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LATENCIES OF THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM IN THE SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract: The projected study intends to give an account of the double position of Women Social Workers in Mexico, as recipients of possible social programs that utopically palliate their vulnerability and as professionals in a helping profession that supposes their collaboration in the personal-social development of the users of their services. The research still under development, which is presented in this article, addresses the conjunction of Mexican women Social Workers in the exercise of this profession and their diverse readings through the theories of Gender, as an interpretative framework. The approach presents several premises. First, social work is generated and developed mainly by women. Second, the feminization of the profession linked to gender socialization in actions such as helping and endless working hours, which, as invisible, are not valued or paid and culturally continue to be attributed to women within patriarchal structures. Third, the individual-professional positions of Women Social Workers, and their readings regarding their professional practice. The epistemological distances between the theory and practice of Social Work are discussed. The background of the research design is also presented, followed by the basic methodological aspects by which the study will be conducted. Emphasis is placed on the beginnings of the field work carried out at the beginning of the year 2020. The first interpretations of the data obtained from the interviews conducted and the questionnaires applied as a pilot test are discussed in depth. The Axis that was investigated was called Self-image. Woman-Social Worker, its objective was to explore the ideological, professional and gender positions, from where the Social Work services are intervened or managed. Some of the data generated and their incipient analysis are presented. It concludes with reflections on the reproduction of gender inequalities also in the Social Work profession, eminently made up of women.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Social Work, Feminization, Profession.

INTRODUCTION

Historically we have been and are women who “think” and “do” Social Work. And despite the fact that texts published in the 80’s and consumed in Mexico as a guide for school courses on social intervention methodologies are authored by men, in the last 25 years there has been an increase in academic productions-texts, articles, essays, scientific research-, especially by women writers/authors/academics, who write about the profession.

In spite of this incessant academic production in the field of Social Work in Mexico, there is still a lack of research that explores not only the profession from and through its practitioners, but also questions the possibilities of intervention and the theoretical and methodological knowledge of social workers in operational fields and employed by public institutions.

Theoretical proposals and methodologies for social intervention represent in themselves utilitarian objects. In the best of cases, their apprehension, comprehension, possibilities and forms of use/application depend absolutely on whoever reads them, analyzes them critically-in the best of cases-and intends to apply them to a certain form of concrete practice. In the worst, but real, intervention scenarios, the absence of theoretical-interpretative bases and certainty in the management of methodological guidelines applicable to users in public institutions is also a fact.

How have these professional distances been produced? What are the results of the institutional interventions of Social Workers? Can we speak of concrete products of intervention, management or social assistance in the practice of Social Work? What are these professional products?

In this sense, there are innumerable questions that link the institution as regulator of the professional activity of Social Work, imposing terms and conditions where its functions merge with its dysfunctions, its services themselves crossed by influence peddling, corruption, inter-professional and inter-hierarchical abuses of power and, in general, what the neoliberal (globalizing) economic-political system has been leaving us over the last 30 years in Mexico, abuses of interprofessional and inter-hierarchical power and in general, what the neoliberal economic-political system (globalizing) has left us over the last 30 years in Mexico, the sharpening of the State's thinning, its retraction in the social coverage of its population and the notorious process of institutional dismantling.

The public institution, as the economic employer of the vast majority of Social Work professionals in this country, determines from the outset the possibilities of planning and developing systematic forms of social management for development and/or human welfare. Its guiding economic principle to operate, must obey, above all, the cost-benefit that any service may hurt its budget.

ABOUT THE OBJECT OF RESEARCH

Epistemologically we consider it obligatory in a disciplinary-operative field such as Social Work, to transcend reductionism and make visible each and every one of the Women Social Workers who daily face, from the insufficient and disarticulated resources of the dismantled public institutions, the human pain represented in the manifestation of social needs, in the claim for rights, in the abuses

1. The CONEVAL is a decentralized public organization of the Federal Public Administration, with autonomy and technical capacity to generate objective information on the situation of social policy and the measurement of poverty in Mexico, which in theory allows improving decision making in the matter.

