

# Social work: A history of gender and class in the profession

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## abstract

Most successful professions emerged as male middle-class projects based on scientific knowledge and are organized to promote the self-interests of those involved and to protect their turf. The professional theories have also been developed from a male perspective. Social work, on the other hand, is a female professional project, where women constitute a vast majority of the professionals. This article explores the process of social work professionalisation in Norway from a feminist perspective and by taking the historical position of women into consideration. According to the official account, social work in Norway is a product of the post-WWII welfare state. A close look reveals the gendered nature of this ‘new’ profession, and further, reveals a professional developmental story prior to World War II, which was formed by women’s ideas; visions and values and that were structurally built into the occupation. This article explores the historical social context of women’s professional work and its interactions with social environments. The paper’s theoretical contribution exposes how masculine theories on professions have proved unable to account for both female *and* male professional projects because they devalue women’s efforts and ignore the different societal expectations of men and women. The development of the post-war welfare state did move Norwegian social work from the margins to a much more central position, but gender is still an important dimension through which to deconstruct professional development.

## Introduction

In 2010, social work officially marked its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a profession in Norway. In 1950 the state-run Norwegian School of Governmental and Social Work was established to meet the needs of a ‘new born’ welfare state emerging immediately after the Second World War (Kluge, 1960; Terum, 1982). A corps of executive officers was required to handle a series of social-political reforms regarding social support and economic services. During the anniversary celebrations, many emphasized that this state demand had given rise to a whole new kind of professional and contributed to continual growth in social work regarding knowledge production.

The social work profession in Norway is the topic of this article, with a focus on two main concerns. First, to describe the formation of social work as a field of professional work for

women in Norway and through this, subsequently to engage in a critical analysis of the ‘male-stream’ way social work has been theorized in the literature on professions. The point of departure is that social work is primarily women’s work; in Norway, as in most countries in the western world, women constitute a vast majority of its practitioners. This consistently large proportion across national boundaries has commonly been explained through the values embedded in the work, with its orientation towards caring for the vulnerable and those with social ‘handicaps’. I challenge the official understanding of the origin of Norwegian social work as a profession, claiming that there already existed a school of professional social work prior to the state school, although its existence has been made invisible and neglected in the official story. From a feminist perspective I explore the constitution of a professional field and the construction of the first school of social work, focusing on what these pioneering women tried to achieve, their working strategies, thought styles and motivations. Also I argue that our understanding of professions and professional growth is still overwhelmingly male biased. The theories in the field need to be elaborated, with closer attention given to gender relations, power structures and women’s ways of knowing. Among other things, gendering professional theories will produce new and richer understandings of the professions and allow us to comment on how the premises for becoming successful within the system of professions differ according to gender. In my view, social work provides an example of a profession where there is still a knowledge gap to fill and where there are silenced stories that need to be told. The article draws on earlier writings on social work (by scholars and by social workers themselves), a series of white papers, annual reports, official statistics, biographies and Festschriften<sup>1</sup>.

The article begins with a brief outline of professional theories and a feminist critique of these before touching on how the process of professionalization in social work has been accounted for internationally by different scholars, taking conventional and feminist interpretations into account. Then I turn to the Norwegian context, setting the scene by drawing attention to the social, cultural and normative conditions of women towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – when women’s ‘natural’ place and role was in the home. Unlike male professionals, women were confronted with obstacles and dilemmas related to their familial obligations and assumed place in society. Given their different positioning, they were guided by a different professional logic and articulated their strategic aims in accordance with the normative expectations towards women. Simultaneously, the process of professionalizing social work was transforming women’s former unpaid charity work in the private domain into paid work in the public sphere.

## **A theoretical framework**

Professions in the form we know them today are inextricably linked to modernity (Fauske, 2008; Larson, 1977; Slagstad, 2008). Although the term ‘profession’ is frequently used in

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<sup>1</sup> Festschriften, written to celebrate the 20th and 40th anniversary of the establishments of the state school of social work

research and everyday speech and seems to have broadened, it is still a contested concept and there is strong dissent on how to define it (Molander and Terum, 2008). Some characteristics, however, seem to recur in the literature: professions are knowledge-based, the management of such knowledge is ruled by codes of ethics, and autonomy is regarded as a core criterion, which implies that professional practices are not subject to an employer's control. In a recent article, Brante (2011) argues vigorously against a broadening of the definition and advocates a universal definition based on an approach that views professions as occupations that conduct interventions derived from the scientific knowledge of mechanisms, structures and contexts. Professions, he argues, are socially and politically significant parts of contextually conditioned truth regimes. According to Brante, a strict definition has an impact on research and the lack of a shared definition renders communication between scholars more difficult. Brante's position sustains a view of practical knowledge (which social work is based on) as non-professional.

