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कुलपति

Prof. Yogesh Singh
Vice-Chancellor

दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय
University of Delhi



No. DU/VC/2023/286
21st August 2023

MESSAGE

I congratulate the Department of Social Work for taking the initiative of publishing the *Indian Journal of Social Work Education and Practice* as a step towards fostering a culture of academic excellence and encouraging innovative research in the field of social work.

The journal serves as a platform for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences in social work education and practice. It brings together scholars, practitioners, and students to contribute to the discourse on social issues, welfare, and progressive social work practices.

I am sure that the journal will make immense contribution in disseminating research, sharing best practices, and stimulating intellectual discourse in the field of social work.

I commend the editorial team for their dedication and hard work in curating an insightful journal that showcases the latest research, current trends, and emerging practices in social work education. The diverse range of articles and perspectives presented provide a valuable resource for professionals in the field.

Through the academic rigor and practical relevance showcased in this journal, social work students, educators, and practitioners shall gain valuable insights that can contribute to their professional growth and development.

I believe that the field of social work plays a crucial role in addressing the challenges faced by our society. Through effective education and practice, we can strive for social justice, equality, inclusive development and reach to the farthest corner.

I would like to extend my appreciation to the editor and his team for continued commitment and dedication towards promoting social work education and practice through this journal. I look forward to witnessing the growth and impact of the journal in the years to come.


Yogesh Singh 21/8/23

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Editorial Note

This issue of the *Indian Journal of Social Work Education and Practice (IJSWEP)* (Volume 1, Issue 3, December 2024) presents a diverse collection of scholarly articles engaging with critical themes within the field. Ranging from micro-level interventions to macro-level analyses, these contributions offer valuable insights into contemporary social work practice and research.

Dr. Shashi Rani and Mr. Shyam K. Saroj's case study, "Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents through Field-Based Action Project – A Case Study of Centre for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (CCAW), University of Delhi," examines the practical application of field-based interventions aimed at enhancing child and adolescent well-being. Dr. Austin Sinesh Das and Dr. Dilip Diwakar G's research, "Effect of Field Supervision and Support System in Enhancing the Quality of Field Practicum in Social Work Education," explores the crucial role of supervision and support systems in optimizing field practicum experiences.

Shifting focus to media representation, Tanwi Suman and Dr. Rahul Kapoor's "Portrayal of Women Characters in OTT Platforms: A Gendered Analysis" provides a timely examination of gender dynamics in contemporary digital media. Simant Chhotara, Neena Pandey, and Md Riyazuddin Khan's article, "Civil Society and its Impact on Curbing Communal Violence: A Study on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar Riots," delves into the role of civil society in mitigating communal violence, offering crucial insights for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Prashant Vikas Karale's work, "Gender Dynamics and Sustainable Development in Melghat: A Comparative Analysis of Livelihoods and Environmental Governance," explores the intersection of gender, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability within a specific geographic context.

Dr. Ngaopunii Trichao Thomas, Dr. Sudhir Maske, and Prof. Sanjoy Roy's article, "Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A Social Work Perspective," examines the challenges and opportunities facing early childhood care and education in India within the context of the National Education Policy 2020, offering a crucial social work lens.

Finally, Ashwathi Muraleedharan, Lizy PJ, and Vijesh PV's article, "From the Iron Law of Oligarchy to Building a Heart of Inclusion in the Schools of Social Work," offers a thought-provoking analysis of organizational dynamics within social work education itself.

This December issue of IJSWEP examines contemporary social challenges in India through rigorous empirical analysis and established theoretical frameworks. The diverse perspectives presented within these articles offer valuable insights for researchers, educators, and practitioners, prompting further investigation into critical social problems and advocating for social justice and equal opportunity. We invite readers to engage critically with these contributions and participate in the ongoing scholarly discourse.

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Prof. Sanjoy Roy

Dr. Sudhir Maske

Dr. N.T Thomas

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Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents through Field-Based Action Project – A Case Study of Centre for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (CCAW), University of Delhi

Dr. Shashi Rani¹ Mr. Shyam K Saroj²

Abstract

Health and wellbeing of children and adolescents is an important area in context of United Nations 20230 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” gives direction to leave no one behind. Within the context of SDGs the children and adolescent needs to be acknowledged and addressed at all levels. Many factors may impact their physical and mental health and overall being. Globally one in seven in the age group of 10-19 years, which comprise 16% of the world population experiences mental health issues (WHO, 2021). The adolescent age is a critical period in the life of an individual. There can be many direct or indirect factors which contribute to healthy adult life. In this context the paper aims to develop an understanding on various factors and approaches of health and well-being of children and adolescents and future outcome. The early age guidance and proper direction can significantly impact adolescents’ resilience, coping mechanisms, and overall physical and mental well-being. The social work interventions through field-based action project experiences are shared to discuss how through evidence based social work practices and intervention the children and adolescent wellbeing can be promoted. The research paper shares outcomes applicable to children and adolescent wellbeing in urban community settings. These insights aim to develop social work intervention plans in fostering well-being of children and adolescents.

Keywords: Children and Adolescents wellbeing, Mental Health, Action Project, Social Work Intervention

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INTRODUCTION

Well-being is characterized by an individual's level of happiness and health, including factors such as life satisfaction, positive emotions and sense of accomplishment. It's an ongoing process of nurturing different aspects of life to create a harmonious balance. The components of well-being develop through the capacity for personal development, growth, and expansion, possessing a sense of life purpose, ability to make choices and guide one's own behaviour, fostering warm, trusting, and loving relationships. Adolescents often aspire to achieve these components as they navigate the starting age of adolescence, a phase marked by significant personal and social development.

Well-being refers to good physical and mental health, happiness, and prosperity, with elevated life satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and adept stress management (Huppert, 2009; Leite et al., 2019; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019). It is a foundation for daily living, influenced by social, economic, and environmental factors (World Health Organisation, n.d.-b). Well-being is a changing process that can vary over time. There is no universal method to attain it, but individuals can proactively strive to improve their well-being by concentrating on these various aspects. Adolescence denotes the life stage between childhood and adulthood; individuals undergo swift physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. The experiences of those between the ages of 10 and 19 significantly influence their well-being in the short and long term (World Health Organisation, n.d.-a).

Scholars explained various approaches to get conceptual clarity. D.A. Ross et al. 2020 discussed two conceptual approaches; the author explained that there are many perspectives around the concept of well-being. The two prominent approaches "eudaimonic" and "hedonic" are important to develop conceptual clarity on the subject subjective and objective well-being. Further it is explained that subjective well being consists of personal experiences and individual fulfilment, and it is related to individual experience about meaning in life, and a sense of personal growth, and hedonic well-being includes happiness and sense of satisfaction with one's own life, as well as others. In contrast, objective approaches define well-being regarding quality of life indicators such, income, food, and housing and social attributes like education, health, political voice, social networks, and connections. Further, the author provided five domains of health and wellbeing that underpin the adolescent well-being framework. These are good health and Optimal nutrition. In this domain, well-being is related to physical, nutritional, emotional, and sociocultural well-being. Connectedness, positive values and contribution to society- this domain highlights the emotional and sociocultural well-being, Safety and a supportive environment- This is related to physical, nutritional and sociocultural well-being, learning competencies, education, skills and employability- In this domain, emotional cognitive well being components are discussed (Ross et. al. 2020).

The role of social work discipline becomes important because of addressing the gaps arising due to social disparities and inequalities. The marginalised sections of society are impacted most due to these inequalities and disparities. Children and adolescents constitute the most vulnerable groups and therefore from the conceptual framework of social justice and protection of human rights the social work intervention is important. The above mentioned adolescent well-being framework is providing conceptual clarity on multidimensional development and approaches for overall wellbeing of children.

According to the census 2011, in India 0-18 year's population is 39% of the total population of India. The early age intervention would enhance the positive living experiences and healthy cognitive development. Further WHO reported that one in seven in the 10-19 years of age group population is exposed to mental health issues, adding to 13% of the global burden of disease. Also, suicide among 15-29 years of age is one of the leading causes of deaths of this age group. Anxiety, depression and behavioural issues are adding in mental health issues.

The well-being of adolescents in vulnerable environments emerges as a complex and pivotal concern that necessitates our focused attention and concerted action. These adolescents contend with a myriad of challenges that imperil their physical, mental, and social health, impeding the realization of their full potential. Vulnerable environments encapsulate diverse contexts, exposing adolescents to elevated risks and disadvantages. Limited access to fundamental necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare can profoundly impact the well-being of adolescents. Instances of violence, whether within the home, community, or broader society, can engender trauma, anxiety, and depression. Marginalization based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation can contribute to the isolation of adolescents and constrain their opportunities. Residing in polluted or unsafe environments introduces health risks that impede overall development. These vulnerabilities wield a profound impact on the well-being of adolescents, manifesting in various manifestations. Insufficient nutrition, inadequate healthcare accessibility, and exposure to environmental hazards elevate the risk of illnesses and chronic health conditions. Adolescents in vulnerable environments exhibit a heightened susceptibility to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The confluence of poverty, violence, and social exclusion disrupts educational trajectories, limiting academic achievement and hindering social and emotional development. Exposure to adversity poses challenges to the cultivation of essential social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem among adolescents in these vulnerable contexts.

Despite the challenges, there are ways to promote the well-being of adolescents in vulnerable environments. Providing support and resources

to families can help them better care for their children. Building strong community networks can foster a sense of belonging and social support for adolescents. Ensuring access to quality education, including life skills training and mental health support, can empower adolescents and open doors to future opportunities. Providing affordable and accessible healthcare services is crucial for addressing adolescents' physical and mental health needs. Protecting adolescents from violence and exploitation and creating safe spaces for them to learn, play, and socialize is essential for their well-being. Engaging adolescents in decision-making processes and promoting their participation in community life can build their confidence and agency. By acknowledging the challenges faced by adolescents in vulnerable environments and implementing targeted interventions, we can help them navigate this critical phase of life and build a brighter future. Investing in adolescents' health and well-being isn't just about saving lives; it's about unlocking their full potential and reaping the dividends of a healthier, more productive society.

