

# Gender Identity in Social Work: Male Social Workers' Experience in Seychelles

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## Introduction

A wide range of studies about men in social work discuss the view that a male presence in the profession has potential risks, and therefore, they should not be part of that profession (Williams, 1995; Scourfield, 2001; Scourfield and Coffey, 2002; McLean, 2003; Christie, 2006). However, Mclean (2003) argues that men in this type of profession are similar to men in other industries and occupations and should not be seen as different from men in other areas of work. Furthermore, Ruxton (1993), Jensen (1995) and Christie (2006) argue that there are many benefits of having men in social work.

In this article, the experience of male social workers within a female-dominated profession called social work will be examined. The aim is to present some narratives that capture the positive experiences of male social workers in the Seychelles context and to show how these experiences/narratives can be used in marketing strategies to attract more men into the profession and to improve the image of social work. It considers three questions: What are the benefits of having men in social work? What are the challenges of working in a female-dominated profession? What is the social response to the needs of boys and men in society?

Social work practices in Seychelles seem to be missing from mainstream research and literature, which tends to focus wholly on the Western context. This highlights the need for research in Seychelles which could produce data for evidence-based practice, which would reveal the views of social workers about practices and experiences in the profession from the local and cultural context.

## Background

Occupations can be numerically male or female dominated. Where this is the case:

*... advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.*

(Acker, 1990, p146)

Numerous studies have examined the challenges faced by men and women who work in jobs traditionally performed by members of the opposite sex (Henson and Rogers, 2001; Padavic, 1991; Prokos and Padavic, 2002; Williams, 1989, 1995). They argue that gendered issues at work highlight the structural inequalities and unequal relations that exist and that place men and women in binary positions. Britton (2000) argues that male or female dominated occupations can be gendered in ways that do not match their sex composition.

Gender identities are localized, according to local culture. Men and women construct their identity according to images of local culture. These images tend to be stereotypical but some do also reflect dominant local gendered practices. Seychelles, like many other societies, has a gendered culture, whereby men's jobs and women's jobs are well defined. Occupations may be identified in gender-specific terms as what is an appropriate job for a man and what is deemed appropriate for a woman. Even though there have been tremendous steps taken and improvement achieved in workplace equality, there are those who still practise sexist and stereotyping behaviours. They continue to implement practices and ideals that deem a job suitable for only one sex. This continues a cycle of culturally produced, sex-role specific occupations that limit the opportunities of both men and women to achieve their fullest potential in the workforce. This paper dwells on that culture and explores experiences within the social work profession in relation to gender.

## The study

The article is based on a study of male social workers and their experiences in a female dominated profession (Nicette, 2014). The aim of the study was to understand the gendered experience of male social workers and how the experience impacts on their identity. This will produce some knowledge that could help in encouraging more men into the profession. By means of semi-structured interviews, six male social workers were interviewed and a focus group discussion was held with two male members of the public and 3 female social workers. The interviewer was male and known to the interviewees as an academic and colleague who interacted frequently with them on a professional basis. All the participants were invited to participate in the study. Participants gave their informed consent to the interviews after having the research and purposes described. Participants were also free to withdraw at any time.

## Data analysis

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002). The data from the semi-structured

interviews were transcribed and were analyzed using the five steps of narrative/content analysis proposed by Powell and Renner (2003):

1. Get to know your data
2. Focus the analysis
3. Categorize information
4. Identify patterns and connections within and between categories
5. Interpretation-bringing it all together.

## Social work as a profession in Seychelles

Traditionally, social work was widely regarded as a caring profession suitable for women (Veale, 2012). This perception has not faded away as it is still one of the professions where women are considered more appropriate for the job. This is based on the premise that women's emotional and caring natures make them more able to perform the functions of the profession (Christie, 2006). Although significant progress has been made in recruiting more women into traditionally male dominated professions, it has proved to be more difficult to recruit men into professions traditionally viewed as being feminine in nature.

In Seychelles there are two educational institutions that offer training for social workers: the National Institute of Health and Social Studies (NIHSS), and the University of Seychelles (Unisey). Statistics from NIHSS show that there are fewer and fewer men applying for and graduating with a qualification in social work. The training runs every three years and this year, 2016, there is only one male graduating as compared to 22 females. Table 2 below shows the number of social work graduates from the Diploma of Social Work since its inception 2002.