Although all agree that professional work is knowledge-based, the knowledge question itself is a much debated issue. What should count as 'true' professional knowledge? From the 1980s onwards, the multitude of different knowledge forms in professions seems to have been more accepted and the assumption that abstract and scientific knowledge forms are always superior to practical and experience-based knowledge has been challenged (Heggen and Engebretsen, 2009).

Fundamental disagreements between scholars in the research field encourage further investigations from different perspectives. As many feminists have pointed out, autonomy and abstract thinking connote masculinity in our society, whereas practical work connotes femininity (Dahle, 1991; Davies, 1995; Annandale, 1998; Waerness, 2003). Hence, the professional work that many women do, such as nursing, social work, and teaching, is regularly associated with being practical, not theoretical. The implications of such tacit conceptions are that their work is not classified as scientific and their occupations are not part of a truth system that constitutes 'true' professions. The knowledge forms are ranked and women's work is regarded as inferior.

The idea that professions emerge in dynamic interaction with their environment and that professional politics are shaped through negotiation and power struggles have gained approval (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Fauske, 2008). To prosper, actors must prove a societal need for their expert knowledge and, furthermore, strategic allies are required to support their professional claims. Those who succeed in promoting their self-interests obtain benefits and privileges on behalf of their group. They achieve sovereignty and jurisdiction over their knowledge, i.e., autonomy. This mode of thought suggests that power is always involved. In his influential work, Abbott (1988) views the professions as a system of expert knowledge that, above all, is characterized by jurisdictional power struggles about turf, privileges and influence. He vividly describes a male world characterized by aggressive masculinities, worlds in which women's occupations are easily relegated to the margins. Within this system, abstract theoretical knowledge confers an important advantage in the power struggles, while practical knowledge is devalued and

subordinated. In his analysis, Abbott does not see an implicit gender order in the system of professions. He denies any gendered power differences and holds that, to the extent women engage in the professional game, they are likely to use the same power strategies as men.<sup>2</sup> He seems to be unaware of how women have been barred from the same weapons and tools that men use and that women historically have been located far from the power sources in working life (Dahl, 2008; Holter, 1977; Witz, 1992). Feminization, he argues, seems to be the most familiar form of degraded recruitment. One of his examples is the move of medical care from home to hospital that destroyed the former independence of the private duty nurse and placed her in a subordinated division of labour. The move from the private to the public automatically ranked the nurses as subordinate assistants to the medical profession in line with the abstract-practical knowledge divide.

In an early phase of theory building, often regarded as the era of the functionalist paradigm, Etzioni (1969) and his associates investigated professional development in three occupations – social work, nursing and teaching – and labelled them *semi*-professions. Stacey (1981) once characterized that term as mystifying and stigmatizing: it mystified social realities and stigmatized women as second-class citizens by labelling them as ‘semi-professional’. The term still circulates<sup>3</sup>, despite the lack of awareness about its original meaning. On Etzioni’s understanding gender was integral to his definition of a ‘semi-profession’, which had two features. Firstly, it was an occupation located within a bureaucratic organization and one in which women predominated. ‘The sheer preponderance of women places a brake on the extent to which these occupations can professionalise’, Witz claimed (1994: 60). Secondly, these occupations were characterized primarily by their shortcomings: they lacked occupational motivation, ambition and any drive towards intellectual mastery, and those in the occupations were incapable of exercising authority over men. Taking an implicit normative and masculine perspective, Etzioni concluded that achieving full professional status for these professions was unlikely and suggested that semi-professionals accepted rather than challenged this reality.

From a feminist and critical perspective, Witz (1992) and Davies (1995; 1999) underline the need to include a gender perspective in the general theories of professions. Historically, women have been barred from men’s privileged world, and the work they do is not recognized as professional, and thus devalued. In her studies of nursing, Davies claims that to understand current trends we need to delve deeper into cultural notions of masculinity and femininity, while Witz’s research focuses more on how processes of exclusion have actively shut women out of men’s professions.

Notably, the professions have historically been dominated by upper-class elite men. Hence, the study of professions deals with social classes; sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly. Still, with a few exceptions, class issues, like gender issues, have mostly been ignored and understudied in mainstream research (Witz, 1992; Dahle, 1991; 2008; 2009).

2 Abbott (1988: 351-2) treats the gender issue only in a footnote.

3 The term is for instance frequently – and uncritically – used in Molander and Terum, 2008.

In Norwegian social work, class relations played an important role in the formative period of the occupation. A feminist theoretical perspective that takes gender and class into account provides the direction for this article's exploration of social work. With this view in mind we start by locating social work in a broader, international context.

