Gender Aspects of the Social Work Profession in Europe

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Introduction

As a profession mainly concerned with inequality, social work, ought to have particularly high standards to safeguard against discrimination within its own ranks. This is however hardly the case, particularly as regards reflection on gender relations. The following pages draw on a number of studies in English and German to illustrate the development of the ‘social work profession’ as a profession which, while consisting mainly of women, nevertheless continues to be one in which women have very little say.

Currently in many European countries, the trend is to move social services from the control of public authorities; on the one hand by seceding social tasks hitherto undertaken by public services to private (for profit) agencies, and on the other hand by expecting citizens to take over certain functions, implicitly expecting women to do them. Social work may increasingly divide into professionalised and independent and informal sectors. The increasing focus on economic aspects further harbours the danger of social work splitting into an “administrative and managing” branch and one that actually carries out the direct work with service users. The current structures of gender relationships in social work give us a hint as to who will be found where in this new landscape.

Parallel to these developments there is also the effect of the women’s movement. This has not only had its impact on the development of the social work profession, but has also exerted a decisive influence on the issues and methods of social work since the 1970s. This influence is one of the main reasons that there is an awareness of gender-hierarchical structures, and of the necessity to see social work fields from a gender-specific perspective in order to prevent practical work being performed mainly on the basis of male dominated theories while failing to take the specific life situations of female clients into account.

The following reflections on gender relationships in specific areas of the ‘social work profession’ are designed to come closer to bringing about gender democracy in social work.

Professional motivation of women and men

The image of a profession is shaped, in part, by the professional motivations of those who choose this profession - although, on the other hand, assumptions and expectations with regard to a profession also shape professional motivation. The following section presents two particular studies, one in Scotland and one in Germany, and draws on other studies to illustrate gender-specific differences.

According to a survey carried out in Scotland by Cree in 1993/4, the following motives are of paramount importance in choosing social work as a profession. Firstly:

“Caring for others came much higher up the agenda for these largely middle-class women than other concerns such as financial remuneration or career advancement.” (Cree, 1996: pp. 66).

Cree drew on Carol Gilligan’s model of the moral development of women that suggested that women were more drawn to work involving relating to other human beings than men (Gilligan, 1982). In order to test this theory in relation to social work, Cree carried out research with the purpose of finding out more about the link between ‘caring’ and the professional motives of women and men. Her central question was:

“Assuming that women choose to become social workers because caring is somehow central to their sense of self, why do men choose to become social workers?” (Cree, 1996: pp. 67).

At the time when the research was being undertaken (1993/4) of all students in Scotland who started social work training, 29 percent were men (137) and 71 percent were women (334). Questionnaires were circulated to all students and, in addition, 17 men and 18 women were
Cree found that most respondents chose the profession as adults; hardly anyone had heard anything about social work before that time. Many therefore had previous working experience in other fields. However, there were clear differences between men and women. While women had mainly worked in jobs that permitted a reconciliation of family life and employment, or had been engaged solely in traditional reproductive and housewife roles, men had worked in many different fields.

Men’s reasons for a change of occupation included their wish for more autonomy or for career development. However, women often chose the social work profession after a phase during which they had been taking care of their children and the household. A clear motive for them was independence through a profession combined with the knowledge that social work mainly dealt with issues which women already had experience in - namely ‘relationship work’. Men and women alike chose the profession more for professional factors (responsibility, variety etc.) than for salary’ and career opportunities.

Earlier studies (cited by Cree) which had investigated family background and its influence on the choice of profession, came to the conclusion that while men who choose professional settings dominated by women were often from non-traditional families (including lone parents), women who choose male dominated professions more often came from traditional families with close ties to father and mother (Lemkau, 1984; Chusmir, 1983 quoted in: Cree, 1996).

Secondly, Cree found that there were gender-specific differences with regard to the personal career opportunity expectations of the respondents. All men assumed that they would be promoted faster than their female colleagues, but they also described additional advantages of their gender in social work:

“Because social work is not considered a male profession, it’s as if there’s not a protocol which is expected of you ... you are open, freer as a man ... there are not so many expectations of you.” (Cree, 1996: p.80).

These findings reinforced those of an earlier study:

“(…) qualities associated with men are more highly regarded than those associated with women, even in predominantly female jobs ... This fact reflects a widespread cultural prejudice that men are simply better than women.’ (Williams, 1993 quoted in: Cree, 1996: p.80).

Cree also found that most respondents did not see social work as a female profession.

