



Gendering social work in Russia: towards anti-discriminatory practices

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Abstract

Purpose – This article seeks to uncover the gendered nature of discourses in social services and social work textbooks and their impact on the professional identity of social workers in Russia.

Design/methodology/approach – It is based on qualitative methodology, referring to interview material, and discourse analysis of the Russian textbooks used in social care education. It addresses three dimensions of gender: labour market policies and women's work/low wages; identity constructions of the social workers; and the discourse of gender in teaching material and textbooks.

Findings – The research shows that, by setting up inadequate wage policies for social workers, the state has reinforced the societal assumption of cheap women's labour. In addition, power relations in social work practice reinforce social inequalities. The ideology of a specific female work-capacity is reproduced in social work, as in other forms of care work.

Research limitations/implications – The findings highlight that gender differences are represented as biologically materialised substances, while social conditions of their construction are not taken into account. Single mothers are often portrayed as immoral or unfortunate and considered dangerous for their own children and society as a whole.

Practical implications – In the education and professional development of social workers, major emphasis needs to be given to anti-discriminatory practice and critical thinking.

Originality/value – The lack of professionalisation of social work is explained in terms of gender inequality in the social order, which is mirrored in the conditions of labour market and therefore especially in "female work".

Keywords Social services, Professional services, Gender, Discrimination, Russia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article seeks to uncover the gendered nature of discourses in social services and social work textbooks and their impact on the professional identity of social workers in Russia. Since the first study of social work as a gendered profession by Walton (1975), much research has been directed to the examination of important issues of gender and power in social work (Dressel, 1992; Taylor and Daly, 1995). Some researchers have focused on the development and enhancement of the feminist perspective in social work practice (Bricker-Jenkins *et al.*, 1991; DiNitto and McNeece, 1997; Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Mason, 1997; Van den Bergh, 1995; Van den Bergh and Cooper, 1986, 1995; White, 1995). However, feminist theories of social work have been criticised for treating women as a uniform category and displaying insufficient sensitivity to the complex ways in which other social divisions – those of race, age, disability, etc. – impact on gender relations. Contemporary debates within both feminist theory and caring professions have added more complexity to our understanding of care and justice, autonomy and citizenship rights (Kuhlmann, 2006; Kuhlmann and Babitsch, 2002; Lloyd, 2006; Orme, 2002). Recent debate also seeks to develop a new framework for social work that takes on board postmodernist arguments concerned with difference and power which retains a commitment to collective solidarity and social change (Dominelli, 2002, 2004).



Tackling the issues of gender and knowledge in social work, studies have explored the continuing significance of gender in social work training, including the issues of inequality among the faculty (Norman, 1986) and administration (Harper, 1990, 1991), educational choice and career paths of social work students and graduates (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2002; Holley and Young, 2005; Perry and Cree, 2003). Of particular importance are the issues of gender-sensitive social work education for better practice (Abramovitz, 1987; Bailey and Cox, 1993; Figueira-McDonough *et al.*, 2001; Grise-Owens, 2002; Norman and Wheeler, 1996; Orme, 2003; Trotter and Leech, 2003).

If social work education is to be truly committed to social justice and self-determination, it needs to critically review the gender ideology embedded in its knowledge base as well as liberate the knowledge of groups with which it works. To do so, it is necessary to recognise the unique role of practitioners in discovering and interpreting subjugated knowledge (Figueira-McDonough *et al.*, 2001). Gender relations in social work continue to be a core issue of the research of knowledge in practice (Lyons and Taylor, 2004; Scourfield, 2002, 2006; Van den Bergh, 1995) and diversity and structural oppression (Morrow and Messinger, 2006; White, 1995). Scourfield (2006) argues that as well as being sensitive to wider discourses of gender relations, social workers need to consider the ways in which gender is localised. Gender practices vary according to local culture, and social workers tend to construct their clients in line with local images of men and women. Anti-oppressive practice involves recognising the important influence of local stereotypes and challenging them, whilst also acknowledging that gendered practices can vary from place to place.

The following questions are in the focus of our study: what are the societal assumptions of social work and which policy and institutional arrangements reinforce these stereotypes? Who are the actors in social work and how are they contributing to the rise of professional identity under the specific economic conditions of social workers and service users, and how is the knowledge produced and reproduced in social work practice? How is the gendered nature of the profession reconstructed and reproduced in the discourses of social work teaching books? The research presented here is based on discourse analysis of Russian social work teaching materials and qualitative interviews with social service providers in the provincial city of Saratov in Russia.