## **Social work**

It is commonly held that the historical roots of social work lie in charity work that was directed towards social needs and poverty throughout the centuries. Much of this work was previously women's unpaid work. The theoretical foundations of social work rest on exploring human behaviour, social systems and principles of social justice (Levin, 2004). The strong ties between professional social work, values of compassion and human support have made it difficult to delineate the boundaries of social work. According to conventional theories on professions, transparent boundaries limit the possibilities for professionalizing in a differentiated system of functions (Stichweh, 2008). On the other hand, Levin (2004) holds that exactly this ambiguity provides a challenge or a starting point for critical reflection of and further development in professional social work.

Bacchi (1999) reminds us that we always need to tease out and comment on the presuppositions and assumptions embedded in competing interpretations of an issue. She argues that any description of a problem is simultaneously an interpretation that involves judgment and choices. Regarding American social work, it is interesting to note how scholars have represented and interpreted its developmental process differently. While Abbott (1988) provides his 'genderless' analysis, sociologists Dresselt (1992) and Deegan (1990) interpret the process of professionalization of social work from a gendered perspective. Through their feminist gaze they observe how gender is structurally embedded in professional work from the very outset. All three agree that social work was constituted as a field of education in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US and in most European countries, but they depict these processes in different ways.

Dresselt (1992) portrays the professional process in very different terms from Abbott. The American Civil War (1861-1865), she argues, created an increased need for social support and a rational, scientific and administrative organization to deal with it. Until then, the charity model was the only option for helping those in need, and because women, who did most of such work, were more or less denied entrance to the paid labour market, it went unpaid. A desire to liberate social work from the 'chaotic charitable sentiments sometimes floating in the minds of women' (Dresselt, 1992: 212) was embedded in the new undertaking. The above critique was explicitly directed at the benevolent upper-class women who organized the volunteer work. According to the ideology emerging at that time, empathy and emotion were no longer assumed to be part of social work; its duties were to be performed in a 'business like', professional manner. There was an attempt to make it more masculine. From that shift, states Dresselt, a whole new industry evolved. Even more importantly, a gendered hierarchy emerged in which men, due to their 'natural

leadership', organized the work, the knowledge production and the teaching, while women, further subordinated, continued their work in the different social practices. Although Dresselt does not deal with the economic question, an obvious assumption is that men were properly compensated for their leadership positions, while women's practical client work was poorly paid. Dresselt notes, however, that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, charity work was more highly valued than it is now, because it was felt that labours of love could not be performed for money. Regardless of that sentiment, or perhaps because of it, through several mechanisms, a gendered wage gap was structurally built into the profession.

Exploring American social work from her position as a historical sociologist, Deegan (1990) connects the emergence of the profession more directly to the University of Chicago in the 1920s. At that time, theories of social interaction were a major focus and the university's influential and progressive scientific milieu attracted several intellectual women. Later, many of them left the institution, saying they preferred to now apply their theoretical knowledge in concrete situations. Most of their male colleagues remained at the university, pursuing a life of the mind and scientific careers. The question of whether these women left academia voluntarily, or were excluded from scientific membership by the men through more or less subtle discriminatory strategies, warrants further exploration.

In 1889, American sociologist Adams co-founded Chicago's Hull House, part of the Settlement Movement. Social worker Richmond worked for the US Charity Organization Society for nearly twenty years from the 1880s, and instituted a method of casework that is still widely used. Notwithstanding the gender split, Deegan argues that American social work was the global pioneer and its ideas spread to most of Europe, including Norway. In England, disparate stories of social work's professional development circulate. The year 1895 is recurrently marked as a starting point, when a female social worker was hired by the Royal Free Hospital in London for a one-year trial period and thereafter the hospital would be able to determine whether social work added to patient treatment. It apparently did; she was contracted to continue her work. In 1921, Sweden was the first country in Scandinavia to establish privately financed social work education. The programme later became a separate institute, located at Stockholm University (Pettersson, 2001) and became state financed in 1945. Positioning social work within the Swedish university system gave it a unique educational standing among the Nordic countries.

This brief comparative glance demonstrates that the development of social work as an educational and professional field has taken different routes in different countries and is accounted for in different ways. There has been no consistent pattern to define social problems across countries, nor is there an unequivocal definition of social work itself. Establishing social work as a profession in a country was dependent on the local context and on the cultural perspectives and presuppositions embedded in the subject.

