Spirituality, Ethics and Social Work

Edited by
Rainer B. Gehrig, Michal Opatrný, Nándor Birher
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IV.2. Spirituality, social work, and female empowerment: an instrument for social change

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Throughout this chapter, readers will be able to take a tour of the skills and strategies of social workers in working with women, from a spiritual perspective. Caring for, accompanying and empowering from a gender perspective are tasks rooted in this profession, focused on caring for the other. From spirituality, the work of social work professionals will be based on helping them to be protagonists of their own lives, also contributing to the transformation of social structures and discourses that consider that women have already achieved effective equality and are fighting for it to be achieved in a real way.

WHAT YOU CAN GET FROM THIS CHAPTER

Knowledge

Readers empathize with the situations of violence suffered by women in the world.

Readers have an ethical and professional understanding of spirituality in the practice of social work with women.

Readers understand spirituality in diversity as a universal dimension.

Skills

Readers can benefit from self-compassion in practice with women.

Readers have the ability to empower its users from a gender perspective, not a paternalistic one.

Attitudes

Readers, as social professionals, can integrate the concept of social violence, which will make them aware of the situations of vulnerability of women.

Readers are learners with an open attitude/mind towards their own values, beliefs and attitudes concerning the religious or spiritual dimension of human existence.

1. Women and social vulnerability. An approach to the reality of women today

Every person, according to Weil (1996), presents the spiritual need for hierarchy, by which the ordering of phenomena is established based on the assigned value. This need "is constituted by a certain veneration, by a certain devotion to superiors, considered not in their persons or in the power they exercise, but as symbols" (Weil, 1996, p.35).

Thus, the problem is not found in the hierarchy, but in the interference of the will to power of the human being that instrumentalized symbols for his own benefit, either individually or collectively, as is well appreciated in the patriarchal paradigm, which makes a distinction between male-female, differentiating them under dominance-submission roles.

Throughout history, it can be seen how this man-woman dichotomy marked by male supremacy has determined the secondary role of women and the feminine, relegating them to the private and domestic sphere, whose caregiving role was imposed by the world of the men, such as the professions historically destined for women: teaching, nursing, or social work. Since ancient times, society had the awareness that each one fulfilled his/her function; the man and the woman, in a different way, each fulfilled their predestined role by nature, considering the man's tasks of greater relevance when being in public and work life (Busto, 1996). Women were considered inferior to men by nature, weak and emotional, inclined to evil and with little capacity for reasoning, that is, they were considered as man's imperfections (Díaz de Greñu, 2010, pp.32-33).

However, since the 19th century, women have awakened in their individual conscience and dignity, making themselves recognized through the emancipatory struggle from the world of men to achieve their self-realization, not as a class struggle but as a defence of their dignity, since gender, being a social construction, should not determine a person's self-realization by their genitality.

Thus, the history of women has been marked by the suffering of not being able to fulfil themselves, by not being free due to the lack of possibilities, by the frustration generated between their real and imposed needs. Even so, the woman found in spirituality a place where she could find peace:

> Spirituality is more attractive to women because it validates the traditionally feminine values of caring, but it also helps them manage the double (or triple) burden of contemporary femininity: caring for the material and emotional needs of their families in the private sphere, sometimes also caring for older parents and having to work in the public sphere (although it is generally grouped in the care professions) (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013)

Today, spirituality could collaborate in the full realization of equality between people in terms of sex or gender, since they are mere expressions of the dignity of the human being, both being complementary and necessary poles for the full realization of the totality of life, which we could call equanimity (Torralba, 1998). For this reason, secular spirituality, which invites us to be self-compassionate, can be considered a subversive mechanism by putting caring for oneself before caring for the other, relegating these tasks to anyone, as it is a common task. However, throughout this chapter we will briefly describe the suffering of women due to gender issues and the contribution of spirituality in alleviating it and the fulfilment of women through social work (Fedelen, 2019).

We start from the premise that, historically, being a woman means experiencing various forms of difference and social discrimination that act simultaneously and place us in a position of social vulnerability, regardless of the individual characteristics of each woman (such as educational level, attitudes and/or expectations, among many others) and regardless of the structural characteristics of the society in which we live (Lockheed, 2010). To contextualize and make the object of this text understandable, it is necessary to address the role that patriarchal societies have granted to women, assuming roles that did not belong to our sex to be included, male roles that favoured our inclusion (De Beauvoir, 2009). Women today claim and assume their feminine condition, knowing what roles or characteristics we do not want to lose (such as greater and better handling of emotional skills or greater intuitive intelligence, to give a few examples) but also from what other characteristics attributed to gender we want to liberate ourselves (submission, being the "weaker sex", and the list goes on) (Batliwala, 1997; León, 1997).

