



Power and gender in social work leadership

Ainhoa Berasaluze Correa¹Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (EHU-UPV)  <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cuts.93004>

Enviado: 13/12/2023 • Aceptado: 18/03/2024

ENG Abstract. Thinking about social work in terms of leadership is something that concerns and challenges all professionals, whether or not we hold a position of management or responsibility. It leads us to reflect on how we relate to power, how our gender identity influences us, and what kind of leadership we identify with. These are often-unexamined questions that make us uncomfortable, and which we often try to avoid. However, we must reflect on them if we aspire to lead the field of knowledge and intervention in social work and social services with practices rooted in ethics, commitment and social justice.

This article shares the findings of research based on the practice of accompaniment and supervision with professionals in social action, primarily social workers in social services who hold positions of responsibility. These findings have taught us about the contextual, professional and personal constraints the social workers face on a daily basis, and together we have built action strategies for more effective and helpful performance. In conclusion, this article is an invitation to reflect on leadership in social work, our professional identity and the role we play in social policies.

Keywords: Social work, social services, leadership, power, gender.

ES Poder y género en los liderazgos del trabajo social

Resumen. Pensar el trabajo social en clave de liderazgo es algo que nos incumbe e interpela al conjunto de las y los profesionales, estemos ocupando o no un puesto de dirección o responsabilidad. Nos remite a pensar sobre nuestra manera de ser y estar en la profesión: ¿cómo nos relacionamos con el poder? ¿cómo influye nuestra identidad de género? ¿con qué tipo de liderazgo nos identificamos? Son cuestiones poco reflexionadas, que nos suelen incomodar y que en muchas ocasiones tratamos de evitar. Sin embargo, debemos reflexionar sobre ellas si aspiramos a liderar el área de conocimiento e intervención del trabajo social y los servicios sociales desde unas prácticas asentadas en la ética, el compromiso y la justicia social. En este artículo se comparten los resultados de investigaciones basados en la práctica del acompañamiento y la supervisión con profesionales de la acción social, fundamentalmente, trabajadoras sociales de los servicios sociales, que se encuentran en puestos de responsabilidad. Gracias a ellas hemos conocido los condicionantes contextuales, profesionales y personales con los que se encuentran en el día a día y juntas hemos ido construyendo estrategias de acción para un desempeño más eficaz y saludable.

Se trata, en definitiva, de una invitación a reflexionar sobre los liderazgos en trabajo social, sobre nuestra identidad profesional y sobre el papel que desempeñamos en las políticas sociales.

Palabras clave: Trabajo social, servicios sociales, liderazgo, poder, género.

How to cite: Berasaluze Correa, A. (2024). Power and gender in social work leadership. *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* 37(2), 221-230. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cuts.93004>

1. From directing to leading: towards a new paradigm

We should begin by stating that there is no unified vision of leadership. However, there are two main trends. On the one hand, theories based on the *trait approach*, which centre on the qualities of the leader, and on the other hand, those based on the *process and relationship approach*, which focus attention on interaction and learning to be a leader.

¹ Social Worker and Doctor in Sociology at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). She has been a teacher and researcher in Social Work at the University of the Basque Country since 2003, where she was Vice-Dean of Practicums (2007-2017), and she has worked as a social worker for ten years. She is president of the Official College of Social Work of Álava (2007-2011). Her research work focuses on Social Work and supervision, and she is accredited as a Supervisor under the standards established by ANSE (Association of National Organisations of Supervision in Europe). She combines her university work with the supervision of professionals in social institutions.

The Western tradition falls within the first group of theories. It defines a leader as a man with specific qualities to lead and command a group or community. Historically, individual leaders have had an enormous influence, and we only have to think of political, military, religious or scientific leaders, all men. This model uses the term *to direct*, linked to an individualistic, non-systemic, asymmetric world view, and it has the following fundamental characteristics: people with a natural gift or quality to lead; great men who give orders and tell others what to do; their main function is to direct the work that others do; they always have all the answers; they cannot make mistakes and they are not allowed to get close to others because it compromises their authority.

However, now we know that in order for these leaders to have achieved great changes and amassed support, they have been supported by certain conditions so that these are therefore not achievements that should be attributed to them alone. This form of leading also has adverse consequences, which do not help achieve the desired objectives. All of this has led to us identifying less and less with this way of understanding leadership and with this model's role of directing, coordinating or leading.

Based on these questions, in recent decades new alternative ways of understanding and exercising leadership have been developed. These are alternative forms that we know as leadership which is *social, democratic, collective, participatory, transformational, shared, collaborative, relational, feminine* and so on, where each denomination highlights the aspect that takes on the greatest relevance. Without going into details, all of them are styles that aim to promote a way of leading that offers an alternative to traditional leadership; more democratic and positive, with a shared vision of working for the general interest and the common good, and linked to the following basic characteristics: you can learn to lead; we can all be leaders, contributing our particular talents; directing means motivating people and monitoring processes; leading is committing to the people you lead; leadership is a choice that requires willingness; people are interrelated and interdependent; and together we can create what we cannot do by ourselves.

