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13 Concluding remarks: a need for women-specific welfare services

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The empirical findings presented in this book convincingly show that despite differences between the service systems and welfare state models in Finland, Canada, Israel, Slovenia, Spain and the UK, the difficulties that women face with the welfare service system and in their encounters with it have striking similarities. Women find it difficult to know how to apply for and receive the services, social support and protection they need to cope in the vulnerable situations they struggle with in their daily lives. They describe service systems as complex, fragmented and complicated, with no clear logic and rules about how to work with them. For these women, the systems look like ‘a jungle with arbitrary rules’, as Virokannas et al. put it in Chapter 3 of this book. Women also said it was merely ‘good luck’ when they encountered an understanding practitioner and received help. More often, they experienced encounters with the welfare system and its practitioners as stigmatising, frustrating and even humiliating. Women who were mothers were afraid of using the services and talking to professionals out of fear of losing their children or not getting them back. Women face expectations, moral judgement and categorisations that do not correspond to their own understanding of the situation and the service needs they require to improve their lives and integrate back into society as ‘normal’ women and citizens. Because of these negative experiences, women avoid and even resist the service system rather than actively search for help, support and social protection, which again might worsen their situation.

Many of the chapters discuss the service needs of women with substance abuse and related problems and the ways in which the service system responds and meets, or fails to meet, their needs. Other major themes are weak social security for poor women and its consequences. Economic vulnerability and poverty are related to the experiences of a vast majority of these women. Furthermore, many authors discuss the control of women's motherhood and sexuality and how women respond to it. None of the chapters focuses specifically on how the service system meets women who are victims of violence, even if this is one of the major women-specific problems throughout the world. Yet experiences of violence are often intertwined with other vulnerabilities women face. Service systems in different countries have problems in how to recognise, meet and help women victims of intimate violence (e.g. Virkki et al. 2015), even if the problem is widely recognised in the local, national and international policy statements.

It is not only that the service system puts negative labels on these women, but the stigma is also internalised, even if women might also resist being defined as vulnerable. Experienced stigma, awareness and sensitivity regarding one's background and vulnerable situation often frame women's encounters with the practitioners, and they interpret them through the experience of a 'stigmatised identity' (Juhila 2004). Patricia Easteal (2001) talks about learned rules of 'Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel', which might be reflected in women's relationship and encounters with the authorities and the service system.

Many of the chapters in this book also analyse the coping strategies that women have developed because they were not able to obtain or did not want to apply for formal services or benefits, or because they resist the way they were treated and defined in the service system. In these strategies, they often relied on social, emotional and financial support from their families, male partners, friends and peers or neighbourhood and community. However, some of these strategies

might be harmful, oppressive or at least contradictory in their consequences. By deciding not to apply for services and benefits, women simultaneously might make their situation even more vulnerable. Especially in searching for or accepting support and protection from men, women might put themselves at risk of economic dependency, oppression, and physical and sexual abuse. Many of these women have suffered several traumatic experiences during their life course, and their harmful coping strategies might be related to these traumas (e.g. Fuentes 2014). However, even if it seems that women are making bad choices that are harmful to them, from their personal perspective, these are the best choices they have available for coping, surviving and supporting themselves and often their children as well.

Social support from other women, both family members and peers, is important, even crucial for women's coping in their daily lives. The service system should also create more opportunities for such support by developing women-only services, peer group activities, promoting community action and simply by providing safe spaces where women would be able to meet each other.

Informal social support is important, but it cannot and should not replace formal services and social security from the state.

How then should service systems be developed to meet women's needs better? Overall, welfare service systems are fragmented and poorly integrated. Women often have multiple and long-term needs and answering them would require a holistic approach and better coordinated services from different sectors and organisations of the service system. There is also a lack of services and gaps in social protection to meet the very basic needs of women to survive, such as basic financial support and accommodation where they can feel at home and protected. In many countries, NGOs rather than the public welfare service system organise services for the most marginalised groups of people, including specific services for women. The problem is that often

these services are organised only locally or on a temporary basis. Even though NGOs are a valuable part of the service system and often actively campaign for the social and human rights of these people, the state should not withdraw from its responsibility to provide adequate services (Fineman 2010). At the general policy level, there seems to be awareness of these problems, but it has not necessarily led to improvements in the service system.

In addition to improving and developing the welfare service system in general, there is also a need for women-specific services. By this, we mean sufficient availability of community-based services and institutional care provided with a gender-sensitive approach. These include counselling and therapy for individuals as well as groups, social work services, housing units, shelters for homeless women and victims of violence, and drug treatment and rehabilitation units, all of which would provide safe environments for women to receive care, counselling and treatment.

Early feminist social work literature of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Hanmer and Statham 1988; Dominelli and McLeod 1989) called for critical practice that would recognise women's oppression and social inequality in society, develop emancipatory action and empowering women-to-women practice free from professional power relations. In many ways, these aims and principles are still relevant even if they have since been problematised as well (see e.g. Orme 2012). It is now understood that women do not share the same experiences only because they are women, not even with women in a similar vulnerable situation, and even less with female professionals. Yet it might be better for women to deal with a female professional, especially if they have traumatic experiences of violent and abusive relationships with men. It has also been questioned whether power relations between women as service users and practitioners can ever be removed, but these hierarchies could at least be lowered and power relations made visible and

open for discussion. Even though controlling aspects of the service system and professional practices cannot be avoided, those should not be hidden and denied either. However, a gender-sensitive approach and understanding is still needed and is widely missing not only in social work but also in all welfare services, in some countries more than in others (Kuronen 2020), and services specifically for women are rather marginal in the service system, especially in public welfare services.

What is important in developing women-specific services is to see, understand and work with the complexity of women's vulnerable situations and their relatedness to social structures and inequalities. For example, women's substance abuse often intersects with issues related to social relations, housing, psychosocial wellbeing, financial issues, crime, violence, abuse and traumatic experiences (see Chapter 9, Karttunen in this book).

Developing women-specific services requires challenging the ways the services are currently organised and provided as well as how women are viewed as service users. What we see as crucial in working with and encountering these women is understanding, respect and a safe environment. Understanding means recognition of the complexity of women's situations, internalised stigma and the consequences of their past, often traumatic experiences.

Understanding also means hearing how women themselves see and interpret their situation, experiences and needs. Respect and a reciprocal relationship (Törrönen 2018) should be basic elements of interaction. Yet we should accept that these encounters unavoidably possess their own distinctions and facing of 'otherness'. The feeling of safety is based on understanding and respect, but it also means a safe physical environment to deal with difficult issues. Women-specificity is not only related to face-to-face interactions. In addition, practitioners should act as

advocates for women in vulnerable situations, fight for their rights to services and make their voice heard in society.

Women's negative experiences with the service system are often personified in individual professionals, mostly women themselves. It is important to improve and develop the practices in which professionals encounter women as service users. However, we should not blame individual practitioners who are part of the organisational order of the service system (Høgsbro 2017; Kuronen 2020). Instead, the focus should be on developing the welfare service system as a whole to better meet the needs of women in vulnerable life situations and in the most marginalised positions in societies.

We are writing the final words of this book in April 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading all over the world and putting the welfare service systems of all countries under great pressure. This exceptional situation might exclude marginalised groups of women even more, as many services have been forced to close or severely limited or are digitalised. There is an enormous risk that the pandemic will deepen their vulnerable situations and the struggles of their daily lives. This time is a test of sustainability for our service systems and especially for the services supporting and protecting people in the most vulnerable situations.

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