Mr. Tessier filed an internal complaint with the Halifax Regional Municipality Fire and Emergency Services (HRMFES) regarding workplace harassment and discrimination that she experienced. Ms. Tessier alleged that her supervisors, Chief Don McLean and DC Doug Burgess, spread rumours about her and denied her access to necessary equipment, had her clothing and gear tampered with, and that any discipline given to her was disproportionate to her transgressions.

According to her complaint, Ms. Tessier alleged that her supervisors supported a system of gender discrimination, and as a result Ms. Tessier also experienced anxiety and depression. March of 2007 a report was released concluding that Ms. Tessier’s complaints were unfounded.

Ms. Tessier filed a complaint against the HRMFES with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, alleging that she has been discriminated against, on the basis of sex and mental disability.

Between April 2007 and February 4, 2010 the commission reassigned Ms. Tessier’s complaint to five different Human Rights Officers, finally ending up with Herbert Desmoulin. December of 2011 Mr. Desmond released his investigation report, recommending that Ms. Tessier’s complaint be dismissed on the basis of insufficient evidence to support the allegations, even though he had interviewed key witnesses (Chief Don McLean and DC Doug Burgess) and based the findings of his report on information that had been collected by prior investigators assigned to the case who also failed to conduct interviews with key witnesses.

Ms. Tessier reported that the discrimination began relating to her gender as the culture of her workplace become hostile to female firefighters.

There are a number of inequalities that exist in the workplace for women. Currently, women receive lower pay in the work force for comparable work and are blocked in their chances of career advancement (Lorber, 2010). Moreover, when women are matched with men who are equally productive, the men tend to get greater recognition and move up the career ladder faster (Lorber, 2010).

Although Ms. Tessier’s case focused on the discrimination she faced as a woman, she did include a discrimination complaint based on disability as she was experiencing anxiety and depression.

There is significant evidence to indicate that individuals with disabilities are more likely to experience economic hardships and experience social disadvantage (WHO, 2011). For example, people with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and earn less when they are employed (WHO, 2011).

Whether or not these concerns were a response to the discrimination that she was already facing. Ms. Tessier would have been entitled to proper accommodation as stated by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

Social Work: As social workers it is important to know and understand that the more power and privilege that one person has that the other person has less (Schiraldi, 2013). As critical anti-oppressive social workers we should be concerned with the breakdown, understanding and transformation of power dynamics at every stage in our social work practice (Healy 2005).

Ms. Tessier’s Case: Many of the people involved with this case held power over Ms. Tessier, and were also male: her supervisors at HRMFES, the NS HRC investigators, the judge in the NS Supreme Court Case. Her supervisors created a hostile work environment, then she had very little power in the processes and decisions being made throughout her case.

Social Work: In structural social work practice the goal and intention is that the service user is the expert of their own lives. Everyone has a story to tell and as social workers it is our job to actively listen to gain an understanding of where are clients are positioning themselves from and to make sure that they have a chance to have their narratives heard and acknowledged (George, Coleman, Barnoff 2007).

Ms. Tessier’s Case: Throughout the case Ms. Tessier was never provided with a fair chance at having her complaints proven. By not interviewing everyone the court was not able to understand the totality of the case. The investigator did not look at all the facts and did not take Ms. Tessier complaint seriously.

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTI-OFFENSIVE SOCIAL WORK

Finally, this case demonstrates how important issues, like experiences of oppression and discrimination, can be overshadowed by processes. While this case demonstrates an extreme example of procedural and process conflict, as social workers it is our duty to reflect on how similar circumstances can play out in our own practices. Too often clients’ cases are passed along from worker to worker, or from department to department while the initial concern that brought the individual through the door initially gets deferred until the agency can figure out their own internal processes. This case was a great lesson not only on procedural fairness but also on how we need to continually remind ourselves to keep the individual at the centre of what we do even when systematic issues arise behind the scenes.

CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION & ALY-SHIP

Social Work: As anti-oppressive social workers it is important to understand the multiple forms of oppressions that our clients face and to critically self-reflex on structural inequalities, our social locations, as well as the position and social locations of our clients in order to shape our relationships with our service users (Healy 2005). Being aware of what discrimination and oppression looks like can help us to encourage our clients to be more vocal about the oppression they face. We must act as a strong ally and help our clients find their voice. And by critically reflecting we can look at ways to decrease the disempowering effects that are at play within different social and institutional structures.

Ms. Tessier’s Case: As social workers we could support Ms. Tessier and use our power of our social location to help empower her by being an ally throughout the case. We can provide advocacy to Ms. Tessier by performing actions like writing letters on her behalf and taking her story to the media.

ADDITIONAL REMARKS

Ms. Tessier had to deal with a lot of turnover from commissioners throughout her case. In your own social work practice and agency think about how much turnover there is with staff and how you feel this impacts your clients? What elements of power and privilege are at play? Are there any ideas or suggestions that workers or supervisors could implement in order to try and decrease and prevent this hassle for our clients?

REFERENCES


Tessier v. Nova Scotia (Human Rights Commission) 2014 NSSC 65

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