

# Soft-spoken and sympathetic: Gendered news-media social worker narratives in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Social work is a female-dominated profession. This study aims to answer the question: what are the gendered narratives of social workers as portrayed in Aotearoa New Zealand newspapers. Despite previous studies investigating the portrayal of social workers in newspaper media in association with crises or specific events, this research investigates a current gap in the literature by focusing explicitly on the role of gender in media reporting across period of 3 months in 2023.

**METHODS:** Newztext was used to search regional and national news media publications between January 1, 2023 and April 1, 2023 for any mention of social work or social workers. In total, 36 articles were included in the final sample, and content analysis was conducted by combining a qualitative and quantitative approach to identify both latent and manifest narratives.

**FINDINGS:** Social work is portrayed as a feminised profession, with key themes of altruism and nurturing combined with dominant terms of help and support reinforcing the historical perceptions of social work as women's work. The findings also evidence unfavourable working conditions experienced by the profession.

**CONCLUSION:** Although further research is needed, this study recommends that collaboration between the social work profession with the media is vital to challenge current portrayals of social work to better inform public perceptions. This will subsequently help improve the value and treatment of social work and care work within society, the public, and across other professions and disciplines.

**Keywords:** Media, social work, newspaper, gender, narratives, public perception

## Media perceptions of social work: A review of the literature

News information shared through multiple communication channels shape, construct, and reproduce individuals' opinions and perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them, and as a result, can also influence their behaviours and attitudes (Lowrey, 2018; Nairn et al., 2011).

Mass media, including newspapers, act as a vehicle for promoting and reinforcing dominant norms and messages to the public (Arias, 2019). Information shared through the media, therefore, aids in creating an acceptance of common knowledge, whether positive or negative, resulting in shared beliefs and updating of societal norms (Arias, 2019). This phenomenon can be further understood through the theories

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of agenda setting (Wanta & Alkazemi, 2018) and cultivation theory (Arendt, 2010) which explain how news media construct, maintain, and reproduce societal perceptions and representations.

Agenda-setting theory explains how the amount of coverage and focus given to an issue or topic in the media influences the public's attention and discussion of the topic, including the perceived importance to an individual's own life (McCombs & Shaw, 2005; Wanta & Alkazemi, 2018). It is argued that media filter information to the reader, and suggests that the issues predominantly reported on can influence what becomes prominent in the public domain. Agenda theory can act to reinforce an individual's beliefs and how strong they hold an opinion rather than necessarily changing them (Wanta & Alkazemi, 2018).

Cultivation theory describes the effect of long-term exposure to the media in shaping consumers' perception and behaviours (Arendt, 2010). Though cultivation theory was originally formed based on investigating the influence of television, research focusing specifically on the role of newspapers has found an individual's perception of the world and their view of reality becomes more aligned with the messages and attitudes shown through the newspaper the more they consumed these (Arendt, 2010). Widely accessed forms of media and media outlets, therefore, have the power to influence the public's perception, with the potential to shape the general public's understanding of social work and related practice and issues (Lowrey, 2018; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013; Wanta & Alkazemi, 2018).

To date, there have been multiple studies investigating the influence of the media in forming or altering public perceptions of social work around the world. One study in Sweden reported changes in the public's trust in social services and social workers due to exposure of scandals of benefit fraud in the news (Niehaus & Krüger, 2016). The

study found that questioning or diminishing the trustworthiness and credibility through the news can alter the perceived value of social work by either confirming or highlighting the public's opinions and ultimately shaping societal beliefs (Niehaus & Krüger, 2016). Furthermore, individual actions like client cooperation and likeliness to access services can also be influenced by messages in the media (Arias, 2019; Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2021; Niehaus & Krüger, 2016).

In the context of the United Kingdom, it has been argued that the news media is one of the main contributors to individual and public perceptions of social workers and the social work profession (Legood et al., 2016). This is highlighted in Warner's (2014) analysis of news media related to the death of Peter Connelly in England. The study highlighted how news media lead a moral and emotional attack on social workers through language choice and partial portrayals to demonise social workers. This case study argues that the media can act as a conduit to mobilise public anger through portraying certain narratives and constructs of social workers (Warner, 2014).

