



# Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice

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# Part Two

## Anti-oppressive practice with individuals, groups and communities



# 6

## Gender

### **Achieving a Social Work Degree**

This chapter will help you develop the following capabilities from the Professional Capabilities Framework (2018):

2. Values and ethics
3. Diversity and equality
5. Knowledge
7. Skills and intervention

See Appendix 1 for Professional Capabilities Framework Fan and a description of the 9 domains.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

It will also introduce you to the following standards as set out in the Social Work Subject Benchmark Statement (2019):

- 5.2 Social work theory
- 5.4 Service users and carers
- 5.16 Skills in working with others

See Appendix 2 for a detailed description of these standards.

## Introduction

In all societies across the world, gender diversity is a fundamental differentiation among its members (Laird and Tedam, 2019). In this chapter, we will examine the various discourses around gender, and articulate how these discourses assist or hinder your involvement and intervention as a social worker. Using case studies and activities, this chapter will encourage you to reflect on new learning, while consolidating existing knowledge and practice competence. The chapter will begin with a discussion about the gender composition within the profession of social work, and examine key concepts such as feminism, masculinity, transgender and the ways in which intersectionality help us to understand the diverse experiences of people. Social work practice with fathers will be explored and the use of the SHARE model (Maclean et al., 2018) proposed as a framework for understanding and disrupting gender oppression.

Globally, in relation to the people who teach social work, it has been recognised that there are more women than men in social work. Reporting the figures from the USA, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE, 2017) found that the majority of social work students (Bachelor's: 85 per cent; Master's: 85 per cent; PhD: 74 per cent) were female, as well as 72 per cent of faculty. In the UK, Moriarty and Murray (2007) indicate the low numbers of men entering social work education, commenting that this reflects the relatively low average salary for men. There is also research by the GSSC (2010) which found that men constituted only 13 per cent of social workers in the UK. The Australian case presents a similar picture, with 83 per cent of all professional social workers in Australia being women in 2006 (Pease, 2011).

Conversely, it is also suggested that the social work curriculum and teaching content has a dominance of male social work theorists, quantitative and masculinist approaches to research. In the following section, I will explain some key terminology in order to aid our understanding of gender oppression.

## The term 'gender'

According to Skehill (2009), the subject of gender is an interesting one for students studying social work, yet it has been found to be a difficult subject to address. This is

because of the different perspectives around the concept itself. Gender is a set of characteristics, behaviours and practices associated with the sexual categories of male and female. Gender is also socially constructed in that its understanding is fluid and changes over time. The power relations that exist between men and women give rise to discussions about men being complicit in the oppression of women for the most part through being silent. In order to draw attention to this unequal power relationship between men and women, feminist writers in social work have argued that the knowledge base, education and social work practice itself must recognise the importance of using a gender-sensitive frame of reference in their practice with service users and carers. According to Newberry-Koroluk (2018), gendered narratives, stereotypes and expectations *emerge in social work classrooms and field placements before they emerge in post-graduation practice* (p448). Such a claim is relevant for social work educators in order that they are conscious of gendered power dynamics from the outset. The aim would be to use this consciousness to model and demonstrate equity, non-oppression and inclusion for students of all genders while guarding against favoritism or reinforcing male privilege. It is also imperative that social work classrooms are spaces where well-being is nurtured through respect, inclusion and dignity. The social work curriculum should include issues of power, its objective and subjective forces, and how it may be channelled into resisting oppression while pursuing liberation (Prilleltensky, 2008). Feminist approaches may assist social work students to achieve this.

## Examining feminism

According to Szymanski (2005), there is no universally agreed definition of feminism because there are many different types and models. The most widely agreed underlying principle of feminism is the recognition of women as equal to men. According to hooks (2000), *Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression* (pviii). Before I examine the various forms of feminism, it is important to understand how and why feminist thinking is important to social work education and practice. It is the view of Barretti (2001) that despite the gaps, there is a close relationship between social work and feminism. The types of feminism we are going to discuss includes *liberal feminism*, which maintains that gender discrimination against women exists due to ignorance and a lack of awareness. Liberal feminists believe that as the world advances, changes will emerge in the relationship between men and women.

