

Chapter 1: Introduction to Gender and Social Work

1. 1. Introduction

Contemporary social issues are highly complex, globally interrelated, and dynamic. Social workers **have contradictory roles** when dealing with them: they have to act as **instruments of government** (the **social control function**) and as **advocates** of people oppressed by the policies of government and other authorities (the **social change function**).

Gender is undoubtedly among the most important issues, not least because the female worldview and women's views on the family, childhood, mothering and fathering tend to become self-evident in the interactions between students and their teachers and peers. Without critical reflection on gender in everyday practices, **social workers are likely to encourage the reproduction of traditional gender-specific family roles** in circumstances in which the constant questioning of them would be more appropriate. This has led us to make the following conclusion: it is not enough to question the present gendered practices of social work as such, but rather we need to extend the investigation to some of the origins of the profession. It is important to **acknowledge the particular gender order** that existed when the earliest forms of the then new profession arose. Second, **knowledge about how gender relations in general and the gendered practices of the profession in particular** became established over time is a key aspect of the cultural heritage of the profession.

Hence, this chapter discusses the relationship between gender and social work starting from its historical origin to practice. It presents how gender problem is considered as a social problem which is supposed to be treated in social work practice. It focuses on important issues that facilitate an understanding of gender, inequalities and injustices and help us to rethink the role of women in the establishment of the social work profession. It also explores how

gender in social work is constructed, gender issues in social work. Generally, the chapter tries to answer questions: what does gender mean in social work? How has gender become a factor in social work? What are the historical meaning and processes of gender in social work?

1. 2. Gender as a Social Work Issue

Social work education cannot neglect an issue of gender since most of the people that use social work services are women, a majority of social workers are women, and women have had throughout history a significant role in the establishment of social work as a profession. For social work it is important to understand primarily the mechanisms that produce and reproduce social inequalities, and in this case the inequalities between the genders. The discourse on women is still trapped in a binary understanding of the differences between nature and culture, body and mind, private and public, civil and political, emotional and rational, and so forth, where the first binary pole is said to belong to women and the other to men. This matrix of thought is sustained by disconnecting the past, knowledge of which could assist us in transcending such binary thinking.

If we recall the definition of social work, it clearly shows how gender was central to the concern of social workers as one element of social work practice. The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Social workers summarily can be described as professional helpers designated by society to aid people who are distressed, disadvantaged, disabled, deviant, defeated or dependent. They are also charged to help people lessen their chances of being poor, neglected, abused, divorced, delinquent, criminal, alienated or mad. Indeed, the chief mandate of the social work profession is to work with people who are disenfranchised and oppressed.

❖ The primary mission of social work is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to promoting social justice, addressing the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, or living in poverty. Since women were historically subject to different forms of oppression they were one target of social work services in history.

Women as Clients: Motherhood and Family life

Since motherhood and women's pivotal position in the family make it more likely that they, rather than men, will become social work clients, there are many common elements in the predicament of women as clients. An analysis of women's experiences of family life, mediated by class and race, and the state's relationship to the institution of the family, is central to a social worker's ability to comprehend the complexity of women's lives. Barrett and McIntosh have argued that the family is oppressive to women, that it is an 'anti-social' institution. The monogamous nuclear family form promotes individualistic rather than social or collective values, and its privatized nature excludes those outside it.

1. 3. Gender Issues in the Historical Developments of Social Work

Social work as a profession started to emerge early in the twentieth century. The profession itself has various ideological origins. Some suggest that it is a continuation of the philanthropic and charitable traditions associated with the activities of various Churches; others seek its roots in social movements, particularly in the labor movement and the women's movement. Social work is connected with various welfare regimes and exists in a variety of social and cultural environments. From the very beginning, many of its activities have been connected with services targeted at women, treating them within the framework of the prevailing gender ideologies.

Women have **gradually and successfully occupied space in the public sphere** such as in social work from the time of philanthropy in the late nineteenth century through to the present day and that the dominance of women in social work is one key indicator of success in ‘occupying’ the social space. From a reading of the relationship between philanthropy and social work in the early twentieth century, we could construct the story of social workers as **representing a progressive strategy** which struggled and succeeded in occupying the discreet space of family and child care, in particular in the public sphere. In some way, professional social work could be described as one of the first “female professions” where women had the opportunity to engage actively outside of this discourse in the sociopolitical context in an effort to mediate between individual need and social context.

