

Exploring feminist egalitarian discourse and sex work for the social work curriculum: a critical pedagogy

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Abstract This article presents theoretical exposition of feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education by drawing on the research findings of 15 sex workers in the Republic of Ireland. The study claims that feminist social work is not considered mainstream across social work programmes despite social work's commitment to human rights and social justice. The paper presents the complexities of feminist standpoint when discussing sex work in Ireland in its current binary context of the neo-abolitionist perspective. We argue for a revised critical feminist egalitarian pedagogical approach to the social work curriculum. We apply a feminist standpoint epistemology and an interpretivist/feminist qualitative framework to examine (1) feminist social work (2) feminist theory and sex work (3) and feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education. The positionality of feminist egalitarian discourse within the social work curriculum has capacity to improve social work's commitment to social justice.

Keywords: social work education; feminist discourse; sex work; social justice

Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to consider the significance of feminist egalitarian discourse for social work and its palpable value for social work education. Feminist theory is underpinned by social justice, and both are core components of social work education and practice (Pease, 2020). Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality (Ferguson, 2017). The global definition of social work underpins social work in the Irish context as a 'practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work' (International Federation of Social Work, 2023). Where we acknowledge some similarities of terms in the definitions, for feminist theory and of social work, feminist theory remains on the periphery of social work curriculum today (Veeran, Flynn and Sweeney, 2023). By drawing on the empirical experiences of sex workers we show how their experiences are valuable to the profession. The data is used for illustrative purposes to substantiate our position. We consider (1) feminist social work, (2) feminist theory and sex work (3), and feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education. We argue that feminist egalitarian discourse can provide a level of preparedness for students in relation to conceptual and practical difficulties that may be encountered in the field (Diaz 2011; Dominelli, 2017).

In Ireland the key concerns are twofold: (1) Females comprise a large percentage of the student and graduate populations in Ireland annually with 83.2%, female and 16.8%, male (Veeran, et al, 2023). This occurs alongside a service user profile not dissimilar due to social work's large representation in child protection and welfare services. Additionally, (2) neo-classic economics and patriarchal discourse shape universities' scope (Healy 2022) and determine programme content. These points merit a place for feminism as an important category in training programmes for professions like social work (Bruckner, 2002, p. 269;

Dominelli, 2017). Feminist discourse provides an active practical critique directed not only at the academic and political levels but at deeply held beliefs about the character of our society, thought patterns and intimate relationships (Dominelli, 2019).

Emerging as a caring profession from the 1900s onwards, social work was committed to the values and teachings of the Catholic church (Skehill, 2007). Similarly, practices reflected the cultural norms of an Irish society which was ideologically patriarchal and with clear assigned roles and expectations for men, women, and the family (Inglis, 2005). Sex workers were considered beyond repute, with little consideration given to their social context such as poverty, or abuse (Crossman, 2013). Although social work has evolved and has progressed from a Catholic based curriculum to an internationally informed theory-based practice, social work remains reflective of Irish society's shift from a Catholic corporate state to a neoliberal state (Dukelow, 2021). Neo-liberalism caused a reconfiguring of the State towards appeasing the interests of capital (Garrett, 2019, p.188). As social workers are often employed within, and mandated by the State, so too did social work have to reconfigure.

Social work is informed by current legislation and policies that shape its practice which remains exclusionary to sex workers with limited available services nationally and with statutory social work predominantly situated in the child protection and welfare domain, there remains limited scope to provide the necessary supports for sex workers today (Ryan and McGarry, 2022). Social work in Ireland is a professionally accredited process. The health regulator, alongside the social work academic team, and the social work professionals who oversee student fieldwork placements, are responsible for each graduate meeting the minimum standards of proficiency to practice (CORU, 2019). This is a robust process and sets out the competency-based curriculum of the standards of proficiency which underpin module descriptors; learning outcomes; and assessment. This happens with specific reference to domains of (1) professional autonomy, and accountability, (2) communication,

collaborative practice and teamworking, (3) safety and quality, (4) professional development, (5) and professional knowledge and skills (CORU, 2019). There are considerations for equality, advocacy, and social justice, within the domains, however, terminology such as `gender` or `feminism` do not exist. Nonetheless, we are cautioned by Wajcman (2013) that diversity should not detract from recognising the concept of `women` and the imbalance in power between men and women. There remain huge disparities in the significance accorded to feminist egalitarian discourse in social work curricula (Veeran, et al, 2023).