“This means that men in social work, while enjoying the advantages of being male in a non-traditional environment (better promotion and more autonomy), experience fewer difficulties than men in other women’s settings such as nursing” (Cree, 1996: p.81)

The author suggests that, in spite of similar family backgrounds of men and women in her sample, there are differences with regard to the motives for choosing social work as a profession. Men who want to become social workers consider themselves different and are convinced that they have qualities that are not seen as typically male. They thus see themselves as something special. They enter the profession with the conviction that they will climb the career ladder. Women by contrast enter a profession that expects qualities which are seen as typically female. They do not consider themselves as exceptional or unconventional. They are aware that their career opportunities are not as good as those of men. The author’s conclusion is that we should avoid praising men for their social skills while taking the same skills in women for granted.

Cree further concludes that:

“Another area which demands urgent attention is the reappraisal of the ‘feminine’ side of social work. Social work practice is rapidly becoming more technical, more bureaucratic, more ‘masculine’ in style, whether carried out by men or by women, and my research has shown that it is the personal, caring, ‘feminine’ aspects of social work which both women and men social work students see as most worthwhile.” (Cree, 1996: p.84).

Turning to a German study, this was mainly an investigation of the professional motivation of female social workers. Birgit Rommelspacher (1992) came to the conclusion that women stay close to their familiar immediate social environment when they choose the profession: Frauen kommen nicht weit weg von zu Hause (women don’t get far from home) (Rommelspacher, 1992: p.138). The closeness between social work and reproductive work is pointed out in many publications in this field, as is the ‘need’ of women to care for others, and it is suggested that this is based on gender-specific socialisation. Thus,
Rommelspacher (1999) has suggested that one of the most important sources of power for women is their power of relationship. It is striking that none of the respondents in her study aspired to professional success and career. Their main aspirations were the wish for ‘horizontal development’ and variety in this field of work. She suggested that this could be linked to a lack of role-models, since not many women in German social work have had leading positions.

Despite the parallels between private and professional helping, Rommelspacher suggested that there are important differences which constitute sources of power for women:

“Professional relationship work offers an opportunity to make it publicly known how much time, knowledge and skill is required and that relationship work cannot be done on the side, automatically, or even instinctively.” (German original: Rommelspacher, 1986 quoted in Glaser, 1998: p. 253).

Another difference lies in the power of controlling and sanctioning (Rommelspacher, 1992: p.191) which comes with the professional position, rather than from the precarious relationship power which might be derived from private relationships. Rommelspacher also found that female social workers are more insecure than male social workers: “if relationship work at home isn’t worth anything in private why should it be in a job?” (German original: Rommelspacher, 1992: p.192). This could be one of the reasons why female social workers strive less for higher salaries or more prestige for the profession than their male colleagues. As opposed to men, women sometimes choose a traditionally female profession because they do not feel confident enough to do ‘more’, i.e. enter a ‘male’ profession.

“The interviews have shown how highly suspicious women are of the criteria of professionalisation and how badly they feel in positions which separate them from the real lives of their clients”

(German original: Rommelspacher, 1992: p.193).

Many women are aware of the ambiguous nature of professionalisation, vis à vis social work, since relationships with people can not be equated with other services and social work is most successful in relationship work. There is a danger, however, that this work is being pushed further and further down the hierarchical ladder. We are, therefore, faced with the central contradiction of “wishing to help others but being powerless ourselves” (German original: Rommelspacher, 1992: p.195). On the other hand, it is important to be aware of the desire for power which may develop when working with dependent and marginalised people, and which carries the danger of the abuse of power.

However, it seems that many women choose the social work professions for reasons of self-actualisation and to give meaning to their lives.

“Since social work is a world full of diverse professional landscapes, glossy expectations of competence and manifold chances of identification, it appears to be the ideal field for multiple expectations. The attraction of social work to today’s women is not that it is a traditional female profession but that it permits the projection of all sorts of hopes. This carries risks and promises alike.”

(German original: Heinemeier, 1994: p.214).

The choice of social work as a profession remains an ambivalent decision for women: on the one hand it is a ‘typical’ female profession and on the other hand it is a diverse, meaningful profession. Both motives were already evident in the earliest social workers: helping others was one of the few opportunities for a woman to work outside the home and at the same time to achieve self-actualisation and emancipation (see for instance Walton (1975) writing about the origins of social work in the UK).

The gender-hierarchichal structure of social work

At first sight one cannot help noticing that very few publications are devoted to gender relationships in social work. One of the first publications (in German) was a survey by Hans Drake (1980) who found that:

“it appears as if women in social work do not feel discriminated against professionally because of their gender. Investigations however have shown that they are at a disadvantage compared to their male colleagues: with regard to pay; career opportunities; and actual exclusion from certain professional functions. ”

(German original: Drake 1980: p.46).

In many European countries, women in the labour market are, as a matter of course, seen as taking on a professional as well as a gender role and very often assumptions become the basis for women missing out on a career.