### *Marxist feminists*

Marxist feminists hold the view that gender oppression is a result of capitalism which has placed women's work at the lower margins of remuneration at best or for no pay at worst. This disadvantage begins in the domestic family and private spheres, and often results in women reproducing and socialising the future generations of women into similar situations and circumstances.

### *Radical feminists*

Radical feminists view the oppression of women as being driven by men because they run the main institutions in society. This theory posits that male domination and power are constructed and maintained through social, political and cultural practices and systems which reinforce female inferiority. Radical feminism also turns on its head the characteristics that are valued in men. Examples of these values include being controlling, competitive, macho and aggressive, which are blamed for wars and hunger on a larger scale, and rape, poverty and abuse within a family context. They believe that these are the ways through which men retain power over women.

### *Postmodern feminists*

This is a combination of postmodern and feminist theories. As a starting point, postmodern feminists dismiss all feminist thought which gives a single explanation for women's oppression. They subscribe to and promote the idea of difference, multiplicity and plurality. Feminists argue that social work practice must be informed by the different forms of feminism already discussed above, and that feminism has contributed to the development of social work and practice in many parts of the world, at least in the USA, the UK and Australia.

## **Black feminism**

Black feminist thought contends that White middle-class women have been the focus of feminist theory and that it is important that feminist theory incorporates the experiences of Black women. Black feminists insist on *self-definition*, which is the power to name one's own reality and *self-valuation*. Collins (1990) argues that if a Black woman chooses to relate to her race, then her identity and struggles as a woman are lost. It could be argued that the same is true when she elevates her gender as the focus of her struggles and race is lost. Black women often engage in activism and the application of critical race theory assists in understanding and theorising the experiences of Black people. In anti-oppressive practice, recognising how social workers from Black and minority ethnic or Asian backgrounds navigate practice where Black service users experience multiple oppressions is an important consideration.

The section above has highlighted some of the different forms of feminism and has attempted to examine the different lenses through which feminists view gender and gender discrimination. We will now look at men and masculinity within the context of social work and anti-oppressive practice.

### **Activity 6.1**

- Can you name any writers who are at the forefront of gender theorising in social work?
- Who are they and what do you like about their writing?



**Guidance**

You may have writers whose work you engage with and use in your assignments and coursework. These do not have to be social work writers, but it is important that you begin to identify people who write about gender and how their writing connects with you – for example, Audre Lorde and bell hooks are two Black feminist writers whose work I often read.

**Men and masculinity**

According to Christie (2001), in female-dominated professions such as social work, there may be fear of feminisation and stigmatisation among the male minority and this could be the reason why the profession continues to attract more women than men. This brings into question what it means to be a man, or indeed the nature of masculinity.

Alvesson (1998, p972) defines masculinity as the

*values, experiences and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel natural for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context.*

Traditional male attributes such as leadership and technical skills have tended to form the image of traditional masculinity, according to Lupton (2000). Cree (2001) suggests that what are considered normative masculine behaviours have always included success and status, creating an emotional distance, and avoiding what are perceived as feminine behaviours. This view is supported by Lupton (2000, p35) who found that men *suffer a challenge to their masculinity by performing a role which is regarded by society as one which woman normally undertake*. Every culture or society will interpret and measure masculinity using different yardsticks. However, there is a common theme about certain roles and tasks being viewed as feminine. As a social worker, you must avoid these stereotypes and ensure that your practice with males is fair, transparent and non-oppressive. In this regard, social work with fathers is an important area for considering and applying anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory principles.

Research by Pease (2016) makes the case for Patriarchy Awareness workshops for men, arguing that men need to understand patriarchy to enable them to acknowledge their complicity in the oppression of women. This is a useful proposal which you may wish to include in your menu of interventions in relation to gender-based oppression and violence.