## Social work development in Norway

As already noted, the social work profession in Norway is publicly assumed to have a relatively brief history of 60 years. However, there are silenced aspects of the story that I now will give voice to. In 1920, the National League of Norwegian Women (NLNW) began on their own initiative to teach courses in social work in Oslo. At that time, the term ‘social work’ was broad and transparent. For the historian Seip (1990), it describes much more than a set of professional practices; she considers it to cover a wide range of women’s unpaid work in society at that time, especially in the late 1890s when Norway was undergoing industrialization. The new society prospered, but created new kinds of social problems, and concurrently, Seip claims, a whole new political awareness regarding society’s responsibility to deal with them.

In this new culture, wage work the way we know it today was established, and a new political democracy and organizational life emerged. It is important to note that most women had scarce access to paid work and were located outside political life; voluntary organizations were the only way for women to engage in activities outside the home. One such group was the philanthropic Post-Natal Women’s Association, organized to assist women in need of help after birth; other organizations promoted missionary work or alcohol abstention. Many women’s organizations gradually began collaborating with public authorities to solve social problems, although it took a long time for their contributions to be acknowledged.

In her analysis of social work, Seip is deeply concerned with class-divided society and treats tensions between middle-class and working-class women as a social issue. The latter sometimes voiced their disgust for what they felt to be an encroachment on their way of life. One working-class woman wrote:

Charity work – what a disgusting term. We don’t want their pity or mercy, what we claim is justice for all. Let the upper class alone with their pities as other people are addicted to other things. (Seip, 1990: 137; my translation)

Notably, women from all classes participated in social work, although from profoundly different premises. The social work of upper- and middle-class women was carried out as top-down charity politics, and for working-class women such work was, without question or analysis, naturalized as female (Seip, 1990: 138). The quotation above indicates strong tension and conflicting views between the classes. Some middle-class women saw a need early on to develop a social work education programme, but there was no explicit goal to develop as a profession. Working-class women, on the other hand, had no aim to make an occupation out of their social work; their contributions were anchored in mutual solidarity.

Although most of the literature on professions does not clarify or deal with the class aspect, the scarce literature on the history of Norwegian social work implicitly shows how gender and class were closely interrelated and formed a foundation for its development through an

education programme and as a professional field (Kiær, 1951; Efskind, 1983; Kluge, 1960; Ulsteen, 1960; Løvskår, 1983).

## **The National League of Norwegian Women's School of Social Work**

During the 1890s, new social and educational policies paved the way for women to enter some social positions in the public sphere. In 1884, the University of Oslo (the only university in Norway at that time) opened its doors to women. By 1896, women could hold a seat on civic guardian committees and in 1889 the school system allowed mixed-gender classes. Soon after 1900, a formal decision was made to allow at least one female representative on every civic committee that dealt with all sorts of questions regarding support for the poor (Agerholt, 1973). Women also began to hold state-financed public and paid positions such as industrial inspectors, housing inspectors and children's home inspectors. These positions demanded formal education of some sort and social work became a sought-after competence and supposedly innate 'female' capacities were deemed insufficient.

Through these factors, Norway's political and social development in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided a context for professional social work to grow. A small-scale education programme found form in 1920, when the National League of Norwegian Women began teaching social courses as a private initiative. The NLNW was founded in 1904 by prominent upper- and middle-class women, some from the educated elite and some with relatively influential positions in society. They had in common a profound engagement with women's questions, with a major ambition to inspire women to engage in humanistic social work to improve the conditions of all women. Many of the league's founders were internationally oriented and had spent time abroad (Løvskår, 1983), hence they were familiar with international developments regarding social work.

The model for a Norwegian school of social work came from Sweden. Conditions for acceptance in the programme were a strong commitment to work for the benefit of the socially disadvantaged and a desire to make a living from practicing social work. The school's founders regarded the capacity to care for others as an inherent, female characteristic but they felt this had to be combined with some theoretical knowledge. According to their ideology, an educated social worker should be able to take on a wide range of professional tasks in the public and private spheres, such as in factories, prisons and police services, where a social worker would perform home visits and sit on committees, such as for public health (Kiær, 1951; Efskind, 1983; Levin, 2004).

The Swedish programme did not completely match the NLNW's visions and values (Ulsteen, 1960; Efskind, 1983); that model was directed mainly at upper- and middle-class women and based on academic ability. The Norwegian ideology was to primarily target

lower-middle- and working-class women, who needed more general education before practicing. The founders regarded it their obligation to educate working-class women so they could increase their employment prospects, and their educational programme was deliberately oriented towards women and values assumed to be female. However, despite the NLNW's moral commitment and intensive recruitment efforts, enrolment from working-class women remained extremely low; most applicants came from the middle class (Løvskår, 1983; Rasmussen, 1985).

