Women in the Social Work Profession

BACKGROUND

The history of social work is a “herstory” of female reformers, suffragists, and charity workers (Vandiver, 1980). A partial list of social work pioneers includes such prestigious names as Grace Abbott, Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Florence Kelly, Julia Lathrop, Lillian Ward, Mary Richmond, Bertha Reynolds, and Francis Perkins. African American reformers were prominent as well and included such luminaries as Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett (Peebles-Wilkins & Francis, 1990), and Nannie Helen Burroughs (Perkins, 1997).

Although women were prominent in the newly developing profession of social work, men often held managerial positions and directed the frontline, and predominantly female, workforce. As early as 1880 women noted and protested this uneven representation (Vandiver, 1980). Social work frequently has been referred to as a “female-dominated profession,” although that supposition has been challenged over the years (Giovannoni & Purvine, 1974; Meyer, 1982). McPhail (2004) contends that a more accurate characterization of social work is a “female majority, male-dominated” profession.

Today women continue to make important contributions to the social work profession while comprising the numerical majority of social workers. For instance, 87.8 percent of students awarded baccalaureate (BSW) degrees and 84.6 percent awarded master’s (MSW) degrees in 1999 and 2000 were women (Lennon, 2002). Women represent approximately 73 percent of all social work doctoral degrees (Di Palma, 2005). A recent representative sample of NASW members found that 80 percent were female (NASW, 2005a). In a book celebrating the faces and voices of social work exemplars (Dumez, 2003), 43 percent of the social workers featured are women.

Women in social work, like their male counterparts, demonstrate a range of professional skills; assist people in overcoming some of life’s most difficult challenges, such as poverty, discrimination, abuse, and addiction (NASW, n.d.); act in a variety of roles such as academics, clinical practitioners, activists, educators, legislators, and policy analysts; bring knowledge, training, determination, professionalism, energy, and enthusiasm to the complex profession of social work; and epitomize social work values as they work for social and economic justice. The strengths of female social workers are a wonder to behold as they make a difference in the lives of people every day.

However, women in social work face challenges inside the profession. Social workers operate in a world that continues to reflect traditional male bias and power in its institutions, structures, and theoretical models. Dressel (1987) argued that “the numerical dominance of women in social work has not translated into authority, power, and pay equity or equality” (p. 297). Female social workers are not immune from the problems women in many other professions confront in the workplace, including pay inequities, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and a problem that has only recently received increased attention, the maternal wall. As a result, female social workers face an ironic situation: working in a profession largely comprised of women, primarily serving women and their children, they are often second-class citizens in the profession they are
said to dominate. Although women in the social work profession have made much progress, inequities continue to exist.

Pay Inequities

Gender-based wage disparities in the social work profession have been documented since 1961, when the first labor force study was conducted by NASW (Becker, 1961) and have been reaffirmed in subsequent investigations (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997; Huber & Orlando, 1995). In an analysis of the Current Population Survey, a U.S. Census-administered monthly survey of the labor market that allows respondents to make their own determination of whether they are a social worker, the average hourly wage in 1999 for social workers was $15.56 per hour for female respondents and $17.90 per hour for male respondents (Barth, 2003). Surveying a random sample of Pennsylvania social workers in 1994, Koeske and Krowinski (2004) found male social workers’ salaries significantly higher than female social workers’ salaries, even after controlling for years of experience in social work, job role, and status; female social workers received about 90 cents to the dollar made by male social workers, a difference of more than $3,500 over the course of a year. Among NASW members in 1995, the median income of female respondents was $34,135 compared with $37,503 for male respondents (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997), a difference of $3,368. A random sample of regular NASW members conducted in 2000 revealed that men earned about $10,780 more than women, with a median income for men reported at $54,290 and for women, $43,510 (NASW, 2002).

Comparing salaries by industry and the proportion of women in the industry, Gibelman (2003) found that “the proportion of women in an occupational group has an inverse relationship to weekly salary levels; that is, as the proportion goes up, salaries go down” (p. 25). Although minor exceptions exist, Gibelman noted that the pattern is consistent and strong.

Pay inequities in social work reflect pay inequities across the board in women’s employment. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reported that the median annual earnings of year-round, full-time women in the paid labor force were 73 percent of the median annual earnings of year-round, full-time men in the labor force. The numbers show racial as well as gender disparities: African American women earned 65 percent and Latinas earned 52 percent of their male counterparts’ earnings.

