GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF SOCIAL WORK IN CUBA FROM 2000 TO 2020

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Abstract: This article aims to reflect about the dilemmas and tensions that characterized the professionalization of social work in Cuba during the period from 2000 to 2020, with a particular focus on the incorporation of a gender perspective in both professional training and practice. Through qualitative research, based on in-depth interviews with professionals in the field, the perceptions and evaluations regarding gender-related training were analyzed, and how these influenced social workers' ways of thinking and intervening. The findings reveal that the absence of a formal degree in Social Work within the Cuban education system led professionals to train in disciplines such as Sociology, Medical Psychology, Sociocultural Studies, Social Communication, and Sociocultural Management, while their work practices centered on typical social work tasks. Despite the notorious feminization of the profession, gender training within the institutions responsible for the professional development of these workers proved to be insufficient. Although the data analyzed corresponds to the period from 2000 to 2020, there is an emphasis on the need for a critical review of the historical process of social work in Cuba, in order to understand better the evolution of this discipline in relation to gender, and the social, political, and academic transformations that took place on the island over two decades.

Keywords: Social Work; Gender; Professionalization; History of Social Work; Gender Perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of social work in Cuba has been marked by numerous transformations throughout its history, reflecting the country's political, economic, and social changes. Between 2000 and 2020, social work acquired particular centrality within welfare policies, with an emphasis on supporting vulnerable sectors and implementing social programs aimed at mitigating inequalities. However, this period was also characterized by a series of dilemmas and tensions in professional training and practice, particularly regarding the integration of a gender perspective.

Social work as a profession emerged in response to the social need to address and treat social problems in specific contexts. Since the Middle Ages, charitable actions represented the first forms of assistance to the marginalized, progressively evolving into more structured models of social protection during the Modern Age. In the case of Cuba, the institutionalization of social work was developed after 1959 Revolution, with the involvement of multiple social actors, such as the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP), and other state institutions. During the 1990s, the state introduced social programs led by young social workers, in response to an initiative by then president Fidel Castro Ruz.

Despite the evident feminization of social work in Cuba, the recognition of a gender perspective in both, training and professional practice, was neither a uniform nor systematic process. The absence of a Bachelor's degree in Social Work within the Cuban higher education system, forced professionals to look for training in related disciplines such as Sociology, Medical Psychology, Sociocultural Studies, and Sociocultural Management. This academic dispersion, directly impacted the way social workers understood and incorporated the gender

approach into their daily work. The lack of specific training in this area contributed to the fact that social interventions, although predominantly led by women, did not always adopt a critical perspective on gender relations.

Sex based inequalities remain a persistent feature in all societies, responding to socioculturaly constructed power relations, norms, and practices that perpetuate structures of domination. If social work does not critically incorporate the gender perspective into its professional practice, its actions may be limited in promoting equity. In the first decade of the 21st century context, Cuba's gender agenda saw progress in several areas, particularly in terms of legislation and state programs aimed at gender equity. However, in the field of social work, the mainstreaming of this perspective was not fully consolidated. During the analyzed period, the state promoted social policies oriented towards the protection of vulnerable groups, but without a systematic emphasis on deconstructing gender inequalities. When gender training was present, it was sporadic and largely depended on specific initiatives by international organizations or cooperation projects, rather than a structural commitment within academic and professional training.

This article aims to critically analyze the presence and absence of the gender perspective in the professionalization of social work in Cuba between 2000 and 2020 period. Based on qualitative research, including in-depth interviews with professionals in the field, the article examines their perceptions of the training they received and its impact on social interventions. Furthermore, it reflects on the implications of these dynamics in shaping social work as a discipline and its contribution to social change processes in the country. At a time when the historical review of social work is fundamental to understanding its evolution, this research aims to provide key elements for the debate on the need for a stronger and structured gender-focused training within the field of social work in Cuba.

The results are presented in three main categories for content analysis: (1) the history of social work in Cuba; (2) social work in Cuba from 2000 to 2020; and (3) the dilemmas associated with the professionalization of social work in Cuba with a gender perspective: the reality and the ideal.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this research, a qualitative approach was employed, based on in-depth and semi-structured interviews with social work professionals in Cuba. A total of 101 professionals, both women and men, involved in social issue programs were interviewed. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the aim of representing various social work practice scenarios and the diversity of actors involved in the field.

The contact strategy was mainly carried out directly, leveraging connections established by the authors through their roles as professors in the Sociology and Social Work Bachelor's program. Additionally, the "snowball" technique was used to access key informants who were referred during the interview process. This approach expanded the sample and ensured the inclusion of professionals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives within the field of social work.

The majority of the interviewees were women, aged between 26 and 40, with more than five years of professional experience. The goal was to gather insights and assessments from professionals with epistemological and empirical knowledge that would support their reflections on gender training within social work. The demographic and professional diversity of the participants allowed for the exploration of a broad range of perspectives, enriching the understanding of the studied phenomena.

The primary data collection instrument was the in-depth interview, which allowed for the construction of collective and personalized discourses and representations regarding the ethical dimension and its relationship with the gender perspective. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted, facilitating open dialogue on specific issues such as ethics, its connection with work positions, institutional affiliation, and involvement in undergraduate and graduate programs. The interview protocol was specifically designed for the study and was organized into seven areas: the institution where they work, work experience, the type of work performed, social work training, the presence of gender in their training, and the importance given to this dimension in professional practice. These topics allowed for a comprehensive exploration of gender perspectives in the training and practice of social work in Cuba.

In addition to the interviews, qualitative ethnographic techniques, such as the authors' field diary, were used to record observations and reflections throughout the research process. This tool proved useful in capturing nuances and unspoken aspects during the interviews, as well as in observing the work context of social sector professionals in Cuba. The field diary notes also helped identify emerging patterns and trends in the respondents' answers, complementing the data interpretation.

For data analysis, ATLAS.ti software was used, enabling systematic coding and categorization of the collected data. Through this program, 45 emerging codes were identified and organized into three main dimensions: the evolution of social work professionalization in Cuba (2000-2020), the incorporation or absence of the gender perspective in professional training and practice, and the persistence of the welfare model in social intervention. This analytical approach allowed for the establishment of relationships between emerging categories and participants' discourses, facilitating the construction of an interpretative framework that highlighted tensions and challenges in the professionalization of social work within the Cuban context.

