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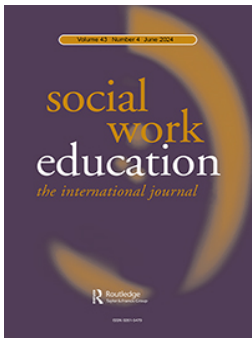
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Integrating human rights in social work education in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The engagement of social workers with human rights is deeply embedded in the history of the profession and discipline. Therefore, incorporating human rights into social work curricula is paramount. However, comparative research on the integration of human rights in Europe is largely missing. This article addresses the gap by analyzing curricula in eight European countries. It is based on a symposium organized by the Special Interest Group on Human Rights in Social Work within the European Association of Schools of Social Work in 2022. The article focuses on three questions: What explicit references to human rights can be found? How are human rights linked to political and structural aspects? In what form is the significance of human rights for social work practice considered? The analysis encompassed the curricula of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and Finland. It shows that human rights are an integrated component within all degree programs in these countries, albeit in different forms and to different extents. However, the critical analysis also shows significant shortcomings, e.g. missing emphasis on human rights topics within the curriculum and insufficient consideration of the practical applicability of human rights.

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1. Introduction

The integration of human rights into social work education holds significant importance, aligning with the globally accepted definition of the discipline and its integral role in professional practice, as stipulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2014. Both professional bodies also emphasize integrating human rights in social work degree programmes through their prominent position within the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (International Association of Schools of Social Work/

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International Federation of Social Workers [IASSW/IFSW], 2020). While the significance of human rights in social work is acknowledged, there remains a need for greater clarity regarding their integration into social work curricula. This clarity is essential for enhancing our comprehension of how human rights are incorporated into social work education, supporting its continued development. Integrating human rights into (European) Social Work education is a crucial starting point for advancing professional social work.

This article offers an overview of the efforts undertaken by European universities to engage in discussions about integrating human rights into their academic programs. The aim is to cultivate a culture of human rights in social work education, a continuous and evolving pursuit.

This project brings together social work educators and scholars from various European universities. The team formed as a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) in 2022. Supported by EASSW, the group organized an international symposium in Ghent, Belgium, during autumn 2022. Besides discussing the symposium's findings, this article also incorporates insights from a 2023 SIG report (European Association of Schools of Social Work Special Interest Group Human Rights and Social Work [EASSW SIG], 2024) that followed the symposium. It is structured around the following three questions:

- (1) What explicit references to human rights can be found in social work degree programs across Europe?
- (2) How are human rights linked to political and structural aspects in social work degree programs?
- (3) In what form is the significance of human rights for social work practice considered in bachelor's degree programs?

While addressing these questions, we will examine bachelor's¹ degree programs in eight European countries. The analysis will show that human rights are integrated within the bachelor's degree programs assessed by the EASSW SIG. In some of these bachelor's degree programs, the focus of the courses is explicitly on human rights. However, there are also significant shortcomings in two key areas: a recurring issue of insufficient emphasis on human rights topics within the curriculum and the practical applicability of human rights to social work needs to be improved. This is particularly noteworthy because social workers engage with individuals who are at risk of having their rights violated. The significance of social worker training in enhancing social work clients' rights has been long acknowledged (e.g. Centre for Human Rights, 1994). In the United States, for example, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) mandatory integration of human rights into the core curriculum of social work education emphasizes this relevance (McPherson & Libal, 2019). Human rights bodies consistently stress the importance of enhancing human rights education for social workers, as their client's human rights are not being adequately met in practice (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014, para. 39; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, para. 53; Council of Europe, 2001).

The engagement of social workers with human rights is deeply embedded in the history of the profession and discipline, as documented by Healy (2008a), Ife, Soldatic,

& Briskman (2022), and Staub-Bernasconi (2016). Statements from global social work bodies assert the critical role of human rights in social work (International Association of Schools of Social Work/International Federation of Social Workers [IASSW/IFSW], 2014; Ornellas et al., 2018). Despite global commitments and explicit references to human rights, there are claims that the human rights perspective needs to be more adequately integrated into social work education (Harrison & Melville, 2010; Sousa-Meixell et al., 2021). While there is a robust theoretical emphasis on human rights, incorporating these principles into social work practice needs to catch up, as Ife et al. (2022) noted.

Incorporating human rights into social work curricula is paramount for further development and relevance. Therefore, educational strategies that embed human rights into social work curricula are essential (Hawkins & Knox, 2014). Sousa-Meixell et al. (2021) conducted a study on integrating human rights into social work education in the United States, shedding light on this crucial aspect. Their study examined 223 social work programs across different schools and identified a prevailing trend: most respondents reported that including human rights concepts in their classes was achieved through diverse learning activities. However, reviewing social work and human rights literature reveals several challenges in implementing human rights into curricula. These challenges include ideological issues, reluctance to experiment with new teaching methods, and the constraints imposed by existing research limitations (Kingston, 2014; Sousa-Meixell et al., 2021). While it is reasonable to anticipate some similarities in challenges faced in the European context, conducting comparable research in Europe becomes imperative and is in high demand.