We present the complexities of feminist theory for social work and emphasise these complexities as critical tools to encourage critical, reflective curricular content which demands students to understand service users in their environment (Pease, 2020). Moreover, we consider how current policies and legislations are shaped by cultural values and beliefs which impose expectations on service users and can also impact the design of social work practice (Thompson, 2024). If we consider sex work in the Republic of Ireland under the current legislation of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, the legislation has been greatly influenced by the liberal feminist – neo abolitionist perspective. This employs the position `prostitution` as inherently exploitative and requiring full eradication using legislation (McGarry and FitzGerald, 2019). This view is also holding strong across Europe and Canada (Crowhurst, Outshoorn, and Skilbrei, 2012; Chu, Glass, and Alta, 2013). We critically examine this position within the paper. Moreover, we examine the feminist egalitarian discourse perspective which considers the opportunity to examine the structural barriers which impede sex workers' rights to social justice and equality (FitzGerald, O'Neill and Wylie, 2020).

Feminist social work

The key principles of feminist social work include a knowledge base and practices that are shared by feminist social workers to include a commitment to social justice, the importance of a critical and reflexive stance on social work, and the valuing of personal experience as political (Wendt and Mourling, 2017, p. 261; Fook, 2022). Cree (2018) suggests there is no single way of being a feminist social worker, just as there is no single way of being a woman. This is an important statement as it allows us to critically reflect on the intersecting lives of women and the socio-political structures which shape their lived experiences.

Notwithstanding this, the intersectional feminist lens argues that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression (Nayak and Robbins, 2018) which supports Cree's (2018) position. Sex workers in the Republic of Ireland are predominantly migrant women, or women experiencing addiction, and within this includes the rising phenomenon catalogued by the emerging data which indicates women can enter sex work to address their housing and education needs (Berry and Frazer, 2021).

Using a feminist lens to address these concerns, feminist social workers contextualise the 'personal as political' and endeavour to locate service users' unique experiences as understood by the political, cultural, and economic circumstances in which the incident has occurred (Gilmore, 2015). This is not the case currently in the Republic of Ireland where the legislation only considers the 'act' of sex work and the legal circumstances surrounding the selling of sex (Sweeney and Flynn, 2023), which we explore further in the paper. Moreover, it is important to recognise the goal of feminist social work practice which is to create an anti-oppressive and an anti-discriminatory practice that includes women and men (Enge, 2013). The feminist social worker also strives to develop a feminist egalitarian relationship with the service user based on person-in-environment and person-centred strategies for practice without judgment (Dominelli, 2017; White 2006). In comprehending the theoretical underpinning of this, it is evident that 'person-in-environment' refers to a practice-guiding

principle, that social workers can operationalise through actively contextualising an individual's circumstances with their wider environments. This fits with feminism because of how feminists uphold the notion that personal life is political (Dominelli, 2017).

Anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices, we argue have become diluted in the recent social work practice context (Baines, Sharma, Massaquoi and Smith, 2022). Anti-oppressive practice refers to an approach and theory in social work that recognises how larger structures and systems in society, create power and privilege, which oppresses some groups and individuals more than others. Alternatively anti-discriminatory practice is an active approach to combatting acts and processes of discrimination (Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas, 2014). The dilution of these practices in social work is a combination of preparing students for practice readiness dictated by a curriculum of learning outcomes deficient of a feminist standpoint. This occurs alongside the demands of preparing students for the practice of neoliberalism, or the neo liberalisation of social work evident of neoliberal values of a case management focus (Garrett, 2009). The agenda which equates to outcome-oriented, information-gathering, and surveillance practices means that social work education no longer relies on its critical and radical value base (Fenton, 2019). Dominelli further clarifies that "the case management vision of social work practice ... facilitate[s] the psychologizing and pathologizing of 'clients' by presenting their problems as the product of their personal inadequacy rather than as political issues which need resolving" (1996, p. 159). Moreover, surveillance practices create practices of social control (Payne, 2020) which reinforces the oppression of certain groups like sex workers in society who exist outside of social norms, values, and current legislative processes (Sweeney and Flynn, 2023). The latter segregated existence comes about because of barriers to integrating with mainstream norms, values and legislation. These barriers include that certain aspects of sex work have been illegal, and also

highly stigmatised and frowned upon, meaning sex workers are pushed out of mainstream life and into a separate, underground and hidden world (McGarry and FitzGerald, 2019).