The use of ATLAS.ti enabled the visualization of conceptual networks and the identification of recurring patterns in the narratives of the interviewees. Furthermore, it allowed for the comparison of testimonies with the observations recorded in the field diary, which strengthened the validity of the analysis by integrating multiple sources of information. The triangulation of qualitative data from interviews, ethnographic observations, and computational analysis ensured a comprehensive approach to the studied issue, providing a deep understanding of the dynamics and challenges in the training and practice of social work in Cuba.

RESULTS

BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL WORK IN CUBA

The history of the social work profession in Cuba is similar to those occurred in other parts of the world. The Catholic Church and charitable organizations carried out a series of activities aimed at assisting people in socially disadvantaged situations. These actions were complemented by initiatives from immigrants, primarily from various regions of Spain, as well as the first workers' associations, which emerged as mutual aid organizations. The concern to equip people working in charitable and philanthropic organizations with some knowledge that would allow them to face social assistance work with greater rigor dates back to the 1930s. In 1938, the founding of the Social Assistance Board, initiated by the Lyceum Society (an association with charitable and cultural purposes), played an important role under the slogan "Create a School of Social Service." This effort united the necessary forces to influence the institutions responsible for fulfilling the proposed objective.

The responsibility of the Cuban state for the social security and assistance of its citizens was enshrined in the 1940 Constitution. However, it was not the Cuban state that promoted the creation of the school for social workers, but rather the Social Assistance Board, which proposed using members of the Lyceum as professors and use their facilities. The initial funding was provided by the Havana City Hall, and once the enrollment was completed, support came from the University of La Habana, particularly from the Faculty of Education, which contributed to the opening of the School of Social Service on May 5, 1943. It was recognized as an Annex School of the Faculty of Education in a meeting held by the Faculty on May 3, 1945.

The requirements for admission to the School of Social Service included personal characteristics such as an interest in human beings and in understanding the significance of social phenomena, as well as respect for human dignity. In terms of academic requirements, a high school diploma was required, preferably in the humanities, or a high school diploma granted by U.S.-based schools in Cuba or the U.S. If these criteria were not met, students could still be accepted if they passed the entrance exams or were graduates of nursing schools, home economics schools, commercial schools, art and trade schools, or technical institutes (Martínez, 2001).

Upon analyzing the student records in social work, the curriculum subjects were identified. It is noted that the curriculum included subjects related to the three levels of social work intervention:

individual, group, and community. The curriculum spanned two academic years, divided into four semesters, allowing for progressive and structured training. Students studied subjects in psychology, sociology, as well as basic principles of medical and legal sciences related to social assistance. These subjects offered an integrated approach, preparing students to address social problems from an interdisciplinary perspective. The school's practical experience covered medical-social areas, juvenile delinquency, abandoned children, and group work, with practice centers in various institutions (Martínez, 2001). This practical approach was crucial, as students faced real-life situations that provided them with experience for their future professional work.

However, the curriculum lacked subjects related to gender or feminist theories, which limited the curriculum's ability to critically and deeply address issues related to gender inequality in social contexts. Over time, these subjects have proven to be fundamental in understanding the power dynamics that affect individuals and groups in vulnerable situations. Additionally, the absence of subjects related to methodology or research in social services or social work was a flaw that, in our opinion, reduced students' capacity to generate empirical and critical knowledge about social practice, which is essential in a discipline focused on social intervention. There was only one subject that included practical activity, leaving little room for theoretical reflection on the work done and the continuous improvement of methods used.

On another note, it is worth mentioning that social work journals of the time adopted definitions of concepts that extrapolated medical terms, such as social pathology, social diseases, medical social work, and cure (Gutiérrez, 2004). This conceptual approach reflects the influence of medical models on social work, which has been criticized in later years. In particular, the tendency to medicalize social problems has been questioned, understanding that not all issues faced by social workers can be addressed from a purely clinical or therapeutic perspective. For example, the concept of "social diseases" reduces complex phenomena such as poverty, exclusion, or violence to mere pathologies, preventing a more holistic and contextualized understanding of these problems. Today, social work tends to adopt more comprehensive approaches, recognizing the social, economic, and political dimensions of problems, without reducing them solely to issues of mental health or physical well-being.

When relating the bibliography used and produced at the time, the list of subjects in the curriculum, and the content of the Graduation Thesis (19, from the 1945-46 to 1959-60 academic years, archived at the Library of the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of La Habana), it is apparent that social work as a profession in Cuba began with a strong connection to medicine, considering it an auxiliary profession. Its assistance function rested on the conception that situations of social deprivation or disadvantage were the result of individual conditions and characteristics (Gutiérrez, 2004). Therefore, in most cases, there were no conditions to address the structural causes of these problems, ignoring the influence of social determinants. This reductionist conception did not allow for a comprehensive understanding of social realities, limiting interventions to superficial solutions. Moreover, the roles of research and planning in social services, as well as participation in decision-making, were unknown. The curriculum contained very little reference to theoretical and methodological aspects, which resulted in interventions with a rather limited character.

This assistance-based approach, grounded in an individualistic and paternalistic view, began to be insufficient in the face of the new social challenges the country was experiencing. The transition from a charity-centered model to a conception of social justice implied rethinking the foundations of social work, understanding that social well-being could not be achieved solely through intervention in individual cases, but also through understanding the structural causes that generated inequalities.

The turbulent political and social climate of the time, marked by the wars leading to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, led to the closure of the School of Social Service at the University of La Habana in 1956, as occurred with other university specialties in the country. This closure reflected the need to reorganize institutions and orient them toward the goals of the new social order. The school reopened in 1959 after the revolutionary triumph, but it did not accept new enrollment; instead, it was dedicated solely to completing the studies of those already enrolled. This transitional stage reflected a restructuring context focused on integrating social work into the new social paradigms driven by the revolution.

It is noteworthy that the dominance of welfare social work remained until the 1990s, characterized by a focus on caring for those in need, providing material aid and spiritual support in terms of services or information. This conception of social work as an instrument of "relief" from immediate difficulties still persists in many contemporary contexts, although in a modified way. This is the original form in which social work appeared, and from there, it evolved into more technical and even more participatory forms, recognizing the importance of community intervention and the need to involve individuals themselves in solving their problems.

