

Social work students' reflections on gender, social justice and human rights during a short-term study programme to India

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Abstract

This article explores the impacts of a short-term international study programme on Australian social work students' understanding of social justice and human rights issues, with particular emphasis on gender oppression. Using qualitative data from a reflective workshop plus written evaluations, students' reflections on learning experiences during the programme are described and explored. Implications for social work study abroad programmes and the professional knowledge base are considered. Findings indicate that student understanding of gender oppression, social justice and human rights as global issues was enriched by the programme and the need for faculty-led facilitated, reflective learning is reinforced.

Keywords

Gender, human rights, international social work, short-term international programmes in social work, social justice, study abroad

Introduction

Many universities, especially in Western countries, are motivated to 'internationalise' their courses and expand options for international study (Dominelli and Hackett, 2011). This expansion usually includes year-long and/or semester-long exchanges as well as short-term programmes (VeLure and Fisher, 2013). While organisational support for increased international opportunities is important, for these programmes to be ethical and educationally worthwhile, other factors such as academic

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facilitation, curriculum content and pedagogical approach also need serious consideration (Bell, 2012; Barner and Okech, 2012; Dominelli and Thomas-Bernard, 2003; Moorhead, 2013; VeLure and Fisher, 2013). Using qualitative data from a reflective workshop and written programme evaluations, this article explores some learning outcomes from a faculty-led, short-term international study programme to India. Before describing the programme, evaluation strategies and the findings, an overview of the literature is presented.

Literature review

In the social work literature, the need is established (although contested) for students and practitioners to develop cultural competence, an appreciation of the global nature of human rights and social justice issues and of social work as a global profession (Dominelli, 2010; International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2005; Mlcek, 2013; Panos et al., 2004; Payne and Askeland, 2008). Likewise, the need for active cultivation of post-colonial cultural awareness, reciprocity and competence for global social work is established (Lough, 2009; Mathieson and Lager, 2007; Wehbi, 2009). In addition, Gringeri and Roche (2010), McPhail (2008) and Pease (2011) all argue that social work education offers an opportunity to critically explore privilege and unearned advantage, including gender advantage and disadvantage. Furthermore, Pease (2011) and McPhail (2008) say that mainstream social work often ignores gender and lacks pro-feminist material on masculinities to assist in the deconstruction of male (and other) privileges. Grise-Owens (2011) concurs and advocates for greater emphasis on gender oppression and pro-feminism in social work curricula. The IFSW policy statement on women describes the wellbeing of women and girls as essential to ethical practice in advancing human rights and as intrinsic to the professional knowledge base (IFSW, 2012, ss. 1.2, 2.1 and 5.12). Arguably then, gender deserves more prominence in social work curricula (Gringeri and Roche, 2010; McPhail, 2008; Pease, 2011) with study abroad programmes offering opportunities for experiential learning in this regard.

International field experience programmes – short-term and longer-term – have the potential to facilitate transformative learning opportunities providing there is an appropriate pedagogical frame and appropriate curriculum content as well as on-site support and facilitation during the on-site programme (Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011). In particular, study abroad programmes provide intense opportunities for experiential learning, intercultural sensitivity, critical reflection and exposure to indigenous social work practices (Bell, 2012; Gammonley et al., 2007; Moorhead, 2013). Even short-term study abroad experiences can provide experiential learning opportunities to ‘unsettle beliefs’ and encourage paradigm shifts as a result of this destabilisation (Macias, 2013). Ideally then, study abroad programmes in social work should be framed using a global citizenship approach to encourage students to commit to transforming their knowledge base in relation to human rights and social justice, to have the capacity to critically reflect and to actively engage in actions that positively contribute to global welfare and avoid oppressive universalism (Abram and Cruce, 2007; Gray and Coates, 2010; Hawkins, 2009).

Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger (2011: 229) identify three motivations for student participation in international programmes: as an opportunity for personal and professional development, altruism and as a personal opportunity for adventure to satisfy cultural curiosity. Wehbi (2009) argues that it is crucial to examine motivations for international experiences in order to problematise North–South global relations and oppression. Furthermore, Wehbi argues that students’ curiosity about other cultures could be positive in that it broadens worldviews and reduces ethnocentrism, but negatives could include voyeurism, superficiality and reinforcement of neo-colonial attitudes.

