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The impact of the ideal of motherhood on the development of professional social work in the United States. A non-standard approach to the historical development of social work

Abstract

The study examines the role of the ideal of motherhood and female emancipation in the development of social work, with a particular focus on the United States. Utilizing qualitative research methods, including contemporary literature reviews, historical analysis, and document review, the study explores the institutionalization process of social work. It reveals how women's emancipation movements contributed to the professional recognition and legitimacy of social work. The research findings indicate that care rooted in the ideal of motherhood and the historical transformation of female roles significantly influenced the development of social work. The evolution of American social work, grounded in the principles of human rights and equality, paralleled the increasing social and political engagement of women, which was also influenced by feminist movements.

Keywords: ideal of motherhood, female emancipation, social work, profession, human rights and equality

Absztrakt

A tanulmány az anyaság eszményének és a női emancipációnak a szociális munka fejlődésében betöltött szerepét vizsgálja, különös tekintettel az Egyesült Államokra. A tanulmány kvalitatív kutatási módszer mentén, többek között, szakirodalmi kortás publikációk, történeti elemzés és dokumentumáttekintés mentén vizsgálja a szociális munka intézményesülésének folyamatát, feltárva azt, hogy a női emancipációs mozgalmak miként járultak hozzá a szociális munka szakmai elismeréséhez és legitimációjához. A kutatási eredmények azt mutatják, hogy az anyaság eszményében gyökerező gondoskodás és a női szerepek történelmi átalakulása jelentősen befolyásolta a szociális munka fejlődését. Az amerikai szociális munka fejlődése az emberi jogok és az egyenlőség elveire építve párhuzamosan fejlődött a nők növekvő társadalmi és politikai azon szerepvállalási irányultságával, amelyet a feminista mozgalmak is befolyásoltak.

Kulcsszavak: anyaság eszménye, nőemancipáció, szociális munka, professzió, emberi jogok és egyenlőség

I. Early Social Care

During the historical development of social assistance, as early as the late 15th century in England, there were religious organizations and administrative units with ecclesiastical backgrounds that helped care for, nurse, and provide for the most vulnerable social groups (e.g., incapacitated poor, elderly, sick). Recognizing that long-term social support for the destitute and poor served the interests of the social elite and "regional community" led to the legal support for public funding of poor relief initiatives (Poor Law Amendment Act, 1842) and the statutory reinforcement of the Anglican Church's charitable role (Albert, 2017). Recognizing the potential for regional cooperation allowed for a division of labour between nearby settlements. This meant that the responsibility no longer fell solely on individual parishes but on alliances of towns and villages. This practical approach proved to be more rational, as these alliances could jointly maintain workhouses and support systems, making resource utilization and sharing more efficient (Hegyesi – Kozma, 1994).

"The social elite throughout history have never had an interest in endangering public safety with an army of destitute and beggars, so rulers (in this form, the state) and church also took part in the upbringing and education of children left without shelter and parental supervision, considering the higher aspects of prevention and elimination, in their own future interests" (Berzsenyi, 2015).

II. Institutionalization of Social Work

In Anglo-Saxon countries, the recognition of social responsibility and the development of self-awareness led to an increased demand for human-centred civil social initiatives. In countries representing liberal social values, voluntary civil organizations have been complementing state support and services to meet the need for social responsibility, thereby providing assistance to those in need. Today, this form of mutual state and civil assistance is known as the mixed

welfare model. In response to societal gaps, in 1869, wealthier volunteer citizens and officials of the Poor Law initiated the establishment of the first professional social workers' organization, the Charity Organization Society (COS).⁵⁸ In Europe, the backbone of the organisation was primarily made up of wealthy citizens (Szalai, 1971), while in the United States it was middle-class white women (Szalai, 1971; Kövér, 2020; Acsády, 2022). In parallel with the development of social work methodology, the main task of the organisation was to provide needs assessment by visiting social workers and to coordinate the process of assistance (Woodroffe, 1959). The later innovations introduced by COS contributed to the definition and further development of the social policy direction deemed necessary by the state and society by reviving social awareness (Szabó, 1999).⁵⁹

III. Women's Emancipation

The development of Western civilisation, the institutional modernisation of social work and the historical transformation of women's roles overlap significantly. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, debates had developed between traditional conservative scholars and the reformist thinkers of the time about the education of women. Contemporary thinkers supporting the emancipation processes believed it was important to provide opportunities for women to pursue higher education, as women also had the right to surpass the traditionally accepted roles of housewife, mother, and wife (Wessely, 2004).⁶⁰ From a scholarly perspective, Acsády's (2020:139) general

⁵⁸ The primary aim of the Charity Organization Society (COS), founded in England, was to address the problems of the poor outside of workhouses. Initially, the organization fully accepted the principle of applying the "less eligibility" method.

