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Women in the world and in daily life: realities, approaches, perspectives

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Abstract

This paper presents certain features of problems and situations closely linked to the risks of exclusion, vulnerability and violence present in the world of women. These were covered by final-year dissertations or projects undertaken by students of the Nuestra Señora del Camino [“Our Lady of the Way”] University School of Social Work during the period 1987 to 2013. These more than ninety pieces of work, deposited in the School’s Library, cover a great range of circumstances, some positive, many adverse, relating to women from the Province of Leon. Their topics run from violence and abuse, through women’s lack of visibility, problems women face, enduring prejudices, social support and sanctions, to hopes for equality, health, education and the like. They form a panorama in which the ever-present strands are a spirit of struggle and a need for a more decent life.

Keywords: women; stages; priorities; prejudices; expectations.

1. Introduction

It is always of interest to look back into history, although in this case the past considered is not so remote. This is because it relates to the period running from 1987 to 2013 and in a geographical context limited to the Province of Leon. On the other hand, it is a period of sufficient length to permit the detection of trends, problems, varying situations, efforts, and other features that have stood out and the noting of their positive and negative sides.

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The holding of an International Conference on the topic of women at risk of exclusion and gender-based violence suggested this retrospective. It seeks to pick out within the activities of the “Our Lady of the Way” University School of Social Work those areas given over to matters that have a profound effect on women’s lives. On this point, it should be noted that the risks of exclusion and gender-based violence make up a considerable part of its work. This dimension was promoted and expressed in a more specific way through the creation in 2005 of a Permanent Seminar for Women’s and Gender Studies within the Gabinete de Investigación de Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales [Research Centre for Social Work and Social Services].

Overall, the lines of research most strongly developed in respect of women have concentrated on processes of humanization and among them women’s contributions to the building of a more humane society. In fact, the Conferences on the University and Humanism held yearly in the School have twice been given over to the topic of women, and the same can be said for the School’s journal, Humanismo y Trabajo Social [“Humanism and Social Work”], which, apart from individual articles in other issues, has had two monographic numbers on this theme. The Research Centre has also performed or promoted research on women’s topics. In the Conferences considerable attention has been paid to the final-year projects and dissertations presented in the period in question.

In order to undertake an in-depth study of these, the documents were investigated with a view to identifying and analysing the various different features of women’s reality that were covered. This was done through a systematic, rigorous and exhaustive trawling through the documentation available, utilizing precise techniques that either directly or indirectly would yield the information relating to the subject being studied.

2. The value of the sources

When weighing up the possibilities for research offered by the final-year projects and dissertations in Social Work, account must be taken of the fact that these pieces of work, done towards the end of a course of studies, imply a training effort whose value in helping students to understand their subject and develop autonomy is widely recognized. This brings with it requirements for setting deadlines, objectives and methods, which in turn require support in the shape of an organization of academic resources making it possible to complete the tasks set without need for excessively prolonged periods before the qualification can be conferred.

In studies relating to social work and social services that consider structural variables, positions and responses, quantitative investigations are valued. At the same time, when actions or interventions are concerned it is often necessary to undertake research of a qualitative nature, more subject to specific variations and changing views, and here much more stress is laid on the objective and subjective perceptions of the individual or individuals. This information must frequently be sought by the use of action research methods (Action Research, Participatory Action Research) and, in these, equal weight is given to theories and to empirically-based interventions in which investigation, action and significance merge. The pieces of work being discussed here have in respect of the topics they cover certain conditions, such as bringing together theory and practice and being of interest for Social Work. Assessment of them takes into consideration aspects such as: theorizing on the basis of practical experiences, quality of bibliographic references and contributions to Social Work, use and suitability of the research for professional purposes, originality of the project, structure of contents, drawing up of the report, presentation and length of the piece of work. These are assessed by an academic board which also conducts a supplementary viva voce in respect of each item submitted.

