15 Rape and sexual assault

Using an intersectional feminist lens

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In this chapter, we examine the feminist idea of 'intersectionality' in order to elaborate its potential as a theoretical perspective that social workers can draw on in their efforts to divest rape and sexual assault of their power to demean women. Before moving into discussion of feminist understandings of rape and sexual assault, and the more recent contribution of an intersectional feminist lens, we will first set some parameters around our discussion by examining understandings of rape and sexual assault in the contemporary context.

Defining the parameters of rape and sexual assault

Rape and sexual assault are global issues affecting the health and well-being of people in all communities. Understandings of the contexts and incidence of rape and sexual abuse are arbitrated by different cultures and rape is defined differently in diverse legal jurisdictions. A definition of rape with international recognition, although not universal incorporation into national jurisdictions, is that adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) on behalf of the United Nations. The WHO defines rape as 'physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration – even if slight – of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object' (WHO, 2002). Oral rape is missing from this definition but is included in many legal definitions in various jurisdictions throughout the world (Cook et al., 2011).

WHO (2002) broadly describes sexual abuse as

> any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

The World Health Organization (2002) identifies difficulties of collecting rape data in multi-country comparisons and cites the unreliability of police

statistics. Despite these difficulties survey reports indicate unacceptable levels of rape and sexual abuse perpetrated against women in all cultures.

Legal and health sector definitions of sexual assault and rape generally specify the nature of the sexual act and sometimes provide a description of what constitutes non-consent and coercive tactics used to compel (Cook et al., 2011). How to establish absence of consent or presence of coercion is a contested issue in many sexual offence cases. Legal jurisdictions place more or less emphasis on the use of physical force, psychological intimidation, threats or blackmail. Whatever the circumstances, rape and sexual assault negatively affect the physical, mental and social health of survivors and can cause sexual and reproductive health problems both in the short and long term (WHO, 2002).

Whether rape is committed against women, transgendered people or men, the control exercised by the perpetrator is widely understood as an attack on the agency and self-worth of the survivor. However, rape and sexual abuse is most often perpetrated by men against women (WHO, 2002). Female sex offending makes up a very small percentage of all sexual assaults and Australian research has found that half of all convicted female sex offenders co-offended with a male perpetrator, suggesting that when women abuse they are often coerced by a male partner (Stathopoulos, 2014). While sexual violence is not infrequently directed against men, this is usually by men who seek power over other men. Men's sexual violence against men is becoming more visible and increasingly a subject of enquiry (Davies, Gilston & Rogers, 2012; Peterson et al., 2011; Sleath & Bull, 2010), but rape and sexual assault of women continues to represent a major social problem. For example, in a telephone survey of 3,000 randomly selected American women, the researchers concluded that 18 per cent had been raped and only 16 per cent of those raped had reported it to the police (Kilpatrick et al., 2007).

In times of peace, most rapes and sexual assaults are perpetrated by persons known to the victim, whether they are a partner, family member, friend, work colleague or acquaintance. For example, in a review of research in the United States, the authors note that being raped by their partner is an aspect of the experience of 40–50 per cent of women enduring domestic violence (Martin, Taft & Resick, 2007). In specifying that rape and sexual assault are violations, regardless of the perpetrator's relationship with the victim, the WHO is mindful of the high prevalence of sexual victimisation within marriage where, as one facet of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault are used to subjugate women. This is borne out by the prevalence of rape shown in large-scale studies and evidence gathered across countries and cultures throughout the world although, given taboos about talking about rape in some cultures, rape is likely to be significantly underreported (WHO, 2002).

Rape and sexual assault are still systematically used as acts of warfare (Brownmiller, 2013; Kelly, 2000; Zurbriggen, 2010). To this day, armed

men 'rape and pillage', with women's bodies used as spoils of war. In 'peace times', acts of rape and sexual assault are also used to subjugate minority groups, whether racialised (Crenshaw, 1991) or marginalised because of sexual or transgender orientation (Lombardi et al., 2002; McNeil et al., 2012; Stotzer, 2009). Acts of sexual assault are often directed at the most vulnerable in society, including people with disabilities (Hollomotz, 2012; Lin et al., 2009), aged people and those with mental impairment, all of which are groups likely to be referred to social workers (McMahon & Schwartz, 2011).