Cognitive Development of Children

Children are active participants in their own learning journey. They don't passively absorb information; instead, they actively construct their understanding of the world through exploration, experimentation, and interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1955). According to Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, children constantly adapt and assimilate new information into their existing mental frameworks. These processes are termed as "assimilation" and "accommodation" (Bormanaki & Khoshal 2017). The active engagement in learning allows children to progressively advance through distinct cognitive stages, demonstrating their innate curiosity and ability to construct knowledge actively. It outlines distinct stages of cognitive growth, such as sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages, each characterized by specific cognitive abilities (Piaget, 2003). The psychosocial challenges individuals face at different stages of life. For children, these stages involve tasks such as trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, and initiative vs. guilt, influencing their overall psychological development (E. Erikson, 1950; E. H. Erikson, 1994). Individuals, including children, have a hierarchy of needs ranging from basic physiological requirements to higher-level psychological needs. Meeting these needs is essential for overall well-being and development (Coon, 2014; Navy, 2020). Attachment theory, proposed by John Bowlby, emphasizes the importance of early emotional bonds between children and their caregivers. It suggests that secure attachments in infancy contribute to healthy social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1979). Children observe the behaviours of their peers and subsequently mimic or emulate them. Albert Bandura's theory highlights the importance of observational

learning, modelling, and the role of reinforcement in shaping children's behaviours (Bandura, 1962; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

With this conceptual framework, CCAW, the Department of Social Work, revived the centre's activities post-pandemic. The multidimensional approaches were adopted to work with underprivileged children. In order to enhance their social and mental well-being various activities were strategically designed and organised.

History of CCAW, Department of Social Work:

The Centre for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (CCAW), earlier known as the Child Guidance Centre, is a field-based action demonstration project of the Department. This centre was established in 1971 and was known as Child Guidance Centre (CGC), which was later renamed as the Centre for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing. Earlier the centre was providing different services related to psychosocial/clinical assessment for children including diagnostic, treatment and referral. In the year 2020-2021, due to Covid-19 Pandemic, all the activities at the Centre were suspended according to the Government of India Instructions. But with the strong commitment of the department to serve the children in need and are underprivileged, the centre started once again its services at the community level, once again, the centre revived its outreach activities and services in 2022 under the new appointment of the Honorary Director (the faculty in charge). In the year 2022-2023, the centre focused on the revival of the centre's activities including infrastructural arrangement, registration of children, meeting with parents, enrolment of children in summer camp and other educational activities with the consent of parents and school authorities. At community level the centre focused on the outreach activities related to children growth and development, exploring networks and scope of collaboration with nearby schools and communities also done to expand the service base. The post pandemic activities of the CCAW revived and expanded with the team of social work trainees. The revival of CCAW was not necessary only from the view point of providing services for children but also to provide an opportunity and space for social work trainees to develop an understanding towards social outreach projects, activities, structural issues, social and economic context, policies and programmes and the need of social work intervention for client systems. Trainees planned and designed the activities within the larger domain of psychosocial development of children and adolescents. They worked under department and agency supervision, and utilised the opportunity to learn about focused area, skills and competence required and field intervention planning and execution with the use of supervisory inputs.

A team of social work trainees started their field practice with need assessment, registration of children, the orientation of children and parents, planning of need-based activities, awareness sessions, assessment of present

field level activities, planning for future short and long-term social work interventions. The socioeconomic profile of registered children, children of the nearby schools and community was prepared to learn about individual and group needs and scope of intervention. The consent of parents was taken to work with children; meeting with parents and school teachers was the first step towards knowing children and their psycho-social needs. The process of revival and activities undertaken by the team of CCAW are discussed in the revival section.

The Revival of the CCAW – A Site of Field Work learning and Practice

Orientation, Training and Supervision of Social Work Trainees-

The social work trainees placed at CCAW were oriented through various orientation sessions. In order to provide them with theoretical knowledge, the sessions on children's growth and development approaches to the psychosocial development of children, rights of children, legal measures for child safety and protection, the scope of field-based interventions for vocational, career development and overall growth of children and adolescents, etc. Also, at field setting, school and community level meetings were organised for mutual understanding about CCAW objectives, its outreach activities and services. In the open community, regular rapport-building sessions with children and parents were organised by trainees under the guidance and supervision of the honorary director (the faculty in charge) of CCAW.

New Registration and collaboration with schools—To start the CCAW services again, the new registrations were done after the reopening of the University post-COVID-19 in physical mode in 2022. To expand the outreach services of CCAW for children, the nearby sites were explored; among these sites different schools and open communities were identified. The children of nearby schools, the open community, and teaching and non-teaching staff of the university were registered in the centre. Likewise, children were registered from CIE School, Department of Education, University of Delhi, Masoom School, Timarpur and an open community, Indira Basti, Timarpur, New Delhi. The informed consent of parents and school teachers was taken for the participation of children in various developmental activities of CCAW.

Learning Scope and Outcome for Social Work Trainees at CCAW

At CCAW, the social work trainees under the CCAW honorary director's supervision acquired a comprehensive understanding of working with children, child rights, approaches and skills to work with children and adolescents' well-being within the given contextual framework. The plan of intervention aimed at enhancing overall well-being among adolescents by developing an understanding of policy and laws, analytical skills and

the determinants of holistic development of adolescents within community settings. Through planned supervision during their concurrent field work, the trainee of social work applied insights provided to them for the overall well-being of adolescents. The trainee acquired proficiency in utilizing tools and strategies for navigating challenges, making informed choices, and laying a strong foundation for personal growth among adolescents. The field setting experience cultivated a community-centric approach among social work trainees by developing an understanding of the role of the Centre for Child and Adolescent Well-Being (CCAW) Department of Social Work, University of Delhi and its commitment to promoting the well-being of underprivileged and neglected adolescent populations. This experience provided guidance for effective practices for social workers, educators and parents, policymakers and researchers.

The engagement with the children in a community setting through CCAW provided social work trainees with valuable learning opportunities. This experience contributed to the development of professional approaches, skills and competencies to work effectively with children and adolescents. The program enhanced the trainee's capacity to recognize and address the diverse needs and challenges of children and adolescents with a deep understanding of community-based social work interventions. Furthermore, it played a pivotal role in refining their networking and collaboration skills with a set of different stakeholders. The overall experience gained at CCAW ignited a passion among social work trainees for working with children and adolescents and making meaningful contributions to their overall well-being. The systematic work plan for the trainees was developed and they were guided to execute the plan according to the learning objectives of the social work course. The work of the social work trainee was supervised and evaluated at the end of the semester. Some of the important activities initiated by the CCAW team and their outcomes are discussed below.

Social and Economic Assessment- The social work trainees placed at CCAW undertaken the task to compile socioeconomic profile of the children of community and school. This is done to maintain records of the clients, to plan for individual and group sessions, design and plan for need based psycho-social interventions. Also, to create a network and alliance with other important stakeholders. The social work trainees also organized public meetings at the community level to understand the community's needs, issues and the scope of working with children from parents and community leaders view point. The meeting with the children's parents and discussion with community key stakeholders helped in developing an understanding of the social context and complexities existing in the field setting. The socio-economic profiling of the community was carried out to learn about children's background, their needs and the scope of interventions.

Community Based Intervention to Enhance Well-being

The CCAW implemented a plan of interventions to enhance well-being among adolescents in the community with a comprehensive and tailored approach. Intervention included a variety of activities such as conducting workshops and awareness sessions on health education, establishing counselling services or support groups to provide a safe space for discussing emotional well-being, collaborating with educational organizations to provide space to demonstrate the talent of children, arrangement of scholarships and economic assistance for children in need, vocational training opportunities, creating after-school programs to support academic performance, guidance for skill development to enhance employability, organizing community events and recreational activities to foster a sense of belonging and community support, encourage adolescents to participate in cultural, sports, or artistic activities to promote social connections. The CCAW initiated a talent show which aimed at presenting the talent of children of marginalised sections at the university level, and a summer camp was organised to provide equal opportunity for learning and development of children in underprivileged section children. The registered children were given the opportunity and guidance to participate in various developmental activities to learn new skills and demonstrate their potential and talent at a more significant level. This was done to build up confidence among children and to channel their energy towards positive growth. The children were awarded at the department level by university officials, all faculty members, students, research scholars, teachers of schools, and parents who attended the programme to motivate the children. The overall activities that are carried out by the CCAW team are aimed at fostering positive cognitive images in children and adolescents to build up a strong foundation for their overall growth and development.

Celebration as a Responsible Citizen

The CCAW organized a session in Indra Basti, New Delhi focusing on promoting a Green Deepwali to raise awareness for a healthy and eco-friendly celebration, with the theme “Green Deepawali, Healthy Deepawali”. The adolescent-age children were educated about the significance of opting for eco-friendly decorations and fireworks and minimizing air and noise pollution. The initiative also focused on promoting the adoption of healthy eating habits and encouraging children to spend quality time with family during the Deepawali holiday. Trainees engaged in various activities, including designing awareness posters, conducting an oath-taking program for children, and facilitating a question and awareness session on the benefits of a good environment. Emphasis was placed on cultural celebration and fostering a collaborative spirit within communities. Additionally, a drawing competition centered on the Green Deepawali theme provided a platform for children to showcase their talents. Responding to the children’s needs, the

social work trainees organized a Green Deepawali Campaign March to spread awareness in the community for eco-friendly Deepawali. The campaign extended to Central Institute of Education's Experimental School, University of Delhi and Masoom Special School, Timarpur, New Delhi. Impact was assessed post the campaign, intervention showed the potential to create a holistic impact, encompassing environmental, health, educational, cultural, and social dimensions. The long-term effects may contribute to sustainable and positive changes within the community and schools.