Lindsey (2005) discusses some of the impacts of study abroad programmes on social work students’ values and argues that these programmes have the potential to increase students’ awareness

of their own and societal values and beliefs as well as develop appreciation of cultural sensitivity, social justice issues and anti-oppressive practice. Furthermore, Brydon (2011) argues that social workers need a complex awareness of cross-cultural issues and an understanding of diverse world-views so as not to reinforce a dominant Western social work paradigm in 'exotic other' contexts (p. 164). Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger (2011) also reinforce the need to challenge the dominance and 'universality' of Western social work perspectives such as individualism, professional distance and individual self-determination (pp. 230–1).

Research into international field work in social work remains relatively underdeveloped (Dominelli, 2003) with some positive outcomes identified in the literature including: increased reflection on host country and home country's cultures; development of a broader, global social work identity; enhanced professional identity; increased awareness of human rights and social justice issues; increased awareness of the impacts of globalisation; observation of extreme poverty; and alternative welfare and social services systems (Bell, 2012; Dominelli and Thomas-Bernard, 2003; Gammonley et al., 2007; Gilin and Young, 2009; Moorhead, 2013; VeLure and Fisher, 2013). Some studies indicate that faculty-led programmes offer the best prospect for ethical international social work field experience and that the involvement of faculty at all stages is likely to generate the most positive learning outcomes (Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011). However, there is a need for additional research to ensure that international field work initiatives are educationally worthwhile, respectful and culturally sensitive (Dominelli and Hackett, 2011) and to avoid these programmes being a form of 'modern colonialism' (Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011: 236). Rich, qualitative data on study abroad programmes contribute to understanding the possibilities and limitations of these initiatives (Poole and Davis, 2006). This project aims to explore one such international study experience, with a particular emphasis on student reflections on gender as a human rights and social justice issue.

Overview of the India Study Programme

Aims, rationale and model

In 2011, the authors facilitated the second India Study Programme from Charles Sturt University (CSU) University, located in New South Wales, Australia. Outcomes from the first programme in 2010 were on the whole positive (see Bell, 2012). The overall aim of the programme is to offer students a study abroad experience to enrich their social work education, to contribute in meaningful ways to the host community in India, as well as to contribute to their development as global citizens in general and as ethical social work practitioners. In addition to the generic pre-programme and post-programme evaluations of the study abroad initiative, the academic facilitators were interested in including additional on-site opportunities for reflective learning as part of the 2011 programme.

The on-site programme was located in the rural village of Malavli, approximately 2–3 hours by motor vehicle east of Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra. The programme is an example of an 'on-site group model' (Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011: 232) in which the student group is accompanied by academics who facilitated the pre-departure orientation programme as well as the on-site academic programme. An online learning environment was used for synchronous and asynchronous communication to encourage cohesion and collaboration in the geographically dispersed student group (Quinney, 2005). Additional support on-site was also provided by the local host partner (the India Study Abroad Centre – ISAC). The programme consisted of three phases as described by Gammonley et al. (2007):

- *Phase 1 – preparation.* Recruitment of participants; development and use of the university's existing online learning environment for academic resources, practical matters and group cohesion; three synchronous, online student-orientation sessions facilitated by faculty with emphases on academic preparation, administrative matters and orientation to host country issues, including the degree of poverty and inequality.
- *Phase 2 – two-week on-site programme.* Week 1 – orientation to the host community and welfare agencies (e.g. women's empowerment project, orphanages, disability service, rural village project); Week 2 – field work in community agencies; daily de-briefing sessions with faculty; three reflective workshops (optional), facilitated by faculty, focussing on social work identity, gender and eco-social work.
- *Phase 3 – post-programme reflection.* Students submit a reflective report based on their experiences; post-programme evaluations completed; ongoing, ad-hoc use of the online learning environment.