⁵⁹ The early application of case studies revealed that the mechanism of providing assistance cannot be generalized but must be individualized in every instance. Due to the uniqueness of each case, it is crucial to examine the case from multiple dimensions. Stabilizing clients' situations requires different helping methods and interventions because of their varying living standards, life paths, life stages, and social statuses.

⁶⁰ The advocates and supporters of the women's movement were already consciously striving at that time to ensure that women could join institutional education on equal terms, recognizing that education is a fundamental prerequisite for the freedom to choose a profession and for participation in public and political life. Although the initial successes of personal initiatives were

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formulation stands out as the most pertinent in covering the scope of the women's emancipation process, emphasizing how women can increasingly integrate and participate equally within specific societal contexts, domains, and positions where they were previously marginalized.

Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel's book on improving the civic status of women was interpreted by most contemporary intellectuals as formulating impractical proposals. According to Hippel, the inclusion of women in administration and business could increase efficiency. Contemporary Amalia Holst, who fought for women's intellectual education, reflected on the book's content as follows (Holst, 1802):

"We gratefully acknowledge the commendable zeal with which you stand by our cause; however, I do not share your opinion on this matter. I believe that such a complete transformation in civil relations would cause enormous confusion. And to the question of whether the two sexes will ever reach such a level of cultivation that this could occur without disadvantages, it is currently impossible to answer with a definite yes" (Wessely, 2004).

Another pioneer in the quest for women's equality was the German physician Dorothea Christiane Leporin. Her initial application was rejected by the University of Halle, but she was later admitted. After successfully defending her doctoral dissertation in 1754, she practiced as a physician while also fulfilling her traditional roles as wife and mother (Neimeyer, 1996:290). Despite the recognition of Dorothea's education and knowledge by many experts of her time, significant steps towards allowing women to pursue higher education or participate in scientific and public life on equal terms with men were either not taken or progressed very slowly. Proponents of women's literacy legitimized their demand by arguing that educated mothers and women could better educate and prepare the next generation (Perlmann & Shirley, 1990). In contrast to the rigid, hierarchical European mindset, American society was more flexible towards women's emancipation movements. For nearly three centuries, according to Michael S. Kimmel (2001), people migrated to America primarily in the hope of independence and self-reliance. However, 19th century industrialization significantly transformed existing dependencies, drastically reducing the number of

encouraging, the social perception and status of women (as wives, mothers, and housekeepers) did not significantly change until the early 20th century.

agricultural workers and independent artisans. Structural changes contributed to the gradual transformation of family relations and the social roles of men and women (Leach, 1980:123; Kimmel, 2001:61).

During World War II, the labour shortage in the United States primarily facilitated the emancipation of oppressed groups, particularly women. During the war, women worked in positions where they were both financially and morally recognized, opportunities they did not have before the war. Due to increasing wartime production needs and the shortage of male labour, companies increasingly employed women, initially as trained workers and volunteer nurses, and later in the service sector. Although the emancipation movement initially succeeded, the post-war years saw an ambivalent societal view of women.⁶¹ Conservative intellectual groups that did not support women's equality and autonomy ideals warned of the dangers of emancipation by reverting to historical roots, portraying working women with negative stereotypes such as infertile, sexually distorted, masculinized monsters (Douglas, 1977:228). Due to economic difficulties and social tensions, the emancipation processes that had come to the forefront under the compulsion of the war gradually slowed and then receded. However, the difference arising from gender identity (e.g. female soul, value system) contributed to the continued and even increased social recognition of female labour, particularly in helping and educational professions (e.g., nursing, social work, day-care, teaching).