Awareness on Menstrual Health and Hygiene

In many slum areas, residents face economic challenges, limiting their access to essential resources. The CCAW trainees conducted a comprehensive survey within the community, engaging in extensive conversations with adolescents to understand their Menstrual Hygiene Practices and the sanitary products they typically use during menstruation. The survey results suggest that a large proportion of adolescents lack basic health education, including information about menstrual hygiene. Most of the girls were school dropouts or had never enrolled in the mainstream educational institution. By conducting awareness programs, individuals learnt about the importance of maintaining good menstrual hygiene for their overall health and well-being, promoting a more open and understanding attitude towards menstrual health. Subsequently, CCAW partnered with HLL Lifecare Limited to offer women affordable and environmentally friendly sanitary pads. Through collaboration with HLL Lifecare Limited, two women in the community were provided help and support to sell 'Happy Days' low-cost sanitary napkins, aimed to introduce self-employment opportunities and make sanitary pads accessible to underprivileged individuals at a nominal cost. Trainees also got the opportunity to grasp and implement the principles of social entrepreneurship within the community.

Connecting to Education with Employability Skills

The CCAW trainees took proactive steps by identifying adolescents who had discontinued their education after high school. In a strategic move towards community development, they initiated a collaboration with the Tech Mahindra Foundation to offer nearly free training in the medical sector for those interested in pursuing a career in this field. A pivotal aspect of this collaboration was the foundation's commitment to ensuring 100% job placement for individuals enrolled in the training program. The Community Center for Adolescent Well-being (CCA) played a crucial role in facilitating this collaboration between the Tech Mahindra Foundation and the members of the community. By directly engaging with both parties, CCAW streamlined the process, ensuring that community members had access to valuable educational and employment opportunities in the medical sector. This initiative not only addressed the issue of high school dropouts

but also opened doors for skill development and meaningful employment, contributing to the overall empowerment and well-being of the community.

Learning through observation and Exposure visit

The CCAW, committed to enriching the cognitive experiences of the underprivileged children, it organized a highly beneficial exposure visit to Rashtrapati Bhavan (Presidential Palace) on the occasion of Constitution Day of India. During this outing, the team of CCAW accompanied the children to provide them with a unique and educational opportunity to explore the iconic landmark. The visit included a well-guided tour, offering valuable insights into the historical and cultural significance of Rashtrapati Bhavan. To ensure the success of this venture, the CCAW trainee meticulously conducted research on various aspects of the visit. This encompassed planning the most suitable mode of transportation, making thoughtful considerations for lunch arrangements, and conducting pre-visit and post-visit assessments of the children. By taking such comprehensive measures, the trainees aimed to optimize the overall experience, ensuring that every aspect of the outing was well-organized, enjoyable, and aligned with the educational objectives of the exposure visit. This initiative not only provided the adolescent with a memorable and educational trip but also provided opportunity to learn through exposure, enhancing the well-being. During the exposure visit, the children pledged to the principles outlined in our constitution, committing themselves to being responsible and committed citizens. The pledge emphasizes that despite their circumstances, these adolescents are full citizens with equal rights and responsibilities that enshrined in the Constitution of India. Through the pledge, CCAW promoted the education about children fundamental rights like protection against discrimination and access to education and healthcare. It also connected adolescents with opportunities to learn volunteering and contributing to community improvement projects. This excursion proved as a meaningful and empowering experience that can be translated into tangible actions for improving the well-being of adolescents in the community.

Debate Club Formation to promote critical thinking, communication and self-confidence

The CCAW initiative of forming a debate club at school fosters growth and development for children. It aimed to promote critical thinking, communication, and self-confidence while creating a space for respectful dialogue and constructive discourse. These advantages extend beyond the classroom, equipping children with valuable skills and experiences that benefit them throughout their lives. CCAW established an adolescent debate club that actively engaged in events commemorating World AIDS Day, International Day for Persons with Disabilities, and Mahaparinirvana Divas of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, aligning their discussions with the specific themes

of these significant days. The debate around gender sensitisation, gender equality, communal harmony, child rights etc. helped in strengthening critical thinking skills, which are crucial for problem-solving, academic success, and informed decision-making in all aspects of life. It has also honed the presentation skills among the adolescents by providing a platform to develop clear and concise arguments, persuasive delivery, and effective communication skills.

CONCLUSION

The present paper aims to elucidate how community based interventions may contribute to enhance the overall well-being of children and adolescents. The experiential learning, planned interventions through community based extension project and outcome based results hold the potential to guide social work educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in investing in the holistic development of children and adolescents within community settings. The CCAW case study presented the scope of social work intervention for positive and healthy growth of children for their overall well-being. Through a yearlong activity calendar for children, the trainees of social work were assigned diverse tasks aimed at fostering well-being within the target population. Sessions on environmental awareness, empowering adolescent girls, promoting physical health and cleanliness, encouraging civic engagement and critical thinking, as well as fostering community cohesion and cultural appreciation found helpful in promoting and enhancing positive well-being. Working with children is an important area within social work domain, this opportunity can be utilised to enhance cognitive development of children, the tools to navigate challenges, make informed choices, and develop a strong foundation for personal growth, which can contribute not only to their immediate well-being but also to build strong foundation for future growth and development. With this aim, the Centre for Child and Adolescent Well-Being (CCA), Department of Social Work at the University of Delhi within its scope offers learning platform for social work students, the opportunity to explore various facets of fieldwork, to work along with values and principles, to relate classroom theory with field practice, to develop skills and competencies required at field setting, to plan and execute field based interventions through network and alliance with other important stakeholders.

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Effect of Field Supervision and Support System in Enhancing the Quality of Field Practicum in Social Work Education

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Abstract

Fieldwork practicum is critical in social work education for shaping MSW students into professional social workers. An ineffective fieldwork practicum deteriorates the quality of social work education. Because fieldwork practicum helps the trainees to experiment the acquired theoretical knowledge in real-world situations. Hence, this study examined the improvements necessary to bring a practical fieldwork practicum syllabus. For this, the paper examined the 'activities' performed and the 'support system' received by trainees during their fieldwork practicum.

The study used an explanatory research design by conducting an online survey among 100 Master of Social Work trainees from Kerala. The variables selected to evaluate the effectiveness of the fieldwork practicum were Fieldwork activities carried out, Support systems, and Social work skills acquired. The hierarchical linear regression test revealed that the activities of the trainees and their support systems played a significant role in acquiring better social work skills during fieldwork. The mediation analysis revealed that the 'support system' is a decisive factor in developing one's social work skills while performing different 'activities' during fieldwork.

Keywords: *Social Work Education, Field Work Practicum, Mediation Analysis, Field Supervision and Social Work Skill.*

INTRODUCTION

The International Federation of Social Workers stated, "Social work is a game changer that finds positive ways forward in challenging situations. They help people build the kind of environments in which they want to live

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through co-determination, co-production and social responsibility. Economic health cannot be achieved without social health” (IFSW, n.d.). Thus, social work can be considered a discipline and a profession. Social work is obliged to bring social change, empowerment, and conscientisation among individuals, groups, and communities (Eriksson & Bjerger, 2019). The tenets of the profession are executed through trained professional social workers. While considering the story of India, professional social work training was started in 1936 in limited institutions. However, in recent times, many institutions were mushroomed recently, majorly in the private sector. The Second UGC Committee in 1978 suggested the need of government-oriented social work education against this extensive commercialisation. They identified three core issues faced in social work education: the curriculum, teacher-student ratio, and fieldwork. They pointed out the flaws in approaches adopted by the distance mode of social work education in fieldwork and classroom learning (Siddiqui, 2015) (Nair, 1981). They also suggested strengthening the fieldwork practicum by including ‘Faculty Development Programmes’ for academicians who engaged in fieldwork training (University Grants Commission, 1991).

Currently, the social work education has two components, i) Classroom Learning and ii) Fieldwork Practicum. The theories, values, methods and ethics related social work profession are introduced in the classroom learning sessions (Singh, 2015). These sessions provide in-depth understanding about the social work discipline, methods and approaches used in social work profession, skills, values & ethics embodied in social work profession and so on. The learnings from the classroom session are practice in the fieldwork practicum sessions, the second component. This provides wide exposure and then experience to the trainees by allowing them to mingle with professional social workers from different areas—medical, community, children, women, transgender, etc. (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998)

Fieldwork Practicum

Brown and Gloyne, in 1966 has, defined the fieldwork practicum as “Any kind of practical experience in a social organisation or agency if this experience has been deliberately arranged for the education of students who are undertaking courses partly or wholly designed for those who intend to become social workers” (Brown & Gloyne, 1966). Various previous literatures stated that fieldwork practicum is very important factor in social work education (Horejsi & Garthwait, 2002) (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2002). The fieldwork practicum helps the social work trainees practise what they learned in theories in the classroom sessions (Bellefeuille & Hemingway, 2006) (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Thus, it is evident that fieldwork practicum plays a crucial role in attaining different social work competencies and skills required during the trainees’ professional lives.

As mentioned earlier, many have highlighted the need of fieldwork practicum in social work education. Dean Schneck (1995) stated that “Field practice can and should be an equal covariable in the determination of the agenda for education” and “Knowledge can inform practice, but practice can reform knowledge”. Secondly, Bogo and Vayda (1991) pointed out that “One factor leading to the improvement of social service delivery is the transfer of new knowledge and service methods to the service providers, and that the interface of field teachers with the professional schools of social work is one avenue for such a transfer”. Hence, the social work institution considers fieldwork practicum an important factor. The institution ensures a fruitful relationship between trainees and the fieldwork institutions as part of the fieldwork practicum. Thus, it can be inferred that the fieldwork institution acts as a bridge between trainees and the members of the community (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

During the fieldwork practicum period, the social work trainees face many constraints, and the work pressure from the fieldwork agency is one such. Because many fieldwork institutions use social work trainees to execute their work, they use this to reduce their scarce human resources, i.e., certificated employees, which also saves their money and resources. Secondly, the clients are facing problems with the fieldwork institution’s work since the trainees working on the task are not competent to deal with the critical situations of the clients. Thirdly, there is work pressure from educational institutions. All training institutions follow a particular curriculum framework, under which the trainees have to complete different activities listed in the fieldwork practicum syllabus. Most of the time, the trainees do not get enough time to finish all those things. However, the institutions never consider these reasons for non-completion of the work. Fundraising is another constraint faced by the social work trainees, the fourth limitation during their fieldwork time. Since the students have to spend the expenses from their pockets, they are prevented from doing many other activities (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997). The last constraint the social work trainee faces during the fieldwork practicum is the inability to join with any reputed fieldwork institutions. The educational institutions do not make an attempt to place their trainees in any reputed fieldwork agencies. The fieldwork trainees are believed to get better experiences only if they get opportunities to work with good fieldwork institutions.