Feminist understandings of rape and sexual assault

In the 1970s radical feminists pioneered a critical analysis of rape, locating it in patriarchal systems of male privilege, power and control over women and their bodies. By listening to the voices of rape and sexual assault survivors, second wave feminists conceptualised rape as a manifestation of male abuse of power. Susanne Brownmiller was one of a number of early feminists who argued that all men benefit from women's fear of rape, as this fear causes women to censor their own movements and to seek male protection (Brownmiller, 2013). From a radical feminist perspective male abuse of power results from and is sustained by patriarchal systems – including economic, political and cultural institutions – that allocate most of the control and resources, status and power to men, sustaining a view of gender inequality as a legitimate outcome of presumably natural male superiority over women. Feminist work also specifically uncovered social attitudes about gender and sexuality that enable and sustain male-perpetrated rape and sexual abuse. For example, feminists showed how victim blaming for rape was based on categorising women into those deserving of men's protection and those who are culpable for the sexual abuse perpetrated against them. Such victim-blaming discourses were shown to be based on ideas of women as 'temptresses' and men as naturally unable to hold back their 'sex drive'.

Many feminists also adopted Liz Kelly's (1988) idea of a continuum of sexual violence: she argued that the small ways in which men intrude into women's spaces and bodies to harass and demean them are at one end of the continuum, with rape and murder at the other. Kelly (1988) therefore used the idea of a continuum to capture both the common underlying coercive exercise of power by men and their continuity with women's experiences of harassment and abuse. Minor forms of misogyny and sexual harassment are not typically counted in official statistics or research despite the understanding that they are part of the context that makes rape possible. Feminists have also shown that women themselves do not always define their experiences of rape and sexual assault in the same way as legal categories (Koss, 2005). In addition to her concept of a continuum of sexual violence, Kelly (1988) also coined the terms 'pressurised

sex' and 'coercive sex' to capture how women talk about unwanted sex when reluctant to use the concept of rape. These practices continue: in a recent large survey of 13–17 year olds in the UK, 10 per cent of girls reported being pressured into having sexual intercourse when they did not want to (Barter & McCarry, 2012). In her research on the trafficking of women, Kelly (2000) also notes that reluctance to name abuse and exploitation is because some elements of coercion are normalised, and because of creeping gradations of entrapment.

While the concept of 'patriarchy' has become less fashionable, contemporary feminists nonetheless continue to document the reproduction of gender inequalities. This includes critical attention to persistent binary cultural ideals of masculinity that valorise 'being a man' as the antithesis of femininity. The essence of this hegemonic masculinity is power over others and, while this includes other men, it particularly rests on an assumption of power and control over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While not all men seek to live up to this cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity, the image of the conquering hero who gains women's sexual favours by heroic acts of physical conquest is as much an expression of women's subordination as the rapist who presumes he can take women for his use and abuse.

Historically, women have been treated as men's property and many jurisdictions defined rape in terms of a crime committed by one man against another's property; it has taken decades of feminist struggle to enable the human rights focus of current United Nations definitions (Bourke, 2008). However, criminal justice systems still typically fail many women. Adversarial systems enable patriarchal perspectives to influence the application of the law of rape, distorting understandings of consensual sex and undermining the credibility of women as witnesses. Through such processes women can be further humiliated and objectified in court procedures in which legal representatives of the accused seek to suggest that they are fabricating or somehow to blame for the events. Thus, issues of the woman's lifestyle choices, appearance, behaviours, location and honesty are brought into question, often despite attempts to exclude irrelevant sexual history and character evidence (Adler, 1987; Brown, Burman & Jamieson, 1993, Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Edwards et al., 2011; Naffine, 2014; Temkin, 2002). In no other field of law is the character of a victim attacked to this extent. By evoking stereotypes of 'authentic' rape and sexual assault as deviant acts perpetrated by a stranger and occurring only within a narrow set of circumstances – outside the home and invoking physical resistance from the person under attack – women who are raped in other circumstances are exposed to disbelief and critical appraisal (Edwards et al., 2011). Lack of understanding about various forms of coercion also allows victim blaming and disavows that women refrain from physical resistance because of fear, intimidation and threats to self or others, such as children. Myths about women's propensity to lie are played

on to reframe acts of rape and sexual assault as spurious attempts to vilify the abuser. Such tactics deny justice to women and deter women who have been raped and sexually assaulted from seeking legal retribution.