**Table 2: Diploma of social work graduates**

<i>Year Graduated</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
2004	4	26
2007	1	29
2010	2	28
2013	1	28

*Source: NIHSS, 2013*

In 2014, the University of Seychelles introduced a Bachelor's degree in social work, the first social work degree course to be introduced in Seychelles. There are only two male students on the program compared to fifteen female students.

The decline of male applicants in social work courses is also a global issue and in most countries where social work exists, men are less likely to apply for social work than women (Perry and Cree, 2003). It is well documented that the emergence of social work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was entirely dominated by women (Glasby, 1999; Payne, 2005). Social work is identified as a caring profession and has been described as a non-traditional occupation for men (William, 1995; Christie, 1998). Social work is still seen today as a female occupation. Researchers and academics have argued that perceiving social work as a female profession founded on feminine qualities and attributes is a disadvantage for society and is preventing men from entering the profession as well as encouraging them to leave (Halford and Leonard, 2001).

Currently, there is a shortage of social workers in the country, at a time when Seychelles is facing a high increase in social problems, such as drugs and substance abuse among the youth, robbery, violent crime and other crimes. Statistics show that men are in a disadvantaged position in regards to the majority of social problems that are constructed in society, for example:

- More men are involved in those acts than women (NSB, 2013).
- The prison population is made up of 1528 (95%) males and 76 (5%) females (NSB, 2013).
- Statistics from the Social Services Department (which comprises community social work, child protection, and probation) show that men are less likely to seek services compared to women. Among the 1875 cases registered at the above institutions in 2012 (only cases brought by the public not those referred by the court or other government institutions), only 232 (12%) were registered by men (SDD, 2013).

This suggests that social work is gendered in its practices, with most clients being women or children and men often being excluded from view (Parker and Crabtree, 2012). Data from focus group interviews with the public and professionals suggest that many people believe that men are not accessing social work services because of the limited presence of male workers in those services (Nicette, 2014). This raises the concern that those services are pro-female, putting men at a disadvantage, thus deterring them from accessing services. This is, of course, completely speculative and no research evidence is available to back this up. Participants in this study, however, speculated that having fewer men in the profession does have an impact on service delivery.

## Gender/identity construction

Gender is defined as ‘the totality of meanings that are attached to the sexes within a particular social system’ (Kramer, 2005 p.185). From this definition, gender is seen as the expected behaviour and roles linked with sex, embedded through our society’s institutions, such as family, school, media, church and the workplace. In addition, Halford and Leonard (2001) argued that these gender roles are seen as reflecting long-established traditional patriarchal societies, which are socially constructed and reinforced within institutions. Traditionally, gender practices are the list of actions or behaviour that society defines as acceptable for males and females. Martin (2006) continued the debate further by claiming that people ‘do gender’ in all social settings and that practicing gender is cultural and found in all societies. This suggests that gender is also embedded in all professional practice settings and that social work, as a profession, practices gender. According to Salih (2002) gender is something that we do, rather than something that we are. This view suggests that culture creates gender and doing so reinforces rigid binaries of men/women.

The issue of identity is central to gender studies, in so far as gender studies examines the contexts within which and through which both individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity. For Mead (1934) ‘the self’ is constructed through its relations with others. Similarly, Goffman (1959) suggested that ‘the self’ is a product of particular interactions, in so far as the individual’s capacities, attitudes, and ways of behaving changes as the people around him/her change. ‘The self’, therefore, has no stability and is fluid. Kimmel (2000) asserted that identity as a man or woman is not a characteristic one possesses, but rather a set of activities that one engages in or performs. Additionally, both Connell and Kimmel agreed that gender is performed in relation to others who subsequently evaluate, validate and legitimate one’s gender identity, and assert that: ‘gender is a product of interaction with others’ (Kimmel, 2000, p 106). Interaction within institutions is seen as the site where identities are formed. He argued that it is in the doing of gender in each interaction, in each situation, in each institution in which people find themselves, that identity is constructed. Thus gender and identity constructions are both a result of interaction.

