" (Hawkins, 2010, p. 68), it does not necessarily relate these areas to one another. If it did, this would highlight that poverty, natural disasters and environmental degradation occur mainly in rural areas, where the most vulnerable people live (Drolet et al., 2015; Lombard, 2015). It would also highlight that, along with gender, age and socioeconomic status, there were key factors limiting poor and vulnerable people's access to social work services and climate-related disaster response support in rural settings.

Because the social work literature neglects rural contexts, there is little clarity on the way in which social workers respond to the effects of global climate change and environmental degradation, where most related interventions take place. As Krings et al. (2020) noted, a place-based approach is essential to reflect the exigencies of context and their influence on practice. Thus, despite the growth in literature on environmental social work, especially disaster responses, social work practice has not engaged in environmental justice and sustainability in rural contexts, even though climate-induced disasters and other catastrophic events disproportionately affect rural people, especially farmers, who endure loss of livestock, and those displaced by related events. Nyahunda et al. (2021a, 2021b) observed the disproportionate effects on rural and farming communities dependent on weather-sensitive livelihoods. Extreme weather events destroyed crops, led to loss of livestock, food insecurity and depleted household incomes. Yet there was a paucity of social work interventions relating to agricultural development, while challenges arising from climate change and environmental problems highlighted the gaps in social work knowledge of and for practice addressing the unique characteristics of *rural life* (Meng & Gray, 2025b; Wu et al., 2022).

Rural social work's lack of engagement with environmental justice

Environmental justice concerns the human right to a safe and healthy environment. It pertains when people have high levels of protection from environmental hazards, such as air pollution, water contamination and climate change, and environmental policy decision-making processes

include all groups and communities. Environmental interventions come into play when environmental hazards are having a detrimental effect on people, especially on vulnerable rural populations most affected by inequality and poverty, such as those on low incomes, women, and Black and Indigenous groups, for whom environmental and social injustices arising from *inter alia* poverty, classism, ageism, gender discrimination and racism exacerbate pre-existing socioeconomic, political, and cultural inequalities (Beltrán et al., 2016; Bexell et al., 2019; Lizzi, 2020; Nyahunda, 2021; Piedra et al., 2020). As with social justice, environmental justice involves the inclusive development, implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation and policies. This means fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people regardless of race, colour, national origin or income. Historical discrimination against low-income, Black and Indigenous groups has resulted in marginalised communities clustered around polluting industrial sites, busy highways and toxic waste dumps or living in overcrowded contaminated housing with polluted air and unsafe water (Strayer & Stoeffler, 2024). To exacerbate these issues, these groups often lack access to information about environmental hazards and safety issues as well as the resources to implement preventive or ameliorative measures. As Strayer and Stoeffler (2024) observed, "people living in poverty are more likely to suffer the consequences of environmental injustice with few resources to adapt and respond" (p. 82). Additionally, they experience stress from social and economic conditions, such as un- or under-employment, food insecurity and limited access to healthcare, education and income-generating opportunities, all of which exacerbate the effects of environmental hazards and result in their disproportionate impact contributing to significant health disparities and social inequalities. For these groups, environmental injustice is "the culmination of multiple environmental risks" (Strayer & Stoeffler, 2024, p. 82). Teixeira and Krings (2015) claimed that social workers were entrenched in service provision for vulnerable populations in "communities most affected by environmental injustice" (p. 3) and had an ethical responsibility to reduce environmental risks for poor, minority and disadvantaged communities disproportionately affected by environmental hazards. Several articles focused on the unique role of women in certain cultures and the gender-related impacts associated with climate change and environmental crises (Muchacha & Mushunje, 2019; Nyahunda, 2021; Nyahunda et al., 2021a, 2021b).

The next section examines developing themes for examination emanating from these various reviews concerning environmental social work and environmental justice in the recent past. It attempts to identify themes that link the various disparate strands of knowledge development in social work alluded to in the introduction.

Linking themes

There are several interrelated themes to consider in bringing together social work knowledge on environmental and rural social work as follows:

- Sustainability, sustainable development, and environmental justice;
- Vulnerability as a linking theme;
- Questioning Western frameworks;
- Understanding the local cultural milieu;

- The need for decolonised practice;
- Understanding the policy and service environment.