2. Human rights in social work degree programs in selected European countries

2.1. Background

The descriptions of human rights within social work degree programs presented here are based on the initiatives of the EASSW SIG and the Belgium symposium titled ‘Critical Approaches for Social Work Education across Europe.’ This symposium brought together approximately 20 colleagues, including social work educators and scholars from European countries such as Poland, Finland, Austria, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The primary focus of discussion at the symposium was bachelor’s degree programs, although some SIG members also contributed to a broader overview. It is worth noting that in Finland, the minimum degree required for social workers is a master’s degree. Consequently, integrating human rights into social work degree programs also needs to encompass the master’s level in perspective. The symposium’s overarching goals were facilitating knowledge exchange, enabling participants, and enhancing human rights teaching within social work education. The participants completed a questionnaire about their universities’ curricula before the event. This questionnaire sought information regarding curriculum development responsibilities, the explicit and implicit inclusion of human rights in modules and courses, and opinions on which modules should prioritize human rights. Subsequently, the collected responses

were presented and discussed during the symposium, fostering a rich dialogue and sharing practices among participants.

One of the symposium sessions was marked by a collective effort to gather knowledge and experiences focusing on whether education in human rights for social work should be more theory-based or practice-oriented, what expected learning outcomes or competencies for human rights-based social work should look like, and whether human rights should be a cross-sectional topic or if there should be an explicit human rights module. From these discussions and an analysis of the collective learning experiences at the symposium, the organizers identified three primary themes in the symposium's public report (European Association of Schools of Social Work Special Interest Group Human Rights and Social Work [EASSW], 2024). These themes are: 'Explicit References to Human Rights', 'Linking Human Rights with Political Aspects', and 'Making Human Rights Accessible for the Practice of Social Workers'. The outcomes of these discussions and the analysis of collective learning experiences at the symposium led to the identification of the three primary themes in the symposium's public report (European Association of Schools of Social Work Special Interest Group Human Rights and Social Work [EASSW], 2024), which form the basis for the organization of this article.

The upcoming sections will offer an overview of social work education in eight European countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and Finland.² Each country's analysis will be introduced with a brief overview. However, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations within the country-specific sections. In some countries, numerous schools of social work with varying curricula make it necessary to concentrate on a particular university. In these instances, we will aim to enhance the analysis by incorporating research insights into the broader human rights situation in the country (e.g. Berlin, Germany).

Furthermore, the article will explore specific regions within smaller countries. This approach results from the 2022 symposium's primary participation from scholars in these regions, such as Flanders, Belgium and Vorarlberg, Austria. The selection of countries for this overview is based on the EASSW SIG group, its members, and the symposium program. Therefore, the choice of countries was primarily driven by practical considerations.

2.2. Explicit references to human rights in social work degree programs

The most crucial requirement is the inclusion of explicit references to human rights in mandatory undergraduate courses. These references should encompass the fundamental aspects of human rights comprehensively. It is important to note that incorporating human rights references should not solely rely on elective courses but should be integrated into compulsory ones.

At the **Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**, social work bachelor's and master's programs are available. Within these programs, particular emphasis is given to human rights (Bašić, 2022), whereas no explicit human rights course is offered.

In the bachelor's degree program based on the curriculum of the 2019/2020 academic year, human rights content is explicitly mentioned, e.g. in the following courses: *Introduction to Social Policy* (the course covers, among others, critical

international human rights instruments); *Social Work with Persons with Disabilities* (this course highlights national and international guidelines, focusing on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities); *Family Law* (students study Bosnian family law provisions, with insights into European regulations and international documents); *Youth Delinquency* (the course teaches students about international tools for addressing minors in conflict with the law).

In the master's program, the course *Human Rights and Social Work* aims to familiarize students with the international human rights system, introduce social work from a historical perspective as a human rights profession, and critically question the significance of human rights in social work.

In summary, the University of Sarajevo strongly emphasizes the integration and understanding of human rights in its bachelor's and master's programs in social work.

In **Poland**, social work education encompasses bachelor's and master's degrees. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of a human rights-based approach in social work, none of the Polish institutions have fully integrated human rights into their curriculum. However, it is worth noting that the Ministry of Family and Social Policy has mandated a 10-hour module on 'Professional Ethics and Human Rights' (Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, 2012).

The **University of Gdańsk** has a unique approach and offers a course entitled *Human Rights-Based Social Work*, which covers the following topics: a) the rights of citizens and the welfare state; b) human rights—history and modernity; c) needs and human rights; d) the implementation of human rights through social work; e) respect for human rights in social work; f) ethical dilemmas and human rights in social work. In addition to this explicit human rights course, there are several courses in which human rights are addressed implicitly, for example, *Philosophical Foundations of Social Work*, *Professional Ethics*, *International Social Work*, *Social Policy*, *Social Work with Refugees and Displaced People*, and *Social Work with Persons with a Disability*.

In summary, while human rights are recognized in Polish social work education, their integration is less profound than expected.

The **Austrian University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg (FHV)** strongly emphasizes embedding human rights in the social work bachelor's and master's degree programs. This commitment to human rights education has its roots in the early initiatives of the FHV, dating back to 2006.

