WOMEN IN SOCIAL WORK

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The topic of "Women In Social Work" turned out to be a lot more than I had bargained for. I began this project with little foreknowledge, except on social work methods, etc. Even with the small amount of research presently available, I encountered a tremendous wealth of material dealing with the history of the field, where it is now, and where it's going. Women's place in the schema was considered especially, along with the role men play. The main focus of all the research I concentrated on was on the changes that should and must take place to keep the profession "honest" and faithful to the principles it purports, and that a big part of these changes concerns sex discrimination.

As a future social worker, I am interested in the field and job market ahead, especially as a woman. Some people would wonder about my concern since social work has always been considered a woman's profession. However, recent studies indicate that there does exist a sexual bias in the field, toward both female social workers and female clients. The need for research in this area has been recognized, and until a substantial amount has been documented, no great changes can be expected. Many social workers are not even aware that discrepancies exist, and until enough material on the subject is generated which will arouse a substantial portion of the profession, I fear it will continue to be ignored.

One variable affecting this slowness to change is that the men in the field have not, for the most part, perceived any discrepancies in their positions as compared to that of their women co-workers. Fortunately, the recognized "governing"
body for social workers, NASW (National Association of Social Workers), realized what was going on, and focused their members' attention on the situation by devoting an entire issue of their journal to the subject. This has resulted in some of the much-needed research being done on the causes, effects, places and people involved.

Social work has, from the beginning, been considered a woman's profession. Its founders and pioneers include mostly women, while men have held the positions of leadership in agencies, education, treatment institutions and in the NASW itself. In 1973, the NASW added the Equal Rights Amendment and the elimination of sexism, in addition to that of racism and poverty, to other legislative priorities. Slowly being developed is an awareness of the injustices (sexist) within the profession; also being examined is sexism in treatment and in the availability and delivery of service.

"Social work has evolved not only as an outcome of industrialization and problems of urban growth, but also as a career for women. In its early growth it was an expression of social service by women and the social forms in which it was realized reflected demographic factors, the class structure and the social position of women." Social work traces its beginnings to women who were pioneers of social change. They were charity workers and even reformers and suffragettes. "Many of these women participated in the social welfare and women's rights movements and were dedicated to the realization of social changes that were of particular concern to women."
However, I do not want to convey the idea that women single-handedly founded "social work." In the late 1800's the various branches of the field began to emerge as separate entities - Charity Organization Society, hospital alming, work with children, settlements, moral welfare and housing management. Of these, only a few owe their inception to women.

 Skipping ahead, I want to remind the reader of the impact of WW II on the general status of women. Suddenly, females were able to get out of the house and work on something different. They saw themselves in a light that revealed new responsibilities and horizons, and many liked what they saw.

 With all the activism generated by the "female liberation" of WW II, it was unfortunate that the ratification of the 19th Amendment also brought with it a growing disinterest of young women, especially college graduates, in social activism. A career in "home engineering" was increasingly viewed as more important than a career. "To the dismay of business and professional women, as of feminists, the growing population of young college women...were unable to reconcile the conflicting role demands of these two pursuits. Chafe has described in this way the conflict experienced by many women:

    In the end, therefore, the real question confronting potential career women was whether they wished to marry and forsake their professional ambitions, or to enter a lifetime job and renounce marriage. The distribution of sexual roles made it impossible for them to do both, because, in order to achieve success in a man's world, they had to accept failure in a woman's world."

    Even from the beginning, social work has been influenced by traditional sex roles:
Social work had been certified as a profession by 1920, declared closed to "vaguely benevolent persons" and open to the college educated, who were specially trained for casework and social research, 62% of whom were women. Yet women were less likely than men to advance to high positions in the new profession. In Minneapolis, for example, more than 30% of the male social workers held executive positions and only 7% of the women.  

Although men occupied the higher agency positions, women remained the "standard bearers" of theory and practice.

