Gender in Social Work: Reflections on Dialogical Teaching

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Introduction

Social Work is historically known to be predominantly a female lead profession, but it has rarely attempted to incorporate gender as an analytical category. Women have significantly contributed to the development of social work education and practice; however, they do not occupy any positions of prominence in the field (Dominelli, 2002). Overlooking gender as a category of analysis has resulted in neglecting gender issues altogether in the profession. Social work developed when femininity was constructed along the public-private dichotomy, writes Vesna Lekosek (2009). A woman's existence revolved around her body and gender-specific roles and behaviours. Religious and social institutions demanded a certain level and kind of morality for them. The beginnings of Social work are rooted in philanthropic traditions of these institutions, labour and welfare movements (Dubois and Miley, 1992). Many women became service users within the framework of prevailing gender norms. They also became associated as service providers and contributed immensely to the growth and development of the Social Work profession (Dominelli, 2002).

Jane Addams (Angela Vode, 1930) and Alice Solomon[1] gave a different orientation to the Social Work profession. They described it as political rather than just a mere continuation of the philanthropic practice of religious institutions. The main goal of Social Work is to bring about a social change for which acknowledging socio-economic realities is essential. The increasing influence of neoliberalism and the welfare state crisis is reproducing inequalities at a higher magnitude (Sewpaul and Holscher, 2004). The Social Work profession needs to recognise the mechanism responsible for creating and deepening the power imbalances that are a cause and effect of social inequalities.

This paper attempts to describe the pedagogy of gender in Social Work education with a broader aim of underlining the importance of incorporating gender as a category of analysis. The reflections are based on my classroom teaching experience with the students of Masters of Social Work. The paper will elaborate on the module and approaches followed, and demonstrate the significance of dialogical teaching in sensitizing students towards gender and rethink the role of women in the profession. The format of teaching follows Caroline Skehill's (2007) framework of integrating gender in Social Work teaching.

Problematizing Gender in Social Work

Thousands of students of Social Work hope to become practitioners or educators every year. With gender not being a category of analysis in classroom teaching gender related issues go unchallenged, and they practice what is known as conforming/consensus Social Work. Issues of gender need understanding in light of historical narratives. Students benefit from this approach as it helps them comprehend complex realities created due to gender discrimination. Exploring issues confronting women in Social Work as service users or service providers from a gender lens attains significance, especially in light of the evidence suggesting their positionality only as subservient to male counterparts.

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Power equations based on gender are manifested in various forms such as discrimination, prejudices, exploitation, stereotyping and violence. Inequality is both a cause and consequence of the power imbalance between genders. The institution of patriarchy reflects in the everyday experiences of women and has more profound than imagined effects on their survival and wellbeing.

This work suggests incorporating ideas and issues related to gender in Social Work teaching. Promoting interactive and inquiry-based learning in classrooms will help develop discourse around the pressing issue of gender justice. Facilitating conversations to help students deconstruct the idea of gender is to be integrated into routine classroom teaching as it will help them challenge their gender-specific assumptions, attitudes and behaviours. An array of feminist perspectives will enlighten them about the construction of gender and help them find their relevance for Social Work education.

Many social work educators and practitioners have contributed to the scholarship on including gender as a category of analysis and advanced feminist perspectives (Skehill, 2007). Some writers advocate the deconstruction of gender using a historical approach. Mitchell Dean (1994) suggests three approaches to study gender historically: progressive, critical and problematization. The three approaches navigate how Social Work has either questioned or buttressed traditional gender assumptions.

The progressive approach suggests that women have gradually captured their spaces in various spheres and within the Social Work profession, predominantly female occupation. The critical approach suggests that even after occupying critical spaces and roles within the profession, women have operated chiefly in conformity with the general gender assumptions choosing not to engage with feminist ideas. While the first approach celebrates the fact that women occupy places of prominence in the public sphere, the second one laments the subservient position of women despite assuming critical roles in the profession.

Dean's third approach of Problematization encourages understanding the 'contradictions and complexities' of Social Work practice to comprehend its relationship with gender. "Such an approach is useful in encouraging students to think outside of modernist constraints of 'either-or' and to engage in a more nuanced and critical understanding of gender and Social Work which neither reduces Social Wok to a mere extension of patriarchal social systems nor elevates it to a champion of women and women's issues" states Caroline Skehill (2009).