IV. The Direction of Modern Social Work

Due to differing cultural environments, social structures, and the varying pace and direction of social development, the institutionalization of professional social work has evolved at different rates across nations. However, its historical roots can invariably be traced back to hierarchical religious organizations with strong masculine influences. Social work practice has its origins in religion and the charitable acts of believers, but as the

⁶¹ One reason for this was that many women who had taken on jobs, gained independence, and received salaries during the war rejected the notion of returning to the traditional, subordinate role of the American housewife once the war ended.

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profession developed it has become increasingly secularised and distanced from the church. One reason for this may be the centuries-long exclusion of women from certain church roles, which led them to find other secular avenues for their vocation in the helping professions. Additionally, the environment of social work has become more complex over time. Social workers serve clients who may be religious or non-religious, and even among believers, only a portion may belong to a particular denomination. This diversity has required social workers to develop methods and tools suitable for all clients, regardless of religious affiliation.

While the mission of social work to assist those in need has fundamentally remained unchanged, the professional knowledge base and applied tools have undergone significant scientific advancements. As early as 1915, Mary Richmond emphasized the necessity of continuous theoretical development and scientific research to build and solidify the knowledge base of the profession. Richmond stressed that social work, as a profession requiring higher education, must become an integral part of scientific and theoretical discourse to ensure its long-term professional competence and development (Hegyesi – Kozma, 1994).

Today, social workers employ scientific methods and empirical research to effectively address complex social issues (Kozma, 2023). Over the past century, the characteristics of the relationship between social work and spirituality have also undergone significant changes. While spirituality previously found meaning almost exclusively within religious frameworks, it is now interpreted in a much broader sense (Gehrig et al., 2021). Social workers have recognized that spirituality can mobilize internal resources, regardless of the client's religious beliefs. This change allows social work to operate more broadly and effectively, considering individuals' diverse spiritual needs, independently of their religious affiliations (Kozma, 2023).

V. Foundations of Social Work in the United States

The cradle of modern professional social work is primarily considered to be the United States. The roots of American social work can be traced back to the volunteer-based Charity Organization Society (COS) in England and later to the Chicago Settlement movement, which organized itself from sociological workshops. The liberal philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon world carried the promise of freedom and equality of opportunity. However, as society became increasingly market-driven, the limitations of the liberal ideology also became evident, as it failed to address the plight of those disadvantaged and victimized by the market. The goal of social reform movements was to transcend liberal ideals and develop methodologies that enabled intervention in social problems (Szalai, 1971; Müller, 1992). Through the introduction of new poor relief methods, the organization played a significant role in shaping official social policy (Szalai, 1971).⁶²

Among those who played key roles in the development of social reform movements were many professionally open-minded individuals who recognized the successes of the women's emancipation movements. However, similar to the leader of the Baltimore COS movement, Mary Richmond, many social workers did not support the goals of the emancipation movements (Kövé, 2020:27).⁶³

VI. Social Work, Maternalism, and Feminism

In America, in the decades following the Second World War, economic and technological advancements spurred an increase in leisure activities (e.g. the

⁶² The casework methodology developed and implemented in the United States allowed for the exploration of the complex nature of poverty by visiting applicants for aid in their homes and conducting interviews with all family members.

⁶³ Emancipatory movements often espouse ideals and goals that align with the core values of social work. However, feminist movements typically advocate for goals that affect narrower segments of society, such as issues related to gender, race, and voting rights.

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spread of household appliances) and higher female enrolment in education. Concurrently, there was a shift from traditional multi-generational family structures to nuclear families. Due to their pivotal role in social reproduction, culture increasingly became synonymous with women's influence. This shift facilitated greater female participation in diverse societal roles such as philanthropy, education, and librarianship (Trachtenberg, 1982:145). These developments collectively bolstered women's autonomy, expanded female employment opportunities, and fostered the acceptance of modern female identities alongside traditional roles in public perception.