The activities planned and carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork practicum are very important for attaining many qualities required for a professional social worker. Hence, the fieldwork curriculum always tries to include activities like orientation visits, rural camps, concurrent field visits, Internships, and block placements in their schedule.

These activities help the trainees to understand various duties and roles, skills, and competencies needed to be played by a social worker during their professional life. The Orientation Visits are activities set up by an educational institution immediately after the induction program to introduce the major initiatives carried out as part of the social work discipline. This provides an idea about the nature of the social work profession. The second one is the Rural camp, which is also organised by the institution through which the trainees get exposure with a particular community namely, a tribal community, a disaster-affected community, a vulnerable community or a slum. The trainees must stay there and work with them for a particular period. The third one is the Concurrent Field Work in which the trainees have to work in a social work agency along with their daily theory classes. This gives them many opportunities to practice what they are learning in their theory classes. Finally, the Block Placement/Internship is a complete field activity where the trainees continuously work in a fieldwork agency for a particular period and practice what they learned during their classroom sessions. The name of these programs would change in accordance with educational institutions or curriculum programs however, the intention behind those programs is the same everywhere.

The study has identified three components: Activities carried out in the field, support system and skills acquired from the field to satisfy the fieldwork practicum's ultimate aim—transform a social work trainee into a professional social worker.

Activities Carried Out in the Field:

The 'Activities Carried Out' are tasks done by the trainees during their fieldwork time. This plays a crucial role in determining the impact of the fieldwork practicum. If the trainee cannot perform these activities properly during their practicum period, they may lack understanding of various roles, duties, skills and competencies required for a social worker. However, engaging in various tasks during fieldwork enables them to grasp the diverse skills, values, techniques, and methods integral to the profession (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

The activities carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork period can be categorised into three levels, i.e., at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. At the micro-level, the trainees are introduced to an individual or family to interact, identify their problems and find solutions. This is called Casework in Social Work. Ideally, social casework is a primary method used in social work to solve the problems of an individual using techniques of restoring, controlling and social functioning. This is considered as a one-to-one activity (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Perlman, 1957). At mezzo level, the trainees are introduced to a group where they identify their problems and

solve their problems, called Group work. Group work is a primary method used in social work which deals the problem of small groups. The members of this group should be limited, and they must possess similar kinds of problems to solve. Even though group work activities are related to small groups, the resultant outcome is expected from each individual in that group (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Brown A. , 2017). Finally, at the macro level, the trainee interacts with a community, works with them, identifies their problems and suggests solutions. The Social Work discipline called it as Community Organisation (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Parmar, 2014). When the trainees practice at these levels, they get an opportunity to acquire various social work skills, values, and roles. In addition to these methods, there are three more methods in social work discipline: Social Work Research, Social Action and Social Welfare Administration.

This paper checks the promptness possessed by the trainees in doing the above activities. This is checked by assessing the frequency of practising the below six items. A Five point scale is used for checking the frequency of practices such as Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Almost Every Time and Every Time. The items are listed in the below table:

Table 1: Items in Activities Carried Out

Sl. No.	Practising Items	Tool Used
	Skills	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Values	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Roles	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Casework	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Group work	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Community Organisation	5-Point Scale (Likert)

Support System

The rookie trainees are ignorant about the nature of social work as a subject and a discipline. They get only limited information from the classroom sessions. The fieldwork practicum is an effective way to solve all the problems faced by the trainees because it help them to suss the reality in the profession and challenges behind it. However, a disciplined action is required during the fieldwork period in order to achieve it. The social work training institutions and fieldwork institution are the two agencies help them to practice the fieldwork in a disciplined way. The activities carried out by trainees during their fieldwork are assessed by the faculty member of the educational institution and the supervisor in the fieldwork agency. The collaborative work of these two parties ensure the successful accomplishment of the fieldwork practicum by the trainees (Singh, 2015). The faculty supervisor evaluates the amount of knowledge acquired by the

trainees during their field experiences, specifically the activities carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork period, to practice the theoretical concepts in practical settings. As the curriculum coordinators, they also oversee the overall performances of trainees throughout the practicum period (Doel & Shardlow, 2012) (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

However, the fieldwork agency supervisor is responsible for monitoring the tasks assigned by the agency during their fieldwork period. As an agency's representative, these supervisors closely monitor the activities carried out by the trainees, assess their performance, and provide corrections when necessary. Finally, the agency supervisor evaluates the trainees' strengths and weaknesses in the field and communicates them to the educational institution for further corrections (Doel & Shardlow, 2012) (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

This paper test the level of support received by the trainees during their fieldwork practicum period. The support from the training institution and support from the fieldwork agency is checked using 5 point Likert scale. The checkpoints used are Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Always. The components selected in the support system is tabled below:

Table 2: Items in Support System

Sl. No.	Support Provided	Tool Used
	From Educational Institution	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	From Fieldwork Agency	5-Point Scale (Likert)

Skills:

The ultimate aim of fieldwork practicum is to attain the necessary skills required for professional social workers. 'Skills' are the systematic and methodical approaches to performing activities effectively to achieve the desired outcomes (Arnoult, 1959). The social work discipline uses multiple theories from other disciplines to develop these skills. Hence, practitioners have to use appropriate theories from their knowledge base and wisdom wisely to address specific issues. This can be attained by understanding various theoretical perspectives like Humanistic, Managerial, Critical, Behavioral, and Psychodynamic frameworks. Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012 identified some essential skills required for a social worker, such as Empathy, Organizational Skills, Critical Thinking, and Active Listening (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Additionally, the study identified some general skills required for the social worker, i.e., documentation and presentation skills.

Firstly, empathy is a skill used by the social worker to deal with the problems of clients in a casework setting, developed under the humanistic

approach (Karpets, 2017). This skill can be used to identify one person's problem and suggest a proper solution. Using this skill, serious problems of clients can be addressed (Spratt & Callan, 2004) (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines empathy as the ability of one person to perceive, understand, experience, and respond to another person's emotional state. Secondly, the Organisational or Managerial Skills that are important for social workers to carry out their duties professionally and systematically. This skill improves the efficiency and accountability of social workers while they deliver services to others (Lees, Meyer, & Rafferty, 2013).

Thirdly, Active Listening skill which is a critical skill that acts as a gateway to enter the problems of a client (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). This skill helps the social workers to ask insightful questions to clients or groups. The reflective answers of the clients/groups are critical in identifying the nature of client or group problems. A skilled active listener can easily overcome the resistance from clients and encourage them to initiate communication about their concerns. Therefore, active listening skills go beyond merely hearing the words spoken by clients; it provide insights through gestures, actions, feelings, and thoughts of the clients/groups (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Finally, the Critical Thinking skill which is an advanced skill required for a professional social worker to effectively address and resolve the issues of a client/group. Critical thinking skills are an effective way to understand extrinsic factors like power, oppression, discrimination, etc. These extrinsic factors may impede the intervention process while dealing with client/group problems (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Hence, the social worker has to be very careful while selecting the necessary theories and approaches to use critical thinking skills (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009).

In addition to the above-mentioned skills, the social workers need two general skills. The first one is the Documentation skill, which is essential for safeguarding clients' and social workers' legal and ethical rights. Proper documentation brings scope for future research by preserving records, photographs, video recordings, and similar materials. The documentation follows a structured procedural code by incorporating chronological reports, summary accounts of client interactions, and detailed process reports that outline all activities related to clients (Eliot, 1928). For a trainee social worker, the documentation process helps gain insights into the practices employed by professional social workers in the past (Reamer, 2005). The second skill is Presentation skill, which is essential for a social worker to convey ideas, problems, and solutions in an organised way.

Through this study, the researcher tries to identify the level of attainment of various skills during the fieldwork practicum period that are

necessary for a professional social worker. The study used a 5-point Likert scale to identify this. The options used in the scale were Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Always. The components used to assess the overall Skills are mentioned in the below table:

Table 3: Items in Skill Attainment Conceptual Framework

Sl. No	Skills Learned	Tool Selected
	Empathy	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Organisation	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Active Listening	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Critical Thinking	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Documentation	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Presentation	5-Point Scale (Likert)

The effectiveness of current curriculum in strengthening fieldwork practicum in MSW training is being assessed by evaluating three variables identified by the researcher. These variables include 'activities carried out' (V1), 'support system' (V2), and 'skills attained' (V3). Each variable is further analysed through various sub-variables to gauge its impact on the overall fieldwork experience and the professional development of MSW trainees.

To develop the first variable, 'Activities Carried Out' (V1), the researcher scrutinised the fundamental components of social work education, encompassing Skills (Sv1), values (Sv2), and roles (Sv3) incumbent upon trainees during fieldwork training. Additionally, the researcher assessed the application of three primary social work methods: case work (Sv4), group work (Sv5), and community organisation (Sv6) which practiced during fieldwork training. For evaluating the second variable, 'support system' (V2), the researcher identified the extent of support received by trainees from both the educational institution (Sv7) and the fieldwork agency (Sv8).