Similar negative media portrayals of social workers seen in the United Kingdom have also been observed in Aotearoa New Zealand (Keenan, 2000; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). Described as a "frenzy of media interest in child abuse cases" (Keenan, 2000, p. 7), Stanfield and Beddoe (2013) further posited how public scrutiny and a focus on negative stories can contribute to "high stress levels and low retention rates" in the profession which, in turn, can affect the quality and consistency of social work services (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013, p. 42). Furthermore, they argued that inaccurate news reporting can have a substantially negative impact on the public's perception and opinion of social workers, decreasing the likelihood of members of the public engaging with social workers or social services. Extended by a telephone survey-based study, Staniforth

et al. (2014) found members of the public believed the image of social work needed to be improved and concluded that the participants' ideas for improvement may stem from internalisation of negative and highly emotive portrayals of sensitive cases in the media, often associated with violence or perceived incompetence of social workers. In a further study examining the media portrayal of Child Youth and Family, the statutory child care and protection service in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time, Staniforth and Beddoe (2017) found limited reporting on the range of issues and interventions in which social work and social workers are engaged. Findings highlight a strong theme of failure, with only an occasional "glimpse of a noble, quietly heroic social worker" being shown (Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017, p. 16).

The above studies are reiterated by Staniforth et al. (2022) who similarly found that negative news stories created a general lack of understanding and undervaluing of social workers. Staniforth et al. (2022) highlighted how the sensationalised nature of the media in Aotearoa has garnered the most shocking response from the public, particularly of child protection uplifts and deaths. The findings go further, however, by also highlighting the media's criticisms on the perceived failings of individual social workers rather than structural and systemic issues. The authors argued that, for the social work profession to influence the narrative of the media, relationships with the media and developing spokesperson roles with organisations are needed to be proactive against negative portrayals (Staniforth et al., 2022).

As a profession that has gained significant negative attention, social work must be proactive and transparent in both practice and mistakes while also actively working to build connections with the media (Legood et al., 2016; Staniforth et al., 2014; Staniforth et al., 2022). The issue of gender is discussed briefly by Staniforth et al. (2014), although

it is not considered as part of the analysis of current studies in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Gender, however, has played a key factor in the history and development of social work both internationally and within Aotearoa New Zealand.

### A gendered history of social work

Historically, the aim of social work has been to provide aid and charity to those who were poor, sick, widowed, or orphaned, and mentally or physically disabled people (Leighninger, 2012; Pierson, 2011). Arising from growing inequality and social issues combined with insufficient state support, early pioneers of social welfare and social work established the first coordinated movement, the *friendly visitors* in England in the 1800s (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Leighninger, 2012). Friendly visitors were volunteers, and almost always middle-class white women of an evangelical background. Through visiting people in their homes, it has been argued the friendly visitor movement was underpinned by the intention of improving personal conditions through reforming the moral character and choices of the poor in association with religious values and classist and gendered ideas of the home (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Pierson, 2011; Winter & Cree, 2016).

Alongside the friendly visitors was the establishment of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the 1840s in England. It was a privately funded establishment aiming to co-ordinate local charities which involved many of the friendly visitor volunteers (Pierson, 2011). The COS continued to follow the philosophy of the deserving poor and operated on beliefs of moral and internal deficits rather than external factors impacting on individuals' living situations (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Maidment & Beddoe, 2016; Pierson, 2011). Harlow (2004) highlighted the deeply rooted nature of historical philanthropy and charity work; social work has long drawn upon women's expected roles, knowledge, and skills which

aided in providing women with acceptable opportunities and activities to contribute outside of the home sphere. This argument is reinforced by Winter and Cree (2016) who stated that friendly visitors were thought to draw upon the natural ideas and abilities of women and their class status to be role models for poor families. As social work continued to expand as a profession through England and the United States of America, increased demand and paid positions eventually led to a need for training and a shift away from the voluntary model (Dahle, 2012; Maidment & Beddoe, 2016; Pierson, 2011).