Since 2012, human rights education at FHV has underscored the connection between ethical principles, the inherent dignity of individuals, and the legitimacy of universal human rights conventions, treaties, and protocols. This emphasis aligns with the IFSW Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018) and links human rights with social justice within the curriculum. In the bachelor's degree program, explicit references to human rights are integrated into courses such as *Social Work Theory I*, *Social Work Theory III*, *Human Rights and Social Work*, *Social Justice and Transcultural Dialogue*, and *Our Generation*. Human rights are at the core of the master's course *Social Work and Human Rights*. Moreover, an interdisciplinary master's elective titled *Human Rights and Professional Ethos* is available to students from various disciplines, including social work. This rights-based educational approach emphasizes ethical principles, a deep understanding of human rights instruments and mechanisms, and their practical application in professional practice contexts.

The FHV has made significant progress in integrating human rights principles and values into its social work bachelor's and master's programs. This integration goes beyond individual courses; it is integrated into the curriculum, ensuring students acquire the knowledge and skills to champion human rights in their professional practice (Du Plessis-Schneider, 2020). However, the integration of human rights, as described above, is contingent on the commitment of individual faculty members. This reliance introduces the potential risk of content omission in the event of staff change.

In **Ireland**, social work and social care work are distinct professions, although the international definition of social work applies to both (Lalor & Share, 2013). Degree programs in these professions are regulated by the Health and Social Care Professionals Council (Coru), which ensures adherence to defined standards. Completion of these standards is a requirement for professional registration. Human rights are integral to the proficiency standards for social workers and social care workers, encompassing five domains. Human rights knowledge and application are particularly emphasized within the 'Professional Knowledge and Skill' domain, where professionals must be well-versed in human rights principles.

The **Atlantic Technological University (ATU)** offers a master's degree program in social work and a bachelor's degree program in social care. The bachelor's program requires an explicit human rights module during the fourth year. This module familiarizes students with fundamental human rights instruments and enforcement mechanisms. Through case studies, students learn how legal mechanisms can effectively uphold human rights. Human rights are also addressed in other modules within the curriculum.

Ireland strongly emphasizes the integration of human rights into the education of social workers and social care workers. This emphasis is enforced through regulatory standards that universities, including ATU, must adhere to.

In the **Netherlands**, social work programs are situated at universities of applied sciences, and the standard degree is at the bachelor's level. The national educational profile (Sectoraal advies college hogere sociale studies [SAHSS], 2017) represents a mandatory framework for the accreditation of degree programs. Human rights references are infrequent in the training profile. However, it strongly emphasizes the importance of ethical conduct and awareness of societal developments in a profession, allowing universities to incorporate human rights entirely.

At the **Saxion University of Applied Science** in Enschede, references to human rights can be found in individual degree units and exams and are primarily used for professional reflection. Besides the major program of seven semesters in the Netherlands, students can choose a minor program of one semester. At Saxion University of Applied Science, an elective minor titled 'Cultures and Human Rights' explicitly focuses on human rights.

The **University of Applied Science Rotterdam** offers a minor on human trafficking, which, while not exclusively focused on human rights, addresses the topic within the broader context of the course. In addition, the degree program has connectable content but no explicit references to human rights.

At **NHL-Stenden** in Leeuwarden, apart from individual legal seminars and obligatory references to children's rights, the social work curriculum currently lacks explicit attention to human rights, recognized as an area for improvement.

In conclusion, while the national educational profile for social work in the Netherlands does not explicitly emphasize human rights, individual universities have taken steps to integrate human rights topics into their curricula.

There is no binding core curriculum in **Germany**. However, the German Association of Social Work (DGSA) has developed a core curriculum as a guideline for social work degree programs (German Association of Social Work [DGSA], 2016). The DGSA recommends incorporating human rights into the core curricula, particularly within the study areas' *The normative foundations of social work* and *General societal and institutional conditions for social work*. However, it does not explicitly address the need to integrate human rights into the courses within other study areas, e.g. *The scientific foundations of social work*, which also focuses on the history of social work.

The **Alice Salomon Hochschule (ASH)** in Berlin distinguishes itself with its specialized master's degree programs, namely *Social Work as a Human Rights Profession*, offered in German and English. In these programs, human rights take center stage in every module, such as research, vulnerable groups, or organizational development.

The module descriptions of the bachelor's degree programs explicitly highlight the presence of human rights within modules like *Law and Social Work*, *Dis_ability*, and *Ethics in Social Work*. Although not explicitly mentioned in the module descriptions, human rights are also addressed in various other modules, such as *Methods of Social Work*. It is worth noting that incorporating human rights into the curriculum relies on individual lecturers. To further enhance the systematic integration of human rights throughout the program, it would be beneficial to include explicit references to human rights in additional modules.

In **Flanders**, there is a framework for professional bachelor's programs. Human rights are explicitly and implicitly included in the qualification framework. They take a prominent position in the first learning outcome: 'The professional bachelor's in social work uses human rights and social justice as standards and perspectives for their actions.'

The **HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts** has a learning line: 'Act from a social-political awareness based on human rights, social justice, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities.' The teaching line includes the courses *Study of Social Work*, *Social Work and Social Justice*, *Human Rights and Community Development* and *Children's Rights*.

