Social Workers' Experiences of Violence: A Critical Literature Review

Natasha C. Marriette,[1,2] and Rita Dhungel[1]

[1]School of Social Work and Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley

[2]School of Social Work, University of British Columbia

Author Note

Natasha C. Marriette https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4557-3610 is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada.

Dr. Rita Dhungel https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0390-5350 is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada.

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Natasha C. Marriette, School of Social Work and Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley, 33844 Kind RD, Abbotsford, BC, V2S 7M7 Canada.

Email: Natasha.Marriette@ufv.ca

Abstract

Violence against social workers is an international issue, yet research worldwide is limited. Social work is a predominantly female profession making violence against social workers an issue of gender-based violence (GBV). Using a postfeminist lens, this paper examines the violence experienced by social workers in the workplace and its impacts on their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the objectives of this study were to 1) critically understand social workers' experiences of violence in the workplace violence; 2) critically review peer-reviewed and grey literature to examine how intersectionality intersect to escalate the vulnerability of social workers to different forms of GBV; and 3) identify significant gaps and priorities for future policies, practices and research on GBV in the social worker profession. Twenty-four peer-reviewed and grey literature were selected for the study. Three themes emerged through this critical review 1) definition of violence; 2) rates of violence; 3) reporting violence; and 4) impacts of violence. The paucity of research in this area highlights the need for increased research in experiences of violence within the social work workplace, as well as how social work education prepares social work students for the potential of violence within the field of social work.

Keywords: social workers, violence, workplace

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Social work is a practice-based profession that involves social workers interacting directly with a variety of individuals, families, and populations in diverse settings (Choi & Choi, 2015; Criss, 2013; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Shier et al., 2021; Tzafrir et al., 2015). As per the National Association of Social Work (2013), social workers have an increasingly complex and broadening client base (2013). Clients interacting with social workers are often in need of support and experiencing complex issues (Padyab et al., 2013; Tzafrir et al., 2015). Social workers often respond to mandatory investigations such as child abuse and elder protection concerns (Choi & Choi, 2015). Social workers are often negotiating between lack of resources and agency constraints, and the needs of the client and can be viewed as gatekeepers or authorities instead of helpers (Choi & Choi, 2015; Spencer & Munch, 2003; Tzafrir et al., 2015). The nature of social work leaves social workers vulnerable to violence (Littlechild, 2005; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Sicora et al., 2022; Tzafrir et al., 2015) and social work is considered a profession with a high risk of burnout (Padyab et al., 2013; Winstanley & Hales, 2014). Research into rates of violence against social workers overall is limited, requiring this literature review to expand to include any location.

Examining social workers' experiences with violence against them and its effects on their personal and professional lives is the aim of this critical review. More specifically, the objectives of this study are to 1) critically understand social workers' experiences of violence in the workplace violence; 2) critically review peer-reviewed and grey literature to examine how intersectionality intersects to escalate the vulnerability of social workers to different forms of GBV; and 3) identify significant gaps and priorities for future policies, practices and research on GBV in the social worker profession. What experiences do social workers have, and how does it affect their personal life are the research questions of this