Leighninger (2012) noted that the expansion from volunteers to paid and trained workers has been a key development whereby social work became a viable career path for many college-educated women, perceived as a profession that follow traditional gender roles (Pierson, 2011). Moving from voluntary to a salaried position was also vital to the growth of the profession in Aotearoa New Zealand, being similarly viewed as a viable career path for women (Maidment & Beddoe, 2016) with shared Eurocentric gender roles resulting from colonisation.

### **Aotearoa New Zealand context**

Prior to colonisation and the systematic settlement of migrants from Great Britain and beyond, tangata whenua had a system of social welfare based on community, collective responsibility, and restorative justice (Maidment & Beddoe, 2016; Nash, 2007; Waitangi Consultancy Group, 1991). The introduction and enforcement of Eurocentric ideologies and western beliefs, however, influenced gendered traits and assumed normative behaviours with a strong focus on a nuclear family unit. As argued by Garlick (2012), this was replicated through early forms of social welfare whereby child welfare field officers were allocated based on the worker's gender and supposed natural traits. Men were assigned to work with and monitor male adolescents, while women

were tasked with looking after infants, girls, and young boys, and to engage in more general roles relating to domestic duties (Garlick, 2012). Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be a female-dominated profession, with 84% of the profession identifying as female (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2022). Gender is an important consideration as social work has been, and continues to be, a highly feminised profession, contributing to vertical and horizontal segregation, as evidenced in the recent pay equity claims in Aotearoa.

Vertical segregation is the division of labour between management and worker positions in a profession, often resulting in differences of pay, benefit, and status (Heilman, 2001; Ministry for Women, 2019, 2022; Talbot, 2003). Within social work, men have historically been recruited for management positions due to gender stereotypes valuing perceived natural leadership abilities (Jones et al., 2019 McPhail, 2004). The Ministry for Women (2022) refers to horizontal or occupational segregation as instances where either men or women occupy 70% or more of the workforce, identifying nursing, teaching, and social work as examples of highly feminised professions within Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry for Women, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022). Occupational segregation is considered a main contributor to the gender pay gap, as feminine work is historically undervalued and underpaid compared to professions dominated by men (Ministry for Women, 2022; Pease, 2011).

A recent development within social work as a profession in Aotearoa New Zealand is pay equity, which addresses historic gendered pay inequalities. The issue of fair and equitable pay arose from a pay equity claim for Oranga Tamariki in 2018 which has ultimately led to pay equity for community and iwi social workers which began in 2022 (Social Service Providers Aotearoa [SSPA], 2022). An investigation into the responsibilities and competencies

needed in social work compared to other male-dominated professions has contributed to greater recognition of the skills and knowledge required for the role, acknowledging the historic underpaying of the profession due to social work being female dominated, and thus undervalued within society (ANZASW, 2022; SSPA, 2022). Ongoing concerns of pay equity, who is eligible and how it is addressed across the profession continue to highlight the gendered nature of social work.

With social work continuing to be a female-dominated profession and recognising the influence the media holds over public perceptions, the following study was designed to answer the question, “What are the gendered narratives of social workers and the profession as represented in Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper articles.” Previous studies have explored the media representation of social work in general terms or in response to crises (Legood et al., 2016; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013; Warner, 2014), however, an exploration of the gendered narratives has been overlooked. This study seeks to extend existing research and subsequently considers potential implications on an individual, organisational, and wider societal level including pay, work conditions, and vertical and horizontal segregation of social workers.

## Method

As part of an Honours dissertation, a content analysis of news media produced over a 3-month period, from January 1–April 1, 2023, was conducted. This period was determined to gather a sample of current newspaper articles, whilst being restricted in size due to the dissertation requirements and available time. Newztext was used as the search database to compile and collect relevant articles. This database was chosen as an archival search engine as it includes national and regional newspaper articles with consistent indexing across all sources to ensure systematic coverage of news media that was not limited

to individual publishers. Whilst the authors recognise access to information has diversified with greater media outputs, newspapers retain relevance in society whereby much of the material is also now published online and shared through social media, and printed copies help bridge a continued digital divide, as it cannot be assumed everyone has both access to technology and the necessary skills to navigate online material. Furthermore, newspapers continue to cover both national and regional attitudes and perceptions of social workers, providing written records that contribute to an archive that can illustrate both current developments and historical narratives.

