

# Against a bitter tide: How a small UK charity operationalises dissent to challenge the “hostile environment” for migrant children and families

Christian Kerr<sup>1</sup> and Nick Watts<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Dissent is currently under political and ideological assault in the UK and immigration has long been a target for those looking to quell dissenting practices. At the same time, dissent appears increasingly out of place in the contemporary social work context in England. Yet, as the authors argue, dissent is codified within the professional and ethical standards that social workers in England must adhere to.

**APPROACH:** This article introduces the work of a small UK Charity, Together with Migrant Children, and applies to it key facets of the theoretical basis for dissent through case study and practice-based reflections on challenges in immigration policy and opportunities for dissenting practice.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The authors set out the challenges and opportunities for dissent in practice in statutory, non-statutory and wider community development settings, illustrating how dissent can bring individual ‘success’ that is located within a cumulative structural and tactical change that points to dissent and its practice as a necessary feature of democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** Dissent; social work; migrant rights; charity sector, undocumented children

<sup>1</sup> Leeds Beckett University

<sup>2</sup> Director, Together with Migrant Children

This article describes how a small UK charity, Together with Migrant Children, uses community action and legal literacy in the form of socio-legal casework and rights-based education to challenge at local and national level oppressive policies and practices in immigration and welfare systems in the UK. The authors discuss the theoretical and legal underpinnings of the charity’s work in operationalising dissent in the service of anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice with migrant children and families facing a “hostile environment” aimed at forcing “returns,” using an anonymised case study as an illustrative example. The

authors are practitioners and educators in social work and community development in England, one of whom is a Director at Together with Migrant Children.

## The charity

Together with Migrant Children (hereafter TwMC) was set up in November 2016 to respond to the growing need of children and young people subject to immigration control in the UK. It is a small charity consisting of five core practitioners from social work, community development and family support backgrounds. TwMC is

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**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Christian Kerr  
[c.kerr@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:c.kerr@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

funded by grants from trusts and donations and has adopted a policy of not accepting government funding, which is critical to the charity's independence in light of funding often tied into collaboration with the hostile environment (Taylor, 2019). The charity operates throughout England and Wales, with the bulk of its work concentrated in the Southeast of England. It supports around 350 children each year through assessment, access to justice projects, anti-destitution advice and casework, child and family casework, groupwork, and rights education. TwMC operates in multiple practice areas including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, children whose age is disputed, and families.

### **Migrant children in the UK and the "hostile environment"**

In 2017, it was estimated that there were around 215,000 undocumented migrant children in the UK (Jolly et al., 2020). In 2011, this number was estimated at around 120,000 (Sigona & Hughes, 2012), suggesting a significant increase of undocumented migrant children in the UK. In addition, 21,308 applications to the Home Office for the right to remain on private and family life grounds since 2012 has meant large numbers of children live in households with "Limited Leave to Remain," a form of temporary leave on which can be attached conditions that limit people's access to the welfare safety net (Jolly et al., 2020). Limited leave to remain can put families on a 10-year route to settlement, with multiple renewals needed at significant cost to families. These applications, however, represent a small number of the total estimated undocumented children in the UK. At TwMC, around 70% of its casework concerns undocumented children, many of whom (around 80%) have a human rights basis according to the immigration rules on which to regularise their immigration status in the UK.