2. LGBTIQ+, acronym for the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, intersex and queer At the end, the symbol + is usually added to include all groups that are not represented in the previous acronyms. Available at: <https://www.womenslaw.org/about-abuse/abuse-specific-communities/lgbtqia-victims/basic-info/what-does-lgbtqia-mean> (Accessed 03/21/2021).

and exploitation of defenseless population groups, in the impunity, in the denial and abandonment of the Mexican State; in the misery and also in the hope for support.

The transcendence of social intervention multiplies, when we approach through official figures to the living status of millions of people in the Mexican Republic. The National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL)¹, reports that as of 2018 the number of people in its population surviving in poverty was 52.4 million.

The measurement of poverty made by the Government of the United Mexican States, through the CONEVAL, is estimated through the following indicators: "Population in a situation of poverty" (moderate, extreme and state of vulnerability); "Social deprivation" (estimated by number of social deprivations); "Social deprivation indicators" (educational backwardness and deprivation for access to health services, social security, housing, housing services and access to food), and "Well-being" (measured by economic income).

The population groups that are considered vulnerable due to their living conditions in a state of poverty, with no or low income, educational backwardness, marginalization and without access to any social security program or professional health services, are **women**, children, adolescents and young people, the elderly, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ communities² and the indigenous population.

On February 9, 2021, the CONEVAL published on the WEB a document in the form of a report, through which certain programs or practices contained in the Mexican Government's Social Development Policy 2020 are evaluated. This development policy evalua-

tion report was justified by the complex scenario we are facing in Mexico due to the health contingency originated by COVID-19.

Among the most noteworthy data from this report and relevant to this discussion are the following.

The number of people living in poverty and misery in Mexico continues to increase. It is said that between 8.9 and 9.8 million of its inhabitants have fallen into poverty, mainly due to the decrease in their economic income, with little possibility of recovering it in the short or medium term. This fact directly affects family groups. It is tacitly accepted in said official document, that there have been important losses in the advances that, in theory, had been achieved in matters of Social Development during the previous Mexican Government (CONEVAL, 2021).

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics of Mexico, INEGI³, by the year 2020, the Mexican Republic will have 126,014,024 people living in its territory, 51.2% women, 48.8% men; and with approximately 60 million (almost half of its population), suffering from poverty conditions.

If we add in round numbers the 10 million people that the pandemic devastation has pushed into poverty or misery, it is possible to affirm that more than half of the Mexican population, in the present 2021, will survive and suffer from multiple shortages that by civil-human right correspond to them.

It is useless to try to explain the usefulness of any governmental proposal through a certain Social Policy with its unreal and confusing speeches, without even looking at what is left of it in the practical fields of the public institutions of the Mexican State and that, ironically being Social Policy one of

its primary functions, it is usually reduced to a mock social assistance network, which originally intended to cover market failures (UNRISD, 2001).

Returning to our subjects of study, the Women Social Workers, let us ask ourselves: How is it possible to estimate their personal and professional resources when they are at the top of the list of vulnerable groups as women inhabitants of Mexico?

The CONEVAL 2021 report mentioned above also emphasizes the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic conditions of historically discriminated groups such as women.

Here is the textual quotation:

One manifestation of gender gaps within households is related to the time allocated to unpaid care work. Based on the Statistical Model for the Continuity of the Socioeconomic Conditions Module of the National Household Income and Expenditure Survey (ENIGH), in 2018, the CONEVAL estimates that women dedicated 22 hours a week to household chores and 28 hours to caregiving, which is equivalent to 2.5 times the time men dedicate to these activities. In addition, on average, women spend 50 hours a week on unpaid care work. This is exacerbated by the presence of the entire family at home and the need to adopt preventive health measures derived from confinement and social isolation due to the pandemic (CONEVAL, 2021. p.p. 1-13).

According to the National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE), as of the first quarter of 2020, approximately 2.7 million people in Mexico were working in the Health Sector, on the front line of pandemic care.