The keyword “Social work\*” was employed to search Newztext, capturing occurrences of “Social work” OR “Social worker” OR “Social workers” across the title, body and author notes of all newspaper articles. This approach was adopted to ensure all potential newspaper articles relating to social work practice and the role of social workers were included in the initial search.

The initial search produced 190 newspaper articles from within Aotearoa New Zealand as seen in Figure 1. Seventy articles were replicated in two or more newspapers. After removing replicates, there were 106 unique results. The title, body of the text, and author’s note for each article was screened to determine relevance to the research question. Newspaper articles that made no direct mention of social workers and the work they do were excluded from the final study (See Figure 1). In total, 36 newspaper articles that contained comments, discussion, or mention of social workers and their work were included in the final sample. This process was repeated with the second author to ensure consistency in determining inclusion and exclusion.

## Analysis

The authors of this study both identify as tangata Tiriti/tau iwi, cis gendered women,



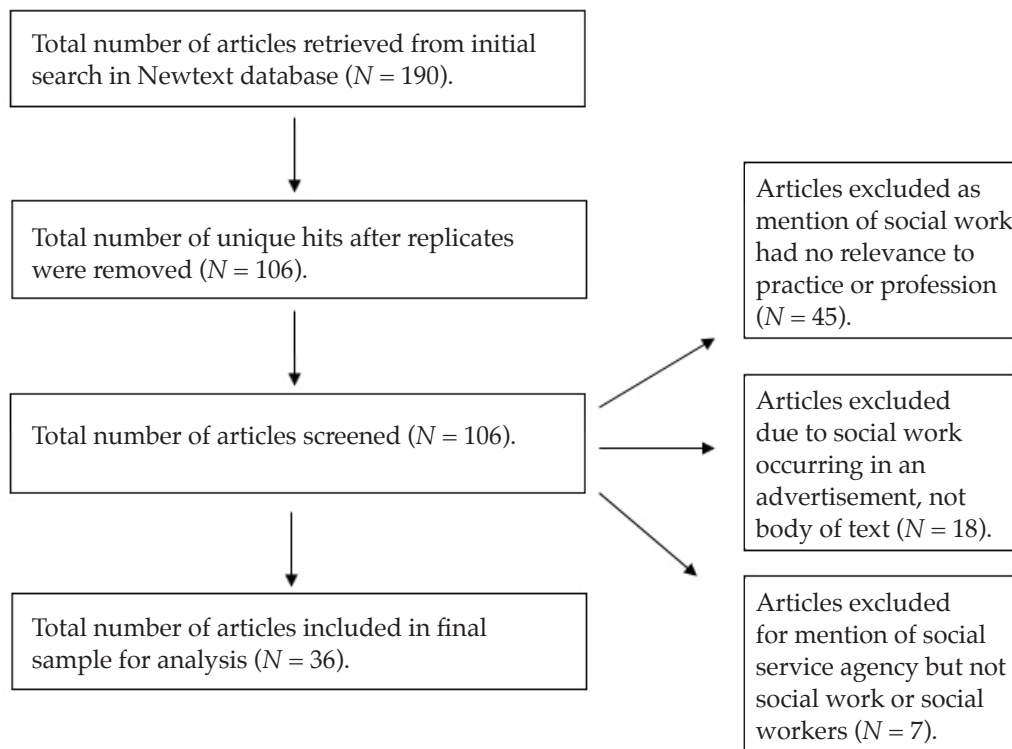


Figure 1 Flow Chart of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Process Applied to the Study

and are registered social workers. One is a current practising social worker in care and protection and the other is a social work educator. We recognise that our perspectives are shaped by our cultural heritage and personal/professional experiences with others and the world. This study captures a Pākehā perspective and does not necessarily reflect Indigenous knowledge or diverse cultural considerations. As authors, we do not believe that gender exists in a binary, rather we recognise gender is a spectrum. However, for the nature of this study, the categorisation of gendered language and terms, as discussed below, was informed by sociological literature developed through traditional/Western narratives and stereotypical constructions of gender, and as such, presents a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. There was explicit attention to pronouns used in the newspaper articles throughout the analysis process; however, it was evident that nonbinary pronouns were not used in the media sample.