Pedagogy

To encourage students to reflect on their experiences, the programme incorporates collaborative, experiential, decolonising and transformational approaches to learning, consistent with Rotabi et al. (2006) and VeLure and Fisher's (2013) pedagogical foundation for international social work programmes. In relation to experiential learning, students were encouraged to engage in guided reflection on critical learning incidents and to reflect on privilege, imperialism and colonisation issues during the reflective workshops (discussed in detail below). The workshops were also structured to encourage collaboration between faculty and students to explore fundamental assumptions and worldviews and to consider how their experiences in India might transform their social work practice.

Methodology

Recruitment

The programme was promoted to students during on-campus teaching times and also via the *CSU University Global* webpage. Students completed an application form and were required to have a sound academic record and current passport, and agree to actively participate in the pre-departure programme. A total of 18 students applied and all were accepted into the programme.

In the four months preceding departure, students were informed about the three optional, reflective workshops on key themes in social work during the on-site phase. Information about the workshops was included on the web site and discussed during the pre-departure meetings. Each workshop had a different theme – gender, environmental social work and professional identity. Outcomes from Workshops 2 and 3 are reported in detail elsewhere (Boetto, in press; Moorhead, 2013). The outcomes from the gender workshop are reported in this article.

Participants

A total of 21 women participated in the 2011 India Study Programme (18 students and 3 social work faculty). Participants were not purposefully recruited as a single-sex group – it was incidental. Students ranged in age from early 20s to mid-60s and were at various stages in their social work/welfare degrees.

Ethical considerations

The research component of the programme was undertaken with the approval of the appropriate University Ethics Committee. Participation in the evaluation surveys and each of the workshops was voluntary and was not linked with core subjects or specific assessable items. It was made clear to students on the information sheet and consent form that participation would involve the two, anonymous written surveys as well as the reflective workshops. Completed forms were submitted to an administration officer for de-identification so as to maximise confidentiality. Students were informed they could withdraw at any time, without penalty, and it was emphasised that participation would not affect assessable items or grades in other subjects.

Data collection

Pre-programme and post-programme evaluation surveys were conducted. On the pre-programme survey, basic demographic data were collected (age range, level of study). The pre-programme survey comprised 10 items – three closed questions (age range, level of study, previous travel) and a series of seven open-ended questions to gauge participants' previous international travel experience. In addition, they were asked to describe

- Motivations to participate;
- Expectations, personally and professionally;
- What 'social work' currently means to them;
- Understanding of 'human rights' and 'social justice';
- Understanding of the impacts of gender on social justice and human rights; and
- Understanding of 'the environment' in social work; and
- General comments.

The post-programme survey included the questions listed above with additional open questions relating to duration, practical matters and suggestions for future programmes.

In addition to data from written surveys, data were collected from the three reflective workshops. Each 1-hour workshop focussed on a different theme; the first on gender, the second on environmental social work, and the third on professional identity. Each workshop was facilitated by a different academic staff member, with the others taking notes during the workshop discussions. Participants also took notes during each workshop and submitted copies of their notes to the researchers as textual data for the project (with their informed consent).

Using Fook and Gardner's (2007) structured approach to critical reflection in order to use concrete experiences as a basis for learning, workshops followed the same format:

- Workshop theme identified;
- Self-selected sub-groups identify and discuss concrete experiences relating to the theme;
- Sub-groups discuss the impacts of their experiences on their understanding of the theme;
- Sub-groups report to the whole group;
- Whole-group discussion of the range of experiences and reflections relevant to the workshop theme.

Data analysis

Completed pre-programme and post-programme surveys were submitted by email to an administrative assistant who de-identified the data and collated responses. The de-identified, aggregated data were then provided to the authors for analysis.

Textual data from the reflective workshops were collected on-site at the end of each workshop, then de-identified and collated post-programme by a (non-faculty) research assistant. Collation of data was achieved using the workshop format – outlined above – to organise the qualitative data into four broad, constructed topic codes (concrete experiences, impacts of experiences on understanding of gender, impacts on social work more broadly, impacts on understanding of social work roles in relation to gender). Within each broad topic code, finer analytic codes were identified through line-by-line coding (Richards, 2005).

The next section describes the overall project and provides an overview of the research participants. Following this, the data on gender, social justice and human rights are explored.