SOCIAL WORK IN CUBA FROM 2000 TO 2020

The 1962 University Reform in Cuba prioritized scientific and technical training in fields related to technical careers, based on the premise that these disciplines would drive the country's accelerated socioeconomic development. This reform entailed the creation of new university programs, the establishment of new universities, the revision of curricula, and the restructuring of higher education institutions. However, this focus created an unfavorable environment for the development of the social sciences, particularly Social Work, as the School of Social Service was never fully established, disrupting the professional training of social workers.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Social Welfare was created through Law No. 49 on February 6, 1959, with the mandate to provide care, prevention, assistance, and rehabilitation services to individuals and groups. Its goal was to ensure that all citizens could enjoy a high standard of living in accordance with the new system being established, while mobilizing all available technical and welfare resources.

The Ministry of Social Welfare was integrated into the political and social framework of the Cuban Revolution, serving as one of the key instruments for implementing the social policies envisioned by the revolutionary process. As part of the emerging political system following the triumph of the revolution in 1959, the creation of institutions and specific programs aimed at improving living conditions became a priority for the new government. In this context, the Ministry

played a central role in organizing and executing social welfare policies, particularly those targeting the most vulnerable sectors of Cuban society, in line with the revolutionary promise of social justice.

However, the Ministry of Social Welfare had a relatively short lifespan. Following the declaration of the socialist nature of the Cuban Revolution in 1961 and the implementation of diverse social programs aligned with Fidel Castro's political agenda, as outlined in History will absolve me, the Ministry was dismantled. This decision was driven by a profound ideological and political shift: it was assumed that the rapid social transformations underway would automatically solve social problems. According to this perspective, the revolution's humanist approach, combined with structural reforms and more equitable access to resources, would ultimately eliminate social inequalities. Consequently, the existence of a centralized social welfare ministry was deemed unnecessary, leading to the absence of systematic training programs for social workers during this period. The professionalization of Social Work suffered as a result, as no structured educational programs or clear policies were established to guide the training of professionals in this field.

The dissolution of the Ministry of Social Welfare and the redistribution of its functions among different ministries highlighted the fragmented nature of social work in Cuba. The integration of social policies into different government sectors led to a dispersion of social intervention efforts, making it difficult to maintain a unified approach to social issues and their systematic resolution. This fragmentation reinforced an assistance-based model of social work, lacking a solid theoretical and methodological framework to guide professional interventions. As a result, social workers were largely confined to specific sectors (such as health, education, and housing), with limited opportunities to adopt a more comprehensive approach involving the planning and evaluation of broader social policies.

This period in the history of Social Work in Cuba, also reflected a traditional, assistance-focused approach, rooted in the belief that social deprivation and inequality were primarily the result of individual circumstances rather than structural

or political factors. This reductionist view failed to consider the systemic causes of poverty and social exclusion, limiting the scope of social work interventions. Moreover, this perspective reinforced the idea of social work as an act of charity rather than as a discipline with transformative potential based on research and strategic planning.

Although the decision to dissolve the Ministry of Social Welfare was based on an optimistic belief in the self-correcting power of revolutionary social changes, it ultimately led to the fragmentation of social work functions and the absence of a strong theoretical and methodological foundation in the field. This situation entrenched an assistance-based model of the profession that would persist for decades, limiting social work's capacity to address social problems from a critical and structural perspective. The legacy of a fragmented, charity-driven model of Social Work continues to influence contemporary professional practices in Cuba.

Within the broader framework of the social transformations driven by the Cuban Revolution, several mass organizations emerged as key actors in supporting and implementing the government's social policies. These organizations served both as vehicles for public policy mobilization and as spaces for participation, particularly for groups historically marginalized from political and social processes.

One of the most prominent organizations in this context was the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which played an active role in various social initiatives, such as vaccination and literacy campaigns. These campaigns not only had a direct impact on improving health and education conditions but also served to consolidate popular support for the revolutionary process, strengthening the relationship between the government and local communities.

Similarly, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) emerged as a fundamental organization in the implementation of social policies targeting women and families. Founded to voluntarily unite cuban women over the age of 14, the FMC aimed to promote social work at the community level. In addition to advocating for gender equality, the organization focused on preventing and addressing social problems affecting women and families, a particularly relevant role given the profound social and economic changes that followed the triumph of the revolution.

Within the FMC's local structures, the role of the voluntary social worker was established as a key figure in addressing community social issues. By the end of 2001, there were 78,861 women engaged in social work through various FMC delegations, underscoring the scale and importance of this initiative. Additionally, at the municipal level, the position of Social Work Technician was introduced, responsible for coordinating social interventions and overseeing the activities of voluntary social workers.

The requirements to become an FMC social worker included completing at least the ninth grade of schooling, ensuring a basic level of general education. However, the most valued qualifications were a strong commitment to service, a desire to contribute to the development of women and families, and a political reputation for supporting the revolution within the community. These criteria reflect the perception of social work during this period as an activity closely tied to social morality and revolutionary construction rather than as a structured professional discipline.

FMC social workers performed a wide range of functions, all aimed at providing social support to women, children, and families. Their primary responsibilities included identifying and addressing social problems affecting these groups, conducting regular home visits to assess family needs, and coordinating efforts with other government institutions such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the Ministry of the Interior. This inter-institutional and community-based approach to social work highlights a model of social intervention centered on coordination and cooperation among various state and societal actors while remaining responsive to the specific needs of each community.

In this context, social work in Cuba was marked by its strong connection to the immediate needs of the population —particularly in the areas of women's and family welfare— and by its voluntary and community-based nature. While this assistance-based and voluntarist approach helped address numerous social issues in the early decades of the revolution, it also exposed the limitations of an intervention model that lacked systematic training and an integrated understanding of the structural causes of poverty and social exclusion.

The training program for FMC social workers consisted of 30 hours of instruction aimed at equipping participants with basic knowledge necessary for their community work. This program was structured as brief refresher courses held twice a year to update social workers on advances and new strategies in social intervention. However, due to the absence of deeper and more systematic training, most voluntary social workers lacked formal professional preparation, even though their role in implementing social welfare policies was crucial. These social workers played an essential role in delivering welfare programs, which in Cuba have historically followed a selective approach, primarily targeting women and children.

THE DILEMMAS OF PROFESSIONALIZING SOCIAL WORK IN CUBA FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: BEING AND SHOULD-BE

This qualitative study was conducted with a sample of 101 social workers, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse professional settings across Cuba. The majority of participants were women (78%), aged between 26 and 40 years, with over five years of professional experience.

Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, allowing for the coding of 45 emerging categories, organized into three key dimensions:

1. The evolution of social work professionalization in Cuba (2000–2020).

2. The integration (or lack thereof) of a gender perspective in education and professional practice.

3. The persistence of an assistance-based model and its impact on social intervention.

Additionally, ethnographic techniques — including field observations and research diaries— were employed to complement the interpretation of interview discourses and to contrast participants' perceptions with their actual work environments.

