

Social Work as a Women's Profession: Image and Reality

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

La conception qu'on se fait du travail social comme une profession féminine est basée sur des réalités statistiques même si les proportions de travailleurs sociaux qui sont des femmes ont baissé de 72 pour cent en 1951 à 55 pour cent en 1970. Par contre, les femmes ont de plus en plus été victimes d'une discrimination dans les salaires et dans les chances d'avancement au sein de cette profession. L'année passée, les femmes n'étaient à peu près pas présentes dans les postes de direction dans les institutions de bien-être social, dans les associations profes-

sionnelles ni au sein de l'éducation professionnelle.

Nous n'avons pas approfondi la recherche dans tous les aspects de cette question, mais il nous semble évident que ceci découle du conditionnement social des femmes et de la conception qu'on se fait du travailleur social voulant que cet individu soit une personne compatissante et se souciant d'autrui. C'est pour cette raison que l'on est porté à croire que les femmes ne semblent pas posséder les qualités nécessaires inhérentes à un poste de responsabilités impliquant des relations avec des directeurs exécutifs, des

hommes d'affaires, des professionnels, des représentants publics et d'autres personnes influentes dans les milieux d'affaires.

En 1970, une étude entreprise parmi les membres de l'Association canadienne des travailleurs sociaux a démontré, que les femmes possédaient les mêmes compétences scolaires et plus d'années d'expérience que les hommes, elles n'accédaient pas aux postes administratifs et étaient moins rémunérées que les hommes, même si elles exécutaient les mêmes fonctions.

On prétend qu'il existe une relation entre l'échec de l'association professionnelle, dans son effort pour éliminer la discrimination envers les femmes dans les politiques de bien-être social, et son impuissance à admettre et à faire face à ses propres pratiques de discrimination. Nous prétendons de plus que la profession de travailleur social était en mesure d'amorcer des changements en faveur de l'égalité, dans ses débuts, mais qu'elle est maintenant beaucoup trop embrouillée dans ses méthodes traditionnelles pour pouvoir promouvoir des changements. Si les femmes oeuvrant dans le travail social décidaient de travailler à améliorer leur propre situation, les conséquences inattendues seraient peut-être d'em-

pêcher que la profession ne se noie dans sa propre hypocrisie.

Social work has an image as a women's profession, a slightly younger sister to the great socially-approved professions for women developed in the nineteenth century--teaching and nursing. In all these professions, women's traditional unpaid labour at home, nurturing and caring for others, is extended to the world outside. Paid work can then be seen as socially acceptable because it makes use of characteristics which the traditional socialization to women's role have made admirable and suitably feminine.

Historically, the job description of the social caseworker grew out of the scientific refinement of the traditional voluntary charitable works which women of leisure were expected to do in caring for the poor and the weak. Scientific charity began after 1875; before the turn of the century, women like Zilpha Smith and Mary Richmond were refining the social casework job into the beginnings of a profession.(1) At that time the predominant, visible job in the social welfare system was the social caseworker.(2) A study of employment of students graduating from schools of social work all across Canada in 1972 indicates that 90% find their first jobs in casework. (3)

The paid work role defined both inside and outside the profession as its essential function then, is the caseworker. Belief in the congruence of women's most socially-valued characteristics and the personal characteristics required for casework is nearly universal. The profession itself believes so thoroughly in the essential social worker as the nurturing, caring caseworker that when young men who have already worked as administrators in provincial welfare departments are sent by their governments to schools of social work to get the social work degrees necessary to their rise in the hierarchy, the education system gives these young men the only professional indoctrination it can imagine, casework training for the position these men never have and never will occupy. As for the outside observer, a shrewd sociologist looking at education for all the professions in 1976 writes of his admiration for "the qualities of compassion which make patient and loving social workers." (4)

What is the effect of this image on women in social work? Margaret Adams calls women's response to the image "The Compassion Trap." (5) She cites the neatness of the fit between women's traditional socialization and women's role in the helping professions, both based in the "pervasive belief. . . that woman's primary and most valuable social function is to provide tender and compassionate moments of life and that through the exercise of these

particular traits, women have set themselves up as the exclusive model for protecting, nurturing and fostering the growth of others." Though women indeed have entered the helping professions because of the severe restriction on other opportunities, once there it is comforting and reassuring to feel needed and to feel confirmed as a woman taking her proper place in socially useful work.

