

Social Work Day at the UN 2005:
Women's World: Global Challenges & Solutions
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Alfredo Sfeir-Younis, Mirian Masaquiza, Wenchi Yu Perkins,
and Gilda Glasinovich, thank you all so much! Your
presentations were as enlightening as they were disturbing.
So, my friends:

- Why is it females in every society who are most likely to be poor across the life span?
- Why are indigenous women in every culture even more at risk than their male counterparts who are oppressed themselves?
- Why are girls and women throughout the world sold into sexual slavery?
- Why is it women in every country on earth who are most likely to experience depression, anxiety and chronic fatigue?

The answer, of course, is that women are dominated in every society and every culture. Gender inequality and social deprivation go hand in hand. The fact that women are among the most socially deprived people worldwide has been called "a particularly pernicious form of oppression." Economic, social and political policies locally and globally not only create, but perpetuate women's subjugation and inequity to succeeding generations of girls, and on and on it goes.

But this picture of victimization is incomplete. There's something else that we must keep in mind. It is the fact that women the world over are more likely to be

resilient, resourceful, and to be happier the older they get, even when they have to live alone and with fewer financial resources. They are able to care for family members from birth through old age and death, to advocate for everyone in society that is found wanting [except themselves of course], and to create community amidst chaos.

I recall in Chile some years back when their men were found missing, women overnight, without telephones, much less the Internet, filled a stadium with 10,000 women to protest their detention and murder. This isn't even an unusual story.

Women are not only the bedrock of societies, but the essential catalysts for its development. But women don't know that. They don't know who they are. They don't know who they are because everyone from the family, to religious institutions, to the government tells them, implicitly if not explicitly, that they are unworthy and second rate. They internalize the message. It is our job as social workers to help them know about their strengths, a cornerstone of social work theory and practice. But before we can make a difference in the lives of women, we have to own up to the fact that we don't know who WE are. Most of us are women, perhaps that's part of the problem. But even those who are not don't

recognize how very important they as social workers are to the world. We don't seem to appreciate the fact that our comprehensive, holistic perspective is unusual and essential to the development of people and their communities. **That others today are trying to emulate our abilities seems to escape us. We intervene at the level of the psyche, the family, groups and the community, even governments, concerning ourselves with the development of people and their societies. We recognize the reciprocal interaction between people and their social environments. It is not enough to know policies without recognizing their impact on practice. We don't split people into psychological or behavioral component parts, divorced from the world in which they live day by day.** But from our own backyard to social workers across the seas, we tend to think we are small potatoes. We are, after all, told we are small potatoes, and we are paid accordingly. We too internalize the message. So beginning with Paulo Friere 101, the esteemed Brazilian educator who wrote the now classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1982), to help the oppressed, they have to be in touch with their own oppression first. It's that simple. And we're no different than the people we serve.

Poverty:

Just as gender inequality and policies that perpetuate poverty and social deprivation create a

cycle of despair transmitted to the next generation of girls, so too does the poverty of spirit among social workers. The United Nations insists that "anti-poverty strategies must deal with issues related to women's low status and lack of empowerment" in order to be successful (UNDP, 1998, p.72). The analogy continues for social work.

It is we social workers that hold among our basic values the importance and worth of all human beings, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age and class, and yes, regardless of sexual orientation. We should be proud of our principles, insisting on applying them to the people that we serve. We can't afford to hide our light under a proverbial bushel. Our cause is too important.

It is for us as social workers to partner with the women of the world in developing anti-poverty strategies that are directly related to women's low class status, a fact made clear by Alfred Sfeir-Younis. But it is not enough to learn about policies. It is our job to advocate for change and facilitate women's advancement. We can start in our own communities, wherever they may be. But in doing so, we must remember to hold a worldview. Anything less

is approaching a problem with too limited an understanding, rendering our knowledge base narrow and inadequate. The world of women is intrinsically interconnected, their problems and solutions to them inherently related.

Mental Health:

Gilda Glasinovich has illuminated our understanding of women's mental health. The United Nations has defined mental health as

psychological, physical, social and spiritual well-being. Quality of life is recognized as a fundamental prerequisite, requiring [among other things], freedom from violence, discrimination, and unjust treatment across the life span.

Doesn't sound much like women's reality.

Vulnerability to mental illness is in direct relation to the absence of such conditions, all too often lacking in the lives of the world's women. While the link between the social forces that impact mental health and well-being are as complex as they are diverse, thoughtful analysis suggests that mental health, even when biologically influenced,

relates in large measure to the economic welfare and resources of people. Women's welfare and resources, of course, are generally in the context of their families and the communities in which they live. All too often they are found wanting.