**Fathers and absent fathers**

There appears to be limited research around single fathers in social work, with the available literature often presenting a negative image of them being passive or uninvolved (Scourfield et al., 2012). In some cases, the conclusion of fathers being perpetrators even before an assessment is undertaken can undermine the role of father and feed into

negative gender stereotypes. Gendered assumptions can influence social workers' assessments and interventions when working with fathers who may be within the home or absent, and these often result in barriers to support. In their everyday decisions about the adequacy of parenting, according to Nygren et al. (2019) it is important to reflect on and challenge what are dominant gendered norms within the family, understand that not involving fathers might increase risks for children and that fathers are a resource that can, for example, provide care to children when mothers are in prison (Flynn, 2012).

Social workers are often working in families where the absence of fathers often contributes to disadvantaging those families. Single fatherhood, according to Haworth (2019), is not a straightforward term, rather its definition is used in different ways by different individuals, depending on the context. A male lone parent is likely to face difficulties when applying for a role as foster carer, for example, much more than a female lone carer or parent. Nygren et al. (2019) found that the policy on the inclusion of fathers in social work was not translated into practice in England, Sweden, Ireland and Norway. Consequently, as social workers we should reflect on and challenge dominant gendered norms within the family, and recognise that not involving fathers could negatively impact on children in terms of the loss of a primary carer, loss of their home and potentially create unstable care arrangements (Flynn, 2012).

In the case study below, you will read an example of Jonathan, a single father who attends a meeting at his children's school.

### Case Study

Jonathan is a single father of three children – sons Peter and Robert, age 8 and 10, and daughter Clare, age 5. The children's mother passed away two years ago and Jonathan has been the sole carer for the children since then. The family recently moved to this area. Jonathan's mother Corrine (the children's grandmother) occasionally supports Jonathan with caring for the children. Clare's class teacher is concerned about her progress in school and involves the special education needs coordinator (SENCO) at the school, who agrees that a meeting is required. The letter is addressed to Mother/Carer of Clare Dodds. The school involves Children's Social Care in this meeting following concerns about all three children being picked up late from school regularly.

The SENCO welcomes everyone to the meeting and during introductions the social worker asks where the mother of the children is because it is important to have her in this meeting. Jonathan reports that the school should have records that he is the sole carer for the children. There are five people at the meeting, four of whom are female (the SENCO, the social worker, the class teacher and the Deputy Head). Jonathan is the only male. The social worker asks Jonathan to describe his daily care routine for the children and why he is late collecting them from school. Jonathan carefully describes the daily routine and stops occasionally to acknowledge the people in the room.

The SENCO asks Jonathan whether he assists the children with their homework and if he has noticed that Clare may have some difficulties.

- Consider how you might progress discussions and contributions to this meeting.
- What questions would you ask and why?

### Commentary

This case study requires you to think about who was at this meeting and how you might ensure that Jonathan feels welcome in that space, being the only male in the room. The original letter inviting the family to this meeting was addressed to the children's late mother. There is a clear message of a lack of attention to detail when the social worker asks about the children's mother who has been dead for about two years. This is not a good start to the meeting, and it may be that Jonathan feels overwhelmed as the meeting progresses. The question about why Jonathan collects the children late from school could be more sensitively asked. Jonathan may be feeling powerless and restricted, components of Barker's (2003) definition of oppression, so it is important to revise your approach.

## Transgender

The term 'transgender' historically referred to a person who wanted to change their social gender through a change of habitus and gender expression, perhaps also with the use of hormones but usually not surgery (Stryker, 2017). The umbrella term 'trans' is used to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth (Stonewall, 2017).