“Since they prefer working with people they
remain on the lowest hierarchical level, in contact with customers, patients, clients, and children; since they prefer getting along well with their colleagues they shy away from competition for higher or leading positions; since they anticipate the interruption of their career they do not seek to improve their qualifications; since they tend to personalise their relationship with their supervisors they choose individual career strategies or choose to do without them in the interest of keeping up a good relationship.” (German original Rabe-Kieberg quoted in Bader et al., 1990: p.30)

These factors, which are certainly true for some women, tend to be projected on to all women, no matter whether this is their orientation, or whether they plan to have children or not. They are considered to be only partially available in the labour market - and the same appears to be true in social work. An Austrian study in 1991 (Gruber & Schmidbauer) investigated fields of social work in which both men and women were working. The study explored the experience of social work graduates between the years 1976 and 1986, in relation to factors such as remuneration and access to managerial positions. According to this study women worked predominantly (43%) in the field of ‘Children /Youth and Family’, while only 17% of the men worked in this field. Conversely, Probation work with offenders was found to be a predominantly male field, in which 32% of the male respondents but only 4% of the female graduates were found. (This situation has traditionally been similar in the UK and Walton (1975) suggested that this mirrored the ‘authority role of men in families’, evident when social work and probation work were being established). It was also shown that women earned significantly less than men, which stems partly from shorter weekly hours of work. Statistics however show that: “remuneration is gender-related, whereas weekly working hours are not gender-specifically different, and that there is a link between workload and pay.” (German original: Gruber, 1995: p.120).

Women were also found less often in leading positions than men (eight percent of women and 19 percent of the male respondents in this study). If the category ‘partly in a leading position’ is included, the share of women increased to one fifth and that of men to one third. (Gruber, 1995: p.121). Further results of this study were: that women could not delegate clerical work as often as men and that acquiring higher qualifications did not result in expanded responsibilities.

A German study in 1991 analysed all youth welfare offices in the German state of the Rhineland (Rheinland Pfälz). In Germany 69 percent of social workers are women. In this study, at the lowest level of the youth welfare officers, 69 percent of the workers were women and 31 percent men. In the middle management (group leaders) 50% are women and 50% men, while at the next higher level 66% of the positions were held by men and only 34% by women. The author concluded that these results were gender-related factors other than the often quoted female ‘fear of success’, or women’s fear of loss of affection (e.g. from a team).

In an investigation carried out by Marianne Meinhold (1993), 56 percent of the female social workers that she interviewed said that they would apply for a higher position. Two thirds of them believed that they would meet with greater recognition after promotion and that their relationships with their colleagues would not deteriorate. One of the obstacles for women with regard to applying for leading positions - in addition to the barriers posed by sexism - is also the high expectation placed on a woman to do everything ‘better’ in such a position, as described by Brückner (1992) and also mentioned by Meinhold (1993). However, Meinhold suggests that: “As a greater number of women rise to leading positions there will be an increased awareness of the multitude of different competencies and deficits among individual female managers, as has always been the case with male managers.” (German original: Meinhold, 1993: p.77).

Meinhold takes a critical view towards the idea of ‘female’ orientation and suggests that: “All investigations which place particular emphasis on the skills of women as therapists should be looked at with some reservation, if they indifferently refer to ‘women’ and if they neglect interactive aspects - for instance the expectations of clients. What appears to be true is that most women are more experienced and successful at establishing and maintaining interpersonal contacts, than men are said to be.” (German original: Meinhold 1993: p.58).

Interpersonal relations, in particular those with men, very often constitute an obstacle to the careers of women, and this is also true for social work: “A study carried out in the United States is of interest in this respect. It shows that in ‘dual-career families’ (in the field of social work;
author’s remark) it usually takes only a few years until women, having identical starting positions, lose in status, and that for female social workers, living together with a partner is a greater obstacle to their careers than caring for their children.”


The effects of the gender-hierarchical structure are manifold. There are remarkable deficits with regard to gender-specific services in particular in larger social agencies. According to investigations by students in Vienna in 1998 there were no women specific programmes in the field of ‘illicit drugs’ and many other women specific programmes are not sufficiently funded. The situation is different in some Western European countries but social work publications suggest that gender-specific issues are only dealt with in a rather marginalised manner. On the whole only female authors of social work literature mention the ‘gender factor’, if it is mentioned at all:

“There are hardly any institutionalised women specific programmes. Social work agencies are all somehow gender neutral. Male decision-makers don’t care about the fact that being a woman results in specific problems in all aspects of society.” (Homm, 1994, quoted in German: Gruber, 1995: p.123).