Glass Ceilings and Escalators

The U.S. Department of Labor defined the glass ceiling as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward into management-level positions” (cited in Gibelman & Schervish, 1993, p. 443). In a study of NASW members, Gibelman & Schervish (1997) found evidence of a glass ceiling in social work; after accumulating 10 or more years of experience, 32.5 percent of men compared with 22.7 percent of women held management positions. Zunz (1991) found that although female social workers seem to have equal access to education, training, and mentors, they move into management positions at a slower pace than men, often lacking self-confidence and finding it a riskier proposition than do men. Another study, based on interviews with female leaders in human services organizations, identified respondents’ greatest barriers to professional advancement as prejudice and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and heterosexism (Gardella & Haynes, 2004).

In a study of undergraduate directors at accredited BSW programs and deans or chairs of accredited MSW programs from 1985 to 1996, DiPalma and Topper (2001) found that the percentage of women directors of BSW programs increased significantly over the years, from 43.4 percent in 1985 to 57.2 percent in 1996. The number of women deans or chairs of MSW programs also increased during this same time period, from 29.3 percent in 1985 to 44.7 percent in 1996. The researchers attributed the gains to two factors: (1) concerted efforts of the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Commission on the Role and Status of Women, and (2) an increase in the number of
Women in the Social Work Profession

This study is encouraging and, as the title of the article suggests, could mean the glass ceiling is beginning to crack.

In social work academia Petchers (1996) found that although there was an increase in the number of women faculty in graduate social work programs from 1972 to 1993, many of these women were clustered in nontenure-track positions. For instance, from 1983 to 1993 the most common rank for male faculty in graduate programs was full professor, whereas female faculty members were more likely to hold a nonprofessorial rank, such as instructor or lecturer. Petchers noted that “as the status level increased, the percentage of female faculty decreased” (pp. 25–26). Di Palma (2005) found that although women continue to be underrepresented on faculties of colleges and universities across disciplines, in contrast women social work faculty have made greater progress: by the year 2000 in graduate social work education 43 percent of full professors were women, 62 percent of associate professors, and 67 percent of assistant professors. Di Palma also noted the dramatic increase in the number of positions for both men and women in nontenure-track positions, in a similar gender ratio as the assistant professor position.

In a study women faculty were asked about their perceptions of obtaining tenure, and they noted the following obstacles: Most tenured faculty are men and thereby dominate the tenure review process; female faculty were perceived to be held to a higher standard of work and effort than male faculty; women felt responsible for more of the “organizational housework” or administrative tasks than male faculty; and in the tenure process more emphasis was placed on scholarship (especially quantitative research methods) than teaching and service, which ran counter to the preferences of many respondents (DiNitto, Aguilar, Franklin, & Jordan, 1995). In an informal survey of CSWE women board members, concerns for women in social work education included gender disparities in salaries, conservative backlash and a drift away from affirmative action, the glass ceiling, lack of real power, and rising expectations for promotion, tenure, and assuming administrative tasks (Bentley, Valentine, & Haskett, 1999).

Researchers also have found that men in the profession take on administrative tasks and move into administrative positions more often and at a much faster rate than women, with significant differences appearing three to 10 years after receiving an MSW degree (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993; Lambert, 1994; Zunz, 1991). Koeske and Krowinski (2004) found that men were more likely to occupy administrative roles, whereas women were more likely to be in direct practice positions. In a study that examined the status of men in predominantly female professions (social work, library science, and teaching), Williams (1995) found that men in these professions often received preference in hiring, were closely mentored by other men in the profession, and were actively encouraged to move into leadership positions. In contrast to the glass ceiling facing women moving into traditionally “male professions,” Williams described the opposite phenomenon, men moving quickly up the management ladder in the so-called “women’s professions,” as analogous to riding a “glass escalator.”

Maternal Wall

The glass ceiling phenomenon has received increased attention over the past couple of decades, but less attention has been given to the maternal wall, which refers to the problems women face in juggling their roles as employed workers with that of mother and caregiver. In a survey of university faculty in California, Mason and Goulden (2004) found that tenure-track faculty differ from their male counterparts in that they are less likely to marry and have children and more likely to divorce. The authors conclude that, “rather than blatant discrimination against women, it is the long work hours and the required travel, precisely at the time when most women with advanced degrees have children and begin families, that force women to leave the fast-track professions” (p. 90).

This problem has largely been invisible, often seen as a personal rather than political struggle for women based on their “choice” to have children or care for aging parents. This attitude is changing. As Crittenden (2001) said, “What is needed is across-the-board recogni-
tion—in the workplace, in the family, in the law, and in social policy—that someone has to do the necessary work of raising children and sustaining families, and that the reward for such vital work should not be professional marginalization, a loss of status, and an increased risk of poverty” (p. 10). This unequal distribution of caregiving between women and men affects women in the social work profession as well as the largely female clientele they serve.

