

Addressing Gaps in Professional Social Work: A Study of Challenges in Himachal Pradesh, IndiaBabita¹**ABSTRACT**

Professional social work is a relatively new profession among the other service fields in India. People generally confuse the profession of social work with charity and philanthropic work and think there is no need for professional training in this field. The paper explored the problems and challenges professional social workers face in Himachal Pradesh. The study was based on the qualitative approach, and 11 in-depth interviews were taken with skilled workers who have completed their Master in Social Work (MSW) either from Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla or Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Kangra. The study found a significant professional training and skill development gap during the MSW programme. The lack of practical experience hinders students' ability to translate theoretical knowledge into effective practice. This underscores the need for curriculum reforms integrating practical training and field-based learning to prepare future social workers for real-world challenges better.

Keywords: Professional, Social work, Himachal Pradesh, Training, Challenges

Introduction

The social work profession in India is relatively new among human service fields, having developed significantly under the influence of Western models, especially in its educational and training approaches (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016). The initial official training program provided by the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay was established in 1936, signifying the extensive history of professional social work education in India (Simon, 2021). In response to the rising demand for skilled personnel, social work education has evolved through India's post-independence constitutional mandates incorporating social welfare initiatives (Simon, 2021). Nevertheless, the Indian field faced several challenges, including adapting Western models to the local context, cultivating Indigenous literature and methodologies, preserving strong connections to the welfare state, and establishing an ethical framework, among others (Singh, n.d.). Bhatt and Phukan (2016) report that around 526 institutions in India provide social work education at both undergraduate and graduate levels. More than 95% of educational institutions confer postgraduate social work (MSW) degrees, and a considerable proportion (59.12%) provide undergraduate social work (BSW) programs (Bhatt, 2021). Approximately twenty percent of social work education institutions are in Tamil Nadu, with Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra ranking second and third, respectively, at 13.5% and 12.5% (Bhatt & Phukan, 2016).

Since starting programs at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh in 2010 and Himachal Pradesh University in Shimla in 2003, professional social work education in the state has seen significant expansion. These universities bolster the local academic and professional community by providing exceptional master's and doctoral programs in social work. The courses seek to impart advanced knowledge and skills necessary to tackle social issues and enhance community welfare. Students from many backgrounds and places enrol in these programs due to their strong emphasis on research and practical application. Graduates are prepared for community development, policymaking, and social services roles in Himachal Pradesh and throughout India.

Examining the importance of social work in tackling societal challenges.

The social work profession is crucial for comprehending societal issues' political, social, and economic dimensions. It aims to tackle and influence these issues by confronting violence, poverty, and inequality.

Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dehra Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. Email: babita77sharma@gmail.com

Social workers diligently advocate for social justice by guaranteeing equitable access to resources for everyone, particularly marginalised populations.

Social work notably addresses environmental issues, underscoring the necessity for sustainability and the relationship between the environment and social justice (Garlington & Collins, 2020; Naranjo, 2020). Social work education must incorporate these fundamental subjects into its curriculum to provide professionals with the essential capabilities to address the intricate challenges of global environmental changes (Naranjo, 2020).

Social work education is urged to include these critical subjects in its core curriculum to prepare professionals with the requisite abilities to tackle the intricate issues posed by global environmental changes (Naranjo, 2020). Moreover, social welfare professionals acknowledge the impact of environmental factors on client welfare, underscoring the imperative to incorporate environmental considerations into social work practice.

A concise summary of the socio-economic landscape of Himachal Pradesh.

Himachal Pradesh, located in northern India, is famous for its scenic vistas, which the Himalayas characterise. It features a heterogeneous demography, including rural and urban inhabitants. The state's economy is predominantly agricultural, centred on agriculture and horticulture, with a growing tourist industry attributed to its natural beauty and cultural legacy (Singh & Thakur, 2014). Himachal Pradesh possesses one of India's highest literacy rates, bolstered by a strong educational infrastructure that includes the Indian Institute of Technology, National Institute of Technology Hamirpur, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh University. Substantial expenditures in infrastructure, encompassing roads, energy, and telecommunications, highlight the state's dedication to enhancing living conditions (Singh & Thakur, 2014). The state's cultural variety significantly impacts its social dynamics, with traditional traditions and festivals affecting communal life. Despite advancements in development, difficulties, including unequal growth, environmental preservation, and sustainable development, remain, requiring social workers' engagement to promote inclusive progress (Ram et al., 2021).