Burdge (2007) has argued that the transgender community has its own unique culture and language with which they communicate. Referring to them as an at-risk population, Burdge (2007) suggests that social workers must possess the knowledge and skills to work with transgender service users in ways that are empowering and anti-oppressive. Like other minority groups, transgendered people face negative social environments that can make them feel alienated and lead to depression and low self-esteem. For children and young people, family and home environments may not offer them the acceptance and support required to keep them safe and enhance their well-being, and may instead unconsciously reject them. This could force them to run away from home and put themselves at risk of exploitation while they are on the street. As a social worker, you therefore have a role to play in ensuring the safety of transgendered people in school, in family environments and among their peers. You can achieve this through education and awareness raising, and supporting therapeutic interventions with families of transgendered young people with the view to helping the family understand and appropriately support their transgendered child or young person. For hospital social workers, the role could extend to supporting gender reassignment or hormone therapies that may be considered by service users or carers. Anti-oppressive frameworks are characterised by values of inclusion, equity and social justice. According to Baines (2011, p26), attempts to explain both *how power works to oppress and marginalise people, as well as how power can be used to liberate and empower them* requires all forms of oppression to be addressed in order to work towards greater social justice. Gender discrimination does not arise from a single, obvious source; instead, it is perpetuated through political, biological, psychological, economic, educational and social inequalities, which can be on a micro, mezzo or macro level.

## Gender and anti-oppressive social work

In this section, we have outlined areas of practice where gender-based discrimination can occur. As students, you will be expected to question the absence of gender considerations in your coursework. When working on a case study or relevant topics during your studies, you will be required to identify where gender discrimination may exist and how you might analyse these issues for effective anti-oppressive practice. In practice and team settings, you should respectfully challenge oppressive attitudes and behaviours such as unfair work allocation, sexist 'jokes', homophobia, sexual violence or harassment of all forms.

Hicks (2015) has argued for consideration and analysis of gender within everyday social work contexts. From receiving initial information about people in need of services through to assessments, and in identifying appropriate interventions, it is crucial that social workers understand the personal, structural and broader contexts around the implications of gender. For example, a social worker's analysis of the role of two heterosexual parents in raising children should be carefully considered.

Gender equality means taking into account men's and women's priorities, needs and interests while recognising the diversity within these groups. Social workers should avoid stereotypical language and recommendations that reinforce gender stereotypes – for example, when a boy is asked to 'take care of your sister', 'be the man' or 'man-up' without due regard to other factors such as age and experience.

On the other hand, it may be the case that in some families – for example, those of a strict Muslim faith – the husband may request that he is present for any interaction between his wife and a male social worker, or his presence may result in the wife not speaking during the interaction. Such a situation would warrant an understanding of the dynamics at play in this interaction, which may be perceived to be culturally appropriate to the family but not necessarily congruent with the requirements of family social work.

Social workers should avoid a line of questioning that borders on heteronormativity (the belief that sexual or marital relationships should be between man and woman) – for example, asking a female if she has a boyfriend or husband. Similarly, asking a man if they have a wife or girlfriend should be avoided.

Burke and Harrison (2016, p46) assert that an awareness of one's own position in relation to others is an important skill to possess when trying to work anti-oppressively. It is also crucial that social workers encourage oppressed groups to challenge oppressive behaviours, attitudes and practices as much as possible.

Barnoff et al. (2006) have noted that the lack of resources can be used to disguise genuine resistance to anti-oppressive work. Consequently, genuine barriers for anti-oppressive practice at organisational and agency levels should be highlighted and addressed. In addition to this, denying, minimising and victim blaming all reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination. People deny gender discrimination by insisting that victims are overreacting; gender oppression does not exist in their space by being silent and not challenging or acting. Social workers must recognise and name their own positionality in the spirit of sound ethical, anti-oppressive practice. According to Fook (2012), we occupy multiple locations, thus possessing multiple perspectives. I am Black, female, social worker, African, academic, mother, daughter, sister, wife, Catholic. I use specific elements of these multiple locations depending on what questions I am being

asked or what I am doing. For example, if a question was asked of me in relation to faith and religion, my social location as a practising Catholic might be at the fore.

