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## GENDER COMPETENCES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: DO WE NEED A TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH?

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**Abstract.** This paper searches for a response to whether gender education and expected gender competences of social workers fit the idea of transformative gender justice proposed by Nancy Fraser. Our research is aimed to review approaches to gender education and expected gender competences of social workers. We also critically look at the gender-centered courses taught at the Ukrainian universities for social workers.

Qualitative in nature this study is based on an examination of gender perspective of social work education both internationally, and in Ukraine. The study reveals that the coexistence of various theorizations of gender makes controversial for social work educators and practitioners to use the gender-centered approach to teaching and practice. Distinctions between conservative and transformative approaches are reviewed in different areas of social work – practice, research, pedagogy and teaching, policy. The study's findings indicate that development of gender competences requires a wide range of activities.

A set of gender competences that could be tentatively divided into practice competences and research competences is presented. The review of selected educational programmes of Ukrainian universities demonstrates needs for enhancing the transformative approach to teaching gender competences for social work students. Currently, training programs for social workers are mainly focused on gender education, rather than on the means of achieving gender equality. They pay little attention to the gender perspectives of research in social work.

**Key words:** gender education; gender socialization; gender competence; gender equity; gender justice; social work.

## Introduction

The international scholars – B. Crisp (2019), J. Lössbroek, J. Radl (2019) – consider gender education a crucial determinant for the development of the appropriate interventions in social work. Ukrainian researchers, such as M. Demchenko, M. Varban, N. Bulyga, L. Holtsas (2017), T. Semigina, N. Tymoshenko, (2016), A. Voitovska (2016), A. Yaroshenko (2020) pointed out the low level of gender competences of social work practitioners and the challenges for gender education of social workers, and subsequently to gender-sensitive social work practice in a country.

So, our research is aimed to review existing theoretical approaches to gender education and expected gender competences of social workers. We also critically look at the gender-centered courses taught at the Ukrainian universities for social workers.

Our desk-review research is conducted with regard to several theoretical concepts. Firstly, we looked on the existing situation through lenses of the structural constructivist approach (Dominelly, 2002) stipulating that reality is constructed not by the individual, but by society and its institutions, and the acquired knowledge is converted into higher values.

The research findings and recommendations were also produced based on the framework of transformative justice described by N. Fraser (2007). It takes into account patterns of representation, interpretation and communication of the inequitable gender differentiation in social work.

Data analysis is done by organizing, sorting into units that can be managed, synthesize, search and find the patterns.

## Results and discussions

In second-wave feminism literature, we can see the separation a concept of «sex» from «gender»; the latter usually refers to a set of social expectations that may be challenged (Oakley, 1972). However, sometimes this notion of gender as a set of cultural practices has been reduced to role or identity, so that gender is treated as a preexisting characteristic or property of the individual. The modern feminist theories stress that gender is a social relationship, based upon the promotion of hierarchy, and that is reiterated through interactions in everyday life (Hicks, 2015).

So, overall, gender is viewed as a characteristic acquired and passed on through socialization or reproduction of structural forms. Some social work literature consider gender as a ground for similarity and shared purpose (Strega et al., 2013), while other suggest to look at gender as a practice and insist on its contextualization within late or reflexive modernity (Dunk-West & Verity, 2013).

Social work academics refer to gender as a social or cultural set of ideas reflecting normative assumptions (Smith, 1990), but they also make reference to gender as a practice encouraging social workers to reflect upon their own assumptions and values about gender (Sheach-Leith et al., 2011).

J. Hanmer and D. Statham (1999) propose a «woman-centred practice» term' and stress that, since women are the majority of social workers and service users, a commonality of gendered experience, along the lines of "being female, their relationships with men, children, living within the family, employment and working conditions" (Hanmer & Statham, 1999, p. 18), forms the basis of social change through social work.