Undocumented children and children in households with limited leave to remain

face unique challenges due to being caught in immigration and welfare policies which work together to create what is known as the "hostile environment." The primary aim of these policies is to make life in the UK extremely difficult for those without status (York, 2018). As stated by the then Home Secretary, Teresa May, in 2012: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (Elgot, 2018). These policies include charging for, and restricting access to, health care, which is universal and free at the point of access for UK citizens (Worthing et al., 2021); exclusion from welfare, housing and benefits systems (Guentner et al., 2016) through "No Recourse to Public Funds" (NRPF) (Farmer, 2021); and a restriction on other forms of support available to children, such as that provided under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (Jolly, 2019). This is in addition to the "everyday bordering"—the widening of immigration control into communities, such as the requirement of landlords to check the immigration status of tenants (the "right to rent") (McKee et al., 2021) and data sharing between public bodies such as the NHS and immigration enforcement representatives (Worthing et al., 2021). These policies contribute to a "shadow" border enforcement within communities, extending the reach of the hostile environment into people's basic rights and entitlements. This extension has increased over time, penetrating the work of some charities who have been complicit within this hostile environment agenda through joint working with immigration enforcement, sometimes with a financial incentive (Taylor, 2019), particularly in the areas of returns enforcement and rough sleeping (Walawalkar, 2021).

Statutory social work has also become increasingly complicit, with everyday bordering pervading local authority (LA) services (Humphries, 2004) such as through data sharing with the Home Office. Perhaps more worryingly, cultures of hostility appear to have developed in some local

authorities. For children and families subject to NRPF and therefore without access to the welfare safety net, Section 17 Children Act 1989 is the only alternative source of support (Jolly, 2019). However, there is emerging evidence of cultures developing within children's departments that encourage gatekeeping, hostility, low levels of support and inadequate accommodation (Project 17, 2019; Jolly, 2018a, 2018b). Taken together, these factors represent a deliberate act of state violence against migrants, designed to inflict harm on those considered "other" in their immigration status, with the aim of forcing people to "return" (York, 2018).

This hostile policy landscape harms the welfare of this group of children. Far from the intended aim of driving returns, these policies force children, many of whom have been born in the UK or who have grounds on which to remain in the UK (Jolly et al., 2020), into destitution (Dickson & Rosen, 2021; Jolly & Thompson, 2022). In TwMC's casework in 2020–2021, 81% of 194 families who contacted the service had an income of under £6,000 a year. The children experience emotional distress not only as a result of enduring poverty but also due to the policies and processes ostensibly aimed at alleviating these difficulties (Project 17, 2019) but which, in effect, lead to the enforcement of "everyday borders" in their daily lives. From the earliest stages of life, these children face significant barriers to accessing services to support their health and development such as maternity care and early years health services and support (Ellul et al., 2020). Anitha (2010) highlights key barriers to migrants being safeguarded from domestic abuse, such as the fear of losing leave to remain when based on a spouse's application and the severe lack of shelter beds for women with NRPF. These barriers are reflected within TwMC's casework: in 2020–2021, 17% of 312 children the charity supported were not registered with a GP, 6% were not registered with a school, 31% were living with domestic abuse and 58% were

described as regularly missing meals or not having enough to eat.

### The theoretical basis of "dissent"

In order to establish what is meant by dissent in this context, and in social work in general, the authors have decided to take as starting points concepts of dissent drawn from Margaret Ledwith's (2016) interpretations and extensions of Paulo Freire's (2000) "critical pedagogy". Ledwith (2016) coins the phrase, "critical dissent dialogue"—"engaging in questioning lived reality in order to understand the contradictions that are taken for granted" (Ledwith, 2016, p. xi). For Ledwith (2016, p. 37), "[b]ecoming critical involves understanding how power discriminates *and acting together to change the source of that power*" (emphasis added). Key components of dissent are being unpacked here: being critical, which is tied to understanding how power operates in societies; and actively working in concert with others to challenge and shift power (by implication in favour of those whom it discriminates against).

At its most basic level, dissent is about saying, "No, I/we do not accept this." Further, if we remain silent, as we too often do, we may be construed as acquiescing (Thomas, as cited in Ledwith, 2016). Dissenting voices that "[question] lived reality in order to understand the contradictions that are taken for granted" (Ledwith, 2016, p. xi) interrupt the collective silence, exposing it as a "nonsense rather than *common sense*" and shining a light on unjust systems and practices (Ledwith, 2016). In doing so, dissenters "hold up a mirror to their governing apparatus and thereby demonstrate their noncompliance" (Falk, 2009, p. 245).