Nowadays, we talk more about *leadership* and not so much about *leaders*, seeing leadership as "the process by which a person influences a group of people to achieve a common objective" (Northouse, 2021, p. 3), i.e.:

- Process: leadership happens in a process of interaction and communication.
- Influence: for leadership to be successful it must influence other people. Without influence, there is no leadership and influence is related to power.
- Group: leadership implies a relationship of at least two people.
- Common objective: leadership serves collective interests.

Thus, we can affirm that today we are more focused and focused towards a leadership model or vision that is closer to *excellence* than *exigence*. Table 1 shows the ideal types of both models, based on the authors Silvia Guarnieri and Miriam Ortiz de Zárate (2015).

Table 1. Leadership models

Model based on exigence	Model based on excellence
Look for perfection	Look for improvement
Focus on the goal	Focus on the path
Error = Failure	Error = Opportunity
Control	Commitment
Distrust	Trust
Resistance to change	Innovation
Does not give good feedback	Gives good feedback
Closed to criticism	Open to criticism and self-criticism
Climate of tension	Positive climate
I am what I do	I am more than what I do

Source: own creation based on Guarnieri and Ortiz de Zárate (2015).

Currently, in our day and age, although the model of leadership based on demanding action exigently is still very present and rooted, we can say, at least on paper, that we have overcome our adherence to the individual, exigent model of the Western tradition, and in practice we are moving towards new, alternative models of leadership on a more democratic, universal, ethical and feminist basis, focusing on excellence.

Nevertheless, within the framework of this model of excellence, each person has to build their own leadership style, according to their own ideological-political and personal-professional identity. Therefore, in this article we will not defend a certain leadership style, but rather, using a vision of leadership based on excellence, we will point out some particularly important aspects so that each person can build their own leadership style. Before exploring them further, we will highlight two central elements all types of leadership

have in common that we must consider and reflect on as a starting point: power and gender. We will refer to them from the perspective of social work.

2. Rethinking social work in terms of power and gender

2.1. Power

Power as a social construct is complex to conceptualise, due to its dynamism, multidimensionality and relational nature. One of the most widely accepted approaches is that which sees power as the ability or potential to influence other people's beliefs, attitudes or ways of proceeding. Foucault (1979) defines power in terms of *relationship*, so that all social interaction is a power relationship and all relationships between people are conditioned by micropowers. Thus, power is always present in social life and is not something we can avoid because it is inevitable.

Although power as an analytical category has been studied widely in the social sciences from philosophical, sociological, anthropological and feminist points of view, in the past in the field of social work we have reflected on power very little. However, in recent decades, research interest in the relationship between social work and power has increased, and we can see interesting contributions on this object of study applied to our field of action, referencing two basic senses of power as applied to social work: social work as an *object of power* and social work as a *subject of power*.

Perhaps in the collective imagination we identify ourselves more as victims of power, as objects of the power of organisations, as a submissive discipline and profession, subject to the execution of political-institutional decisions, taken at a distance from us. From this position, we mean power as something bad and negative, in the hands of others.

However, the perspective that places us as subjects of power towards the people we serve through social intervention is no less true. Scientific knowledge or expert knowledge is a powerful source of professional power, even though the discipline of social work is an epistemologically weak discipline. Social workers exercise power in the professional relationships they establish. Nevertheless, it is more difficult for us to identify and recognise this position as subjects of power. Xavier Pelegrí (2018) considers that we tend to be "refractory to power" (p. 44) and Francisco Idareta (2017) points out that "we intentionally euphemise violence in social intervention" (p. 78). Belén Navarro (2023) emphasises that denying the asymmetry of power between the professional and the person being cared for is an exercise in professional immaturity and places us in a very delicate, dangerous position, since it can unconsciously lead us to the abuse of power against those we intend to help. And this abuse is precisely what we must avoid, maintaining a critical relationship and a responsible and ethical use of the exercise of power. Moreover, Maribel Martín (2011) considers that power in social work is necessary, in order to influence people's lives positively.

To look at leadership in social work, we are interested in the sense of the *subject of power* in its *positive dimension*. As Foucault says (2009), it is about the government of oneself or control of the ego. It is what feminism has called the power within: vital or life-affirming power, that is, recognising the unique potential that each person has to shape their life and their world (Just Associates, 2020). Pelegrí (2018), applying this positive dimension to our field, expresses it in the following way: "To become aware of the need to empower oneself personally and as a profession, to develop a positive power that, in harmony with the also empowered population, allows us to make changes effective in reality" (p. 44).