Gender stereotypes refer to the generalised view and characteristics of women and men. Within gendered stereotypes are qualities, traits and characteristics based on social expectations and definitions for men and women to be masculine and feminine respectively (Koenig, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2022). For women, stereotypically acceptable feminine traits including being caring, compassionate, nurturing, helpful, soft, emotional, and submissive; while for men acceptable behaviour includes stereotypically masculine traits of power, dominance, leadership, strength, independence, bravery, and assertiveness (Kachel et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2022; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These beliefs and ideations stem from traditional Western and Eurocentric views of men and women, particularly from within the family unit where men have been expected to be the breadwinners and economic providers while women have been expected to be carers for the family and within the home (Dahle, 2012; Kachel et al., 2016; Ministry for Women, 2019; Pease, 2011).

To prepare for the content analysis, an initial scoping of such stereotypical gendered terms in the literature was conducted to formulate a guiding list. For example, masculine language included decisive, ambitious, and strong, while feminine language included caring, sympathetic, warm, and compassionate (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Talbot, 2003).

A quantitative content analysis was first conducted. Each article was numbered and analysed individually, counting the occurrence of terms and concepts used within the articles which described social workers and their practice (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The frequency of terms was recorded, alongside which article the terms were used in to determine the predominant language used. A second-level analysis was conducted to evaluate the terms, in respect of synonyms, to group terms which held similar meanings.

Next a qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyse the underlying messages and perceptions conveyed in the articles (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). This included coding each individual article, identifying the explicit and latent messages when the media referred to social workers and their role or practice. Upon completion of coding, the first-level analysis was revisited to recheck for consistency in application. The codes were then analysed to evaluate the context of the extracts under

each code, checking for coherence in the meaning ascribed to each extract to then create initial groupings to identify similar themes. The final level of analysis included an assessment of prevalence and relevance to the research question to determine key themes and minor themes. The qualitative themes were then considered alongside the quantitative findings to understand dominant narratives, questioning the gendered representation of social workers.

### Quantitative findings

There were a total of 49 terms identified. Multiple terms shared the same meaning and were grouped together, reducing the overall total to 32 terms. This study reports on the five most predominant terms which occurred nine times or more across the sample, with the remaining terms having only been used four times or less.

As seen in Table 2, the most common language used were general verbs which included the terms, *advised*, *wrote*, *listened*, *monitoring*, and *asked*. The verbs described the practical aspects of social worker's practice when working at a micro level with service users. These words were not considered gendered descriptors, rather this finding indicates that there is some, although limited, knowledge of the tasks associated with social work. Core functions and descriptions such as promoting social change, empowerment, advocacy and

Table 2 Quantitative Analysis: Most Frequently Used Terms

Term	Frequency	Number of articles each term appeared in (N = 36)	Masculine or feminine language?
Verbs	13	11/36	
Help	10	6/36	F
Building relationships (with service users)	10	5/36	F
Leadership	10	7/36	M
Support	9	7/36	F

Note: Reported findings include only the top five most frequently used terms across the sample.

challenging structures were absent from the media despite being central to the mandate of the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

The second most common term was *help*, which included suffix variations *helped* and *helping*. This was closely followed by the term *support*, including *supported* and *supporting*. Both *help* and *support* are stereotypically feminine traits which derive from an understanding and common perception of women doing acts of service for others; benevolence (Dahle, 2012). This is a widely accepted perception associated with the social work profession, aligning with previous research which investigated the New Zealand public's understanding of social workers (Staniforth et al., 2014).

Social workers *building relationships* with clients was also identified 10 times. Language including *spending time with*, *building relationships*, and *connecting with* was used to describe social workers building relationships with tamariki and whānau. A number of these terms were found in articles discussing a recent Oranga Tamariki report which highlighted the need for social workers to prioritise relational practice with whānau. The concept of spending time with others and building connections and relationships is typically associated as a feminine trait (Mitchell et al., 2022).