The Research Centre has an important function in this process. It falls to the Centre to accept and review plans of work and to offer more specific orientation in accordance with whether the research refers to professional interventions, investigations for the benefit of the profession, a study of institutions, bodies or services, analysis of life processes for individuals or social groups, or to social and environmental studies. It makes observations and suggestions about structure and guidelines on content with the aim of avoiding as far as possible any repetition or overlapping of the topics considered. It also puts forward suggestions that will help to round out shades of meaning and to highlight those aspects that give originality to the work, when this feature is not immediately evident. Finally, when required it offers advice, technical support, or both, to ensure better organization and development of the research.

The results presented yield data of interest for the community in general, for the general public in Leon in particular, and most specifically for organizations and services involved in women’s topics and social well-being. They make available an extensive fund of information on social questions, problems, services and initiatives. The results are the
fruit of joint effort by all the members of the educational community and also of numerous organizations, associations and services. Some of the latter have been active participants and collaborators, facilitating access to data and at all times encouraging the production of the pieces of research work. In this context it is crucial to stress the value to the School and to the University of being open and cultivating relations with the community and its institutions, especially nowadays when such emphasis is laid on the social responsibility of academic institutions.

3. Purpose and scope

Although there were some previous examples, for this study final-year projects corresponding to the period 1987 to 2013 were selected. This is because the start date set was the point at which new enrolments began after the incorporation of Social Work as a full degree programme at university level. The intention was to discover what topics relating to women had been covered by students of Social Work in the “Our Lady of the Way” University School of Social Work over the time-span indicated.

It was of interest to learn the number of pieces of work presented, the types of topic covered and how they evolved over time, whether certain topics studied persisted over the years, what new questions or approaches were incorporated as time went by, how they were handled and developed, and what balance was adopted between theory, practice and proposals. It was also hoped to provide a perspective on the development or persistence of questions significantly affecting the world of women with special reference to matters highlighted in International Conferences on women at risk of exclusion and gender-based violence. It was intended to note the points that posed problems at a personal or social level in respect of life circumstances that help or hinder in gaining opportunities and conditions of equality, together with efforts made, distances covered, successes, failures, hopes and expectations.

4. Starting points

From the very first moment an effort was made to formulate questions that would provide guidelines for the search, and to answer queries that might yield information on the reality under study. The first overview of the pieces of work showed up a diversity of situations and topics. This suggested a set of questions to which an attempt would be made to find an answer through the research. Among these were the following:

Which women were involved? What were the situations appearing most often? What were the problems covered? Were countryside areas represented to any extent? What questions were most directly linked to social exclusion? How were the problems of violence and abuse of women reflected? Was there mention of measures to promote equality, or actions and services for protection and support? Were there comments on prisons, restriction orders, or other legal deprivations of liberty? Were women of specific ethnic groups paid any attention? Were details given of projects for integration, rehabilitation, and the like? Were there differences between the final years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first?

5. Procedure

The research design was divided into three levels. These were the establishment of general characteristics of a descriptive nature, followed by a more in-depth account of these categories and their characteristic features, and then an account of the lines of significance they comprised.

6. Results

This paper refers exclusively to the first level, containing answers about general characteristics of an overall nature. Systematic listing in chronological order showed a total of ninety-four pieces of work containing the terms “woman” or “women” in their titles. The women in question were for the most part from the Province of Leon, and were from age groups corresponding to working years, being from both rural and urban zones. They were mostly involved in the activities of reproduction and personal care, with a low level of paid employment, fragile and unstable family relationships, and living in precarious circumstances and conditions of vulnerability.
A classification on the basis of frequency of situations yielded the topic areas or categories shown in the table below, which have been organized into three chronological stages. The first of these corresponds to the final years of the twentieth century (1987 to 2000) and the remaining two to the twenty-first century (2001 to 2010 and 2011 to 2013).

Table 1: Topics Relating to Women Covered in the Three Periods Studied and their Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Areas</th>
<th>1987 to 2000</th>
<th>2001 to 2010</th>
<th>2011 to 2013</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence and Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Centres</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisons</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Councils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Environment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewives</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women from West Sahara</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Resources</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Women</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in the Mass Media</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The larger number of pieces of work in the first stage is an outcome not merely of its greater length in years but also of the higher numbers of students enrolled, these having declined somewhat over the full period considered. With regard to distribution of topics, the most frequent were in the category of problems, followed by violence and abuse, social services and situations specific to women. Reception centres and questions relating to motherhood were of some importance at this stage, while prisons, attention to specific local councils and rural women each attracted three pieces of work, as did consideration of the future and employment.