Of that number, 1.7 million were women, equivalent to 63% of the population working in this sector (almost two thirds of the working

3. INEGI is an autonomous public agency responsible for regulating and coordinating the National Statistical and Geographic Information System, as well as for collecting and disseminating information on Mexico's territory, resources, population and economy, in order to provide information on the country's characteristics and support the Mexican Government's decision-making process. Available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx>.

population in the field of public health). Regardless of the fact that Mexican women in general have received more intense workloads, caregiving responsibilities and multiple forms of violence in both public and private spaces, it has also been women working in the health sector who have experienced significant increases in their workload, and also with greater exposure to the risk of infection by COVID-19 (CONEVAL, 2021).

Let us remember that a large percentage of female social workers are found in this group of work overloads and greater exposure to infection by COVID. The medical or health field has historically been the field where the largest number of jobs for these professionals are offered in the different regions of the Mexican Republic, followed by the health care and education fields. We do not yet have official figures on this assertion. The basis of our statement comes from our teaching and tutoring experience for over 30 years, working from the academy in curricula and professional training programs in the field of Social Work, both in the educational program of the Bachelor of Social Work (school-based mode), and in the program of Leveling to the Bachelor of Social Work⁴ (distance mode), both belonging to the University of Guadalajara.

The NILITS program has the particularity of having among its academic criteria for admission, first, to have a degree in Social Work and second, to be in professional practice of Social Work at the time of admission to the program and during its course in any of the territories of the Mexican Republic. The pro-

fessional practice represents the “object of problematization”, from which work is done in each and every one of the modules that make up the program.

Therefore, the margin of possibilities that NILITS allows us to approach Women Social Workers from different regions of the Mexican territory and their respective professional practices is infinite. For this reason, we chose, with prior authorization to participate in the study, to include them as our Research Subjects, with full capacity for social agency in their respective work environments.

We are convinced, from our academic work, that the analysis of gender theories and their fluid articulation with qualitative research methodologies and sociological/anthropological theoretical supports, are ideal to portray a feminized profession such as this one. From this framework of interpretation we consider as our *research subjects*, the social workers as professional women in the institutional field; and the profession itself, as the *feminized object of study*.

Our interest is that the point of origin of the study comes from those who construct the practice, from those who materialize it, exhibit it, from those who have the experiential contact with the users of their services and who must articulate themselves, in the scarce margin of available institutional resources. Part of our task is also to make visible the diversity of contexts of professional performance and the chilling living conditions of large groups of the Mexican population, who seek to be served. Social workers also live in these conditions, suffering from the traditional cul-

4. The educational program of **Nivelación a la Licenciatura en Trabajo Social (NiLiTS)**, of the CUCSH, was implemented in 1994 to respond to the training and updating needs of Social Workers with a technical degree. Its purpose is to professionalize and systematize the professional-labor practice of Social Workers, based on their previous knowledge. The problematization axis of NILITS is centered on the professional practice itself. Through 12 curricular modules, the students are expected to develop their analytical skills, professional self-criticism and construction-implementation of possible forms of social intervention. The goal is to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work. The program is distance learning through the MOODLE platform as a technological base. Students have permanent academic guidance from a team of teachers and advisors, as well as support and accompaniment through individualized tutorials. NILITS, a pioneer program at the national level in Mexico, has enrolled students from all the states of the Mexican Republic.

tural formats of patriarchal society, as do the women who use their services. Do these social intervention professionals have greater resources-ideological, informative, formative-to escape from the conditioning that traps them?

In the field of Social Work, whether it is said (should be) or done (is), there persists a female collective unconscious that has not yet landed with respect to the problematization of the meanings, bases and forms of professional action that are inscribed in who are the Mexican Social Workers.

The social origins of Social Work professionals can also explain their ways of understanding and apprehending the increasingly complex and interdependent realities in which they must intervene. As an example we name some of them: the diversity of family conformations; structural changes in family groups with women multiplying working hours (reproductive work), with unfairly paid jobs (productive work), and crisis in masculinities; gender violence in all its manifestations; neglect and abandonment of minors and elderly people; high rates of girls and adolescents suffering early pregnancies and their existential-social consequences; the current trends of social organization to address problems that the incapacity of the Mexican State relegates, such as the case of missing, assaulted and murdered people; the Mexican social fabric attacked morally, socially and economically by the crimes of drug trafficking cartels and by the trafficking and exploitation of women and minors; the alliances of the dominant business class with these cartels and their capital; ecological exploitation and extermination; human displacement due to real estate speculation, to mention a few.