study. The paper begins with the discussion of the study's methodology followed by the exploration of the key results of the study. This article concludes with a critical discussion of the implications of the study.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study, 24 peer-reviewed and grey articles that examined violence against social workers were selected. The articles ranged from years 1993-2022 worldwide. A wide range of different data search engines, such as Academic search complete, JSTOR, PsycINFO and EBSCO host were used to collect data. One study was completed in Italy (Sicora et al., 2022), one in Iceland (Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020), three in Canada (Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Shier et al., 2021; Shier et al., 2018), one in South Korea (Choi & Choi, 2015), one in Saudi Arabia (Alsaleem et al., 2018), one in Iran (Padyab et al., 2013), three studies based in Israel (Tzafrir et al, 2015; Kagan, 2021; Kagan & Itzik, 2019,) two in South Africa (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Masson & Moodley, 2020) and seven studies were US based (Astor et al.,1998; Criss, 2013; King, 2021; Kropf et al.,1993; Newhill, 1996; NSAW, 2005; Spencer & Munch, 2003), two studies were completed in the UK (Harris & Leather, 2011; Winstanley & Hales, 2015), and one was a comparative study between England and Finland (Littlechild, 2005). Of these studies, fifteen used surveys/questionnaires (Alsaleem et al., 2018; Astor et al.,1998; Choi & Choi, 2015; Criss, 2013; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020; Harris & Leather, 2011; Kagan, 2021; Kagan &Itzik, 2019; Kropf et al., 1993; Macdonald &Sirotich, 2001; NASW, n.d; Newhill, 1996; Padyab et al., 2013; Shier et al., 2021; Shier et al., 2018; Sicora et al., 2022; Winstanley & Hales, 2015), four used mixed-methods (surveys and interviews) (Littlechild, 2005; Masson & Moodley, 2020), two used interviews (Males & Pillay, 2020; Tzafrir et al., 2015), one used secondary analysis (King, 2021), and one was a review of literature (Spencer & Munch,

2003). Sample sizes for participants in the total literature reviewed in this paper ranged from 40-20112.

Theoretical Framework

Social work is a profession with roots in community work undertaken by women (Jones et al., 2019) and continues to be a predominantly female profession (Moylan & Wood, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2022). The gendered dynamics of the social work profession cannot be ignored, particularly when examining violence in the social work workplace. Violence in the social work workplace and how this violence is reported and responded to is an issue of gender-based violence (GBV). GBV includes many forms and methods and causes a continuum of harm and can include financial, emotional, physical, or sexual harm (UNHCR, n.d.). This critical literature review applied a postfeminist lens to analyze the resulting literature and the *lack* of research in this area. Postfeminism recognizes there is no one definition of feminism as there is no singular female experience (Fawcett, 2023). The female experience varies depending on various intersecting factors such as ethnicity, location, age, economic status, and culture (Fawcett, 2023). Similarly, social workers' experiences of violence differ based on intersecting elements.

Results of the Study

Three themes emerged through this critical review 1) definition of violence, 2) rates of violence, 3) reporting violence, and 4) impacts of violence.

Definition of Violence

An issue in the understanding of social workers' experience of violence is the lack of an agreed-upon definition of violence (Choi & Choi, 2015; Criss, 2013; Harris & Leather, 2011; Littlechild, 2005; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Spencer & Munch, 2003; Van Soest & Bryant, 2005). Newhill (1996) concluded that the definition of violence often varies depending on the setting.

Kagan (2021) and Kagan and Itzick (2019) define workplace violence as "..actual or attempted physical assault, or as any behavior intended to harm workers or their organization such as verbal abuse and damage to property" (p.125). Malesa and Pillay (2020) refer to a definition by Magnavita and Heponiemi (2011) in defining workplace violence as "violent acts directed toward workers, which includes physical assault, the threat of assault, and verbal abuse…" (p.2).

Shier and colleagues (2021) specify client-engaged violence and refer to Wynne and colleagues (1997) in defining violence as "Any incidence where workers are threatened, abused or assaulted in circumstances related to their work that result in threats to their safety and well-being that are initiated by engagement with clients" (p.1239). Macdonald and Sirotich (2001) define violence as "Client violence defined as "...any incident in which a helping professional is harassed, threatened, or physically assaulted by a client in circumstances emerging from the course of the professional's work with the client" (p.109). The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) has a similar definition, defining workplace violence as "any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment". Multiple articles refer to the CCOHS definition of violence in their research.

Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) (2011) states violence includes an employee being abused, assaulted, threatened or harassed. Littlechild (2005) recommended the use of the European Commission DG-V in defining workplace violence as "Incidents where persons are abused, threatened or assault in circumstances relating to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health" (p.63).