Because social work was identified as a woman's profession, it was hard to recruit men into the field. A good question is, "why bother to recruit men?" The move to counter the negative effects of the field's "womanish image" played a major role. The process was described by Chafetz as "an effort to 'defeminize' social work, i.e., make it more intellectual, rational, scientific, and administrative - in short, give it 'male' qualities."  

Of course, the fault of this endeavor lies in part with the women involved. They did not reflect the sexual biases that underlay the divisions in labor, and in effect, their acceptance of this controlled their professional behavior and goals. They accepted the fact that men were to occupy the administrative and executive positions in practically every company or agency. In order to upgrade social work, these women recruited men. The idea that the work of a female administrator or caseworker was comparable to better than that of a man's was set aside, and they cowed to society's dictates. As Brager and Michael contend:

Men are preferred for organizing positions, for reasons stemming from the requirements of community organization practice. Organizers are more likely than practitioners in the other methods to interact
with executives, businessmen, professionals, public officials, and others influential in community affairs...Men fill these roles in American society, and men are usually believed to be more effective in working with other men. 6

They continued to say that on a scale involving passivity - activity, or submissiveness-aggression, community organization practice requires more activism and aggression than do the other social work methods.

As men came into the field, the practice of casework remained the domain of women. Although they made significant contributions in literature and group work practice, men made the major contributions in new method theories, and in the areas of community organization. Still, the stereotyped thinking about male/female roles influenced the views of social work methods. For example, it is generally thought that casework was women's work because it involved interaction on a deeply personal basis (of course, women are noted for being good at this!), while community organization involves going out and being the initiators of interaction and activity with clients. It involves dealing with the business community, and the leaders thereof, and men will (of course) be more adept at such activity.

Walton speaks of the uneven distribution of men and women in the different branches of social work:

Besides the degree of authority which influenced the proportion of men in a branch of social work there were sexual taboos which dictated that to some extent men dealt men and boys and women dealt with women, girls, and younger boys. This has been particularly evident in probation, child care and above all in residential institutions of all kinds—prisons, approved schools, mental hospitals, and homes for the aged. Although
in children's homes, homes for the aged and mental hospitals much progress has been made in breaking down this isolation of the sexes, attitudes associated with it die very hard...

Another factor influencing the distribution of men and women in social work was the administrative setting. Men have avoided the hospital setting and preferred the local authority social work. This is related to the traditional pattern of female auxiliary staff in hospitals and to the greater career opportunities in local authority work.

From the very beginning, the authority and power of men (in terms of patronage and influence) was strong. They were the controllers of finances and they dominated the memberships of committees. There were women who were outstanding leaders and who were accepted by their male counterparts as equals, so the lack of representation by women in senior positions reflects not on their inability, but on the resistances they met from society and from within social work. Historical records show how women had to fight to be able to employ their helping abilities and how men resisted any efforts by women to move into administrative positions. Men attempted to limit women's roles to very narrow boundaries, and to restrict them to positions which would not upset the delicate balance of the male "hierarchy." Walton concludes that

Management and overall control were male prerogatives and, in spite of some evidence to the contrary, there still seems to be a strong residue of prejudice against women in senior positions. In recent years it is almost as if men were arguing that they could be tender if they wished but women were unable to be managers on any scale. Sufficient evidence has been presented to prove that women have not received a proportionate share in management posts. How much this is due to women's dual role, how much to her lack of ambition or readiness to take on these responsibilities, and how much to masculine prejudice is much more difficult to say.
Today, these ideas bring many and varied arguments to front. In my own mind, agreement exists to the statement about male prejudice against female administrators. It is a sad truth that too many men feel threatened by "powerful"women, and will outdo themselves to keep these ladies out of managerial positions. For example, in many mental health clinics, the disbursement of new cases is decided by a senior staff group of "team leaders." In the decision-making process, remarks are made not only about the natural abilities of one sex to handle such-and-such a problem, but also alluding to alleged weaknesses of a certain sex when it comes to a particular aspect of mental health practices.