Therefore, leadership means conceiving and recognising oneself as a subject of power, that is, as a professional who has the potential and ability to become more than what is dictated by the context (Zamanillo, 2018). It means power to decide about one's own life responsibly and to participate in political advocacy because of social commitment.

2.2. Gender

In this reflection, it is also pertinent to dedicate a space to the category of gender, as it is one of the ways power operates. It is an unquestionable fact that social work is a feminised profession (Berasaluze, 2009). According to the latest data provided by the General Council of Social Work, women still make up 89% of social workers (Vicente, Nogués and Orgaz, 2022).

As all studies point out, what is known as the glass ceiling or sticky floor continues to work for women in their professional careers. We are not usually the first option when looking for someone for a position of responsibility. In social work, this social functioning is also reproduced, and we only have to look at those who occupy posts of responsibility in our universities, administrations and organisations to see that men continue to be overrepresented and management positions masculinised. The data collected in the *IV Report on social services in Spain and the social work profession* (2022) highlights the privileged access of male social workers to management positions.

Furthermore, the fact that many professional women reject the few proposals they receive for this type of position also has a gender interpretation. We have not been socialised to occupy the public space, we have not had female reference models, we do not identify with the traditional leadership style, and all of this makes us doubt ourselves, so that we feel uncomfortable, intrusive, insecure and afraid. It is imposter syndrome, a structural phenomenon of self-sabotage that Emma Vallespinós (2023) explains so well:

From childhood onward, we have received a patriarchal education that has tried to make it very clear to us what space we occupy, what we can aspire to and how far we can go. Public space has historically been occupied by men and they have been the ones who have decided who should be there and who should not. (...) The parameters with which we have been judged have been absolutely masculine (...) Therefore, it is not a coincidence that imposture and vulnerability appear in everything related with the public and professional life (p. 51).

Moreover, it is common for women not to receive the support, backing and trust from their environment that is needed to accept management positions, with comments such as: Why are you going to get yourself into that kind of trouble? Isn't what you have achieved enough for you? Don't you have enough on with your current job? Are you going to be able to do everything? And if you can't manage, what are you going to do?

Despite everything, sometimes we take a chance and decide to take on the challenge of a position of responsibility, knowing or not that we will encounter new obstacles, criticisms and reproaches for being a woman. But always coming under suspicion and receiving continuous insults and personal attacks for issues that have nothing to do with the position can even lead us to throw in the towel.

In this patriarchal context, looking at gender identity is one of the keys. Professional identity is a personal construct in interaction with the context. This process may be more conscious or less conscious, more intrinsic or less intrinsic:

- To the extent that it is more unconscious, more extrinsic, from the outside in, I will let myself be swayed by the environment, which will tell me what I should be like and what I should do.
- To the extent that it is more conscious, more intrinsic, from the inside out, I will have more capacity to define it and make decisions regarding what I want to be like professionally.

From a gender perspective, women's primary socialisation is more from the outside in, even going so far as to think that what others think of us is more important than what we think of ourselves. Getting closer to consciousness is more costly and demanding, it involves greater effort, but it is healthier and more appropriate, because meaningful learning always comes from the inside out. As Diego Gracia (2020) masterfully expresses it, "one's own identity must be built, with materials from the environment, but autonomously (...) otherwise, we will let ourselves be carried away by the context that will direct our life" (p. 292).

The reason that led us to make the decision to accept a position of responsibility is fundamental for understanding how we will carry out this new role. On many occasions, we accept certain proposals because someone we respect asks us to do so and we do not want to disappoint them, for reasons of loyalty, reproducing the work scheme *from the outside in*. Leadership is a choice that requires willingness, and willingness implies conscious intention and individual commitment. Only through intrinsic willingness can good leadership be developed, stripped of the victimhood of circumstances and assuming the responsibility that comes with actively participating in the creation of new circumstances.

3. Three levels of research into leadership in social work

3.1. Micro level: self-leadership

This is the innermost level, leadership linked to oneself, because there is no leadership without self-leadership. But how does one develop self-leadership? Through self-knowledge as the ability to connect with one's emotions, thoughts and actions; it is about becoming aware of yourself in order to grow personally and professionally.

In social work, professionals are the main resource, and the working life is about people. In social intervention, we must generate a relationship, a bond, and to do so we also need our inner being, our personal part. Thus, in social work the personal and the professional are closely linked. Behind the professional role there is always a person with a certain life experience, values, a character, a style... in short, an identity.

Self-leadership and self-knowledge means taking time for yourself, to look at yourself, to think and observe yourself. It means doing introspective work through self-observation and critical reflection to understand at least three personal fields:

- Values: these make up the internal engine that guides action. Discovering them helps us understand why we behave in one way and not another.
- Resources: these are one's own strengths. Discovering them allows us to use them more and better because we build on what we have and it gives us the drive and security we need to gain new resources and skills.
- Limitations: these are the negative judgments we make about ourselves. They are not objective limitations or weaknesses, but rather those that we believe we have and that operate as if they were real. Identifying them allows us to set limits and sometimes even overcome them.

