

Gendered Professional Dynamics in Community Social Work: A Systematic Review of Female Social Workers in China

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ABSTRACT

This literature review systematically examines the gendered dynamics of roles, professional identity, and community participation among female social workers. The analysis reveals that their distinctive empathetic and relational competencies significantly enhance service quality and community cohesion, yet simultaneously incur heavier emotional labor and professional vulnerabilities. Gender roles and stereotypes are found to shape their practice while imposing structural constraints. The study concludes that transforming these gendered strengths into sustainable professional capital necessitates supportive organizational environments and equitable career pathways, offering key implications for optimizing community practice and policy.

Keywords: Female Social Workers, Community Social Work, Gendered Traits, Professional Identity, Emotional Labor, Community Participation

1. Introduction

Social work, as a profession committed to social justice and human well-being, has evolved significantly in both global and Chinese contexts (Wang, 2007). The field has long attracted more women than men, reflecting broader gendered labor patterns and social expectations (Daniel, 1990). Female social workers therefore occupy a distinctive position, as gendered traits shape their professional behaviors, career paths, and interactions with service users (Cui, 2021; Wang, 2014). Understanding these dynamics is essential for advancing theoretical discussions and for informing policies and practices that better support female practitioners.

In China, gendered dynamics gain particular significance due to the coexistence of traditional norms, institutional structures, and rapidly changing community social work practices. Similar tensions are observed across other Asian contexts. Research from South Korea and Malaysia shows that conflicts between traditional family gender expectations and the relational and emotional demands of social work are common challenges for female practitioners (Ma, 1990; Noor, 2010). These parallels suggest that insights from China hold broader relevance within East and Southeast Asia. Integrating evidence from both Chinese and international studies therefore helps build a more comprehensive understanding of how gender shapes professional identity, role performance, and community engagement in Asian settings.

This review synthesizes literature on gender roles, gendered traits, and female social workers' professional identity and participation in community practice. It addresses three research

questions: (1) How are gender roles and gendered traits conceptualized in social work research? (2) What professional characteristics, identity processes, and challenges do female social workers experience? and (3) How do female social workers participate in and influence community service delivery? The findings aim to inform organizational policies, professional development, and community service strategies that promote gender-responsive practice.

2. Gender Roles and Gendered Traits

2.1. Gender Roles

The concept of gender roles was first articulated by Constantinople (1973), defining masculinity and femininity as relatively stable traits distinguishing men and women in appearance, attitudes, and behavior. In the Chinese context, Wei (2000) described gender roles as socially assigned psychological and behavioral patterns, shaped by both socialization and individual predispositions. Huang (2009) further emphasized that gender roles function as symbolic systems reflecting societal expectations, where childhood experiences provide the conditions for gender formation.

Gender roles act as frameworks guiding both professional and personal behaviors. They shape expectations about occupational roles and influence career trajectories, offering certain social advantages while simultaneously imposing constraints. However, these theoretical perspectives often assume static and universal traits, overlooking the dynamic and context-dependent nature of gender in professional settings.

2.2. Gendered Traits

Gendered traits, or temperaments associated with masculinity and femininity, are culturally constructed and socially reinforced (Fang, 2006). Femininity is often associated with empathy, relational sensitivity, and nurturing behaviors, while masculinity emphasizes assertiveness, decisiveness, and independence (Zhang, 2025). In social work, relational engagement and empathy align with professional values, making these traits particularly salient.

Female social workers are frequently perceived as emotionally attuned and relationally competent, which can enhance service quality and client satisfaction. Yet these same traits also expose women to heightened emotional labor, stress, and role-related vulnerabilities (Guo, 2011; Wang, 2014). For example, a 2021 survey indicated that female social workers spend approximately 30% more time on relational maintenance than their male counterparts (Cui, 2021). Such findings highlight a tension: gendered traits can both facilitate professional effectiveness and create occupational risk.

2.3. Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes—widely shared beliefs about appropriate roles and behaviors—can further constrain professional opportunities. Women are often expected to occupy nurturing roles, while men are assumed to pursue leadership or high-stakes decision-making positions (Zhang, 2025; Huang, 2009). These stereotypes shape organizational culture, hiring practices, and perceptions of professional competence.