The NLNW's mode of thinking regarding their educational programme departs substantially from the logic in most masculine-defined professional projects in that a major concern of the leaders was to educate women with lower class background than themselves. There are few, if any, indications that the NLNW considered strategies for promoting their self-interests or protecting their own turf to ensure their own exclusiveness in a professional market. Rather, their goal seemed to be helping people in need of support and to educate qualified helpers. This also implied that any striving for autonomy, which is regarded as a core value in most theories on professions, and that helps to protect boundaries and the independence of the professional group, is strikingly absent in the literature on social workers. They needed a strong professional organization to protect and promote the interests of the clients. However, they did not consider the class inequalities and the educated working-class women were never regarded equal to the women leaders of the NLNW. The class hierarchy rather remained untouched, it was only silently visible and taken for granted.

Their school started quite modestly with a series of short courses. They were initially organized as half-year units that soon expanded to full-year classes. The curriculum covered a wide variety of subjects such as language, history, psychology, personal hygiene, family planning and budgeting economy. Because of the short amount of teaching time the education was necessarily fragmented and superficial. In the 1930s most schools of social work in Europe used a two-year curriculum, which met the minimum standards set by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (Rasmussen, 1985). It remains unclear why the Norwegian education programme fell short of the international standards, but possibly it was due to national conditions such as lack of support from strategic allies, i.e. the intellectual academic elite and the state. In addition, the general fiscal crisis in the 1930s was devastating for women's rights and gender equality issues. Another assumption could be that a higher educational standard worked against the NLNW's ideology of encouraging primarily working-class women to engage in education.

Anthropologist Solheim argues that the modern gender regime rests on two mutually dependent pillars (Solheim, 2007: 19). The first pillar is the split between family and working life; the second is the split between private life and public life. Using Solheim's theoretical perspective to analyze upper-middle-class women in the 1930s, one sees that, married or not, they participated actively in public life while maintaining a firm foundation in family and the private sphere. A social work education programme was a 'natural' expansion of their commitment to help others, not a split from it, and their work was never

meant to be at the expense of their familial obligations. The construction of the social work profession, the professional organization and the content of the education were adapted to the normative conceptions of womanhood of that time. The founders of the NLNW's school of social work were likely aware of – and probably acknowledged – that a majority of educated social workers would leave professional work when they married or had children, according to the norms. Generally, those women who tried to combine family and professional life were met with contradictory expectations and often negative sanctions (Agerholt, 1973; Dahle, 1991).

There were other tensions and dilemmas. Despite the gendered restrictions discussed above, the NLNW had high aspirations for its school. One of their visions was to make women's values of caring a model for the whole society. Contrary to such an ambitious goal, however, they were modest about their endeavours and almost reluctant to consider the implications of the transformation of women's unpaid work in others' homes to paid work in the labour market. Their concern was to increase women's professional influence but without challenging their traditional domestic roles. The school's initiators took the gendered world as a given, and accepted – even emphasized – that female obligations necessitated different opportunity structures regarding involvement in professional work. Investigating social work as a gendered professional construction brings ignored theoretical dilemmas to the forefront; ones that account for people's actual lives, their obligations and the work they did (and do).

## A new education takes form

After World War II a new welfare state was emerging in Norway (and Scandinavia) that demanded a corps of qualified personnel to handle its governmental tasks, such as distribution of welfare services, counseling, and to administer the welfare offices (Terum, 1982). Very soon a state-regulated education was planned to meet with these new challenges, and the Norwegian School of Governmental and Social Work (NSGSW) was established in 1950. This state financed school soon became the major competitor of the NLNW's school – and eventually the cause of its demise.

According to Terum (1982), the establishment of a state school marks the distinct starting point for social work as a professional field in Norway. He points to the exceptional nature of this process through the close links to the state needs in the arising welfare state. As noted earlier, most theories of professions amply demonstrate that a more common pathway to professional growth has been that a group of private actors with strong self-interests aim at monopolizing a specific field of knowledge-based work practices in a competitive market.<sup>4</sup> In the formation of professional social work in the Norwegian context, such private self-interests hardly played a prominent role, Terum claims. With his

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<sup>4</sup> Abbotts (1988) analysis is a particularly distinct example of this research position, although he published his analysis much later than Terum (1982).

strong focus on the role of the state in developing social work as a professional field, he points to an important, although underestimated dimension in the common knowledge of professional growth that deserves to be further explored. However, what Terum neglects – or silences – is the thirty years of women's endeavours to establish a field of professional social work and that they even established an education long before the state school. There are no signs that the private entrepreneurship of upper class women was to protect their self-interests, rather it was based on a moral and political commitment to offer social support to people in need, besides providing an opportunity for working class women to get an education. One might however conceive that these upper class women preferred to educate working class women to do the practical work rather than doing it themselves, but this has to be explored. The important aspect here is that Terum, in his analysis of the professionalization process of Norwegian social work, hardly mentions the NLNW's school of social work. One assumption for not taking the existing into account, could be that he was not aware of its existence, another (and more plausible) is that he regarded the school to be unimportant for the constitution of social work as a professional field and hence there was no need to account for its origin or significance.