Social work is very seductive in making women feel useful and wanted when they have not been sought after in other paid work, but the price of this opportunity to participate in society has been the acceptance of the soothing rationalization that personal ambition and success are corrupting, and that women achieve their best work by promoting the personal growth and comfort of others. What makes women's commitment to helping others on a one by one basis so untenable in social work is the fact that many individual social problems can only be temporarily alleviated because they spring from social pathology which requires a more basic attack on underlying problems.

Women's comfort in the profession, their lack of other opportunities, their socialization to the ideal of constant helpfulness, all make it incredibly difficult for women in social work to think their way through the

inherent contradictions in their professional situation and to survive the genuine pain and emotional disruption this thinking must cause. At a national meeting of the Canadian Association of Social Workers in 1973, I was stunned at a demonstration of the way women had to protect themselves from beginning to think about women in the profession. Dr. Sylva Gelber, then Director of the Women's Bureau, Department of Labour, was the main invited speaker and was heard by three or four hundred social workers. She presented then-unpublished data from a 1970 survey of the national membership of the association conducted by the association itself. Women had been clearly handicapped in Canadian social work; though they had the same educational qualifications and more years of experience, they did not advance to administrative positions and they received less pay for the same work as men. Dr. Gelber made the connection between the failure of the professional association to have anything to say to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, its failure to try to alleviate discrimination against women in social welfare policy and practice (for example, the infamous "man in the house" rules for women on welfare), and the inability of the profession to admit and begin to deal with its own discriminatory practices.(6) Women social workers were the vast majority of Dr. Gelber's listeners, many of them women with long years in the profession. These

women listened quietly, clapped politely and stood up at the end of the session as if they had rehearsed together their one-hundred-eighty-degree turn to face the exit doors and put their backs to Dr. Gelber. Only three of us moved toward Dr. Gelber, all three willing to call ourselves feminists. I dwell on this example only to illustrate the high risk to personal and professional identity when women begin to think where they are in social work.

A tiny literature has begun to examine the status of women in social work, starting in 1958 with a startling two pages in an influential theoretical book, Industrial Society and Social Welfare.(7) Two male authors, a social worker and a sociologist, saw role conflict resulting from discrepancies between agency and professional roles as a problem experienced by the rank and file male social worker and the female supervisor. They explained that it is not considered suitable for women to be in authority over men of roughly the same class and age and furthermore that women supervisors are blocked from the next step up the hierarchy into administration. Women, they argued, were not considered good risks for administration because their careers are thought to be intermittent, and because "the active, aggressive entrepreneurial behaviour needed to develop professional and community contacts and to gain access to men of power--both essential for

agency survival--is often deprecated for women."(8) They went on to say that the young male social worker's problems of sex role identity in a profession with such a female image may be "one explanation of the sky-rocketing careers observers note among young men in this field."(9) They also mentioned the "much-needed recruitment of males to the profession" without a single explanation.(10)

A decade later, a male social-worker-sociologist team studied sex distribution of social work students.(11) They found that although far fewer social workers practice in community organization and group work than in casework, and far fewer students chose these practice specialties, men choose community organization in disproportionate numbers and women choose casework disproportionately. The authors say median salaries in community organization are \$3000 higher than median salaries in casework, and explain that men are preferred for organizing positions because men are needed to deal with the executives, businessmen, professionals, public officials and others influential in community affairs. Women's choice of casework is explained in terms of the societal proscription that a woman reconcile the demands of her career with those of her family, so that the job demands of casework are more suitable for the wife and mother because casework does not require the frequent night work needed in group work and community organization.

The present and past sex distribution in social work does confirm the image of a women's profession: more women than men are employed, but for all the anxiety expressed about the need for more men in the profession, men have never dropped lower than a third of those employed. In the longest time series, documented in the United States Census, women were fifty-two percent of social workers employed in 1910, sixty-two percent in 1920, and just at the two-thirds mark for another three decades, 1930, 1940 and 1950. From 1950 to 1960, while male social work writers worried most about recruiting men, it was apparently happening, so that women dropped from two-thirds to fifty-seven percent.(12) Canadian figures show somewhat more predominance of women and a recent decrease: seventy-two percent in 1951, sixty-three percent in 1965, and fifty-five percent in 1970.(13)