Advancing feminist understandings of rape and sexual assault: intersectional feminism

Patriarchal views and practices are still present in most if not all social systems around the world, including many legal systems, although now they are sometimes more subtly expressed. In particular, victim blaming continues to be supported by myths about rape despite feminist ideas supposedly becoming more mainstream (Bohner et al., 2013; Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012; Edwards et al., 2011; Gavey, 2013; Horvarth & Brown, 2009). At the same time, academic theorisation of gender and power has become increasingly sophisticated, and the concept of 'intersectionality' now informs much feminist discussion. Intersectional feminism grew from the work of African-American feminists who first theorised the interrelationships of gender with racism and class inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill, McLaughlin & Nieves, 2007). Intersectional feminists also worked to counter what has been described as 'hegemonic feminisms' that privilege the perspective of middle-class white women (Martinez, 2011, p. 148). However, we argue that intersectional feminism builds on the work of radical feminists by expanding our vision rather than replacing it with a different premise. Intersectional feminism furthers our understanding by drawing out the diverse ways that oppression and discrimination intersect to disadvantage women. An intersectional perspective pays attention to how social circumstances and cultural norms promote and proscribe particular ways of being, identifying as and displaying being a woman. Focusing on women's identities as affected by how they are treated enables understanding from disenfranchised groups of how multifaceted oppression exacerbates distress and distrust of systems which should protect the human rights of all people (Dill et al., 2007).

In situations of rape and sexual assault, the lens of intersectional feminism makes more visible women's experiences across diverse ages, abilities, cultures, socioeconomic classes and sex/gender identities, such as lesbian and transsexual women. For example, issues of poverty, discrimination and racism differentiate the experiences of many women from that of white, middle-class women. The perspective can also work against simply individualising difference as a matter of unique psychology or reducing difference to simplistic one-factor explanations such as 'culture'. For example, studies of the prevalence of rape and sexual assault show differences in prevalence between ethnic groups and by social class but such differences are produced by interacting social processes. They are not adequately explained by 'culture' or 'identity' without both remembering that men's violence against women is a problem in all cultures and looking

for the interlocking systems of inequality that frame its specific forms (Gavey, 2013; Gill, 2013). Circumstances of poverty create stresses that exacerbate levels of violence, and findings of different rates of sexual violence between ethnic groups sometimes disappear when controlling for socioeconomic circumstances (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

In the case of African-American women and Indigenous women in white settler societies, the interaction of poverty with the constant incursion of racism alongside legacies of subjugation through colonisation or slavery have more explanatory power than a simplistic use of 'culture' or 'identity'. The idea that particular marginalised or multiply disadvantaged groups have 'rape cultures' also enhances prejudice and stigma that cause further harm to women who are raped. The vulnerability of Indigenous women is demonstrated through the finding that they are twice as likely to experience rape as other women in the population (Nixon & Humphreys, 2010). In Australia, McCalman et al. (2014) note that an inordinately high incidence of rape against Aboriginal women is exacerbated by fear of disclosure. Racist discourse denigrating Aboriginal people, the terrible history of colonisation, and negative experiences of government agencies and services amplify the risks of rape and disclosure of rape. This backdrop means that the incidence of abuse feeds racist discourses about Aboriginal people and it fractures trust in help-giving services. This makes rape more possible and promotes questioning and condemnation of disclosure within Aboriginal communities that may result in family retaliation, community condemnation and blame (McCalman et al., 2014).

Absence of legal redress or appropriate assistance from support services is particularly common in the experience of disadvantaged groups. The reasons for this failure are entwined with the systems of inequality underpinning their disadvantage. Women with physical and intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to rape but the disadvantages of gender and disability mean they are often disbelieved or disregarded (Lin et al., 2009; Hollomotz, 2012). The failure of agencies to deliver appropriate support is also documented as a commonplace experience of the transgender community (Namaste, 2000; McNeil et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2008). Research suggests very high rates of sexual assault as part of a pattern of hate crime and prejudice against transgender people (Stotzer, 2009), particularly against male to female and female to male transsexual people (Lombardi et al., 2002). In many jurisdictions, definitions of rape remain gendered in ways that create insurmountable difficulties when transgender people seek legal redress as rape victims; at the same time transgender people have been convicted of sexual assault for failing to disclose their gender history prior to consensual sex (Sharpe, 1994, 2014). It takes a particular awareness among service providers to recognise and resist the interplay between misogyny, discrimination and intolerance of difference that leads to rape as a method for further targeting and demoralising disenfranchised groups.

