Professionalizing Social Work Paving the Way to Competent Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The social work profession has a history of more than a century in India. However, whether the profession needs to be standardized is still debated and commented upon. Consequently, the profession's knowledge base and education remain on loose ends. About these issues, competent practice has not yet been made possible. Developing a regulatory body for Indian social work can help create and regulate a competence-based social work education. Students and practitioners, with such advantages, can become the best of their competent selves.

The study's purpose was to find the relevance of a regulatory social work body in the competence of social workers. It assessed the competence of Indian social workers practicing outside India and helped to better understand the impact of a professional social work body on the competence of practitioners. The study utilizes a socio-demographic profile and two standardized measures – the General Self-Efficacy scale by Ralph Schwarzer and the Intercultural Effectiveness scale by Tamra Portalla and Guo-Ming Chen. Competence is measured in terms of knowledge of the professional social work body, general skills, self-efficacy, and intercultural competence. The results gave the expected assumption that professional bodies influenced the improvement of practitioners' practice.

Keywords: Competence, competence-based education, self-efficacy, inter-cultural competence, skills

INTRODUCTION

Competence is an important factor in every profession and when interacting in a diverse community, intercultural competence becomes far more important, especially when it comes down to a social work practitioner. However, without the knowledge of competence, no worker can become the best of themselves. Hence a competence-imparting education must be part of the social work education curriculum. To regulate the required competencies, impacting education and practice and continuous professional development, the existence of a professional body is necessary. The lack of all the above-mentioned contributes to the flaws in social work practice in India. This study focused on the competence of social work practitioners practicing abroad after completing their education in India. It assessed the influence of a professional body on the competence level of a social work practitioner and hence highlighted the necessity of a professional body.

Achieving competence for a social worker isn't just a one-time process. It has to be improved throughout life – both in their professional as well as personal spheres. Becoming a

competent social workers don't mean they just stick to the laid out criteria. More inputs should be made to enhance personal and professional development, as social work is more than a

profession, taking on different roles from time to time to satisfy the needs and interests of clients. The thinking level should expand to an innovative and inspirational level and should be achieved through scholarly reading, research, and involving oneself in educational opportunities (Swinton, et al., 2019). Social workers are constantly working with individuals, families, groups, communities, and professionals. Therefore, they must build a strong foundation for self-development to produce the best possible professional outcomes. The General Self-efficacy scale used in this research helped the respondents to analyze where they stand in terms of their inner capabilities. According to Albert Bandura, self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Research has proved that self-efficacy is an important aspect and is central to how one thinks, behaves, and feels. It also determines how one can achieve their goal and review their performance (Cherry, 2020). People with strong self-efficacy can:

1. Handle challenging problems as manageable tasks

2. Develop a deep interest in their activities

3. Form a strong dedication to their interests and activities

4. Recover quickly from failures

Sense of self-efficacy can be improved by minimizing stress and facing difficult tasks optimistically. People with strong self-efficacy can better manage their nutrition, health problems, and issues. For example, a strong self-efficacy can help a person who is trying to quit smoking. The study also included questions asking about the respondents' contribution towards their profession, the means they use to professionally develop, their self-assessment patterns, etc., all of which make up the components of the required competencies that are important to build further the attained competencies. To a great extent personal and professional development of social workers is possible only through a regulatory body that assists in continuing professional development, conducts regular meetings, provides opportunities to grow and expand creative thinking, etc. This reinforces the fact that professional bodies have immense value in molding competent social work practitioners.

Relevance of Professional Associations/Organizations

Professional organizations for social work help social workers connect across nations and throughout the world. They help students with finding employment and provide a platform to share ideas and new developments in the field. Many of these professional organizations host job boards, allow discounts for student membership, and run events for early-career opportunities. Organizations also host seminars on training and other events that help in the networking of members and acquiring new skills and techniques. Becoming a member of an association is a great way to professionally develop as a social worker (SocialWork.org, 2020).

Professional associations of the respective fields are important as they help in broadening the interests of that field and that of the practitioners. Social work associations sponsor and publish research, scholarly journals, and policy plans that spread information and promote the

work of this profession. Being an active member of an association is an effective method to update oneself while practicing within the field.