Contemporary research shows that the role of women in establishing social work was greater than was believed in the past, when only provider and user roles were attributed to them. **Alice Salomon was a founder of the first social work school in Germany.** It is evident from her writings that perceptions of social work as a **mere continuation of the charitable activities** of the Churches are **untrue and neglect the significant contribution of women.** She described social work in the following terms:

- ❖ **Helping** people in need
- ❖ **Diminishing** the differences between the rich and the poor
- ❖ **Aiming to ensure** that the goals of social work should be **collective and not individualistic**
- ❖ **Protecting** working women
- ❖ **Enabling** women to be both educated and employed
- ❖ **Influencing** social policy
- ❖ **Advocating** for social justice

Jane Adams also played an important role in the establishment of social work. She dedicated her life to the poor and other people in need. She advocated for those who were **oppressed and she campaigned against social injustices**. Elements of social work as a profession that can be identified in her notes are as follows:

- ❖ Working with the poor and people in need
- ❖ **Offering** shelter and housing to children and single mothers
- ❖ Developing child care
- ❖ Offering education to migrants and women
- ❖ **Enabling** voluntary work, especially by students
- ❖ **Offering advocacy** for the poor when their rights were violated
- ❖ Claiming that **charity alone is not enough** for the resolution of social problems, because it is **private and individualistic**. Social work should be a collective action involving both local and national authorities
- ❖ Campaigning **against social injustices** (and **against the effects of capitalism**)
- ❖ **Raising public awareness** of social problems and social inequalities
- ❖ **Developing** social rights and a system of social benefits (in case of unemployment, illness etc.)
- ❖ **Influencing social policy** (also by researching the everyday life of people in need)

Alice Salomon and Jane Adams described social work as **political**, because it was **directed towards social change**. Offering help either in kind or in money was no longer seen as an act of good will or morality by people with resources; instead, it was defined as the right of those lacking in resources in recognition of the social inequalities. As a result, **collective action** was **aimed** at the development of the state's responsibility to care for people that **could not**

provide for themselves or for their families. *Collective action against social injustice and inequalities was also an important function of the women's movement.*

1. 4. Gender Issues in Social Work Theory and Practice

Any consideration of the experiences of women as *social work clients and workers should not proceed without examining the intersections between racial, class and gender oppression.* The debate within social work about these different forms of oppression has a somewhat chequered history. The radical social work movement, informed by a Marxist analysis, *introduced class as a central organizing concept*; then feminism raised *gender* as a crucial issue; and most recently, anti-racist activists have put *race and racism* on the agenda of social work practice.

In the 1970s the *individualistic approach and casework* methods of traditional social work came under challenge from the radical social work movement. In circumstances of rising unemployment and growing austerity, *radical social workers emphasized* the *structural determinants of deviant behaviour in society*. Often strongly influenced by Marxist or socialist ideas, they drew attention to the overwhelmingly working-class character of social work clients. They insisted that an analysis of the oppressive social relationships endured by these clients was essential to understand their responses to society. Furthermore they emphasized that the practice of social work as a means to correct clients' adjustment to an oppressive social reality was both *futile and politically unjustifiable*. They advocated a collective approach to the resolution of social problems, through working with tenants' groups, community associations, trade unions and other organizations of working-class people.

In the course of the 1980s the limitations of both the traditional and the radical models became increasingly apparent, especially to feminist social workers. The women's movement

had emerged alongside the development of radical social work, and became increasingly critical of its narrow analytic framework and the restricted scope of its approach to practice. The women's movement embodied different analyses of women's oppression. As a product of the established left, the radical social work movement was male-dominated and often insensitive to some of the basic realities of the world of social work, notably the fact that the large majority of both clients and workers are women. The radical social work movement of the 1970s and early 1980s was largely gender blind. In their concern to put an analysis of class and class inequalities on to the agenda for practitioners, these mostly male writers ignored issues of institutionalized sexism and gender inequalities.

Feminist social work has begun to move beyond some of the limitations of both the traditional and the radical social work models of the past. Feminist social workers drew attention to the role of patriarchal power relations in all spheres, from the families of clients to the hierarchy of social services departments, and emphasized the need to raise awareness of these relations and to challenge them. Both from within the women's movement, and from autonomous organizations of black people and those of other ethnic minorities, came further demands that the world of social work acknowledge the diversity of oppression in British society and organize to tackle it. Social work has also been obliged to become aware of discrimination on grounds of age and disability.

Beginning from the debates between gender and class perspectives in the 1970s, the movement towards anti-discriminatory social work really took off from the encounter between feminist and anti-racist women in the 1980s. In recent years, feminists have attempted to develop a wider, non-oppressive, anti-discriminatory form of social work theory and practice. This approach questions both the conservative presumptions of orthodox casework, and the simple

class and gender frameworks advanced by the radical social work movement, and indeed by the early women's movement. The new approach recognizes the complexity and diversity of the manifold oppressions that affect the lives of most women and most social work clients. It broadened out through the inclusion of the critiques of women of different ethnic, national, religious and cultural identities as well as those of women with disabilities and older women. The attempt to construct an anti-discriminatory social work has taken shape out of a growing recognition of the specificities of oppression, according to gender, race, class, age, disability and sexual orientation. It emphasizes the diversity of experience and the validity of each person's experience. It seeks to develop an understanding of both the totality of oppression and its specific manifestations as the precondition for developing an anti-discriminatory practice relevant to all spheres of social work.