This invites us to consider both the form and function of dissent. The function of dissent at its most basic level involves questioning and disrupting the status quo (Falk, 2009; Freire, 2000 [1968]; Ledwith

2016) that maintains and advances unequal and unjust power imbalances in societies (Kemmis, as cited in Ledwith, 2016). In doing so it activates, deepens and strengthens democracy (Ledwith, 2016). If democracy is a process through which the expression of different interests and voices is enabled and legitimised, then dissent should be viewed as a vital and valuable component of a healthy, functioning democracy (Ledwith, 2016). In the face of collective silences that support and uphold the unjust status quo, “tell[ing] unwelcome truths” (Kemmis, as cited in Ledwith, 2016, p. 149) opens up spaces for a better future to take root.

The ability to dissent and the ability to bring about social change are inextricably linked (Patel, 2021). There is no democratic social change without dissent, for without it societies would default to hegemonic power resulting in totalitarianism, dictatorships and despotism. Therein lies the danger to societies in which dissent is “off the table.” Without dissent, there is no democracy.

Dissent challenges the strict hierarchy between the rulers and the ruled (Falk, 2009). For Falk (2009), dissent is successful if it yields “tactical results and tangible change” (p. 248). Additionally, instances of successful dissent become instructive cases for future generations about the function and value of diverse viewpoints and noncompliance in society (Patel, 2021). Dissidents leave their marks in the historical sands of healthy, functioning democracies. But with the ebb and flow of societal attitudes and preoccupations, these marks are all too easily obscured, or even erased. The authors argue it is vital that dissent is operationalised as an ongoing project in the service of democracy.

### **Dissent in social work: The radical tradition**

Meaningful discussion about dissent in social work must acknowledge social work’s radical roots. In brief, radical

social work seeks to address the structural and political causes of social ills. The rise of neoliberalism, managerialism and professionalisation in social work presents increasing challenges to social workers concerned with the structural causes of social ills (Briskman, 2013; Williams & Briskman, 2015). Speaking to the Australian context, but nevertheless with significant relevance to the UK context, Briskman (2013) argued that the radical tradition has increasingly been subsumed within the arguably more palatable wider critical social work tradition. Further, this has been increasingly framed as a human rights focus. Human rights practice most often has reference to the realm of legalism and is therefore, unlike radical social work, seen as not overtly political. This perceived waning of radical social work appears in step with the implicit repudiation of the political in contemporary social work in favour of a focus on technical competency within an ongoing project of professionalisation. To counter this, Ife (1997) has argued for the “mainstreaming” of radical social work. Ife (2001, p. 6) also argued, “a human rights perspective can strengthen social work by providing a moral basis for practice at a range of levels including day-to-day work with ‘clients’, in community development and in policy advocacy and activism.” This suggests the human rights perspective is a practical-moral framing encompassing relational (micro-level) work, community (meso-level) work and political (macro-level) activism. This is not at odds with Ife’s call for the de-marginalisation of radical social work. Rather, a radical perspective is a tool in the box of the contemporary practitioner faced with ever more complexity in a world characterised by the fast pace of political and environmental change.

### **Statutory and non-statutory social work: Divergences and commonalities**

All of this is bound up in assumptions about divergences between local authority (LA),

or statutory, social work and third sector / charity, or non-statutory, social work. The over-arching assumption is that the former is constrained by hyper-accountability, proceduralism and bureaucracy wrought by neoliberalism and the New Public Management, which has led to social workers constantly having to justify decisions and expenditure in increasingly resource-poor environments. The latter is held to be liberated from such constraints due to its location outside of such systems and seen as more creative and politically radical (Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