Beyond personal values, Adela Cortina (2021) tells us about the need to cultivate a series of *virtues*, which have traditionally been assigned to women, to become virtuous professionals, seeing virtues as qualities that predispose us to do good and that are acquired through habit. For good leadership in social work, these are some of the virtues or faculties to cultivate:

- Willingness: to lead oneself and other people.
- Protagonism: from a position of power with oneself. Abandon the victimhood of circumstances and complaint. Overcome imposter syndrome. Become aware of what depends on each person and what does not.
- Care: acceptance and respect for yourself. Cultivate an appreciative outlook, view yourself with affection, understand yourself and treat yourself with kindness. Validate yourself as a leader; look at what you can contribute.
- Interdependence: recognise that we need others to survive. Recognising vulnerability first hand allows us to be imperfect, to make mistakes, and this is precisely what makes us stronger.
- Lucidity: awareness of social complexity and recognition of one's own limitations.
- Learning: a continuous process to know and understand from a critical-reflective attitude.
- Trust: trust yourself, trust others and make yourself trustworthy for others.
- Congruence: align thinking, feeling and doing.
- Commitment: involvement and a certain rebellion in what we participate in.

This perspective will favour the ability to differentiate between immediate experience and its reflective explanation, acquiring greater awareness of oneself. In the words of Silvia Navarro (2020), "it is about launching a process of personal and professional development, because it is mature professionals who desire mature work and organisational contexts, and who are oriented toward excellence" (p. 57).

Probably, many professionals have had to go through this process of self-knowledge at some point of crisis or upset. This proposal consists of taking the initiative and developing the ability to self-lead without waiting for a critical moment. Taking care of ourselves is the first and most important task that must be undertaken. As Teresa Zamanillo (1990) points out, "conquering yourself is the most beautiful task that you can do" (p. 33).

3.2. Intermediate level: leading other people (teams, projects, organisations)

As social work professionals, we can occupy leadership positions in various forms and degrees, such as managers of a resource, coordinators of a service, heads of an area or directors of a department.

On many occasions, the opportunity comes to us because our professional work is recognised as being good, and this is precisely what the profession requires when it comes to filling management and coordination positions. Víctor Giménez-Bertomeu, director of the research group on Social Work and Social Services (GITSS) at the University of Alicante, in research published in 2021, shows precisely this idea in the interviews carried out with social workers:

They [management positions] should be filled by people with previous experience in direct intervention positions, in order to understand and know the procedures and needs of the service better, as well as empathise with the work and day-to-day life of the professional staff (p. 132).

But a good professional is not automatically a good leader. Sometimes we hear people say "we lost a great professional and ended up with a bad boss." This transition from direct care to coordination is frequently carried out without a safety net, without preparation or training for it, as if this new role did not need to be built. As we have pointed out, leading is learned and, therefore, one must build one's own leadership style through continuous training, self-analysis and supervision.

So, how is it possible to exercise good leadership in spaces of social action? Social workers have to face the contradictions, tensions, dilemmas and challenges of social intervention. It is common for social organisations to forget that their main resource is professionals. They invest in technology, design new plans or offer training, but the most basic needs of professionals and teams are neglected, such as the need to do meaningful work, the need to contribute and be recognised or the need to participate in the changes that affect us.

Direct care professionals need managers and directors not to lock themselves into management but to assume the role of supporting professional teams, promoting the development of a common work culture in which values are shared and the different roles are seen as complementary to each other in a horizontal way (Zamanillo, 2008).

Looked at from this point of view, what is necessary is leadership that focuses both on the *goals* of the organisation, and also on the *means* to achieve those goals. In other words, they should combine responsibility for the quality of care that professional teams offer citizens (goals), with responsibility for the health and well-being of the teams themselves, so as to promote a culture of professional care in our organisations (means).

Organisations, services and projects are created to carry out a collective purpose. The professional who occupies a position of responsibility has to share the common purpose, and has to be aligned with the organisation, service or project. Furthermore, when people come together to achieve that common purpose, a relationship is created. Therefore, from positions of responsibility, both issues must be addressed: the task and the relationship, bearing in mind that the relationship is at the service of the task, which at the same time is at the service of the common purpose. We will look in more depth at some aspects of this below.

3.2.1. The task

This is the organisational task and covers the rational field, and there are different questions related to the task that we must reflect on. On this occasion, we will name three of the basic issues.

- The collective and shared purpose

It is essential that those responsible should always keep the collective purpose in mind, as a guide for their action, because there is a great difference between *putting oneself at the service of the collective purpose* and *putting the collective purpose at our service*, and if we think about it, the latter happens very frequently. This is one of the keys to being a good leader.