The diversity of professional formations-deformations that are offered in private and public schools, technical schools and universities in Mexico to study the career of Social Work, also adds to the plot of complexities

underlying it. But let us not forget that the central point, explanatory principle and generator of Social Work practices, we are placing it in and from the Mexican women in the exercise of the profession. From the ways of understanding their labor fields, from the social realities that are aired in those spaces, from the explanation of their ways of doing Social Work itself (professional praxis), from their professional resources to intervene.

RESEARCH, ITS BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The research project that has just begun and that we share in this article, has its origins in a thesis entitled: "The Cultural Conditionings of Gender, as an underlying element in the profession of Social Work in Mexico". The thesis, the result of a qualitative process, built from the analysis of theoretical and empirical work, was presented in 2002 by one of the authors of this document, in order to obtain a Master's Degree in Social Work.

The objective of the study was to verify the latency of cultural conditioning as a recurrent pattern in the choice of career, in professional practice and in potential future professional projects for the social workers interviewed.

The sample consisted of 20 women social workers working in the main areas of employment in which positions have historically been open for this profession: welfare, health, education, law, prisons and business. The women participating in the study were all from the State of Jalisco, Mexico and living there. With the intention of having significantly valid information from the temporality of the professional practice, in order to symbolize in time the cultural elements sought, women Social Workers graduated from the Social Work career between 1953 and the year 2000 were included in the sample by convenience.

The methodology for the construction of the research was based mainly on in-depth interviews and content analysis combined with the interpretative (hermeneutic) method. Three dimensions of analysis were designed: the *past temporal dimension*, the *self-image dimension* and the *dimension of plans and expectations of the profession*.

The results of such a study, although rightly foreshadowed in the respective hypotheses, were discouraging. The most questioned point in the analyses was that in a range of more than 40 years in the professional training of the Women Social Workers interviewed, some answers were similar.

That is, from a sociological perspective, 3 regularities were identified in the responses. Here is the explanation. The mystique of the profession of Social Work and the culturally feminine activities seemed to emerge in the interviewees as echoes of the same synthesis immersed in social codes: the “humanistic” role understood as “service”, “help”, innate capacity to “delve into the problems of others” and tinged by “the taste for” and “how beautiful” the career is.

In contrast to such allegories, the meanings when speaking of their failures *as social workers*, there was a conjunction of prolonged laments where identity is not confirmed; where the efforts invested in institutional practices remain in a kind of “no place”, a space of invisibility, where products derived from the professional fact do not materialize. The absence of local, regional and national union unity in Mexico crowned the gaps.

In general, it was absolutely evident in their responses that the social workers interviewed did not go into, did not review, did not recognize their immersion in the patriarchal culture, when on the contrary, in the reflections shared through their speeches, they spoke about professional dependence; about invisibilization in their work environments; about

subjugation to third parties; about the limited possibility of making decisions.

The general lament about the lack of recognition of their multitasking and endless work in the institution was reproduced and repeated incessantly in their speeches. The gender conditioning factors, which had been cemented by the patriarchal system, were permeated in the professional practice of the institution.

It is from these results and due to our professional, trade union and gender interest, that we decided to redesign a research protocol that would somehow update us on these patriarchal determinants, which have been installed in those who do the profession of Social Work and, therefore emerge and come to support the readings of the social realities faced by each Social Worker Woman.

On the other hand, in the research we have just begun on Women, Gender and Social Work, we are including an analytical axis that will allow us to explore the male position in the exercise of a historically feminine profession. Although male social workers represent a minority in this profession, it is essential to include them and enrich the perspective that includes both women and men, although for the moment we are only focusing on this binary perspective.

