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A Job Full of Conflicts
The experiences of women
child protection social workers
in New Zealand

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the requirements for degree of Master of Social Work

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Abstract

This qualitative study researched the experiences of ten women who worked as care and protection social workers in the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service in New Zealand. Although there is an extensive literature on social work theory and practice, little has been recorded internationally or in New Zealand about the experiences of women social workers throughout the span of their working lives. This thesis sought to redress that imbalance.

The participants had a minimum of three years and a combined total of eighty-three years, working in the agency. They were interviewed about their general work experiences, the way they practised social work, the effects of the work on them, the influence of feminist ideas on their work and about identifying as lesbian or as heterosexual in their workplaces.

The participants' general work experiences were analysed within the framework of a theory about women's career choice and work behaviour. Their social work practice was analysed against a number of sets of practice principles in the feminist social work literature. A chapter was devoted to exploring the experiences of lesbian social workers.

The participants found their work satisfying and challenging but also stressful. This stress was greatly compounded by changes to the organisation's management practices which had arisen from the State sector reforms. These had generated an environment in which it was impossible to practise social work thoroughly and safely. The social workers' enthusiasm and hope was being sapped by the organisation's obsession with outputs, administration, and data collection.

Guidelines for the future of statutory child protection services in New Zealand were developed, based on the participants' experiences.

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