Further, due to its oft-times function as a coercive arm of the state, LA social work is co-opted into the surveillance and control of migrants and in doing so colludes with and implements racist policies (Collett, 2004; Hayes, 2013; Humphries, 2004). Third sector social work is more positively framed as an emancipatory, countervailing force, far more unambiguously vocal in its advocacy for migrants' human rights (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). However, Robinson and Masocha (2017) found that practitioners in both settings expressed disconnect between their desire to practise emancipatory social work with migrants and the realities of what their respective roles actually required them to do. A common theme is frustration with the curtailment of rights which limit or delay access to assistance, such as when supporting parents to find work and enter education, which forces families into destitution due to paltry subsistence payments from the state. Further, charities and third sector agencies are increasingly called on to provide more direct services as a result of the rolling back of state support. This outsourcing of what were previously state functions and the concomitant competition among charity and third sector organisations for government funding leads to concern that charities' crucial political role (Alcock & Craig, 2009) and capacity to mount meaningful structural challenge are compromised, illustrated by the examples of several rough sleeping support organisations assisting with forced

returns (Taylor, 2019). Collusion with state coercion can be found in the activities of several third sector organisations under the guise of "support" (Southall Black Sisters, 2018). The strict no-government funding policy of TwMC, while presenting a constant challenge in securing funding from other, highly competitive funding application streams, preserves the integrity of the charity's ethical responsibility to independently challenge unjust, interlocking immigration and welfare policies.

### The case for "moral outrage"

[A]ddressing contraventions of human rights and social justice issues demands an emotional connection with the nature of injustice. (Williams & Briskman, 2015, p. 3)

Within Western, rationalist epistemologies such as positivism and neoliberalism, emotions are viewed as anathema (Williams & Briskman, 2015).

Neoliberalism has succeeded in "removing discontent and outrage from the streets [and] subduing grassroots resistance via incorporation into the bureaucratic logic and the control of funding streams" (Williams & Briskman, 2015, p. 6) leading to attacks on the validity of moral arguments spurred by emotional responses to injustice. Yet, if we are not motivated by moral outrage (Williams & Briskman, 2015) at the treatment of migrants subject to inhumane policies and hostile environments that actively harm them, how can we uphold the espoused values and codes of the international social work profession, which is founded on a bedrock concern for social justice? Moral outrage is the visceral spur to concerted, considered individual and collective action aimed at disrupting and subverting a status quo that consolidates and advances the privilege of those with most power, and harms the people and communities that social workers hope and aim to support.



### Codified dissent in social work's regulatory frameworks

Social justice dissent involves objecting to unjust policies and practices that lead to prejudicial outcomes. (Ledwith, 2016, p. 158)

The Global Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work...

The above quote carries the strong implication of dissenting action. If there is a need for a profession that consciously and explicitly upholds and defends "[p]rinciples of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities" then these things are, by definition, challenged for less empowered people and groups due to the actions of more powerful people and groups, and the structures that maintain the status quo in their favour. The first step to successfully challenging these prevailing orthodoxies is to say, "No, I/we do not accept this." This is the starting point of dissenting action.

In the UK, social work is a registered profession founded in adherence to the professional standards of the regulatory body, Social Work England. These include the following:

- Recognise differences across diverse communities and challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people and their families and communities.
- Promote social justice, helping to confront and resolve issues of inequality and inclusion.

(Social Work England, 2020, 1.5-1.6)

Again, this speaks to a profession that must challenge disadvantage and discrimination, and confront inequality, all of which must start with the dissidents' refrain: "No, I/we do not accept this."

In order to demonstrate suitability for registration and re-registration, social workers in England must engage in and record their continuing professional development against the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2018) at the appropriate level, across nine interlinking domains. For qualified social workers who have completed their first year in employment, these capabilities include the following, drawn from some of those domains:

- demonstrate confident application of ethical reasoning to professional practice, rights and entitlements, questioning and challenging others using a legal and human rights framework
- recognise discriminatory practices and inequality and develop a range of approaches to appropriately challenge service users, colleagues and senior staff
- promote strengths, agency, hope and self-determination in people using services, carers, families and communities and support them in raising their own challenges and finding solutions to inequality, social injustice and rights violations.

(BASW, 2018)

Again, we can see that there are explicit professional requirements for social workers in England to effectively practise dissent through challenging and tackling discrimination, injustice and rights violations, including through using legal and human rights frameworks.