The research project that begins, is of qualitative cohort and its nature is analytical. Its theoretical-conceptual and interpretative framework is nourished by theoretical proposals of women academic-writers on gender theory and feminist theory. The philosophical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is also a guide to conceptualize and apprehend specific realities through his theories on habitus, fields and capitals. The aim is to define contemporary Social Work and its correspondences between its theorization and feminized professional practices. Each category is understood relationally, trying to avoid reductionism and social Manichaeism.

The transversal axis that will walk through the research process is supported and signified by the Gender Theory. Therefore, any treatment considered as “natural” for the ways of being a woman and being a man is excluded.

The objectives will be oriented to question, on the one hand, the meanings of being a woman in a helping profession, and from this, to explore the possible self-recognitions of female social workers of those conditioning factors associated with their position in function of the omnipresent patriarchal system in Mexico, which could maintain, as feminization devices, their ideological position in their professional actions.

The methodology includes in its first stage, the development of in-depth interviews, both to Social Workers in operative positions in Mexican public institutions, as well as to professionals who are in positions as Heads of S.T. areas. In the second stage, it is expected to develop the focus group method during 6 months. The duration of the research, with all the planned phases, is estimated in 2 years, independently of the possibilities of progress in the work due to the contingencies caused by the COVID 19 pandemic.

As a final methodological fact that can be shared at this point, it is also in our interest that the research generates empirical elements to discuss the double status that is omitted in the multiple discourses enriched with utopian qualifying adjectives for this profession: the status as women in a state of vulnerability in a patriarchal society, waiting for help; and the status as professional women of Social Work, supposed doers-managers of development for others, waiting to help.

This project was recently registered in the Research Program 2021 of the University Center for Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Guadalajara.

RESEARCH ADVANCES: WOMEN, GENDER AND SOCIAL WORK. POSSIBILITIES AND IMPOSSIBILITIES IN THE MANAGEMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN MEXICO

During the month of February 2023, 40 questionnaires were applied in person to 40 social workers from 12 Mexican states.

The reason that brought this diverse group together was their attendance to a Propedeutic course of the NILITS educational program, in the facilities of the University Center of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Guadalajara.

The objective of this first exercise in the field work of this research was to verify the pertinence of the questions, their comprehension in order to be answered, as well as to observe the personal reactions of the interviewees when reading the questions. This pilot test included the first axis of analysis of the 3 that will be worked on throughout the study: *Self-image Woman-Social Worker*.

The other 2 Axes of analysis, *Plans and expectations of the Social Work profession* and *Social Work in Gender code*.

The following categories were explored through the *Women-Social Worker Self-Image* Axis:

- Meanings of being a woman in the practice of Social Work.
- Advantages or facilitating elements due to the fact of being a woman and being a Social Worker in the exercise of the profession.
- Difficulties or unfortunate circumstances due to the fact of being a Woman and being a Social Worker in the exercise of the profession.
- Changes in the career of Social Work if the profession in Mexico were to be a male-dominated field.

- Salary-salary systems and their relationship with Social Work as a feminized profession.

In relation to the first axis of analysis on self-image and the possible relational links between being a woman and being a social worker, we obtained the following.

The first relevant fact is that 31 of the 40 female social workers interviewed had not-up to the time of the interview-reflected on the implications, representations or meanings of being a woman in the exercise of a helping profession. In their very specific answers, most of the interviewees were of the opinion that there was no difference if Social Work was done by women or by men.

The Women-Social Workers interviewed reported as experiences of professional achievement due to the fact of being women, the empathic capacity with the other; the natural capacity to help, to give solutions or to solve. Approximately 30 people can be included in these responses. There were even 6 associations with the meaning of the maternal, as a desirable element in a woman for the “good” performance of this profession. Here is one of the responses: “By being a woman, users can have more confidence to share their problems, since they can naturally let themselves be carried away by a maternal image or more confidence than a male social worker” (Gabriela, Mexicali, Baja California).

On the other hand, the tendency of the intervention or institutional procedure was reported in most of the questionnaires with adjectives and processes that fit into the category of assistencialism. That is, to palliate, to grant and someone (users) in a passive way, to receive.