Taking a membership in a professional association also has a positive impact at the individual level, by contributing to members' personal growth, both internal and external to the profession. Some of the positive impacts are:

1. Improved physical and mental health by identifying with a group
2. A sense of self-confidence
3. Awareness of one's competence in social work
4. An opportunity to conduct introspection on one's practice (Murphy, 2019)

Despite the numerous efforts to standardize the profession, debates are going on as to why social work must be professionalized. One providing first aid to an injured man will not be called a doctor because to be one you are required to qualify with the respective regulatory body. However, if one does charity work then they are called a social worker, same as the one who graduates a BSW or MSW course. This is the case in India. The profession faces a lot of issues due to the absence of a regulatory body. There is no line drawn to distinguish between a charity worker and a social worker. Considering this scenario, there is a part of society voicing to keep the social work profession not standardized (Desai, 2018). With differences in opinions continuing, without coming to a solution, professionalizing turns out to be even more challenging in India.

The present study examined how membership to a regulatory body influenced a practitioner's competence, thereby proving the necessity for a professional body, and responses collected put forward a positive response to the problem statement in the paper.

Competency-Based Education

The primary focus of education is to prepare individuals for life and this involves imitating multiple roles to enhance their social functioning in the community. It is important that individuals attain the knowledge and skills necessary for preparing themselves and this attainment is called competence. Achieving competence plays a vital role in pursuing higher education and in preparing for professional practice (Poulin & Matis, 2015).

Social work education must focus on competency to develop a curriculum that is competency-based. It is in the social work education phase that educators have to ensure that students are capable of becoming culturally competent practitioners (Jani, et al., 2016). They have to first know and understand the competencies of practice to become a competent practitioner. This factor is missing throughout the Indian social work curriculum. Hence, there is a need to include competency in the education curriculum. Even with this issue at hand, it is satisfactory to know that efforts have been made to bring about novel breaks into Indian social work education for new models. Academicians have been fervently trying for a renovation in the profession since the 1940s and without doubt, criticizing the existing models of social work education and the profession. One particular framework has described the usage of a Competency-Based Education approach that takes roots in the Indian social work practice.

This framework, being an example of the context in hand, desires to pay more attention to Indian social realities, thereby counteracting the shortfalls of the existing model. In doing so it aims to build a bridge between theory and practice and to entertain a much greater dedication to the profession. Additionally, the framework hopes to aid social work schools and social welfare institutions in setting out training standards useful for both students and practitioners of the social work field (Alexander, 2017). So in other words, similar approaches can support the present scenario of lack of regulation to shorten the gap between unawareness of competencies and professional practice.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence has immense relevance in social work practice especially when clients are from ethnic and racial minority groups (Johnson & Munch, 2009). It is of significant importance in caring professions. With globalization being of enormous importance, practitioners must become culturally competent as they have to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. Among the competencies, intercultural competence is of the most importance. The findings of a particular study suggested that social workers have to develop knowledge and attitudes to become culturally competent. The findings also emphasized a broader definition of cultural competence and transformed them into practice behaviors and assessed how these behaviors are performed by students (Jani, et al., 2016).

Social work practitioners will often find themselves in diverse environments, especially for those working abroad. Diversity can mean differences in gender, age, religion, physical or mental capabilities, etc (Nguyen, et al., 2020). This study gave importance to responding with competent skills while being in a culturally diverse environment and applying such knowledge. That is why the Inter-cultural Effectiveness scale was used based on EPAS competency 2.

Measuring Competencies

The 2015 EPAS described nine competencies under which each competency comprises components that contribute to the generalist degree of practice required by practitioners irrespective of their fields. Even with this set-out, it has not yet been converted into a tool against which competency levels can be measured. However, some efforts have been made to look into possibilities. Finding out measures to assess the nine social work competencies is a challenging process. Some articles have provided certain possible measures in which one of them gives an example for three competency levels, namely, cognitive, behavioral, and holistic. The discussion puts forward an approach that provides programs to flexibly design assessment and measurement techniques and so is based on competency levels instead of competency dimensions. There is also the thought that multidimensional assessment should cover the aspects of values, critical thinking, affective reactions, and professional judgment along with the foundational aspects of knowledge and performance (Poulin & Matis, 2015).

This study attempted to prepare a data tool that could analyze the competencies in respondents and it was derived from the EPAS competencies 1 and 2 and also the universal

social work competencies specified in the book 'Social Work - A Profession of Many Faces', which describes competencies required for social workers across their disciplines.