In the social construction of this difference between men and women, the concepts of sex and gender are key, which have been, on many occasions, used to designate the same thing, despite being very different concepts, fundamental to understand the inequalities that historically have been built between men and women (Conway,

Bourque, & Scott, 2013; Lamas, 2013). The concept of sex refers to the differential physiological characteristics of men and women, while gender refers to the idea of a cultural construction that hierarchically assigns different forms of behaviour and roles to women and men based on their sexual difference (Espinoza, 2016). Gender is, therefore, a multidimensional variable understood as the roles, values, functions and expectations that are attributed differently to women and men in the collective imagination that is determined by the spirituality of a population.

The concept of gender masks the attributions that have been granted to the sexes, granting each of them a differentiated power, built on the basis of culture and granting different statuses. Behind this conceptualization lies sexism (Cowie, Greaves, & Sibley, 2019), understood as the power that one human group exerts over another because of their sex. Sau (2002), in her feminist ideological dictionary, defines it as:

> The set of each and every one of the methods used within the patriarchy to be able to maintain the dominated sex in a situation of inferiority, subordination and exploitation: the female […]. Sexism encompasses all areas of life and human relationships, so it is impossible to make a relationship, not exhaustive, but not even approximate of its forms of expression and points of incidence. (Sau, 2002, p.257)

Following this definition, in order to understand the concept of sexism and the structural differences between men and women, we have to address the concept of patriarchy, which is identified as the direct origin of these inequalities (Facio & Fries, 2005). Social institutions, articulated in patriarchy, have developed around the male figure, counting on a naturalized and imposed ideological domination. Lerner defines patriarchy as:

> The manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the expansion of that dominance over women in society in general. (Lerner, 1990, p.84)

We are talking, then, of a system of historical social organization that links key positions of power to the male figure. Despite the achievements made by women in the different spheres of social life, the visible faces of economic and political power

continue to be represented by men, without there being any concrete and explicit way to institutionalize this discrimination against women (Fernández-Montaño, 2015).

2. Women, social suffering and vulnerability. The role of the social worker with women in an unequal context

To talk about gender and vulnerability today, we have to frame these elements in the context of the global era and in how globalization processes are currently translated into a context of generalized changes regarding the defining characteristics of industrial society. Economic, social, and cultural globalization has led to an increase in the fragility of the conditions on which the ability to participate in ordinary forms of life, customs and activities of society is based (Potrafke & Ursprung, 2012). There has been an increase in the risk of exclusion as a result of a new economic, political and social scenario, where women are going to occupy a space of particular fragility. Although the globalization process has given rise to new possibilities for growth, this phenomenon has also led to uneven development of the world that mainly affects women (Keller & Utar, 2018). Perhaps the most profound transformation has to do with the effect that these processes of global change have had on women and gender relations, on their individuality, on motherhood and child rearing, family structure and the implications that this means for gender inequality. The transformations in the family structure, the insertion of women as a new workforce in global production regimes, the feminization of migrations or the feminization of poverty are some of the transformations associated with this new order (Khatri Babbar, 2017), which place women in a position of subordination, making them special users of social work. In this sense, the International Federation of Workers and Social Workers defines this science as "a profession based on practice and an academic discipline that promotes change and social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are fundamental to social work" (IFSW, 2020). Social work with women recognizes that the development of critical awareness through reflection on structural sources of oppression, based on criteria such as gender, as well as the development of action strategies to address structural and personal barriers, are fundamental for this practice, where the objectives are the empowerment and liberation of women. One of the main characteristics derived from this globalized world is individualism

(Rose, 1995). Individualism is associated with the detachment of people from their most direct groups and communities, in an environment where people have the option to choose what they want to do with their lives, while their dependence on the market and the market have increased. State (Foucault, 2007). Women today are doubly affected by this individualism, characteristic of modern societies. With their incorporation into the world of work, the economic and psychological bonding of men, existing in previous times, ends, leading to a transformation of family and social relationships. The new roles they play derive from this, assuming that they have the same opportunities as men, but with the historical burden of female subjection on their shoulders, in a still heteronormative context. Women suffer more social vulnerability, more social violence (or structural violence), understood, according to Farmer, as:

> The violence systematically exerted by all who belong to a certain social order: hence the discomfort that these ideas provoke in a moral economy that is still oriented to attribute praise or blame to individual actors. In summary, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression. Oppression is the result of many conditions, the least of which resides in conscience. (Farmer, 2004, p.307)