For social work education, competency-based, discursive practice approaches to learning, set down by professional accreditation bodies, reduce education to training in the micro-skills of assessment and case-management (Morley, Macfarlane and Ablett, 2017; Morley, 2009). The consequences of this include a curriculum that is not driven by commitments to social justice` (Morley, McFarlane and Ablett, p. 27). This confirms our position for a feminist egalitarian social work education to encompass social justice and criticality of systemic oppression.

Feminist theory and sex work

Sex workers exist in a vacuum of feminist perspectives which are often shaped by a society`s cultural and political discourse. Sex workers oftentimes hide within parts of society where the culture is much less aligned to feminist values (Armstrong, 2012). The purpose of the paper is not to examine each feminist perspective but to explore sex workers within the two dominant feminist ideologies shaping current sex work narratives, `prostitution` and `sex work` (Scouler, 2004). As stated earlier, the `prostitution` narrative is embedded in policy and legislation across European countries and Canada which has followed the implementation of the Nordic/Swedish model to `end demand model` which came into law in 1999 (Svensson, 2006). The model prosecutes the `buyer` of sex and not the `seller`. The main objective of the model is to decrease the demand for prostitution by punishing the purchase of sexual services in order to decrease the volume of the illegal sex industry overall (Mullin, 2021). In the Republic of Ireland, this position is upheld under the 2017 (Sexual Offences) Act, having adopted a radical feminist view of sex work and a neo abolitionist position reifying the harm reduction perspective (Wylie, 2017). However, many researchers have challenged this approach as it gives little attention to or addresses the structural context of why sex workers become involved in the first instance (Ward and Day, 2014). For

example, this entails the structural experiences of poverty, migration, gender, and the intersecting lived experiences of sex workers (O'Neill and Campbell, 2010) as we mention earlier and is supported by the intersectional feminist social work position of Nayak and Robbins (2018). Since the 1990s, Ireland has experienced unprecedented migration flows and female migrants predominate (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004). Critical scholarship reveals that migration is a racialised, classed and gendered process and this is also reflected in the labour market (Anderson, 2009; Sweeney and FitzGerald, 2017, p. 420). Migrant women respond to Europe's demand for cheap wage labour in domestic labour, and factory and sex industries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004; Munck, 2008). Moreover, knowing the precarious legal status of a predominantly migrant sex work population, the current law pushes women further underground, furthering their risk and removing them from health and social care services where they could access support (Sweeney and FitzGerald, 2017). Under Irish law, where 'prostitution' is not a criminal offence, the legislation fails to protect sex workers who prefer to work together for protection because under current legislation they are prosecuted through the conditions of keeping a brothel (Platt et al, 2018). This is counterproductive to providing protection for sex workers and creates a surveillance response. We argue that social work services have been greatly influenced by anti-prostitution lobbyists and have adapted a surveillance practice in accordance with current prostitution legislation and current discourse (Ward and Wylie, 2017).

The study gives voice to sex workers and their experiences by drawing on the feminist egalitarian perspective. Unlike the radical feminist position, egalitarianism gives sex workers agency to be at the forefront of identifying their needs and self-determination which is a tenet of feminist politics (Zeegers and Althoff, 2015). In support of this perspective 'women's self-definitions are highly valid because they emerge from and take on meaning in the contexts of women's lives and experiences' (Barretti 2001). Sex workers in the Republic of Ireland enter

sex work for a multitude of complex and systemic reasons and their experiences are often unique (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2017). With a contested number of more than 1000 sex workers actively engaged in sex work daily, Sweeney and Flynn (2023) and Ward (2017) believe these figures to be higher, and that sex workers' experiences often equate to violence and abuse, theft, and stigmas. Yet, accessing health and social services or reporting harm to social workers and the police is not an option for most sex workers as they believe surveillance services reinforce stigma and may compromise their legal status (Platt, Grenfell, Meiksin, Elmes, Sherman, Sanders and Crago, 2018). For street-based sex workers who experience addiction and complex relationships with their drug dealers or have come through the care system and are known to police for public order offences and/or crime, they are less likely to report harm to services and police (Ryan and McGarry, 2022; Berry and Frazer, 2021). Feminist egalitarian discourse provides an organising framework and a lens through which a broader analysis of women's issues can be undertaken, informed by feminist theories (Adams, Dominelli, and Payne 2002, 2017), and recognising the systemic social inequalities sex workers face.