The final most frequent term used to describe social workers was language relating to *leadership*. This included *leading*, *founder*, *organised*, *pioneered*, and *decision-making*. These terms were used to describe social workers as leaders including their actions and holding positions in which they provided leadership to people, organisations, and the social work profession. This included examples of sitting on a board or chairing a committee. Leadership is a stereotypical masculine trait; however, across the sample, this term was used to describe women on six occasions and men four times.

The quantitative findings show a strong inclination of the news media using key words of a feminine nature to describe social work and social workers. The few masculine words are sparingly used in a positive light which are expanded upon below in the discussion. There appears to be a lack of accurate representation of the broad and diverse scope of work, responsibilities, skills, and competencies the social work profession and social workers encompass.

### Qualitative findings

Five key themes and one minor theme were established through qualitative content analysis, each of which was then assessed for gendered language or gendered implications in connection with the research. Due to its limited size and scope, this article reports on the three most prevalent qualitative themes: social workers being nurturing; altruism; and unfavourable working conditions. Each theme includes a general definition, how it was used in the newspaper articles, and a minimum of three extracts to illustrate the theme.

#### *Social workers being nurturing*

The most dominant theme was the portrayal of social workers as nurturing of service users and their communities. Within the articles, social workers were described as empathetic, nurturers, kind, and supportive. This theme includes mention of individual social workers as well as broad generalisations of social workers and the profession.

Article 16. "She proved to be a born social worker and had a heart for the poor."

Article 29. "So fear not, workers in jobs that require empathy, emotional intelligence and critical thought. Like creatives or people who work with others who have emotional needs, like therapists, social workers, and teachers."

Article 32. "Carla says social workers and counsellors are connecting with those in need."



### **Altruism**

The theme of altruism refers to the selflessness of social workers that has been portrayed in the newspaper articles. Social workers were often noted as generous, giving their time and resources to help others and those in need, often going above and beyond what is expected of them or within their job description.

Article 5. "As much of New Zealand enjoyed their summer holidays over the last month, there were many core public service workers doing the mahi and not spending much time with their whānau. They might have been... social workers helping families in crisis."

Article 6. "Te Tuinga Whānau Support Service Trust community social worker Scotty Harvey was supposed to take annual leave from December 19 until January 9 but made the last-minute call to work until the end of the year because of how busy it was at Whare Taratoa on Chadwick Rd."

Article 26. "[The social work lecturer] said she didn't know why anyone would spend four years training to be a social worker, teacher or nurse if they were doing it for the money."

### **Unfavourable working conditions**

Unfavourable working conditions refers to social workers being under-resourced and ill equipped to perform their work and roles. This was noted often in the newspaper articles as a result of strains on social workers due to high demands on services and a lack of staffing and funding. Additionally, one article highlighted the growing complexities of individuals and whānau that require intense engagement with social workers and social services paired with cuts to social work roles. These unfavourable working conditions reflect the historical and societal expectations that women do unpaid care work.

Article 6. "It was still too busy so we [the social workers] just didn't take the time off.

We just couldn't because people are still needing support through that period."

Article 13. "[H]igh workload from social workers resulted in limited trust between the child, caregivers and whānau."

Article 30. "A Wainuiomata principal is upset at the loss of her school's social worker at a time when students have higher and more complex needs."

### **Discussion**

Upon closer analysis of the quantitative findings, the prevalence of leadership was predominantly portrayed positively for male social workers. For example, article 4 praised a male social worker as a leader in their field, holding positions of power for decision-making. This was illustrated by praise of his ability to establish and grow multiple services and associations for practitioners in addiction services. The article further highlighted his achievements and contributions to the field and recognised his services for the New Zealand Order of Merit award. As previously explored in the literature, the term *leadership* is stereotypically associated with masculine traits (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Despite this association, there was reference of leadership for female social workers in six out of the 10 occurrences. When associated with the role of female social workers, however, women were only portrayed positively in association with leadership in three of six instances, while men were portrayed positively in all occurrences in the sample. The positive occurrences of females as leaders or in leadership roles are mitigated by the context. For example, one instance (article 16) occurred in an obituary, another (article 8) simply described a social worker leading a walk, and the third (article 36) described a married couple as founders of a service, though the woman was not mentioned as a leader on her own despite holding the necessary and relevant qualifications.