We begin by exploring the methodology and move on to discuss how the ideology of a specific female work-capacity is reproduced, as in other forms of care work, in the discourse and social representation of social work. This is followed by an analysis of the dominant knowledge of social order that informs discourses in social work education. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on the lack of professionalisation of social work and the importance of anti-discriminatory practice and critical thinking that are set to become an important emphasis in the education and professional development of social workers.

Methodology

Our analysis is conducted on three levels: policy and institutions; discourse and culture; actors and identity. Such an approach requires a methodology that combines studies of social work discourses in practice and education. Social work practice discourse is analysed using the empirical data collected between 1996-2006 in Saratov, Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova, 1999; Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, 2002, 2004). The case studies in two social services were conducted by the group of the researchers including the authors of this paper in 1996-1998, based on various documentary data,

observations and 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with service providers. Further qualitative interviews were conducted in 2001-2002 with eight service users, namely with single mothers who live in poverty, and two social workers who provided services for them. Material also includes 20 interviews with single mothers (2003), 10 interviews with administrators (2004) and 15 interviews with service providers and administrators (2006).

The main research questions in these data collection series address the contradictions in the rise of professional identity in a context of labour market policies, social work ideologies in dealing with the issues of poverty, the knowledge base in social work and the ideologies of managerialism in social services. The meanings attached to the notion of a profession as “women’s work” in the interviews and in the mass media were analysed from a feminist social theory position (Dominelli, 2002).

Addressing gender inequality issues while educating social workers promotes the development of professional competencies to recognise discrimination and advocate human rights. In Russia, the National Standard for Social Work Education was introduced in 2000 that stresses the importance of awareness of gender issues in the curriculum. “Gender and Women’s Studies” is a mandatory course among the disciplines of the National Standard of Social Work Education. A wide range of other disciplines also focuses on gender issues: family studies, social gerontology, problems of social work with juveniles, and social policy. Our main criteria for inclusion of the textbooks in our study were, first, a book should be teaching material on social work and/or social policy issues, and second, a book should be published in a large number of copies (several thousand) by established publishers. An additional criterion was related to recommendation of this book by the National Council of Social Work Education (SWE) or by the Ministry of Education for wide use in universities throughout Russia. This sample represents almost the entire list of teaching books on social work published and distributed on the national level in these years. We analysed 42 textbooks that are used as teaching materials for social work curriculum and published between 1999 and 2004 by reputable Moscow and Saint-Petersburg houses; twenty-eight of these books were also recommended by the National Council of SWE or by the Ministry of Education.

Our categories for analysing the textbooks were, at first, characters, which were inscribed with “sex traits” – such as, for instance, emperor and empress, prostitute, single mother – and qualified in a certain way. Second, such explicit categories as man, woman, he, she, feminism, gender, sex, sexual differences, gender-related categories such as sexuality, family, parenthood, as well as descriptions of social policy directions and social work practices related to gender. Third, we looked at implicit gender dimensions, for instance, silence surrounding gender relations, gender differences and discrimination. Fourth, we paid special attention to the manifestations of sexist language. Sometimes, and in addition, a book, a chapter or a section was selected for special analysis if it was devoted to gender issues as a whole.

We also scrutinised a certain volume of text in an attempt to quantify how much attention was paid to the topics of gender within a book and within an individual chapter. We looked at both the explicit – “that has been told” – and the implicit – “that has not been told” – dimensions of gender. In books that contained no explicit gender-related issues in the title or table of contents, we read the whole book to see whether or not there are any relevant messages in it. Using critical discourse analysis (Park, 2005; Van Dijk, 1997; Van Leeuwen, 1993), we sought to investigate the particular ways in which “gender” is inscribed and deployed in social work discourse. Language and

discourse are approached in this study “as the instrument of power and control [...] as well as the instruments of social construction of reality” (Van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193).

