



**Executive Summary: Workplace Violence
National Committee on Women's Issues:
Social Workers' Perceptions of Workforce Challenges among Women Employed in
Social Service Settings**

Introduction

Social work is a profession that encompasses helping and empowering individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being (International Federation of Social Workers, 2016; NASW, 2008). Women's rights are inherently human rights, and social work's historical and international commitment to human rights is a core value of the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2016; NASW, 2008). Despite the fact that the majority of social workers in the United States are women, they are plagued with discrimination across the various social welfare systems. Specifically, women perform the vast majority of social work services, but continue to experience discrimination in pay, promotions, and other areas of practice (Bent-Goodley & Carlton-LaNey, 2015; NASW Center for Workforce Studies and Social Work Practice, 2011; National Organization of Women, 2004).

NASW has also found that within the social work profession, which has traditionally been viewed as a "female" profession, men tend to more often hold the positions of power at social service agencies and programs (NASW, 2009). The number of managerial positions held by women in the workforce is greatly disproportionate when compared to the number of qualified women who work within the profession. In nonprofit human service organizations, men are disproportionately represented in upper management, and earn higher salaries than women, at all hierarchical levels of the organization (Gibelman, 2000). Research done by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Hegewisch, 2016) found that male social workers earned significantly more than female social workers, with a median income for men reported at \$54,290, compared with \$43,510 for women (The New Social Worker, Winter 2003).

In addition, there also appears to be a disparity when comparing the social worker position as a whole to other high-risk professions such as electricians, and linemen. Professionals with on-the-job risks are often compensated with higher salaries (Kurtzleben, 2012); however, the risks that come with social work are not similarly compensated (Knight, 1999). Social workers do experience risk of exposure to violence through the implementation of case

management services with the clients they serve. This exposure puts social workers at risk for various forms of harm, including negative physical, psychological, social, spiritual, legal, ethical, and financial consequences (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008). Social workers also manage people with substance abuse and mental illness as well as people who are homeless. Crucial indicators of potential violence include exposure to externalizing behaviors from clients who present with symptoms of schizophrenia, medication noncompliance, and active drug or alcohol use (Reamer, 2013). Those factors, combined with the fact that many social workers must visit their clients' homes often located in dangerous neighborhoods and engaging in potentially volatile situations, creates potential safety risks for the social work professional. Women in the field of social work are at a higher risk to be verbally abused, threatened and/or sexual assaulted by their clients (Knight, 1999). As female social workers are disproportionately represented in direct service positions and take longer to move into management positions, they are exposed to these risks for a longer period of time than their male counterparts.

The United States Bureau of Labor (2016) defines hazard pay as additional pay for performing hazardous duty or work involving physical hardship. Work duty that causes extreme physical discomfort and distress which is not adequately alleviated by protective devices is deemed to impose a physical hardship (Bureau of Labor, 2016). This idea is not a new concept in male dominated professions including outdoor occupations or factory/manufacturing industries (Compensation and Working Conditions, 1997). The physical safety issues social workers face has to do more with violence from others as opposed to malfunction or natural disaster (NASW, 2013).

To learn more about our understanding of experiences of women in the profession, the NASW National Committee on Women's Issues (NCOWI) developed and disseminated a survey to assess the unique challenges particularly experienced by women in the profession in 2015. The focus of this Executive Summary is on findings pertinent to workplace violence as experienced according to gender.

Methodology

A total of 3,221 social workers from across the country responded to the survey in February 2013, of which 1349 surveys were completed in their entirety. Respondents were 93% female, 6% male, and 1% transgender. The racial makeup of the same was 76% white, followed by African American (11%), Chicano/Mexican/Puerto Rican/other Hispanic descent (5%), Asian American (1.5%), Alaskan Native/American Indian/Native Hawaiian (.8%), biracial (3%), and other (2%). Respondents ranged from under 25 years of age to over 71, with 42% of respondents identifying as being 51 years of age and older, and 39% reporting being under the age of 40. The vast majority of survey respondents were post-degree professionals, (84% were MSWs, 8% had BSWs, and 3% had PhD's); 6% of respondents were students currently enrolled in social work degree granting programs. In addition, 29% of respondents reported that they have been working in the social work field for 20 years or more, followed by 10-19 years (23%), 2-9 years (33%), and less than 2 years (15%). 28% of respondents were employed in government settings including federal (5%), state (13%) and local (10%); 61% were employed in the private sector, and 12% were self-employed. 66% of respondents work full time.