In community social work, gender stereotypes reinforce assumptions about female social workers' capabilities and amplify emotional labor expectations (Guo, 2007; Liang, 2021). Such dynamics can limit autonomy, hinder career progression, and contribute to role strain.

2.4. Critical Summary

Overall, gender roles, gendered traits, and stereotypes jointly shape the experiences of female social workers. While these constructs can enhance relational competencies and service effectiveness, they simultaneously create structural and emotional burdens that are often unacknowledged in policy and organizational practice. Existing literature tends to describe these dynamics descriptively, with limited attention to how institutional contexts can mitigate or exacerbate gendered vulnerabilities. A more critical approach is needed—one that examines both the enabling and constraining effects of gender in social work and considers context-specific strategies for supporting female practitioners without reinforcing traditional stereotypes.

3. Female Social Workers

3.1. Professional Characteristics

Female social workers make up the majority of the community social work workforce and are often recognized for attentiveness, empathy, and strong relational skills (Wang, 2014). These qualities align well with the profession's core values and enhance client-centered practice. At the same time, the same traits can increase vulnerability to emotional stress and burnout, reflecting the tension between relational effectiveness and occupational risk (Cui, 2021; Liang, 2021).

Women's predominance in social work has historical roots in gendered labor expectations and available professional opportunities (Daniel, 1990). This legacy continues to shape contemporary practice, as many female social workers must navigate dual expectations of professional competence and traditional gender roles, which may influence career development and access to leadership positions.

3.2. Professional Identity

Professional identity refers to how practitioners integrate occupational roles with personal and social identities (Daniel, 1990). For female social workers, this process is shaped by interactions with colleagues, clients, and organizational contexts. Research shows that women often display a stronger emotional attachment to their work, which can deepen commitment but also heighten the risk of role strain (Gao, 2021).

Emotion-focused studies highlight that female social workers engage extensively in emotional labor—such as sustained empathy, relational maintenance, and conflict mediation (Guo, 2007; Liang, 2021). While this labor reinforces professional identity and supports client outcomes, it also increases exposure to stress and emotional exhaustion. This duality underscores the importance of examining both the enabling and constraining effects of gendered traits in identity formation.

3.3. Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Female social workers encounter a range of challenges, including emotional overload, role ambiguity, and insufficient organizational support (Wang, 2014; Kou, 2017). Constant exposure

to clients' difficulties and structural inequities can intensify stress, placing women at greater risk of burnout compared with male colleagues (Cui, 2021). In addition, traditional gender norms and institutional expectations can limit professional autonomy, restrict career advancement, and reduce job satisfaction (Huang, 2018; Xu, 2021).

These challenges reveal a structural contradiction: while female social workers contribute essential relational and emotional capacities to community practice, organizational and societal systems often do not provide adequate mechanisms to protect their well-being.

3.4. Critical Summary

Overall, female social workers demonstrate professional strengths grounded in empathy, relational competence, and emotional engagement. These qualities improve service quality but also expose practitioners to substantial emotional labor and role-related stress. Current literature tends to describe these patterns rather than interrogate their structural roots. More critical, context-sensitive research is needed to examine how institutional arrangements, workplace policies, and organizational cultures can reduce risks while supporting the unique strengths female practitioners bring to community practice.

4. Community Participation

4.1. Participation Patterns

Female social workers are highly active in community service, often forming the majority of the workforce (Wang, 2021). Their gendered traits, empathy, relational focus, and attentiveness enable meaningful engagement with residents and community stakeholders (Zhao, 2013; Chen, 2010). This engagement enhances service quality, fosters social cohesion, and strengthens local relational networks.

Beyond routine service delivery, female social workers frequently initiate volunteering, community advocacy, and program development, shaping both the design and implementation of local interventions. Their proactive engagement underscores their central role in sustaining community connections and promoting participatory governance.

4.2. Roles and Contributions

Female social workers perform multiple interconnected roles that are essential to community well-being. As Resource Connectors, they link vulnerable populations such as low-income families, homebound elderly, and migrant children to institutional and nonprofit resources, using trust-building to ensure these groups are not overlooked (Yuan, 2017).