Sustainability, sustainable development, and environmental justice

Variously referred to as environmentalism, the environmental movement, and conservation, sustainability, sustainable development, and environmental or ecological justice, all call for changes in the way human beings relate to, and behave towards, the natural environment. However, there are differences between environmental justice advocacy and the mainstream environmental movement; Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) criticised the latter "for engaging in racism and elitism, and valuing wilderness over people" (p. 575). In regard to environmental justice, two concepts have been key to the global policy discourse: human rights and sustainability. They embrace the central notion that, without the preservation of the natural environment, humanity is doomed. Put another way, the fate of human beings rests on sustaining the planet for future generations. There followed policies on sustainable development that recognised the inextricable link between social, economic and environmental justice and challenged the profession's deeply held beliefs and attitudes about its nature, practice and future existence (Gray & Coates, 2015). Policies on human development have long focused on economic development, with the subsequent theory of social development highlighting the neglected social dimension, particularly the long-term devastating consequences of ignoring the social consequences of economic development. Sustainable development sought to redress this unbalanced development, while the growing environmental justice movement linked sustainability to human rights, particularly to the right of human beings to live in a clean, safe and healthy environment (Gray, 2020; Gray et al., 2017). Environmental justice advocates drew attention to the fact that the poorest and most oppressed people lived in the most toxic, unsafe and unhealthy environments. Inequality and overconsumption became a major focus, although the fact that affluent societies had long exploited poorer ones in the name of economic development was not new. It had led to the establishment of the international human rights charter that undergirded all subsequent policies for human, social and sustainable development spearheaded by the supreme advocate for poor and oppressed people, the United Nations. Thus, to integrate environmental justice and sustainability into their practice, social workers in rural communities had to recognise that the strong relationship between human rights and sustainable development arose from the inextricable link between a healthy environment and human wellbeing (Drolet & Sampson, 2017). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development claimed that human rights were the foundation for sustainable development, the aim of which was to leave no one behind (United Nations, 2015).

Vulnerability and vulnerable populations

Meng and Gray (2025b) revealed an emerging focus on the intersection between rural practice and vulnerability relating to climate change, extreme weather events, and environmental concerns. The literature pertaining to the significant impact of environmental degradation and weather-related events on vulnerable rural populations and related literature on disasters that have affected rural communities across the world attest to social work's tendency to treat these

various areas of scholarship in discrete streams. This results in many aspects of knowledge development and practice relating to rural populations that never mention 'rural social work' or see their subject matter as 'rural practice'. A stark example is the copious literature on disasters, climate change, the environment, sustainable development and Indigenous social work. However, there are key concepts that highlight the interrelationships between diverse streams of social work scholarship to understand the multilayered complexities of rural problems (Doyle et al., 2023; Holmes et al., 2021). One such concept is *vulnerability*, a recurring theme in the rural social work literature, which emphasises that the majority of the most vulnerable populations *live in rural areas*. The literature on climate change, the environment, disasters and sustainable development highlights that the most vulnerable people bear the brunt of environmental disasters, but it loses the rural connection. For example, Willett (2019) observed that environmental problems mirrored "oppressive structural forces in society, as the primary victims of environmental degradation are also the main victims of other injustices" (p. 133), that is, they are people whom social work scholars refer to as 'vulnerable groups', such as Indigenous people, women, children, older people and people living with disability, who are prone to poverty, social isolation and exclusion before disasters or other adverse events occur, like the withdrawal of foreign aid for AIDS and HIV programmes. In this vein, social work scholarship has consistently emphasised the way in which "disaster vulnerability [or any other type of vulnerability] intersects with chronic conditions of social inequality" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1500). It follows logically that vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by negative events, because they are already experiencing social discrimination and isolation; socioeconomic disparities arising from low income, unemployment and low education levels, as well as diminished access to supportive services (Holmes et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2022).