Policy and institutional contexts: social work and societal assumptions of women's labour

The restructuring of industry in Russia led to a rise of unemployment figures. The unemployed people became the nuclei of social services in 1990s. In Saratov, a large provincial city where we conducted our research, the creation of jobs in the “social sphere” opened up a perspective of employment for hundreds of people, the vast majority of them were women. Only 1.5 per cent of the labour force in social work agencies are men, who work as drivers and plumbers, and a few administrators. In the mid-1990s, the majority of social workers in Russia were either women around 50 years of age, who lost their jobs after enterprises were closed down or mothers with young children. In both cases, the attractions of social work were flexible working hours and moral reasons – “helping people”. The wages of social workers are not therefore only monetary, but rather symbolic in that social work enables them to fulfil their “primary” female obligations – bringing up their own children, taking care of sick relatives and meeting societal expectations of “female destiny”.

The predominance of women in social work – as in nursing and other caring work – implies low wage levels, and, instead of formal professional knowledge and skills, stresses the personal qualities of a worker and the emotional aspects of duties, which in turn reinforces a stereotype of social work as a “female occupation”. Patriarchal stereotypes justify the cheap labour of women due to assumptions held not only by social service administrators, but also by social workers themselves. It is assumed that taking care of children, the elderly or persons with disabilities comes “naturally” to women, a task that is learned from childhood and does not require any formal training. Besides, a woman's work is considered a secondary source of family income.

Indeed, contemporary Russian social service is arranged in such a way that it encourages women to work more effectively by stressing conventional femininity – dependency, empathy, passivity and obedience. Advertising can be seen as providing some functional equivalents of myth; like myths, it frequently resolves social contradictions, provides models of identity, and celebrates the existing social order. For example, advertising washing powder in TV commercial in 1994, a roughly 40-year-old woman is shown in her home, and subtitles inform us that this is “Elena Feldman, an employee of social sphere”. When compared to advertisements for deodorant and breath-freshener in these years, which provided a model for “business woman”, detergent advertisements rarely sent the message “she is employed”, and tended to portray a mother-in-law showing a young housewife how to take care of her kitchen. An exception to most advertisements in mid-1990s was an image of hot-dog seller – a pompous and clean housewife-like lady. Although in late 1990s, the images of flight attendants and waitresses joined this repertoire, mainstream advertising of household cleaning products continues to employ the image of a cosy, stay-at-home housewife.

The conditions of recruitment in social work (low pay, high staff turnover) and selection (“the qualities of soul”, assiduity), work duties (listening attentively, cleaning rooms, changing beds) and work hours (flexible schedule) – all constitute post-Soviet social service philosophy. Such a symbolic contract between women and the state has been legitimised by the “National plan of activities concerning the improvement of women's position in Russia and increasing their role in society up to 2000”, which promotes a “creation of additional working places for women by widening the network

of social services" (National Plan, 1996). An idea inherent within such a system is that social groups who have fewer opportunities of finding a job would work for less money, and that therefore a state interested in minimising social work expenditure will reproduce such a type of exploitation. At the same time, there is another interpretation of such professional self-image: a social worker was previously in the same position as his or her client but accidentally and temporarily started playing a role of the professional helper. In other words, social workers and clients are not separated by barriers of professionalism, class, or the nature of experienced difficulties in their lives.

Actors and professional identity

What brings people to social work and what keeps them here? It is obviously neither money nor prestige. The following statements demonstrate a woman's evaluation of material assets of her work in 1996:

Small, miserable salary . . . In this business the salary does not matter . . . For woman it is certainly low, but acceptable. Though it is "crumbs", they are constant and there is less risk (#8, social worker, 1996).

The informants stated that the work is not difficult, but rather interesting. Flexible working hours provide much opportunity for women to care for children or look after ill relatives. Added to this, these positions were open while other job chances were scarce: "There are not very many options to find jobs, no choices" (#2, social worker, 1996). At the same time, a central motive in all interviews is being useful to people:

I would like to help, [with] some kindness, not even material [support], just purely psychological. [We have a] large effect – both mums and children leave with shining eyes – it inspires a lot! (#4, social worker, 1996).

Some of the interviewees reported, they are got accustomed to their clients, developed friendly relationships with them, and could not imagine any other work: "I have so much got used to them . . . I already could not [be] without these families" (#1, social worker, 1996). The higher officials in the social services system claim that formal training is a secondary factor for the career in social work. For instance, a head of the human resource department at the Russian Ministry of Labour and Social Development (cited in Poniatovskaia, 2001, p. 10) declared that for the university graduates it is necessary to work for three years in low paid positions in order to gain practice experience. At the same time, many officials and managers of social services were dissatisfied with the level of knowledge of social workers because of the lack of formal training in their career paths. Research conducted in different regions of Russia bears this out: most employees lack training, and this impacts negatively on the quality of their services.