You also have to clarify with the team: Why are we here? What is the objective that unites us? What and who do we put ourselves at the service of? If we started to reflect on this in teams, we would be surprised at the very different perceptions we have. It must be dealt with explicitly since it helps us move from what is mine to what is ours, to create a group identity. It is also necessary to listen to the voice of citizens in general and discuss the common purpose with them.

- The role as a function

Clarifying one's role or function in this management post is another of the basic tasks: What is my responsibility and what is not? What possibilities and limitations do I have in this role? You cannot take on and solve everything in a position of responsibility. There are issues that are not the responsibility of that role and it is very important to be clear about this, to have clear expectations and not feel frustrated or over-burdened with responsibility.

Nor can we lose sight of the fact that a role is not all that a person is. Sometimes this becomes confused and these things are mixed up. We feel critical opinions directed at the role as personal attacks and this leads to suffering and a deterioration of the relationship.

- Delegation

This is one of the basic skills that must be acquired in leadership roles. Although it may not seem so, it is a necessary but complicated skill to do well. The leader delegates functions, but never responsibility. Therefore, a good leader will loyally defend their team and take responsibility for any mistakes they may make, and there is nothing worse than seeing a boss dodge responsibility and blame a team member for it. The leader's responsibility involves taking on the risk inherent in decision-making, undergoing evaluation processes and holding themselves accountable (Fantova and Arrieta, 2021).

Furthermore, delegating is not an act, but a process. You have to think about what function is delegated, choose a person from the team to do it, make the request personally, prepare them and accompany them throughout the process. If done well, it means a lot of work for the person in charge, but it will contribute to the proper functioning of the team, because delegation is a means of learning, and it enhances and enriches the content of the work, encourages initiative and commitment, and favours active participation in making decisions.

3.2.2. The relationship

This refers to the professional team and covers the emotional field. In the team, a position of responsibility can be held in two different ways, each of which places us at a different starting point. The first would be when the team does not know the person who occupies the position of responsibility, when they come from outside the organisation or service. It is a situation of mutual ignorance that often causes mistrust. The second way would be when the manager has been part of the team, i.e. that they are an internal promotion. In this situation, we find two possible risks: cronyism and role confusion (continuing with the functions as a direct social work professional instead of carrying out the new functions as a manager). In both cases, one must be aware of the isolation of the position and the fact that the team always has a judgment to make about the leader, whether they know them or not.

In positions of responsibility, it is necessary to dedicate time and maintain spaces for the team itself, beyond the task, to be aware of the situation, and encourage relationships within the team to be based on:

- Personal maturity: teams need mature people who understand the existence of different roles and functions among team members, accepting differences and giving the same value to all of them.
- Mutual respect: all professional relationships are personal relationships, but personal relationships should not be confused with friendships. Without a minimally acceptable personal relationship, there cannot be a good professional relationship.
- Recognition: it is necessary to generate relationships that include recognition because it is a vital human need.
- Team cohesion and common purpose: team cohesion is achieved by generating a team identity (who we want to be), sharing the objectives (what we want to do) and designing the relationship (how we are going to do it). As a team, it is necessary to agree on a common purpose as the central element that will guide the activity. All the people on the team have to feel a significant connection to the common purpose or objective.

In order to work on all this, communication skills are required (Hernández, 2000), and two relationship skills should be highlighted: listening and trust.

Listening is an underrated skill, perhaps because we think it is simple, but nothing could be further from the truth. We only have to look at the analysis of listening carried out by Jesús Madrid (2005) to see its complexity. It is common for us to listen poorly, either because we have a lot to say, because we think we are right, or because we are thinking about what our response is going to be. Listening involves gathering what is heard that is considered positive, new or that can be useful. Therefore, silence, genuine curiosity, appreciative inquiry and open questions are allies of listening.

Trust within the framework of professional relationships is the predisposition towards working with other people. People in positions of responsibility have to trust and generate trust, and to do so they must cultivate the following principles and attitudes, since they contribute to the generation of trust:

- Competence: being competent to carry out the task.
- Generosity: putting oneself at the service of collective interests.
- Credibility: fulfilling commitments in a timely manner.
- Dedication: dedicating time to talking with professionals and the team.
- Clarity: making precise requests, avoiding ambiguity.
- Complaining: hold conversations about unfinished tasks or commitments, with the intention of seeking solutions.

Thus, at this intermediate level, good leadership in the social field is that which, beyond management, is focused on the care and support of the team so that it can carry out its tasks as well as possible. This is done with generosity, being aware that by leading they sacrifice part of their personal interests to serve collective interests.