The stage between 2001 and 2010 had as its most frequent topic the realities of violence and abuse. It maintained the level of items on employment, but had more that interested themselves with groups. New topics appearing for the first time were the handling of violence by the media, mature women, Sahrawi (West Saharan) women, housewives and social resources. Decreased attention was paid to prisons, problems and other situations concerning women, as also to questions of motherhood. During this stage no items were produced relating to reception centres, local councils, the rural environment, social services, health or education.

The most recent stage, between 2011 and 2013, saw a striking increase in topics linked to violence and abuse, with interest in violence in the media remaining steady. Reception centres came back into focus and prisons continued to attract some attention, as did worries about the future and employment. A topic newly arising was education.
7. What specific questions received cover?

An attempt has been made here to avoid uniformity, so as to highlight as far as possible the great variety of situations to be found in the female universe presented in the pieces of work. For this purpose, the criteria that characterized belonging to the categories established were defined in advance, as shown below.

1. Violence and Abuse: These cover situations relating to the vexatious treatment of women.

Featured Topics: These included violence and abuse within the couple, domestic abuse of women, rape and its repercussions on women, women’s despair and their determination not to give up, abuse as a drama going beyond mere blows, domestic abuse as an anti-woman sub-culture, advice on where to go if abused, aggression against women, the situation of women victims of violence and their problems, violence between the sexes in Spanish cinema films. This category also looked at titles relating to a municipal service for women and equality; attention to victims of gender-based violence included in the Spanish national ATENPRO (“attend and protect”) telephone support programme; the process of attending to cases of gender-based violence at the Leon City Hall, in the Social Action Centres (abbreviated CEAS in Spanish) and at the municipal office for women’s information; the availability of a social and legal expert in the units for integrated forensic evaluation of gender-based violence.

2. Reception Centres: These are places that offer attention and support to women in situations involving violence and lack of protection, with the aim of protecting them and facilitating their social integration.

Featured Topics: The *Nuestra Señora de Fátima* [“Our Lady of Fatima”] reception home in Fabero, the reception home of the Leon Charitable Association, the *Isadora Duncan* Association, the centre for reception and social and work integration of immigrant women run by the Diocesan branch of the charity *Caritas*.


Featured Topics: Among these were factors in female crime, the Women’s Section of Villanubla Prison and the presence of minors in this jail, and in the situation in Villahierro de Mansilla Prison of Spanish women and those of other nationalities.

4. Local Councils: This brings together social and environmental items which have as their scope a given municipal area.

Featured Topics: These were social and environmental studies limited to particular municipal districts. They focused on the situation of women in general terms or in respect of specific contexts such as the family, the world of work, or the social and work problems facing women.

5. Rural Environment: Items in this category explicitly highlight the problems of rural women.

Featured Topics: There were two pieces of work that looked in general terms at women in rural environments. A third item concentrated on the topic of rural women as members of a group that lacks visibility.

6. Problems: Questions of varying levels of difficulty that must be confronted by women.

Featured Topics: The “problems” category covered a great variety of situations. Among these may be mentioned social and work problems of women in Laciana, depression among housewives, discrimination against women, or the stance on abortion of Women’s Associations in Leon. Other topics and titles included lesbianism, a love with a woman’s name; women facing menopause, their degree of training for it and its social, family and work repercussions; women’s curves, a threatened empire; drugs, men and women; and the phenomenon of female prostitution. The latter involved analysis of causes and effects, with prostitution also being seen from the viewpoint of the marginalization of women and of the alternatives for social de reinsertion, together with interventions in the area of prostitution, prevention and reinsertion.

7. Motherhood: This is a dimension naturally having a special effect on women. In the items it is considered from the angle of its complexity in situations of lack of support or solitude.
Featured Topics: In the first time stage the situations covered were those of teenage mothers and the reality of unmarried mothers. In 2010 an item studied the setting up of an association of single mothers in Astorga.