Here, too, social work has a role. We take pride in our systems perspective, our bio-psycho-social thesis, our commitment to social justice, and yes, to human rights. But it is not enough to just say so. We must help women and men, families and communities to be aware that psychological and social conditions must be responsive to human rights principles. Women's rights are now recognized officially throughout the world as human rights. That means that women are no less deserving than men of freedom from violence, discrimination and unjust treatment at any age. To ensure the human rights of women, the United Nations mandates "gender mainstreaming" all research, policies and practices. That means that we social workers must analyze what we do in all aspects of our education and our work in the field in terms of the consequences to women and yes, to men. Are we certain to include the impact on women in our research? Do we assess policies in terms of their impact on the lives of women?

And what about the ways in which we work with individual women and with families? Do we settle for familial subservience, or do we struggle on behalf of their liberation? And while we're asking these questions, what about men? How are they being impacted? Do our efforts help make them more responsible, developed, fulfilled human beings?

Indigenous Women:

Mirian Masaquiza has provided a window into the vulnerability of indigenous women that we cannot ignore. Not only do they suffer along with their men as members of ancient long oppressed societies, but they struggle with oppression by their men within each of their own families. As social workers are aware, this is understood as structural inequality. We recognize the intersection of gender, race and class that create interlocking systems of oppression, whatever the culture. Nowhere is this more clear than in the lives of indigenous women. Nowhere can our social justice values be put to the test more importantly. And yet, at our jointly sponsored International conference in Australia last October, indigenous people asked the audience, "As social workers, are you an agent of social control, of compliance, or of change?" Social workers, they said, have been part of

indigenous colonization, upholding the government policies of the day. Are we so different when it comes to women? Do we focus our work on collective affiliation and community when that is the preference of our clients? Or do we follow governmental regulations and "treat" them individually in our offices, defining their reality for them? I was struck by the fact that the two indigenous women who spoke in Australia, both referred to their mothers' and grandmothers' incredible challenges and successes. One described her mother as being imbued with "the fire of resilience," a quality necessary for survival in a punishing world. I believe that women the world over are imbued with that fire of resilience. And I believe that social workers are, too. How else do you carry on so courageously?

The UN Human Rights Convention of 1993 and the Beijing Conference of 1995 made the uncomfortable point that women's rights must transcend cultural, religious and social customs when those customs discriminate against the rights of women. This fact cannot be ignored by the world's social workers. In fact, at the 1999 National Association of Social Workers' Delegate Assembly in Washington, DC, U.S. social workers endorsed the principle as an official policy. If we're not teaching it, we must. If we're not

advocating for it, we must. If we're not practicing it, we must. The old adage, "don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk" is under the spotlight. And so are we.

Trafficking of Women:

The trafficking of girls and women, as Wenchi Yu Perkins has pointed out, has much the same implication. Because females of every age have such low status, they are treated as chattel by their families and traffickers alike. We have seen the impact of poverty that usually drives the process.

But the truth is that girls in middle class families also are being traded for cars and television sets, a global version of "keeping up with the Joneses." The underlying theme that "girls just aren't worth much" tells the story: Why are they not worth much? *The answer:* One, because the cultural lineage is patriarchal and/or they don't carry the family name to the next generation. *Who decided that?* And two, because men earn more than women do, so they can contribute more money to their families. *Who decided that?* And why are these girls and women, raped and molested against their will, rejected by their families of origin? *The answer:* Because they are the vessels of family honor and are now said to be "damaged goods." *Who decided that?* Social workers must keep uppermost in mind the

realities of women's shared existence. All too often they are marginalized, treated as if they are invisible and of little worth; all too often they have learned the lie of incompetence and dependence, when in fact, they are resilient, resourceful, essential, and courageous role models for the world.

It is time for social workers throughout the world to stand up and be counted as advocates of women. And it is time for social workers throughout the world to stand up and be counted as advocates on their own behalf. We know from our social work education how people are socialized. We know that no one can change conditions alone. We know that if people are to be successful, they must work in supportive, collaborative partnerships. We know that there is nothing stronger than empowered community groups to make a difference. And we know how to help facilitate the development of such groups. The time is now, colleagues. Let's challenge one another to make women a social work priority. And let's challenge one another to make social work a priority. The world's women need our expertise. And they need it now!

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