Because most female social work researchers are academicians, not surprising, research on the status of women in social work has primarily focused on women in the academy. Less is known about how female social workers fare outside of the academy. A random sample of 10,000 social workers drawn from social work licensure lists in 48 states and the District of Colombia shed some light on social workers outside academic settings (NASW, 2005b). Female social workers were found in many practice settings with women comprising 90 percent of social workers in the field of aging, 79 percent in behavioral health, 83 percent in children and families, and 87 percent in health care venues. Although other results were not reported by gender, the study found serious challenges facing social workers today. For instance, the social work labor force is older than most professions, the current labor force is expected to decrease significantly over the next two years, the profession is not keeping pace with population trends in its ability to attract social workers of color, and social workers have experienced increased demands in their work in recent years, but decreased resources and supports. How these challenges affect women similarly or differently than their male counterparts is unknown.

Other Inequities

Sexual harassment has been documented in social work at agencies and educational institutions (Risley-Curtiss & Hudson, 1998; Singer, 1989). Across the board men have been the most frequent perpetrators of sexual harassment, and women have been the most common victims. Sexual harassment has been categorized as violence against women and as a form of economic coercion (Hill, 2003). Another serious issue for women in social work is client violence perpetrated against social workers. Newhill (1996) found gender to be a risk factor in client violence, and other studies have documented client threats or physical violence directed toward social workers (Spencer & Munch, 2003).

Publication rates have traditionally been higher among male than female faculty, including among African American scholars (Bentley, Hutchison, & Green, 1994; Rosenblatt, Turner, Patterson, & Rollosson, 1970; Schiele, 1992). In addition, although the majority of social workers and social work clients are female, traditional male-model theories continue to be taught (that is, Freud, Erickson, and Piaget) instead of newer theories that take into account female growth and development and the structural issues that negatively affect women.

Curricular content on women had to be mandated for inclusion in social work education in 1977 (Bentley et al., 1999), and evidence suggests that it still is not fully integrated in the social work curriculum (Figueira-McDonough, Netting, & Nichols-Casebolt, 1998). To more fully integrate gender in the curriculum, Nichols-Casebolt, Figueira-McDonough, and Netting (2000) suggested assessing both the school’s resources and culture to plan an effective change strategy that matches appropriate tactics with the school’s culture.

ISSUE STATEMENT

Although it may seem ironic that a profession often termed “female-dominated” would need a policy statement on the status of women in the profession, such a statement is necessary. Although some of the greatest social reformers have been women, Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, Ida Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell to name a few, the personal and structural sexism and discrimination that women face in the larger society exists in the profession as well. Rather than being an exception to the systemic discrimination women face in the world, the social work profession is a microcosm of that world.
This state of affairs may be invisible to many within and outside the social work profession for several reasons (McPhail, 2004). First, the fact that historically women have played an important role in the profession and are frequently (and naively) credited with founding the profession may cause some to overlook the subordinate status of women within the profession. The fact that women comprise the numerical majority of social workers often conceals the power imbalance in the profession. But, as observed in other professions and societies, having the numerical majority may not translate into wielding the majority of the power. In addition, the semantics of calling a profession female-dominated or a “women’s profession” can distract or disguise the second-class status of women within the profession.

The background provided in this policy statement systematically makes the case that women do not dominate the profession, and in fact, are often subordinate in terms of salary, prestige, position, and the curriculum. Although the profession has taken helpful and effective steps to document and address some of these inequities, such as NASW’s affirmative action stance that places women in leadership positions in proportion to their numbers among the membership, much work needs to be done.

Some might describe the present time period “post-patriarchal” or “post-feminist,” however, the research findings presented here challenge such a characterization. Although gains have been made and can be celebrated, social workers must continue to examine and document the status of women in the profession and seek new, innovative ways to support women. Such a stance is necessary, fair, and can be accomplished without blaming or denigrating men.

Some social workers might believe that the focus on women in the profession is misplaced and constitutes a distraction from work with clients. A helpful metaphor to address this potential concern is the preflight emergency instructions given by flight attendants to passengers who are traveling with small children or those needing additional assistance. Passengers are advised to first put on their own oxygen mask before assisting others. Similarly, if female social workers do not advocate for and empower themselves by confronting sexism and discrimination in their professional lives, it is hard (and hypocritical) to teach those skills and strategies to female clients operating in the larger world. The health and well-being of social work clients should not come at the expense of female social workers.