8. Housewives: One of the most firmly present dimensions of female functions.
   Featured Topics: The work of housewives. The situation of housewives in Ponferrada City.

9. Social Services: This category refers to the various aspects that may affect the relationships of women with social services.
   Featured Topics: Initial views of social services for women in the City of Leon gradually expanded into a range of features for study. Among titles there were women in the Palomera San Mames Social Action Centre, the prevalence of women as requesters of front-line social services, attending to women and minors in Police and Security Forces.

   Featured Topics: Plans for equality for women and equality of opportunity for women, experiences of working with women: more than just housewives. Positive actions for women and the disabled by the Maria Estela Women’s Group. Women with qualifications in Social Work and the research field.

11. Health: Typically female health questions
   Featured Topics: Awareness-raising among the female population on preventing breast cancer and gynaecological cancers.

12. Employment: Possibilities in the world of work.
   Featured Topics: Titles included the S.A.D. home-help service, a resource for the elderly and alternative work for women in rural environments, the integration of women into the Spanish armed forces, the twentieth anniversary of the incorporation of women into the Spanish armed forces at the Conde de Gazola military base, women and self-employment in rural environments, with special reference to the northern part of the Province of Palencia.

13. Specific Groups: Women belonging to particular ethnic groups.
   Featured Topics: From the shadows: discovering the Gypsy woman of the twenty-first century, the situation of Gypsy women in the City of Leon, the Mujeres del Mañana [“Women of the Future”] Association, and the current situation of Gypsy women linked to the Hogar de la Esperanza [“Home of Hope”] Gypsy Association.

14. Situations: States of affairs affecting women and having an impact on their lives. Reconciling the various different dimensions of their commitments.
   Featured Topics: Motherhood and the physical and psycho-social changes it brings in women; reconciliation of family life and work before and after giving birth among women attending courses in education for motherhood in Health Centres in Leon in 2009.

15. Sahrawi (West Saharan) Women: Specific contributions on women who have to live in two contrasting worlds.
   Featured Topics: The Sahrawi woman, rose of the desert; Moslems there, women here.

16. Social Resources: This looks in detail at social resources for women, as against social services in general.
   Featured Topics: Women and social resources specifically aimed at them in the town of Villablino; women as a group requiring social protection and the services and actions offered by the Regional Government of Castile and Leon

17. Older Women: The cohort of more mature women is quantitatively and qualitatively relevant reality in the Province of Leon.
   Featured Topics: Characteristics and problems of elderly women attending the Leon II Day Centre; social participation by the elderly of the municipality of Villalobos from the perspective of their sex.
8. Overview and conclusion

The results emerging from this initial approach offer a panorama of questions that have been the object of attention and study. These provide a reflection of women’s problems in contexts primarily marked by vulnerability and social exclusion occurring in the environment of day-to-day life and taking concrete shape in daily actions. The first impression is that the day-to-day lives of these women are supported by interpersonal strands that construct relationships whose links are fragile. The contexts and circumstances, interpersonal links, relevance, communication and other aspects that may be observed in these studies encapsulate experiences, living, suffering, behaviours and meanings of great intensity. The categories established and the featured topics illustrating the contents of investigations also indicate that some of the pieces of work could easily be assigned to more than one category. However, at this initial stage of research assignment as belonging to a given category responds to the chief criterion of “avoiding homogenization” and making the diversity of situations more visible. It is intended at a later point to reassess the properties of the items with the criterion of the degree to which they have a transverse nature.

This run through the length and breadth of a body of work opens up an extensive panorama that may arouse some anguish. There are also, however, signs of encouraging impulses that point to a more equitable view of reality and a way of acting that will show more humaneness, collaboration and solidarity.

As a conclusion, it may be stated that the questions which were the starting point have here received an initial answer. It must be appreciated that this is descriptive and in some senses relatively superficial, principally referring to the structure of the pieces of work and the topics they cover. However, even though this information is just a first step, it is the necessary foundation for a more in-depth continuation to further levels.

References