### Activity 6.2

On your own or with a colleague, describe the multiple locations which you occupy.

## The SHARE Model

For social workers seeking a practical and flexible model to examine gender discrimination and oppression, the SHARE model (Maclean et al., 2018) offers opportunities. The SHARE model (Seeing, Hearing, Acting, Reading, Evaluating) has already been discussed in Chapter 2. To recap, when working with families, social workers need to acknowledge what they are seeing as part of the intervention as well as what they hear. What social workers see in relation to gender and gender discrimination may impact on their view of families, service users or carers. What they hear will ultimately inform the action they take. What is being said about the males, females, transgendered people in the context of work? How are they described, talked about and viewed? Social workers will need to take action or intervene with families where there is likely to be gendered practice and expectations. For example, where a social worker is unfamiliar with or has little or no experience working with transgendered people, it is important to be open about this knowledge and skills gap in order to avoid oppressive practice arising from ignorance or lack of experience. You may need to undertake additional reading to enhance your understanding. Once the case proceeds beyond a certain stage, you will need to evaluate the outcomes of your intervention using a gendered and intersectional lens to ensure that their intervention has been devoid of oppressive practice.

### Activity 6.3

- What are your knowledge gaps at this stage of your studies in relation to transgendered people?
- What skills do you need to work with transgendered people?

Discuss these questions with a colleague or write down your thoughts.

There can be no discussion of the implications of gender on its own; instead, the understanding of intersectionality is important and has been a theme throughout this book. Intersectionality accounts for the many ways that structural forces intersect in women's lives and has had an undeniable influence on feminist theory. Anti-oppressive practice is intersectional practice and requires a critical understanding of power

relations. Patriarchy upholds and supports gender oppression which, according to Gellman (2006), emanates from the Bible where women are considered inferior to men. Intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression arising from their race, identity, sexual orientation, religion, class, gender and other identity markers. Intersectionality recognises that identity markers (e.g. 'male' and 'Black') do not exist independently of each other, and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression.

### Activity 6.4

Having read the case study about Jonathan and his children earlier in this chapter, you receive the following additional information:

1. The children's mother died while seeking asylum in the UK.
2. Jonathan is a transgender parent.
  - How might you use this new information?

Consider incorporating the SHARE model.

#### Guidance

I will apply some of the elements of the SHARE model and invite you to consider how you might apply the other elements with Jonathan and his family.

In the case of Jonathan and family, this new information is important, and it is good practice to update your records to reflect this additional information. To avoid oppressive practice, you will need to read (R) up on what it means to be transgender and seek to hear (H) directly from Jonathan about how you might support him. It may be that before this information you were considering referring him a parenting group or other specific services. Considering the new information, this will need to be carefully and sensitively explored before you act (A).

## Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined a number of key terminologies in the area of gender which are important for social workers to understand and draw upon when working with service users. Recognising the factors that perpetuate gender discrimination is the first step towards disrupting it in social work education and practice. I have sought to emphasise the centrality of understanding and acknowledging one's positionality and the power (or powerlessness) invested in those multiple positions we occupy. For social workers attempting to work in an anti-oppressive way, avoiding gender stereotypes through our language and practice is an effective strategy, alongside calling out gender discrimination wherever we are faced with it.

### Further reading

**Baines, D** (2011) *Anti-oppressive Practice: Social Justice Social Work* (2nd edn). Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing.

This edited book examines anti-oppressive practice and focuses on the complexities and challenges of 'doing' anti-oppressive social work practice. Its strengths lie in the broad scope of the text and the range of chapter authors who emphasise the need for allies and activism to disrupt oppression.

**Burdge, B** (2007) Bending gender, ending gender: theoretical foundations for social work practice with the transgender community. *Social Work*, 52(3): 243–50.

This article examines gender-based oppression and the resulting psychosocial difficulties experienced by many transgendered individuals who are an at-risk population.