The committee to give a report of a state education consisted of both male and female members. In the final report, submitted in 1947, the committee suggested an educational model with three different branches: social work, government and social pedagogy, with the suggested name of the school the Norwegian School of Social and Governmental Work. On a symbolic level the ordering of the three elements conveyed different meanings and the committee favoured the social aspects by putting it first. When debated in Parliament later on, however, the suggested name became a highly contentious issue (Kluge, 1960). The parliamentarians, all of them men with one single exception, strongly underlined the needs for administrative competencies, while they questioned the needs for client-focused social work. The existing NLNW's school of social work – and the 30 years of work women had put into developing this school – seemed to be unknown to most parliamentarians (Kluge, 1960). The major concern was instead to implement the emerging social and radical policy, based on new welfare rights. The outcome of the heated debate in Parliament thus became to rank the administrative and governmental aspects above the social needs of individual's. Viewed from Terum's perspective, the state school therefore rightly marks an official starting point of the social work education programme in Norway (despite the unofficial work and education that had taken place for many years prior to the establishment of the state school), a process in which professional interests played an uttermost modest role. As noted earlier, this seems to be similar to the US development and may be also be the case in other European countries (Deegan, 1990; Pettersson, 2001).

## **A gendering of the state education**

The new school gave rise to gendered divisions of work on many levels. The educational programmes comprised two paths of study: one of administration and one of social work. Each branch was divided into two parts: Level I (1 ½ years) and Level II (1 year). Entrance

required having completed elementary school and two years of secondary school, lower than the requirements for university study. Both branches were open to women and men, but the enrolment was gendered from the beginning (student statistics, 1960; Kluge, 1960). Among the 27 students in the first administrative class there was only one female. Ten years later, three out of 28 students were female. The social work branch held 19 men and 12 women in the first year. Only three years later, women constituted the majority, with 17 women and 12 men. The proportion of women in the social work branch continued to increase and stabilized at 80 per cent after its first twenty years of existence; public administration was the preference of males, social work the preference of females.

In a different gender split, the majority of men left the school after Level I, while nearly all women finished the two levels (Kluge, 1960). Why this gendered pattern? The most obvious answer lies in the labour market conditions of the emerging welfare state. Due to a shortage of competent administrative personnel in local governments, males were regularly recruited for jobs well before finishing Level I. Conversely, employment in social work was scarce. There were a few positions in medical institutions and some child welfare and rehabilitation positions. Because of this women may have taken the position that the best way to increase their job chances was to complete the education (Kluge, 1960).

On an institutional level, competition between the NLNW and NSGSW to recruit students had been heavy from the beginning. Because of the NLNW's school's historical and ideological roots, its programme accepted only women, and was shorter, due to women's assumed 'natural' family obligations. There were also substantial curriculum differences between the two schools. The NLNW's school focused on a broad range of humanistic subjects and paid less attention to the welfare economy and legal rights. Profiling the NLNW's school as different from the state school proved to be insufficient for attracting more students; the NSGSW rapidly achieved higher status and the number of female students increased.

The NLNW's school was forced to continually re-evaluate its functions and roles, but was reluctant to give up its educational endeavours. The course content was revised, some years later male students were accepted and the length of the programme was expanded to three years, in fact half a year longer than the NSSW's. However, none of these strategies proved successful. In 1961, a state policy made almost all private post-secondary schools state run, and the NLNW's school finally closed. An era of social work in Norway had come to an end.

The NSGSW had also changed its format over the years. Between 1950 and 1966, it had focused more on the public administration aspect; gradually, however, this perspective shifted towards client services because of empirical demands in the field (Terum, 1982). Further, new expectations regarding social work were articulated and promoted in Parliament, with the aim to better support clients in need of social and economic help.

The shift in ideology subsequently raised a debate about entrance requirements for state schools. Some argued to reduce the formal education requirement in favour of focusing on

having the ‘right’ qualities, skills and values to perform empathetic social work. The consequences were that the educational ideas of the NLNW’s school gradually found a place in state schools. Why did a discussion of changing the requirements arise? One assumption is that in the 1960s it was still regarded appropriate for women to attend shorter educational programmes because of their familial obligations. As social work primarily attracted women, the education adapted to this gendered norm rather than challenged it. Through such arrangements, gender and education were implicitly co-constituted.