Since there is no unifying body for social work in India, there are no prescribed competencies that are required for efficient practice. As a result, measuring the competence levels of Indian social work practitioners will be even more difficult. It is only with a regulatory body that practitioners can assess themselves and continue their professional development.

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study highlights the necessity for establishing a professional body in India for social work by depicting its influence on the high competence levels of Indian practitioners practicing abroad, where they are registered under various social work bodies. In doing so, the study addresses the issues in Indian social work practice and shows the impact of a regulatory body on the education curriculum. It depicts the importance of molding competent social work practitioners and also encourages more research in discovering a tool for competency measurement.

Through the study, the researcher sought to find the intercultural competence and self-efficacy in respondents along with their general skills and awareness of their registered bodies and their regulations. The study raises some relevant arguments as to whether social workers in India are competent enough or if will they be able to enhance their practice while practicing with a registered body. The figure below shows how the respondents think of their practice outcomes without a professional body.

Figure 1 *Produce the same outcomes without established standards*
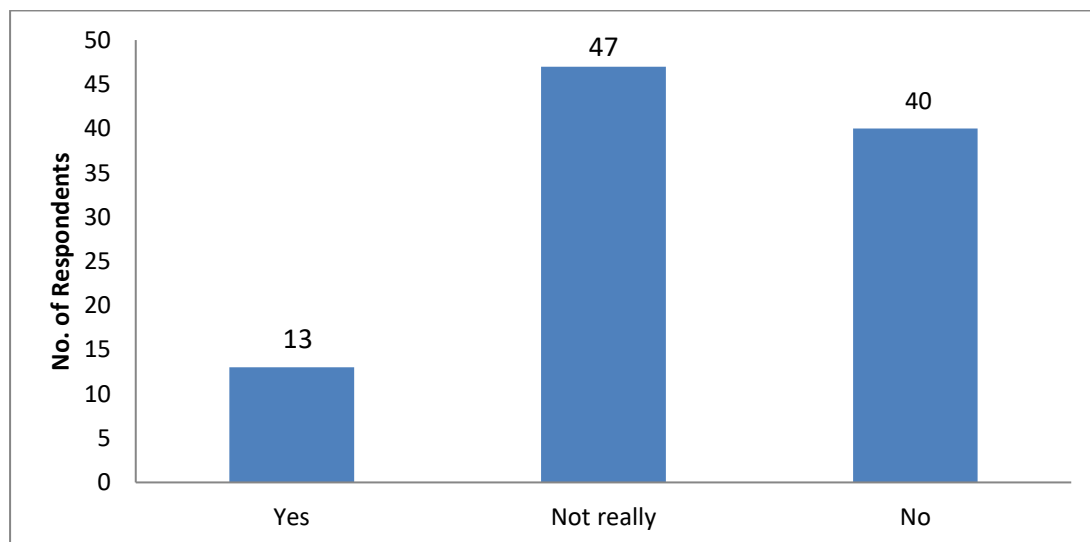
Note. Response on whether social work practitioners can produce the same quality practice outcomes without the guidance of established standards is shown.

Also, if social workers cannot measure their competencies against a standard, then how can their practice outputs be evaluated?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Data was collected from a sample size of a hundred social work practitioners from the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the US, and Ireland. I chose the social work practitioners having a social work background of practicing abroad, that is, in countries where there are established professional bodies. They were required to have studied in India and to have at least one year of work experience. The common factors seen among them that were necessary for the study were, that all of them were registered social workers, they could tell the difference between their practice in India and abroad, and were aware of their competencies.

The sample sizes consisted of female and male respondents, 53 and 47 respectively and the upper limit of the age categorization was 52, and the lower limit was 21. They were selected using the non-probability snowball sampling method and the method calls for contacting known persons for data collection and then widening the circle of contacts using the help of primary sources to reach the required number of respondents. The researcher, in the initial stage, contacted twenty respondents from the known contact list. These were the primary respondents. Using these respondents the contact circle was broadened which consisted of sixty secondary respondents. The secondary circle was used to contact a further twenty more respondents who were the tertiary respondents. Responses were collected using Google Forms and no confidential data was collected.