We could then define social violence as a form of violence against women, simply because it is. And violence against women is socially built on the patriarchal relational model and is continually reinforced. Explicit forms of social violence against women are the micro sexisms present in our daily lives, the stereotyped discourses that refer to women as dependent subjects, the accepted social construction of female identity (cunning, traitor, among many other pejorative adjectives), the belief in a rivalry between women, the use of sexist language and expressions, the objectification of the woman's body, understood as an object, as a fetish, the concealment and denial of women through their invisibility, the reduction of women to their reproductive work. These, among many others, are structural elements in the architecture of violence against women (Kleinman, Veena, & Lock, 1997; Lockwood, Palazzolo, & Savage, 2012). The literature review has given us a perspective on certain forms of vulnerability, leaving the protagonists reduced to three spheres: gender violence, labour market and motherhood (Clavijo & Aguirre, 2002). Hence, it is so important to unmask

all these discriminatory practices, which continue to exist in everyday life, configuring our most immediate reality, constituting the ground on which all violence is based.

An example of how this violence affects women can be observed when women put the needs of others before their own, presenting a deficit of self-compassion. Western culture has established that compassion towards the other is something worthy of praise but being compassionate towards one's own suffering, in the case of women, is victimhood or weakness, which leads to compassion fatigue that can lead to burnout towards the roles they play, as well as it can have consequences on their own health by not taking care of themselves as required (Bluth, Campo, Futch, & Gaylord, 2017; Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999; Lynch & Lobo, 2012). In turn, society as a whole, both for individualism and for narcissism, does not show empathy towards the other being, so that both parties, women and society, could improve both spiritual abilities: self-compassion-compassion. In this way, we could develop a human system based on love where the sexes do not confront each other, but rather understand each other. The defence and support of human rights and social justice are the motivation and justification for social work.

However, in order to mitigate the suffering of women, the social worker could focus on the spiritual need for freedom, equality and honour (Weil, 1996). Following Weil (1996), freedom "consists in the possibility of choice. It is, of course, a real possibility. […] It is a need of the soul, since when the intelligence is unhappy, the whole soul is sick" (p.30; 38).

If we talk about violence against women, one of these forms of violence (understanding that there are many other forms of subtle, structural violence against women) that currently affects one in three women in the world is physical and/or sexual violence. According to global data, 35 percent of women have experienced physical or sexual violence, not including sexual harassment. Other data that show us the magnitude of this problem in the world reveal that every day, 137 women are murdered by members of their own family. On a global scale, even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, one in three women suffered physical or sexual violence, mostly from their partner, and this was exacerbated during periods of confinement, causing women who could be suffering Gender Violence to remain in their homes with the person who was exercising violence on them (UN Women, 2021). In addition, since the pandemic broke out, statistics show that, in many

countries, calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased. In these exceptional situations where the need has required the adaptation of professionals to new forms and methodologies of intervention, such as the use of new technologies and the telephone line as the main tool, instead of the direct contact that has always nurtured the practice of social work, the value of listening and speaking has been reinforced, now acquiring an added value and reaffirming that the role of social workers involves accompanying the process from respect and care, avoiding that they feel alone (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2020).

Currently, women, although they have reached a higher level of freedom to be able to emancipate themselves from men due to their economic and labour freedom, continue to suffer difficulties in choosing, since family reconciliation and care continue to be assigned mostly to women, and even that work, due to the female historical past, is despised on a social level. Therefore, it requires an empowerment not only of women but of care as an essential task to guarantee life. Therefore, it is no longer only women who suffer discrimination, but we must liberate the feminine, culturally, so that women can develop their qualities in full freedom.

Psychological conditioning or social pressures have made the woman unable to be herself as she is or to realize the world from her feminine perspective. In this way, the social worker could collaborate with people in self-knowledge to discover the psycho-socio-spiritual structures that oppress them in their self-realization (Torralba, 2003). Emotions such as guilt, shame, insecurity, fear... can be experienced by many women limiting themselves in their day-to-day life, as seen today by the abuse of sexual power by men over women. In turn, patriarchy can also make emotionality or sensitivity be experienced as something despicable, which can lead to emotional stress or emotional repression, to be treated as equal to men. And, certainly, both sexes converge in the same common nature, but this does not have to be lived in the same way as patriarchy preaches, imposing a single masculinity as a way of living the personal being. Thus, we see that both men and women can experience the oppression of masculinity imposed by the patriarchal paradigm, since sensitivity has been banished from everyday life. Phrases such as *you can*, *don't cry*, *it hasn't been that bad*, *you have to be strong*... are expressions that manifest that oppressive mentality of the emotional, being this already described as a human anomaly in classical Hellenism, as Aristotle well referred. Guardini (2003) stated that being free "means belonging to oneself, being one with oneself" (p.117), so that, as Lévinas (1997) affirms, the social worker should feel

that "responsibility towards others is prior to my freedom" (p.263). The social worker, by safeguarding the freedom of the woman, inside and outside her person, would allow the woman to obtain the recognition of her equality by enjoying public and general recognition, since "every human being is owed the same amount of respect and consideration, because respect is owed to the human being as such, and in this there are no gradations" (Weil, 1996, p. 33), this being translated as justice or social justice, depending on the individual or collective case.