Additionally, two articles openly critiqued the leadership capacity of social workers in association with the Malachai case. In 2021, a young child, Malachai Subecz, was abused and murdered by his caregiver. The resulting Oranga Tamariki Practice Review found the government department did not meet their obligations to Malachi or his whānau, and did not undertake a comprehensive assessment when concerns of care and protection were reported to them (Oranga Tamariki, 2022). The newspaper articles quoted Malachi's family who noted the female social worker did not have the capabilities to lead on the case and should have been overseen by supervisors and managers. In these instances, the female social workers were in a position of power to influence decision-making and were critiqued for doing an inadequate job leading the case. These findings are not unfamiliar and align with previous studies in Aotearoa. Staniforth et al. (2022) and Staniforth et al. (2014) found that individual social workers are blamed within the media as scapegoats in highly sensitive and contentious cases relating to child care and protection. With continuous exposure of negative instances involving individual social workers, cultivation and agenda theory can reiterate in society that female social workers lack capacity to lead or be in position of power and responsibility, whereas male social workers are portrayed positively as leaders in the media. Applying an agenda-setting theoretical perspective would suggest that the positive representation of male social workers as leaders can filter into unconscious bias of recruiting, hiring, and promoting of male social worker to management positions. This perspective can help towards an understanding of the trend in employment statistics and existing literature describing vertical segregation within social work internationally and within Aotearoa New Zealand (Jones et al., 2018; McPhail, 2004; Ministry for Women, 2019, 2022).

The qualitative theme of social workers being nurturing is reinforced by the quantitative

findings which illustrate the dominance of the terms *help* and *support*. This is a familiar narrative reoccurring throughout the history and development of social work grounded in care and the charitable acts of women. The findings suggest the media are perpetuating feminine stereotypes of social workers as carers who embody characteristics of tenderness, nurturing and empathy (Beddoe, 2013; Dahle, 2012; Harlow, 2004). Being kind and empathetic is an important value for social work as identified in competency eight of the *Aotearoa New Zealand Core Competencies*, and the *Code of Ethics* through the values of Aroha and Manaakitanga (Social Workers Registration Board, n.d; ANZASW, 2019). Therefore, the finding is not necessarily unexpected, and is further reinforced by the second qualitative theme, *altruism*.

Altruism can be understood as selflessness, going above and beyond to support the wellbeing of others. It has long been expected of women to perform unpaid care labour which is also reinforced through cultivation theory of the historic and ongoing narratives of women as caregivers. Social work is rooted in charitable acts and service, characterised by women giving their time and efforts for free to support the needs of others (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). The expectation and stereotype that women are selfless and willing to give their energy contributes to an intrinsic and fundamental undervaluing of social work (Baines et al., 2014; Dahle, 2012), which is further evidenced in the qualitative theme of unfavourable working conditions for social workers. Within this theme, social workers were described as underappreciated and underfunded while facing high demand for services. The devaluing of social work is evident in vertical and horizontal segregation associated with gender, resulting in subpar working conditions including pay, support and funding. Evaluating the findings through cultivation theory, it can be argued that the media contributes to maintaining and reproducing the gendered societal

perceptions and representations of social work, with dominant narratives of help, support, care and altruism reinforcing bias of women's work and occupational segregation.

This is recognised in the current policy context of Aotearoa as identified in the recent pay equity scheme which has highlighted the consistent undervaluing of social work as a feminised profession (ANZASW, 2022). The pay equity scheme is currently being rolled out to increase the pay of Oranga Tamariki social workers and subsequently community and iwi-based social workers employed in agencies who hold government service contracts (ANZASW, 2022; SSPA, 2022). The pay equity scheme can be understood as a challenge against current societal perceptions of social workers and care work by recognising the historically poor working conditions and undervaluing of social work compared to male-dominated professions with similar levels of role complexity, responsibility and training requirements. This policy development could highlight the value of social work to the public by recognising the need to address existing gendered inequalities, although further change is required within policy to address gendered and societal stereotypes that are linked to the history of social work which continue to be conveyed through the terms and themes in the newspapers in this study.