Further, social workers in England are also guided by the BASW Code of Ethics (BASW, 2021). This code is non-binding outside of membership of BASW, which is

voluntary, although it is very often cited within educational institutions and by social work employers and therefore does have considerable status and influence in UK social work. The code includes the following under the section, “Social Justice”:

- Social workers have a responsibility to challenge oppression on any basis....
- Social workers should demonstrate a clear commitment to anti-oppressive practice such as pro-active anti-racism and promoting the rights of all people experiencing discrimination, structural inequality and marginalisation.
- Social workers are expected to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate, and /or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, discriminatory or otherwise unfair, harmful or illegal.
- Social workers, individually, collectively and with others, have a duty to challenge social conditions that contribute to oppression, social exclusion, stigma or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society.

(BASW, 2021)

Even if the word itself is never used within these regulatory, professional and ethical frameworks, it is clear that dissent is a key requirement of contemporary professional social work in England. The authors argue, therefore, that it is not possible to practise as a social worker in accordance with the above regulatory, professional and ethical frameworks without practising dissent, while also recognising this is increasingly challenged in the context of increasing legal and ideological assaults on dissent as a component of a functioning healthy democracy. In the UK today, as in other Western, late capitalist societies, inequalities are increasing while human rights, civil liberties, social movements, trade unionism, democratic protest and other forms of collective action—of which dissent is both

purpose and product—are under attack. Notable examples from this jurisdiction include the Nationality and Borders Bill, which criminalises and punishes asylum seekers based on their method of arrival and intensifies the existing hostile environment; the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which seeks to severely curtail the right to peaceful protest; not to mention proposed reform of the Human Rights Act and the government’s rhetorical assaults on activist lawyers and the judicial review process. The purpose and overall effect of all these is to deny opportunities to dissent, to remove it from the agenda and to effectively render it a *dirty*, even *illegal*, word and concept.

The current trajectory means that dissent, and the activism it necessitates in order to be meaningful, is increasingly seen as an annoyance and somewhat out of place in contemporary society (Huish, 2013). However, if we move away from the concept of activism as mere placard-waving or civil disobedience and view it as “a process of communication, where the governed can engage the governors, [we make] it possible to position the narrative of activism as intrinsic to civic democracy” (Huish, 2013, citing Tully 2005). The impact of activism is cumulative, creating “moments of dissent” (Huish, 2013, citing Tully, 2005) that, together, lead to wider social change.

### **Challenging the “hostile environment”—The charity’s methods and approach**

TwMC uses a socio-legal approach in casework that combines traditional methods of family support with legal approaches, often in collaboration with other projects. This includes using legal processes such as judicial review, a type of court case used to challenge the lawfulness of a public body’s decision. An example of a successful judicial review in immigration law was *R (CO & Anor) v LB Lewisham* (2017) which challenged the lawfulness of an LA assessment of a family left to sleep

in a hospital waiting room because the LA refused to support them (Connor, 2017), which led to judicial confirmation of the ongoing duty to assess children's needs. Cuts to legal aid for immigration cases—another key plank of the hostile environment—has led to the development of access to justice projects which support families to access Exceptional Case Funding to enable access to advice and support from immigration advisors in relation to individual cases and appeals (Public Law Project, n.d.).

In its work, TwMC seeks to build trust with impacted communities through safe spaces, in legal, physical and temporal senses. Safe spaces are of critical importance to migrants facing creeping encroachment of immigration enforcement into the communities in which they live—the everyday bordering of their daily experience. TwMC uses outreach and community partnerships as a primary tool to engage people, alongside strict policies on information and data sharing. This includes working with other organisations to build trust in communities, working directly with communities and working with universal settings like schools to offer advice and support them to become safe havens for migrants. TwMC aims to provide wrap-around support founded in principles of anti-discriminatory practice (Tedam, 2020) including psychosocial support with a named keyworker, groupwork aimed at fostering community solidarity, socioeconomic approaches such as grant seeking and hardship funding, advocacy and education, accessing healthcare and socio-legal casework already described. Key to delivery of this support are partnerships or rather, solidarity, with other organisations in the sector that share the charity's value base.