Although women have made great strides, the successes have been uneven. For instance, although some structural barriers have fallen in the public realm, women struggle with inequality in the home, which affects their lives at work. In addition, although some institutions have changed to accommodate women in the workforce, the underlying institutional structures, theoretical models, and work requirements continue to be imbued with a subtle, and not so subtle, bias that privileges men. The mixed messages women receive and the multiple roles they are expected to play have profound consequences for both female social workers and their clients. In addition, the gains that have been achieved often benefit women differently based on their race, ethnicity, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, caregiving roles, and level of ability.

POLICY STATEMENT

NASW has actively responded to the issues that negatively affect women in the social work profession—in the workplace, in social work education, and in program development and design. According to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2000), social workers should act to prevent and eliminate discrimination in organizations and in society. In 1973 NASW adopted a policy to address sexism and sex discrimination in the profession and in society. An affirmative action plan was initiated to ensure that NASW leadership would reflect the racial and gender composition of the membership and that women and people of color would have equal employment opportunities in NASW.

The National Committee on Women’s Issues became a standing committee of NASW in 1975 to encourage and monitor activities aimed at the elimination of sexism in the association, the profession, and society. In 1976 NASW’s journal Social Work published a special issue on
women; in 1977 the NASW Delegate Assembly adopted a policy statement on women’s issues; in 1980 the first NASW Conference on Social Work Practice with Women was held. In 1987 the Delegate Assembly revised the policy statement on women’s issues to express a commitment to increase women’s leadership in professional organizations and social services agencies and to ensure equal pay for men and women with similar qualifications and responsibilities. The 1993 Delegate Assembly approved a resolution titled “NASW Personnel Policies on Sexual Harassment” that addressed the need for educational materials, personnel policies, and procedures to protect NASW employees and social workers from sexual harassment. The NASW Standards for Social Work Personnel Practices (NASW, 2003) addresses discriminatory hiring and personnel actions, comparable worth, and employer’s support of the family responsibilities of caregivers. NASW has made progress in addressing these issues within the organization and the larger society; however, much remains to be done.

Therefore, NASW supports the following:

- continued attention to and documentation of the status of women in the social work profession, both within and outside of social work academia, including disparities faced by subpopulations of women due to race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual identity, focusing on, but not limited to, pay inequities, leadership and tenure-track positions, sexual harassment, gender inclusion in the curriculum, publication rates in professional journals, disparities in receipt of research funding, and the work–family conflict.

- identifying and overcoming barriers to the advancement of women in social work, including internal and external obstacles, by teaching female social work students job negotiation, confidence-building, and assertiveness skills; establishing support and networking groups for women planning a managerial career; challenging internalized restrictive gender-role stereotypes; increasing management training for women including financial statement analysis and budget development; educating social workers about legal remedies such as filing a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; using the accreditation process to hold schools accountable for attention to women’s issues; continuing to develop mentoring programs for women starting early in their careers; and increasing union membership and the use of comparable worth policies as a way to increase women’s salaries.

- adopting and teaching non-oppressive leadership styles to male and female social work administrators that more congruently fit both social work values and women’s preferred style of interactional leadership.

- continued use of affirmative action programs inside and outside NASW as an effective tool for the advancement of women and other marginalized groups, while countering the current backlash and premature curtailing of such programs across the nation.

- initiatives that maximize the flexibility of working conditions to support the caregiving roles of both female and male social workers, including tenure-track flexibility, better and less-expensive child care, and improved maternity and paternity leaves.

- policies and procedures designed to eliminate violence and sexual harassment in social work agencies and educational institutions and research to document the extent of these problems and the outcomes of educational and intervention efforts.

- working for the advancement of women in academia. Petchers (1996) recommended setting goals and strategies and specific, objective, and quantifiable targets for the proportional representation of women at each academic rank, and strengthening the function of accreditation review to enforce remedial measures. DiNitto and colleagues (1995) recommended greater value placed on qualitative research, teaching, and service; adequate representation of women on promotion and tenure committees; and male faculty taking greater responsibility for organizational tasks.

- conducting research that more fully examines the reasons for pay and position inequities in social work. For instance, are the barriers internal and external? Are women choosing
less well paid and lower status positions to better juggle work and family? And if so, why must women choose between family and work while men are less likely to have to choose between the two? Are the barriers the result of institutionalized sexism and discrimination? How are the barriers similar and different for women of color, lesbian women, and women with disabilities? Research must take the profession beyond documenting the disparities to understanding them more fully and addressing them with change at structural levels.

REFERENCES


