


The patriarchal framework of social work

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ABSTRACT

Social Work, from its origins, has implicitly the purpose of "helping...", an intention recreated in assistance itself. Historically, those who have produced and reproduced, thought, and practiced this profession, are Women. However, more than 60 years after its professionalization in Mexico, atavisms remain that define the very praxis of Social Work. The objective of this article is to make visible symbolic elements that, embedded in the patriarchal ideology,

guide the practice of Social Workers in Mexican Public Institutions. The data discussed is the result of qualitative research carried out with 20 Social Workers, as a sample, in the State of Jalisco. Mexico. In-depth interviews and content analysis combined with the interpretive (hermeneutical) method constituted the sequence to produce the data and interpret it. Three dimensions of analysis were established: the past time; self-image and plans-expectations of the profession. The conclusions outline both symbolic elements and those contained in the very praxis of the interviewed professionals.

Keywords: Gender, Social Work, Identity, Self-image.

1 INTRODUCTION

Even though it is evident that the majority of women have been and are the ones who "think" and "do" Social Work - in Mexico and the rest of the world -, there is deficient research from the Gender Perspective to analyze a feminized profession like this. In this disciplinary and professional field, a female collective unconscious persists that does not finish landing and, in a majority of Social Workers, does not even start, regarding the problematization of meanings and forms of action that are inscribed in the thinking and doing of the profession in question.

Twenty-three years into the 21st century, it is unusual that the analysis that the socio-political scientist Amitai Etzioni proposed in 1969 in his valuable treatise called "Semi-professions and their organization: teachers, nurses, social workers." In said theoretical treatment, Etzioni exposes three qualities that are applicable today to the field of Mexican Social Workers: Women Social Workers subject to the supervision of other professionals or higher-ranking colleagues; restricted institutional labor autonomy, limited possibilities of labor hierarchical promotion and, element that has been the "cause" of personal suffering of many Social Workers in professional practice, the lower status of the profession compared to other historically constituted professions, such as medicine and the right.

On the other hand, the political dimension associated with the struggles for women's equality also makes sense in professional fields, especially when it comes to female predominance such as Mexican Social Work.

2 WOMEN HELPING THE “OTHER”. IS IT POSSIBLE TO PROFESSIONALIZE IT?

As was exposed in a previous work¹, Social Work has been the subject of multiple and varied definitions. Progressively, especially with the installation of economic systems associated with the "Welfare State" in countries like Mexico, social work has been legitimized through school and academic processes in a large part of the world's countries, those of the first and especially those of the third world. But it remains to be asked if, in the eminently institutional practical field, Social Work has consolidated the levels of professionalization that the Academy has produced and usually proclaims.

Historically, what is now recognized as Social Work in Mexican public institutions has undergone various forms of “doing for”... others, this is “helping”.

Thus, the denominations to the various forms of help exercised by predecessors of today's Social Workers, even in other latitudes of the planet, have gone through similar paths, although the current professional status of the profession is dissimilar. This fact is not exclusive to this profession, it has to do, above all, with the levels of social, political, and economic development of the countries where they are inserted.

In this regard, Luisa Aranzazú Hernández in her doctoral thesis² presented this year, cites a comparative study carried out by Jean-Pierre Deslauriers and Yves Hurtubise (2007), where the authors comparatively analyze the situation of Social Work in various countries. The American continent includes the Canadian province of Quebec and the Latin American block includes Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile; of the European continent are Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, Switzerland, and Belgium.

From the conclusions of the aforementioned comparative study and highlighted by Luisa Aranzazú regarding the professional status of Social Work, it is found, first, that Deslauriers and Hurtubise assert that there are common elements in the professionalization of Social Work among some countries; the elements are directly related to the status of the country in question. Second, in most cases, Social Work began to be legitimized professionally in 1920, an event that occurred in Mexico at the beginning of the 1930s with the institutionalization of training to practice this career in schools and progressively in some universities; coupled with legal recognition of the profession.

¹ Trabajo social y desarrollo: objetivos comunes, caminos divergentes. Dos paradigmas analizados desde la perspectiva de género. Presentado en el Congreso *Academiajournals Celaya 2016* por María Elena Chávez García y Martha Gálvez Landeros, maestras de tiempo completo en la Universidad de Guadalajara.