The charity's ethos is rooted in the radical tradition of addressing structural issues. TwMC works individually but also collectively alongside other organisations, lawyers, journalists, as well as, crucially, families, children and young people. This

has led to, for instance, the production of a guide for families accessing support from LAs (Hackney Migrant Centre et al., 2019), a collaboration between families with lived experience and organisations. The ultimate aim is to provide children, young people and families affected by the issues opportunities to get involved in campaigning for change. The charity's user groups meet with user groups from other organisations to look at wider policy change. The aim is to create a wider network of collective solidarity and resistance in which lived experience drives the development of the charity and its future agenda. This challenges the prevailing orthodoxy around campaigning (which privileges professional perspectives) and, instead, focuses on shared and co-produced knowledge, skills development and rights education. This work has included delivering workshops on upholding children's rights with direct reference the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child, as well as protest arts workshops, campaigning groups and wider network collaboration.

### **Barriers to inclusion and participation of people most affected**

A perennial challenge is providing routes for long and bonded participation in the charity for people with differential immigration status. This is particularly and poignantly the case for the groups and communities the charity support due to their liminal (or lack of) status, which limits the degree to which they can get involved and be remunerated for their involvement. People who lack status, or have differential status, can engage in the charity through groupwork and joining campaign groups, but are prevented from inclusion within the governance structure of the charity, such as through being appointed a trustee or taking paid employment. The length of time involved in regularising the status of people the charity supports so that they can have central roles in the governance and running of the charity is a key barrier to their inclusion. Also, at a



fundamental level, people who are subject to immigration control are, by definition, locked out of the democratic process, which speaks to the urgent necessity for those who can partake in the democratic processes and mechanisms of challenge and accountability to take a stand and access those systems on behalf of people with differential status. They do not have a say. All of this speaks to key dichotomies and problems of power in the migrant charity sector (Tadam, 2020) which can lead to the people most affected being denied opportunities for meaningful inclusion. It remains a key priority for TwMC to continue to work to break down those barriers.

### Migration and supporting migration as acts of dissent

“[I]llegal” migration is speech of necessity – there is no other way for [the excluded] to be heard [on the question of immigration exclusion]. Protest speech occurs every time a migrant crosses a border without permission and every time a noncitizen chooses to overstay a visa...

(Morales 2017, as cited in Morales, 2020, p. 258)

The very act of migrating in a hegemonic society is an act of dissent. Multiplied by millions, this constitutes a transnational social, as well as literal, movement of people(s), albeit one that coheres around a specific act rather than a common goal, save perhaps the goal of seeking a better tomorrow for themselves and their families.

In addition, legal practitioners, in challenging immigration decisions, operationalise and formalise acts of dissent, using the law to carve out legally empowered spaces, the cumulative effect of which is a substantial contribution to more progressive immigration law and policy (Morales, 2020). Such legal challenges offer the spectacle of successful dissenting

performances “as regular and important parts of the political and legal pageant that is the rule of law” (Burgess, 2013, p. 213) which, like democracy itself, needs both consent and dissent to maintain its healthy functioning. Indelibly etched in the public record, these marks are not so easily erased from the sands of history, although their effects may be weakened or rolled back by subsequent developments in law. At the very least, in the face of governments that increasingly create, promote and maintain hostile environments for migrants, this legally empowered immigration dissent serves to stem a cruel and oppressive tide.

### Case study

In presenting a representative real-world example of TwMC’s work, the authors’ aim is to “provide insight into the events and situations prevalent in [the] group from which the case study has been drawn” (Kumar, 2019, p. 196) to yield insights and meanings beyond the reach of other methods in an area characterised by high complexity and a poignant, human-experiential aspect.