The concept of 'intersectionality' therefore draws attention to the fluid and supporting ways in which systems of inequality and social division generate hybrid forms of social disadvantage (Anthias, 2014). The term signals a theoretical approach that goes beyond treating gender inequality as the only relevant story in understanding gender and sexual violence. The 'intersection' metaphor is one of social position rather than individual attributes (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). It is important not to reduce individuals to carriers of disadvantage but rather to understand how the joint operations of social worlds create exposure to sexual abuse, and reduce both recognition and opportunities to seek redress. For example, it is the ways in which social worlds privilege men, white ethnicities and able-bodied people that diminish the room for manoeuvre of many women, not the attributes of gender, skin colour or bodily disabilities in themselves.

As the earlier examples show, systems of inequality other than gender can increase victimisation of women, reduce protection against rape and sexual assault, increase the silencing of victims and create barriers to assistance with recovery. Equality policies and protections against discrimination, as well as legal redress for sexual assault, are often insensitive to multiple disadvantages in ways which marginalise and exclude women who should have access to legal redress. Unacknowledged legacies of cultural stereotyping as an aspect of treating subordinate groups as 'others' can discourage clients from disclosing to service providers and contribute to service providers failing to recognise sexual assault, thus inadvertently discouraging reporting and missing opportunities to enquire about needs for support. Colonial histories of subordination and ideologies denigrating others, such as racism, homophobia and bigotry, deny members of the subordinated group the authority to speak, sometimes producing self-censoring because of fear of stigma and defeat (Collins, 2004). If social workers are to show that they are part of the solution and not part of the problem they may have to build a history of protecting the community from the abuse of racism or other histories of discrimination before being able to protect individuals from the abuse of assault (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Rape and sexual assault as a social work issue: an intersectional lens

The persistence of men's sexual assaults on women, children and other men, and the potential depth of the consequent harm, gives all social workers cause to address rape and sexual assault as human rights and social justice issues across the whole range of social work practices. An appropriate social work response requires understanding of how the production, incidence, experience and harm of men's violence against women intersects with inequalities and disadvantages other than gender.

The experience of women who stand at the intersections of disadvantage, for example, poor women from racially abused ethnic minorities or lesbian women within stigmatised religious groups, remind us that men's gendered control over women is not the only dimension of power shaping the harms of sexual assault.

Social workers have a mandate to advocate for human rights within the ideal of a just society; rape and sexual assault represent a denial of both. However, as McMahon and Schwartz (2011) have documented in their research, attention to this topic within social work is limited. Yet from a feminist and human rights perspective, social workers should be at the vanguard of rape prevention and addressing the needs of rape survivors (McMahon & Schwartz, 2011).

It is, therefore, essential that social workers are able to ask about rape and sexual assault sensitively during assessments and have the skills and knowledge to address any disclosures. In particular, social workers in mental health services, homeless accommodation, community-based programmes, migrant and refugee services, and disability services will be working with women who have been raped or sexually assaulted, including women from diverse social backgrounds. In some instances, the difficulties clients are experiencing will have been caused or exacerbated by undeclared rape and sexual assault in the recent or more distant past. If rape and sexual assault are not identified as a cause or contributing factor, distressing thoughts, feelings and circumstances related to the assault cannot be resolved. Without appropriate responses women may be re-victimised by service providers, including social workers, and societal myths that intensify shame and self-blame may be reinforced (McMahon & Schwartz, 2011). Social workers who lack knowledge in this area therefore may not only silence women but can also exacerbate harm.