² Doctoral thesis: “The process of (de)professionalization of Social Work in Spain (1980-2015): deficits, risks and potentialities”. The central argument is that the de-professionalization process has as its most immediate consequence the loss of autonomy and professional authority; in short, the loss of power.

Finally, it is recognized through the aforementioned study, that in all cases Social Work followed a trajectory from philanthropy, passing through assistance and reaching the current discipline.

I find it important to observe this last point. Philanthropy and welfare denote praxis, above all, regardless of the epistemological frameworks that can explain them. More to speak of a discipline in the macro-context of the Social Sciences is to refer in formal terms, to specialized fields of study organized and supported for the production of knowledge.

Therefore, in the interpretations and conjectures that we usually make about the professionalization of Social Work, we continue with the latency of adjectivizing praxis and theory with the same elements of analysis. When precisely a historically constructed key point is the bifurcation between theoretical, methodological, and ideological training to carry out social work, and the "logic" to execute it.

To conclude this section, it seems pertinent to mention some hypotheses about Social Work, proposed by Teresa Zamanillo and Lourdes Gaitán.³ (1991) and that comes to enrich the previous approaches.

1st. Social Work is defined by the authors as an organized form of help; they affirm that it was constituted as a professional activity through the modern social division of labor.

2nd. The authors assign three characteristics to Social Work. The first is that it has implicit historical conditions; The second characteristic is that it maintains a strong ideological charge, in the sense of being more oriented to praxis than to theory, and, as a last quality, is that said profession carries a double ambiguity: that of its object of study and/or intervention, and the ambiguity of its scope.

3rd. Social Work, from the academic point of view as a discipline derived from the Social Sciences, has certain theoretical elements, but on the praxis side, cuenta con un sinfín de relatos que se traducen como experiencia acumulada. El punto sustancial es que dicha historia puestas en su praxis está insuficientemente sistematizada.

Las autoras en cuestión, con brote de optimismo cierran este tercer punto afirmando que la vasta experiencia del Trabajo Social constituye base importante to build contributions both to the field of Social Sciences, and to organizations that deal with social welfare. This encouraging thought has been present for several decades in university academic circles and proposed in certain texts on the profession in question. Plus, it's still in the pipeline. As is often the case with social issues, emerging situations make it necessary to attend to what is urgent and leave what is desirable to be postponed.

To make a bridge to the arguments derived from the research that I present, I return to the quality of ambiguity of Social Work mentioned by Zamanillo and Gaitán.

In the research on underlying patriarchal cultural conditioning factors in the exercise of Social Work, the following was expressed as a regularity in the reports of the interviewed Social Workers: the

³ T Teresa Zamanillo Peral has a Diploma in Social Work, a Bachelor's Degree, and a Ph.D. in Political Science and Sociology. She is a graduate and professor at the Complutense University of Madrid. Lourdes Gaitán has a Ph.D. in Sociology and a Diploma in Social Work. Professor at Comillas Pontifical University, Madrid, Spain. Both are authors of one of the most consulted works in the field of international Social Work: "To understand social work" first edition in 1991.

non-specificity of the professional function, that latent ambiguity that does not provide any opportunity for its apprehension, nor it allows clarity to be identified and, therefore, to be recognized. "Do everything" was the response by way of complaint and, at times with shades of resignation. Daily work activities refer to what is "not valued" and "not recognized" as a professional activity or as a result of certain intervention methodological training; a kind of performance that cannot be legitimized in itself; a series of repeated practices that "others" underestimate.

3 DO THESE DESCRIPTIONS SOUND LIKE “REPRODUCTIVE LABOR”?

The latent need of women Social Workers to be recognized for "their work" is mentally represented with components such as "vocation", virtues, socializing skills, listening skills, patience, and submission to decisions of characters with greater Power, doesn't it have the same meaning as "being a woman" in the patriarchal structure? What will then be the variables that could "approve" critical thinking for social intervention based on epistemic-scientific knowledge with the set of behavioral personal qualities described above?

Eduarne Aranguren, in her current treatise on Professional and Intellectual Empowerment in Social Work, wonders if it could be possible that "...one of the problems of Social Work, in all its dimensions (academic, professional, collegiate, institutional,...) has been placing more emphasis on visible power than on hidden or invisible power, which could have given rise to confusing and unrealistic strategies to deal with the loss of power and exclusion from professional and academic spaces" (Aranguren, 2014:144).