Finally, the researcher formulated the last variable, 'The skills attained' (V3), by evaluating the proficiency levels attained by trainees during

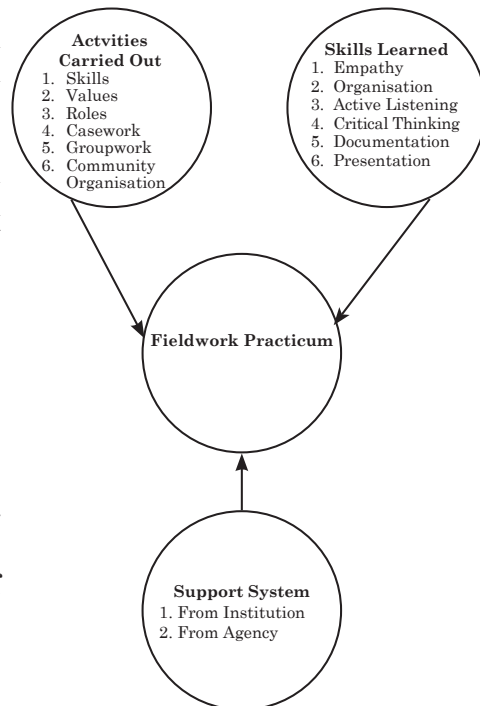


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

fieldwork training. These encompass a range of skills including empathy (Sv9), organisational skills (Sv10), active listening skills (Sv11), critical thinking skills (Sv12), documentation skills (Sv13), and presentation skills (Sv14).

During the analysis, the researcher investigated the influence of Variable 1 (V1) on enhancing Variable 3 (V3) during the implementation of fieldwork practicum. Additionally, the researcher explored the mediating effect of Variable 2 (V2) in enhancing Variable 3 (V3).

Methodology

This study investigates the effectiveness of fieldwork practicum in enhancing practical knowledge within the social work profession. Three key components of the fieldwork practicum are scrutinised: i) activities during fieldwork, ii) available support systems during fieldwork practice, and iii) skills acquired through fieldwork practice. The literature has successfully stated that a successful fieldwork practicum is essential for a successful social work practice. Thus, this study progresses through the assumption that activities by the trainees and support received during the fieldwork practicum are directly associated with their skill acquisition. Hence, the study considered the activities carried out by the trainees as the independent variable and the skills acquired by trainees as the dependent variable. Alongside this, the researcher investigated the mediating role played by the 'support system' in improving skill acquisition.

The researcher conducted an inquiry study to test the stated assumptions. Hence, the researcher employed an explanatory research design in a pragmatic paradigm and adopted a quantitative approach. The researcher used a survey method for the data collection, which was collected from 100 MSW trainees belonging to the 2019-21 and 2020-2022 batches. The survey was administered using a self-designed scale through an online platform, Google Forms. This study was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, the students got guidance through online platforms, many students faced challenges in getting regular guidance. In order to validate the assumptions, the researcher employed two statistical tests: hierarchical linear regression and mediation analysis technique. All statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi, an open-source software.

Analysis

In this section, the researcher endeavours to validate the assumptions outlined in the methodology. The session unfolds in three sections: first, a presentation of the respondents' socio-demographic details; second, the execution of hierarchical linear regression aimed at predicting the influence exerted by the independent variables on enhancing the dependent variable;

and third, an assessment employing mediation testing to evaluate the mediating impact of the support system received by trainees during their fieldwork practicum.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this study, 100 MSW trainees participated, with 78 percent being female and 22 percent male. Upon assessing the nature of institutions, the researcher identified three categories based on administration and financial support: Government Institutions, Government-Aided Institutions, and Private Institutions. It was observed that 53 percent of respondents were from aided institutions, 28 percent from private institutions, and 19 percent from government institutions. Regarding the social category of respondents, 69 percent were from the General Category, 28 percent from the OBC Category, while only 3 percent represented the SC (Scheduled Caste) Category, with no participants from the Scheduled Tribe Category.

Predicting the Influence of Activities and Support Systems on Skill Attainment in Fieldwork Practicum

In order to predict the role played by different activities and support system in a fieldwork practicum in developing social work skills necessary for a professional social worker. This is assessed with a hierarchical multiple regression test in which the level of *Skill Attainment* (V_3) by the social work trainees as the dependent variable (DV) and '*Activities Carried Out*' in the field (V_1) and '*Support System*' (V_2) as the independent variables (IV). The regression test performed in two blocks, i.e., Block 1—*Activities Carried Out* (IV_1) and Block 2—*Activities Carried Out* (IV_1) & *Support System* (IV_2). The result of the tests were explained in the below:

Model Fit Measures

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Table (Model Fit Measurement)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.652	0.426	0.42	72.6	1	98	<.001
2	0.696	0.484	0.473	45.5	2	97	<.001

The result showed that both the models in the test showed a statistically significant result. The *Activities Carried Out* (Block 1) has explained a 42.6% variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*, i.e., $R^2 = 0.426$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.420$, $F(1, 98) = 72.6$, $p < 0.01$. However, the *Activities Carried out & Support System* jointly showed 47.3% of variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*, i.e., $R^2 = 0.484$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.473$, $F(1, 97) = 45.5$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 4)

Model Comparisons

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression (Model Comparison)

Model	Model	ΔR^2	F	df1	df2	p
1	2	0.0583	11	1	97	0.001

In the model comparison, 5.8% of additional variance, i.e., $R^2_{Change} = 0.058$, $F_{Changes}(1, 97) = 10.966$, $p = 0.001$ which explain that the inclusion of *Support System* brought additional variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*. The below table explains the variance of each predictor (independent variables) in the regression model (Table 5).

Model Coefficients - Skills

Table 6: Hierarchical Regression (Model Coefficients)

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		t	p
			Lower	Upper		
Intercept	13.309	3.364	6.632	19.99	3.96	<.001
Practice	0.529	0.096	0.338	0.72	5.51	<.001
Support	0.736	0.222	0.295	1.178	3.31	0.001

The above table describe the effect of each variable (*Activities Carried out & Support System*) in the independent variable (*Skill Attained*). It shows that both the dependent variable shows statistically significant effect on the independent variable (Table 6).

The Mediating Role of Support Systems in Enhancing Skill Attainment during Fieldwork Practicum

The researcher aimed to evaluate the mediating effect of the support system while trainees performed various activities to acquire better social work skills during fieldwork practicum. A mediation analysis was employed for this assessment, where the Activities Carried Out (Practice) served as the Outcome variable (Independent Variable), Skills Attained (Skills) as the Predictor variable (Dependent Variable), and the Support System (Support) as the selected Mediating variable (Catalyst). This relationship is summarised in the following diagram.

Table 7: Mediation Analysis Table

	Coefficient	Std. Error	z Value	p Value
Total Effect				
Practice => Skills	0.709	0.082	8.610	0.000
Direct Effect				
Practice => Support	0.244	0.036	6.850	0.000

Support => Skills	0.736	0.219	3.360	0.001
Practice => Skills	0.529	0.095	5.590	0.000
Indirect Effect				
Practice => Skills	0.180	0.060	3.020	0.003

Total Effect= Effect of IV on DV without the effect of mediating variable; **Direct Effect**= Effect of IV on DV in the presence of mediating variable; **Indirect Effect**= The effect of IV on DV through the mediating variable

The mediation analysis revealed several significant findings. Firstly, the total effect of 'activities' on 'skills' attainment was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.709$, $SE = 0.082$, $z = 8.610$, $p < 0.001$). Secondly, the direct effect of 'activities' on 'support' was also significant ($\beta = 0.244$, $SE = 0.036$, $z = 6.850$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that engagement in 'activities' influenced the level of 'support' received. Additionally, the direct effect of 'support' on 'skills' attainment was significant ($\beta = 0.736$, $SE = 0.219$, $z = 3.360$, $p = 0.001$), demonstrating that the support system positively impacted 'skills' acquisition. Moreover, when considering the mediation pathway, the effect of 'activities' on skills attainment through the support system was significant ($\beta = 0.529$, $SE = 0.095$, $z = 5.590$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the mediating role of the support system. Finally, the indirect effect of 'activities' on 'skills' attainment through the 'support system' was also significant ($\beta = 0.180$, $SE = 0.060$, $z = 3.020$, $p = 0.003$), further underscoring the importance of the support system in facilitating skills development during fieldwork practicum.

Here, a diagrammatic representation of the mediation assessment is displayed.

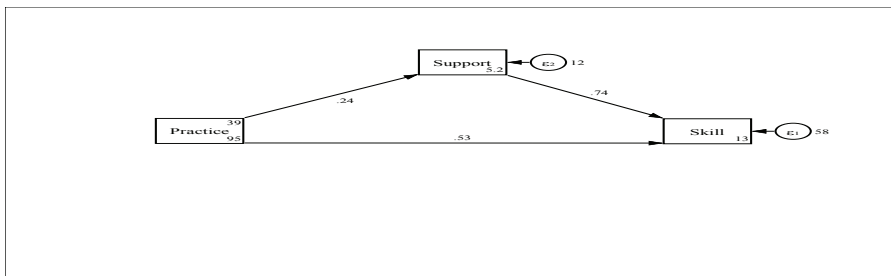


Figure 2: Mediation Diagram

Practice= Independent Variable (Var. Name: Activities Carried Out); Skills= Dependent Variable (Var. Name: Skills Acquired); Support= Mediating Variable (Var. Name: Support System)

The mediation analysis revealed a significant correlation between the 'activities' undertaken by MSW trainees during their fieldwork training

and the 'skills' they acquired. It was established that engaging in various activities had a notable net effect on skill development, underscoring the importance of diversifying activities for enhancing skill acquisition. The total effect of including different 'activities' for social work 'skill' attainment was substantial, highlighting the necessity of incorporating different activities in the field work practicum for enhancement of social work skills. Furthermore, the direct influence of 'activities' performed during the fieldwork practicum on 'skill' acquisition was elucidated, indicating the supportive role of institutions and agencies in influencing these variables. Moreover, the direct impact of the support system on skill acquisition acquires their significance in augmenting skill attainment during the fieldwork practicum.

Consequently, the mediation pathway indicated that the connection between activities carried out during the fieldwork practicum and the attainment of skills was partially mediated by the support system. Thus, it is evident that the support system acted as a facilitator in promoting the skill development of MSW trainees during the fieldwork practicum. In summary, these findings underscored the interplay among activities, support systems, and skill attainment within the framework of fieldwork practicum in social work education.

