

Practising feminism for social welfare: A global perspective

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Routledge, 2023

ISBN: 978-1-138-65068-8, paperback, pp.193, \$62.24

(through www.routledge.com)

The need for a feminist approach to social work and social care has always been present. Still, given the increasing prominence of misogyny online and in global populist movements, it seems increasingly so. As Mattsson (2014) rightly points out, being an anti-oppressive social worker is not enough if you do not understand the nature of different (and almost always intersecting) oppressions. Being able to consider, for example, how patriarchy and misogyny intersect in the lives of wāhine Māori is essential for practice when working with them. What Phillips offers here in her book *Practising feminism for social welfare: A global perspective* is a needed re-examination and, indeed, re-affirmation of how vital a feminist perspective is in social welfare, not simply in social work. Phillips is clear that she chose the title to include all types of social interventions—from policy to social work to human services—and while I might quibble over this (arguing that social work includes policy and human services), I think this choice can appeal to readers who might otherwise avoid a social work specific text.

Phillips helpfully begins her re-examination by talking about feminism as praxis: practising feminism. Here, she deftly avoids an artificial distinction between theory and practice by explaining that “feminism is about putting theory into practice: praxis is theory in action” (p. 8). However, in making this claim, she takes care to avoid the mistakes of feminists gone by, mainly white

feminists. She affirms that feminism is not a monolith, that it requires and necessitates a constant re-examination of where we are ‘at’, and that past iterations have all too often been focused on the voices and needs of white middle-class women at the expense of those racialised, disabled, and having diverse gender and sexual identities. Indeed, instead of feminism, perhaps we can consider feminisms as being a more encompassing term.

Indeed, it is feminisms that Phillips attempts to include in each of the chapters. Consideration of different positionalities is important, even critical, in any field, and it is this inclusion (which should be standard) that makes familiar feminist topics like domestic violence, motherhood, and reproductive rights more engaging and relevant. Phillips frames this in her second chapter, focusing on global feminism, social policy and social welfare. She critiques a reliance on Western feminism and the Global North, noting that feminists from these regions have often positioned themselves as saviours of women in the Global South. Phillips also notes that while feminists might work in nations and within those in their communities and areas of practice, neoliberalism has global effects and influences all areas, including co-opting feminism and feminist work.

Her third chapter traverses familiar territory, focusing on domestic violence, albeit centring on the Global South. However, I

found Phillip's fourth chapter to be the most exciting in that she focuses on motherhood, maternal rights and *trans parenthood*. Phillips explicitly includes trans parenthood in the chapter title and content—it is not ignored or reduced to a footnote. This explicit inclusion is refreshing, and while Phillips does acknowledge that the chapter is “mostly about women”, she also points out that “much of the key social justice issues are relevant to those who don't identify as women but choose to bear children” (p. 73). Phillips' assertion here is essential in an environment where moral panic about trans women, in particular, has ramifications for *all* genders. For example, having to perform gender in a highly visible and normative way—regardless of being cis or trans—to be able to go to the bathroom is becoming a reality for many women who resist feminine norms.

In the remainder of this excellent middle chapter on motherhood, Phillips addresses the pernicious good and bad mother binary, noting that even women who do not have children (by choice or not) are subject to its effects. This is a significant chapter for those of us who work in social welfare, as women, often mothers, are the majority of our clients. She deftly notes a need for practitioner reflexivity in considering what motherhood looks like and can look like, for mothering identities intersected with class, ethnicity, and age. Such reflexivity is essential for any practitioner working with parents, but especially those in child protection where unexamined beliefs and assumptions—often privileging white, western parenting norms—can and do have devastating consequences for racialised mothers.

The remaining chapters cover reproductive justice, older women, and feminist perspectives on the law before concluding with a discussion about the ‘fourth wave’ of

feminism. Like the earlier chapters, each of these later chapters deliberately engages with both expected and less expected (but still necessary) material. For example, the chapter on reproductive rights covers abortion, contraception, and assisted reproductive technologies, but she also (briefly) addresses perimenopause and menopause. Arguably, more room could have been made for a deeper discussion; however, menopause is rarely discussed, even in the context of reproductive justice, and seldom in social work, so I was pleasantly surprised to see its inclusion here.

Phillips' book is a great taster for those practitioners (actively) feminist or not, who want to consider gender in their practice. It should appeal to those like myself, who have spent years working in feminist circles and those new to the field. What I simultaneously liked and did not like about her book is the explicit inclusion of non-Western perspectives. This concomitant like and dislike was connected as so many similar texts of the past (and present) have not made this effort, so this is a bittersweet observation borne from the knowledge that white feminists have much more work to do in decentring themselves from feminist praxis. Here, I would encourage readers and practitioners to not stop their exploration of gender and practice with texts like this. Instead, go beyond by gathering the pearls in the references of such works to engage with, and support, the work and praxis of practitioners whose voices are frequently marginalised. Curating and, therefore, choosing to read with a critically minded lens can then be used to inform a more liberatory and emancipatory praxis.

Reference

- Mattsson, T. (2014). Intersectionality as a useful tool: Anti-oppressive social work and critical reflection. *Affilia*, 29(1), 8–17.

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