It would be encouraging if, in the various areas of Social Work in Mexico, we were discussing empowerment processes, first for women in those who do Social Work and then for groups of people who use our services. More also in this area that concerns us. the gap between developed countries and exploited countries is manifested.

Features of the methodology and categories used in the research

The elements that will be included below are the product of a qualitative study carried out with 20 Social Workers. At the time, these were inserted in the main work areas where positions have historically been opened for the Social Work profession, such as care, health, education, legal-penitentiary, and business. Specifically, there were 4 Social Workers by field of work.

With the pretense of having significantly temporal information valid to symbolize in time the cultural elements sought, women Social Workers who graduated from the Social Work career between the years 1953 and the year 2000 were included.

The objective of the study was to verify the latency of cultural conditioning as a recurring pattern seen through three moments: the choice of career; during the professional exercise and the personal perspective of potential future professional projects for the interviewed Social Workers.

To apprehend this purpose, it was considered crucial to develop a bilateral process through research.

On the one hand, it was based on a principle of temporality - past, present and future - of each interviewee, from the motivations to study the Social Work career, going through their exercise and visualizing their possible professional future.

On the other hand, in each principle of temporality, a different dimension was explored. Thus, to explore retrospectives, the past temporal dimension was defined. To explore the present, the self-image dimension was designed. And to delve into potential futures, the dimension of plans and expectations of the profession was defined.

Each of the dimensions was explored through open questions worked on by in-depth interviewees. In each dimension, there was an implicit intention to delve into the perception of the self: "how I feel and how I think". Although in this analysis I will not cover the three dimensions used as categories of analysis for the research, I consider it important to mention them to fully understand the approach of the study.

The past temporal dimension focused on the references that each Social Worker expressed having had when she decided to study the career and "be" a Social Worker. The objective of this block was to approach the idealization of being a Social Worker; With this information expressed through the speeches of the interviewees, it was possible to establish the first interpretations of the links - being a Woman and being a Social Worker - from the perspective of Gender.

The Self-image dimension sought to situate the women Social Workers in their present moment when they were interviewed, relating their context of professional performance and with special emphasis on the actions carried out by them. The objective was for each one to express, as far as possible, her thoughts and emotions in a relational way, so that the corresponding interpretation based on an integrating self was achieved: Woman–Social Worker. This dimension is the only one that will be addressed in this paper.

The dimension Plans and expectations of the profession were located in the respective professional platforms of the interviewees. The variables considered were her professional action as praxis itself and her considerations regarding the theoretical-methodological corpus of the discipline that was intended to support her professional work.

The three dimensions were operationalized to define categories and sub-categories that gave meaning and direction to the interpretation of the information.

The product achieved was materialized in two axes: Gender Identity and Identity as a Social Worker. Two cohesive identities explained the cultural conditioning inscribed in the patriarchal system and underlying the practice of Social Work.

Identity as a Social Worker can be understood as the repertoire of beliefs and experiences framed in certain codes that guide the "help" processes. Such repertoires are internalized in each professional, they are usually expressed and assumed as specific functions in institutional arenas having as an invariable referent the "other" person, the one in need of the service provided by Social Work.

Identity, Beatriz Ramírez⁴ He describes it as "a construction that supposes alienation and creation at the same time; necessary to give the self-certainty of what it is not and, in turn, invent and believe what it is, striving for a pact of recognition with the world" (Ramírez 2017:196). From this logic, identities - with their symbols - can self-recognize themselves as truths within a social system.

Identity also has to do with an imaginary construction that is framed in specific symbologies, as Ramírez explains, this imaginary construction also appears as a synthesis of multiple times and spaces.

I return to the interpretation that the author in question raises, to transpose it to the women Social Workers. Identity represents a sense-creating effort that summons a unit: Woman-Social Worker. Although identity may be illusory, it gives many Social Workers the certainty and support that they are "something" for "someone" (Ramírez 2017:198).

To explain Gender Identity, it is necessary to start from the analysis base of this work: The Gender Perspective.

For the Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde⁵ The term gender perspective is synonymous with a gender approach, gender vision, and gender perspective and intrinsically carries gender analysis. The perspective of Gender following Lagarde theoretically and ideologically is embedded in the theory of Gender and is inscribed in two important paradigms, the historical-critical theoretical paradigm and the cultural paradigm of feminism (Lagarde, 1996:13).