Recent changes in Russian social services include rise of a third sector, a concern with social work professionalisation, and the development of the new managerialism. There is an obvious attempt to move from the vague concepts of social work as an occupation where one needs only a "big heart" and motherly kindness to manageable and accountable activities. Terms from business and management are increasingly entering the world of social services, like effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, professional qualification, successful performance and effective service delivery. This may indicate a turn towards the rational "male" world of business, but in social services the majority of employees are still women with low pay and prescribed feminine qualities in their job:

She got herself inside, she, on her shoulders . . . a number of families with domestic violence, she gets inside these families, almost got herself in-between this offender and victim. She sort of takes them through herself. She tries hard, so that the family would be an ideal one (social service administrator, 2006).

An element of professional qualification, which has been taken-for-granted, is a set of “natural” qualities of a specialist’s personality. This may lead to a neglect of the employee’s needs owing to the uncertainty of standards of services, workload, administration and clients’ demands. An assumption of core qualities as a guarantee of the efficiency and quality of staff members’ also carries the risk of neglecting the needs of the social workers due to lack of standards. In turn, this gives rise to uncertain definitions of services, as well as fuzzy expectations and demands on the part of both administrators and clients.

The peculiarities of social work routine in social services include high workload and inadequate reward, indefinite and irrational relations between a social worker and a client, an uncertain, irrational nature of worker–client relationships, a vulnerability of workers vis-à-vis the organisation and service users, paternalistic treatment of clients, non-transparency and complexity of caring work measurement, too high demands on the clients’ side and the concomitant risk of neglecting the needs of the same. Clearly, it is not “feminine qualities” but the structural conditions of work that determine the labour relations and the choice of women among the labour force.

Social workers and service users

The role of a social service system in constructing the clients of a welfare system is ambiguous. Social workers are gradually acquiring new skills and tools to effect social change; they succeed in promoting positive changes in lives of single mothers, contributing to a rising awareness of a status of full social citizenship. Positive experience of interaction with welfare agencies is related in the narratives of single mothers to an evaluation of professional qualities of workers, their accessibility and good treatment of clients:

It happened so that I came in and sat at her table at once. And when she [social worker] began asking me about my problems, about everything, about my current life, it occurred that I have a lot of different problems. And she ‘arranged my things in their respective drawers’ and wrote it all down (single mother, 2003).

All services are free of charge, which is highly valued by single mothers. Each successfully completed “project” – for instance, finding resources, getting specific assistance and services – generates a more positive attitude towards the agency and the professionals. Often, however, social workers contribute to practices of social exclusion. The fact that street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) often do not perceive social work as a specific professional activity but rather as paid domestic chores, has different consequences in everyday working activity. In some cases, this is a positive sign of classlessness, an absence of social and class barriers between the recipients of social help and agency representatives (Reeser and Epstein, 1996). At the same time, it may damage professional relations because too high a level of equality can have both positive and negative effects. It will hinder a rational performance of service providers, who reproduce the model of familial relations in communication with their clients (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, 2002).

Zeira and Rosen (2000) point out that everyday knowledge – “tacit knowledge” that is not necessarily expressed verbally but must be experienced – plays an important

role in practitioners' work. It includes "practical wisdom" and "life experience", implicitly included in everyday practical action and tacitly implied directions in social work routine. This knowledge is available to us only through practitioners' experience. Those employees who are responsible for the primary registration of clients exert their authority when classifying them and sometimes construct informal rules with regard to the client. An explanation of poverty by a social worker means that single mothers as social service clients are assigned to a separate group, loaded with specific problems:

It may be because of their nature, maybe upbringing was different, environment was wrong, situation was different, life circumstances absolutely different . . . I don't know, maybe just psychological traits of a personality itself, a life philosophy (specialist in social work, 2003).

Social workers sometimes have a tendency to blame the victim, interpreting complex issues in the life situations of single mothers as their individual psychological peculiarities or laying the responsibility on women for problems that have societal origin, thus ignoring important social conditions. Following Foucault, Dominelli (2004) maintains that clients become the subjects of governmentality technologies, beginning to control themselves on their own, treating themselves as fragmented and atomised creatures, isolated from others. She argues that with the help of differential inclusion social workers encourage individuals to choose identity models that could be called a limited type of citizenship of a "deserving" poor.