There are three dependent variables in this study: social workers reported exposure to workplace violence, social workers reported exposure to sexual harassment at the workplace, and social workers' perceptions of the availability of a workplace violence plan to address violence when it occurs. Several independent variables were modeled to predict workplace violence exposure, including sexual harassment, and whether agencies have formal plans in place to address violence if and when it occurs.

A bivariate and multivariate research design, including logistic regression, was employed to model predictors of workplace violence exposure, including sexual harassment, and the availability of workplace violence plans to address violence that occurs in the line of duty at social service agencies.

Results

- **Exposure to Workplace Violence:** Although only 19% of respondents expressed concerns related to exposure to workplace violence, 24% of respondents reported either witnessing or being a victim of a violent incident at work.
 - **Witnessing Violence:** Women were more likely to report witnessing or being a victim of a violent attack than their male counterparts. Those who were in the field 5 or fewer years were more likely to report an incident than more seasoned workers. Those employed in the government sector were more likely to report workplace violence than those employed in the private sector, and those that were employed full time were more likely to report workplace violence than those who were employed part time.
 - **Types of Violence:** Of those who reported witnessing or being a victim of a violent incident at work, 77% reported concerns with staring, dirty looks, cold shoulder, or other negative eye contact, 29% experienced negative or obscene gestures, 42% experienced verbal harassment (e.g. having someone make unwelcome sexual comments, jokes or gestures to or about you or others, rumors), 6% survived an attack with a weapon while attempting to complete work tasks, 18% experienced a physical attack/assault (e.g. pushing, shoving, hitting) at work, and 38% experienced threats of physical violence towards themselves or others they care about in the line of duty¹.
 - **Sexual Harassment:** More seasoned social workers were more likely to report sexual harassment than social workers who were employed less than five years in the profession. Government employed social workers were more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment than their private sector employed colleagues, and those employed full time were more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment than those employed part-time.
 - **Workplace Policies:** 18% of respondents reported that there is no formal policy in place at their worksite that specifies what employees can do should they become a victim of workplace violence. Females were more likely to report a lack of formal policies at their worksite than their male counterparts, and those that were single, divorced or widowed were less likely to report having access to these protective policies than their married colleagues.
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Discussion

The present study examined gender differences in exposure to workplace violence in social service settings. Female social workers were more likely to report exposure to workplace violence, including sexual harassment than their male counterparts. They were also less likely to report having access to formal workplace violence policies to support them should an incident occur. This information is consistent with the results of earlier studies which have found that female social workers are exposed to workplace violence at higher levels than male colleagues (Knight, 1999; NASW, 2009).

However, these gender differences, although significant in the bivariate analysis, disappeared in the final regression models. What is most significant in terms of workplace violence are the findings that part-time social work workforce and those employed in private settings are those with the least support in managing workplace violence.

Conclusions and implications for practice, policy, professional development and research

Additional steps are needed to ensure gender equity in social welfare workplace settings. These steps include the need for social welfare employers to pay higher wages that reflect the specialized skill level required to successfully complete the work, and to ensure that practicing social workers are able to pay off educational debts and other work related costs (licensure and continuing education credits) without the concern of it conflicting with the costs of other activities of daily living. Social workers are exposed to safety risks in the work setting to a high degree, and wages in the social work profession should reflect the safety risk hazards that other professions take into consideration, like skilled trades, in determining wage levels. As workplace violence is a pervasive problem in social welfare workplace settings, it is critical that specific policies and procedures are put in place to not only prevent workplace violence, but also adequately treat social workers when workplace violence occurs.

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Prepared by: Angelique Day, PhD

Contributors:

Tricia Bent-Goodley, Neoshua Butler, Megan Pennefather, Tonya Perry, Anna Scheyett, Tracy Whitaker, Rita Webb