In Canada, the 1970 data presented by Dr. Sylva Gelber in her speech to the CASW in 1973 was published in 1974 and was interpreted by James Gripton, as a male takeover of social work to which women offered no resistance, indeed they seem not to have noticed.(14)

The survey data included details on salaries, education, length of time on the job and total career tenure which made it possible to compare the rate at which men and women advance to senior positions and the salaries they receive for the same work while re-

moving the possible influence of different education and work experience. Women do not advance to administrative positions and women are consistently paid less than men for the same work, with no differences in capacity, job performance or work motivation. Comparison of married and single women reveals both that married women advanced even less than single women, and that single women had suffered a substantial penalty in career advancement.(15) The disadvantage of single women, nearly all of whom have continuous careers, from their membership in the sex which is supposed to marry and retire to childrearing and perhaps return later, is still basically unexamined in social work. Perhaps both men and married women are reluctant to think about reasons for discrimination against single women in a profession so committed to support of the nuclear family and improving the socialization of children.

The 1970 Canadian study goes on to examine male dominance in the professional association and in social work education, as two institutions which exert critical control over the profession. Male membership in the Board of Directors of the Canadian Association of Social Workers increased from twenty-five percent in the 1930s to sixty-five percent in 1970-74. Social work education shows the same trend to male dominance: men were thirty-five percent of full-time faculty in 1951, fifty-one percent in 1970 and sixty-

six percent in 1974. More male faculty have doctoral degrees but when faculty with and without doctoral degrees are considered separately, males are still disproportionately assigned to higher ranks and positions.(16) The eighteen deans and directors of Canadian schools of social work were all men when the report went to press in 1974, but later the same year one retired and was replaced by a woman. Before 1960, at a time when there were fewer schools, a half-dozen women had long and outstanding careers as directors of Canadian schools of social work.

The interpretation of the increasing domination of men in social work in Canada and the United States is still unclear because of lack of data. The standard explanation that women were not available for administrative positions and leadership in professional schools and associations in the 1960s and 1970s because they had dropped out earlier for home and family responsibilities would not be a sufficient explanation even if better verified. What happened to single women, to married women without children, compared to married women with children and women with children who were heads of families? Varieties of family circumstances related to career motivation and career goals and continuity remain unknown because it has been too threatening to ask the questions.

It appears from the biographies of

outstanding women in social work before 1940 that they did not have a choice of marriage and career, much less the choice of children and career. A 1977 obituary explains the choices of a Canadian pioneer, Ethel Dodds Parker. She enrolled in the first class at the School of Social Work at the University of Toronto, became head worker at a Toronto settlement house, a consultant on the establishment of settlement houses in other Canadian cities and successful advocate of improved measures for the health and welfare of children. Eventually she became Director of the City of Toronto Welfare Services. She then married and her biographer explains what that meant: "Since the city would not allow married women to continue working, she retired from active life."(17)

The future of women in social work appears likely to be one of continued sex discrimination, exacerbated by the introduction of the Bachelor of Social Work degree as the first professional degree, a development now ten years old in Canada. Every prediction is that the bachelor's degree worker will be preferred for direct service positions, pushing both men and women with master's degrees into competition for a few supervisory and administrative jobs.(18) A study of 1972 graduates in Canada as they entered employment showed higher unemployment rates for women than for men, and the unemployed group were disproportionately bachelor's degree holders. Women with master's

degrees appeared better able to get a first job, but their fate five years later would begin to tell us whether they are being pushed out as predicted. Casework in 1972 was still by far the predominant method preparation of graduates, involving three-quarters of them, and an even higher percentage of those who had jobs seven to ten months after graduation had casework duties.(19)

To summarize the state of social work in 1978: women are increasingly discriminated against in salary and advancement in the profession, women are nearly absent from power and leadership positions in social welfare institutions and in professional associations and professional education: the detailed research which might indicate causation has yet to be formulated and the profession as a whole appears unable to face the discrimination against women already documented.

To consider what can be done and who can do it leads to a first step we all know. What is required is for a substantial group of women in social work to face the pain of their own degraded status and join together to demand improvement. Men who concur can help, probably must help if change is to occur, but women will have to initiate the changes. It is just this active, aggressive, initiating role that professional selection and training and work experience has made women social workers feel diffident about in the past thirty years, though women in

social work were great initiators before 1940.