Problematzing gender assumes significance as it helps develop an understanding of the construction and usage of the idea. It requires presenting facts about gender and underlining the most prevalent veiled meanings of gender in cultural contexts, inquiring why certain forms of knowledge production and representation are privileged while probing their relationship to the dominant ideas.

Reviewing feminist perspectives that have changed the course of history for women is a meaningful way of engaging students in critical debates. Different waves of Feminism and their contribution in challenging the status quo resulted in translating into action the goals of women rights and helping locate gender within a specific timeframe. Though these waves emerged in the west, they did have a spillover effect on the rest of the world.

The significance of feminist Social Work cannot be emphasized more owing to prevailing gender norms. Lena Dominelli (2002) defines the practice as "a form of social work practice that takes women's experience of the world as the starting point of its analysis and by focusing on the links between a woman's position in society and her individual predicament, responds to her specific needs, creates egalitarian relations in 'client'–worker interactions and addresses structural

inequalities. Meeting women's particular needs in a holistic manner and dealing with the complexities of their lives – including the numerous tensions and diverse forms of oppression impacting upon them, is an integral part of feminist social work. Its focus on the interdependent nature of social relations ensures that it also addresses the needs of those that women interact with – men, children and other women". By making women the centre of analysis, feminist Social Work "challenges gender-blind theories and practices that have treated women as offshoots of men" writes Hardinge (1990).

The approach of integrating gender in Social Work is more practical than Feminist Social Work approach as it helps create a better workforce that can respond to women's needs in every category created by social divisions. The interventions will be more sensitive and will not reinforce gender divisions.

Social Work response to gender assumptions and women's issues has to be sensitized and informed by construction discourse. However, some scholars argue that gender cannot be viewed as a homogenous category (Ramazanoglu, 1989). The essentialism in assuming uniformity in analyzing gender ignores the influences of other social divisions on gender relations. Generalist social work intervention concerns itself with enhancing social functioning without considering social situations in which women live and work (Dominelli, 2002). Feminist Social workers have critiqued practitioners responses to women's issues, including viewing them as passive victims with no voice or right to determine their course of action and imposing various means of social control on desiring liberation from their difficult circumstances (2002).

Dialogical Teaching in Social Work

Teaching is usually misconstrued as an exchange of information, but the philosophy of teaching rests on recognizing it as a process of communication that helps in the exchange of ideas. The process entails developing, refining, sharing and criticizing ideas until they generate a new discourse or modify the old one. Teaching based on dialogue between the teacher and the taught opens up spaces hitherto unknown to students. Dialogues aim at the transformation of knowledge, ideas, attitudes and behaviours. Reciprocity and directness are essential facets of a dialogue. A good transformative discussion includes a diversity of voices and encourages the participation of those who speak from direct experience, writes Dean (1994). A dialogue reflects one's knowledge and experiences, and it involves relating a personal experience with a general circumstance.

Dialogical teaching on gender in Social Work happens in a milieu of confidence. Participants share a space as equals, and no one tries to impose ideas. The approach used is to integrate teaching on gender with Social Work education. Integrative teaching helps students learn across various disciplines and can link ideas, concepts and skills between and among them. This approach is challenging to apply and requires more imagination on the part of the educator. I will focus on the outcome of using this approach later in the paper. The focus here is on describing an inquiry-based learning approach that encourages self-directed learning.

Anna Keselman (2003) calls inquiry-based learning an educational strategy used to construct knowledge using methods and practices that professional scientists follow. Several problem-solving skills are applied to solve problems (Pedaste and Sarapuu, 2006). 'A process of discovering new causal relations, with the learner formulating hypothesis and testing them by conducting experiments/and or making observations' (Pedaste, Maeots, Leijen and Sarapuu, 2012). The model of teaching entails active involvement by students in learning new facts. It is their responsibility to acquire knowledge about the subject at hand. Students engage with self-

directed learning based on inductive and deductive or both by exploring the relationship between dependent and independent variables (Wilhelm & Beishuizen, 2003).

Social Work students generally learn to operate in environments of conformity with gender norms which is reinforced by their socialization process. Integrative teaching of Social Work based on Inquiry-based learning has the potential to augment and transform learning. It encourages students to grow by taking responsibility for their learning.

Ideas about how the social world operates in consonance with divisions based on gender, class, caste, religion and region and how these divisions were created and communicated between generations through cultural traditions are explored and explained through dialogical teaching. Conversations on gender happen around the issues of gender construction and its impact on women and feminist movements as a response to patriarchy.