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION IN CUBA (2000–2020)

Qualitative analysis using ATLAS.ti identified key factors influencing the evolution of social work in Cuba between 2000 and 2020. The elimination of the Bachelor's Degree in Social Work created an academic and professional void, forcing social workers to train in related disciplines without a clear specialization.

From the 101 in-depth interviews, four primary codes were identified, structuring this issue:

• Absence of a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work (85 references).

• Training in related disciplines (54 references).

• Academic fragmentation (42 references).

• Impact of educational reform (27 references).

These findings highlight how the absence of a specialized academic program led to fragmented training, affecting social workers' professional identity and their recognition within Cuba's social policy system.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW ANALYSIS AND ATLAS.TI

ABSENCE OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN SOCIAL WORK

The absence of a formal Social Work degree emerged as the most recurrent theme in the interviews (85 references). Participants widely agreed that the elimination of this program resulted in the devaluation of the profession within state institutions.

Coded Excerpts:

"When they eliminated the degree, they left us without a clear professional identity. We became 'de facto' social workers, but without academic recognition". (Interviewee 12, female, 41 years old, social worker in healthcare).

"I studied Sociology because the Social Work program didn't exist, but I never received any training in social intervention. I had to learn everything on the job".

(Interviewee 45, male, 35 years old, community social worker).

The lack of a specialized degree limited access to postgraduate training, resulting in insufficient professional development and limited innovation in social intervention.

"Without a bachelor's degree, we couldn't access specialized training abroad. Many colleagues tried to focus on gender studies or social policy, but they found no opportunities". (Interviewee 32, female, 38 years old, social worker at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security).

TRAINING IN RELATED DISCIPLINES AND ACADEMIC FRAGMENTATION

Fifty-four percent of interviewees reported having trained in disciplines such as Sociology, Medical Psychology, and Sociocultural Management. While these fields share some common ground with social work, they do not provide the specific tools needed for social intervention.

Coded Excerpts:

"We were given Sociology and Psychology training, but we never really learned what it means to be a social worker. We were trained in disciplines that weren't designed for our work". (Interviewee 36, male, 40 years old, social worker in the health sector).

"My degree is in Psychology, but my entire job is social intervention. Sometimes I feel like we were prepared for something entirely different". (Interviewee 29, female, 34 years old, social worker in education).

This academic fragmentation led to inconsistencies in social workers' training, affecting the implementation of standardized methodological strategies within Cuba's social assistance system.

"Every social worker has a different training background. We didn't have a common intervention model. Some used sociological approaches, others psychological ones, and in the end, everything was improvised". (Interviewee 50, male, 42 years old, social worker in community programs).

IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Twenty-seven percent of interviewees pointed out that educational reforms in Cuba during the early 21st century prioritized technical and medical sciences over social sciences. As a result, social work was sidelined and lost its place in university education.

Coded Excerpts:

"Social work was marginalized in educational reforms. It was not considered a priority, and we social workers had to adapt as best we could". (Interviewee 42, female, 35 years old, social worker at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security).

"We were left without options. There was no effort to integrate social work into the new reforms. It was assumed that any professional could replace us". (Interviewee 55, male, 39 years old, social worker in health institutions).

This lack of prioritization negatively impacted the professionalization of the field, limiting the establishment of a dedicated area of study within the Cuban university system.

"Not only was the degree eliminated, but no alternative training programs were created to compensate for this gap. We were left without an academic pathway".

(Interviewee 31, female, 37 years old, social worker in public policy).

CODE NETWORK ON THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (2000–2020)

Below is a graphical representation of the code network obtained through ATLAS.ti, illustrating the relationships between the key factors shaping social work education in Cuba between 2000 and 2020.

The graph provides a visual representation of the key factors influencing the professionalization of social work during the period under study. One of the most decisive factors was the absence of a Bachelor's degree in Social Work, which created a gap in academic training and weakened the professional recognition of social workers. This situation led to a devaluation of the profession

within state institutions and limited access to specialized training programs, ultimately affecting professional development and the acquisition of new competencies in the field.

In the absence of a dedicated university program, many social workers had to pursue training in related disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, and Sociocultural Management. However, these fields did not provide the specific tools needed for social intervention, resulting in a disconnect between academic training and the actual demands of professional practice.

This lack of structured education led to academic fragmentation, where social workers acquired knowledge from diverse perspectives without a common intervention model. Consequently, there was a lack of uniformity in professional training, which hindered the implementation of standardized methodological strategies within Cuba's social assistance system. Many social workers reported that their work was often improvised, relying on knowledge acquired from other disciplines and on-field experience rather than specialized training.

Finally, the impact of educational reform played a crucial role in the evolution of Social Work in Cuba. During the first decade of the 21st century, educational policies prioritized the development of technical and medical sciences, sidelining the social sciences and weakening the institutionalization of Social Work within the university system. As a result, not only was the Bachelor's degree eliminated, but no alternative programs were introduced to ensure specialized training for professionals in the field.