Since its 2018 update, the **UCLL University of Applied Sciences in Leuven** has incorporated human rights and social justice as key learning outcomes in social work, particularly in general courses like *The Basis of Social Work* and *The Fundamentals of Rights*. In addition to this course with explicit references, there is a direct human rights course: *Working on Human Rights*.

The **University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp (AP)** social work program strongly focuses on human rights, social justice, and solidarity. Two courses on the identity of social work link human rights to social work. Law courses introduce the formal framework of human rights. In the second year, there is an explicit human rights course, *Realizing Human Rights*.

In summary, within the Flemish framework and the degree programs of the three universities, there are modules explicitly dedicated to human rights and those that incorporate explicit human rights content.

In **Finland**, social work is a research-based discipline that spans all three levels of education: the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. The minimum degree for social workers' graduation is a master's degree. Like in Ireland, a practice-oriented degree program at the University of Applied Sciences qualifies graduates as social service professionals or social instructors (in Finnish: *sosionomi*). An umbrella term for social workers and social service professionals is *social welfare professionals* (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2005).

Human rights education is implicitly part of all social work degree programs in Finland. However, its inclusion is usually not explicitly mentioned in course descriptions. In most universities, human rights are implicitly taught mainly in courses on *Welfare Law and Social Rights*, *Rights of Social Welfare Clients*, *Social Work Ethics*, *Child Protection*, *Children's Rights and Migration*, and *Diversity*.

At the **University of Helsinki**, there is, at the master's level, an explicit human rights course, *Social Work and Human Rights*, which provides a comprehensive overview. The Developing Online Social Work Courses in English (DEOT) program is also set up by the Finnish National University Network for Social Work to improve Finnish students' English language skills and as a learning program for non-Finnish social work students in Finland. This program consists of six degree modules, three explicitly incorporating human rights education: *Multicultural Social Work*, *Social Work in Ecosocial Transition*, and *Global Perspectives in Social Work*. A course on ecosocial work, based on the DEOT project at the University of Jyväskylä's master level, links ecosocial work with a human rights-based approach.

In summary, while human rights education is an integral part of social work programs in Finland, its explicit mentions in course descriptions could be more extensive.

[Section 2.2](#) provides a detailed overview of integrating human rights aspects into social work degree programs in several European countries. It sheds light on the diverse approaches and varying degrees of emphasis on human rights education, focusing on the impact of regulatory standards and curriculum design on integrating human rights content. While some universities have successfully integrated human rights throughout their programs, others have integrated it, but not comprehensively. This analysis emphasizes the variety of approaches to human rights education in social work and underscores ongoing efforts to enhance its integration.

2.3. Linking human rights with political and structural aspects in social work degree programs

Incorporating human rights content involves contextualization within the political context, adapting it to the degree programs' respective national and local frameworks. Additionally, it is crucial to explore the significance of human rights for the (professional) political and structural actions in social work.

Social work education at the **University of Sarajevo** in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** has historically emphasized a strong political perspective. This approach is rooted in the origins of social work schools during a broader communist and socialist modernization process. It involves viewing social policy and the welfare state as a framework for the social work profession. In addition to this political perspective, the human rights dimension gained significance in the

aftermath of the 1990s war. It was instrumental in addressing human rights violations during the conflict, often called transitional justice, and creating conditions for a peaceful future. The courses that explicitly reference human rights have a clear link to the structural context. However, this link is primarily descriptive, as it relates national frameworks to human rights and identifies them as contributing factors to social problems.

Of higher relevance is the question of action-oriented human rights components. An emerging concern at the University of Sarajevo is the gap between the university's human rights-focused curriculum and the so-called needs-based paradigm that dominates practical social work. Students need clarification on human rights teaching and the realities of field placement. The crux is social work education's disconnect between micro and macro perspectives. Though rich in content, the current curriculum needs a more coherent integration of both perspectives. To ensure an actionable education, future curricula must prioritize this micro-macro linkage, teaching students how to bridge the two realms for a more rights-based, inclusive, and just societal impact.

In **Poland**, political aspects are particularly significant. While human rights-based social work is gaining recognition, political polarization challenges the universality of human rights and their status as legal entitlements.

The degree program of the **University of Gdańsk** includes some aspects that frame structural problems in terms of human rights and link structural approaches to social work with human rights. The structural perspective of social work's responsibility in implementing human rights is addressed in the explicit course *Human Rights-Based Social Work*. Additionally, a critical perspective emphasizes social work's respect for human rights.

Some modules explicitly address vulnerable groups for whom specific human rights conventions exist. Examples include refugees, victims of forced migration, and people with disabilities. Additionally, structure-oriented approaches to social work, such as anti-discriminatory and anti-racist social work, are closely linked with human rights components.

At the **University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg (FHV)** in **Austria**, significant importance is placed on linking human rights principles with specific national and local contexts and exploring these from the perspective of human rights, e.g. by examining the history of social work in the context of Austrian fascism, and the role of social workers in the Second Austrian Republic. This historical context aids students in identifying and utilizing theory to explain the importance of human rights within a particular national context.