An intersectional feminist lens can particularly offer social work practitioners and policy makers a perspective from which to view disparities in the incidence of rape and a means to address the impact of myths which compound the effects of rape and sexual assault. Social work intervention can be understood as sitting along a continuum from social activism to support of individuals. This continuum includes advocacy, policy development, political lobbying, work in communities, counselling, therapy and working with disadvantaged and vulnerable people in all sectors of society. Social workers in specialist rape and sexual assault services are adept at using their social work knowledge and skills to have a positive impact along this continuum. Likewise, there are social workers within services who incorporate anti-rape practice in their work. However, all social workers have a mandate to promote social justice. Given that social work is concerned with the needs of vulnerable communities all social workers need to be conversant with and skilled in using feminist knowledge, based in diverse lived experiences of survivors, to address rape and sexual abuse. An important element of this knowledge base is an understanding of rape

myths, including how their operation misrecognises and exacerbates multiple disadvantages, and feeds on and perpetuates not only misogyny but other forms of prejudice.

Rape myths have long histories and permeate religious, legal and media institutions. Edwards et al. (2011) offer a review of how each myth has come about and is being sustained. The myth that women frequently tell lies about rape co-exists comfortably with legal systems which demand proof of physical resistance in rape cases and conclude that the absence of such proof indicates telling lies. Women's social position at the intersections of disadvantage further affects the ways they are subjected to the charge of lying in rape cases. For example, working-class women may be faced with defence tactics that appeal to class-based prejudices of supposed unreliability and poor self-control. Defence lawyers may draw the attention of the court to any circumstances reflecting disadvantage, such as living in stigmatised housing areas, growing up in state care or a history of glue sniffing (Brown et al., 1993; Phipps 2009). Such details can become part of a general strategy of undermining a woman's credibility (Jordan, 2011; Temkin, 2002; Temkin & Krahé, 2008) because in many cultures ideas about 'good' and 'bad' character are deeply infused with prejudices about social class and ethnicity as well as gender. Skeggs (2004) has documented how feminine 'respectability' has been culturally aligned with images of white, middle-class women in the UK, making it difficult for working-class and ethnic minority women to claim this for themselves. The perception that women lie about rape supports and draws on a more general misogyny, portraying women as dishonest and unreliable, or motivated by revenge. Similarly, tactics drawing on prejudices about ethnicity, religion, able-bodiedness or sexuality buy into racism, bigotry, denigration of disability and homophobia. Edwards et al. (2011) trace the suggestion that women lie about rape back to biblical texts and point to contemporary echoes in criminal justice systems. In some jurisdictions, efforts to improve the experience of women have focused on changing the attitudes and practices of the police and legal practitioners, with mixed success (Burman, Jamieson & Nicholson, 2007; Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Jordan, 2011; Naffine, 2014; McMillan & Thomas, 2013). The tactics of defence lawyers are not typically the focus of such efforts at changing professional cultures, and research into mock juries suggests defence tactics are effective (Ellison & Munro, 2009). Some sociolegal scholars advocate bringing expert witnesses into the courts explicitly to counteract the repertoire of rape myths that defence lawyers play on (Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Krahé & Temkin, 2009).

Media biases also lend support to rape myths. Ideas about ethnicity, 'race' and social class are often implicit in media accounts of rape with the ideal-typical victim being white and middle-class (Berrington & Jones 2002; Dowler, 2006; Kitzinger 2013; Soothill & Walby, 1991; Gill, 2007). There is a long and well-documented history of racist assumptions about

black men and rape of white women which still surface in popular discourse (Collins, 2004).

There is now a very significant body of feminist research documenting the prevalence of rape myths across diverse populations. Much of it documents higher rates of acceptance of sceptical victim-blaming myths among men than women (Edwards et al., 2011; Foster & Kidd, 2014; Grubb & Turner, 2012). Edwards et al. (2011) cite many studies which find that 'the invitation to rape' myth is pervasive in diverse communities, nurturing and supported by the misplaced belief that women who confine themselves to stereotypical roles avoid rape. This view may be reinforced when public announcements made by the police, following publicised rape cases, ask women to restrict their movements. The message reinforces the idea that if women are in the public domain they are putting themselves at risk and that women who stay indoors will be safe. Such a message may weigh particularly heavily on women who are defying local cultural conventions by travelling alone and those who lack the economic resources to avoid forms of transport and places associated with risk. In contradiction to this message, surveys of victimisation show that there are high numbers of women, including women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, abilities and sexualities, who are sexually assaulted at home, often by males that they know as partners, relatives or friends. Abuse of women and children who are frail or vulnerable residents in care homes is also known to be perpetrated primarily by carers in positions of trust (Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Edwards et al., 2011). The suggestion that home is safe and public space is a place of danger for women is an insidious myth that partially continues the effect of more explicit patriarchal questioning of women's right to participate in public life, whether or not there is social acceptance for such views.