This study aims to elucidate the problems and possibilities faced by social workers in Himachal Pradesh, offering insights and recommendations to fortify the social work infrastructure and improve community well-being.

Methodology

The research employed a descriptive methodology to examine professional social workers' viewpoints of their jobs and the challenges and possibilities they experienced in Himachal Pradesh. The research was conducted among individuals who completed their post-graduation in social work from Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, or the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Kangra. Another exclusion criterion for participants was current employment in the area of social work, whether in academic roles or as practitioners in governmental or non-governmental organisations. The gathered data was subsequently analysed thematically in the following sections of this study.

Ethical consideration

Data were gathered from individuals who granted informed consent prior to the interview. Verbal permission was obtained to assure ethical adherence and participant competence.

Training and Education

The study revealed different views regarding the availability and quality of education. Four out of eleven participants considered their university training during their MSW adequate, while two rated it

moderately sufficient, indicating potential enhancement. Conversely, five participants expressed dissatisfaction with their educational training, criticising the coursework as overly generic, lacking specialisation, and ineffective fieldwork execution. One participant stated, "I possess a master's degree in social work from Himachal Pradesh University. We must strive for the advancement of this profession. I observed an absence of infrastructure in this institution."

This indicates the need for more professional competencies and infrastructure within the institutions of Himachal Pradesh.

The course we study is rather broad, and many colleges need to provide specialisation, which constitutes a significant gap. The fieldwork is neither done successfully nor efficiently.

Numerous replies underscore the need for experiential learning and practical training in the field, indicate that the existing curriculum is overly broad, and propose that more specialised courses may be necessary to meet specific demands and issues within social work. Providing specialised courses can address specific interests within social work, facilitating the profession for individuals aiming to concentrate on those particular areas in the future.

Opportunities for professional development and continuing education.

Himachal Pradesh has possibilities for social workers in developmental sectors. Many social workers work at various tiers within governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Sr. No.	Organisations	Position	Salary (Monthly CTC)
Participants 1	PRC (Population Research Centre)	Supervisor	₹20,000
Participants 2	Waste Warriors	Associate Manager - Outreach & Partnership	₹28,000
Participants 3	The Huns Foundation	Health Program Coordinator	₹40,000
Participants 4	Asha Kiran Home Society	Counsellor	₹15000
Participants 5	Honda	CSR Manager	₹60,000
Participants 6	Not specified	Program Manager	₹28,000
Participants 7	The Huns Foundation	Social Protection Officer	₹32,500
Participants 8	Vardhman Textile	Labour welfare officer	₹28,750
Participants 9	Helpage	Counsellor cum Advocacy officer	₹20000
Participants 10	Indra Gandhi Medical College	Medical Social Worker	₹52000
Participants 11	Government of Haryana, India	Assistant Professor	Above 57000

The above table shows organisations and positions related to social workers. It shows that social workers were working in various organisations, such as corporations like Honda, medical institutions like Indira

Gandhi Medical College and Hospital, and charitable entities like Waste Warriors and The Hans Foundation. The diverse areas in which these organisations work reflect India's broad scope of social work. In the present study, social workers were working as program managers, counsellors, social protection officers, and health program coordinators. Some social workers also worked as CSR managers and labour welfare officers in corporate organisations like Honda and Vardhman Textile. Responsibilities and scope vary depending on the post.

Barriers to accessing training and how these affect practice.

Social work is a profession that works in diverse settings and deals with different social issues. Having the skills and information pertinent to the specific context is essential. When addressing the difficulties they encountered in their Master of Social Work program. Participants highlighted the need for specialisation in the MSW program to acquire the necessary skills and techniques to help their profession afterwards. Secondly, some attendees addressed the university's inadequate infrastructure and insufficient teaching personnel. The absence of teaching and non-teaching personnel resulted in inadequate academic assistance for students at the institution, adversely impacting their acquisition of professional skills and procedures.

Participants indicated a necessity for comprehensive fieldwork training that enables students to comprehend society's grassroots realities and equips them to address these concerns effectively.

One participant stated, "Our curriculum is primarily theoretical, yet these ideas are essential for comprehending societal notions, human nature, and related subjects. Nevertheless, we have to prioritise skill-oriented education and practical experience. Indeed, fieldwork is included in our curriculum. However, the fieldwork I undertook during my master's program does not contribute to my current employment, as we did not develop any practical skills in the field, maybe due to insufficient supervision."