We present feminist egalitarian discourse as an active practical critique directed not only at the academic and political levels but at deeply held beliefs about the character of our society, thought patterns and intimate relationships (Dominelli, 2019).

Feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education

The core principles and values which underpin feminist egalitarian social work is anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. Both are valuable and necessary, yet principles of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice have been replaced within the teaching framework by empowerment principles and person-centred practice which focus on people's

self-determination and ability to shape their own future (Adams, Dominelli, and Payne 2002). We argue that systems theory which underpins the empowerment perspective, places demand on service users to comply with current structures as opposed to the anti-oppressive lens of addressing the structural oppressions that impact on services user`s lives (Dominelli, 2017). According to Healy (2022) the true essence of the person-in-environment perspectives must also encompass the environment as a modern phenomenon of social and political norms which entails patriarchal thought and structures. It is within this context that the relationship between structural and individual deficits is critical for understanding power and empowerment.

The synergy between social work and feminism challenges ‘institutionalised oppression and the reconceptualization and redistribution of power’ which is seemingly neglected in social work (Barretti 2001, p. 267; Veeran et al, 2023). Theoretically breaking this down further, involves recognition that feminism requires social work to reorient more toward social issues at a societal and large-scale level, meaning social problems like institutionalised oppression, are brought into sharper focus. Feminist egalitarian discourse provides a framework where students are encouraged to analyse the impact of broader contextual and environmental factors such as the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors on individual`s experiences (Veeran et al, 2023). In the empirical data provided here, sex worker`s experiences are placed within the structural and political ideologies which have impacted on their decisions to enter sex work. These decisions further impact on sex worker`s experiences of supports and service provisions which under the current systems fail to address their multifaceted and complex needs. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 legislation itself supports exiting strategies for sex workers wishing to exit sex work and yet, does so with contradictions, and without addressing the structural barriers which continue to impact on sex worker`s lives and which continue to present sex work as the only options in response to homelessness,

addiction, breakdown in the care system, and the rising phenomenon of women and children within migration (Sweeney and Flynn, 2023). Where social work acts as an agent of the courts, social work itself becomes not anti-oppressive in its practice (Dominelli, 2017). This remains a notable concern for a lack of feminist egalitarian discourse within social work education in Ireland and internationally and is reflective of the broader social issues representing the personal and political dimensions of human experiences (Bricker-Jenkins 1991; Jaggar 2018). Education and training on feminist egalitarian discourse should be promoted to critically operationalize student's understanding of the broader socio-political factors in their critical assessment of women's issues.

The sex industry in the Republic of Ireland is predominantly female sex workers (Campbell, Smith, Leacy, Ryan, and Stoica, 2020). Despite this, research often occurs 'about' or 'around' sex workers rather than 'with' the participation of sex workers (FitzGerald, O'Neill and Wylie, 2020). This deficit in evidence informs social work knowledge and practice. Where sex worker's voices remain absent from the research then the narrative of 'other' continues to permeate policies and social work practice designed to support and protect sex workers (Benoit, Unsworth, Healey, Smith and Jansson, 2021; Wahab, 2004). White (2006) draws upon the commonality of experiences shared by women and acknowledges the opportunity for social workers to utilise feminist approaches to practice and to engage and promote a non-hierarchical and non-oppressive manner with service users; to include egalitarian relationship-based practice. There are many opportunities like this empirical study for the collective discourse to validate women's subjective experiences through research and practice (Wahab, 2004). Feminist egalitarian discourse endeavours to inform students' knowledge base in the classroom, and practice approaches in fieldwork which are pedagogically integral to social work training (Anand 2022). We make the claim that social

work education is in a strategic position to engage in gender-integrated theory to practice (Figueira-McDonough 2018).

More broadly, before moving to examine methods, it is useful to return momentarily to the feminist framework that overarches and underscores this entire analysis. The question prompted by such a re-engagement, is what does this feminist egalitarian framework have to offer social work practice with sex workers? From the outset, the claim was made that a strong contribution lies in enhancing social work's commitment to social justice in this space. It is perhaps now conclusive, having examined the literature, that there is potential in enhancing the knowledge base and practices of social workers around socially just modes of support for sex workers, through feminist egalitarian teaching and training, including educating social work students. Other lines for enhancing commitment to social justice includes advocacy and activism, and uptake of a critical and reflexive stance on social work, as well as being intentional about viewing personal experience of sex workers as political (Wendt and Mourling, 2017, p. 261; Fook, 2022). These steps, driven by feminist egalitarian principles, augment commitment to social justice within social work practice.