The FHV strongly emphasizes integrating human rights principles into structural and policy-related interventions, which closely aligns with social work's triple mandate, including policy engagement and social activism (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018). Students learn about community organizing and various advocacy techniques during their field excursions. They learn to identify structural barriers and develop strategies for sustainable systemic change grounded in human rights principles. These approaches encompass human rights instruments and establish a strong connection with grassroots social movements. The emphasis on human rights-sensitive research, along with the guidance provided to master's students during their research, assists

them in integrating human rights principles into their studies. This guidance is crucial in preventing the unintentional perpetuation of oppression in their research projects.

The bachelor courses at FHV, which focus on human rights, highlight the role of emerging social workers as agents of social change. This perspective underscores the role of students in advocacy and systemic reform to advance social justice and safeguard the rights of marginalized populations.

In **Ireland**, a distinction must be made between social work and social care regarding the connection between human rights content and structural and political aspects. While social work tends to take on an overarching, managing role, the social care professional primarily focuses on individual one-to-one contact.

In line with a general orientation toward action, the aim is to ensure that graduates are equipped with a theoretical understanding of human rights and have the skills to address structural challenges in their professional practice. Despite the formerly named distinction, the human rights-related modules in the social care degree program at **Atlantic Technological University (ATU)** aim to apply human rights concepts in real-life scenarios. By critically analyzing case studies, students learn how legal mechanisms can be used to uphold human rights and improve the well-being of social service clients. This includes addressing structural barriers and policy decisions that affect the realization of human rights.

Nevertheless, there is room for improvement, and it would appear desirable to expand the action-oriented elements. One desirable option would be a two-step approach in which the basics of human rights instruments and enforcement mechanisms are developed in the first module. A second module, *Human Rights in Action*, could involve students in current human rights issues, cases, and projects.

The integration of human rights elements in the study of social work in the **Netherlands**, linked to the national training profile, shows a strong emphasis on ethical aspects, with few references to structural and political dimensions. At the same time, the educational profile emphasizes the need for structural approaches. In the obligatory parts of the primary program, for example, at Saxion University of Applied Science, human rights components appear primarily as a frame of reference for professional reflection, e.g. in methods such as ‘moral consultation’ (moreel beraad). Additional structural and political aspects of human rights are mainly found within the minors, i.e. within elective courses.

This applies to the minor in cultures and human rights at the **Saxion University of Applied Science**. Here, forms of structural discrimination with direct reference to practice and social work clients are explored, and action-oriented approaches also play a critical role through the large amount of project work.

In the minor *Human Trafficking* at the **University of Applied Science Rotterdam**, relevant structural and political aspects in the emergence of the (human rights) problem and structural approaches to action are explored.

The minor in *International Social Work* at **NHL-Stenden** explicitly addresses social work as a human rights profession, including its realization as a political task. Thus, in addition to learning about human rights, learning *through* and *for* human rights is pursued.

Overall, there is room for improvement in integrating a human rights-based assessment of social problems and structural approaches in the Netherlands, which could build on existing initiatives in the Dutch-speaking area to understand human rights in their political dimension (Reynaert et al., 2018).

Although the core curriculum for social work developed by the DGSA is not binding for universities in **Germany**, its impact should be considered here. Human rights aspects can be found here in *General societal and institutional conditions for social work*. This includes human rights, which assess the structural conditions of social work while explicitly emphasizing social work's role in creating and implementing policies.

In addition to the prominent master's programs at **Alice Salomon Hochschule (ASH)** in Berlin mentioned above, structural and political aspects can also be found in the bachelor's degree program in social work, albeit not explicitly linked to human rights. However, depending on the respective lecturer, the students will learn about these aspects in different modules. Even structural change methods are sometimes taught (e.g. in the *Project Module*). A discrimination-sensitive perspective that could be connected to the structural human rights approach can be found in the explicit human rights references in the module *Dis_Ability*. However, explicit references to human rights would be desirable in all modules that understand groups in vulnerable situations as clients of social work, e.g. *Racism & Migration, Poverty and Gerontology*.

In **Flanders**, Belgium, a more structural perspective on human rights is indicated by the explicit link between them and social justice in the learning outcomes of the national framework for social work programs. The implicit references in several other learning outcomes underline this perspective.

At **HOGENT**, the university's learning outcome 11, inspired by the IFSW/IASSW Global Definition of Social Work (2014), includes human rights, social justice, and collective responsibility. The teaching line based on this is explicitly focused on socio-cultural framework conditions. Implementing human rights is based on research findings that follow a 'human rights from below' approach, i.e. a clear structural and political perspective that is recognizable in the human rights references.

Based on the connection between human rights and social justice, the structural perspective can also be found at **UCLL**, particularly in the course mentioned above, *Working on Human Rights*, where the question of human rights violations and the role of social work is central.

At the **AP**, the above link between human rights and social justice is further emphasized by referring to solidarity and inclusion as central concepts. In the course *Realizing Human Rights*, connections are made to social policy and politicization in social work.