In many jurisdictions legislation was, and in some cases still is, in place so that men cannot be charged with raping their wives. Some interpretations of religious doctrines support this idea of a husband's access to his wife's body which allows men to rape their wives with impunity (Edwards et al., 2011). In addition to some jurisdictions denying women the right to seek justice, many women either do not know that they have the right or have lost belief in their rights. Women who are segregated and isolated may not have access to information that contradicts their husband's beliefs about his entitlement to sex. Research has documented the debilitating, confidence-destroying impact of the coercive control of an abusive partner (Stark, 2007). An abuser exercising coercive control engineers a woman's social isolation but women who are already isolated, for example, distanced from friends and family by migration and facing language barriers in making new ties, are especially vulnerable. Myths about rape add to the smokescreen obscuring possibilities of exit for women who are being raped by a partner exercising coercive control. An intersectional lens encourages further consideration of how some social situations offer fewer

routes of exit than others. Women who believe their legal right to citizenship or means of economic support depend on their relationships with their abusers are particularly cut off from means of redress.

Intersectional feminist principles for social work

If the role of social work is to promote positive social change, then it is highly appropriate to make the values of social justice and human rights explicit when addressing rape and sexual assault. Further, social work is distinguished by using a strengths approach to enable empowerment of clients and client groups. Following an intersectional feminist approach recognising multiple identities (Damant et al., 2008), a focus on women's diverse strengths and identities can help to ensure that survivors of rape and sexual abuse are not solely defined by the trauma that they have endured. By integrating feminist-informed knowledge into practice, alternative messages can be used to refute internalised prejudices. With knowledge of myths, and practice at their rebuttal, social workers can challenge clients' experiences of shame and self-blame and influence how rape and sexual assault survivors see themselves.

Working directly with rape and sexual assault survivors begins with established social work skills of taking a non-judgemental attitude, and showing empathy and acceptance (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). Through building respectful relationships with clients combined with awareness of barriers they are likely to face, truly listening and enabling women to tell their story in their own time, questions about possible rape and sexual assault can be asked sensitively. Using social work skills with survivors of rape and sexual assault should create openings for disclosure, following the clients' leads, and acknowledging their right to make their own decisions. When working with survivors from a strengths perspective, there is scope to recognise and reinforce individual women's agency by seeking to understand and acknowledge each woman's survival strategies. From an intersectional feminist perspective, honouring individual women's strengths, despite multiple oppressions, means that women are not defined by the act of rape and the strengths gained from varied identities can be valued.

Good social work practice is already sensitive to cultural stereotyping. An intersectional perspective reinforces the importance of resisting ethnocentric assumptions dressed up as if they reflect 'universal civilisation', by listening to and honouring knowledge rooted in the experiences of women in circumstances of disadvantage and minority cultures (Ono 2013; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Appropriate assistance to rape victims may mean acknowledging sources of expertise outside the social work community and being aware of the range of community supports available to particular groups. For example an Australian Aboriginal woman may draw strength from being encouraged to speak

with a trusted woman who is an elder in her community and better positioned to understand the impacts of multigenerational discrimination and abuse suffered by her people and by Aboriginal women in general.

Social workers working in policy have an important role to play in ensuring that the voices of women from minority groups are included. Analysis of policy documents shows that, even when the diversity of women's circumstances is acknowledged, along with recognition that women with particular disadvantages may have particular needs, the voices of disadvantaged minorities are seldom heard, despite being the obvious experts on their own needs (Strid, Walby & Armstrong, 2013). Researchers and campaigners working to reduce violence against women can point to policies and practices formed with good intentions but which, without consulting ethnic minority women, have caused them harm. For example, absolute confidentiality is much more important for women's safety and wellbeing in some communities than others and practices of sharing information across professional groups can be experienced as a serious breach of trust (Kelly, 2010).

Research, including practitioner research, which draws on intersectional feminist perspectives can add to the knowledge base supporting practice and activism to promote change at individual, policy and societal levels. Social work researchers can inform practice through a social work evidence base which delineates incidence, issues, prevention programmes and effective practice strategies with diverse client groups. When researching participants' experiences of rape and sexual assault, social work skills fit with feminist methods of qualitative research and are particularly helpful in research with diverse vulnerable groups because they simultaneously uncover deep and rich meaning while helping participants to feel valued and empowered (Liamputtong, 2007).