Taken together, this network of codes highlights the fragmentation in the training of social workers in Cuba and its effects on the professionalization of the sector. The lack of a structured academic program affected the professional identity of social workers and limited their ability to develop effective social interventions. These findings underscore the urgent need to reform the Social Work training system to ensure a solid and specialized academic preparation that meets the needs of Cuban society.
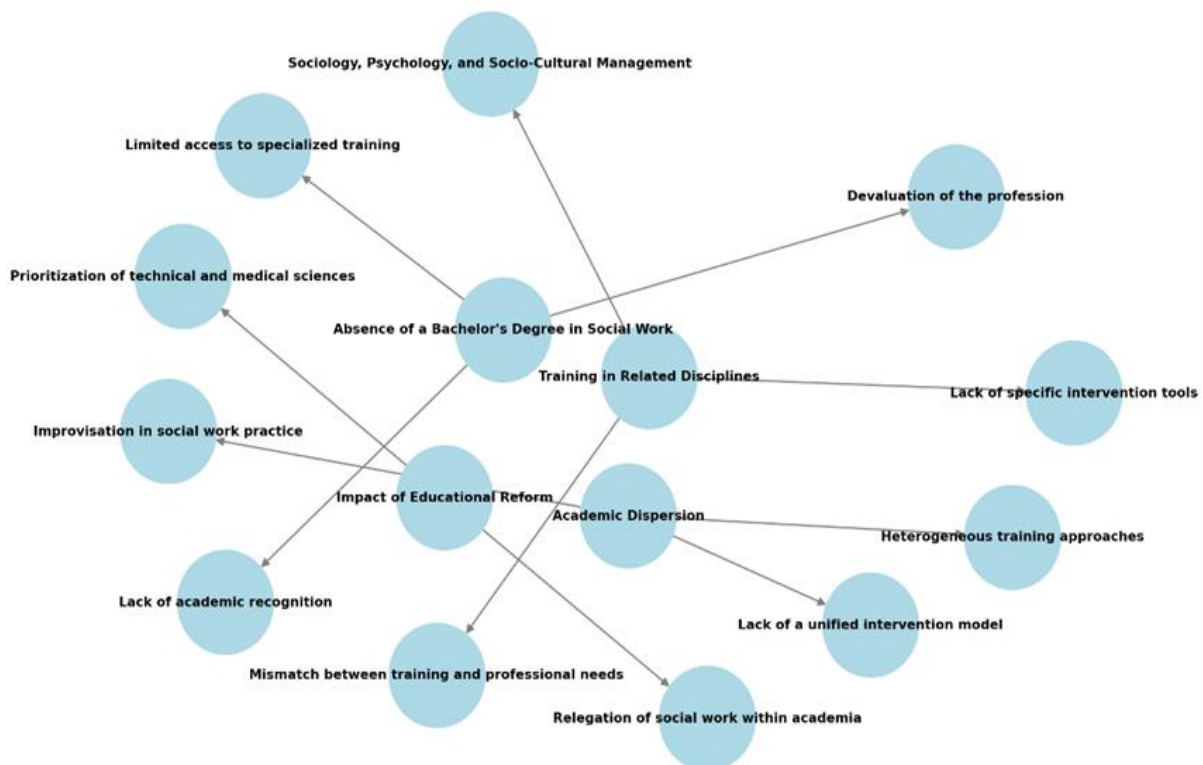
Figure 1: Code Network on the Evolution of Social Work Education (2000–2020).

FIELD DIARY OBSERVATIONS

A detailed analysis of the observations recorded in the field diary, revealed recurring patterns in how social work was perceived and valued within healthcare and educational institutions. In many cases, social workers were seen primarily as administrative support staff rather than as professionals with autonomous decision-making roles and direct intervention responsibilities. This issue was not merely a matter of perception but was also deeply influenced by the lack of specialized academic training and the limited recognition of the discipline in the studied settings.

"At a secondary school we visited, there were no social workers; teachers were responsible for handling disciplinary cases and behavioral issues. Social work was not even considered as a form of 'support for problematic students', nor was it recognized as an active agent in creating an inclusive school environment".

"In a rural hospital, the primary role of the social worker was to conduct initial interviews to gather patients' socioeconomic data. However, they were never allowed to participate in discussions regarding treatment progress or in planning post-hospital care. Their work remained entirely separate from medical and psychological aspects, limiting their ability to contribute to comprehensive patient well-being".

"In a residential facility for older adults, social workers were responsible for managing external resources for residents but were not involved in developing strategies to improve quality of life within the institution. Despite their knowledge of residents' psychosocial needs, their role was confined to administrative tasks and coordinating external services".

In institutions dedicated to serving vulnerable populations, such as residential care homes and hospitals, social workers faced structural limitations that restricted their ability to influence the design and implementation of internal policies that could support a more holistic and inclusive care model. The absence of a formal degree program and the overall low level of specialized training were significant barriers preventing social workers from taking on a proactive and transformative role within these institutions. The perception of their role as merely administrative reinforced a system in which their contributions were minimized, and their potential to drive meaningful changes in the organization of social and healthcare services remained unrecognized.

INCORPORATION OF GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE (2000-2020)

Results from In-Depth and Semi-Structured Interviews

Key Code Network:

1. Feminization of Social Work (63 references)

2. Lack of Gender Training (71 references)

3. Inequality in Professional Practice (48 references)

4. Interventions Without a Gender Perspective (39 references)

The feminization of social work in Cuba between 2000 and 2020 was not accompanied by gender-sensitive training. Sixty-seven percent of respondents indicated that their education did not include specific courses on gender equity, while 22% reported receiving only superficial content. Additionally, 85% of participants believed that the lack of gender training negatively affected the quality of social interventions, perpetuating structural inequalities during the period studied.

Codified Excerpts:

"We were told to work with women, but we were never taught to question gender inequalities." (Interviewee 33, female, 40 years old, social worker in education)

"When I started working in 2010, I realized that everything I was doing reinforced gender stereotypes. I had to train myself because the university didn't teach us about feminism or intersectionality". (Interviewee 12, female, 34 years old, social worker in public health).

"Our supervisors told us to work with a gender perspective, but the institution had no protocol for that. We felt lost". (Interviewee 47, female, 39 years old, social worker in community services).

"In social work, most of us were women, but men were promoted more easily. It wasn't just about how many of us there were, but about who had the decision-making power". (Interviewee 22, female, 41 years old, social program supervisor).

"We worked with women victims of violence, but had no conceptual tools on patriarchy or structural violence. Sometimes we didn't know how to intervene effectively". (Interviewee 30, male, 38 years old, social work technician)

The collected testimonies reflect the ongoing absence of a gender perspective in the training and professional practice of social work in Cuba from 2000 to 2020. Despite the feminization of the profession, intervention models continued without incorporating a critical view of gender inequalities. The lack of specific training led to difficulties in recognizing and addressing gender-based violence, stereotypes, and structural discrimination.

The results suggest that social workers, particularly women, had to self-educate to fill these gaps, highlighting a disconnect between job demands and the academic preparation they received. Furthermore, the organizational structure of social work in Cuba mirrored patterns of inequality, where men, although a minority in the profession, found it easier to access leadership and decision-making positions.

The following graph represents the Code Network on the feminization of social work and the absence of a gender perspective. It shows the interconnection between the main challenges identified in the research: the lack of gender training, inequality in professional practice, and the persistence of interventions without a gender perspective.

The visualization of this code network allows us to identify both direct and indirect relationships between the various factors analyzed. In this case, the central code of the network, feminization of social work, represents the predominant presence of women in the profession. However, rather than leading to equity, this feminization coexisted with other structural issues, such as the lack of gender training, inequality in professional practice, and interventions without a gender perspective. The structure of the network allowed us to observe how these elements interacted and reinforced the perpetuation of inequalities within the profession.