In the same article, Lagarde highlights some explanations that the feminist philosopher Françoise Collin built to delve into feminism. The letter says: "The feminism of the 20th century, a new episode in an already long history, presents the specificity of having produced, in addition to political and social effects, effects in the field of knowledge, effects that are indicated or even institutionalized under the formula feminist studies, but also women's studies, women's studies, gender studies" (Collin, 1993:318).

Concluding, the analysis of Gender according to Lagarde's vision, is produced with the conjunction of Gender theory and the so-called Gender perspective (derived from the feminist conception of the world).

So how can the foundations of cultural conditioning be explained based on Gender?

The social subjects that are received according to the sex of birth, female or male, come from the same culture where one is born, where one is raised, and where one travels for at least the first two decades of life. It would be risky to talk about chronological determinants to carry out cultural investitures as women or as men, however, it is the sociocultural processes in childhood and adolescence, which are leaving their effects on minds, bodies, and many of the forms of feeling.

⁴ The consulted article by Beatriz Ramírez Grajeda, is derived from his doctoral work: The destinations of a summoned identity, object of discussion in the Inter-institutional Seminar, Culture, Education and Social Imaginary. Ramírez is a Professor-Researcher at the Department of Education and Communication, UAM-Xochimilco. Mexico.

⁵ Master of Ethnologist and Ph.D. in Anthropology. She is a professor at the Postgraduate Program in Anthropology and Sociology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

For the Mexican anthropologist and feminist Marta Lamas⁶, Gender Identity occurs historically. Gender Identity is shaped according to patterns and considerations that each culture maintains and legitimizes for "the feminine" and for "the masculine", starting from the same upbringing group (family group and/or subsidiary) and the environment where it occurs. Specifically, Gender Identity is shaped by cultural symbolizations regarding sexual differences (Lamas, 1997).

And confronting what I have discussed up to now, what was it possible to make visible about the determining factors of the patriarchal culture installed in the thinking - reason and symbolism - and the doing - professional praxis - of the Women Social Workers interviewed?

The self-image: is it possible to differentiate being a Woman and being a Social Worker?

The self-image attributed to women in a helping profession such as Social Work was understood beyond the concept of self-esteem. This term has been abundantly worked on, both in written documents and in recurring discourses in Social Work students, graduates, teachers of the same field, and, relevantly, those who are practicing their careers in Mexican Public Institutions.

In the research carried out, four sub-categories were defined to interpret how the self-image is played in the "being" Woman - Social Work professional. The categories are:

- a. Achievement experiences as a Social Worker.
- b. Experiences of failure as a Social Worker.
- c. Self-perception and,
- d. Perception of "others" about the profession.

Although the study left abundant and significant records in all the explored areas, I present below some of the most outstanding for the particular topic of this article.

Regarding what was reported by the Women - Social Workers interviewed regarding the achievement experiences, the generically "feminine" elements predominated within the patriarchal structure.

Based on this logic, "help", "provide solutions" and "resolve" was recognized as achievements; these three nuances remained invariant in the 20 responses. The overtones of existentialism - where someone gives and someone else receives - lacked any other way of reflection or criticism in the face of the intervened realities, which, appreciating them from this perspective, I would call assisted realities.

On the other hand, the majority of the interviewees added adjectives to professional practice such as "delivery", "attention" and the search for constant empathy always at the service of other people - users and users - of its services.

In these "achievements" oriented towards the typically feminine, there seems to be an underlying joy for the ideal of the "exemplary mother" with the attributes placed on the endless reproductive work and, in general, in the vast territory of the Mexican Republic, so invasive continue to be supported and driven

⁶ Ethnologist and Ph.D. in Anthropology from UNAM. She is a professor-researcher at UNAM and ITAM. Her most recent books are *Body, sex, and politics* (2014) and *The long road to ILE. My version of the facts* is PUEG/UNAM 2015.

by the Marian cult: submission, sin and the impossibility of millions of women to recognize themselves as independent, individual and desiring people, differentiated from their domestic units, their family groups and upbringing.

I exalt this idea with the contributions of Edurne Aranguren about the mystics placed in Social Work. The author thinks like this: "There is an extra value of sacrifice, of suffering, it may be due to the Judeo-Christian nature of the very roots where it is located. With symbolic expressions that range from the messianic nature of the profession to guilt for not saving the world and the people it helps..." And he adds, "This together with the vocational nature that some discourses within the profession pose, linked to a voluntary nature or voluntarist that marks a certain religious connotation and dogma of faith" (Aranguren, 2014: 144).