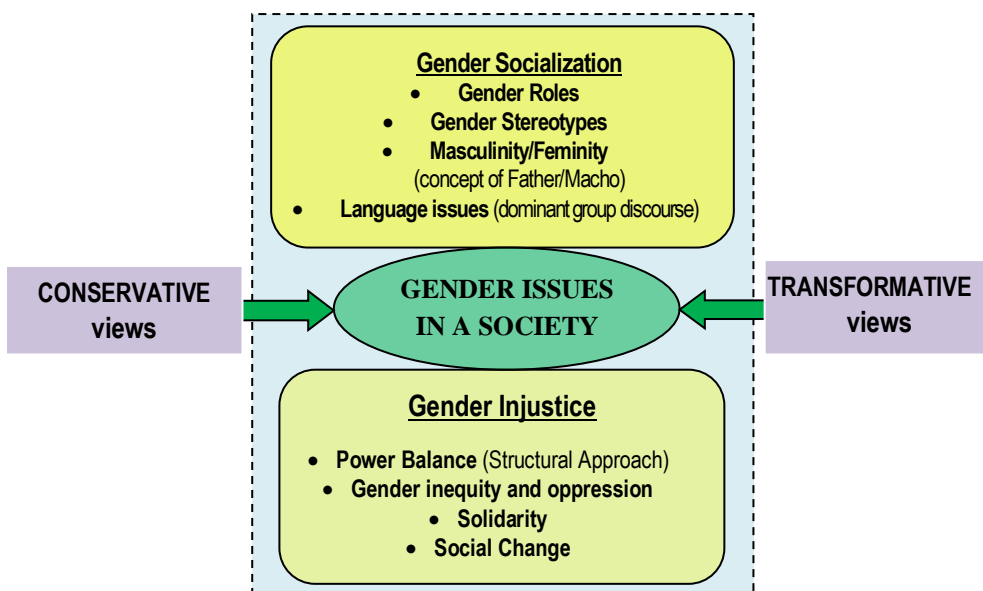
The social and structural gender injustice matters are not always viewed as social problems to be addressed by social workers or welfare policy. Within the conservative paradigm of thinking the gender differentiation is considered as 'normal', and injustice is being justified as 'traditional' division between sexes. This paradigm attempts to position women and femininity in relation to the more valued, men and masculinity, and for women this implies the need to be considered «attractive» or «desirable» (Smith, 1990).

While the status model of gender justice (Fraser, 2007) refers to the intersections of gender and socio-economic injustice, and states that arising from the enduring public/private ('productive'/'reproductive') division of labor, gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalization and deprivation continue to be generated. Fraser theorizes the aims of redistributive justice as associated with eliminating gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation through transforming the inequities produced by a gendered political economy. This model determines the construction of justice by society in the following two dimensions: 1) institutionalized gender policy; 2) self-esteem, which is formed under the influence of other people in the social environment (Fraser, 2007).

Feminists in social work (Domimelly, 2002; Orme, 2001) have drawn attention to the prevalence of sexist attitudes and practices in welfare policy and social services.

Critical awareness (Flemet al., 2017) and critical reflections (Keddie, 2006) could be regarded as drivers of transformative approach. Moreover, S. Butler-Mokoro and L. Grant (2018) acknowledge difference and multisystemic oppression while simultaneously stress the importance of solidarity when it comes to feminist social work practice and social change.