This finding is key to dismantling the misconception that the high presence of women in a professional field guarantees greater gender equity in terms of working conditions, access to opportunities, and recognition of the work done.

One of the main findings reflected by this network is the connection between the feminization of social work and inequality in professional practice. Despite women constituting the majority of the workforce in this field, men continued to occupy a disproportionately high percentage of leadership and decision-making positions. This phenomenon was the result of patriarchal organizational structures that continued to favor men in accessing hierarchical roles, leading to an unequal distribution of power. As a result, the fact that social work was a predominantly female profession did not translate into improved working conditions for women or greater equity in the distribution of resources and opportunities within the sector. This finding revealed the existence of a "glass ceiling" within the profession, where women faced invisible barriers to career advancement, while men who entered the field more easily accessed management and coordination positions.

Another key aspect visualized by the code network is the relationship between the lack of gender training and interventions without a gender perspective. The research revealed that social work training programs presented a deficiency in content specifically focused on gender studies. This lack of preparation prevented professionals from acquiring the critical tools needed to analyze and address structural inequalities in their interventions. As a result, many of the practices within the field of social work were implemented without a gender perspective, which perpetuated paternalistic dynamics instead of promoting strategies aimed at equity and the empowerment of vulnerable individuals. The absence of proper gender training not only limited professionals' ability to design transformative interventions but also reinforced the reproduction of gender stereotypes in the practice of the profession. In this regard, the research highlighted that social work interventions tended to reproduce traditional care models, in which women were seen as natural caregivers and, therefore, responsible for welfare tasks, while men, when they participated in this field, were assigned to administrative or supervisory roles.

A third result emerging from the analysis of the network is the relationship between inequality in professional practice and interventions without a gender perspective. The unequal distribution of power within social work directly affected the way intervention strategies were designed and implemented. Since leadership positions in the profession continued to be occupied predominantly by men, decision-making regarding social work policies and practices did not always consider the gender perspective as a central axis. This had a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of interventions, as many of them failed to address the differentiated needs of women and men or tackle structural inequalities from a critical perspective. Additionally, it was observed that the absence of a gender perspective in social work policies contributed to the invisibility of specific issues affecting women in vulnerable situations, such as gender-based violence, the feminization of poverty, and the caregiving burden. This lack of recognition of gender inequalities in professional practice not only perpetuated discriminatory dynamics but also limited professionals' ability to generate a real impact on social transformation.
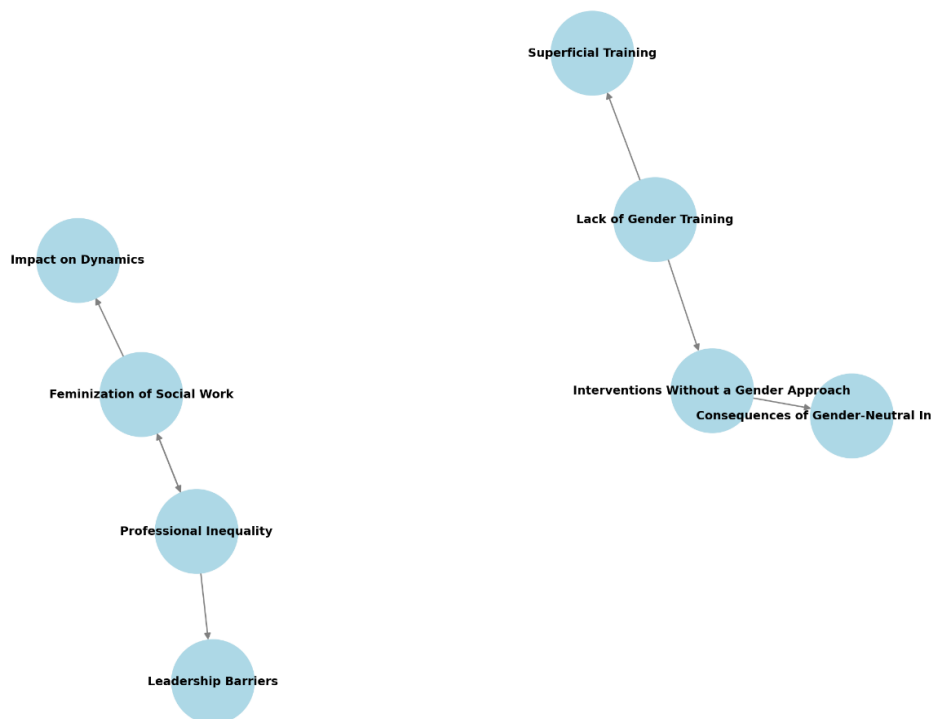
Figure 2: Network of Codes: Feminization and Gender Issues in Social Work.

DATA OBTAINED FROM THE FIELD DIARY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

The ethnographic observations revealed that in workplace settings, social workers applied intervention strategies with women without specific gender training. This finding highlights a gap in professional training that impacted the effectiveness of assistance and support programs.

Example of ethnographic observation:

"During a visit to a social assistance department, a social worker explained that, lacking gender training, she based her interventions on personal criteria and the experience of colleagues, leading to unequal approaches in assisting women in vulnerable situations."

"In a case coordination meeting, a social worker stated that he typically recommended traditional solutions based on family reconciliation, without questioning how these might affect the autonomy of the women being assisted."

"In an internal training session, when the importance of integrating a gender perspective into social interventions was mentioned, some attendees expressed that they considered this approach unnecessary or secondary in relation to other issues. However, this perception was due to a lack of knowledge about the subject and its relevance to social intervention."

The absence of a gender perspective in training limited social workers' ability to promote structural changes in their interventions. This deficiency translated into practices that, although well-intentioned, could reproduce patterns of inequality and fail to address the needs of women in vulnerable situations comprehensively.

The data obtained through the field diary reveal various manifestations of this training gap:

• Informal interviews with social workers revealed a lack of knowledge about feminist theoretical frameworks and intersectionality approaches.

• Interventions were recorded where the focus was solely on the assistance dimension, without strategies to strengthen the autonomy of the women being assisted.

• In several internal training sessions, it was evident that gender categories were addressed superficially or tangentially.

• It was identified that, in some contexts, social workers internalized gender stereotypes, influencing their interventions unintentionally.

• Cases were observed where the focus was more on resolving immediate needs, without a structural analysis of the causes of gender inequality.