Tool of Data Collection

The tool was prepared using a questionnaire method which included two scales - the General Self-efficacy scale by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralph Schwarzer (1981) and the Intercultural Effectiveness scale by Tamra Portalla and Guo-Ming Chen - University of Rhode Island (2010). The self-made questionnaire was based on the literature from the book 'Social Work - A Profession of Many Faces' authored by Morales & Sheafor, 2004.

The study used a 74-item questionnaire with which competence levels were assessed. It had both open-ended as well as close-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into four parts based on the four objectives of the paper. The responses to the scales were calculated to get the appropriate scores and for the rest of the questions the responses were converted into graphs and tables and the majority were taken into account.

Data Collection

Data was collected for a period of 4 months, from September to December. Two methods were used by the researcher to collect data for the study. The first method was the primary method and the second one was the secondary method. The primary method was employed to collect data from the respondents and the secondary method was used to collect data from books, journals, articles, and the Internet.

Analysis of Data

The researcher used SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Version 25.0) for analyzing data. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation were also employed for the data analysis

Design

Survey design was used for this study as the study defines competence in terms of awareness of competencies and code of ethics, general skills, self-efficacy, and intercultural competence of social workers practicing abroad.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was sought from the respondents and they were assured that the information provided by the respondents would be kept confidential. The respondents were informed about the purpose and genuineness of the study. They were promised that the data collected would be used only for academic purposes and for the welfare of the targeted group of study.

RESULTS

All the respondents were registered under a professional body respective to their countries and among them, ninety-six percent agreed that they had improved their competence levels after registering under a professional body. Most of the respondents claimed to have improved their practice skills the most after registering under their respective bodies. The respondents showcased various skills that they possess the most and the least possessing ones. Among them, active listening was the most possessed skill, and setting boundaries was the least possessed skill and it was also the least improved skill. Communication and problem-solving skills were found to be used effectively, which are two equally important skills in defining competence. The competence was also assessed in terms of conducting professional introspection in which ninety-eight percent of them did self-assessments at different intervals. Being competent also calls for contributing to the profession and sharing insights with others. Sixty-nine percent of the sample population agreed that they always shared practice insights with others and ninety-six percent of them were willing to contribute to social work's knowledge base. While measuring the self-efficacy of the practitioners, sixty-one percent showed very high self-efficacy and thirty-eight percent showed high self-efficacy.

Table 1 *Self-efficacy of the respondents*

Self-efficacy	Percentage
Very high	61
High	38
Moderate	1
Total	100

Regarding inter-cultural competence, fifteen percent showed very high inter-cultural competence and seventy-three percent showed high inter-cultural competence.

Table 2 *Intercultural competence of the respondents*

Intercultural competence	Frequency
Very high	15
High	73
Moderate	12
Total	100

Note. The table shows the different score levels of the intercultural competence of the respondents, measured using the Intercultural Effectiveness scale.

Since the study used two scales, we wanted to see if there was any relationship between them and while measuring the correlation between the General Self-Efficacy scale and Intercultural Effectiveness scale it was found that there existed a positive significant relationship. When the self-efficacy of a respondent increases, their inter-cultural effectiveness also increases and when self-efficacy decreases, the inter-cultural effectiveness also decreases.

Table 3 *Correlation with GSE scale and IE scale*

|		GSE	IES
GSE	Pearson Correlation	1	.230[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.021
	N	100	100
IES	Pearson Correlation	.230[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.021	
	N	100	100

[*]. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Note. This table demonstrates a positive significant relation between GSE and IE scales and shows that, as self-efficacy increases intercultural competence also increases and vice-versa.

It was found that a professional body is crucial for the professional development and developing competence levels of social work practitioners. While reviewing the respondents' responses, it was found that ninety-five percent of them agreed that there existed a need for a professional body in India.