Results

The above analysis found the pivotal roles played by the "activities" and the "support system" in a fieldwork practicum in fostering the development of "skills" essential for a professional social worker. Using two statistical assessments, the researcher substantiated these findings. The first assessment, hierarchical regression, affirmed that the "activities" undertaken and the "support" received by MSW trainees during fieldwork practice significantly contribute to the inculcation of requisite social work skills. The results showed that the 'activities' performed by trainees accounted for a 42 per cent impact on skill development, which was further increased to 47 per cent when the 'support system' was included. These results revealed that properly planned 'activities' during fieldwork practicum are imperative for improving social work skills. Hence, the trainees should be encouraged to incorporate activities related to primary and secondary methods in social work along with their fieldwork activities. This will foster the inculcation of various social work skills in MSW trainees.

The second assessment, the mediation analysis, declared that during the fieldwork, enhanced support from educational institutions and fieldwork agencies is essential for social work skill acquisition. Hence, the supervisor's support in the form of guidance and monitoring is an obligatory factor during the fieldwork practicum period. This support

should be comprehensive and should extend from the planning of 'activities' to its evaluation. The support comes mainly from two groups: educational institutions and fieldwork agencies. Educational institutions provide theoretical support for trainees' activities. The fieldwork agencies facilitate exposure to what they learned from the theory through various activities in the field, which ultimately leads to their professional development. Therefore, the study concluded that the efficacy of both these groups determines the strength of the 'support system'.

Therefore, all social work educational institutions should keep some guidelines on rules, regulations, and directions to the supervisors, students and fieldwork agencies for better fieldwork practices. Hence, the educational institution must ensure the trainee's engagement in various activities provided by the fieldwork agencies in all social work methods, techniques, and skills. Additionally, the institutions must ensure that the selected fieldwork agencies have the proper exposure in different social work settings and can provide proper guidance, support, and monitoring to those activities.

Finally, the study addressed the case of online/distance mode of MSW training by considering that they follow a different training method against traditional training. Since distance/online education programs allow the flexibility of pursuing the course at one's own convenience, a different approach should be taken to ensure a proper support system to enhance the quality of fieldwork practicum. In this case, a unique fieldwork practicum curriculum should be designed which must ensure the exposure of trainees in various activities that can develop social work skills. The curriculum should permit only those fieldwork agencies with proper stakes on ongoing projects. In addition, the study centre should appoint a supervisor for each trainee, who must review the trainees' activities to ensure comprehensive skill acquisition. The supervisor should regularly contact the fieldwork agencies to ensure that they receive necessary support. If the agencies fail to provide the necessary support to the trainees, the supervisor has to reassign them into an appropriate institution.

Conclusion

The study "The Mediating Role of Support Systems in Fieldwork Practice of Social Work Education" examined the effectiveness of fieldwork practicum in transforming MSW trainees into professional social workers. This study assumed that the cause-effect relationship between variables such as the 'activities' in the fieldwork, the 'level of support' received, and the 'skills' attained would help to improve the efficacy of a fieldwork practicum.

An explanatory research design and survey method was adopted to validate these assumptions. For this purpose, the researcher developed a self-prepared scale and administered it among 100 MSW trainees from Kerala. For the analysis, the researcher administered two statistical assessments: hierarchical linear regression and mediation analysis.

The study found that the 'activities' carried out by trainees during the fieldwork practicum positively affected the development of their social work 'skills'. The 'support system' of the trainees is also an important factor in developing their social work skills. Therefore, while upgrading the curriculum related to fieldwork practicum, both the 'activities carried out' by the trainees and the 'support system' provided should be considered. Hence, the study suggests that for a skilful professional social work generation, curriculum framers should design a fieldwork practicum syllabus by considering all these factors for all the regular, online, or distance modes.

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Portrayal of Women Characters in OTT Platforms: A Gendered Analysis

Tanwi Suman¹, Dr. Rahul Kapoor²

Abstract

Use of digital platforms accelerated in India much later than the west but gained prominence in a much shorter span of time, transcending various metrics in the world of digitization. The portrayal of women in cinema has always been a point of contention. The participation, performance and portrayal of women through the male gaze has raised questions of concerns time and again. With the advent of streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Zee5 and many others streaming services, along with their original content, web series culture in India is seen as a fresh way of narrating women's stories, showcasing their realities. The emergence of OTT platforms has been able to break gender stereotype notions and have presented a new and refreshing way of presenting women characters and their stories. Women have struggled to find a space for themselves in every field and cinema has been no different. This paper has analysed some of the women-centric web series and parallel cinema through a gendered lens.

Keywords: *Women, Media, Representation, OTT, Gender Stereotypes, Cinema*

INTRODUCTION

The way women are portrayed in the media shows how this whole system revolves around objectification of women, is a harsh reality. For the creators in field of media, women are no more than sex object; the reality of women's lives are far away from what has been shown in cinema. Movies can never be seen distinct from society as they do not exist in isolation. Women's representation is a topic of constant debate. The participation of women, their portrayal and performance are concern for many feminist

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thinkers. Classic feminist writers such as Shulamite Firestone, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Gallagher and Betty Friedman argued that the media reinforces the stereotype of women as docile, submissive and inferior, believing that they are only house-wives who lacks the agency of decision making. In context of India, some of the renowned feminist thinkers like Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Kiran Prasad have spoken against the biased representation of women in visual and print media (Patowary, 2014).

The landscape of movies has witnessed enormous change. With the advent of social media and digital platform, Indian population geared up very soon towards various online platforms and viewership has increased manifold. Over-the-top (OTT) platforms emerged as a new era for telling women's stories with refreshing honesty (Wardhan, 2020). OTT is media streaming service which is offered directly to the viewers via the internet. In contrast to television, the internet allows filmmakers to experiment with forms, styles and narratives since it is less constrained by censorship and budgetary restrictions.

This article has analysed how OTT platforms have been able to break gender stereotypes and prejudices notions about women. It has further analysed some of the women-centric web series and parallel cinema. Online platforms are becoming more and more effective tools for rallying viewers' support. With the advent of streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Zee5 and others along with their original content, the web series culture in India is reflecting the realities of women from a new perspective (Wardhan, 2020). The media has a significant impact on individuals and it can become a powerful tool for advocating for women's advancement in society and promoting gender equality.

There have been many women centric movies in the past but this does not imply that they fall under the ambit of women empowerment. Women have struggled to find a space for themselves in every field and cinema has been no different. Women were late entrants in this domain as well. The articles has both analysed OTT platforms through a gendered lens while also highlighting the need of emerging and parallel media like the OTT platforms to squash the existing patriarchal stereotypes which dominated how women are portrayed in films.

Women and OTT

Since the emergence of Covid-19 and nationwide lockdown in India, with movie theatres closed, people tend to spend more time on over-the-top platforms. These platforms are liberating filmmakers and content creators from pressure of superhero kind of thing (The Hindu, 2020). OTT is free

from biases such as women in typical submissive roles always needing a 'superhero' who can protect them from the world. The OTT platforms have brought paradigmatic shift in the content which is not limited to female leading roles. Female characters on these OTT platforms are now portrayed nearer to reality instead of the *aadarsh* bahu/beti and the usual saas-bahu drama. Many women centric contents have been produced which have given space for socio-political debates like in the series *Leila* on Netflix. In the series *Leila*, a dystopian world has been portrayed which is marred by problems arising due to climate change and interfaith marriages. In India, the emergence of digital content started in 2014 with web series. In addition to honouring womanhood, these online series address subjects that are not covered by the mainstream media, like dysfunctional relationships, LGBTQ concerns and diversity in caste ensembles. Web series have tried to normalise sexuality, emphasise gender identity and highlights the struggles and stories of women.

A joint study conducted by IBM Research, India, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Delhi and Delhi Technological University (DTU) that examined, 4000 Bollywood films found that women are never shown as independent characters and are always linked to successful men, whereas men are seen as successful. It has been noticed that in the context of occupation, women are assigned lower-level positions while men are assigned higher-level roles. Similar trends have been seen in centrality, where women play a smaller role in the story than their male counterparts (AAAI, 2018).

OTT platforms are providing relatively more freedom of expression to content creators so that they are now able to bring out female characters from the image of saas-bahu melodrama or vamp vs ideal woman. The content creators are coming up with new and uncensored narratives of women; from their (women's) own perspective. Most of the tales are based either on personal or observed experiences. However, the question of representation of Dalit women is still not addressed in these emerging platforms. Thus, as Margaret Caples in Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) has rightly said "We need to train our girls to think differently about the media, to think about becoming the director, the person who controls the image."

According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Oppressed groups are usually put in such a situation where they being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups"(Collins, 2019). Stereotypes, myths and dominating imagery are ingrained in cinematic cultural texts. It is crucial

to investigate the existence and popularity of these images to analyse their impact on women's development, as they discourage and suppress women.

The phrase "alternative media" refers to media that are positioned against the hegemonic mass media, to be more precise, as counter-hegemonic. It is described as any form of media that either stands in opposition or serves as an alternate to widely accessible and consumed mass media products. Alternative media, according to Michael Tarber, is media that "change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers) but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being" (Traber 1985: 3; also, in Atton 2002: 16).

There is a certain stigma attached to women which expects women to write a specific kind of cinema, so you do not look for an action movie written by a woman since women are expected to write a specific genre of films. We still refer to it these as "women's pictures." If the target audience is female, the image of a so-called woman is always somewhat derogatory (Danquah 1994). Sudarsanam, (2005) discusses the crucial issues brought up during the Beijing Conference 1995 on the mass media's responsibility to stop the negative portrayal of women. According to Sudarsanam, women should be empowered by improving their information technology access, knowledge and skill sets. By doing so, it will be able to put an end to the derogatory representation of women around the world and to address instances of power abuse in the mass media, an increasingly important industry. The Beijing Platform of Action calls for the development of the strategies to end gender-biased programming as well as the creation and reinforcement of the media self-regulation mechanisms. It also implies that women should have more access to and involvement in all forms of media and new communication technologies for the sake of expression and decision making.