Situated largely beyond the limits of government protection, many rural communities, where most vulnerable people live, already occupy "abject spaces where crisis is a normal condition of life" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1510). With uneven service access, under-resourced local authorities, and disaster and development planning processes largely conducted outside the rural context, vulnerability "was an effect, in part, of … planning regime[s] that failed to make adequate provisions to mitigate risk" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1510). This is a constant theme in the development literature. As Holmes et al. (2021, p. 1500) observed "research has shown that without a nuanced, locally situated understanding of disaster [or any other local problem], social workers engaged in relatively short-term recovery work [or any other intervention] may exacerbate cultural imperialism, gender discrimination, labor exploitation, and other longer term problems". Thus, through the lens of vulnerability, the argument leads towards the need for local understanding, cultural relevance and decolonising practice that permeates the literature on disasters, climate change, the environment, sustainable development, and rural and Indigenous social work.

Another strand of this literature links vulnerability to the legacies of colonialism as the root cause of poverty, inequality and social injustice. Thus, writing specifically about disaster social work in the wake of the Haiti earthquake, Pyles (2018) called for locally-situated understanding and recognition of the differential impacts of disasters on previously colonised and other subjugated groups. Neoliberal social and economic policies promoting unlimited growth, trade

deregulation, and the commodification and privatisation of welfare services, as well as the individualisation of social problems, have compounded persistent inequalities in postcolonial contexts. Thus, Pyles (2018) highlighted the interplay between natural disasters, environmental destruction and neoliberal capitalism, an understanding of which was necessary to avoid replicating the injustices of a colonial past, such as the expropriation and exploitation of land, natural resources and human labour. This understanding is likewise distilled into the need for contextualisation that reflects two related strands of social work literature:

1. The questioning of Western frameworks and their dominance that are inconsistent with collective cultures and holistic worldviews seen in consequent calls for *indigenisation* and cultural relevance, i.e. adapting Western theory to local contexts (Gray et al., 2008);
2. The negative effects of Western worldviews on Indigenous cultures and social identities leading to calls for *decolonisation,* i.e. the generation of local historically and culturally situated knowledge rather than the imposition of ill-fitting imported knowledge (Gray et al., 2013a).

Questioning Western frameworks: Towards cultural relevance

The rebranding of alternative (non-Western) disciplinary knowledge(s) as international perspectives in social work reviews tends to mask the dominance of Western knowledge (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2024). As Krings et al. (2020) observed, place-based accounts of environmental social work were necessary to portray the diversity of cultural and geographic milieus and attendant responses emanating from particular contexts. However, as discussed at the outset, publication sources included and search terms used in most international reviews tend to exclude culturally nuanced literature. African scholarship attests this as international studies overlook Afrocentric perspectives examining the importance of indigenous knowledge to contextually relevant environmental social work (Ayeni et al., 2014; Chigangaidze, 2023a, 2023b; Dube et al., 2018; Masoga & Shokane, 2019; Mukurazhizha et al., 2023; Shokane, 2016; Shokane & Masoga, 2018). For example, Dube et al. (2018) highlighted the way in which communities prone to flood risk "studied and interpreted the behaviour of certain animals and birds to forecast the magnitude of rains" (p. 8), yet believed authorities largely ignored their local knowledge. Omorogiuwa's (2015, 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2021) research on child labour highlighted the dangers endured by children engaged in child labour that contradicted popular notions linking their engagement mainly to domestic and agricultural work and street trading:

> *The Afrocentric perspective on child labour identifies the notion of children's work as linked with economic, social, cultural transformation, geographical construction, and how it becomes either rewarding or exploitative. Therefore, while it is vital to view child labour from different perspectives, it is required to consider these thoughts within the multifaceted social and cultural practices of the connected histories and geographies in which children's and family's livelihoods continue to unfold.* (Omorogiuwa, 2017, p. 61)

She highlighted the large number of children working in extractive industries, such as quarrying granite, artisan mining and scavenging waste dumps filled with toxic materials. Her research showed the harmful effects of children carrying loads of goods and garbage, working on construction sites, in factories and on roads, in often hazardous weather conditions, to help

their families sustain their livelihoods. It also underscored the health implications of work on children locked into supporting their families, who were economically dependent on their income (Omorogiuwa 2020b). These insights point to the need to understand the local cultural milieu.

