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Feminism and the professionalisation of social work: a socio-historical approach through two Swiss examples (1910-1970)

The importance of the role of women, in particular of feminist organisations, in the history of social work has been highlighted by several historical studies¹. These studies have also emphasised the necessity for a comparative and transnational approach, in order to understand not only the role of these social actors in the creation of the first institutions, associations and schools, but also their contribution to the definition of the missions of social work.

This article aims at contributing to this discussion through a comparison of the professionalisation process of two distinct professions within the social work field in Switzerland at two different periods. We will view professionalisation as a socio-historical process reflecting collective strategies implemented by workers in the field. This strategies will be considered in collaboration or in conflict with other social actors, aimed at achieving recognition for specific missions and thus legitimating the place held in a particular field of intervention and granting value to the work being carried out².

Firstly, we shall analyse the impact of the involvement of feminist movements in the professionalisation process of social service, in particular around the establishment of the first School of Social Work in French-speaking Switzerland, i.e. at the end of the 1910s. We will then discuss the absence of feminist influence in the emergence of sociocultural community work in French-speaking Switzerland in the 1960s and 1970s, that led to a primarily masculine profession. Finally, we shall offer some analyses focused on the comparison of these two processes, as well as thoughts on how the examination of these issues could be furthered.

1910 -1920: the professionalisation of social service

¹ S. Herig, B. Waaldijk (eds), *History of Social Work in Europe (1900-1960). Female Pioneers and their Influence on the Development of International Social Organizations*, Opladen, Leske and Budrich, 2003 ; G. Hauss, D. Schulte (eds), *Amid Social Contradictions. Towards a History of Social Work in Europe*, Opladen, Budrich, 2009 ; B. Bortoli, *I giganti del lavoro sociale*, Trento, Erickson, 2006. D. Rannveig, *Social work: A history of gender and class in the profession*, «Ephemera», 12, 2012, E. Vezzosi, *L'histoire du travail social sous le regard du genre en Italie: du service social d'usine au travail de communauté*, « Revue suisse de travail social », 2018.

² E. C. Hughes, *Le regard sociologique. Essais choisis*. Paris, Ehes, 1996 ; C. Dubar et al., *Sociologie des professions*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in Switzerland as in many other Western countries, the first training institutions in social work are created. Between 1910 and 1918, two schools open in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and one in the French-speaking region, in Geneva. The philanthropic movements, political authorities as well as other bourgeois movements are involved in reforming assistance to the poor, in a post-war context characterised by pauperisation and by intense social conflict³. Feminist movements, led by women from the moneyed classes and close to the bourgeois political parties, take part in the implementation of these reforms, notably through their active support for the professionalisation of social assistance to the poor⁴. A case in point is the *Alliance des sociétés féminines suisses* (ASF), one of the main feminist organisations of the era⁵. In 1918, more than a third of the thirty members of a committee promoting the creation of the School of Social Work for Women in Geneva are active in feminist groups, including several members of the ASF. The ASF regularly takes a position in its journal, *Le Mouvement féministe*, edited by Emilie Gourd, in favour of the creation of the School and of the professionalisation of the social service profession. Among these opinion pieces we find, unsurprisingly, the arguments used by the philanthropic movements of the time that are somewhat critical of the action of volunteer women active in the field of assistance to the poor. According to this perspective, professionalisation should lead to more effective assistance, particularly through providing education to members of the working class, especially children and their mothers, in the norms of work, hygiene, health, as well as family and sexual morality⁶. However, feminists also promote another goal, to wit that of providing middle and upper class women new employment perspectives, in a context in which employment for these women remains frowned upon and access to paid work is limited to very few professions⁷. The social work profession, like teaching and nursing, is portrayed as appropriate, fitting in with aptitudes associated with women as wives, and even more as mothers (softness, empathy, solicitude, love, abnegation, etc.). The concept of « social motherhood » is used as a synthesis of this discursive approach, referring to qualities naturally attributed to women in order to stake a claim their place in the public sphere. These feminists' discourse also demonstrates the desire to give value to « care work » and to contrast, as Gehrard states, a more « human » model to policies viewed as « masculine »⁸. As Abrams and Curran suggest, a detailed analysis of the complex

³ V. Boilat et al. (eds), *La valeur du travail. Histoire et histoires des syndicats suisses*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2006.

⁴ S. Matter, *Der Armut auf den Leib rücken. Die Professionalisierung der Sozialen Arbeit in der Schweiz (1900-1960)*, Zürich, Chronos, 2011.