Women's Representation and Key Findings

A report conducted by *Thumbs Down 2020: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters* gives a glimpse into the status and portrayal of women in U.S. media. This study examines the portrayal of women in U.S. and those employed by print, broadcast and internet between January and March, 2020 are considered in this research (Lauzen, 2020). This study was first conducted in 2007. The key findings of the report were-

- In the U.S., there are still more men than women working as film reviewers. For every female reviewer, there are nearly 2 male reviewers.
- 34% of reviews were written by women, and 66% by men.

- There is more male reviewer in every job title than female reviewer.
- Men predominate among individuals who write reviews of films in all genres, and they exceed female reviewers in all media outlets except television and radio.
- In every genre, most people who write reviews of film are male.
- Both female and male reviewers of colour remain dramatically underrepresented.
- There are more female protagonists in films evaluated by women than men.
- On average, female reviewers award slightly higher ratings than men to films with female protagonists.
- Women direct more than twice as many of the films reviewed by women as by men.

Adding to another report by Lauzen (2019), *Indie Women: Behind the-Scenes Employment of Women in Independent Film*, 2018-19 provides the insights into women's representation in independent films in U.S.

- For independent films, the proportion of women directors, writers, producers, executive producers and editors hit all-time highs in 2018-19.
- Overall, 32% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers involved in independent filmmaking in 2018-19 were women.
- The proportion of female writers, editors and cinematographers was far higher in films with at least one female director.

In comparison to films with only male directors, films featuring at least one female director had much greater percentages of women working as writers, editors and cinematographers. On films with at least one-woman director, women comprised 72 % of writers. Women made up 11% of the writers who worked on films with just male (Lauzen, 2019).

Table 1: Character Gender Prevalence by Country

Country	Per cent of Female Character	Per cent of Female Leads/Co Leads	Per cent with Balanced Casts	Total Number of Characters
Australia	29.8	40	0	386
Brazil	37.1	20	20	423
China	35	40	30	514

France	28.7	0	0	526
Germany	35.2	20	20	443
India	24.9	0	0	493
Japan	26.6	40	0	575
Korea	35.9	50	20	409
Russia	30.3	10	10	522
U.K.	37.9	30	20	454
U.S./U.K.	23.6	0	0	522
U.S.	29.3	30	0	502

Source: Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

The data in Table 1 is taken from the report *Gender Bias Without Borders* (2014). Of the 5,799 speaking or named characters that were assessed, 30.9% were female and 69.1% were male. This translates into a 2.24 male to one female gender ratio. Considering that women make up 49.6% of the global population, this result is a little unexpected. The gender preponderance on screen throughout the sample territories is shown in the above table. The proportion of girls and women in films from the United Kingdom (37.9%), Brazil (37.1), and Korea (34.9%) was significantly greater than the general percentage of females in the sample (30.9%). The films from India (24.9%) and the United States/United Kingdom (23.6%) had the lowest percentages of women and girls on screen.

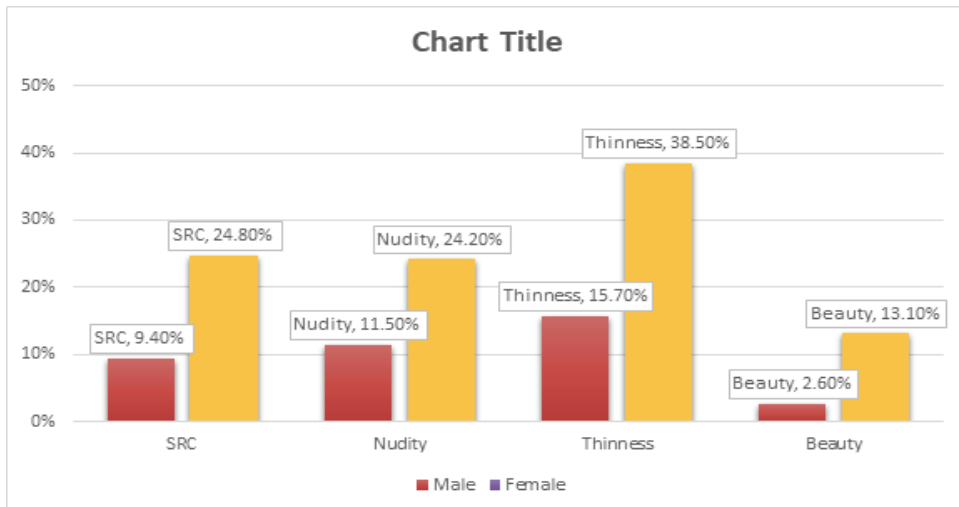


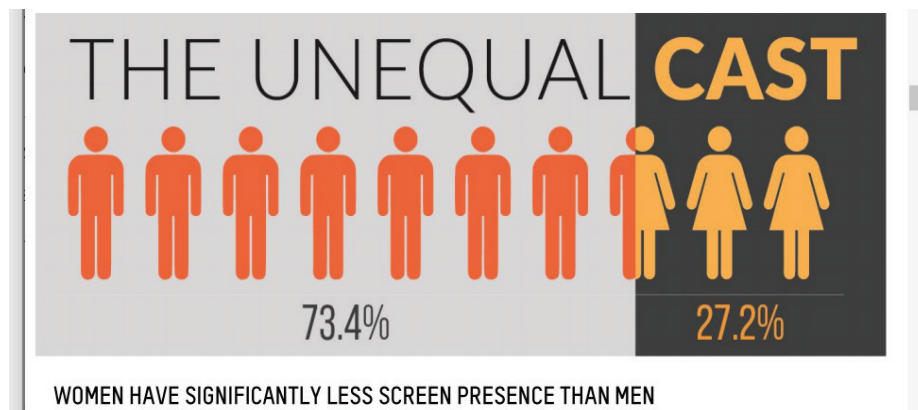
Figure 1: Sexualisation Indicators by Character Gender Worldwide

Source: Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

Concern over the objectification of people is growing on a global scale. The extent to which women and girls are portrayed in the media in an inappropriate and possibly demeaning manner has received a lot of attention. This data, which focusses on four important characteristics—sexually provocative clothing (SRC), nudity, thinness, and beauty—was gathered from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Germany, and Japan for the publication *Gender Bias Without Borders* (2014). There were gender differences in each of these sexualisation markers. Compared to men, women were more than twice as likely to be slender (38.5% vs. 15.7%), partially or completely nude (24.2% vs. 11.5%), and displayed in SRC (24.8% vs. 9.4%). Comments on appearance were made about women (13.1%) five times more often than about men (2.6%).

Similar situation is seen in the Indian media. The proportion of female speaking roles in the highest-grossing films has remained constant over the past 50 years, according to the 2014 report *Gender Bias Without Borders*. A significant portion of entertainment media, the film industry, and advertising campaigns are occupied by female actresses, indicating their apparent prominence. Nevertheless, this frequently does not result in fair and non-objectified portrayal in the movie's plot. According to the survey, out of over 1300 characters, 73.4% are portrayed by male actors, while just 27.2% are portrayed by female actors.

Image 1: Unequal Cast in Indian Cinema



Source: Indian Cinema and Young Viewers' Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

According to the 2018 report *Indian Cinema and Young Viewers' Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women*, women play the lead in 23% of films. Women play a romantic part in 76.7% of films, either as a romantic interest (38.5%) or as a co-lead in a romantic role (37.2%). Approximately 48% of women in leading positions were deemed

to contribute in some way to the plot's advancement. Plots are driven by revenge, retaliation against violence, and romantic roles in around one-third of films.

Image 2: Type of Roles Played by Female Actors



Source: Indian Cinema and Young Viewers' Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

Only 24.9% of Indian films have female leads or co-leads, according to another survey, *Cinema and Society: Shaping our Worldview Beyond the Lens* (2015). Additionally, none of the top 10 highest grossing films of 2014 had a female lead or co-lead. Women are frequently not portrayed in films in positions of authority. Women are hyper-sexualised in Indian films.

Image 3: Objectification of Women Characters



Source: Indian Cinema and Young Viewers Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

According to the 2018 research *Indian Cinema and Young Viewers Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women*, 88% of the films examined objectified women. According to at least one of the indicators created for this study, all of the highest grossing films, especially those

with a predominantly male cast, such as 3 Idiots (2009), Dabangg 2 (2012), Student of the Year (2012), Dhoom 3 (2013), Chennai Express (2013), Krrish 3 (2013), Kick (2014), Happy New Year (2014), and Sultan (2016), objectified women. This included sexist depictions of women wearing skimpy attire, as well as gestures and behaviours that resemble sexual aggression, assault, and harassment. Nearly all these films reinforce ideas of the traditional good woman.

The data in Table 2 is taken from *Gender Bias Without Border* (2014). Of the 1452 filmmakers who could be identified by their gender, 79.5% were men and 20.5% were women. This equates to a 3.9 male to 1 female gender proportion behind the camera. Across the sample, women made up 22.7% of producers, 19.7% of writers, and 7% of directors. The table provides a breakdown of directors, writers, and producers by country.

Table 2: Gender Prevalence Behind the Camera by Country

Country	Directors	Writers	Producers	Gender Ratio
Australia	8.3%	33.3%	29.4%	2.5 to 1
Brazil	9.1%	30.8%	47.2%	1.7 to 1
China	16.7%	21.4%	25.3%	3.1 to 1
France	0%	6.7%	13.6%	9.6 to 1
Germany	7.1%	22.2%	23.8%	3.7 to 1
India	9.1%	12.1%	15.2%	6.2 to 1
Japan	0%	22.7%	7.5%	9.5 to 1
Korea	0%	15.4%	20%	5.2 to 1
Russia	0%	13.6%	17.7%	6.3 to 1
U.K.	27.3%	58.8%	21.8%	2.7 to 1
U.S./U.K.	9.1%	9.1%	21.6%	4.7 to 1
U.S.	0%	11.8%	30.2%	3.4 to 1
Total	7%	19.7%	22.7%	3.9 to 1

Source: Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

In India, there are just 15% female producers, 12% female writers, and 9% female directors. These are below average for the world. This also affects how women are portrayed on screen, as studies show that films with female directors or writers feature a disproportionately high number of women. Indian cinema has a significant impact on patriarchal views, the legitimisation of violence against women, and sexist behaviour in all spheres of life and society, according to the 2015 research *Cinema and Society: Shaping our Worldview Beyond the Lens*.