Rates of Violence

Countries such as Canada, the UK, and that US report the highest rates of client violence towards social workers (Choi & Choi, 2015). NASW (n.d)

reported health and service workers are five times more likely to suffer a workplace violence injury than other sectors. Alsaleemand colleagues (2018) had no specific data on the rates of specific types of violence but concluded that nurses/social work/paramedical professionals were 13% more at risk of experiencing violence in healthcare. The studies stated that verbal aggression, threats, and intimidation are the most common forms of violence (Alsaleem et al., 2018; Harris & Leather, 2011; Shier et al., 2021), whereas the study identified indirect violence as the most common (Littlechild, 2005).

Overall rates of violence ranged from 56.1%-100% (Criss, 2013; Kropf et al., 1993; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; NASW, n.d; Newhill, 1996; Sicora et al., 2022; Winstanley & Hales, 2014). Rates of physical assault ranged from 5.8%-70% (Astor et al., 1998; Choi & Choi, 2015; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022;2020; King, 2021; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Newhill, 1996; Sicora et al., 2022). Rates of emotional and psychological violence ranged from 70.5%-100% (Choi & Choi, 2015; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020; King, 2021; Malesa & Pillay, 2020). Property damage rates ranged from 28.4% to 53% (Choi & Choi, 2015; Newhill, 1996; Sicora et al., 2022). Rates of harassment and threats ranged from 47.2%-88.2% (King, 2021; Kropf et al., 1993; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Newhill, 1996; Sicora et al., 2022). Sicora and colleagues (2022) conducted the only study that recorded the rate of witnessed violence (61%). Astor and colleagues (1998) also recorded the rate of social workers who feared violence (39.79%).

Reporting Violence

Experiences of violence in the workplace is difficult to address due to underreporting. minimiing behaviours and the perspective that violence is part of the job (Kropf et al., 1993; Shier et al., 2021; Tzafrir et al., 2015; Van Soest &

Bryan, 1995). Some workers fear being blamed for the violence (Sicora et al., 2022) while others reported incidents of violence in their workplace as they felt the incident was not serious enough to report (Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001). Further responses identified that not reporting violent incidents was part of the professional socialisation of social work (Choi & Choi, 2015; Kropf et al., 1993; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Shier et al., 2021).

Impacts of Violence

Exposure to workplace violence can lead to psychological distress, physical harm, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020; King, 2021; Mcdonald&Sirotich, 2005; Sicora et al., 2022). Social workers can experience fatigue, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, depression, burnout, and extended leaves from work (Choi & Choi, 2015; Kagan & Itzick, 2019; King, 2021; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2005; Malesa& Pillay, 2020; Masson & Moddley, 2020; NASW, n.d; Padyab et al., 2013; Tzafrir et al., 2015; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). Experiences of violence lead to a loss of job satisfaction, reduce work performance, and cause social workers and practitioners to leave the profession completely (Choi & Choi, 2015; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2005; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). This reduces the number of practising social workers in the field, affecting client care and continuity of workers. It deprives agencies of skilled social workers (Choi & Choi, 2015; Mcdonald & Sirotich, 2005; Spencer & Munch, 2003).

Social work is a profession at high risk of burnout (Choi & Choi, 2015; Padyab et al., 2013). Many factors contribute to burnout, including high caseloads, lack of resources, lack of support within an organization, experiences of violence (Choi & Choi, 2015; Criss, 2013; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022;2020; King, 2021; Padyab et al., 2013) Burnout directly affects the quality of work and is associated with loss of job satisfaction and early exit from the

profession (Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022;2020; Padyab et al., 2013). Burnout was mentioned in 16 of the 23 articles that examined workplace violence (Alsaleem et al., 2018; Astor et al.,1998; Choi & Choi, 2015; Criss, 2013; Freysteinsdóttir & Sveinbjörnsson, 2022, 2020; Harris & Leather, 2011; Kagan, 2021; Kagan & Itzik, 2019; Kropf et al., 1993; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2001; Newhill, 1996; Padyab et al., 2013; Shier et al., 2021; Shier et al., 2018; Sicora et al., 2022; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). Winstanley and Hales (2015) and Padyab and colleagues (2013) specifically looked at burnout in the social work profession while exploring a broad understanding of burnout and job satisfaction.