3.3. Macro level: leading social work

The leadership of the professional and disciplinary space is located at this macro level. This involves directing our energies to becoming strong in our own area, in what is specific, in what is singular, and from that position of strength being able to contribute to the improvement of social policies and collaborate with other disciplines without confusing ourselves, with equality. By specific and singular, we refer to social intervention or collaborative praxis. Leading social work is leading social intervention. It is something obvious, but nevertheless on many occasions we neglect the most important field and instead work on other areas that are not so vital. Below are some clues to moving forward along this path:

3.3.1. Do not lose sight of the professional and disciplinary objective: social intervention or collaborative praxis

The term *social intervention* was coined in social work in the 1950s to replace the term *treatment*, which is more typical of medical terminology. Teresa Zamanillo (2012) defined social intervention as “any social action that is carried out by professional agents in public or private entities that aims to transform the living conditions of people and groups in situations of disadvantage or social exclusion” (p. 103). More recently, Miren Ariño (2017) advocates replacing the term social intervention with *collaborative praxis*, with *praxis* to connote the combination of theory and practice, and *collaborative* to indicate a horizontal relationship between the professionals and the people attended.

Beyond the terminology, we must consider the relational dimension that social intervention entails. Josefa Fombuena (2023) explains this dimension as the helping relationship built between the professional and the person, the meeting or the bond that is generated, the alliance or collaboration. We begin and carry out the professional work within this significant relationship, and the effectiveness of social intervention depends largely on the quality of the relationship established. In other words, without a relationship there is no intervention; there may be resource management, but no social intervention.

We have neglected social intervention for too long. It is known that since the 1980s along with the development of the public system of Social Services, there has been a gradual process of reduction in social intervention. This is one of the great sources of discomfort among professionals, and also one of the reasons why the students studying the Degree in Social Work show scepticism when carrying out their work placements in this area of protection. This is somewhat paradoxical if we take into account that social intervention is the main technical provision of the Social Services System and, therefore, the protection system par excellence for social intervention.

If we want to be leaders in social work, and even social services, we will have to care for and cultivate social intervention or collaborative praxis, working on our own objectives rather than other goals.

3.3.2. Putting limits on the virus of bureaucratisation in social intervention

The high level of bureaucratisation in social work is a challenge that is recognised by professionals, and is present in research and reports. The *IV Report on social services in Spain and the profession of Social Work* (Vicente et al, 2022) refers to the general discomfort and disaffection of professionals with this bureaucratisation. The report also points out the diversity of meanings that bureaucracy has taken on within the professional community. Therefore, it is pertinent to clarify what we mean by the bureaucratisation of social intervention:

To carry out professional work from an administrative approach or that of resource management, focusing on the verification of requirements and their processing (Berasaluze and Ovejas, 2022), so that theory and knowledge are replaced by the set of standards and procedures as a basis or guide for social intervention (Montagud, 2016), leading to deprofessionalisation (Nogués and García, 2023).

Resource management (and its necessary bureaucracy) is part of social intervention. However, resource management versus social intervention are not two alternatives for action, as they cannot be equated, since we would be giving resource management an importance that it does not have. Good management is essential for the proper administration of resources that are always scarce, but always within the framework of social intervention. Therefore, it is about giving everything its place and acting accordingly, to achieve the correct administration of resources within social intervention.

3.3.3. Calling for the development of the Income Guarantee System that guarantees coverage of economic deficiency or insufficiency

To stop putting the coverage of basic subsistence needs (Fantova, 2020) or the certification of poverty (Navarro, 2022) at the centre of professional social work activity.

Since conditional minimum incomes linked to exclusion and social insertion (social intervention) were created in the 1990s, the management of social benefits has passed to social workers, once again meaning we are managing an object that is not our responsibility, seriously damaging the profession.

Moving towards a universal basic income managed by the Public Income Guarantee System, rather than by the Social Services System, would give dignity to impoverished citizens and the social work profession (General Council of Social Work, 2020).

3.3.4. Advancing as a discipline: building knowledge from the systematisation of work placement and PAR (participatory action research)

Since 1990, we have had our own area of knowledge: *Social Work and Social Services*. It has meant the recognition and linking of social work and social services to the university and scientific field, and has made the current Degree and Doctorate in Social Work possible. All of this is a strength that we already have and that we should be proud of.

The counterpoint or weakness is that, in the academic field, this area has not been nourished with sufficient theoretical-methodological knowledge agreed upon in an intradisciplinary manner, giving rise to a disciplinary weakness, i.e., a corpus of knowledge that lacks epistemological depth and scientific development (Chaves-Montero and Vázquez-Aguado, 2021) and that automatically leads to professional fragility.

Not all types of knowledge serve to enrich the study of social work and the social services. Here we come across the object again; in this case, the object of research. We need more *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 1995) about aspects linked to social intervention that guide social policies and transform social reality. The question is to build new epistemological, methodological and technical frameworks for social intervention and more specifically, for the processes of knowledge, diagnosis, planning, execution and evaluation (Ovejas and Berasaluze, 2022).