A critical realization in the development of social work was that women, due to their moral, biological, psychological, and emotional inclinations, were much closer to caregiving and nurturing services than men. Consequently, the social recognition of motherhood as a 'profession' increasingly gained affirmation and acceptance. These societal changes resulted in women-mothers assuming greater responsibility for the professional management of children's socialization (Douglas, 1977), leading to the situation by the end of the 19th century where it was primarily women who were raising boys to manhood (Rotundo, 1983:32). The spread of this societal mindset allowed for an increasing number of women to enter helping professions such as child protection, social work, education, and nursing. Based on the aforementioned concepts, social work can be understood as a form of professionalization emerging through the discourses of motherhood / maternal roles (e.g. casework with children and families) (Kövé, 2020). In the United States, women involved in the Settlement-COS movements gained significant authority as experts in motherhood and child welfare, thereby establishing the foundation of the social work profession. Moreover, they formed a natural political identity, enabling them to organize wide-ranging political and social actions and movements in the future. This unique theoretical and practical discourse on maternalism and social work facilitated the legitimization of social work in the Western world, primarily in the United States (Kövé, 2020).⁶⁴ As a result of this process, women became effective actors not only at

⁶⁴ According to Ágnes Kövé's formulation (2020:26), white women from the upper and middle classes framed their movement proposals and activism between 1890 and 1930 within an idealized rhetoric of motherhood. During this period, they appealed to the state for the protection

the family and community levels but also in the broader social and political spheres, influencing public policy and promoting social change (Acél – Szikra, 2012). According to Ife (2001), the roots of human rights-based social work are closely intertwined with liberal feminism.⁶⁵ His theory suggests that this interactive process, based on mutual support between social work and liberal feminism, significantly contributed to the foundation of modern social work and the strengthening of women's roles. The core principles of human rights-based social work include respect for human dignity and rights,⁶⁶ which are closely aligned with the ideals of liberal feminism.⁶⁷ Liberal feminism emphasizes individual rights and the importance of equal treatment, which also play a central role in social work practice.⁶⁸ According to Ife (2001), these principles are integrated into social work practice, ensuring that professionals employ approaches that promote equality and the protection of human rights.⁶⁹

By the early 20th century, social work had gradually begun its path to professionalization, with advocacy and political-scientific-public participation efforts increasingly replacing previous charity-based activities. Ágnes Kövér (2020) notes in her study that these efforts aimed not only to eliminate political inequalities but also to pursue targeted reforms that could directly improve the living conditions of poorer families.

of poor and working women, seeing maternalism as essential to womanhood, symbolized by the 'maternal instinct'.

⁶⁵ Gender equality means that women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men, which is particularly important in social work. Social workers engage with individuals and groups marginalized by society, supporting them in asserting their rights and advocating against discrimination.

⁶⁶ Various feminist perspectives have contributed to the development of social work and shaped its practice. Lay and Daley (2007) note that many women in the field of social work, while not identifying as feminists overtly, often subconsciously support feminist principles.

⁶⁷ Ensuring equal citizenship rights means that all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to participate in society and access services. Social workers often play an intermediary role in ensuring that these rights are respected, especially for marginalized groups.

⁶⁸ The fight against discrimination is crucial in social work. Social workers need to be aware of various forms of discrimination experienced by their clients and actively work towards eliminating them. This includes combating gender-based discrimination as well as other intersectional forms, such as ethnic, religious, and economic discrimination.

⁶⁹ Initiatives that contributed to the establishment of social work institutions and the development of its theory aimed to integrate marginalized populations and address the elimination of unjust processes.

From the 1960s onwards, feminist philosophers pointed out that the oppression of women stems from patriarchal social structures, legislation, and culture. Conceptual frameworks derived from the patriarchal system do not provide the cognitive tools needed for women and other marginalized groups to make sense of their experiences in the world. Nancy Hartsock (1983a) argues that traditional patriarchal structures create conceptual frameworks that exclude women and other marginalized groups from the knowledge-creation process. These frameworks convey a worldview that does not reflect the realities and experiences of the marginalized, making it difficult for them to find their place and voice in this narrative.

In contrast, new theoretical frameworks equip marginalized groups with cognitive tools that enable them to become active knowledge creators, bringing new perspectives and deeper understanding to scientific and social discourse (Hartsock, 1983b). Women's emancipation cannot be complete until they have adequate access to cultural and social representations and can participate in building support systems according to their needs and visions. According to Horkai et al. (2013), social-cultural representation is a form of content expression and designation through which individual consciousness relates to the reality presented by society and institutions. This process also works in reverse, as society manifests behavioral patterns and communication forms that become visible through social representation. The social status and cultural patterns of the group that adopts and creates the conceptual framework play a significant role in this process. The same theory may appear in different interpretations across different social groups (within the context of this paper, in the patriarchal social-cultural field) (Horkai et al., 2013).