Findings and discussion

Participation

Eight students (44%) submitted pre-programme surveys and nine (50%) submitted post-programme surveys. While a higher response rate is desirable, rates in excess of 40 percent are considered ‘quite good’ (Yegidis and Weinbach, 2002: 173). The timing of each survey could have impacted on students’ capacity to respond in that the pre-programme survey was distributed at a time when they would also have been busy submitting end-of-semester assignments and finalising their international travel arrangements. Likewise, the post-programme survey was distributed at the end of the programme and could have been overlooked as students returned to the usual demands of home, work and study.

A total of 14 students (77%) participated in the gender workshop with 10 in the environmental social work workshop (55%) and 10 in the professional identity workshop (55%). The variation in participation rates for the workshops could be due to the timing of each one; with the gender workshop being the first one to be held, student curiosity, energy and enthusiasm were likely to be at their peak. Attendance numbers at the later workshops declined most likely due to general fatigue felt by most programme participants in the later stages of a very intense experience.

Data from pre-programme evaluations

Five of the eight respondents were aged over 40 years; two were in the 25–29 year age range and one in the 18–24 year age range. Six participants were in an undergraduate or qualifying social work or social science degree; one participant was in a post-graduate (Master’s level) social work degree and one student did not nominate their level of study. All eight respondents had previous overseas travel experience, mostly in Asia-Pacific countries ($n=6$) and two students had also travelled in Europe, the United Kingdom and the Middle East.

Motivations to participate in the India Study Programme. In terms of motivations to participate in the India Study Programme, many respondents identified the value of direct field work *experience* as a key motivation. One student noted that the chance to travel and ‘experience another culture in a supportive environment with like-minded people’ was a major attraction. Two students identified a particular interest in international social work and cultural diversity; one student had a special interest in community development, and one student was interested in pursuing international work with women and children. These motivations correspond with the literature on motivations to participate in international study (Bell, 2012; Moorhead, 2013; Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011). All eight respondents anticipated professional and personal benefits including

... a better understanding of the extent of how people in the world are so socially disadvantaged ... will help place things in perspective.

... challenge some of my own preconceptions. I like to believe I don't have any, but I realise that isn't true. I expect to be inspired, challenged and hopefully experience the local culture on a much deeper level than I would as a tourist.

Understanding of human rights and social justice. Seven of the eight respondents offered comments on their level of understanding in relation to these key issues in social work. Comments showed a nuanced approach to human rights and social justice, in that human rights were defined by all respondents in terms of a 'birth right', 'universal', 'basic to everyone, no matter what your background, colour or gender', 'as valuing the dignity of all people', and at a minimum, as having 'access to food ... shelter, education and the right to be safe'. Social justice was also described in all seven of the comments and the distributive aspect was emphasised:

Social justice means the fair distribution of wealth, power and services.

Social justice is concerned with equity and fairness ... in the distribution of resources.

Social justice is a process of redressing social inequalities that are linked to human rights. It could mean advocating for or with a group or individual, or lobbying for change.

After asking about their understanding of these basic tenets of social work, respondents were then asked to comment on whether they think gender affects human rights and social justice, and if so, how.

Understanding of gender in relation to human rights and social justice. All respondents offered comments on gender and made links between gender and inequality in terms of social justice and the equitable distribution of privilege in society (Pease, 2011). Interestingly, four of the eight respondents offered a somewhat generalised and externalised view of gender oppression, in that their comments related to women as 'others' and nothing in their comments linked gender issues to their own experience. These externalised comments are possibly illustrative of a tendency for some Western, relatively privileged women to think that gender equity has been achieved in their home country but not in 'other' countries (Fraser and McMaster, 2009). However more in-depth exploration would be needed to draw firmer conclusions. Some typical 'externalised' comments included the following:

Gender inequality denies women in some countries their basic rights.

Some male cultures have struggled to allow women to have rights ... the girls being aborted or killed so the parent doesn't have to pay for the wedding is an injustice.

Four of the respondents did discuss gender in terms of their own current experiences and cultural context, demonstrating an 'internalized' frame of reference (Fraser and McMaster, 2009):

I am aware of the position of women within our society and that women are often disadvantaged on multiple levels ... I am also aware that patriarchal [values] are entrenched within religion, cultural mores and politics ... I have become involved with a local group that directly supports ... women ...