This signifies a lack of oversight throughout the fieldwork, underscoring the need for supportive supervision to assist and mentor students during their fieldwork experiences. Participants also voiced concerns regarding the efficient positioning of NGOs near their universities for concurrent fieldwork.

The participants indicated that the existing curriculum requires revision to incorporate contemporary issues relevant to social work. These updates are essential to link the course content with current practices and challenges, enabling students to understand these issues as they encounter them in their future professions.

Professional Identity and Role Perception

Although the social work profession was founded in India around the mid-19th century, its professional identity must be clarified. Himachal Pradesh offers social workers several prospects in the development sector, yet their professional identity needs to be prominently recognised among peers, community, and family.

"I have been employed as a medical social worker here for eighteen months, although I receive few job assignments. I was assigned to clerical duties. Even physicians fail to acknowledge and regard us."

One participant articulated that the individual needed to be made aware of her obligations and responsibilities as a medical social worker since no explicit duties had been assigned to her in that capacity.

When I joined this course, my parents were unsure about it, and when anybody asked them about me and my course, "tumhari beti kya kr rhi hai.". People are amazed by listening to this subject. There is also a perception about social work: "Pese le kr kon sa social work kia jata hai.."

This indicates that social work is grappling with its identity, and individuals often conflate social work with social services. Social work is considered philanthropic, including practices such as charity and langar seva, etc. So, it is difficult for people to understand social work as a paid profession. The profession of social work still needs recognition in Himachal Pradesh.

Due to inadequate compensation, excessive workload, and inadequate personnel, some people conflate social work with social services. The profession of social work remains unknown in Himachal Pradesh

The social work profession is predominantly field-based, requiring social workers to confront society's harsh realities and provide them with the potential to effect change. Upon inquiry on work satisfaction, most participants expressed contentment in assisting those in need. They are content to engage in labour that benefits a worthy purpose. Intrinsic drive and a sense of pleasure derived from assisting others are substantial factors in their job happiness. Most respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their pay scale, indicating that their salaries do not align with their job contributions. One participant stated, "Job satisfaction is essential, yet it does not provide sustenance."

Organisations and institutions should reconcile social activity's inherent rewards with sufficient financial remuneration. Although employment pleasure derived from assisting others is substantial, it must not jeopardize financial security.

Challenges to the Social Work Profession in Himachal Pradesh

Social workers face many challenges in their profession. From the discussion of the participants, the following are the In Himachal Pradesh, the main challenges faced by social workers in Himachal Pradesh, the

Professional Identity: Social work is not regarded as a profession, and there is a conflation between social services-related occupations and social work. Individuals' views on social work are closely linked to the altruistic services provided to others. Himachal Pradesh is referred to as Dev Bhumi. Individuals associate "samaj ka karya Bhagwan ka karya" with the belief that it should not incur any cost. Aside from this, the diverse nature of the field results in the absence of a standardised set of tasks and obligations for professional social workers, unlike in other professions such as medicine or engineering. Their functions and responsibilities differ according to the nature and scope of the work, leading to confusion over their identification.

Lack of skilled manpower: There are many limitations in social work training in Himachal Pradesh because these workers are not able to acquire the essential skills that will help them in their jobs. Lack of essential skills also impacts the pay scale of a social worker, and a low pay scale is also a challenge to the social work profession in Himachal Pradesh.

Need for more adherence to professional standards: Social workers in Himachal Pradesh face challenges in meeting professional benchmarks and a lack of adherence to ethical norms in their professional setting.

Fieldwork risk: Another significant problem noted by participants was the risks associated with fieldwork and the difficulties in managing personnel. The social worker must engage in fieldwork with diverse individuals, occasionally encountering life-threatening situations during their duties.

Conclusion:

Social work as a profession is new in India. Still, India has achieved much with renowned social workers like Medha Patkar and Nandita Das, who have served the country with excellent professional skills. Students in small states like Himachal have also started opting for social work as an academic subject and a profession.

However, considerable progress remains to be made. Although there remains a period for societal acceptance of social work as a profession, it is crucial to recognise that social work transcends mere charity in the context of evolving times. Emerging disciplines such as psychiatric social work, counselling, labour officer, and CDPO (Child development project officer) need skills and academic knowledge for effective practice. Furthermore, it is essential for social workers to be satisfied when identifying themselves as professional social workers.

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