Although there is sparse coverage of rape and sexual assault in the social work literature, feminist researchers have developed a knowledge base that social workers can use to counter societal views which disempower women who have endured rape and sexual assault (Edwards et al. 2011; Fisher & Cullen, 2000; Littleton, 2011; Macy et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2007; McMahon & Schwartz, 2011). Knowledge about rape myths and openness to understanding effects of multiple layers of discrimination are tools that social workers can bring to address rape and sexual abuse. In addition, social workers who are conversant with the systems and legislation in their jurisdiction can help women to make choices about seeking justice.

Social workers can contribute to combating the climate in which rape flourishes through promoting discourses on gender, sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression, for example, by supporting school and community prevention programmes which promote tolerance of differences and respectful relationships (Edwards et al., 2011; Horvarth

& Brown, 2009; Jones, 2012; Littleton, 2011). Social workers who have made it their business to understand the specific barriers to justice for women at intersections of multiple disadvantage are well placed to interact with criminal justice systems on their behalf, as advocate or witness, and they have an opportunity to educate police, lawyers and court officials (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Visible involvement in anti-violence activities such as Reclaim the Night Marches and online campaigns which inclusively acknowledge gendered injustices adds a social work voice to resistance to violence against women in diverse communities. Through advocating, lobbying, policy work and educating, systems can be influenced from inside and out.

Social workers can similarly build a knowledge base that will help to make the case for including women at intersections of disadvantage in policy consultation. By conducting qualitative and quantitative research into the instance, effects and interventions for women in diverse populations using intersectional feminist approaches, social workers can promote recognition of the varied ways in which discrimination oppresses women. Feminist research on rape and sexual assault can expose how racism and other prejudices may lead to higher rates of assault, increased adverse effects, particular assaults on identities and reduced access to justice for women across a range of disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined the definition and incidence of rape and sexual assault, and considered the contribution that radical and intersectional feminisms bring to our understanding of these problems. Social workers, no matter in which sector of service provision or policy writing, will be working with women who have survived rape, yet this is an area of social work that is insufficiently recognised. There is little research and evidence of reflection on practice. All social workers can raise awareness of societal myths and how they sustain victim blaming, which allows systemic discrimination against vulnerable individuals and groups to persist. There is much to be done to combat rape and sexual abuse but social work skills and values combined with knowledge based in feminist perspectives puts social workers in a position to support clients and promote social change. Working across the continuum of social work practice can promote knowledgeable, just societies which refute patriarchal belief systems and help to empower survivors of rape and sexual abuse to speak out and have their voices heard. Moreover, social workers can work with survivors to use their agency in collective efforts for social change. Since the 1970s feminists have dreamed of a world free from rape, and we believe that social workers continue to have an important role to play in helping to realise that dream.

Further reading and websites

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International websites

End Violence Against Women International includes information about best practice in a range of service provision settings: www.evawintl.org/.

Sexual Violence Research Initiative is a South African-based programme with a very useful website offering news about conferences and research papers. This site also has information about availability of funding for new research: www.svri.org/.

Australian websites

Sexual Violence Research, Australian Institute of Family Studies: www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/.

National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence: www.nasasv.org.au/index.htm.