VII. Direction of modern social work in the United States

During the period between the two world wars, university training in professional social work based on psychology began in the United States of America on the initiative of social organizations, and the code of ethics for the

profession was established.⁷⁰ The practice-oriented university courses, grounded in the science of psychology, led to a continuous expansion of the range of people utilizing social workers' services (Szabó, 1999).⁷¹ Responding to the needs of the increasingly broad social strata affected by poverty and war, practical applications of mental health approaches began to gain prominence alongside community activities, case management related to poverty, school-based casework, healthcare case management, and child welfare tasks.

The social and professional recognition of the effectiveness of social work significantly contributed to the fact that by the end of the 20th century, social workers handled 50% of mental health casework in the United States (Morris, 2000). Due to the socio-political direction of a capitalist market economy and a residual welfare system, the primary focus of North American social work today is on the mental health management of accidental and normative crises (Szabó, 1999).⁷² As a result of changes in social and structural institutional systems and the methodological and practical development of the profession, the social service system is continually evolving, contributing to the presence of social work in various social and market segments.

Two key factors have played the most important roles in the favourable development of North American social work:

- Close relationships between professional advocacy organizations (e.g. National Association of Social Workers [NASW], Clinical Social Work [CSW]) and social policy.
- The problem-solving educational model accepted as the basis of university training.

⁷⁰ In the United States, the dominant practice model of social work has been oriented towards psychological and therapeutic approaches

⁷¹ One of the defining factors directing social work towards psychoanalysis in the United States has been the need to align with allied professions and establish social work as a respected qualitative profession. This necessitated the development of a common conceptual framework and language to facilitate dialogue with allied professions, such as psychiatrists and psychologists in hospitals, and within emerging investigation and counseling systems in child welfare institutions.

⁷² Since the 1980s, social workers specializing in mental health have provided a wide spectrum of assistance alongside psychologists in addressing individual and societal issues. However, the expansion of practice-based social work towards psychology in the early 1990s created significant conflicts of interest in the relationship between psychology and social work.

VIII. Summary

The interpretation and methodology of social care has undergone significant changes due to societal changes and economic transformations (e.g. industrialization, urbanization, state responsibility) throughout history. Despite the fact that the process of social assistance spans several centuries, professional social work is considered a relatively young scientific field. The scientific community holds divided views regarding the profession of social work.⁷³ The nature, methods, practice, client support, and priority direction of social work largely depend on the differing political, economic, cultural, and social contexts of countries (e.g., social norms, values, traditions, regulations, institutional systems and legal background).

Women have primarily been suited for successfully applying their practical knowledge within professional frameworks as experts in child welfare and aid for the needy due to characteristics stemming from their gender identity.⁷⁴ The increasing social recognition of their charitable activities and the successes of early women's emancipation movements have also facilitated this. Social care, built on the ideal of motherhood, has continuously adapted to social needs over the past 70 years in response to societal changes.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel's book on improving the civic status of women was interpreted by most contemporary intellectuals as formulating impractical proposals, Hippel's early hypotheses have been validated. Due to Western modernization and changes in various

⁷³ According to numerous authors, despite the high level of professional knowledge and specialized skills in social work, it has often been categorized not as a fully-fledged profession but rather as a semi-profession or a care profession (Etzioni, 1969; Hodson – Sullivan, 2012; Kleisz, 2005). On the other hand, others argue that professionalization is a process through which a professional activity evolves into a distinct field with well-defined theoretical and practical knowledge, a scientific background, and its own ethical frameworks (Kornbeck, 1988). Professionals in the helping fields provide services with a social function, driven by a commitment to public welfare stemming from their professional identity.

⁷⁴ As part of the process of women's emancipation, women sought to assert themselves not only in traditional roles as mothers and wives but also in broader aspects of life, such as education, science, and politics.

⁷⁵ Social work is increasingly integrating with other fields such as healthcare, education, and employment policy, allowing for the early detection of issues and more effective intervention.

spheres of society, the role of women has undergone significant transformations over the past 200 years.

Efforts to reduce gender inequality, regulate educational and labour market conditions, and the political and social support for "motherly thinking" have enabled women to play an active role in the professionalization of social work.

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