This brings up the questions of sexism in social work methods, and women and mental health. The women's liberation movement has exposed the pervasiveness of sex role stereotyping, but according to Broverman, et al, few changes have resulted in re-defining these roles. Stevens accuses social workers of labeling women as passive, and perpetuating the belief that women are inferior to men. "Thus even when no specific role conflicts are at issue in therapy - the therapist's unconscious attitude toward his patient is to some extent anti-therapeutic."

Sexism is also prevalent in social work education, especially where the works of Freud, Erikson and Lidz are taught. Here, the emphasis is on male superiority and rigid sex roles. Often, these theories are presented matter-of-factly, and little discussion follows concerning their relevancy to modern-day practices and research. Very often, I think, professors introduce this kind of material, and assume that their students can, and will, take this knowledge a step further, considering
it's implications. However, this type of student is the exception. Too often, lecture notes are recorded, digested, and regurgitated for exams or papers, but little thought goes into reading between the lines. In a field such as social work, where actions have such far-reaching consequences, I strongly feel that it is the responsibility of the instructor to make it clear that theories are just theories, and to acquaint them (students) with representative research, pro and con, on the theories. Also, and equally important, it is the responsibility of students to examine and question what they are being taught, and to initiate discussion on its validity. This kind of learning atmosphere will encourage students and faculty to develop a better awareness of their own value systems.

Specifically, curriculum deals with stereotyped views of female psychological development. Also, traditional sex role "standards" are the basis of the field's theoretical framework. Very little criticism is offered in the teaching of this subject matter, and its practice is widespread. A going concern is of the attitudes and treatment practices of mental health professionals because they reflect a negative view of women. "A recent nation-wide survey identified four areas in which sex bias is evident in psychotherapy: (1) in the fostering of traditional sex roles, (2) in the adherence to biased expectations and devaluing concepts of women, (3) in a sexist application of psychoanalytic concepts, and, (4) in responding to women as sex objects."

Where women and mental health are concerned, studies show that females constitute the majority of those receiving therapy, both in hospitals and in out-patient clinics. Also,
the evidence shows a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders and mental illness in women than in men.

"Chesler questions whether this consistent tendency for females to surpass men in the rates of mental illness and the number of diagnoses that are not by definition sex-linked may be a function of a diagnostic bias on the part of mental health professionals." As Wesley and Weisstein suggest, "it is possible that the therapists' preconceived notions may influence labeling and promote the high incidence of observed mental illness among women."

Broverman et al observe:

Clinicians have different standards of health for men and women. Clinicians are more likely to suggest that healthy women differ from healthy men by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more excitable in minor crises, having their feelings more easily hurt, being more emotional, more conceited about their appearance, less objective and disliking mathematics and science. This constellation seems a most unusual way of describing any mature healthy individual.

There exists in social work a curious phenomenon. After the World Wars, there was considerable interest in psychological trauma such as war neuroses. Interest here led to the establishment of training centers to deal with such mental health problems, but it remained the work of psychologists.
My point is that social workers now often deal with the same kinds of problems as psychologists, yet their training and education is quite different. Unless the student specializes in both psychology and social work, valuable knowledge and insight is lost. This is not to say that a social work education is worth less, but that good training in psychology is of benefit because so much social work theory and methodology has its roots in psychology. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the student should be aware of the background and implications of the material that is learned. At the same time, it is essential that the education not be lacking. For the most part, the case is that social work students are either ignorant of, or ill-acquainted with the material future psychologists learn and apply in the same clinics where social workers practice. The psychologists are esteemed because of their "special" training and the general mystique which surrounds psychology. As a result, the social workers blindly follow the sexist example of these psychologists, few having had the chance to be adequately exposed to, and question these theories which do much to perpetuate inequality in the treatment of the sexes in the field of mental health.