Although open-ended questions were posed and 2 days were given to respond to the information exploration instrument, most of the answers lacked reflection or critical sense towards their functions and their work

environment. Needless to say about her position sociologically speaking, as a Woman in Social Work.

Among the concepts that were presented as regularity to adjectivize their professional practice were: “helping”, “serving”, “work of dedication”, “profession that serves” and “search for empathy” with the users of their services.

Such adjectivations to describe the essence of professional practice are read as the typically feminine attributions that in the patriarchal structure are assigned to women, exemplified by the ideal of the “exemplary mother” always sustaining the never-ending reproductive work.

Eduarne Aranguren, in this regard, gives us her perspective on mysticism in the imagery of Social Work: “There is an extra value placed on sacrifice, on suffering, perhaps because of the Judeo-Christian character of the roots where it is located. With symbolic expressions that go from the messianic character of the profession to the guilt for not saving the world and the people that are helped...” And he adds, “This coupled with the vocational character that some discourses within the profession raise, linked to a voluntary or voluntarist character that marks a certain religious connotation and dogma of faith” (Aranguren, 2014: 144).

Authors such as Spanish PhDs Belén Lorente (2004) and Tomaza Bañez (2012), have extensively discussed the interrelationships between feminized professions such as Social Work and the social division of labor as prevalent in it, as well as the reproduction of typically female roles understood from patriarchal structures.

On the other hand, in the experiences of failure in the practice of Social Work reported by the interviewees, the opinion of blaming others for their frustrations predominated. They stated that the perceptions of the rest of

the professional teams that also work in their employing institutions, saw their professional actions as unimportant or easy, and even that they did not know what Social Work does. The practice of Social Work in Mexican public institutions continues in a state of subordination that it has historically kept in front of other professions, especially those of higher professional status.

The social practice of social workers cannot avoid this type of analysis, says Dr. in Philosophy Cecilia Aguayo (2012). This Chilean author believes that it is essential to be aware that the professional work of social workers has also been characterized as bureaucratic, normative and controlling. Cecilia Aguayo states that "This type of intervention, where instrumental rationality has prevailed, has subsumed the value worlds and the life worlds of professional and disciplinary practice" (p.3).

We recognize that there are still pending reviews in order to unveil the factors involved in the weak professional consistency of Social Work, which, although it was already a warning sign within the neoliberal economic system, with the free market and the thinning of the State. Undoubtedly, the old institutional labor framework that had sustained the bulk of Social Workers continues to fracture.

As we stated in a recent international forum on feminized professions, Mexican Social Work is mostly done on a daily basis by women; women trapped, from the outset, between double and triple shifts of reproductive-productive work; women whose professional base brings the disadvantage of a profession that is still seeking professional and scientific recognition; women who must be subjected to cycles of routinization in their work, where paperwork, management and/or mediation of services dominate, and therefore, there is no possibility of producing real projects of social intervention. Women dependent on

the compliance and non-compliance of other specialists, whose profession of greater social prestige usually represents the core of the institutions and, therefore, holds the power. Women who attend, from their institutional scenarios, to women in the same social conditions and who generally come to the institution to manage the attention and care of other vulnerable groups such as minors, adolescents, young women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM IN SOCIAL WORK?

Sandra G. Harding (1998), American philosopher, epistemologist and feminist, asserts that in order for "gender" as a theoretical-analytical category to be introduced into the vast spectrum of the social sciences, the existence of a consolidated critical interpretative tradition in the disciplinary group that intends to use gender analysis for its social analysis is required as a premise.

Based on this premise, we wonder if it would be possible to consider that at some point Social Workers would be able to make themselves visible as women, before trying to cover themselves with a certain form of identity that a profession can provide them? Is it utopian to expect that Mexican Social Workers could call themselves feminine?

We assume that in order to achieve personal positions that renounce the impositions that the patriarchal gender condition produces, it is necessary that each Social Worker develops in her conscious part the recognition of "Being a Woman" in a social and private context of patriarchal domination and, as an executor of a "helping" profession in institutions that intend to alleviate social inequalities. From that moment on, it is possible that we start another possible, desirable and necessary history.

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