⁵ The ASF, from its inception, managed to unite rather diverse groups of women, from suffragettes to professional associations of teachers and of midwives, as well as charitable and welfare societies. B. Mesmer, *Staatsbürgerinnen ohne Stimmrecht. Die Politik des schweizerischen Frauenverbände 1914-1971*, Zurich, Chronos, 2007.

⁶ J.P. Tabin, A. Frauenfelder, C. Togni, V. Keller, *Temps d'assistance. Le gouvernement des pauvres en Suisse romande depuis la fin du XIXe siècle*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2010.

⁷ C. Schoeni, *Travail féminin : retour à l'ordre !*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2012.

⁸ U. Gerhard, *Concepts et controverses*, in Gubin et al, *le Siècle des féminismes*, Paris, De l'Atelier, 2004.

implications of this *maternalist discourse* in social work must be carried out⁹. When they claim the right to employment for women, some of these feminists actually distance themselves, at least in part, from the dominant family model of women as housewives. Moreover, they are fighting for professional recognition and good working conditions for women's jobs. Thus, we cannot separate involvement in activities promoting the professionalisation of social work from battles for wage equality, for the right to education and employment, and for the right to vote.

Within this feminist perspective, social workers are encouraged to pay particular attention to interventions benefitting women, taking into account their specific situations and problems. In the columns of the *Mouvement féministe*, low salaries for women and their lack of professional training are cited among the causes of unemployment and poverty¹⁰. Social work must thus devise strategies to deal with these causes. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, whilst the right of women to employment is frequently questioned, a social investigator for the Labour Bureau in Geneva writes a diploma thesis at the Geneva School of Social Work, with Emilie Gourd as a thesis director. She states that the response to female unemployment must involve better professional training for women, as well as « a better conception of the value of women », i.e. one that recognizes women's responsibilities and broadens their opportunities for participation¹¹. While sharing in a dualist vision of social roles, this feminist discourse affirms a will to change women's place in society by attributing them more power and better recognition.

1960-1970: the professionalisation of socio-cultural community work

The context of the emergence of socio-cultural community work in French-speaking Switzerland is characterised by the political issue of supervising the use of leisure time by working-class populations, in particular of young men and immigrants¹². In the two largest cities in French-speaking Switzerland, Geneva and Lausanne, the authorities subsidized, from the 1960s onwards, community centres that were most often set up by philanthropic associations, by Christian youth groups or by unions. Public financing made it possible to increase the number of salaried positions within these structures. Women also played an important role and were often involved in the creation of community centres, particularly as volunteers. They are also present within the first

⁹ L. S. Abrams, L. Curran, *Between women: gender and social work in historical perspective*, «The social service review», 2004, 3.

¹⁰ C. Togni, *Le genre du chômage. Assurance chômage et division sexuée du travail en Suisse (1924-1982)*, Lausanne, Antipodes, 2015.

¹¹ D. Caillat, *Enquête sur les femmes qui ont touché des allocations de chômage cantonales ou fédérales en 1936 à Genève*, Travail de diplôme de l'École d'études sociales de Genève, 1937, 63.

¹² C. Dallera, D. Malatesta, C. Togni, *L'émergence de l'animation socioculturelle sous le regard du genre. L'exemple des centres de loisirs lausannois 1960-1980*, « Revue de la Société suisse de travail social », 2018; S. Cattacin et al., « *Etat incitateur* » ou « *deuxième ville* »: *l'animation socioculturelle à Genève*, « Revue Suisse de Science Politique », 1999, 2.

salaried teams. However, a study specifically focused on the history of City of Lausanne community centres shows that during the 1960s and 1970s, the professionalisation process will relegate women to the margins of the emerging profession¹³.