... even though we are meant to live in an equal country this is not the case ... stereotypes are still dominant in our country and the world.

All comments indicated an awareness of gender oppression; however three students also mentioned hopefulness as well as the need for change ‘so no matter if a child is male or female they have the same rights’.

Data from the reflective workshop on gender

Concrete learning experiences. After the introductory phase of the reflective workshop where the theme and format of the workshop was reiterated, the five self-selected sub-groups identified and discussed concrete learning experiences with reference to gender. Using the textual data from each sub-group, the following concrete experiences were identified:

- *Women’s self-help groups.* Four of the five sub-groups mentioned their observations of a community-based self-help group programme and specifically commented on the pride demonstrated by the women involved. The collective, sustainable approach of the self-help group model of community development and empowerment was highlighted as was being invited into the homes of women in their village; for example, ‘the strength of women’s self-help groups, formed in trust and collective power to support each other’, and – ‘I felt the power in that room’.
- *The ‘ladies’ train carriage.* Three of the five sub-groups noted that the regional trains they had travelled on had segregated carriages for women – ‘the ladies’ carriage’. Other carriages on these trains were ‘mixed’ with only a minority identified as ‘ladies-only’ carriages, usually to the rear of the train. Some students wondered – ‘is this for safety?’; ‘is it to promote women’s rights?’; ‘is this gender bias and discrimination?’; ‘is it oppressive?’ They also wondered about the acceptability of a woman travelling in a mixed or even in a men’s carriage. One group was curious about ‘what happens in the men’s carriage?’
- *Food consumption.* Two of the five sub-groups identified access to food as a learning experience and discussed how they felt when a local worker spoke of men typically being served food first and being given the largest portion, followed by sons, then daughters and finally older women (mothers and grandmothers). The students described this as an example of how male privilege is enacted and maintained.
- *Visibility.* Two of the five sub-groups noted the high visibility of men compared to women in public spaces – ‘there were ample men walking around and on cars and bikes’. One sub-group noted the visibility of female goddesses and wondered how spiritual traditions interplay with current gender oppression; another sub-group noted the relative invisibility of men in the private homes we were invited into in one of the villages.
- *Clothing.* One group wondered about the different types of clothing they had observed – saris, *salwaar kameez*, Westernised clothing – and how their own attire was perceived by locals. This group also expressed how unsettling it can be when it is unclear how cultural cues relating to clothing are interpreted.
- *Orphaned girls.* One group observed that at the co-educational orphanages, girls outnumbered boys. A worker at one orphanage described how boys are generally more in demand as adoptees compared to girls.

These experiences represent mostly unfamiliar situations for the student group; each experience was identified presumably because it had unsettled participants to some extent (Larsen and Allen, 2006; Macias, 2013). Asking participants to articulate these experiences is the first step in the guided reflection process and can become the basis for deconstructing privilege in relation to social work, gender, social justice and human rights (Grise-Owens, 2011; McPhail, 2008; Pease, 2011).

Impacts of concrete experiences on understanding of gender as a social justice issue. In the whole-group discussion, participants spoke of how their experiences had reinforced that many gendered issues are universal – specifically violence, access to some resources, safety in public spaces and multiple role expectations for women. Gender equity was reinforced as central to human rights and social justice, in line with IFSW (2012) principles. Two sub-groups raised questions about cultural relativism and wondered how ‘respect for customs and traditions’ could be reconciled with advocacy for equal rights for women and girls. One sub-group said that the gender inequities they observed were ‘not in line with our values’ while another sub-group felt that in terms of gender oppression, ‘we could be anywhere’ (Brydon, 2011), noting in particular the ‘commodification’ of women and girls (Grise-Owens, 2011; IFSW, 2012).

Reflections on social work in relation to concrete learning experiences. One sub-group noted the importance of grassroots activism as a means to genuinely empower people. Furthermore, this group stated that Western social workers often use the word ‘empowerment’ in a ‘nonchalant’ or ‘devalued’ manner as ‘a word to be thrown around’. This group felt they had observed empowerment-in-action, especially in the women’s empowerment (self-help) village programmes. Another sub-group mentioned empowerment as a collective notion ‘as opposed to individual’ empowerment. For another sub-group, the sight of the occasional woman riding her own motorcycle was to them a symbol of female emancipation.