Persistence of the Welfare Model and its Impact on Social Intervention Analysis of In-depth Interviews and Coding in ATLAS.ti Main Code Network:

1. Bureaucratized social work (58 citations)

2. Lack of professional autonomy (46 citations)

3. Welfare approach (71 citations)

4. Disconnection from social research (34 citations)

Encoded Fragments:

"Social work in Cuba was all about paperwork. We didn't solve problems, we just managed temporary assistance." (Interviewee 22, male, 45 years old, social worker at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security)

"Our job was limited to filling out forms and sending reports. There was no room for creativity or real intervention." (Interviewee 40, female, 44 years old, social worker in the public sector)

"Research was not a priority. We were trained to manage cases, but not to analyze structural problems." (Interviewee 15, male, 39 years old, social worker in the healthcare system)

"There was a contradiction: we were told to promote participation, but our decisions depended on bureaucratic orders." (Interviewee 28, female, 37 years old, social worker in community programs)

"We had no room for action. Social intervention was limited to distributing resources, not to transforming realities." (Interviewee 32, male, 41 years old, social worker in family assistance)

As result, the 81% of the social workers surveyed reported that their work focused on administrative tasks, such as managing subsidies and allocating resources. Only 19% indicated that their work included community intervention or social research.

The testimonies collected reflect a series of structural issues in social work practice in Cuba between 2000 and 2020. Below is a detailed analysis of the encoded fragments based on the main identified codes.

1. Bureaucratized Social Work

Rather than promoting social transformation or community intervention, social workers were required to focus on meeting bureaucratic requirements. The lack of flexibility in their roles limited their ability to design effective strategies to address structural issues.

2. Lack of Professional Autonomy

Although community participation was encouraged, social workers had no decision-making power and relied on external directives. This reveals a hierarchical management model that restricted innovation and the contextualized response to local needs.

3. Welfare Approach

Rather than promoting the empowerment of communities and the structural resolution of inequalities, professionals were reduced to mere aid managers.

**4. Disconnection from Social Research**

The training and performance of social workers were oriented toward managing individual cases rather than analyzing the structural causes of inequality and designing evidence-based intervention strategies.

The analysis of the encoded fragments reveals that social workers' work in Cuba was marked by strong bureaucratization, lack of professional autonomy, and the persistence of the welfare model. Additionally, there is a gap between professional practice and social research, limiting the effectiveness of interventions.

The picture described in the testimonies suggests the need to transform the training and practice of social work, promoting greater professional autonomy, a less welfare-driven approach, and a closer connection with research to strengthen social intervention strategies.

As observed, 81% of social workers focus primarily on managing subsidies and resources, while only 19% engage in community intervention or social research. This reflects a trend toward a bureaucratized and welfare-based model in social work practice.
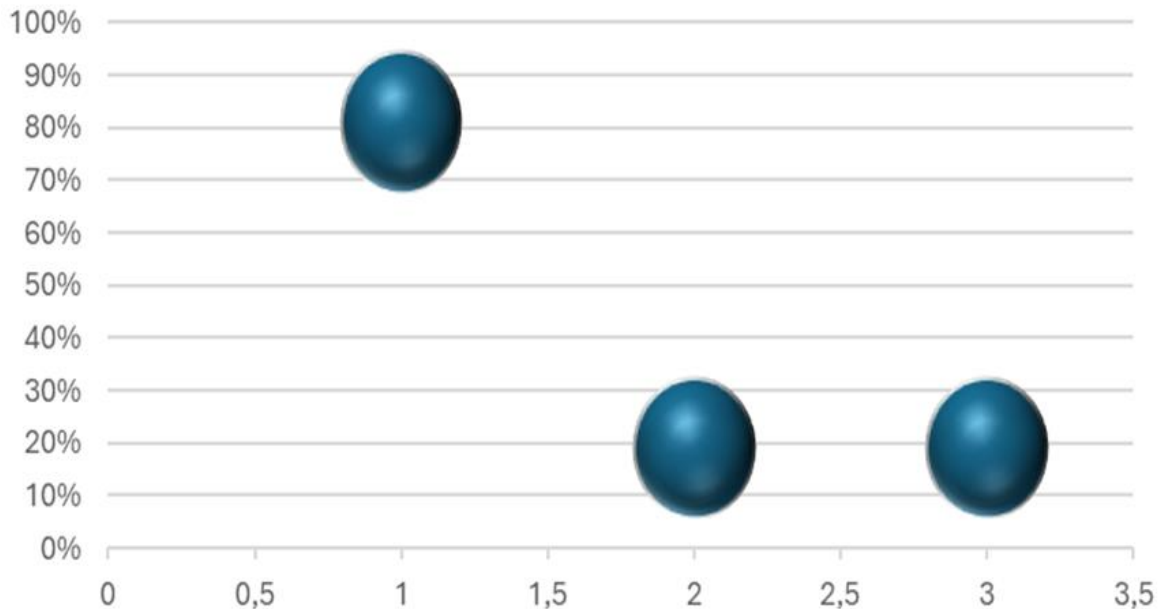
Figure 3: Percentage of Social Workers.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS AND FIELD JOURNAL

Example of a Field Journal Entry:

"During a visit to a Social Security office, it was observed that the social worker had no autonomy to assess cases; they only followed directives from administrative staff".

This entry highlights a key observation: the limitation of professional autonomy within the organizational structure, pointing to a possible disconnection between social workers' professional practices and the regulations imposed by administrative bureaucracy. This finding opens the door for a deeper analysis of the tensions between public policies, professional roles, and daily practices in state-run institutions.

The finding that the social worker lacked autonomy to evaluate cases and only followed instructions from administrative staff has significant implications for both the effectiveness and transformative impact of the social worker's interventions in the lives of individuals attending these offices. From a bureaucratic perspective, this limitation on autonomy can be explained as a measure to ensure the standardization of processes, but from a social work perspective, it can be interpreted as a reduction in professional capacity to assess the context and individual needs of service users.

More generally, the bureaucratization of public institutions has been a central concern in social and political criticism of the public sector in many contexts. Social work, typically understood as a profession dedicated to promoting the well-being of vulnerable individuals, can be undermined by the hierarchical and rigid structure that limits professionals' ability to make autonomous decisions that are tailored to the realities of the cases they face.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLE OF A FIELD JOURNAL ENTRY:

"In a meeting with administrative staff, the implementation of new control policies for social assistance cases was discussed. Social workers expressed concern about the lack of resources and the inability to conduct regular home visits. However, the administrators' responses were focused on the need to meet the performance metrics set by the government".