...a task-force report of the American Psychological Association (APA) notes that psychologists expect women to be more passive and dependent than men, even though the psychologists acknowledge that these traits are not ideal for mental health. The APA also revealed a bias among psychologists in their expectations and evaluations of women, which was reflected in inaccurate and demeaning clinical labeling of female clients and a general attitude that assertive women were hostile.
My recommendation is that at the very least, graduate level training should include classes on psychological theories and the accompanying research that undergraduate psychology majors are familiar with. Psychology is not all hocus-pocus, and the fields of social and abnormal psychology, learning theories, and the accompanying research are of special importance to social workers. The research is especially relevant because much of it concerns every-day situations which is what so many caseworkers must deal with.

At this time I'd like to pursue something which was mentioned at the beginning, that of women who have made a career in social work, and the problems they face because of their sex. The positions women are allowed to occupy and the salaries they are given are too many times the result of some die-hard myths perpetuated by society. A review of the evidence showing the differences in salary and career advances between men and women in social work indicates that these are not due to differences in job performance, capability, or work motivation. Rather, it is due to the conflicts experienced by women who combine work and family roles.

Women among the labor force was an accepted part of the "life and times" of WW II. But when the boys came home needing jobs and wanting women, the women obliged, going home and leaving the labor market to the returning soldiers. Of course, the real situation was not as trite as I make it sound. Well, the women stayed home to raise families, but things so happen (death, divorce) to change lives, and many of these women found themselves needing employment. Even those females who had had experience found themselves to be "rookies" entering
a world that was and is primarily dominated by men... because of this,

...the economic value of working women and of the jobs that they perform has tended to be downgraded, underrated, and undercompensed. But it may be that the most significant factor deterring the advance of working women - and one that goes immediately beyond the boundary of economic determinants - is that many working women also bear and care for the offspring of the human race.

There have been a number of studies that point to the demands of child-raising as one of the major factors which limit women's participation in social work. The lack of adequate child care facilities in communities makes dealing with this problem difficult. Until the social and economic pressures and circumstances surrounding working women are alleviated, the women making careers in social work won't be able to freely or fully determine to what extent they can commit themselves to the profession.

The following are reasons expressed by employers and others as to why women aren't hired to occupy the same positions as men:

"***Young women are too likely to withdraw from the labor force for marriage and childbearing.

***Men have greater responsibility than women do for supporting a family and so have a greater right to a job.

***Women who reenter the labor force later in life lack the sustained work experience that most men have."

All these views that reflect so negatively on the working women are based on one factor - marriage. "Since there is no way of knowing in advance which women will stay single, all women - even those who never marry - are penalized by such
notions." The proportion of the salary differences between
male and female social workers attributable to discrimination
is about three times as great as that proportion linked to the
costs of combining the roles of work and family. Also, single
women experience more limited opportunities in career advance-
ments as a result of discrimination.

Let us consider first that young women leave the labor
force to get married. I am inclined to agree with this. Until
society's dictates change which pressure the young bride to
take up the full responsibility of caring for the home, women
will continue to play "hopscotch" with their jobs. It is
expected (by men) for their bride to remain at home, watching
over the "nest," preparing for his return from a hard day's
work. It is the minority of couples who (both) continue to
work right after marriage, although the number is growing.
Included in this idea is the "baby" factor. Many newlyweds
start right in on adding to their nuclear family. As society
wills it, the female stays at home to become the focal parent
of the offspring until the child can enter preschool, then the
woman may return to work.

The available statistics show that this trend is rapidly
changing. Young women are leaving work, but only for a short
time, to start a family. But, more and more of them are re-
turning to the job market after a few months or years. No
longer are they waiting for their kids to move away from home.
Now, the youngsters are dropped off at day care centers or
baby sitters so that the woman can contribute to the family
income. This brings up two important points that must be
discussed. First of all, it is a statistical fact that more
and more women are joining their husbands in "bringing home the bacon." In addition, there is an ever-increasing number of women holding the head-of-hold position. What is happening is that women are pouring into the labor force in numbers not seen since WW II. Secondly, many of these women have young children who are not yet old enough for school. Their mothers must provide day care for the youngsters, either through baby-sitters, neighborhood day care centers or those sponsored by the place of employment. Government studies show that one out of every three children under the age of six has a mother who is employed.