To this we must add the respect that is owed to each human being for the dignity they present, since "said respect is identical for all, and immutable, while honour is not simply related to the human being as such but to him considered in their social environment" (Weil, 1996, p.34). While honour is inherent to each human being due to their dignity, it is up to the other to recognize said honour by alterity and as a necessary being (Torralba, 1998).

In this way, the social worker could collaborate with society in the practice of the gaze towards the feminine and with the woman, re-educating in healthy values, so that both the woman and the feminine can be included, recognized, and valued in the universal ideology, liberating and empowering what is most typical of the feminine gender, being a good start the feminine spiritual movements that generate sisterhood.

3. Social work and spirituality: female empowerment as an instrument of social change

Social work is a helping profession whose professional objective is to intervene in some fundamental dimensions of people, promoting the most convenient intervention to improve their living conditions, enabling the attention, care and defence of the most vulnerable groups (ANECA, 2004), framed in a traditional female gender model of *social caregivers* (Lima, 2014; European Anti-Poverty Network, 2015). Historically, feminization is part of the profession of social workers, of the academic sphere but also of the population served (Agrela, Gutiérrez & Fernández, 2016).

In practice, social work with women involves empowering them and making them the protagonists of their own lives, through non-paternalistic interventions that include informing and bringing community resources closer to these women in the different fields of action: social, legal, educational and/or occupational, among others; advising and guiding women to advance in the definition of their

own personal project, with the derivations that this requires in specific aspects: professional, educational, family or social; intervening with these women always in favour of a better quality of life and being a support to these users, always showing them that they themselves have to be a participant in their life improvement project and that they have to be the ones who, with professional support and their social environment, must change or eradicate the situation that could harm some aspect of their life (Martín Estalayo, 2018).

The objective of working with women will be to achieve equity, not equality, by respecting the honour and dignity of women. To do this, use self-compassion to set limits, which through empowerment will facilitate being responsible, accepting the consequences in full social and individual freedom. To improve self-compassion, we could use the following intervention, both individually and in groups. The objective of this intervention is to know the self-critical voices to learn from them and turn them into friendly and motivating voices (Neff & Germer, 2020):

- Choose unsavoury and useless behaviour, such as complacent behaviours.
- Become aware of the manifestations of self-critical voices: what words and intonation does our mind use?
- Be aware of the consequences of these voices: how do these self-critical voices make you feel?
- Respond with understanding to these voices.
- Why have self-critical voices lasted so long? Did they fulfil any protective function, even if they were not adaptive? What were the motivations of those voices? If the benefit of these voices is not found, we acknowledge the good intentions of our mind and are self-pitying towards it.
- Write a letter to herself as if it were intended for a friend with the same problems with phrases such as "I wish you to be happy and free from all suffering", "I love you and value you", "You can count on me to whatever you need".
- Make decisions following self-compassionate voices and respect for their own needs.

As has been commented throughout this chapter, it is undeniable that the function of social work is carried out mainly by women and that they are also configured as a group of intervention, as a consequence of problems in the family nucleus, due to situations derived from gender violence, among others (Richmond, 1995). Social work is an important focus from which forms of intervention must be provided that

contribute to the transformation of social structures and discourses that consider that women have already achieved effective equality and struggle for it to be achieved in a real way (Alcazar-Campos, 2014; Dominelli, 2002; Van Den Bergh & Lynn, 1986). Therefore, it is not a question of redefining new masculinities and femininities, but rather of this practice of reestablishing the values assigned to gender. Women have been occupying their space in a world governed by heteronormative logic, although there is still a long way to go. It is necessary for everyone to refound the feminine space. This means marking a deep cultural transformation, which tends to achieve greater equity and sustainability in the shared life system, goals shared by the practice of social work. Men and women together have to work to redefine our roots and our roles, but also as women, it is necessary for us to maintain our own space to freely rebuild our own condition as women.

Questions for self-reflection
- From social work, what priority should we give as professionals to making changes in the situation of a woman that (we believe) will lead to greater well-being, despite the fact that she does not want to make them?
- What happens when as professionals, we are capable of analysing the problem from a gender perspective, understanding the factors that give rise to a subordinate position of women, but this only demands a specific intervention of short-term benefit that reproduces their situation of inequality?

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