As part of the differentiation between social work as a research-based, scientific discipline and social service professionals (sosionomi), university social work in **Finland** is structurally oriented. From the connection of the—albeit implicit—human rights content with the areas of social work expertise, it can be assumed that human rights are considered in their structural significance on the levels of recognition and action. This structural perspective is particularly emphasized in service system expertise, development and change expertise, and legal and structural social work expertise.

Within the DEOT program, further structural and political references can be found within the modules mentioned above, albeit at the master's level. Among others, concepts by Staub-Bernasconi (2016) are taught here, explicitly including structural perspectives and describing social work policies. At the same time, an action-oriented perspective is also opened here when human rights violations of vulnerable groups, such as the Sami people in Nordic countries, but also people in poverty, are addressed in education *for* human rights. A human rights perspective in the eco-social work course at the University of Jyväskylä also necessarily includes structural elements when exploring the environmental dimension of human rights and its importance for social work.

SectionG 2.3 examines the integration of human rights with political and structural elements in social work degree programs in European countries. Examples include the University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a strong political perspective intertwines with human rights education, and Poland, which addresses structural issues through courses like *Human Rights-Based Social Work*. Austria's University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg emphasizes linking human rights principles with national contexts, focusing on advocacy and systemic change. There is a drive to apply human rights concepts to real-life scenarios in Ireland. The Netherlands emphasizes ethical aspects, while Germany seeks to assess structural conditions. Flanders, Belgium, highlights the link between human rights and social justice. Finnish programs are structurally oriented. Although already present in some of these countries, a more explicit integration of human rights principles with structural and political elements in social work education is called for.

2.4. Making human rights accessible for practice in social work degree programs

One theme that became particularly clear during the discussion at the symposium in Ghent was the necessary practical relevance of human rights components in social work studies. Human rights must be made accessible within the courses of study regarding their significance for social work practice. This concerns the practical relevance of the theoretical foundations of human rights within the study units and the human rights components within the supervision of field placements. This necessary practical relevance also ties in with claims in the professional discourse (Sousa-Meixell et al., 2021; Staub-Bernasconi, 2018; Steen & Mathiesen, 2008).

In contrast to the two previous themes, the overview of degree programs provided in the symposium report (EASSW, 2024) needs more explicit practical relevance. In the following description of the need to make human rights accessible for practice in the degree programs, the structure will differ from the previous one based on the participating countries and universities. In the following description of the requirement to make human rights accessible for practice, the corresponding elements of the degree programs described are summarized under practical relevance.

Making the practical relevance of the theoretical foundations of human rights accessible in the degree programs can be found in various ways. At the **University of Sarajevo**, the program includes the course *Social and Legal Protection*, which, for the exam, studies the implementation or violation of specific human rights in the national context and, thus, in social work practice. Additionally, students will be

explicitly introduced to professional practice to protect the rights of beneficiaries. The module in the *Social Care* program at **Atlantic Technological University** uses a critical analysis of case studies to make human rights problems from practice accessible to students. The educational profile in the **Netherlands** shows a strong emphasis on the ethical aspects of human rights, some of which are taken up in the context of ethical decision-making methods. Part-time courses in social work are a unique feature here, as the theoretical content of the course, including human rights, is directly related to practice. The elective minor program *Cultures and Human Rights* at **Saxion University of Applied Science** opens theoretical foundations of human rights to the students to prepare them for the practical project that follows. A similar linking of theoretical foundations of human rights and their relevance for practice could be found in the minor program *Human Trafficking* at the **University of Applied Science Rotterdam**. At the **Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin** in **Germany**, the modules implicitly address human rights content connected to social work practice. In particular, the modules *Introduction to the Field of Social Work*, *Practical Reflection*, and the *Project Module* offer opportunities to explore the significance of human rights practice. The *Dis_Ability* module addresses, among other things, social work in the field of ‘disability’ with an explicit focus on reflected action, promoting self-determination, participation, and human rights. In **Flanders**, Belgium, explicit practical references are made in the implicit references, for example, when human rights aspects play a role in stakeholder analysis and assessing organizations, services, and initiatives. At **UCLL**, the importance of human rights for practice becomes evident in the course *Working from Human Rights*, in which the role of social work and its practice in realizing human rights is explored and developed, using specific practical topics as examples. In addition, a functional transfer of human rights content takes place by including experts drawing upon experience. In **Finland**, the importance of human rights content for practice is reflected in the DEOT modules, among other things, by the reference in the module *Global Perspectives in Social Work*, in which models from human rights education are also aimed at the application for the realization of human rights and thus concrete practice.

In [Section 2.4](#), the discussion centers around the practical relevance of human rights education in specific universities. Various universities, including the University of Sarajevo, Atlantic Technological University in Ireland, Saxion University of Applied Science in the Netherlands, Alice Salomon Hochschule in Berlin, UCLL in Leuven, and AP in Antwerp, are mentioned for their approaches to making human rights accessible for practice within their degree programs. These universities employ different methods, such as case studies, ethical decision-making, and real-world applications, to bridge the gap between theory and practice in human rights education.

To conclude the presentation of the three primary themes, an overview of the individual topics per country is provided to illustrate the results. [Table 1](#) shows the central aspects, broken down by country and topic.



Table 1. Overview of three primary themes.

