

Out of the shadows: The role of social workers in disasters

Angie Bartoli, Maris Stratulis, & Rebekah Pierre (Eds.)

Critical Publishing Ltd, St Albans, UK, 2022

ISBN: 9781915080073, pp.168, paperback, \$NZD \$44.25

The role of social workers in disaster settings is becoming more likely in the context of the climate emergency, where disasters are predicted to continue to intensify. *Out of the Shadows* is a timely and fascinating text for the social work profession. Despite it being focused on UK practice, there are many elements that will translate to social work practice in Aotearoa.

Out of the Shadows is a concise book, written in language accessible to social workers across all sectors. The introduction (Chapter 1) highlights the basics of “what is a disaster” (p. 1) and who will be impacted; it uses case studies, including the recent Covid pandemic, which most of us can relate to. Each chapter throughout the book helpfully acknowledges the need for self-care when reading the book, urging the reader to take their time and reach out if in need of support.

Professor Lena Dominelli, a seminal writer in this area, reports in Chapter 2 on the role of social work in the Covid pandemic across international borders. Dominelli highlights the hidden social work role in disaster events, “they perform a vast array of roles to protect people and provide services to human victim survivors ... tackling climate change to obtain climate justice becomes another strand in that work” (p. 27). Clearly linking the increase in disasters to the climate emergency. She urges social workers to take to traditional and social media to seek recognition, arguing that social work is often hidden from public vision.

From chapter 3 onwards, the book gives voice to people with a lived experience of

disasters (Chapter 3). Their stories were so fascinating I found it difficult to put the book down. The survivor stories were from people who have a connection to social work, either social workers themselves or who were in training at the time. Their stories are heart-wrenching and difficult to read but give a real and unique insight into the experience of living through a disaster. One poignant statement stood out: from a mother of a boy killed in the Hillsborough football disaster, “I have not recovered, none of us have, you can’t recover from losing a child you learn to live with it” (p. 34). For those of us lucky enough not to have had disaster experience, it offers valuable learning and a vicarious experience of such difficult and traumatic events. The chapter ends with valuable, practical advice from the victims to social workers on how best to offer them support. A recurring and especially insightful message to social workers highlights the need for dedicated Disaster Social Workers who are specifically trained and ready for disaster response. They urge managers not to give the work to social workers on top of their already busy schedule. In the case cites, this just made survivors feel like a burden and they did not get the support they needed (p. 46). Training in disasters was a recurrent theme in chapters 2 and 3: trained, “pre identified social workers should be seconded into a specialist team. This way they can drop what they are doing and provide an immediate response” (p. 49), which needs to be ongoing over time and not just a quick fix.

Chapter 4 showcases the voices of social workers who have lived through and supported communities through disasters.

Social workers talk about their experiences supporting people in manmade disasters, such as the Hillsborough football disaster (1989), the Manchester stadium bombing (2017), the Grenfell fire disaster (2017) as well as two airplane disasters. All had the commonality of working alongside grieving families. The chapter offers a poignant reality check, “you can only do what you can to help people be more ready to survive” (p. 57). It also offers practical advice such as what to take with you when you are called out to attend a disaster and the importance of having supportive colleagues around you (p. 62). It addresses issues uncommon in other social work, such as being in the spotlight of the media and the re-trauma that can come from replays of the event on the news.

A particularly interesting point raised was that of when the social worker should leave, how to do this safely with the people they have been supporting and, importantly, the support they themselves may need during and afterwards once they resume normal duties (p. 66). The book provides a useful list of potential training for social worker in preparation for a disaster situation (p. 69). This education is not in the usual social work training programme in Aotearoa and would be worth looking at for social work educators going forward.

I was interested in the focus on the Covid pandemic both in chapters 2 and 5. Being the most prominent health emergency of recent history, it is fitting to attend to the findings so far. I was proud to see a mention of the stark contrast in the response to the pandemic in the protection of lives by the

UK PM, and our PM, Jacinda Ardern, who was praised for her supportive approach to leadership and protection of the public (pp. 86 and 87).

The final chapter (Chapter 6) looks to the future in healing and recovering from disasters, particularly the impact of disasters on the social workers involved. The chapter highlighted new concepts, “post traumatic growth” and “vicarious resilience” (p. 109). These are explored in the aftermath of disasters, where the community and social workers can learn and grow from the experience and deal with the trauma. There is a helpful list on page 111 which helps reader to “promote and prioritise self-care” (p. 110).

Overall, the book has a UK focus and, although there are useful lessons, we can take from this text and the experiences of UK disasters. The challenges for our region both meteorological and political are unique, so a text that attends to our Pacific social work needs, addressing colonisation and inequalities in our Pacific island, would be most welcome.

From this book I will take away the experiences of disaster survivors and the social workers who supported them in desperate times. I both cried and felt hope while reading it. I would definitely recommend this as a foundational text for anyone who is unfamiliar with the social work role in disaster work or is interested in learning more about this urgently needed, and extremely relevant, emerging social work practice, as our profession prepares to support humanity facing an uncertain future.

Reviewed by **Dr Lynsey Ellis**, Massey University Te Kunenga Ki Purehoro