The idea of Feminism is discussed in light of various perspectives that have emerged historically challenging patriarchy and how it affects women. It is essential to understand these perspectives in context of the period they emerged. Conversations around the ideology of Feminism and its contribution to upholding women's rights help dismiss various myths associated with it. Feminism has to be taught in a way that it does not exclude men while reinforcing the idea that all those people who believe in gender equality are feminists. Feminism cannot be viewed as a war between the two sexes but as an equalizer.

While the first wave of Feminism was associated with a struggle for achieving voting rights for women, commonly referred to as the Suffragette Movement, second-wave Feminism had an influence on welfare policies for women and hence of interest to Social Work. Different streaks of feminism help students comprehend the complex socio-economic, cultural and political realities of women's experiences. The perspectives offer a historical understanding of the concept of gender.

Liberal Feminism offered a critique of the lesser accessibility to opportunities for women and advocated for changes in legislation favorable to them. This approach was conformist to gender norms as it did not challenge gender injustice. Marxist-socialist feminist perspective provides an analytical tool to consider the issues of gender inequality which leaves them with lesser socio-economic power. Radical Feminism sees the oppression of females as a consequence of male control over reproduction, emphasizing the need for a matriarchal system as a solution.

The debate on feminist perspectives gives rise to questions analyzed in the context of time and situations. Comparing the historical and current conditions of various aspects and dimensions of women's experiences helps gauge the impact of these perspectives. The intersection of culture and religion with gender provides a space for understanding these two plays in the construction of gender. Students are encouraged to examine the complexities inherent in gender relations critically. Deconstruction discourse further helps develop a more nuanced understanding of power equations based on gender. Questions are supported by statistics provided by various agencies that point to the wide prevalence of gender discrimination and inequality. For instance, data about women by National Family Health Surveys (round IV and V) and NITI Aayog in India reflect a high incidence of violence against women, including sexual and domestic violence, and discrimination in education, nutrition, and opportunities. "These perspectives encourage a more sophisticated understanding of women's position," writes Lena Dominelli (2002).

The debate reveals a critical fault line in Social work. Various statistics challenge the empowerment of women narrative, which Social Work actively promotes. Without challenging gender stereotypes, their assumptions about gender are carried forth to their professional level

leading to faulty intervention processes, especially at the family level. Gender is a sensitive issue and needs much sensitivity on the part of educators in dealing with it. Social Work educators focus on unlearning gender assumptions in students developed through the socialization process and relearning attitudes based on equality. Dialogical teaching thus considers the history of gender construction and how it played a role in making Social Work a conformist profession. It gradually unpacks the dynamics of gender in Social Work.

Classroom Reflections

The classroom discussions begin by asking questions to students that force them to think. Questions such as: who among men and women are better care givers? The response almost unequivocally is women. The second question follows: are women being better care givers a biological course or socio-culturally transmitted assumption? The responses primarily support the former. Third question: why do you think men cannot provide the essential care that women supposedly do? The answer begins to differ. 'Men are not biologically suited to provide care', 'men are socially not equipped for the job', 'men do not want to', 'their job is to only earn for the family. The discussion moves further to: if women are better caregivers than men, why are higher positions in Social Work, a caring profession, occupied by men?

The responses are discussed at length, and students are encouraged to critically examine the historical construction of gender and the associated narratives that frame women as weak and fickle-minded. Examples of women who have achieved better in their fields are discussed to counter the narratives of women as weak suited for caring and household work only. Students begin to see the achievements as an outcome of opportunities and access to resources that are not available to other women. The response to the question of men occupying higher positions in Social work is discussed due to gender inequality. Increasing managerialism in Social Work places men in decision-making positions, and women follow them unquestioningly as their subordinates, reflecting the general social order (Sewpaul and Holscher, 2004). The decisions made at a superior level may not reflect the unbiased views of men towards women. Prevailing inequality has historically given the power to men over women, further exacerbating inequalities. The question why many women chose to join Social Work as professionals initiates a debate on socialization process and work opportunities available for women.

The discussion revolves around a module that has been prepared to challenge universal gender issues and the ones specific to Indian culture. The module includes a conceptual framework and all dimensions related to gender. The learning continues with a brainstorming session about the importance of studying gender and its relevance to Social Work. Students are asked to fill out questionnaires and handouts on gender, which are formulated in both global and Indian contexts. The questions revolve around the schedules of men and women, usually parents in their families. This helps them explore the gendered nature of work. While primarily women's work schedules stretch from early morning to late nights without a break throughout the year and most of their lives, their work does not get counted in a country's Gross Domestic Product. The work that women do is thus, unvalued and considered their moral and social responsibility. Despite working hard and throughout, there is no economic value on their work, leaving them dependent on their male family members and devoid of opportunities.