In this example, the field journal highlights a classic conflict between administrative objectives (focused on efficiency and adherence to external regulations) and the ethical and professional values of social work (focused on the well-being and individualized care of users). This tension is reflected in the lack of resources and the difficulties in performing fieldwork that would allow the social worker to gain a deep understanding of the users' circumstances.

What is observed is an ethical and professional dilemma: social workers were forced to navigate between the expectations of administrators, who were more focused on quantitative performance indicators, and the ethical commitment to addressing the human needs of individuals requiring social services. This type of tension is crucial for understanding how public policy impacts the daily practice of professionals in the field and their ability to provide truly effective and personalized solutions.

DISCUSSION

Despite the challenges, 100% of the social workers interviewed identified the need for postgraduate studies and short courses as key elements to explain many of the common professional (dis)satisfactions in Social Work and to enhance their practice. These programs would allow the implementation of gender mainstreaming actions, with topics focused on the Cuban context, where the course "Gender and Social Policy", affiliated with the Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Social Work, could serve as a model.

Statements such as, "we believe we will be able to solve the situation of many women and men, but then you realize you're just a band-aid on an open wound (...) And recognizing it generates a lot of dissatisfaction" were present in part of the sample.

Specifically, 70% of the social workers who graduated from the Health Technical Schools felt that their curriculum should have been updated to include more in-depth gender topics. They believed this would have supported their methodological and theoretical preparation, allowing them to perform better in their roles.

Social work, as practiced in Cuba, is associated with the assistance of others and is linked to the valorization of personal and professional sacrifice aimed at promoting the well-being of citizens. Some interviewees also connected the profession to a vocational nature, associating it with voluntary or voluntarist work. This issue was frequently raised during the interviews, particularly when discussing their training and professional trajectories. As one participant stated:

"Like most of my generation, and the generations today, as they tell me, vocation is what drives you. It's the central element of the identity of this profession. Above all, you must feel that call to want to help, to get involved, to be there for others, even if it's sacrificial".

Of the social workers interviewed, 25% graduated from Social Work Training Schools, while 7% were graduates of Health Technical Schools. On average, they had 7 years of professional experience. Among the 101 interviewees, 81% worked in various health departments, 12% in provincial departments of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and 7% in the fields of Education and Higher Education.

Those working in health institutions primarily engaged in bureaucratic activities, such as preparing patient files for specific medical conditions and handling requests for medications. Meanwhile, those working at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security focused on processing housing requests for "social cases," employment management, and elderly care homes. Only social workers who continued their studies in related fields such as Sociology, Social Communication, and Psychology, and worked in the education sector, engaged in research activities. This demonstrates the auxiliary nature of the social work profession in Cuba.

94% of the sample highlighted the usefulness of the studies they completed. Regarding their training in gender topics, particularly gender equity, 27% mentioned courses that addressed gender equity and gender-based violence, while 67% identified that their theoretical and practical training as social workers lacked a gender perspective. Additionally, 6% stated they had not encountered any theoretical concepts, such as feminism, related to these studies.

The interviewees valued their profession positively and emphasized the need to move beyond the welfare approach to social work in Cuba. They criticized the narrow and bureaucratic view of social work in Cuban institutions, along with the lack of resources and excessive centralization, which hindered the development of their activities.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the professionalization of social work in Cuba during the period 2000-2020 has revealed several structural limitations that influenced its development as a discipline and its impact on society. One of the most significant findings of this research is the elimination of the Bachelor's degree in Social Work, which created an academic gap that forced professionals in the field to pursue training in related disciplines such as Sociology, Medical Psychology, Sociocultural Studies, and Sociocultural Management. This fragmentation in education had direct consequences on the professional identity of social workers and the recognition of their work within the Cuban social policy system. The absence of a specific university program affected the standardization of knowledge and methodologies, limiting opportunities for specialization and professional development.

Another central issue identified in the research is the insufficient integration of a gender perspective in social work education and practice. Although the feminization of the profession was evident during the first two decades of the 21st century, training in gender issues was inadequate in the institutions responsible for educating these professionals. As a result, social interventions, while primarily led by women, did not always adopt a critical approach to gender inequalities.

The lack of specific training in this area led to many social work strategies being developed without questioning power structures and without addressing issues such as gender-based violence and structural discrimination in a comprehensive manner.

Moreover, the research reveals that social work in Cuba was characterized by a predominantly welfare-oriented and bureaucratic approach. Rather than promoting transformative social intervention, social workers' roles were largely focused on the administrative management of resources and subsidies, which reduced their capacity to plan and implement social change strategies. This situation limited the professionals' ability to influence public policy formulation, relegating them to operational functions within state structures. The lack of professional autonomy was a constant feature of this period, preventing the implementation of innovative approaches in social intervention and restricting the potential for more integrated and effective practice.

These findings highlight that, during the period from 2000 to 2020, social work in Cuba faced multiple challenges that hindered its consolidation as an academic discipline and its impact on society. The absence of a dedicated university program, the lack of gender training, and the persistence of a welfare model created a scenario in which social workers played a key role in managing welfare policies but lacked the necessary tools to structurally address inequalities and promote effective social change.

Based on these results, future research could delve into the impact of the elimination of the Bachelor's degree in Social Work and analyze how this decision affected the professionalization of social workers in the subsequent decades. It will also be important to explore strategies for incorporating gender perspectives into education and professional practice, with the aim of strengthening equity in social intervention and providing social workers with the theoretical and methodological tools to effectively address gender-related issues.

Additionally, it will be necessary to critically review the welfare model that prevailed during this period and assess the possibilities of transforming social work in Cuba towards a more participatory approach that is less reliant on state bureaucracy.

This will involve investigating strategies to strengthen the professional autonomy of social workers, promoting their involvement in public policy formulation and the design of more comprehensive and sustainable social programs.

Furthermore, future studies could analyze the evolution of social work in Cuba after 2020, evaluating the reforms implemented and their impact on the profession's structure. International comparisons could also be of interest, allowing for the identification of successful experiences in the professionalization of social work in other countries with similar sociopolitical contexts, with the aim of extracting lessons that could be applied to the Cuban reality.

This research provides a solid foundation for the ongoing debate about social work in Cuba and its development in the 21st century. Understanding the limitations of the 2000-2020 period is crucial for designing strategies to strengthen the discipline, enhance its academic and professional recognition, and increase its capacity for social transformation in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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