The complexity increases when these individual-cultural profiles are transferred to the professional field and, even more worrying, that the Social Workers themselves state and classify them as achievements, as maximum levels of professionalism.

The teacher Clara Murguialday⁷ Those who work on women's empowerment processes believe that the cultural norms and guidelines established by each society set the limits and scope of women's action, and I would add, at private and public levels. More overlapping with the professional field of Social Workers and returning to Murguialday (2006:28), I assert that, if there are no significant achievements in the social-institutional practices of Social Workers in terms of well-being, legal equity, access to services of the institution, respecting the free will of the users of its services, really the achievements of their interventions will remain subjective. On the other hand, in the experiences of failure as Social Workers, the vast majority of the interviewees deposited their frustrations in the forms of perceptions such as "low", "poor" and "unmotivating" on the part of "others". Those others translate into the people with whom professional spaces are shared and who are hired - like the Social Workers themselves - by the institution in question. Those who are mentioned outstandingly in the responses are professionals in careers with a higher status than Social Work, such as medicine and law mainly, as well as those who hold managerial positions in institutions.

The Self-perception sub-category is assembled with other concepts that may carry similar or relational meanings. Understood in this way, delving into the interpretation of self-image, it also includes terms such as self-perception and self-concept. All these expressions are understood to be attached to the threads that interweave the identity, the "I".

I recognize, first of all, that approaching in first person a personal field that involves consciousness and unconsciousness at the same time, is not an easy act. And it is much more complex when, as a result of an academic-interpretative investigation of this nature, it implied analyzing in the same line of a "continuum" Being a Woman and Being a Social Worker. It was especially difficult to collect information

⁷ Clara Murguialday Martínez is an Economist and Feminist. She is a consultant specializing in Gender and Development Cooperation Policies. She worked at the Development Cooperation Office of the University of the Basque Country (2001-2009).

from the interviewees that had connotations about their self-image. However, the importance of the prefix "auto..." seems fundamental to me to analyze the two categories expressed in this work. The prefix "auto" is based on the fact that it produces real behaviors, and objectification; structures explanations of facts, and means them.

4 FINAL COMMENTS

The mystique of the Social Work profession and culturally feminine activities seem to emerge in the interviewees as echoes of the same synthesis immersed in social codes, where the role is always relational, "humanist" understood as "service", "help", innate ability to "go deeper" into the problems of the "other" and nuanced by "the taste for" and "how beautiful" the career is.

In contrast, the meaning of failure as a Social Worker is a prolonged lament where identity is not confirmed, and the efforts invested in institutional practices remain in a kind of "non-place", a space of invisibility, where products derived from the done professional. The absence of union unity, local, regional, and national in Mexico, comes to crown the gaps.

It was evident through the answers of the interviewees general way, that they did not delve into, did not review, and did not recognize their immersion in the patriarchal culture, since the generic cultural conditioning factors were incessantly reproduced and repeated in their speeches - dependency, invisibility, submission, absence of decision-making -; although it is not possible to talk about them because they do not identify themselves as such.

To reflect

It is essential and urgent to introduce the Gender Perspective in the areas where Social Work is produced, created, and reproduced. As women and professionals who work for and with groups and populations, the double work of awareness is mandatory, both with the personal circumstance and with the construction of new femininities through collectives.

Aranguren (2014), reflecting on these tasks, considers that awareness processes are the best routes towards the empowerment of women, to realize and understand the complexity of circumstances that generate and maintain their subordination and mobilize to face them.

One approach that the author proposes combines the following three elements:

First, training in the gender perspective facilitates the process of critical review of internalized messages about femininity and leads to the creation of new awareness based on personal capacities and priorities.

Second, the performance of external agents, who are activists and women also act as advisers, in their access to information and new knowledge. It is intended to develop critical thoughts toward patriarchal ideology and towards the institutions that support gender inequality.

Third, the training itself of specific groups of women.

It will be necessary to understand that the design and construction of new symbolic structures for Mexican women can give Social Workers spaces where different practices can be produced, to the extent that we are clear that, although contemporary society sounds like "equality" of opportunities and respect for individual differences, the female identities of the majority continue to be formed based on traditional patterns embedded in the patriarchal culture.

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