Country/University	Explicit References to Human Rights	Linking with Political & Structural Aspects	Making Human Rights Accessible for Practice
Poland <i>University of Gdańsk</i>	10-hour module mandated; some courses at University of Gdańsk focus explicitly on human rights	Courses frame structural problems in terms of human rights, focusing on vulnerable groups	Emphasis on theory, less on practice; potential for more action-oriented education
Netherlands <i>Saxion UAS; UAS Rotterdam, NHL-Stenden</i>	No state-wide structural embedding of human rights; varying degrees of human rights integration in participating UAS	Insufficient connection between human rights and structural aspects; only elective courses integrate structural components	Strong emphasis on practice includes human rights elements; potential beyond ethical references requires further development
Finland <i>University of Jyväskylä</i>	No state-wide structural embedding of human rights; only one module in a social work master program explicitly addresses human rights	Social work in Finland is generally structurally oriented; a connection between human rights and structural aspects is only implicitly integrated in various courses	Emphasis on structural aspects; research and theories; insufficient consideration of the accessibility of human rights for practice
Flanders <i>HOGENT, UCLL, UAS Antwerpen</i>	Human rights are an integral part of the Flemish Qualifications Framework; the participating UAS all have explicit human right courses	Linking with social justice underlines structural perspective; courses linked to politicisation of social work	Human Rights as part of (stakeholder) analysis of social work practice; partly including experts by experience;
Ireland <i>Atlantic Technological University</i>	Integration of human rights is forced through state-wide regulatory standards; explicit human rights module at ATU	Human rights module includes addressing structural barriers; separate additional module 'Human Rights in Action' desirable	Strong emphasis on practice including human rights (Professional Knowledge and Skills); critical Analysis of case studies from a human rights perspective;
Bosnia & Herzegovina <i>University of Sarajevo</i>	Human rights are explicitly integrated in several courses with a strong emphasis on international human rights instruments	Strong emphasis on structural aspects including human rights aspects; facing difficulties in bringing structural aspects to action	Applying theoretical knowledge to social work practice examples, including analysis of implementation/violation of specific rights
Austria <i>FHV Vorarlberg</i>	Human rights are embedded in the social work bachelor and master programs. Courses explicitly address human rights and social justice both locally and globally, emphasising the profession's triple mandate in action. Integration depends on the commitment of individual faculty members, posing a risk of content omission with staff changes.	Strong focus on addressing social problems faced by individuals and groups at various socio-cultural levels. Emphasis is placed on tackling the roots of these problems, particularly structural obstacles that hinder equitable access to resources.	Human rights are accessible through international treaties, monitoring bodies, and frameworks such as human needs theory. Groupwork assignments, where students compile shadow reports on specific conventions, enhance understanding by analysing real-world applications and gaps.
Germany <i>Alice Salomon Hochschule</i>	Human rights are explicitly integrated in the courses Law and Social Work, Dis_Ability and Ethics in Social Work.	Emphasis on structural and political aspects but reference to human rights depends on the respective lecturer; a human rights based discrimination-sensitive perspective is (only) explicitly mentioned on disability	The Dis_Ability module explicitly addresses aspects of human rights-oriented practice, other modules also offer the opportunity lecturers to do so.

3. Conclusion

The report on the Human Rights and Social Work Symposium and the presented summaries indicate that all participating universities are incorporating human rights into their social work curriculum. This shows that a start has been made toward an essential goal of the professional associations (IASSW, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018) and concerning the requirements of international and regional bodies (Council of Europe, 2001). At the same time, the integration of human rights into the study programs varies significantly in terms of extent and content. The social work degree programs differ considerably in their context: the national and organizational traditions of social work practice, the associated understanding of social work, and the corresponding discourses. The differences in anchoring human rights components are therefore not only self-evident but also necessary. The references to practice, for example, must consider the corresponding training and the concrete organization.

Despite the justified differences within the curricula presented, one of the aims of the symposium and the SIGs involved is to develop a proposal for a guiding framework concerning implementing human rights in social work studies, initially at the bachelor's level. Even though, further to early demands by professional associations (Healy, 2008b) and international organizations (Dolan, 1987), a development toward a more substantial consideration of human rights content in social work bachelor programs can be deduced from the presentations, a further development toward sufficient consideration still appears necessary.

For instance, a notable aspect of this discussion is the inclusion of explicit human rights references in bachelor's degree programs. Considering the various ways that explicit human rights content is integrated, a question arises about the form and extent required for this integration. Human rights content must be anchored within the compulsory courses and modules (Steen & Mathiesen, 2008). However, the relationship between human rights content in other social work-related courses and explicit human rights courses or modules still needs to be discussed. It is undisputed that the curricula should be 'based on human rights principles' (IASSW, 2020, p. 11) and, as in Sarajevo, Berlin, or Finland, for example, human rights should therefore be a cross-sectional topic within the entire degree program. An isolated human rights module or course alone is, therefore, not sufficient. However, such cross-sectional integration depends on the lecturers' skills, orientation, and ability (Gabel & Mapp, 2020).