In a similar way, not just any type of research is useful either. Knowledge about social intervention must be built from fundamentally applied research that aims to transform social reality. Participatory-action-research (PAR) is the modality that is most in line with this purpose, since it allows research and action to be harmonized in a participatory way to achieve the objectives of change or improvement. This therefore involves mixed teams (academics, professionals, citizens) who participate (P) in the process and the results, while developing social intervention actions (A) based on research (R) that generates knowledge about social reality.

The generation and transfer of knowledge that we are proposing is intended to improve action. It is, therefore, a question of researching-acting to better understand social reality by incorporating other ways of looking at and problematising it, and improving social action in light of new information. In other words, the aim is to know and understand, in order to act and transform. In this sense, the knowledge that is generated must be constructed, used and applied by professionals in their professional practice, and at the same time, this knowledge must be generated by professionals drawing on their professional practice. Based on this idea, leadership must stimulate action research in teams.

3.3.5. Joining forces, addressing challenges collectively

We know that we cannot meet the challenges of social work by acting individually. Experience tells us that fragmentation (into levels of intervention and areas of action) within the profession, disorientation within the discipline (committing to objects of study barely linked to social intervention) and splitting or dissociation between theory and practice does not help us. According to Teresa Zamanillo (2018), research on social intervention “is the field that must unite us professionals and teachers” (p. 133).

Becoming aware of all this should prompt us to undertake a process of collective reflection that redefines our social function, that pushes us to an ethical and collaborative commitment with citizens and that transforms complaints and unrest into proposals for action. Leading social work involves finding a shared minimum vision (who we are and who we want to be) and fighting for it collectively.

4. Final reflections: leadership as an intrinsic element of social work

In this article, we have stated that leadership is an issue that concerns all of us, at least on two levels: the micro level, referring to self-leadership as a person and social work professional, and the macro level, taking into account the professional and academic ambits of social work. These two levels can be the task we set ourselves, or we can also undertake the intermediate level, leading teams, projects, services or organisations. However, if we want to collaborate with people in processes of self-determination and well-being and influence social policies, then we will have to see leadership as an intrinsic element of social work, as a part of our professional work (Baumann, 2021).

In order to move in that direction, we need to halt, stop working... and provide ourselves with spaces for awareness and critical reflection on our ways of being, thinking and doing. We need spaces for critical reflection that contribute to creating reflective, participatory and efficient social protection systems. These spaces for training and reflection on professional practice or action can take different forms, such as supervision groups, ethics committees, and action-research projects.

Activating leadership throughout our structure allows us to have the necessary collective strength to overcome difficulties that cannot be overcome by acting individually. In this article, we maintain that we all can and must be leaders in social work from a set of premises that we lay out here as a final decalogue:

- Put your faith in your own leadership style.
- Recognise your own source of power to decide about yourself and to influence others socially and politically.
- Live, learn and grow from the inside out with other people.
- Start with self-leadership and then lead other people.
- Lead for the common purpose using the care and support of professional teams.
- Build a shared vision of social work and fight for it collectively.

5. References

- Ariño, M. (2017). Contra el diagnóstico. A propósito de las enseñanzas de Paul Feyerabend. *Revista de treball social*, (211), 66-77. <https://www.revistarts.com/es/article/contra-el-diagnostico-proposito-de-las-ensenanzas-de-paul-feyerabend>
- Baumann, K. (2021). Liderazgo en trabajo social y espiritualidad. En Gehrig, R. B.; Opatrný, M.; Birher, N. y Baumann, K. (Ed.). *Espiritualidad, Ética y Trabajo Social* (pp. 175-191). FreiDok plus.
- Berasaluze, A. (2009). El devenir del trabajo social en clave de género. *Zerbitzuan*, (46), 133-140. <https://www.zerbitzuan.net/boletinescompletos.php?op=5>
- Berasaluze, A. y Ovejas, C. (2022). Los desafíos de la intervención social en el sistema de servicios sociales. En *Servicios Sociales y vulnerabilidad frente a la pandemia* (pp. 71-85). Fundación Eguía Careaga. <https://www.sis.net/es/documentacion/catalogo/Record/574119>
- Chaves-Montero, A. y Vázquez-Aguado, O. (2021). La calidad de la producción de Trabajo Social de autores/as españoles/as indexada en ESCI. *Alternativas. Cuadernos de Trabajo Social*, 28(2), 189-213. <https://doi.org/10.14198/ALTERN2021.28.2.03>
- Consejo General del Trabajo Social (2020). *Trabajo social ante la garantía de rentas*. <https://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/> (Consultado el 15 septiembre de 2023)
- Cortina, A. (2021). *Ética cosmopolita. Una apuesta por la cordura en tiempos de pandemia*. Paidós.
- Fantova, F. (27 de abril de 2020). *Garantizar la subsistencia en tiempos de emergencias* [Entrada en un blog]. Obtenido de <https://www.fantova.net/2020/04/27/garantizar-la-subsistencia-en-tiempos-de-emergencias/>
- Fantova, F. y Arrieta, F. (2021). Gobernanza colaborativa: construyendo ecosistemas. En *Etorkizuna Eraikiz. Nuevos futuros del estado del bienestar*. Memoria de la reunión 7, (pp. 26-29). Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa. <https://www.etorkizunaeraikiz.eus/es/think-tank-futuro-estado-bienestar>
- Fombuena, F. (2023). Relación de ayuda: la consideración debida. En Berasaluze, A.; Ariño-Altuna, M.; Ovejas-Lara, R. y Epelde-Juaristi, M. (Ed.), *Supervisión: hacia un modelo colaborativo y transdisciplinar* (pp. 153-164). Aranzadi.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Microfísica del poder*. La Piqueta.
- Foucault, M. (2009). *El gobierno de sí y de los otros*. Curso en el Collège de France (1982-1983). Fondo Cultura Económica.
- Gracia, D. (2020). *En busca de la identidad perdida*. Triacastela.
- Giménez-Bertomeu, V. M. (dir.) (2021). *El diagnóstico y la planificación de la intervención individual y familiar en los Servicios Sociales de Atención Primaria*. Universidad de Alicante. <http://hdl.handle.net/10045/120120>
- Guarnieri, S. y Ortiz de Zárate, M. (2015). *No es lo mismo*. LID.
- Haraway, D. (1995). *Ciencia, cyborgs y mujeres: la reinención de la naturaleza*. Cátedra.
- Hernández, J. (2000). El equipo de trabajo como sistema interaccional. *Anales de pedagogía*, (18), 189-208. <https://revistas.um.es/analespedagogia/article/view/285191>
- Idareta, F. (2017). Eufemización de la violencia ejercida en trabajo social: hacia el reconocimiento intradisciplinar del abuso de poder. *Trabajo Social Hoy*, (81), 59-82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12960/TSH.2017.0011>