Adi (not his real name) is a 14-year-old boy who uses a wheelchair due to multiple health issues. Originally from West Africa, he has been in the UK since he was three. Despite this, Adi, his siblings (aged 18 and 16) and his mother had no status to remain in the UK. Consequently, Adi was denied access to important aspects of healthcare—those deemed “not essential”, which included household aids and adaptations such as a chair and a hoist—and was experiencing destitution. The family approached the LA for help which led to them being accommodated in a room on the second floor of a run-down shared house, with no lift access or other suitable adaptations, and accessible only via a small staircase. This made it virtually impossible for Adi to leave the house and placed his mother and siblings at risk due to the necessity of supporting Adi’s mobility in an unsuitable environment without proper equipment, including

moving Adi and his wheelchair up and down the stairs. This led to him no longer attending school. As a result, the LA then placed Adi on a child protection plan under Section 47 Of the Children Act 1989. Later, it became apparent (through information gained from subject access requests made to the LA) that social services were in regular communication with the Home Office about expediting the family's removal from the UK. The family were referred to TwMC by a community organisation.

Taking a rights-based approach, TwMC identified numerous relevant factors to be taken into consideration in the context of their claim to leave to remain, including the length of time the family had resided in the UK, their connections and ties to people and places formed during that time, and their right to a private and family life. Adi's disabilities prompted the question of whether it would be in his best interests to return to his country of origin: Would the appropriate treatment, care and education be available to him there? Numerous issues with the LA's approach were identified, including that the "need" for a child protection plan arose as a direct result of the LA not providing appropriate support. The ongoing, discreet communication between LA social workers and the Home Office was troubling, strongly suggesting the LA's focus was on immigration enforcement at the expense of properly meeting their duties and obligations in respect of the rights and interests of Adi and his family, exemplified by the lack of support provided by the LA to help them access legal advice on their options and the lack of assessment of the impact on Adi's human rights.

In order to address these issues, TwMC worked with another charity to make an application to the Home Office for Adi and his family to remain in the UK. TwMC provided an assessment to support the application, based on Adi's needs, wishes and feelings as well as undertaking direct work with Adi and his family to help them

understand their rights and entitlements, and ensured they were kept up to date on what was happening. The charity also worked alongside another group of solicitors to challenge, via judicial review, the inadequacy of the accommodation and support provided by the LA, whilst at the same time providing advocacy for the family in the child-protection process that had been set in train. This work was introduced in a graduated fashion, starting with advocacy and direct work, then, when the desired change was not achieved, on to legal challenge via court proceedings. As a result of this work, appropriate accommodation was secured for Adi and his family, as well as appropriate health and care-related support, including disability aids and adaptations. This enabled Adi to attend school and be part of his community. The child protection plan was then closed.

Over the next one-and-a-half years, Adi and his family had their leave to remain granted, providing them access to the welfare safety net. Adi was then able to source funding for legal representation which led to him obtaining British Citizenship. Further welfare rights advocacy ensured that Adi's family was able to access appropriate benefits and entitlements, continue to seek and access housing suitable to their needs, and secure access to further education for Adi's older sibling. Finally, Adi's family was connected to further sources of legal advice and support to seek recompense for the LA's repeated failures to properly meet their needs.

## Discussion

In the UK today, inequalities are deepening and widening. At the same time, there is concerted and ongoing removal of opportunities for meaningful dissent. Migration has been a key battleground in the erosion of rights and the furthering of inequality, through policies designed to make migrants' lives unbearable through the creation of a hostile environment. The co-opting of state and community support

services, including local authorities and their employees (including social workers), landlords, doctors and nurses, and even charities, hitherto held as emancipatory and countervailing, into the process of everyday bordering creates ethical dilemmas for the helping professions. Through an interlocking web of exclusionary policy and practice, which include data-sharing agreements between the Home Office and LAs, immigration enforcement has crept into everyday public life.