Where did the men go? Statistics from the 1960s and 1970s confirm that more men than women attended university and became lawyers, sociologists and political scientists, who were later recruited to leading positions in local governments (Kluge, 1960). The state-run social work education remained positioned outside the universities until 1978, when the school joined a new university college system. Even today, the gender composition in social work education remains female dominated, with approximately 80-85 per cent women (SSB 2011)<sup>5</sup>.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this article has been to explore the roles of women in constituting social work as a professional field in Norway, from a gendered perspective and in the light of general theories of professions. The analysis has been guided by the question of how the historical, social and cultural conditions formed the social workers’ professional aspirations. There has been both driving but also prohibiting forces in this endeavour. ‘The professions dominate our world’ was the opening sentence in Abbott’s (1988: 1) influential book, which – taking a gendered analysis of professions into account – is equal to saying that men dominate our world. This gendered subtext is however not mentioned in most ‘malestream’ theories of professions. Feminist scholars have challenged this biased view. The term profession is itself a concept of elite masculinity aimed at describing the work of men within a realm of possibilities to which women have had limited access. If they speak at all, women have been speaking from the margins of a male world. I shall comment on how the findings in this study both relate to and challenge the universality of the conventional theories of professions.

In liberal societies citizenship is contingent upon an individual’s ability to participate in the public realm and measured by paid labour in the work force. Professions are to be regarded as social constructions within this matrix of citizenship. Following Pateman (1988), women have continued to challenge their alleged natural subordination within private life since universal citizenship first appeared as a political ideal three centuries ago. Women in Norway were barred from the ivory tower of the elites – the university – until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and hence had no access to the professions. Middle- and upper-class women belonged to the social elite, but only achieved social and cultural status through their

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5 SSB: The National Statistic Bureau

husbands. The home was their primary site and unpaid charity work an extension of ‘natural’ female tasks outside the home without much reward. As we have seen, the pioneering women in social work belonged to the social and cultural elite who demonstrated a strong moral commitment to offer unpaid help to other women and men and their families in need of social support, which they had witnessed through their organizational work in the civil society. There is no indication that professional self-interests or collective upward mobility, as described in conventional theories of professions, was a motive or a primary goal. More likely such an effort might rather have threatened their social status as ‘virtuous women’. The historical context however was a time of upheaval and modernization. The university had been forced to allow entrance for women in 1884, there was an initial discourse with regard to women’s right to vote and more women entered the labour market in paid but subordinate positions. The pioneering women’s familiarity with professional international social work constituted a common ground for the work in the public.

In the literature on the professions, the knowledge question is a major issue. Abbott (1988) characterized professions as a system of expert knowledge and he emphasized that abstract, scientific knowledge is an asset in the power struggles between professions. As noted earlier, a whole new discourse in regard to what counts, and not least what should count, as knowledge has arisen more recently that contests the masculine view of expertise. Social work is clearly located within this new discourse. The pioneers were deeply concerned with the knowledge question, but on other terms than those that are prominent in the literature on professions. A major ambition was to develop useful practical knowledge, which is ranked low within the professional elite system. Abstract, theoretical/scientific knowledge is regarded an admission ticket to the elite and part of the definition of professional knowledge (Brante, 2012). None of the theories of professions have so far acknowledged that the contributions of women have been based on different grounds than those of men. Rather they are characterized by their shortages to explain why they are inferior to the knowledge produced by traditionally male professions. Practical knowledge itself connotes femininity that renders lower status (Holter, 1997, Waerness, 2001, Bacchi, 2009), and as Heggen and Engebretsen (2009) more specifically pointed to, we still need to challenge the relationship and constant balances between scientific and experience-based knowledge forms in professional work. Moreover, women’s longstanding responsibilities to balance obligations both in the private and public sphere raise problems that conventional theories have not been concerned to account for. A broader gender shared participation in the home and the workplace may even challenge traditional theorizing on professions.