As Service Providers, they deliver both broad community programs, including health literacy workshops and parenting classes, and targeted interventions, such as counseling for at-risk adolescents or crisis support. This dual approach aligns with client-centered values while addressing diverse community needs (Yuan, 2017). Additionally, as Relationship Facilitators, they mediate interactions between residents and institutions, resolve conflicts, coordinate collaborations, and support emergency communication, thereby fostering social cohesion and promoting collaborative governance (Ren, 2017; Yan, 2021).

While these roles demonstrate indispensable contributions, they also reveal a critical tension: the relational and empathetic skills that enhance service delivery simultaneously increase workload and emotional labor, highlighting the need for organizational recognition and practical support.

4.3. Challenges in Community Engagement

Female social workers face structural and organizational constraints, including administrative burdens, rigid institutional policies, and entrenched gendered expectations that limit autonomy and professional discretion (Huang, 2018; Xu, 2021; Zhang, 2021). They must also navigate tensions between societal norms and professional demands, creating role conflict and emotional strain (Shen, 2011; Xia, 2015).

Balancing multiple roles—Resource Connector, Service Provider, and Relationship Facilitator—can intensify workload pressures and risk of burnout. Addressing these challenges requires policies and management practices that recognize women’s gendered contributions while mitigating excessive emotional labor.

4.4. Critical Summary

Female social workers contribute significantly to community cohesion and service quality through relational engagement, program facilitation, and resource coordination. However, these gendered strengths come with inherent vulnerabilities, including high emotional labor, role strain, and limited autonomy. Existing literature often describes contributions descriptively but underexplored structural and institutional conditions that amplify these risks. Future research and practice should focus on strategies to balance gendered strengths with organizational support, ensuring sustainable and equitable participation in community social work.

5. Discussion

5.1. Key Findings

The reviewed literature reveals three core links between gender, professional identity, and community social work for female practitioners: their inherent empathy and relational competencies not only enhance community service quality and social cohesion but also expose them to heavier emotional labor and elevated burnout risks; administrative burdens, rigid institutional policies, and entrenched gender stereotypes jointly restrict their professional autonomy and impede career progression; as the primary workforce in community social work, they fulfill multifaceted roles as resource connectors, service deliverers, and relationship mediators, which directly strengthens community resilience and interpersonal bonding in local contexts.

5.2. Research Gaps

Existing studies on this topic have three notable limitations that constrain their depth and practical applicability: theoretically, there is a lack of social work-specific localized frameworks such as a targeted “gendered professional capital” construct, and research on emotional labor fails to integrate core social work ethics like client self-determination to delineate the boundary between necessary emotional investment and harmful overexertion; methodologically, most studies rely on cross-sectional qualitative interviews, with no longitudinal designs to track the dynamic evolution of female social workers’ professional identity or cross-regional comparisons to

explore gendered dilemmas across contexts like urban and rural settings; in terms of topical coverage, gendered challenges in emerging practice scenarios including digital community services, rural revitalization initiatives, and cross-cultural community contexts remain largely under-explored and unaddressed.

5.3. Future Research Directions

To address the above gaps, future research should focus on three key priorities: first, it needs to construct localized gendered professional capital frameworks tailored to social work, clarifying how gendered traits translate into sustainable professional advantages under different institutional models such as government-purchased services or community mutual aid systems; second, studies should adopt innovative methodologies like longitudinal tracking or mixed-methods designs to capture dynamic identity trajectories and regional differences in gendered professional experiences; third, researchers should explore understudied topics including gender-technology-institution interactions in emerging scenarios, as well as test and validate organizational strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of excessive emotional labor on female social workers.

6. Conclusion

Female social workers are integral to community social work, bringing gendered competencies that enhance service quality and social cohesion. However, they face distinct challenges arising from emotional labor, gendered expectations, and institutional constraints. Strengthening support structures, acknowledging gendered contributions, and promoting equitable professional development are essential for sustaining an effective and resilient social work workforce.

This review contributes to the understanding of gendered dynamics in social work by integrating global theories with Chinese grassroots governance contexts, providing targeted insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to optimize professional practice and community outcomes. It also lays a preliminary foundation for exploring gender-responsive support systems in the era of modern community governance.

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