Critical Discussion

Violence against social workers is a complex issue. While this review was focused on social workers' experiences of violence towards social workers in the workplace, it cannot be ignored that social work as a profession has been part of historical efforts of colonialism (for example, the forceable and discriminate removal of Indigenous children from their homes known as the 60's scoop) (BlackDeer, 2023).This may in part explain some of the reluctance in discussing violence against social workers and is an area that deserves further exploration.

Social work is an international issue yet research worldwide is limited. Social work is viewed as a normative extension of the Western view of women's roles as that of caring (Jones et al., 2019). The paucity of research in this area is first and foremost a reflection on the continued dismissal of, or possibly acceptance of, GBV both by society but also by social workers themselves. Social work is a profession based in values of social justice, yet experiences of violence remain underreported and unaddressed. Freysteinsdóttir and Sveinbjörnsson (2022, 2020) and Spencer and Munch (2003) identified that social workers who are most at risk of harm are those who enter clients' homes. There is a dearth of

research that looks at specific community settings, particularly settings where social workers provide support within client homes.

Newhill (1996) stated that definitions of workplace violence need to be specific to each setting, and what may be defined as violence in one area may not be accurate for other settings. The majority of research on social work experiences of violence lumps social work with human service and health care workers. The CCOHS (n.d) reported health and social service workers experience the highest rate of workplace violence, but do not separate social work from other health care or social service workers. WorkSafeBC (2021), the CUPE (2016), and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (as reported by Spencer & Munch, 2003) combine social and community service workers into one category.

Studies such as Alsaleem and colleagues (2018), Haris and Leather (2011), King (2021), Kagan (2021), Shier and colleagues (2021), Tzafrirand colleagues (2015) explored violence in the workplace but participants were not specifically social workers and included human service workers, health care workers, nurses, paramedics, and social workers. Alsaleem and colleagues (2018) explored violence against healthcare workers in hospital and primary care centres, but combined social workers, nurses, and paramedics into one category. King (2021) examined violence against child welfare workers but did not specify social work. Kagan (2021) researched job satisfaction in the context of experiences of violence and while the study mentioned social work, did not specify if the participants were all social workers.

Masson and Moodley (2020) completed research specific to social workers' experience of secondary trauma. Malesa and Pillay (2020) completed research specific to social workers in the South African State Department of the Limpopo Province. Kagan and Itzick (2019) studied the affect of professional characteristics, work perspectives, and personal characteristics on the experience

of psychological distress. The study was specific to social workers and mentioned workplace violence but was not specific to social work experiences of violence. Winstanley and Hales (2015) completed a study on social workers' experience of workplace aggression but the study was specific to institutional settings. Tzafrirand colleagues (2015) completed interviews with social workers, supervisors, managers, and administrators. Harris and Leather (2011) surveyed social care staff which they defined as any employee providing support to a service user, including but not specific to social workers. Littlechild (2005) surveyed social workers in England and Finland but the research was specific to child protection.

Conclusion

Social workers are integral to the support of community populations. They meet individuals, families, and communities often in crisis, recognizing and addressing gaps in support and services. The settings social workers work in and the populations social workers work with will only increase in complexity (Shier et al., 2021). Workplace violence must be mitigated to reduce burnout and retain workers (NASW, n.d). Research is needed to understand social workers' experiences of violence and if this affects rates of burnout and, therefore, retention of social work professionals. These authors also recommend violence prevention and response as part of social work professional development. Research is needed to understand how social work students are prepared for the potential, and often unavoidable, conflict and violence within the social work profession.

Overall, this critical review identified that social workers are vulnerable to psychological risks due to numerous contexts of aggression in the profession of social work. It is highly advised that participatory action and mixed method research be employed to understand causes of, prevalence of, and responses to

violence in the social work profession and how social work education includes educational components such as how to deal with risk, safety, and violence. Further, an in-depth study of the level of burnout and its causes in the social work profession is important.

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