Measuring or identifying poverty is conducted by social workers by different means, including the inspection of living premises. In interviews, the poverty level is assessed by evaluating external characteristics of wellbeing, which is usually done in comparison to social worker's own conditions. According to a specialist in social work, living conditions in such houses are hard, but comparable to those of social workers at the lower end of the salary scale. Emotional encounter with poverty deeply affects a social worker:

At first I would just come home and say, "God, how good we live ourselves, my house is strong enough, although our flat is alike, it is very small and many people live here, but I said, how happy I am living here!" And now, I've been working for two years and still cannot adjust to an appearance [of poverty] (specialist in social work, 2003).

Social workers construct categories of poverty on the basis of emotional impressions, which can limit the professional's view. Smells, colour, lack of fresh air, or old furniture are the signs of difference helping to build practical topologies of social work. For instance, a metaphor "smell of poverty" reveals everyday theories used for "adjustment" of complex reality of human relationships to strict classifications of service users as deserving and undeserving.

Knowledge production in social work: gender in social work teaching books

Our analysis of social work teaching books has shown that a failure to mention gender in many cases leads to avoiding important aspects of professional knowledge. Social work history (Firsov, 2001) ignores the women's movement of late 19th and early 20th centuries and gender policy in Soviet times. "Social management" (Makasheva and Kalinnikova, 2002) avoids issues of non-governmental organisations where women play a very important role. Some publications support a "gender-blind" ideological position probably due to historically developed and unspoken relations of gender

inequality. A textbook on social protection of people with disabilities (Antip'eva, 2002) presents the fundamentals of Russian legislation, which is considered as progressive gender neutral – for instance, talking about the parents of disabled children but not about their mothers. At the same time, though the author mentions some difficulties with the implementation of legislation, the problems of discrimination, of the different influence the laws have on lives of people – whether disabled themselves or parents of disabled children – according to their sex are not called into question. In the meanwhile, gender expertise of social policy and legislation would have enabled critical reflection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities.

Some books mention a character, which possesses gender features, and is as a rule, a woman. Gender analysis is not employed here, rather, certain issues of “women in general” are on the agenda, including motherhood (Kholostova and Sorvina, 2001; Klimantova, 2004), corresponding rights (Antip'eva, 2002), social benefits and guarantees, which are granted to individual categories of workers subject to their physiological and other peculiarities (Anisimov, 1999).

Gender as a demographic variable, according to the authors, affects the acuteness of a social problem, the strength of stress, the peculiarities of life style and the character of required social assistance. As a rule, sexual differences are taken for granted as a contributory factor of different patterns of behaviour, and the emotional and psychosocial wellbeing of a person – for example, as a factor of post-traumatic stress disorder in a textbook on clinical psychology in social work (Marshinin, 2002). In these cases, gender differences are represented as biologically materialised substances, while the social conditions of their construction are not taken into account. A textbook on social rehabilitation points out the importance of gender roles' acquisition in a process of family socialisation of children with disabilities (Mardakhaev, 2001, p. 19). At the same time, the author over-emphasises the competence of mothers in their children's affairs, regarding it as a natural feature, on the instinctive level, without any explanation or reason, while father's role is completely excluded from this educational narrative. Another example supports an old stereotype of women's paid jobs as being temporary and superficial while domestic labour is their prior domain: “Social gerontology' offers explanations of sexual differences that have an impact on retirement. It seems that “women take retirement easier than men. [...] The retirement of women who are burdened by domestic duties, by keeping house, by rearing children is viewed by them as a relief and satisfaction” (Iatsemirskaia and Belenkaia, 1999, p. 158).

Gender related issues are included in several books as a structural component of a whole publication and can be identified in the table of contents. The message is contradictory as the different chapters are written by numerous authors. For example, a textbook on social work (Kurbatov, 1999) has a chapter on women's studies (feminologia), where feminism is described as a positive social force and a theory, while in other chapters, we find that divorce is blamed for its negative influence on the moral and psychological development of children, and single parent families are qualified in a stereotyped and negative way. A textbook on social policy views women as a “socio-demographic category of the population distinguished by a number of physiological peculiarities, by a specific hormone status, by the position in a social structure. [...] The main reason for viewing women as a special socio-demographic group and as a specific category of social work clients is a biological precondition of a number of cultural and social consequences” (Volgin, 2002, p. 684). In a textbook on theory of

social work (Firsov and Studenova, 2000, pp. 321-7), the role of a social worker is seen to be to assign a correct gender role for a client to help him/her to re-socialise.

