

voices from the front line

People, power, Pollokshields

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A social work perspective of dawn raids of refugees and asylum seekers within the Pollokshields area of Glasgow, which were stopped by community action. The hostile environment whipped up by politicians and the ongoing oppression of refugees and asylum seekers is considered within the context of counter terrorism legislation and the need for grassroots community social work working.

Key words migration • community practice • dawn raids • refugees • hostile environment

To cite this article: Jarvis, Z. and Anderson, R. (2021) People, power, Pollokshields, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, vol 9, no 2, 297–299, DOI: 10.1332/204986021X16231575017622

Pollokshields

In the early hours of 13 May 2021, families all over Pollokshields were gently waking with the dawn that would signal the end of Ramadan. Daybreak marked the start of Eid-al-Fitr, a day that fills the Muslim community with a sense of compassion and unity as they emerge from their Ramadan fast, ‘illuminated by eternal revelations, that have the power to bring a revolution of the heart and help restore justice, peace, and harmony in the world’ (Initiatives of Change International, 2003).

It was on this morning, before the first Eid greeting had been shared between loved ones, that a white UK immigration van arrived on Kenmure Street to steal away two members of the Pollokshields community. Dressed in helmets and bulletproof vests, a group of armed officers burst through the doors of two sleeping men, rushing them up and out of bed, rushing them up and out of the house, rushing down the stairs, storming out of the doors, onto the street and into their van. Stealthily bundling two bewildered people into a state van while neighbours sleep was simply business as usual for these dawn raiders. It is not their job to ask questions; their job was to follow orders and make a safe delivery of the names on their list to the designated detention centre. Simple.

This raid was not so simple. The Pollokshields area has a network of roughly 679 registered charities (Scottish Charity Regulator, 2021), many of which are community-based and work in partnership with each other. Several days prior, a petition had been shared through this Southside network condemning the practice of dawn raids. This meant that when news from Kenmure Street spread through Pollokshields, the community quickly pivoted in resistance.

Glasgow's history of resistance to deportations and the oppression of refugees goes back to the 2000s, when the government felt that they could force refugees out. When the Sighthill area came under attack (Bostanci et al, 2009), a movement of resistance quickly emerged, led by campaigners, trade unionists, socialists and community members, who stood alongside the refugees. In 2005, a group of pupils from Drumchapel High School in Glasgow formed to campaign for the release of their friend, Agnesa, and her family, who had been detained in a dawn raid (education.gov.scot, 2021). Their efforts eventually resulted in the family's release. Kenmure Street is a legacy of those movements – a living history of community collectively fighting injustice (see also Sivanandan, 2008). Interestingly, many who joined the protest had various reasons for joining. The neighbours who had witnessed and intercepted the raid chanted through the crowd, 'These are our neighbours, let them go!' Ambassadors from local organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers, who had participated in the petition, arrived with signs reading, 'Migrants and refugees are welcome here', 'No borders. No human is illegal' and 'Only mobs bundle people into vans'. As the hours drew on and more people joined, the stories of the two men in the van and how the demonstration had started began to vary. What is important, however, is that the natural position of the community was that the presence of immigration officers was not welcome.

As a policy, dawn raids have various implications. First, they create fear among refugees. Time, money and certainty are limited as it stands, with the inability to earn a living or secure education, appropriate benefits, housing and the citizenship granted to others looming heavy. Creating an atmosphere of fear through the threat of immediate detention and deportation in the form of dawn raids only increases the trauma that many refugees experience. Furthermore, calculated surprise attacks by immigration forces means that for those who fled war, terror and injustice, the very hardships that caused people to flee are never truly far away, no matter how far they have travelled.

Second, dawn raids increase self-policing among refugees, further entrenching their economic and social oppression, with few resources to live. The environment in which refugees are policed, either outright or via the environment of fear, places limitations on them that translate into lives of mindful decision-making that avoids placing themselves in jeopardy of being deported. It also means that individual circumstances are seen to impact the whole. Any form of activity that can be used to police refugees, such as joining a protest or earning money well below the minimum wage, further perpetuates the atmosphere of self-policing within the refugee community, with the impetus being to create suspicion and break the solidarity among them. The toxic language surrounding refugees fails to inspire condemnation of the hostile environment created by politicians or the horrendous conditions they face (Lynn and Lea, 2003).

Finally, the hostile environment in which raids and deportations take place appears to be part of a wider push to entrench and legitimise racialised fear and division among communities and the working class. Legislation such as PREVENT – the counterterrorism bill (gov.uk, 2015) that forces public sector workers to refer children for potential radicalisation – was a politically motivated, anti-migrant rhetoric that highlights how Islamophobia has been applied as a key political force from within government and the ruling class since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The creation of such an environment is an attempt to deter refugees and migrants coming to Britain.

This includes placing refugees in detention centres when arriving from France. The underlying sentiment of the ‘deserving and undeserving migrant’ will not be lost on social workers and is clearly illustrated through the under-resourcing of services, lack of housing and limited provisions for refugees, the consequences of which seep into the daily practice of workers, where choices are limited and restricted.

Victory

Despite the efforts of politicians to proliferate the hostile environment, what we saw in Pollokshields was a negation of the points outlined earlier in a mass of beautiful community resistance. The confidence of the community to stand up to the dawn raid is something that goes much further than Kenmure Street. Its effects could certainly be seen in the bolstering of the 10,000-strong Palestine protest the following Sunday.

Social workers must be part of these movements if our profession is to break with the dominant, racist ideologies that can worm their way into practice. Social work has been beaten back over several years by the encroachment of austerity and managerial approaches. Our trade unions have weakened through anti-trade union laws, and in this context, confidence and strength for social workers to fight back has been reduced. The victory at Kenmure Street reminds us that collective action is key in creating any form of real change. Our work is to respond to social issues, and that includes our own. We must be bold, join campaigns and fight for refugee rights and against racist policies. We must bring these issues into our trade union activity and challenge practice that is oppressive. Fighting for community-based social work is both the heritage and the source of our professional strength. Collaboration with communities is essential to a practice that is rooted in resistance against any push to further disenfranchise the vulnerable from their basic human rights, which in all eras, but more especially in the 21st century, must be non-negotiable.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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