Methods

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate the importance of the feminist egalitarian perspective for the social work curriculum. To support the claim, we provide the empirical evidence of sex workers in the Republic of Ireland for illustrative purposes and to provide experiences that are valuable for the profession.

Research design

In keeping with a feminist methodology, we employ a feminist standpoint epistemology through a qualitative framework to present the lived experiences and the phenomena of sex workers (Armstrong, 2012). Feminist standpoint epistemology combines the knowledge and

professional values of social work (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2017; Swigonski, 1994) and critically examines the oppressive structures which can impact on service user's and sex worker's lives.

The study only includes the experiences of female sex workers with unique gendered experiences. We note that male and transgender sex workers exist also, and we apply the feminist egalitarian perspective to address all oppressions respectfully to include all sex workers (Maginn and Ellison, 2014; Sanders, McGarry and Ryan, 2022).

The lead researcher critically considered their own positionality to undertake research with sex workers by drawing on their knowledge and experience as a reflexive social work practitioner (Houston and Marshall, 2020). Central to the research study is the voice of the 'sex worker' and in order to fully capture this 'voice' the researcher was required to examine their own beliefs, judgments and practices during the research process, in particular how the data was interpreted and analysed which we explain later. Reflexivity in research informs (feminist) qualitative research (Clarke and Braun, 2019) and is in keeping with feminist egalitarian principles (Veeran et al, 2023).

Data collection

The lead researcher interviewed 15 female sex workers in the Republic of Ireland. The sex workers experiences include a) reasons for entering sex work, b) reasons for remaining in sex work, and c) sex worker's experiences of supportive services. Participants were recruited using a gatekeeper from a statutory agency working directly with women involved in sex work. Participants ranged in ages of 19-50 years who worked indoors and in street-based sex work. Following informed consent, face to face interviews commenced for the duration of 30-60 minutes using a biographical narrative approach (Miller, 2017). In keeping with the feminist framework, biographical narrative interviewing provides a coherent whole story from the

perspectives of the participants (Wengraf, 2004). Sex workers were provided with a debriefing session following each interview to establish and confirm that participants were happy with the content and provided the opportunity to redact or withdraw their interview (Young, Ferreira and Pantidi, 2024). Onsite support was provided through the gatekeeper, which hosted a medical practitioner, counsellor, and trained support staff.

Data Analyses

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using an adapted voice centred relational model (Brown and Gilligan, 1993; Mauthner and Doucet, 2008) to provide a 'relational ontological' understanding of sex worker's lived experiences in keeping with the feminist methodological approach (O'Neill, 2013). Here, 'relational ontology' refers to an ontological position that affords primacy to relations that are present between entities. In simpler terms, what it means to be present in the world as a sex worker, is constructed by the relations of that sex worker with others (Schaab, 2013).

Interviews were analysed closely attending to multiple forms of relationship: those within the data; between the voices in data; between the participant and those around them; and with the contexts in which they live (Doucet, 1998; Mauthner and Doucet, 2008). The researcher read each transcript four times to first identify the main plot in the story, secondly to identify how the participant used terms like 'I', 'we', 'they', thirdly to locate or identify relationships in the story that are important to the participant and finally, reading to locate the cultural context of the story (Sweeney et al, 2019). Themes from the data are reasons for entering sex work, reasons for remaining in sex work, and sex worker's experiences of supportive services.

Ethical approval was granted. All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study and this was approved by the ethics committee.

Findings

The purpose of the paper is to explore feminist egalitarian discourse and sex work to inform the social work curriculum. The sex work data is illustrative to substantiate our position and provides experiences that are valuable for the profession. Feminist egalitarian social work focuses on the structural oppressions which impede on service users and sex worker`s lives (Dominelli, 2019) and for this reason the data captures the structural consequences for sex workers to include sex worker`s reasons for entering sex work; sex worker`s reasons for remaining in sex work and sex worker`s experiences of supportive services. Sex workers in the Republic of Ireland were interviewed using a stratified purposive sample inclusive of 2/15 street-based sex workers and 13/15 indoor-based sex workers. Of the participants 3/15 were Irish nationals and 12/15 were migrant women who were seeking asylum in Ireland; undocumented migrants; refugees; international students, and European visitors. A commitment to give voice to the participants was our priority and direct quotes are provided using pseudonyms (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006).