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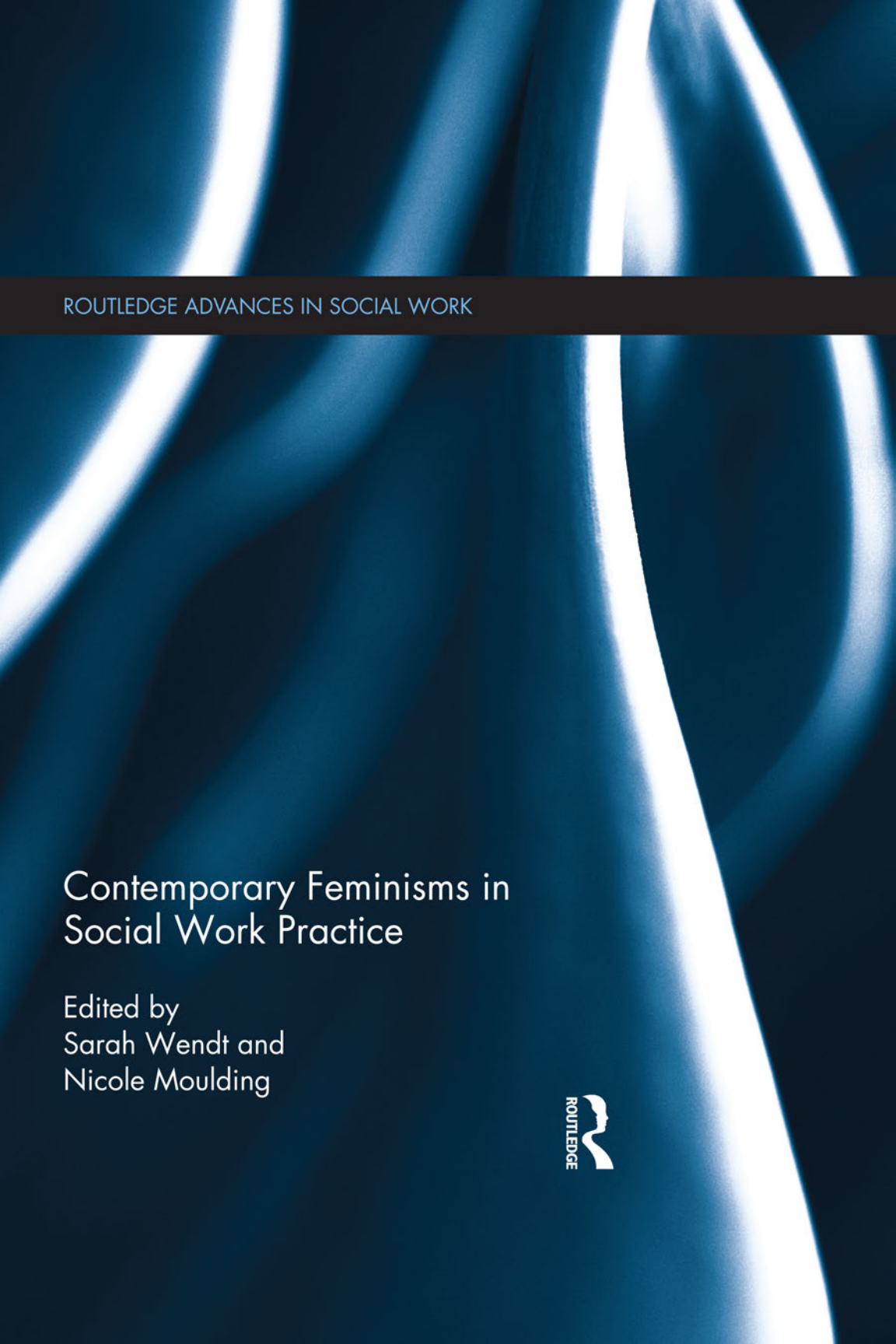
ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK
Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice
Edited by
Sarah Wendt and
Nicole Moulding
ROUTLEDGE

Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice

Contemporary Feminisms in Social Work Practice explores feminism as core to social work knowledge, practice and ethics. It demonstrates how gender-neutral perspectives and practices obscure gender discourses and power relations. It also shows feminist social work practice can transform areas of social work not specifically concerned with gender, through its emphasis on relationships and power.

Within and outside feminism, there is a growing assumption that equality has been won and is readily available to all women. However, women continue to dominate the ranks of the poor in developed and developing countries around the world; male perpetrated violence against women and children has not reduced; women outnumber men by up to three to one in the diagnosis of common mental health problems; and women continue to be severely underrepresented in every realm of power, decision making and wealth. This worrying context draws attention to the ways gender relations structure most of the problems faced by the women, men and children in the day-to-day worlds in which social work operates. Drawing together key contemporary thinking about feminism and its place in social work, this international collection looks both at core curriculum areas taught in social work programmes and at a wide range of practice fields that involve key challenges and opportunities for future feminist social work.

This book is suitable for all social work students and academics. It examines the nuanced nature of power relationships in the everyday and areas such as working with cross-cultural communities, mental health, interpersonal violence and abuse, homelessness, child protection, ageing, disability and sexuality.

Sarah Wendt is a Professor of Social Work at Flinders University, South Australia.

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