What are the implications of ALL of this? One thing is for sure—women have become a definite part of the labor force. Something else that still seems to be part of the general "scene" is the out-dated, sexist attitudes toward women. Until these stereotypic views can be changed — and this will take generations of individuals being socialized in very different ways than you and I — then special provisions should be made for the working woman. Since men expect their wives to raise the children, yet appreciate the extra income brought in by an employed spouse, I propose that employers be more flexible about a working mother's schedule — after all, everybody wants her to be able to fulfill her maternal duties. Since women will be out working to increase the family's income, surely the husband can contribute some extra time to help out with keeping the house up.

All kidding aside, I am serious about some fast changes being in the wind. The men have my sympathy. For many years they have been indoctrinated with misinformation about half the world's population, much of it by that half itself! In
too many ways we have dug our own hole, but it's past time to get out of it. I realize it will take time, but the less effort each of us expends in this endeavor for full status as humans the longer it will take, and in my book, we have waited long enough.

Walton set forth what he calls the "future trends" of the profession:

Without fundamental changes in attitudes and policies the following trends are implied by the present study:

A. Women will continue to be discriminated against in senior line management posts resulting in a disproportionate number of men in senior social work posts.

B. Senior women will be mainly single or married without children.

C. If any branch of social work previously dominated by women becomes equally accessible and attractive to men, it will come to be dominated by men. Women will tend to hold lower participant positions.

D. Women will tend to be appointed as training officers.

E. Women will continue to play a key part in social work education. 19

The outlook for the future of women in social work is looking to be brighter, though changes will be slow in coming. Organized efforts of women social workers on local and national levels have raised the profession's consciousness to an awareness of women's issues and have provided impetus for change.

Several factors should facilitate the efforts in this direction. First of all, the goal of eliminating sex bias and philosophy in the profession. Women and men in social work should be able to eliminate sexism in the field and broaden the options and opportunities of women, whether they be worker or client.

Secondly, the education of social workers must be changed.
The present system has failed to critically analyze sexism, resulting in limiting male and female social workers in their ability to identify and understand its effects on their clients. Not enough emphasis is placed on the effect of the professional's beliefs on the treatment process and in their relationships with their clients. Rigid sex role requirements, limited options regarding marital, family, and work roles, and institutional sexism all contribute to the problems of women clients. AND since the whole purpose of a social worker's job is to benefit the client, discriminating against the female clients is doing less than half a job because women constitute the majority of those seeking help from this helping profession.

Personally, I will be doing my part. I began 'way back at age 3 when I successfully waged a campaign whose aim was a football helmet for Christmas. This year has been rather eventful where it concerns battles for a square deal. I challenged the local chapter of Blue Key National Honor Fraternity, citing Title IX when they refused me admission in the fall of '76. They slipped through on the basis of a technicality concerning one of the University's policies concerning the structure of student organizations. What I discovered is that nobody likes the boat to be rocked - it's too likely somebody might get wet. In other words, the university officials were not too helpful. In addition, along with some pretty fantastic ladies, we 76-77 Mortar Boarders set out to prove to the university that we women were more than a match for the men on this campus who are allegedly the cream of their crop. The feedback from University administra-
-tion, faculty, staff, students, and respected members of the community indicates that we have more than proved our point-through our outstanding achievement in diverse fields of interest.

I'm not planning on stopping this crusade; my whistle is just starting to get wet enough to make some noise. I will not work happily or well in a field that so discriminates against its members and clients. A large part of my career will be working to rectify the present inequalities and inadequacies based on sex.

"Now, Mr. Smith, what was that you were saying about being tired of feeling like just another househusband? Tell me all about it."
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