Understanding the local cultural milieu

A respondent in Arkert and Jacobs' (2023) study of social work educators' perceptions of the importance and relevance of environmental social work noted that:

> *If we are pushing environmental social work, we need to understand that we are not going to be dealing only with urban environmental awareness, but with rural environmental awareness too. Because in the rural area they understand and treat the environment differently to what an urbanite would. I think it is essential to find indigenous ways of promoting environmental awareness and finding indigenous ways in which we can prevent harmful practices in the environment.* (p. 139)

The literature pertaining to the non-Western cultural milieu highlighted the need to understand the rural family economy and kinship-centred strategies of economic survival. Rural communities' grassroots strategies and historical knowledge feature possible responses to climate change; many farming communities embrace sustainable farming practices to protect the environment not as a life-style choice but through necessity. Nevertheless, people in rural agricultural regions are exposed to myriad environmental hazards, such as high levels of toxins from pesticides used on farms that lead to adverse health consequences (Wu et al., 2022). Besides exposure to toxic chemicals and pesticides, hazardous waste and natural resource exploitation were problems in rural settings (Anazonwu et al., 2017; Pfeifer, 2016). Furthermore, agricultural communities were prone to climate-related disasters that caused extensive damage to rural lives and livelihoods, as a result of their isolation and reliance on the physical environment for their wellbeing and economic survival. Thus the finances of those engaged in the agricultural sector could be 'feast or famine'. As Wu et al. (2022) observed, "climate change-induced disasters and other catastrophic events disproportionately affect the agriculture industry worldwide" (p. 2).

Given that rural livelihoods rested largely on livestock rearing and crop production, land was a core social, economic and cultural asset in the rural economy. Rural residents generally had deep and lasting cultural attachments to the land, because of *inter alia* family ties, ancestral connections, root rural identities and livelihoods that facilitated "the intergenerational transmission of family values" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1505). These "tight kinship bonds … provide mutual aid and maintain the resilience of these communities" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1505). Thus, the rural family economy reflected "the ways in which rural life was organized to build resilience in the face of political economic marginalization" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1510). Even though spatial living arrangements might intensify vulnerability, they tended to reflect "strategies to manage scarce resources … [and] maintain networks of mutual aid that provide a degree of family resilience to other risks, such as precarious employment, disability, or poverty" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1510). Thus, "rather than problematizing the rural

population or their homes, we need to think critically about the broader social context of inequality structuring their lives and how it can be addressed" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1511).

The need for decolonising practice

Fraser et al. (2021) posit several elements in decolonising social work. It called for:

- A shift from traditional, individualistic, and hierarchical Western thinking and "ongoing interrogation of non-indigenous worldviews, so that they do not continue to be treated as the default position" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1749);
- Recognition of diverse knowledge claims, including previously ignored indigenous ontologies and epistemologies;
- Use of local knowledge to ensure local community-needs-driven responses, as Bennett and Woodman (2019) showed in their equine-assisted psychotherapy to aid in trauma recovery in Indigenous communities.

Fraser et al. (2021) saw green social work as exemplifying decolonising practice, given its central concern with opposing injustice and capitalist domination to prevent further environmental destruction. It did this through its embrace of antiracist and ecofeminist thinking that reflects a deep concern about human populations in their physical environments. Critical of the way in which patriarchal capitalism reproduces structural inequalities and environmental degradation that influence "who is hardest hit from disasters" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1750), green social work, as promoted by Dominelli (2012), adopts the feminist personal-is-political mantra and intersectionality as "a theory and analytical method of inquiry that focuses on the interplay of race, gender, class, age, ability and sexuality as fluid and often mobile identities" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1750) to work across differences. As an extension of green (anti-racist and ecofeminist) theory, intersectional analysis draws attention to power relations and the dynamics of privilege and oppression that reproduce inequality and injustice through "relations of class, gender, age, sexuality, race/ethnicity and ability" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1750). Thus, Dominelli (2012) built her theory of green social work on critical analyses of power as they related to intersectional experiences of oppression "but only for humans" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1750). Gray and Coates (2015) described environmental social work as "a tough sell" (p. 506), as it questioned Western beliefs and practices rooted in individualism and sought an understanding of problems in "the larger social context of inter alia poverty, inequality, patriarchy, classism, racism, heterosexism, privilege and ableism" (p. 506). They, too, saw social work's ethical obligations to the non-human world (Gray & Coates, 2012) and the need for decolonising practice (Gray & Coates, 2016).