While it is seen as increasingly difficult to practise dissenting social work in these contexts, arguably more so in the statutory setting, but also increasingly in non-statutory social work, it is by no means impossible. As we have shown, the necessity to dissent is codified into the professional standards and capabilities, as well as the ethical frameworks, that social workers in this jurisdiction are required to meet to gain and maintain their professional registration. However, against a backdrop of politically chosen austerity, politically mandated hostility and deliberate acts of state violence against migrant communities, truly independent charities like TwMC play a crucial role in challenging and furthering the rights of those affected by unjust policies. This work takes multiple forms. Firstly, it is about open dialogue, critical reflection and collaboration, discussion and “telling [of] uncomfortable truths”. This is done through groupwork and rights-based education which contribute to the building of communities and the fostering of solidarity. It has been most interesting and useful to the authors to reflect on the cumulative impact of TwMC’s everyday micro-level practice with migrant children and their families. Through advocacy, direct work and legal casework, immediate tangible outcomes are secured for individual children and families, such as better housing; access to social and health care and support; improved standards of living; the obtaining of leave to remain and citizenship; and overall improved wellbeing. In addition, this micro-practice

accumulates to create wider change, through the development of case law, changes in societal attitudes which, in turn, drives changes in policy at local and national levels, albeit very slowly. Therefore, a socio-legal approach to migrant rights’ issues for children combined with emancipatory education approaches such as group work and rights-based direct can achieve both tangible benefit at individual level and generate momentum for tactical change at wider, structural levels. Operationalising dissent in this space often involves these small-scale acts of tangible change—daily dissenting practice—which, over time, accumulate and lead to structural change.

However, there are tensions and dichotomies within this particular space. For instance, the structural challenges to promoting the participation of those affected, locking them out of roles and employment within the charities like TwMC. Also, there is the ever-present risk that dissenting practices will be met with oppressive responses by those in power, a key example being the Nationality and Borders Bill, served by the pernicious narratives of activist lawyers and social do-gooders frustrating immigration control and abusing the law. Dissent, therefore, is an ongoing process of communication and dialogue within the contested spaces of a democracy, of push-and-pull power struggles, as opposed to single, sweeping acts of reform.

Much of what has been described and discussed here would appear to run counter to the increasingly bureaucratic, proceduralist and managerialist social work seen in the UK today. Yet, however dissonant, it also rings true with the global definition of social work and the professional and ethical frameworks social workers are required to uphold. It is often argued that the theoretical basis and social justice orientation of social work are at odds with the daily practice of state-agent social work. However, the principles, missions, and values of the profession—respecting and promoting rights, anti-oppressive practice

and social justice—have dissent at their core. At the same time, in the contemporary context, state-agent social work is often also implicated in maintaining and enforcing the hostile environment which, through legislative and enforcement frameworks, creep into daily interactions between social support services, which should be sources of help and assistance, and migrant families who go to them for help. Of particular concern is the increasing securitisation and hostility of some facets of statutory social work towards migrants, and also the stealthy everyday bordering into which charities are increasingly co-opted, compromised as they may be by their accountability to state funders. The independence of charities like TwMC is crucial to their work in operationalising dissent and building trust within this vital area of practice, as well as playing a crucial role in maintaining the health of our democracy.

### Conclusion

Successful dissenting practice, such as that described and discussed here, not only makes crucial and instructive marks in the sand, but places pebbles and rocks in the water, the cumulative effect of which is to stem—or at least disrupt—the bitter tide of state-mandated hostility towards migrants in the UK today. In doing so, it runs an ever-present risk of increasingly vociferous and hostile state responses aimed at suppressing and preventing such resistance and disruption. However, this is no reason to lapse into hopelessness. This hostility serves to galvanise and inspire more dissent, and ever more creative resistance. Setting the risks against the many benefits gives reasons to be hopeful. Dissent is the necessary and effective counter to oppression, suppression and state hostility with which it is in dynamic opposition, at the very least keeping it at bay, and in its fullest expression and effect, driving progress at individual and structural level. In short, dissent *works*. Dissent is social work.

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