Several papers have been published from the study examining the lived experiences of sex workers in Ireland and access to health and social care supports (Sweeney, et al, 2017; 2019; 2023). Future publications will include the structural oppressions of sex workers, towards informing critical social work education.

Reasons for entering sex work.

Women are on the move globally (Nussbaum, 2011) and the structural oppression of migration impacts on women seeking work in lower paid jobs with precarious contracts predominantly in the caring and service industry. Within this, the structural oppression of migration is a process that refers to the very structures of a society which oppress migrants, such as residential segregation due to policy and practical barriers to home ownership, and barriers to gaining employment and accumulating wealth (Reed-Sandoval, 2020). Women in

migration are often responsible for the care of their families and communities back home and find themselves making different choices about how they can make enough money to support loved ones. As Dorothea explains:

I can work in a factory for 5 Euro for half, for 1 hour I don't know what, but here if I can make 100 Euro for half an hour, do you know I send money to Africa to my family, I can give a good school, I can give a good education to my brothers and sisters.

Dorothea's story is not unique and outlines the structural context which shapes her country of origin and forces women to migrate for money. Women find themselves arriving in Ireland on a temporary visa and after they run out, women choose to go underground rather than return home and become involved in sex work. This leaves women at risk and vulnerable as Cora tells:

Maybe if you are Irish born, it is ok, you know some people they have family, they have friends, they have brothers who can take care of themselves (you), I don't have nobody... Because of my status, I am not here legally, so to find work is very difficult.

Migrant women make up the largest cohort of sex workers working indoors across Ireland. Although street-based sex work is less visible now than in previous decades, women who have experienced family breakdown as minors and breakdown of the care system, can be at risk of choosing sex work. Bridget tells of her experience of becoming homeless at 17 after a fall out with her family:

After a fall out with my family, I was 17... so I rang this number [homeless agency] I said I've no money, I've nowhere to stay? He said, are you homeless? And I said I'm not homeless, and he said; your homeless and I was like, oh my God I am...

While supported by homeless services, Bridget met other girls in similar circumstances who introduced her to sex work.

Yeah, I am homeless, Then I met a girl, and I was told not to hang around with her, we went shopping, we went robbing.

Street based sex workers are often exposed to drugs through pimps and drug dealers or may choose sex work to buy drugs and support their addiction. Chloe explains:

...it's a package, definitely, yeah, I will tell you now, if I, I must, for instance, If I struggle financially and I thought 'oh let me just go and do one night on the street to make some money', now that I'm clean (free from drugs) it is going to be very difficult.

Chloe entered sex work to support her crack cocaine addiction and found herself in a relationship with her drug dealer who also acted as her pimp. Despite many attempts to remove herself from drugs, this continued to be difficult.

The structural reasons for entering sex work are complex and multifaceted. The women shared their experiences to provide a better understanding of how they become involved, and each story is a consequence of failed systems. The next theme supports this view and explores sex workers reasons for remaining in sex work.

Reasons for remaining in sex work.

Women in the study explained why they became involved in sex work in the first place.

Situations and circumstances did not change for their families back home in other countries, and there became a responsibility to continue to support their families and communities.

Circumstances and opportunities did not improve in the host's countries in terms of legal status, education, or employment prospects.

My children need money, they live still in Brazil with their father, he is sick, and he cannot work so I make money for my children... I talk to them every day; every day and I miss them.
(Anna).

Selina came to Ireland to raise money for her mothers' medical bills which her family could not afford. Her mother had cancer and access to cancer treatment in her country was expensive. Healthcare as a structural barrier evidenced in many sex workers stories. Selina's mothers' treatment was extended, and this meant staying longer in Ireland and in the sex industry.

I had to stay longer because my mom had to pay for the radiotherapy, and I decided to stay and work in prostitution longer to financially help her ... and my dad lost his job.

Systemic oppression weighted heavily in their stories and emphasised the gender disparities of migration. Rachel believes, her sacrifices are in the best interest of her siblings' long term and endeavours to remain in sex work for as long as she can *`most of my brothers and sisters they have been in school, they are in colleges, and I think if I can give them a better education, they will not ever be like me. `*

Although street-based sex workers experiences were different insofar as they were more likely to be Irish citizens, they equally remained in sex work because of continued housing and accommodation shortages, family breakdown and addiction. We revisit Chloe's story where she affirms the difficulties attached to addiction and street-based sex work.