## What are the challenges of working in a female dominated profession?

Men in female dominated occupations are viewed as a challenge to the naturalness of the gendered organization of work. Morgan (1992) suggested that organizations exist as major sites for the construction and reconstruction of what it means to be a man or a woman. This has been seen as having consequences for men and women who move into

gender atypical areas and who thereby challenge conventionally held attitudes and assumptions concerning male and female work (William, 1993; Cameron, 2001; Pringle, 2001; Fröschl, 2002; Scourfield, 2003).

Participants in this study categorically challenged the assumption that social work is a feminine profession. They see themselves as caring, aspiring for a better society, and that is why they are in the profession. When asked why, or what influenced them to join the profession, male social workers claimed that it was because of their desire and willingness to help other people and make a difference.

*I have always wanted to help people. If I was a teacher, I would be able to educate the students. As a social worker you are given the opportunity to help people in all age groups and make a difference.*

*It is a career that I have always wanted to do. After I completed my studies, I took a first job in a different field (a male dominated field) but I always wanted to help vulnerable people, therefore I joined social work and I discovered that I was able to help other people, bring about positive changes in people's life and later I found the work to be rather a vocation for me and until now I am still doing it.*

*It was purely a personal decision, something that happened in my childhood and in the environment where I grew up. Then I started developing an interest in helping people, especially those who have experienced difficulty in their childhood.*

*I really don't care if they call it a women's job. My intent is to help people. Social work is part of me. It is who I am and none of the negative gender remarks will change that.*

*I had a very difficult childhood, and being able to help others to deal with difficulties and problems in their lives, make you feel good.*

Male social workers in this study acknowledged that in one way or another social work has made them a better person and that social work is a very important part of their lives forming part of their identity.

*Social work has very important meaning for me, having the chance to help people and making a difference in their lives is satisfying. To me it's a calling, a vocation, not many people get the chance to do the kind of work we social workers are doing. Doing social work, you gain lots of knowledge that helps you in your everyday life. For example, it has helped me to strengthen my relationship with friends and families. I really don't care if they call it a women's job. My intent is to help people.*

*Social work is a vocation for me, just like priesthood. I believe that this world is for every one of us and making sure every day in your work that people get included and feel that*



*they have a part in this world is a good feeling. Social work has helped me to have patience, listen and understand people. This has brought about lots of friendship in my life. Social work is part of me. It is who I am and none of the negative gender remarks will change that.*

*Social work and all its values is part of me. If I did not embrace that profession, I don't know how my life would have been. I had a very difficult childhood, and being able to help others to deal with difficulties and problems in their lives, make you feel good. I was a shy and reserved person and today I have good and lasting relationship with people and I am able to communicate with any group or individual in any given situation. However, sometimes you question your masculinity.*

## What are the benefits of having men in social work?

One assumption found in the literature with regards to men in social work professions is that they come into the profession for the opportunity to abuse women and children. This is corroborated by Perry and Cree (2003) who highlighted that one possible reason for the decline of male applicants into social work courses was the poor public image of social work due to child abuse scandals and protection failures most specifically by male workers. This is also a feminist discourse that relates to the myth that all men are potential abusers of women and children (McLean, 2003; Scourfield and Coffey, 2002). According to Pringle (1992) men should not be employed as social workers because of the prevalence of child abuse by men. In a study done by Christie (2006), women participants question men's relationship to social work in some circumstances. Some women see men as a potential threat to the profession and children are viewed as at risk of violent men in the profession. Discourses of risk can identify men's presence as dangerous (Cameron, 2001; Pringle, 2001; Scourfield, 2003).

However, in the same study Christie found that female colleagues viewed men's presence in social work as beneficial. For example, men are seen as protectors for female workers in potentially hostile encounters with service users. Other writers also talked about the benefit of male presence in social work. Ruxton (1993) claimed that men in social work can make up for the absence of fathers in the family. It is also argued that men are more likely to work more effectively than women with unruly or deviant boys (Jensen, 1995).

According to the female participants in the focus group discussion, more men in the profession will be beneficial both to the profession and the society as a whole. They all value male presence in social work and believe that more should be done to encourage more men into the profession.