To take up our proper role, we can draw some strength and inspiration from our foremothers: we know the names of Jane Addams, Mary Richmond and Lillian Wald in the United States, Beatrice Webb and Octavia Hill in England, but we must come to know better our Canadian foremothers. For instance, Dr. Laura Holland, Zella Collins and Mary McPhedran were all recruited to British Columbia social welfare agencies in 1927-28, and together they so changed the face of that developing social welfare system that they are known as "the three Wise Women from the East." Mary King in British Columbia and Ethel Dodds Parker in Toronto and others were outstanding in public welfare organizations. Jane Wisdom, a Maritimer, in a long career pioneered three times over: first the Family Service Bureau in Halifax in its emergency expansion after the 1917 explosion, then an agency in Montreal to serve unmarried mothers who kept their children, and last, initiation of public welfare services in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. We also need to know more about women of the past who had more typical professional careers. The information will be buried: for instance, Jane Wisdom wrote for the Canadian Welfare Journal rather frequently but her work was published with no name attached to it, while other articles in those issues are

written by persons with surnames and two first initials.

The situation of women who had paid employment in social work was often only a little better financially than that of women receiving welfare payments, at least until the 1960s. In addition, it has been as difficult to face the sex discrimination practiced by the social welfare system on the women it is trying to help, as to admit the discrimination against women in employment. Indeed, as Dr. Gelber suggests, the inability to admit and cope with sex discrimination against women workers may cause the profession's blindness about what the system does to women consumers of its services.(20) Rosemary Brown, writing in the 1976 special women's issue of the professional social work journal, sees much more complex interrelationships between women as workers and consumers: changes for women in the form of new ideas and services are not coming from social workers but from women's groups and community groups, for example, transition houses, rape relief centres, women's health collectives and welfare rights organizations.(21) She urges women social workers to take courage and move beyond sex stereotypes and job stereotypes to seek a true equality of people.

Brown was writing to social workers, suggesting actions that they should take to initiate change for themselves and all women. One implication she

did not explore is the suspicion that the profession of social work was able to initiate change toward equality in its early days but is now so entangled in traditional institutions that its change agent potential is very low. To women who are not involved in social work, this might suggest the search for some newer, more open structures where they might both earn a living and seek some changes in the status of women.

For all women, we understand the message that none of us escape the consequences of living in a sexist society, that feeling comfortable and wanted in what is reputed to be a women's profession may mean we have paid for our comfort by blinding ourselves to our own needs and the needs of others for a more human place to live and be. In the case of a profession which seeks just this humanity and equality, the effect of blindness to the inequality of women might be to prevent the whole profession from moving toward any of its goals. So if women in social work could move to improve their own situation, the unanticipated consequences might be to save the profession from drowning in its own hypocrisy.

4. Ronald P. Dore, The Diploma Disease (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 184.
5. Margaret Adams, "The Compassion Trap," in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness (New York: Basic Books, 1971).
6. Dr. Sylva Gelber, Address to the Canadian Association of Social Workers Annual Meeting, Vancouver, June 8, 1973.
7. Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux, Industrial Society and Social Welfare (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1958).
8. Ibid., p. 323.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 324.
11. George Brager and John A. Michael, "The Sex Distribution in Social Work: Causes and Consequences," Social Casework (December 1969), p. 595.
12. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Woman's Place, Options and Limits in Professional Careers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 7.
13. James Gripton, "Sexism in Social Work: Male Takeover of a Female Profession," The Social Worker, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer 1974), p. 80.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
16. Ibid., p. 86.
17. A.J. Austin, "Anne Ethel (Dodds) Parker, 1890-1977," The Social Worker, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn 1977), p. 137.
18. C. Bernard Scotch, "Sex Status in Social Work: Grist for Women's Liberation," Social Work, Vol. 11, No. 3 (July 1971).
19. Crane, op. cit.
20. Gelber, op. cit.
21. Rosemary Brown, "Dual Exploitation, Dual Oppression," '76 and Beyond, special issue of The Social Worker, 1976.

NOTES

1. Ralph E. Pumphrey and Muriel W. Pumphrey, eds., The Heritage of American Social Work (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
2. Ibid.
3. John A. Crane, Employment of Social Service Graduates in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, 1974).