In contrast with *social service worker (assistante sociale)*, a term used in the feminine in French from the beginning, the term *socio-cultural community worker (animateur socioculturel)* is designated as masculine from the get go. Titles given to the first salaried workers employed in the centres is of interest here. Men, as soon as they are hired, automatically obtain *socio-cultural community worker* status, although in most cases they have had no specific training in the social work field. For female employees, titles vary: they are sometimes designated as community workers, but are also called assistants, social carers, or child care workers. This may refer to their qualification, but it is mostly indicative of the fact they are primarily hired to take care of children attending the centres. Even before the implementation of a specific course in community work in Lausanne, community worker status is granted to salaried men who develop youth activities, especially for teenage boys, while the child care work attributed to women is viewed as not (or less) relevant for the « *socio-cultural community work project* » of the centres. This conception is confirmed during the debates about the creation of a community work training programme in Lausanne in 1967. About 15 unionized community workers, all male, are involved in this debate, along with an expert committee named by the city executive government, as well as the city authorities themselves. Women are altogether absent from the debates. First-wave feminists are not involved in the issues surrounding the design of community work education; at the time, they are mostly active in the campaign for the women's right to vote at federal level, obtained in 1971. Second-wave feminism does not manifest itself in French-speaking Switzerland till this battle has been won; it then mostly focuses on other struggles, such as those concerning sexual and reproductive rights¹⁴. Whilst feminist militants in Geneva later do occupy a community centre in order to promote their claims, no such event takes place in Lausanne.

In this context, the position of male community workers, partly supported by the expert committee and the political authorities, emphasizes the distinction between community work and other social work professions and differences with competencies viewed as feminine and particularly associated with child care. Community workers describe themselves as « promoters and inspirers of activities », « imaginative organisers », « moderators » whose mission is to provide impulses for and to organise leisure, sports and/or cultural activities within a community education programme aimed at the whole of a neighbourhood's population¹⁵. Their goal is clearly to demonstrate that *socio-*

¹³ C. Dallera, D. Malatesta, C. Togni., *L'émergence de l'animation socioculturelle*, cit.

¹⁴ C. Villiger, *Notre ventre, leur loi ! Le mouvement de libération des femmes de Genève*, Neuchâtel Alphil, 2009 ; S. Meyer, *MLF et Femmes en lutte : le militantisme féministe à Lausanne dans les années 1970*, « L'Emilie : magazine socio-culturelles », 96, 2008.

¹⁵ *Rapport du groupe de travail mandaté par la Municipalité pour l'étude des centres de loisirs*, juin 1971, p. 40-41, Archives de la ville de Lausanne.

cultural community work is not « merely » focused on child care, and more broadly to distance themselves from the care dimension of social work¹⁶.

When a professional socio-cultural community work training programme opens its doors in September 1967, the first class is comprised of 15 men and one woman. During the following few years, community centres will in fact almost exclusively hire men as community workers¹⁷. The latter will attempt to offer activities to an adult population, but their work will continue to primarily focus on youth work, in particular on teenage working-class boys, viewed as high risk for drifting into deviant activities. When girls are present, they are seen by the community workers as « the girlfriends of the guys », and the staff do not plan specific activities for them or pay them particular attention. Women are also most often present, but as volunteers or in assistant positions that are less well-paid, less stable and usually part-time – mostly focusing on child care tasks.

Conclusion

When feminists are involved in the professionalisation process, it results in a more important place for women within the profession as well as in a reflective examination of the role and mission of social work. First-wave feminists did not restrict themselves to claims for employment opportunities; they also carried forth claims for recognition and improvement of the place of women in society. They deemed that paying attention to the living conditions and the needs of women (particularly working-class women) was fundamental and worth fighting for, as was taking into account the importance of care work within social interventions.

In the case of socio-cultural community work, the absence of feminist involvement has resulted in a masculine mode of professionalisation, leading to the relegation of women to the margins of the profession. Through the definition of professional missions, it also relegated care work to the outer reaches of the profession. Modak and Messant have shown how the female connotations of care practices does discredit them and represents a factor that may devalue professional identity¹⁸. Care work is thus viewed as « dirty work » (in the Hughesian sense) and delegated to female volunteers and assistants, also to the small number of female community workers.

We view the place professionals and other actors of the social work field have allocated to care work within the professionalisation process as a theme that should be further investigated in the context of comparative studies in the history of social work in a gender perspective. Indeed, this approach provides an opportunity to analyse the

¹⁶ The concept of *care*, developed by feminist studies since the 1980s, refers to the mental, emotional and physical work necessary for the welfare of persons within a dependency relationship. A. R. Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life. Notes from Home and Work*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

¹⁷ From the 1980s onward, the number of female community workers increases; this is probably due to the extension of programmes for children in community centres.

¹⁸M. Modak, F. Messant, *Dilemmes et engrenages dans les pratiques de « care » : l'exemple du travail social*, « Revue (petite) enfance » 100, 2009.

construction of social work missions by highlighting issues pertaining to the definition of target populations; it also allows a focus on modes of interventions, readjustments taking place in the gendered division of labour, as well as on levels of legitimacy and recognition granted to social work professionals.