Issues of inequality are discussed when students research linkages between education levels and positions within different professions of men and women. The small survey is conducted by going through the websites of the different public sector and private companies. The findings usually reveal women with the same or similar levels of education and experience as their male

counterparts in an organization working at subordinate levels. The findings of the survey point to a lack of institutional support and culturally sanctioned practices that work unfavorably for women.

Questions dealing with stereotyping based on gender forces students to think about how it affects both males and females. At this stage, they are introduced to the concept of patriarchy and its direct and indirect implications, especially for females.

Patriarchy is an institution that gives immense and unlimited power and control to men over women. This system is responsible for constructing gender and norms related to it and hence create power imbalances between the two sexes. Discrimination, stereotyping, exploitation, inequality and violence against women are an outcome of this system. Alda Fascio (2013) defines patriarchy as "a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalization of sex-based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles. These institutions interconnect not only with each other to strengthen the structures of domination of men over women but also with other systems of exclusion, oppression and domination based on actual or perceived differences between humans, creating states that respond only to the needs and interests of a few powerful men".

Discussions around patriarchy too often reflect students' own biases, which, if left unresolved, lead to consensus Social work practice undermining gender justice. In light of the above mentioned and many other definitions, patriarchy's origin, operation, and impact are analyzed. The institution shapes women's experiences and defines their roles and responsibilities. It prescribes certain behaviors that depict weaker human traits for women and stronger ones for men. The distinction between the two genders is made based on femininity and masculinity; with the unfolding of the perceived attributes, the discussion defines gender as a social construct and is differentiated against biological sex.

Social Work trainees begin critically reflecting on the ways experiences are gendered. They raise issue of violence against women the basis of which is traced to the toxic masculine culture that views women as slaves, servants and objects rendering them with less or no power. Neo-liberal influences on objectification of women are discussed at length. Role of mass media is critically examined in reinforcing gender stereotypes and promoting objectification of women.

The discussions around gender in a classroom aim at helping make Social Work practice bias-free. At the beginning of the learning process, it is common to observe some students uncertain and others argumentative. They agree on some issues but consider gender differences mainly a consequence of natural endowment. However, as classes advance, they begin to question their own biases and inquire which leads them to seek answers. A reading list is provided, which they reflect on critically. The list is exhaustive, and they chose readings that are more likely to satisfy their curiosity. Students are also introduced to a wide range of authors through the reading list.

Case Studies are an excellent way of helping students analyze their own subtle and overt attitudes and examine the prevalence of gender bias in Social Work. They prepare responses which are then discussed in the classroom. Case studies are also helpful in locating and resolving gender assumptions in various cultural settings within families and help trace patterns of bias against women.

As classes advance, students are brought in touch with women ready to narrate their stories. This engagement facilitates producing knowledge and understanding of the world (Reinhartz, 1992).

The interactive, participatory process of engaging with women to gather knowledge embedded in women's practices reveal power imbalances.

The outcome of these discussions at the end of the semester is reflected in the students' responses to another questionnaire that asks questions about gender, its construction, aspects, dimensions and impact. Role play exercises allow them to frame responses to situations involving gendered experiences. Sensitized students in the classroom tend to become informed and thoughtful practitioners and educators. They are highly likely to challenge gender inequality in the Social Work profession at the organizational level and individual, group and community levels. Locating sources of oppression and their intersectionality and integrating these ideas into the teaching of Social Work helps practitioners confront oppression and make their practice truly humane and free from any prejudices.

Conclusion

Social Work is a female-dominated but not female-oriented profession. The attitudes and emotions regarding gender are ingrained through the socialization process and carried forth as Social Work students and later practitioners. Consequently, the profession functions within the domain of gender disparity, devoid of any contestation. Incorporating gender into teaching becomes essential in consideration of Social Work values. Promoting inquiry-based erudition that guides students in questioning traditional gender assumptions through self-directed learning assume significance in Social Work. Problematising gender through dialogical teaching helps students seek answers to gender equations and their influence on defining power. Interventions at the family level become more valuable and helpful to women when their gender roles and expectations do not force them to compromise. As survivors of oppression, they are not blamed for their circumstances.

Note:

[1]Alice Solomon Archive webpage

https://www.alice-solomon-archive.de/english.

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