To mitigate the risk of human rights fading into the background, it is reasonable to offer an explicit human rights module or course. This approach has been adopted in countries such as Austria (FHV), Ireland, and Poland. This should include basics such as the most important human rights instruments and principles and a critical reflection on their history (within social work) (IASSW, 2020). These basics are also necessary as references for other modules or courses.

Building on the question of forms of implementing human rights content as a necessary further development of bachelor's degree programs, the understanding of human rights and their significance for social work could be addressed. Knowledge of the most critical human rights norms and their enforcement instruments is essential, as international bodies demand (Council of Europe, 2001), primarily as social workers can also actively use human rights protection instruments (Niendorf, 2023; Prasad, 2011). However, social workers are named by these bodies as potential—and often actual—violators of human rights, e.g. the addressees

of these norms (Kappeler, 2008; Klein, 2019). The risk is particularly pronounced in the welfare states of Europe, where social workers are often engaged in implementing state regulations. This integration into state processes significantly strengthens the position of power of social workers, which, given the proximity to the most personal environment of social work clients, further increases the potential vulnerability of their situation. In addition, there is a risk that state regulations that potentially violate human rights will take priority over the client's interests. For the social work profession, such a perspective, in which human rights are regarded as 'external claims' for the protection of social work clients, is insufficient, and the obligation of professional associations goes beyond this. At the same time, this is linked to the professional duty to critically reflect on their practices and, for example, to create effective complaint mechanisms.

The ongoing question of social work focuses on identifying and explaining how the profession views itself as a promoter and enabler of human rights, examining its core mandate concerning, e.g. human rights advocacy. There is a clear consensus on emphasizing the social dimensions or the person-in-environment concept (Steen & Mathiesen, 2008) and its association with social justice (Gabel & Mapp, 2020). The mission of addressing and mitigating the associated social problems of discrimination, oppression, and exclusion is widely recognized. This perspective, which acknowledges both roles, the self-critical and the potential facilitating social work, is exemplified in programs such as the master's in *Social Work as a Human Rights Profession* at ASH in Berlin and the bachelor's degree programs at the FHV in Austria, UCLL and AP in Belgium.

To facilitate the comprehensive and consistent integration of human rights into social work bachelor's degree programs across different countries, there is a need for a better understanding of the status quo. This understanding would serve as the foundation for developing an effective guiding framework. It is worth noting that research in this area is still in its nascent stages (Sousa-Meixell et al., 2021). Future studies should consider the variations in the respective contexts mentioned earlier. However, they should also consider shared factors, particularly within the European context. These commonalities include integrating human rights into welfare state initiatives, the impact of austerity policies, and the connections to social movements.

Another common feature of the various contexts, which also underlines the need to implement human rights components, is the resurgence of populism. This political threat of instrumentalisation of human rights terminology arises from right-wing populism, authoritarianism, and nationalism, all of which use them through relativization for their own localized purposes worldwide. The most significant issue is that political regimes violate them and hijack human rights terminology (Neuman, 2020), so they take on a new meaning when incorporated into a discourse legitimizing authoritarian and nationalist policies. Right-wing populists act as defenders of the so-called 'majority's human rights' but at the same time undermine such rights and engage in conflicts with international human rights bodies. This perspective takes us back to the idea of the critical consciousness of social workers and the need for education to expose conservative, racist, and nationalist policies that support repressive identities like whiteness, masculinity, or religious fundamentalism and enable the oppression of minorities. Nationalist authoritarianism and populism are new challenges that endanger human rights, especially of social work clients, and make it all the more important to deal with them in depth. Thus, establishing a solid foundation of human rights within social work

bachelor's programs is also of utmost importance. This foundation serves a dual purpose: preventing social workers from (inadvertently) engaging in human rights violations and, at the same time, making them able to support clients in enforcing their rights.

All objectives and actions following the symposium in Ghent are linked to the EASSW SIG Human Rights and Social Work, which aims to strengthen cooperation between social work scholars working on (or interested in) human rights in social work. The SIG aims to share knowledge, strengthen each other, and promote and improve the teaching of human rights in social work. The SIG holds regular online meetings and joint events. Further plans include the development of a database of existing approaches to human rights education in social work and research and practice concepts related to human rights in social work, strengthening joint teaching and promoting interdisciplinary cooperation with civil society and social work clients and social service organizations. This includes, for example, linking with a (self-)critical perspective addressing the human rights culture within social work and its schools, e.g. concerning complaints mechanisms for students and social work clients.

Significant progress has been made in implementing human rights in social work education; however, the challenge of defending and solidifying these rights remains particularly pronounced during times of crisis. This underscores the imperative of ensuring that human rights form an enduring and pertinent theoretical, ethical, and action framework within professional social work. We aim to move beyond (existing) concepts and sporadic engagement for the implementation of human rights. The pivotal query we must address is this: *How can social work educators, scholars, students, and practitioners across Europe collaborate effectively to ensure a sustainable integration of human rights into social work (practice)?*

Notes

1. In most European countries students in bachelor's degree programs in social work graduate with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) certificate. However, in some countries, degree programs offer a specific Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). Additionally, other degree programs, e.g. Bachelor of Social Services, can be found in the field of social work across Europe.
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