Not only are women's issues in social work education largely ignored, the experiences of both women and men are presented in frameworks of a traditional body of knowledge and not reflected critically. Women's issues become an addendum to the body of dominant knowledge; they are presented as exceptions or deviant cases from the general theoretical and practice principles that are being taught; this marginalises women even further and consigns their knowledge to the ghetto. Social work is defined here as "according to therapeutic models that reinforce socially sanctioned consumer roles. The expert defines what needs to be changed by defining (diagnosing) what is wrong with the consumer, interpreting and shaping the consumer's life toward socially desirable adaptation" (Figueira-McDonough *et al.*, 2001, p. 418).

Towards non-discriminatory and gender sensitive social work education

The societal assumptions of social work constitute this profession as "female work", while the state has reinforced the societal assumption of cheap women's labour by setting up inadequate wage policies for social workers. Social work practice theories, which often exist in a form of "tacit knowledge" (Zeira and Rosen, 2000), are interconnected with dominant thinking on gender and social order. The problems of a client might be an outcome of beliefs in traditional gender roles and traditional family definitions, which supposes inequality and subordination of women. However, models of social work practice often admit such a definition and, therefore, worsen the condition of women. Furthermore, professionals try to solve the problems of each woman separately instead of bringing them together with other people with similar experience, which could provide help from the group. Dividing the poor as deserving and undeserving turned out to be very useful to scientifically rationalise the allocation of resources. By saving resources, ideologies of governmentality create a gap between clients and social workers. That may be the reason why clients view practitioners not as sources of help, but as obstacles that must be overcome to get required services (Dominelli, 2004).

Gender matters when it comes to practice and forms a part of social work education. Our analysis shows that the textbooks are insufficient in their gender analysis in preparing social workers for the reality they will face. At present, Russian social work textbooks still lack not only a serious discussion of gender and multiculturalism but also many other modern social theories. Gender is discussed on the basis of theories supported by foreign research examples and results in a few textbooks. Even in these publications, the authors are not genuinely concerned with gender disparities. These issues are usually addressed in small extracts in a single part of the book and deeper scrutiny discloses that the text is not based on gender theory; it even contradicts it.

Silence surrounding gender indicates the choice of a bio determinist perspective. Untold messages reveal a text's selective inattention to gender and reflect an attitude of insouciance towards sexism and oppression (Titus, 1993). Thus, the borders and the contents of "gender" are understood to be constructed rather than discovered (Allen, 1996). Though explicit sexism in manuals is rare, unintentional or implicit sexism produce considerable problems in social work and social policy should be criticised when required (Grise-Owens, 2002). Mothers in general and single mothers in particular are examined from the point of view of patriarchal state ideology. The latter are classified as deserving and non-deserving – immoral, unfortunate and dangerous, not only for their own children but for society as a whole. Professional discourse

reinforces the powerless status of the service users, labelling them “as incompetent and compelling them to adapt to their marginal position” (Figueira-McDonough *et al.*, 2001, p. 418).

The research presented here underlines the need of anti-discriminatory and emancipatory practice and critical thinking in the education and professional development of social workers. This is especially obvious when it comes to vulnerable groups, like single mothers: in order to mobilise the resources of local communities to help single mothers fully realise their social citizenship, social workers need to collaborate with non-governmental organisations, including women’s organisations, trade unions and human rights organisations. Social workers can help people understand that not individual guilt but social inequality and exclusion alienate people from the society. While the need for and benefit of a participatory approach is striking, the principles of non-discriminatory or culture-sensitive social work continue to be ignored in social work education discourse. To transform the curriculum requires a fundamental paradigm shift (Bernard, 1987) that challenges a traditional body of knowledge claims universal “truth”. A contextual approach in social work, critical and holistic knowledge and skills to empower service users need to be developed in both public and non-governmental sector in Russia to replace today’s dominant approaches, which limit rather than improve the opportunities for social citizenship.

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