- Just Associates. (14 de marzo de 2020). *Análisis de poder*. Recuperado de: https://justassociates.org/es/topic_blog/analisis-de-poder/ (Consultado el 4 octubre 2023)
- Madrid, J. (2005). *Los procesos de la relación de ayuda*. Desclèe De Brouwer.
- Martín, M. (2011). Los dilemas éticos en la profesión de trabajo social. En Zamanillo, T. (Ed.), *Ética, teoría y técnica. La responsabilidad política del trabajo social* (pp. 9-43). Talasa.
- Montagud, X. (2016). Las consecuencias de la burocratización en las organizaciones de servicios sociales. *Comunitania*, (11), 69-89. <https://doi.org/10.5944/comunitania.11.4>
- Navarro, B. (2022). *Desempeños profesionales* [Entrada en un blog]. Obtenido de <https://trabajosocialytal.com/2022/02/desempenos-profesionales>
- Navarro, B. (2023). Burocracia, poder y praxis profesional. En Berasaluze, A.; Ariño-Altuna, M.; Ovejas-Lara, R. y Epelde-Juaristi, M. (Ed.), *Supervisión: hacia un modelo colaborativo y transdisciplinar* (pp. 287-304). Aranzadi.
- Navarro, S. (2020). *Pensamiento creativo y acción social innovadora*. CCS.
- Nogués, L. y García, T. (2023). Metamorfosis de los servicios sociales en España. En Berasaluze, A.; Ariño-Altuna, M.; Ovejas-Lara, R. y Epelde-Juaristi, M. (Ed.), *Supervisión: hacia un modelo colaborativo y transdisciplinar* (pp. 233-246). Aranzadi.
- Northouse, P.G. (2010). *Leadership: theory and practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Pelegrí, X. (2018). Repensado el poder de los profesionales del trabajo social. *Revista de Treball Social*, (212), 31-46. <https://www.revistarts.com/es/article/repensando-el-poder-de-los-profesionales-del-trabajo-social>
- Vallespinós, E. (2023). *No lo haré bien*. Arpa.
- Vicente, E.; Nogués, L. y Orgaz, C. (Coord.) (2022). *IV Informe sobre los Servicios Sociales en España y la profesión del Trabajo Social*. Consejo General del Trabajo Social. <https://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/publicaciones/iv-informe-sobre-los-servicios-sociales-en-espana-y-la-profesion-del-trabajo-social-isse-iv/114/view>
- Zamanillo, T. (1990). Lo viejo se renueva. Un perfil del trabajador social de hoy. *Documentación Social*, (79), 21-34.
- Zamanillo, T. (2008). *Trabajo social con grupos y pedagogía ciudadana*. Síntesis.
- Zamanillo, T. (2012). La intervención social. *Servicios Sociales y Política Social*, (100), 103-112. <https://www.serviciosocialesypoliticassociales.com/la-intervencion-social>
- Zamanillo, T. (2018). *Epistemología del Trabajo Social. De la evidencia empírica a la exigencia teórica*. Ediciones Complotense.