Fraser et al. (2021, p. 1751) noted a significant barrier to decolonising social work arising from "the discipline's positivist and modernist roots that maintain the status quo vis-à-vis power relations". For critical environmental theorists generally, "social work is inherently political work … bound up [as it is] in webs of often unequal power relations … [with] disaster social work … no exception" (Fraser et al., 2021, p. 1753). Through this line of reasoning came calls for culturally relevant and locality specific interventions that consider the connections between the familial, cultural, social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable community development (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013a, 2013b; Ku & Ma, 2015).

Understanding the policy environment and supportive services

Writing about policy vis-à-vis the environment, Holmes et al. (2021) observed that the problem was not the remoteness of rural communities "but rather governance failures" (p. 1510). Deaths resulting from natural disasters, in this case tornadoes, "were not inevitable but rather a product of the marginalization of the rural South [in the USA] and the failure to meaningfully engage with people in these communities" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1510).

In China, Wu et al. (2019) claimed that the administrative system neglected at-risk, isolated and vulnerable rural communities that lived far from government centres. China's top-down, government-led system relied on a coordinated response from multiple levels of government (provincial, prefectural, county, township and village) for disaster risk reduction and management, while the military played an important rescue and reconstruction role under the national government's command (Sim et al., 2017). However, Sim et al. (2017) noted that the government's 'one-size-fits-all' strategy tended to undermine local abilities and knowledge and ignore the cultural specifics of local communities. Likewise, Ku and Ma (2015) showed how the Chinese government's reconstruction programme following the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 failed to take account of the villagers' core concerns about their livelihoods. New homes "were built in such close proximity that the villagers had no space to raise livestock, grow vegetables or store farming tools. The location of the houses meant that the villagers faced long journeys to their fields: some had to spend 2 hours walking from their new home to their farming land" (Ku & Ma, 2015, p. 749). Thus, social workers had to "advocate for more robust, community-engaged disaster preparation by state agencies" (Holmes et al., 2021, p. 1511) that was responsive to local needs and concerns.

Morley and Robertson (2023) noted that rural communities were "only as resilient as the support systems … able to assist them" (p. 21). In the absence of public services, religious communities often provided "physical, emotional, social and philanthropic supports to victims" (Benson et al., 2016, p. 1373), as did kinship-based mutual aid. Agoramoorthy and Hsu (2015) explored social work practice among tribal groups in the drylands of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, who experienced drought and other climate change-related disasters that undermined their traditional agricultural activities. Initiating irrigation-based social work, a non-profit agency was able to empower the farmers by mobilising them around cooperatives that built social capital and self-help initiatives to reduce the risks posed by severe drought and erratic rainfall. These activities reduced the economic dangers that could easily befall poor rural communities. They also enabled them to devise strategies that enhanced their ability to resist market-based initiatives that threatened to destroy traditional livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by highlighting problems in social work knowledge development that failed to draw together related bodies of literature pertaining to environmental issues and rural populations. To do this, it identified a neglected link to rural social work in articles on environmental justice that clearly noted the disproportionate impact of climate change on rural communities and did not explicitly construe environmental interventions as an aspect of, or adding to knowledge on, rural social work practice. Relatedly, the rural social work literature

reflected a lack of engagement with environmental justice. In seeking a more integrated approach to knowledge development on environmental and rural social work, it examined recent reviews of related literature and suggested linking themes in social work research and scholarship that yield a clearer picture on social work's engagement with environmentally-related issues and rural populations. By putting these two bodies of work together, a clearer picture of social work engagement in fostering environmental awareness and promoting sustainable practices would emerge that would show the importance of much-neglected rural practice.

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Mel Gray (PhD) in an Emeritus Professor at the University of Newcastle, School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science, New South Wales, Australia. The paper arises from a scoping review of literature on rural social work with her co-author conducted in 2024 in which environmental social work emerged as an evolving area of rural practice. Preparation for a further study on environmental social work led to the issues raised in this conceptual paper.

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