Among the gender neutral services we very often find programmes that are tailored to the male biography without, however, explicitly referring to the ‘male’ factor. In the ‘Children and Family’ sector - where many ‘general’ services implicitly address only women - it is exactly the other way round, which obscures who usually does the work involved in caring for children. In Austria, a few year ago, the counselling centres for mothers at youth and family welfare offices were renamed “Counselling Centres for Parents” but this has not made much difference to assumptions and practices. There are only a few social work programmes in Austria that assist and support women on the labour market - compared to the range of services addressing women in their function as mothers. Many social work services must therefore be seen as rather traditional in their gender role orientation.

The gender hierarchy also has an effect on the image of women held by clients:

“This gender hierarchy prevents any emancipatory features of social work. Female clients see female social workers in subordinate roles. This conveys, to female as well as to male clients, the notion that women are simply subordinate,” (Homm, 1994; quoted in German: Gruber, 1995: p. 123).

Since many social problems stem from traditional role concepts, this situation is not conducive to the development of empowerment strategies and the prevention of continuing inequalities.

Conclusions

“Women’s professions in the social field depend specifically on sociopolitical definitions. They define which aspects of reproductive work are to be done by women in an employed capacity and which are to be done in the private sphere. Furthermore, female professions are much affected - much more than most male professions - by cyclical and ideological changes.”

(German original: Schmidbauer, 1994: p.30).

The crucial question is whether female social workers will be able to overcome their heritage of ‘spiritual motherhood’, since otherwise the proximity to (unpaid) reproductive work will repeatedly trigger the debate on whether social work is a profession or voluntary charitable work.

Meanwhile, in many North West European countries currently, the tendency towards social management may prove to be a further step towards greater professionalisation. However, whether women will be able to participate in this development or whether they will be pushed to the (then even more) controlled sidelines of relationship work is unclear. Social work should also, where it is taught and where it is the subject of research, be made a truly female profession (see also Schmidbauer, 1994). In most countries, specific plans for the advancement of women or an increased reflection on social management from a gender-specific point of view are still lacking. The concept of ‘advancement of women’ is highly controversial, since it could be understood as meaning that women require special assistance to establish themselves in the employment market.

However, as part of an overall policy of gender equality, this concept means much more.

“The instruments for the advancement of women - institutions for gender equality, advancement
programmes, legal provisions, should serve to reduce the structural disadvantages women face. In this respect the advancement of women is a political issue.”
(German original: Meinhold, 1993: p.78)

Strategies for the advancement of women could contribute to gender democracy in social work. Experts agree that such strategies should include the following:

- job advertisements - women should feel directly addressed;
- hiring procedures: women should be given preference until they are proportionally represented at all levels of the profession (performance-related quotas);
- training and continued education should be organised in a women-friendly way - near their place of residence or with child care facilities; women’s or gender-specific topics should be offered, and gender-specific aspects should be integrated into all subjects taught;
- reconciliation of family and employment: this includes special leave arrangements and part-time work, including for more senior positions. (see: Meinhold 1993).

One disadvantage of measures for the advancement of women is the lack of sanctions in case of non-compliance with a given measure. In social work there would, however, be enough opportunities, in particular on the part of the funding bodies, to exert their influence. Programmes for the advancement of women should, if possible, be developed by the agencies and training institutions themselves.

“The polemical arguments against performance-related quotas hide the fact that there have always been ‘quotas’ in force - mainly to the detriment of women - either quotas for political parties, or some other non-transparent rules.”
(German original: Meinhold, 1993: p.82)

A crucial question will be the extent to which social work will succeed in overcoming the - often gender-specific - dichotomies described above - between theory and practice; between empathic helping and the rational analysing of the causes of social problems - to achieve gender democracy in the social work professions in Europe.

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Note:
The social work profession in Norway is the topic of this article, with a focus on two main concerns. First, to describe the formation of social work as a field of professional work for women in Norway and through this, subsequently to engage in a critical analysis of the "male-stream" way social work has been theorized in the literature on professions. Among other things, gendering professional theories will produce new and richer understandings of the professions and allow us to comment on how the premises for becoming successful within the system of professions differ according to gender. In my view, social work provides an example of a profession where there is still a knowledge gap to fill and where there are silenced stories that need to be told. Another aspect of discrimination against women in the workplace concerns how they are treated. Are they being treated professionally and fairly? This movement brought about sweeping cultural and social changes regarding the place of women in our society, particularly in regards to women’s ever-increasing role in the workplace. The 1980s and 1990s were decades of remarkable progress for women in business. When I'm working being a gentleman is out of the question when it comes to work. You make the same money as me, I'll hold the door open for you and such, but that box is your problem. I did a research project on the Glass Ceiling among women in the IT profession, many years ago...sad to say that it still exists.