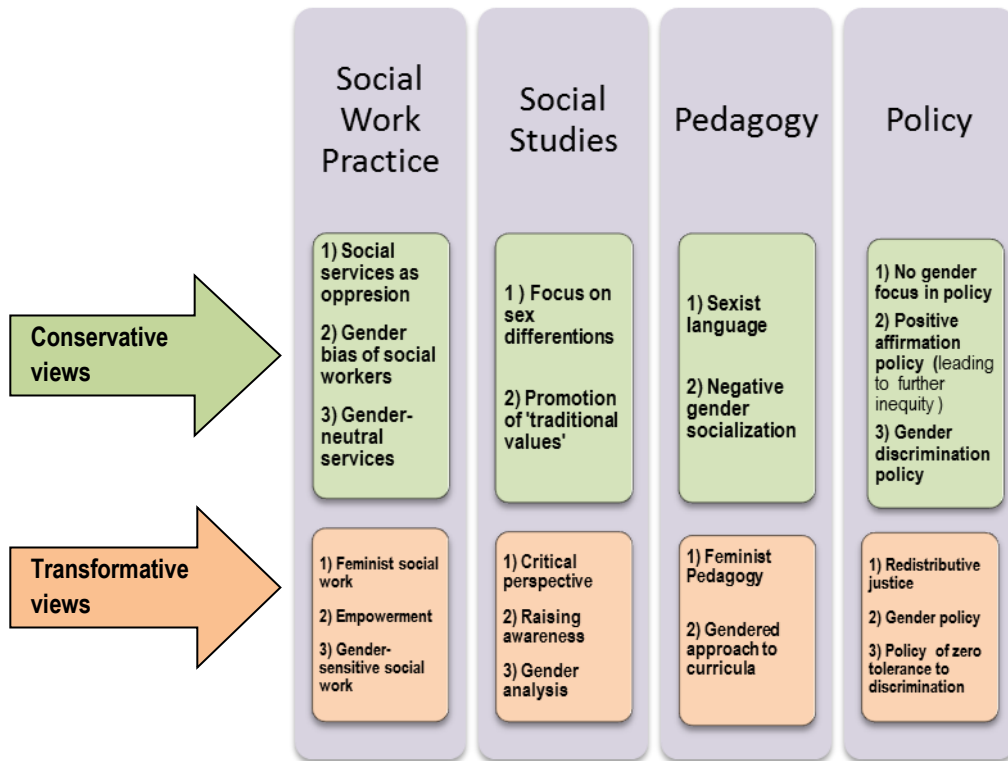
It is worth to point out that the coexistence of various theorizations of gender makes controversial for social work educators and practitioners to use the gender-centered approach to teaching and practice. The review of above mentioned and other recent publications (Howie & Tauchert, 2019), Featherstone et. al., 2010, Leskošek, 2019) allows producing a conceptual mapping of gender theories and approaches that have substantial meaning for social work (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Conceptual mapping of the gender theories and views on gender issues**

With regard to analytical principles: (1) gender analysis, (2) awareness of power relations, (3) analysis of welfare services as structures of oppression, and (4) utilization of feminist language (Roni & Krumer-Nevo, 2016), the distinction between conservative and transformative approaches could be observed in different areas of social work – practice (Norman & Wheeler, 1996, Scourfield, 2006), research (Howie & Tauchert, 2019), pedagogy and teaching (Cramer, 1995, Leskošek, 2019, Levin et al., 2015), policy (Dominelly, 2002; Orme, 2001). For example, Orme argues that the “gender politics of social work has to include the relationship between the helper and those who require help, and ... between the individual and the state” (Orme, 2001, p. 14). Figure 2 presents the differences between the conservative and transformative approaches within the professional social work.

Current global social work standards promote anti-discriminatory and empowering approaches. The Global Definition of Social Work, the Global Ethical Principle, as well as the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training – key documents by the International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW, 2020) – clearly emphasize the transformative approaches to gender issues, and call to address the issues of gender inequality. Thus, competences of social work students developed in the higher educational institutions in accordance with the views of professional community should include a gender perspective.