... you are on the drugs because of this person, so once you are gone from the person, you are gone from the drugs. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Sex workers in the study all had experiences with healthcare providers and the police and like the literature, they felt mistrust and stigma. Where possible they would not disclose their involvement in sex work and were more fearful of services which we outline in our final theme of *`sex worker's experiences of support services`*.

Sex worker's experiences of supportive services.

Systemic barriers exist for sex workers in the Republic of Ireland and include access to health and social care support and the policing of sex workers. Due to the intersecting experiences and needs of sex workers which we know are migration, family and the care system breakdown, sex workers remain cautious and less trusting of services. Jemma has accessed medical services in the past but would not disclose her involvement in sex work:

No, if they say 'what are you doing here?', I say I'm a tourist. I don't say I'm a prostitute, yes, if I go to a private doctor, I don't say I'm a prostitute!

This view is widely felt amongst migrant sex workers who would prefer to remain unknown. Penny adds: *'if they asked me why I was here, and I said I am here on holiday and that's it'.* Specifically, she says this following her experience in accident and emergency after falling ill. Sex workers extended their reservations towards the police and although selling sex is not illegal in Ireland, sex workers were concerned about their legal status to remain in the country. They may also have had previous negative experiences with police in their past.

... but I don't think we would go to the police or, I don't think so because I wouldn't trust the police (pauses), I think they are, you know (pauses), they would be prejudice yeah, they would have authority; you know if you tell them something happened to you. I wouldn't feel comfortable... (Lizzie)

Sex workers in the study discussed their needs and what kind of services and supports they would require. Sophie discussed how sex workers remain isolated and fearful of services and how *'they don't go anywhere; they would just be quite and forget it.'* Sophie also added her view of the importance of early intervention: *'Earlier, yeah, earlier intervention of support'.*

Moreover, participants discussed practical needs *'I would say, most supports, the types of supports they would need is housing, accommodation wise' (Jo).* A significant finding from the

stories was not having a voice. Sex workers identified the importance of being heard, and opportunities for services to advocate on their behalf:

'Yeah, we need advocates, we need advocates, all the time there is people like, like you know, against us, but, because of the misconception, because of that stereotypical thing..'. (Zara).

The empirical data presents the structural barriers imposed on sex workers and supports our claim for a revised feminist egalitarian framework for social work education where students are required to critically unpack service user`s lived experiences of systemic oppression.

Discussion

The study confirms the importance of feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education because the discourse provides a framework for students to analyse the impact of broader contextual and environmental factors such as the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors which impact on service user`s lives (Veeran et al, 2023). We evidence how competency-based practice approaches to learning can reduce education to training in the micro-skills of assessment and case-management (Morley, Macfarlane and Ablett, 2017; Morley, 2009). The consequences of excluding a social justice perspective are significant particularly as according to the International Federation of Social Work (2023), social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work education. Social work education is in danger of preparing students for practice readiness by being primarily concerned with a curriculum of learning outcomes and a case management vision which pathologizes service users and their problems (Morley, 2009). How this specifically happens is through framing problems as though they are a product of service user`s personal inadequacy rather than as political issues that reinforce oppression which require attention and resolution (Dominelli, 1996). The position is supported by examining the structural barriers which impede sex worker`s rights to social justice and equality

(FitzGerald, O'Neill and Wylie, 2020) and determines social work's capacity to adopt a surveillance approach to practice supported by current prostitution legislation. Feminist egalitarian principles address the curriculum deficit to encompass social justice and the criticality of systemic oppression (Veeran et al, 2023). This is because feminist egalitarian principles include the principle that all people are fundamentally equal despite social identity as well as the principle that gender discrimination must be eliminated to reflect this equality (Swigonski, 1994).