Four of the five sub-groups mentioned the importance of collective approaches in the social work they had observed during the programme. These students felt that the dominant form of Western social work is predominantly individualist in orientation and that there is much to learn from collectivism. These groups also observed how resources are shared in the community welfare agencies they had visited. One sub-group felt they now had a ‘bigger notion of social work’ and greater confidence in ‘building my own view of social work’; they identified working at grassroots level with communities and having a holistic, inclusive view of practice as central factors in this notion of macro level social work, reflecting Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger’s (2011) identified need for critical approaches to individualised social work.

Four of the five sub-groups said that the programme had reinforced the importance of cultural awareness – ‘our own cultural context as well as others’. One sub-group noted that there are cultural similarities as well as differences. In terms of similarities, they mentioned women’s multiple roles in paid and unpaid work as being similar to their own cultural context. In terms of differences, participants noted that collectivist approaches to social welfare issues are predominant in India compared to their Western cultural context, where individualist approaches tend to dominate.

The whole group discussed how the programme had enhanced perceptions of social work as a global profession and how, despite social work having its various forms internationally, it also has a fundamental, uniting focus on human rights and social justice. These developments reflect the literature on the importance of providing experiential learning opportunities for social work students in intercultural sensitivity, critical reflection and indigenous social work practices (Bell, 2012; Gammonley et al., 2007; Moorhead, 2013).

Data from post-programme evaluations

Overall impacts. A total of 50 percent of students returned their written evaluations of the programme to an administrative officer within 2 weeks of their return to Australia, and all said the programme was positive with most (77%) describing it as a ‘very positive, very valuable’ learning experience overall and 22 percent describing it as ‘positive’, identifying opportunities for experiential learning as a catalyst for ‘bringing the theory we learn to life’:

I have learned not to jump to conclusions and ... to understand before building judgements ... We can always learn from each other no matter what nationality.

... What stood out for me was the ability to contribute in ways that may support making a difference internationally, even though I live in Australia ... As a future qualified social worker I will ensure that I reflect on the global impacts that have relevance to practice, not only in the country I live in but in developing countries.

Experiencing life – however briefly – as ‘the other’, not knowing the language and relying on interpreters gave me a deeper appreciation of the challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse people.

These findings are also supported in the literature (Gammonley et al., 2007; Gilin and Young, 2009; VeLure and Fisher, 2013).

Impacts on understanding of human rights and social justice. All nine respondents said that their understanding of human rights and social justice had been enhanced as a result of the programme. Eight of the nine respondents offered additional comments on how the programme had impacted on their understanding. For example, one student specified how concrete experiences had reinforced human rights and social justice as ‘living realities and not just theoretical terminology’. Four students commented on how their worldviews had expanded and how their appreciation of the extent of poverty had been enhanced, for example,

This has opened my eyes to the human rights issues internationally and how they are important to all people.

... this was invaluable in highlighting the ... local and global context ... I was confronted ... my western view challenged.

We have much to learn from Indian values of collectiveness, family, empowerment and capacity-building ... countries have a right to self determine ... great care must be taken to ensure that as social workers we do not impose our Anglo-based values.

Seven respondents identified specific key experiences in relation to their enhanced appreciation of social justice and human rights issues, including witnessing environmental degradation and lack of basic sanitation, some people’s lack of access to safe drinking water and visits to ‘slum’ areas, visiting women’s self-help and community development agencies and interacting with children in orphanages. Overall, participants’ responses indicate a more nuanced understanding of human rights issues as complex, global issues (Abram and Cruce, 2007; Brydon, 2011; Gray and Coates, 2010).

Impacts of understanding of gender in relation to human rights and social justice. All nine respondents commented on this question indicating their experiences enabled them to develop a better understanding of the impacts of gender on human rights and social justice – ‘highlighted when you experience them first hand’. Three respondents’ comments were mostly negative and reflected their feelings that it was still ‘not-so-lucky to be born female in India’. Two respondents were mostly positive in their comments, citing ‘education for girls’ and ‘improvements in regards to women’s rights’ as illustrations of positive developments. The rest of the comments ($n=4$) were ‘mixed’ and captured some positive developments in terms of gender equity as well as some ongoing challenges in terms of gender oppression.