The way the pioneers intended to develop a knowledge-based social work practice brings the class question to the forefront in a way that has not been accounted for in the literature on the professions. Earlier on Larson (1977), Abbott (1988) and most recently Brante (2012) argue that professions represent elites in society and implicitly these elites are restricted to comprise only men. Before them Etzioni (1969) had applied the term ‘semi-professions’ to account for typical women’s work. Gender was embedded in this concept, but not class. Stacey (1981) has characterized the concept of ‘semi-profession’ to be both

stigmatizing and mystifying. The concept, however, has survived and is still frequently used in the Norwegian discourse on professions. Holter (1960) explored the class question in social work with regard to practitioners' professional aspirations from a somewhat different angle. In line with the functionalist paradigm of the 1960s, her research focused on whether or not social work had the potential to achieve status as a full-fledged profession.<sup>6</sup> In giving attention to an aspiring profession in which women constituted a majority, her investigation was exceptional for the time and she focused on a group that her male colleagues took little interest in. Holter noted particularly the 'charity aspect', which she judged as a characteristic that prevented professional progress. Still, she concluded that social work definitely had the potential for becoming a profession, but only if social workers rejected their old-fashioned ideas of charity work of middle class women:

The social worker takes over the functions of family, medical doctor and nurses. Not least, the social worker substitutes *the upper-class charity woman* – and it is exactly this role that the social worker has made great efforts to avoid being identified with. If this upper-class charity woman is the forerunner of the social worker, the naked truth is that the social work occupation does not live in peace with its forefathers in the way that other occupations do. (Holter, 1960: 47; my emphasis)

In stating this, Holter neglects the historical context and the contributions of elite and upper-class women to public organizational life around the turn of the century that was pivotal for constituting a platform for their position in the late 1950s. She even used the social background and the efforts of the pioneers to criticize their project and paid attention to how masculinity was an in-built and indispensable part of most successful male professions. She regarded charity work as the opposite of professional work. 'They do not live in peace with their forefathers', Holter wrote, but without taking their *foremothers* into account. She also neglected their efforts to involve working-class women in the new practices and hence failed to explore the societal and contextual dynamics involved. Holter did not theorize the class relations, since her concern was not to explore how professional social workers handled the class issue in theory or in practice.

Conventional theories underline the fact that to prosper, actors are dependent on a dynamic interaction with their environment (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Fauske, 2008). This analysis demonstrates that the pioneering constructors of social work lacked support from strong allies. But as Holter (1977) herself stated much later in life, women are located far from the power sources in society. In my own previous work, I have found this to be the case also for Norwegian physiotherapists, who were left on the margin and remained invisible up to the late 1940ies (Dahle, 1991).<sup>7</sup> Various research findings indicate that we need to study much more systematically women's ways of working strategically to attain

6 The functionalist paradigm was based on a taxonomy approach.

7 Rehabilitation of soldiers after WW II and the polio epidemic demonstrated a need and brought the profession 'out of the shadow' (Dahle 1991).

professional acceptance and move themselves from the margins to more central positions. Such studies will enable a closer look at the continuities and changes that so far have been understudied.

The most unexpected finding and the most difficult to explain in this study is the awkward relationship between the ‘first’ and the ‘second’ school of education of social work. How have the efforts of these competent women remained invisible for so long? I have not been able to fully account for the mechanisms in the process of silencing, although I see this as a sign of the complexity in the case that calls for further attention.

The ways in which women’s efforts have been overlooked and silenced is related to questions of gender and power. The barring of women from the university was only one instance of a gendered power relation, based on deeply rooted conceptions of women’s lack of intellectual capacities. Women in general were confined to the private realm. Given the historical context and women’s conditions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a modernised Norway, upper class women gradually entered new positions in the public realm, from which they articulated professional aims on their own terms, although their motivations and knowledge claims differed from those of men. As we have seen, this is highly relevant in regard to the early development of professional social work. Viewed from one perspective the early social workers may be considered to be in victim positions, but from a different angle we should rather acknowledge the way they virtually acted as independent subjects transgressing their ‘natural’ confinements.

Acker (1992) reminds us that because people’s mode of thought in a particular society (in this case Western) is formed within the same overarching power structures, these very same power structures and their influence on society often become concealed to ourselves as they because of their overarching status are taken for granted or seen as normal – even for the most critical feminists. Uncovering gender issues and making them visible necessitates a reinterpretation of conventional theorizing. Such research will result in a deeper understanding of both women and men’s lives and how specific gender regimes are reflected in the theories on what has come to be labelled as a profession.

The old concepts of the professions are contested and rightly so. Still, Brante’s (2012) recent vigorous defence of the old-fashioned ‘scientific truth systems’, serves as a reminder that the golden days of the masculine theories and visions are not yet gone. The field demands new, updated and fresh perspectives. This study illustrates that the gender question in the theories of professions matters and also that gendering processes and transformations deserve a much closer examination than they have been subjected to so far. We need studies that take both men and women’s lives into account. New and gendered approaches may move the women’s classical professional work from the margins to a more central position that may expand our knowledge horizon in unexpected ways.

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