To address the current dominant narratives and mitigate potential negative consequences, it is recommended that social workers and the social work profession in Aotearoa are more active in challenging current portrayals by engaging with journalists and media outlets to highlight the other important aspects of social work such as advocacy, community development and programme implementation, whilst seeking to accurately illustrate leadership roles across all genders in the field. Such involvement would help disrupt the current devaluing of care work and establish a better representation of social work in the public sphere.

### Limitations and recommendations for further research

There are several limitations to this study. The first is the inability to capture the representation of intersectional identities in the media. Articles included minimal details about individuals or groups; therefore, other factors that contribute to identity and lived experiences such as ethnicity or age, could not be accounted for. In Aotearoa New Zealand this is of significance, with previous research noting the portrayal of Māori in English language media has largely been negative, prioritising violence or crime and trivialising Māori culture, whilst routinely masking or normalising Pākehā culture (see Nairn et al., 2011, 2012). Future studies that can analyse the portrayal of social workers through an intersectional lens would add to the understanding of media representation in the profession. Additionally, a European-dominant perspective of gendered narratives has framed the research, and Indigenous understandings and concepts of gender should be integrated in future research in the context of colonisation or multicultural nations.

A second limitation is the challenge of utilising a gendered binary. Such an approach can erase or simplify social work practitioners who identify between, or outside of, the gender binary. With the absence of gender-diverse pronouns or positionality statements in the articles, the authors were unable to identify any reference to members of the profession who identify as gender diverse in the media, and therefore could not account for this in the analysis. Further research should be done to better understand the (mis)representation of non-binary or gender-diverse social workers in the media. Furthermore, this study was the conceptualisation of gender based on masculinity and femininity as a binary for men and women respectively. As a result, long-held stereotypical concepts of gender performativity were used in this study to determine the portrayal of social

workers in newspaper articles in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is linked to the historical nature and construction of language stemming from traditional and Western beliefs of women and men (Talbot, 2003). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the mainstream use and normalisation of non-binary terms and language has occurred only in recent years. Future research may be able to better capture these changes in society and dominant language associated with social workers and the profession when understanding public perception and portrayals in the media with particular regard to gender.

Lastly, there continues to be a gap in understanding the representation and portrayal of male social workers in the media. Recognising that male social workers are not adequately captured in the sample of articles examined in this study, further research that focuses specifically on the narratives of male social workers is warranted. The limited visibility of male and gender-diverse social workers in the current sample is reflective of the feminisation of social work and is a finding in itself. This may, in part, be influenced by the short period of analysis which spans only 3 months.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides an analysis of recent media coverage at a time which does not include any periods of crisis or high-profile cases. The analysis, therefore, can be considered a baseline or regular representation in the media, unlike previous, crisis-focused media attention that has contributed to an overarching theme of failure and sensationalism in the portrayal of the profession (see Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017; Staniforth et al., 2022; Warner, 2014).

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate what the gendered narratives of social workers are in Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper articles over a short period of time in 2023. As

argued in the literature review, social work has been based on charity and women's unpaid care work which has continued to develop internationally, with ongoing gender-based disparities in the workforce, as seen in Aotearoa New Zealand through vertical and horizontal segregation. Examining narratives in the media is important to understand the current context as the media can influence public opinion which, at times, has been a contentious issue between the press, the public, and the profession (Warner, 2014).

The results have reinforced that social work is still associated with feminine care work. Further findings indicate that social workers are portrayed through gendered stereotypes, men being portrayed more positively as leaders and women and social work more generally represented as carers and nurturers. With the persistent gendered narratives evident in the study, there is potential to inform public perception of social workers with subsequent consequences for individuals and organisations within the profession, influencing the treatment and value of social work within society and across other professions and disciplines. To mitigate these consequences, this study recommends that social work as a profession in Aotearoa should actively challenge current portrayals of social workers by collaborating within the profession to work with media outlets to highlight the value of care work and illustrate the other important aspects of social work role. The study, however, includes limitations of intersectionality, use of a gender binary, and limited representation of gender-diverse and male social workers, resulting in recommendations for future research.

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