Some commented on gender-empowerment initiatives they had observed, including free education for some ‘tribal’ girls, changes to domestic violence legislation and micro-finance/self-help programmes for women in villages. Others commented on how their experiences had affected their worldview in relation to gender:

At times the issues I was confronted with challenged my Western world view ... gender issues and abhorrent treatment of women ... abuse of women and children for the monetary gain of others ...

Again, opportunities for experiential learning in an unfamiliar environment and the subsequent opportunity for guided reflection provided 'space' for students to articulate their thoughts on gender. While most comments focused on women and girls, three participants also commented on men and boys and their relative privilege in society and offered some critique of this privilege (Gringeri and Roche, 2010; Pease, 2011); for example, 'the value of men and boys is highlighted ... in the family and social realm' and 'where are the programmes for men and boys?'

Limitations. This is a small, exploratory project, focussed on qualitative data from a student-participant group. While this in itself is not strictly a limitation, it is necessary to clearly identify the nature of the contribution this research makes to the professional knowledge base as grounded research into experiential, reflective learning (Yegidis and Weinbach, 2002). The project focuses on rich, grounded information provided by students as they reflected on their international experience. As such, the outcomes from this project are indicative and useful as a basis for further research and programme development.

The participation in the surveys or workshops was not 100 percent; non-participant student views or information on reasons for non-participation was not gathered. Also, as an all-female group, the research does not explore male social work students' views. Future research focussing on male students' reflections on gender would be worthwhile (Grise-Owens, 2011; McPhail, 2008; Pease, 2011).

The unilateral nature of this research presents a limitation in that the views of host agencies and communities were not sought. Ideally, future research will be undertaken to explore gender, social justice and human rights from host-community perspectives.

Conclusion

Findings from this study reinforce the literature on the potential of short-term international programmes as effective teaching tools to unsettle students from the familiar to the unfamiliar and to actively cultivate student awareness of global social work issues (Bell, 2012; Gammonley et al. 2007; Lough, 2009; Macias, 2013; Moorhead, 2013; Wehbi, 2009). Key ingredients for success are the intensity of the programme, active academic facilitation, along with experiential learning and opportunities for guided, critical reflection. In particular, this study emphasises the importance of actively engaging participants in critical reflection as central in reducing or avoiding attitudes of oppressive universalism in Western Social Work, ethnocentrism and neo-colonialism (Abram and Cruce, 2007; Brydon, 2011; Gray and Coates, 2010; Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011; Wehbi, 2009).

Based on the participants' comments, indications are that the programme enhanced appreciation of human rights, social justice and gender inequity as key issues in ethical social work theory and practice. Of particular significance, students indicated their experiences during the programme helped to expand their frame of reference from a mainly 'local' view of these issues to a wider, global frame of reference (Brydon, 2011; Dominelli, 2010; Panos et al., 2004). It is argued that such changes in worldview are an important element in developing an appreciation of not only the global nature of social issues and social work, but also for recognition and appreciation of indigenous forms of social work.

Further research is needed into student motivations as well as faculty motivations for participating in international field education initiatives (Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2011). In addition, more information is needed on the various levels of institutional resourcing and support for faculty-led international social work programmes (Lough, 2009). More research is also needed to explore the hosts' views of study abroad programmes in general, as well as research into specific

issues such as gender, human rights and social justice. Indeed the findings relating to gender oppression also reinforce the need for a greater emphasis on gender oppression and privilege in social work education (Gringeri and Roche, 2010; Grise-Owens, 2011; McPhail, 2008).

Additional research is also needed on how to sustain and extend this type of learning in social work education. The power of this type of experiential learning is enhanced when opportunities for guided reflection during the on-site phase along with consistent academic facilitation by faculty can be extended beyond the life of the programme and holistically woven throughout social work curricula. With careful planning, sustained facilitation and adequate resourcing, short-term study abroad programmes can make a positive contribution to ethical, social work professional development and global citizenship.

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