Figure 3 *Necessity for a regulatory body in India*

Horizontal bar chart. X-axis labelled "No. of Respondents" ranging from 0 to 100. Yes = 95, No = 5.
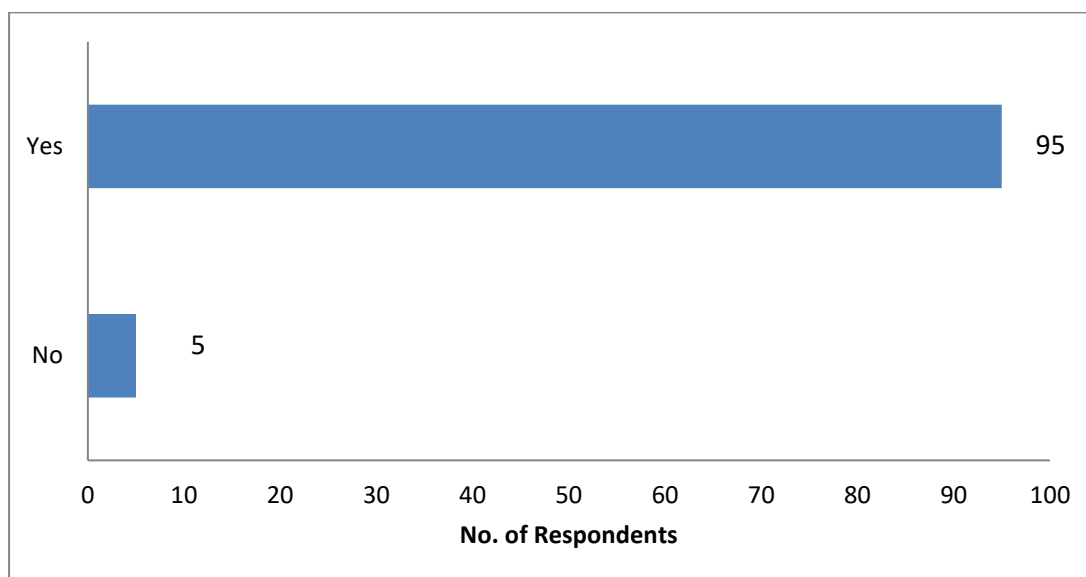
Note. The frequency of respondents who do and do not agree with a regulatory body for the Indian social work profession is depicted.

Various challenges of the Indian social work profession were also recorded. Among them, the social work profession not being professionalized was seen to be the biggest issue.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the population taken for data collection were social workers who had experience living in two culturally different communities. They were brought up and educated in India and after their tertiary education, migrated to foreign countries to pursue careers in the social work field. Hence, this study does not focus on their core competencies as they come from two racial backgrounds, but on their intercultural competence and self-efficacy. That is why this study has kept the Inter-cultural Effectiveness scale and the General Self-efficacy scale along with measuring skills and assessing awareness of competencies as competence measuring standards for this study. Not many studies have been conducted to know the relevance of a professional body in social work practitioners, irrespective of their practice fields. Only limited studies have been done so far. The ones that have been conducted were confined to the types of social work or other criteria. However, among the studies conducted, similar results were found where certain professional bodies have helped in improving the practice of particular social workers. Social work practitioners from one country locate the opportunities and challenges associated with working and living in a country different from where they acquired their educational qualifications. In a small study that was conducted, ten social workers who were qualified from New Zealand and who were either practicing in England, Scotland, or Ireland. Even though the respondents were faced with differences in community, work, and professional cultures, they received the opportunity to assess the

cultural and professional differences which led to the respondents' overall positive experiences (Beddoe & Fouché, 2014). For the present study, the EPAS (Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards) competencies were used as a reference to include the two scales of General Self-Efficacy and Inter-cultural Effectiveness. Among its nine competencies, competency 1 and competency 2 have relevance with the two scales being used in this study, respectively. Competency 1 is to 'Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behaviour' and Competency 2 is to 'Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice'. Regarding the competencies required for social work practice, intercultural competence is very important as it is highly required in an era of globalization especially when a profession calls for social interaction across racial communities. A study was conducted to understand to what degree social work students adapted to cultural competence and how many of them were interested in taking up international social work as their field of work. The findings showed that students who felt that cultural competency was important also showed interest in international student exchange programs. Students with Master's degrees showed more interest in global issues than Bachelor's and Ph.D. students. The conclusion was that social work students were ready and willing to pursue their studies in different cultural contexts. Hence program curricula must be designed to meet the needs of cultural competency (Small, et al., 2017).

There have not yet been developed any standards or scales to measure competencies in social workers, irrespective of their practice settings. Also, in a country like India, practitioners are hardly aware of competencies as there is no system or a formal body to unify practice and define the general competencies. However, establishing a professional body influences the competence levels of practitioners.

