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Women's Health: Where is the Social Work Agenda Advocating for Women?

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Social work practice is dedicated to addressing the needs of the underserved; however, women continue to experience health disparities. Social work information on women's health is not well presented in the scholarly arena. Recently, Frost et al. (2013) suggested that women's health is composed of an interlinked set of seven domains: emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual. These domains provide opportunities to work across the siloed boundaries for addressing women's health in social work. In other words, women's health across the lifespan is more than just "bikini lines."

As social work educators, practitioners, and researchers working on women's health issues, this study set out to better understand the status of the social work literature on women's health. To answer this broad question, we conducted a literature search about information published between 2010 to 2014 using Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and JSTOR--all commonly used article databases for students and scholars in the field of social work. Our search terms were women and health, women and reproductive health, women's rights and health, and women and global (or international) health. Very few articles on these topics were being published in the social work scholarly literature. We identified 110 articles that met the criteria by dealing with U.S. women's health (n=48), U.S. women's reproductive health (n=33), and/or global women's health (n=29) that were all published only in social work journals. Topics addressed in the scholarly literature do not present a complete and/or holistic view of women's health, nor do they situate their findings in terms of social work practice or policy needs. Articles focused on HIV and STI prevention among women who engage in high-risk behaviors such as abusing alcohol, the intersection mental health and reproduction-related topics, explored the needs and experiences of adolescent females, evaluated perceptions on abortion and the HPV vaccine, discussed infertility, examined surrogacy, and defined empowerment, along with a myriad of other issues. In addition, the majority of articles presented qualitative data, increasing what is "known" about these topics using a social work lens. Very little quantitative work is being done, and much of what is published provides general recommendations for policy and practice.

The implications of this study explore the intersectionalities of sexuality for anyone who identifies as female, with the complexities of contemporary society, specifically in relation to social work research, education and practice.