**Figure 2. Conservative and transformative approaches to gender issues within the professional social work**

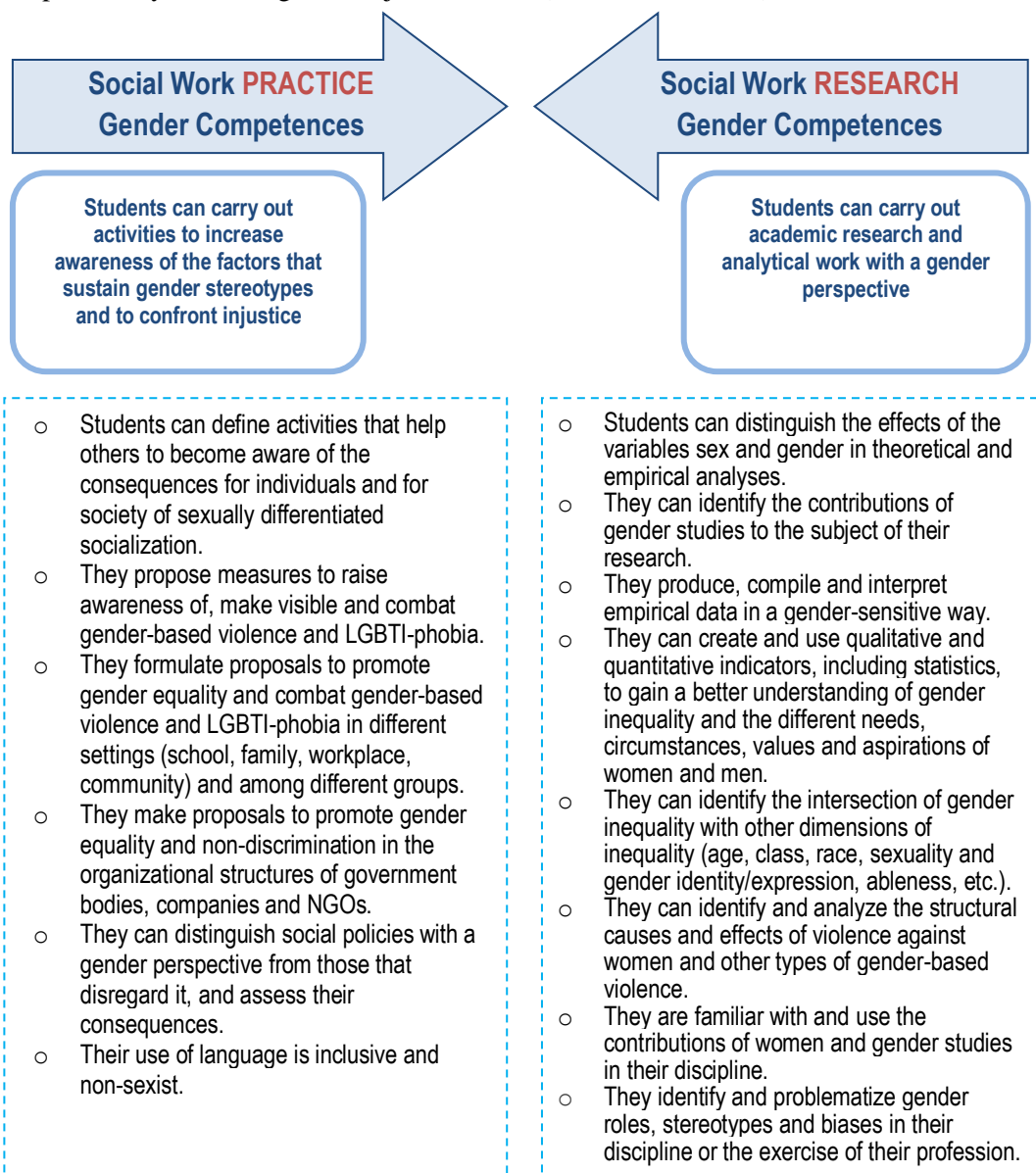
Social work education should lead to the formation of social workers' gender competence as an integrated set of values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, abilities regarding the gender component of human rights, which is acquired in the learning process, and allows to effectively implementing the principle of equal rights and opportunities.

We share the ideas of academics (The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, 2019, Goode et al., 2020) who had proposed a set of gender competences that could be tentatively divided into practice competences and research competences. The Figure 3 provides detailed lists of such competences that could be reputed as transformative.

Does our analysis of international practice make sense for Ukraine and its social work education?

Ukraine shares the tradition of the post-Soviet region where women are highly educated and make significant economic contributions to support their families through employment. However, their views about gender roles remain controversial, and it is also unclear whether opportunity structures and social mobility have influenced these views (Urbaeva, 2019). The patriarchal social structure and policy dominate in the

Ukrainian society. The social work practice partially reflects the dominant masculine culture. The limited evidence on the preparedness of social workers to assume responsibility to tackle gender injustice exists (Yaroshenko, 2020).