Apart from the two scales used, the questionnaire was developed based on data collected by Teare and Sheafor that explained eighteen sets of activities that provided a framework for determining universal competencies required to carry out social work practice. Hence the questionnaire consisted of aspects that contributed to universal competencies and these aspects were a part of analyzing the competence levels of the respondents. The questionnaire included questions relating to skills, the effectiveness of practice outputs, communication skills, problem-solving skills, self-assessment, making contributions to the professional knowledge base, and sharing practice insights. In all these assessments, most of the respondents gave a positive response. A figure depicting self-assessment is shown below.

Figure 2 *Conducting self-assessment*
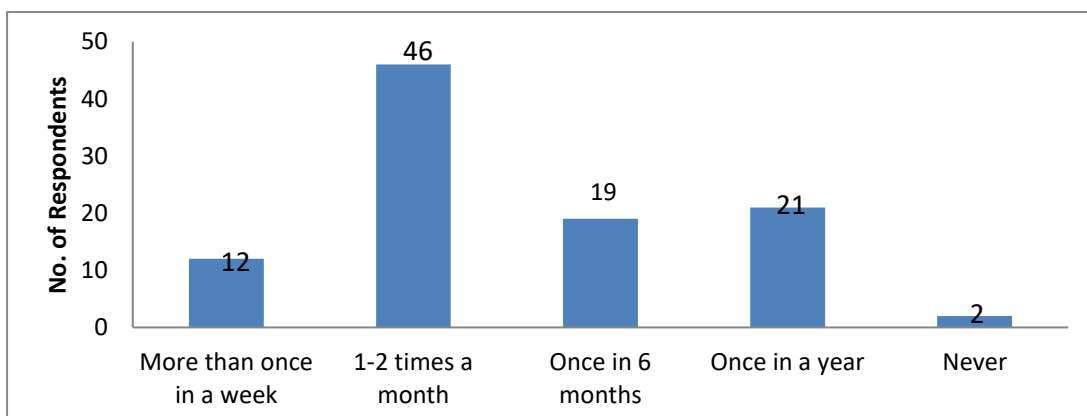
Note. The number of practitioners conducting self-assessments concerning various intervals can be seen.

From all these results it can mean that more than half of the respondents have high competence levels. This result can be said to be in line with the finding of the second objective, that was, professional bodies influence the competence levels of practitioners.

Further research has to be conducted to determine an appropriate scale to measure the competence levels of social workers as there still are no systems to properly evaluate and mark practitioners against their competencies that define the quality of practice at the generalist level. It is only if one is competent enough can he/she produce effective outcomes. To regulate such competencies respective to that country, the existence of a professional body is vital. In India, such a professional body for the social work profession has to initiate. There are many social work associations in our country, however unifying social work practice throughout the country remains as the biggest challenge to the Indian social work. However, efforts are being made to shed light on these issues. Since there are no prescribed competencies for Indian social work, graduating practitioners are not aware of the competencies required in their practice. To mitigate this issue, a competency-based education in social work education has to be included in the curriculum. Education should be given by teaching and making the students aware of the competencies required in this field. Such an education plays an important role in producing competent social workers in society. Till the social work profession gets established recognition, this kind of education will yield effective social work practice to an extent, for in the long run regulation will be required by a regulatory body.

CONCLUSION

Social work has evolved through time, taking various forms, starting from individual casework to the current roles we see across countries. The once-a-helping process has now taken a professional shape in many countries and some, it is developing into one. The very nature of the profession has attracted many minds and social workers have always strived to make a difference in other people's lives, strengthening families and improving societies. Even though the baseline of social work remains the same globally, it is influenced by a country's policies, laws, culture, community structure, etc. And therefore, the practice varies from country to country and so do the challenges. In India, the greatest challenge to social work is the profession not having a regulatory body. Most of the other issues exist as a result of this.

Finding out the influence of a professional body over a practitioner's competence was an effective and relevant method of showing how important a professional body is. The assessment of the responses depicted high competence in the majority of the sample population. The study also helped to discuss the relevant changes needed to be brought to the social work education curriculum and what it means to be a competent social worker. Forming a professional body for social work can develop and strengthen the knowledge base and regulate the competence-based education curriculum which in turn will produce competent social workers who are then subject to many opportunities for professional

development and other benefits. A regulatory body can unify and take the profession to a higher degree. With social work professionals working under such an influence, the impact would pay off a great deal of positive change to that country.

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