The findings indicate clearly the structural oppressions impacting on sex worker's lives. We explored the empirical data and the emerging themes of reasons for entering sex work; reasons for remaining in sex work; and sex worker's experiences of supportive services. We consider the structural experiences of poverty, migration, gender, and the intersecting lived experiences of sex workers (O'Neill and Campbell, 2010) which challenge the 'prostitution' narrative and the neo abolitionist position which are greatly influencing and impacting on social work services. Sex workers discussed 'mistrust' and 'fear' of services compounded by Sophie's experience of how sex workers remain isolated and fearful of services and how *'they don't go anywhere; they would just be quite and forget it'*. This is further impacted by their precarious legal status to remain in Ireland, and/or other misdemeanour or public order offences accumulated while experiencing family or care system breakdown. Where sex worker's structural barriers continue to exist then so too will 'prostitution' contradictory of the 'end demand model' approach and the 2017 (Sexual Offences) Act. Sex workers talked about not discussing their involvement in sex work with health care providers as Lizzie states *'I wouldn't trust the police ... they would be prejudice yeah, they would have authority,* which again supports the view that current law pushes women further underground, furthering risk whilst removed from health and social care services where sex workers could access support (Sweeney and FitzGerald, 2017). This view is further exacerbated where Irish

law fails to protect sex workers who prefer to work together for protection and they are accordingly prosecuted under the conditions of keeping a brothel (Platt et al, 2018).

The study demonstrates how the feminist social worker develops a feminist egalitarian relationship with the service user based on person-in-environment strategies without judgment (White, 2006; Dominelli, 2017). However, according to the sex workers in the study they do feel judged and have experienced prejudice from support services which is consistent with demands on service users to comply with current structures as opposed to the anti-oppressive lens of addressing the structural oppressions which impact on service user's lives (Dominelli, 2017). Anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices have become replaced by empowerment perspectives at the cost of recognising and confronting structural barriers which we address in the finding's sections, reasons for entering sex work, and reasons for remaining in sex work (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2017). This is problematic as the theoretical basis of empowerment theory in social work is about giving power to service users to change their own circumstances and take control in their lives (Dominelli, Payne, and Adams, 2017). Whilst this is well-intentioned and ostensibly helpful, it is also misguided in under-estimating the immense structural barriers to equality that sex worker's face (FitzGerald, O'Neill and Wylie, 2020).

Sex workers have little control of neoliberal macro policies impacting migration and poverty, and they clearly outline in their stories the need for advocates, and the need for early interventions. However, while social work is busy maintaining a surveillance role subject to current law and policies, we confirm social justice and criticality of systemic oppression are not a priority (Baines, 2020). The intention is not to claim that social workers dismiss social justice and systemic oppression, but rather that they are forced to practice within legislative, resource and policy constraints that force the prioritisation of risk management work, including but not exclusive to surveillance (Adams, Dominelli, and Payne 2002).

The paper reifies Healy's (2022) position where the true essence of the person-in-environment perspectives must also understand the environment as a modern phenomenon of social and political norms which encompass patriarchal thought and structures. The study gives voice to sex workers and their experiences by drawing on the feminist egalitarian perspective to give sex worker's agency and to be at the forefront of identifying their needs and encompass the self-determination perspective (Dominelli, 2017; White 2006). A significant finding was sex workers identified the importance of being heard and for Zara, to demystify misconceptions: *`All the time there is people like, like you know, against us, but, because of the misconception, because of that stereotypical thing`*. We claim how feminist egalitarian discourse provides an organising framework through which a broader analysis of women's issues can be undertaken and informed by feminist theories (Adams, Dominelli, and Payne 2002, 2017). We make this claim by drawing on the empirical experiences of sex workers for illustrative purposes to demonstrate how their experiences are valuable to the profession and we call for a revised critical pedagogy for social work education and practice to inform students' knowledge base in the classroom and to make this approach pedagogically integral to social work training (Anand 2022). Finally, we make the claim that social work education is in a strategic position to engage in gender-integrated theory to practice (Figueira-McDonough 2018).

We acknowledge limitations to the study. The sample is small and considering factors include accessing a *`hard to reach population`* and the time frame available to carry out the study. We have addressed this limitation by employing a qualitative sample of sex workers throughout the Republic of Ireland, and by using a feminist standpoint phenomenological approach across the data collection and the data analyses components.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been on a theoretical exposition of feminist egalitarian discourse for social work education. This work was undertaken using the empirical experiences of sex workers in the Republic of Ireland. A central concern has been the lack of centrality afforded to feminist social work across social work programmes. This endures despite social work's commitment to human rights and social justice. It is arguably now conclusive that a revised critical [feminist egalitarian] pedagogical approach is necessary within the social work curriculum to improve social work's commitment to social justice, to sex worker's lives, and provide a critical pedagogy for social work education and practice.

Conflict of interest statement

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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