**Figure 3. Gender competences of social workers within the transformative approach** (adapted from The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (2019, Goode et al., (2020))

The review of educational programmes of the Ukrainian universities (Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism; National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy; Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University; Taras Shevchenko National

University of Kyiv; Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University) gives grounds to distinguish three areas of gender training of social workers:

1) inclusion of the gender component in various disciplines, both those that form the general competencies of social workers (mainly by introducing relevant topics to the content of traditional disciplines of the socio-humanitarian cycle) and those courses designed to form professional competencies;

2) inclusion of gender-themed courses in bachelor's and master's programs in social work, such as "Gender Socialization", "Gender Psychology", "Gender Sociology", "Gender Studies", etc.;

3) development and implementation of specialized courses aimed at strengthening the gender sensitivity of social work practice, in particular: "Gender aspects of social work", "Feminist social work", "Fundamentals of gender theory and practice", "Social work with women" (Karagodina & Semigina, 2020).

The transformative capacities of Ukrainian universities and particular courses to address issues of gender equity in social work are not high. Training programs for social workers are mainly focused on gender education, rather than on the means of achieving gender equality. They pay little attention to the gender perspectives of research in social work. Therefore, it is unlikely that Ukrainian students of social work are prepared and ready to implement the ideas of transformative gender justice.

All in all, different aspects of social work education and its context might be seen as either enabling or constraining a transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice within and beyond the contexts of higher education as a social institute in Ukraine.

So, the curricula of Ukrainian social work education should be revised in line with international professional documents stressing the gender equity and justice (IASSW, 2020). A necessary prerequisite for the development of gender competence of social workers can also include the availability of quality educational literature, free from gender stereotypes, and methodological developments that teach the implementation of gender-sensitive approaches in social work.

Moreover, the development of the profeminist professional culture of social workers seems to be crucially important for Ukraine in order to introduce a transformative approach to shaping gender competences.

### **Concluding remarks**

In social work international standards the demand for transformative approach is evident. It calls to address issues of gender inequality and gender-based stereotypes. In social work professional reality, gender-sensitive services and social change oriented approaches co-exist with oppressive, conservative practice. Thus, social work educators should be clear the approach they choose to pursue in their students.

So far, Ukrainian social work education was not distinctly based on the ideas of the transformative gender justice, the courses do not undoubtedly stress the importance of

solidarity and social change. The main focus of gender training is on gender roles and gender socialization, but not on the power balance in society. Pedagogy and philosophical considerations should be shifted in order to prepare students to confront injustice and to carry out academic research and analytical work within a gender perspective.

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## ГЕНДЕРНІ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТІ СТУДЕНТІВ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ РОБОТИ: ЧИ ПОТРІБНИЙ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЙНИЙ ПІДХІД?

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**Анотація.** Ця стаття шукає відповідь на те, чи збігається гендерна освіта та очікувані гендерні компетенції соціальних працівників з ідеєю трансформативної гендерної справедливості, запропонованою Ненсі Фрейзер. Наше дослідження спрямоване на огляд підходів до гендерної освіти та очікуваних гендерних компетентностей соціальних працівників. Ми також критично дивимось на гендерно орієнтовані курси, які викладаються в українських університетах для соціальних працівників.

Якісне за своїм характером це дослідження базується на вивченні гендерної перспективи освіти в галузі соціальної роботи як на міжнародному рівні, так і в Україні. Дослідження виявляє, що співіснування різних теорій гендеру робить суперечливим для педагогів та практиків соціальної роботи використання гендерно-орієнтованого підходу до викладання та практики. Розглянуто відмінності між консервативним та трансформаційним підходами у різних сферах соціальної роботи – у практиці, дослідженнях, педагогіці та викладанні, політиці. Результати дослідження вказують на те, що розвиток гендерних компетентностей вимагає широкого кола заходів.

Представлено набір гендерних компетентностей, які можна умовно об'єднати у дві групи – практичні та дослідницькі. Аналіз деяких освітніх програм українських університетів демонструє потреби у вдосконаленні трансформаційного підходу до викладання гендерних компетентностей студентів соціальної роботи. В даний час навчальні програми для соціальних працівників в основному зосереджені на гендерній освіті, а не на засобах досягнення гендерної рівності. Вони приділяють мало уваги гендерним перспективам досліджень у соціальній роботі.

**Ключові слова:** гендерна освіта; гендерна соціалізація; гендерна компетентність; гендерна рівність; гендерна справедливість; соціальна робота..