

## **Beyond Marginality: The Exclusion of White Working Class Men from a Prosperous Europe, What Can/Should Social Workers Do?**

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Wealthy societies are becoming increasingly polarized as wealth becomes skewed in favour of the few wealthy individuals, mainly but not all, from the global North, to the detriment of children, women, older people, people from black and minority ethnic groups, asylum seekers and refugees, and white working class men. The situation has become so distorted, that Oxfam (2016) has been prompted to write a report entitled, *An Economy for the 1%*, whereby it argues that 62 individuals hold more wealth between them than 50 per cent of the world's population (3.6 billion people). Moreover, 53 of this wealthy elite group are men. According to the Forbes list of billionaires, the world's richest man (Bill Gates) holds twice the wealth of the richest woman (Christy Walton). Women also hold only 24 Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions in the Fortune 500 companies. While CEO salaries have become hugely inflated, salaries at the bottom end have been either stagnant or reduced. For example, American CEOs have seen their salaries increase by 54 per cent since 2009 while salaries at the bottom have not moved. In India, a CEO earns 416 times the salary of the average worker. Women are concentrated in the lowest-paid, most precarious jobs, often doing dangerous work in the sweatshops of the world. These inequalities are exacerbated in Europe - throughout the continent, through what I term 'state-induced inequalities' whereby public expenditure cuts and increasingly privatized welfare states, including in the more social democratic Nordic ones. The loss of transfers through the welfare state mean that more and more people are consigned to struggling at society's margins, merely to survive, and there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people going to food-banks and begging in major, affluent cities like London and Paris, as institutionalized solidarity in the shape of welfare benefits as of right become harder and harder to come by.

Income inequalities lead to other forms of inequalities, including lost opportunities for the full growth and development of the talents of an individual. The ravages of a neoliberal industrial model of development produce more losers than winners – the 'one per cent and the rest' as the Occupy Wall Street Movement put it. Intervening to prevent its march across the world demands a more sophisticated analysis than is evident to the public which is fed myths by a media that is dominated by right-wingers and rightwing politicians who have appropriated the words of progressive-minded individuals and turned them to their advantage. Such messages have legitimated racist discourses and give rise to the lack of social cohesion, despair, loss of solidarity and empathy with those in difficulty, and loss of hope in the system delivering basic rights to all peoples living in a particular nation-state. While the gender implications of a globalized neoliberal world are clear and discussed in various media outlets, class-based inequalities remain taboo. And, in this, the social exclusion of white working class men is less evident, except in the spaces they frequent, e.g., the pubs, and an increasingly hostile discourse against immigrants, asylum seekers, and 'othering' that scapegoats anyone who is different from them for taking 'their' jobs, 'their' houses, and 'their' communities. In these discourses, the spectre in the room responsible for these manufactured shortages – a global economic system that is driving living standards to the bottom for the 99 per cent, remains invisible. But far right parties, and even those in the centre mainstream of politics, have picked up on growing disillusionment among white working class men who used to be employed in well-paid blue collar jobs and have seen these replaced with low-paid jobs in the service sector which do not attract them or highly paid jobs in the financial sector to which they cannot even aspire, with their messages of hostility towards those they 'other' – white working class people from Eastern and Central Europe, Syrian refugees, black and ethnic minority groups, and asylum seekers. So, from London with the rise of UKIP and the growing popularity of Brexit

to Budapest's far right Jobbik party, we have seen anti-immigrant rhetoric growing in popularity among this marginalized segment of the population. This should not come as a surprise. Deindustrialisation caused by neoliberal ideologies becoming hegemonic, has devastated working-class neighbourhoods, especially the economic base that gave white working class men some stability and certainty in meeting the demands of masculinity. Consequently, generations of working class men who have been unable to obtain the secure employment to which their forefathers had become accustomed, have begun to absorb the blame-game and promises of rightwing ideologues. This is not to blame white working class men for their predicament, but to ask the question, what can social workers do to reintegrate them into mainstream society so that they do not blame other victim-survivors of an inequitable system for their plight?

To answer this question, I have devised some vignettes based on real-life scenarios, but based in specific locations, which I will use for discussions aimed at articulating solutions that might be relevant to an issue which is central to reducing the rise of racism, violence against women and children, and those from other lands. The discussions will be guided by questions that draw on the insights of working with men and hegemonic masculinity, and how feminist and anti-racist perspectives might be used to change behaviour and attitudes among a group that is rarely seen as a legitimate target for social work interventions.