*We lack men in that profession. There is the assumption out there that few men are accessing the service because the social work services are pro female, maybe if we have more*

*male social workers, possibly more men would access the service. The way the situation is actually, men are not coming forward to report their domestic problems because they know that the service is made up of majority women and believe that they will not get a fair service.*

*I would like to see more men in the social work profession. I do not believe that social work is only a woman's job. I believe that any male who has a heart for the profession deserves a place and will do an extremely good job.*

*In Seychelles, we need more men to take up the challenge because a lot of men and boys are in difficult situations. I am not saying that the female social workers cannot help them but these boys need a father figure. They cannot afford to see that each time they have a concern it is a woman who is taking care of them, they need that change.*

## Discussion: Implications for social work practices (social work response to the needs of boys and men in society)

Based on the above narratives, it is clear that gender issues, such as the disproportion between men and women in the profession have an impact on service delivery. Many clients, especially male, are at a disadvantage in relation to the service received. For example, potential male clients might be less likely to avail themselves of needed social programs. Many men have not even considered social work because of persistent stereotypes about workers in the helping professions (Christie, 2006). It is important to bring these stereotypes out into the open, discredit them, and welcome more males into social work.

A social worker's performance has nothing to do with gender, but the gender of a social worker can influence a client's initial decision to seek help. Many people find that certain topics are best discussed with someone of the same gender, at least at first. For many males, topics like sex and aggression are much easier to discuss with another male. Other topics that men may prefer to discuss with another man include unemployment, being a stay-at-home father, and male depression. Just as women often struggle with having a career and a family, males often struggle with being both a provider and a father (Simpson, 2004; Christie, 2006).

It is important to note that in Seychelles, much of the direct social work provision seems to have focused on the issue of working with, and supporting, women and mothers. In doing so, we have, in part, maintained and perpetuated the notions of gendered division of labour in terms of child care. We must begin at all levels to involve men as fathers in families. Often in practice we forget to consider the supportive role of fathers in families. This may be because so often our focus as social workers, working with men, has had to be about issues of neglect, violence and abuse. Male social workers and clients are



similarly influenced by the dominant discourse in the social construction of masculinity. That is to say, men, are all taught from an early age to be strong, independent, and capable of looking after themselves. In terms of language, conversations and relationships, men are expected not to ask for advice or support, or to talk about our vulnerabilities or intimate feelings in any public way. We must find ways to invite men to talk about their intimacies and vulnerabilities in a new way (Hogan, 1998). Many men live their lives based on conforming and performing in ways which try to satisfy the socially constructed notions of what it means to be a man – a real man. The commonly held belief is that that men are incapable of intimacy, are not in touch with their feelings, and are into competition rather than connection. These are all social constructs that must be challenged if we want men participating in the social life of a society without gender barriers.

Social workers must become involved in debunking these myths. Dominant notions which construct men as uncaring and incapable of intimacy keep men on the margins of meaningful relationships, families and society in general. The very attempts to comply with these notions of masculinity lead so many men to live shorter lives than women; for men to live more dangerous and accident-prone lives; to suffer more stress-related illnesses; and to hide their pain and isolation in self-abusive behaviour, such as drug and drink addictions (Halford and Leonard, 2001). It is a dangerous myth that perpetuates the notion that men are invulnerable and can live lives of isolation. Men, as much as women, need to live lives of connection with others. The single most frightening consequence of men's attempts to live up to these rules of real masculinity, of toughness, invulnerability, and consequent isolation can be seen in the very high numbers of men's suicides (WHO, 2016).

The social construction of masculinity both creates specific forms of depression in men and also causes men to hide the face of depression from others and themselves. Real argues that the results of 'not talking about it' are negative to men, women and children.

*Many covertly depressed men, unwilling to face the vulnerability of their own hidden pain, and unwilling to be intimate with their own hearts, cannot face intimacy with anyone else.*

(Real, 1997, p.151).

## Conclusion

Social workers are gatekeepers of our society and should be more representative of the communities they serve. Social workers have a commitment to human rights and social justice, thus addressing inequity and injustice (IFSW, 2014). This article argues that the gender composition in the profession does affect social work practices. It also argues that for social work to evolve, it is helpful to deconstruct the socially constructed gender discourses in the profession and their impact on social service delivery, as well as

appreciate men for the positive qualities they bring and can bring to social work, which could lead to a more positive image of the profession. From the narratives, male social workers expressed their desire to build a better society for all. They also suggest that more men in the profession might encourage more men to access social work services. This might bring a more positive image of the profession, thus altering public perception and encouraging more men to join the profession. This article suggests that social work educational institutions and social work services in the country can use narratives of male social workers' experiences in the job for marketing and recruitment.

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