Creative Heads of OTT

With the changing times, women started leaving their footmark everywhere in media industry. In the era of digital media with a boom of shows and series on over-the-top platforms, women start to hold positions in form of content creators, creative directors, content head, film producer, etc. To start with Aparna Purohit who is better known as ‘The Woman behind Amazon Prime Videos.’

Aparna is always drawn to stories and storytellers. In an interview Aparna said, when it comes to folk artists, she tended to talk strongly. Stories that were honestly grounded sparked her curiosity. Although Aparna acknowledges that her gender has a significant impact on her artistic choices, she stated that she did not encounter any discrimination because she is a woman. She said, “when I am reading a script, I look at how the women characters are being portrayed. Is this part written by a man who is not understanding the woman’s point of view at all? Does she have agency? Women in this country have fought too hard to raise a certain narrative. I’ve a sense of tremendous responsibility towards that” (Pathak, 2020).

Monika Shergil who was earlier content head of Viacom 18 (Voot) is currently in charge of Netflix India as the director of international originals. She claims that compared to many organizations; Netflix has a higher proportion of female executives in senior positions. She stays motivated at Netflix because of the relaxed and enthusiastic environment surrounding a talented woman and her suitable position (Roy, 2019).

Shailja Kejriwal is an accomplished name in the field of Indian media and entertainment. Kejriwal is the first Indian producer to have produced films by Pakistani filmmakers through Zeal for Unity – Zee Entertainment’s apolitical platform to bring together Indian and Pakistani filmmakers. Her vision of non-formulaic storytelling, the medium notwithstanding, is further seen through her ventures such as Zee Theatre – the biggest initiative to revive and catalogue Indian theatre, and films such as Madaari and Qarib-Qarib Single.

Ridhima Lulla- CCO (Eros Group), as CCO, in the face of 70-100 % increase in viewing, Lulla is driving originals. At Eros Group, Ridhima Lulla oversees content strategy and makes sure that a growing audience sees original content. Adding on Poonam Sahay- Creative Director (Enterr10), Monika Shergil- Content head Viacom 18 (Voot), Tanuja Chandra- Director and Writer, Sucheta Shah- Creative Director (Youth Entertainment-MTV|Viacom18) are some of the prominent women who are bringing change by breaking stereotypical notions around gender and

cinema. These women are the driving force behind surge in viewership (Balakrishnan, 2020).

Indian Web Series through Gendered Lens

Made in Heaven

This is a well acclaimed series streaming on amazon prime video directed by Zoya Akhtar. The web series, Made In heaven was a conglomerate of all the heavy topics we witness in our social circles but choose to ignore openly. This show entails a combination of 9 stories ranging from homosexuality to dowry to mid-age marriage. It's an ugly reality of urban families. The content creators of this series dare to make such stories where women gender is playing dominant role. Be it calling off wedding for dowry or re-marriage of a mid-age widow or a middle-class girl's struggle in elite workspace and drug abuse of her elder brother or a gay couple's love story and their struggle. The show makers are trying to show these realities on screen. The OTT platforms allow the makers of this content to touch upon contemporary issues of homosexuality as well.

Soni

This series is a tale of two women police officers in Delhi which is streaming on Netflix directed by Ivan Ayr. The series highlights the patriarchal setup within police forces where police trains about gender sensitisation but fail to conform to it. Despite major personal and professional failures, a young Delhi police officer is trying to address the growing problem of violent crimes against women. Soni is a tale not usually told in Indian cinema. This movie uncovers the struggle and hardships of women in police forces. It highlights the fact that no matter how independent or masculine a woman can be on her duty, in home she has to adhere those patriarchal norms which keeps her on subordinate position. Netflix's another brainstorming series based on the Delhi Police investigation into the Delhi Gang Rape Case, "Delhi Crime" which was headed by a woman, DCP Vartika Chaturvedi. This series also investigated the lives & struggles of women police officers.

Nude

Nude is a Marathi movie web streaming on Zee5 directed by Ravi Jadhav. *Nude's* journey mirrors the very societal double standards. This movie uncovers the struggle faced by "Nude Artists" and their role in art and sculpture. It requires unimaginable courage to naked your soul. This movie revolves around the protagonist struggles against poverty, patriarchy and conservatism. This movie has multiple layers as it deals with the role

of mother and multiple hardships of a woman. The director tries to make demarcation that being 'nude' doesn't always associate with vulgarity. It shows that taking off clothes do not connote any sexual aspect. Lust does not form any important part in this movie. This movie was stopped from screening in a film festival and it reflects the lack of artistic freedom among people. They fear that artists might uncover the ugly truth of society.

Bulbbul

This film is streaming on Netflix produced by Anushka Sharma, written and directed by Anvita Dutt. Bulbbul is a classic horror reorganised to make a solid statement about gender abuse. A child bride named Bulbbul develops into a mysterious woman who runs her home while concealing her traumatic history as her community is plagued by unexplained male homicides. The word *Vash* (control) and an image of *bichhua* (toe ring) at beginning of the movie conveys it all about the irony of young girls who were feeding patriarchal notions since their childhood. The story gripping dark tale of 18th century India, when people believed in '*chudails*'. Bulbbul is story of a woman who was married as child bride and being raped by her husband's mentally retracted twin brother. She was a survivor of domestic violence. The protagonist is stunning and talks volumes with her eyes, transforming from the weak and naive to the mysterious tease. This movie strikes at the putrid core of patriarchy.

Critical Analysis

In previous films, women were shown as being subservient, self-sacrificing and chaste. Though with the rise of online platforms, it is only in independent films and parallel cinemas audience witness strong female characters. These platforms give women's voices to a new rise. Women are claiming their spaces and came up with their own narratives which is beyond male gaze. Over the top platforms provide space and freedom to filmmakers and it help them to come up with some raw and real image of women. A space where woman can fit into world of imperfection while breaking the typical "good-woman" notion.

Both Bollywood and television will have to alter their ways because it appears that the internet is setting precedent of how women ought to be represented. One of the most popular digital entertainment organisations in India, The Viral Fever, started a channel called Girliyapa to share new, unfiltered stories about women from a female point of view. Most of the stories are based on either firsthand or observed events. These independent spaces do have some major drawbacks.

It is also important to note that OTT platforms have also been marred by the long existing sexually objectified portrayal of women in cinema, digital platform like ALT Balaji has taken objectification of women to the next level. In the name of bold stories of female sexuality from rural India in *Gandi Baat* series, the web series has made every possible attempt to commoditise the female body.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The power of the media has grown exponentially since the arrival of new communication technologies. Our perceptions of the world around us are shaped by the mass media's constant repetition of images and messages and its portrayal of only certain aspects of reality. Mass media have played a crucial role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture by creating new meanings and images and by influencing public opinion through chosen themes and points of view, even though their form and content have changed significantly over the past year. By emphasising on woman's physical appearance, Hindi films diminish her sense of individuality and intellect. With the commencement of digital platforms, these stereotypical images have been challenged by independent filmmakers and content creators.

It has been a wonderful year for women-oriented Media on Demand on OTT platforms, with the majority breaking gender preconceptions. Over the past year, the platform has created and disseminated more content centred on women than mainstream film has done over the previous five years. Online platforms are steadily growing in strength as tools for rallying public support. People are greatly influenced by the media, which can also be a powerful tool for promoting gender equality and improving women's current standing in society. Globally, print and visual media have exposed female bodies to the greatest degree conceivable. In the context of feminist discourse, "doing gender" or "performing gender" are some examples of the complicated interplay that exists between power, ideology, language, and its practice within its sociocultural milieu. The print and visual media present a stereotypical picture, an imposition that "women" must internalise and display their "beauty" to conform to the prevailing and popular view of the broader population. Feminist scholars have often questioned the male gaze. They have also highlighted media as a powerful form of gender socialisation. Feminist scholars have often questioned the male gaze. They have also highlighted media as a powerful form of gender socialisation.

The meagre representation of Dalit women and near absence of Adivasi women also needs to be questioned and portrayal of women from

marginalised section as lustful exotic women similar to the white men claim over black women's body during apartheid. These questions are still not addressed in these emerging platforms. Thus, as Margaret Caples in Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) has rightly said "We need to train our girls to think differently about the media, to think about becoming the director, the person who controls the image."

Women's participation in media seems to be increasing however the question remains, whether the participation alone can make any difference in their lives. Participation alone cannot bring any change in one's life until and unless they are provided with enough room to choose the subject matter on which they are working or in decision-making process. In the period of information explosion, OTT platforms provide more opportunities for film makers to work with their content independently. Censorship issue is not there. They are free from budget constraints and it allows them to experiment with their content without spending too much amount.

Restraining the films in the name of "Public Interest" is going to affect online platforms also. Web platforms like Netflix, amazon prime earlier lacks censorship and viewers have the option to select such content based on social issues thereby giving the viewers an alternative to mainstream media. But, with the latest announcement of government on censorship of OTT platforms, it will be interesting to see how this going to affect the independent creation. It is to be seen whether OTT remains untouched after this aforesaid law will pass.

Gender-sensitive characters in the mass media are usually hegemonized representations of elite class and upper cast women. However, media intervention must take an intersectional approach to communicate the ways various inequalities emergently intersect. LGBTQIA issues are inseparable issues with gender-sensitivity issues as well. In relation to legal exclusion, cultural and social exclusion, exclusions at workplace, it calls for a stringent critical analysis of portrayal of sexual minority groups in the India media. Workshops that would bring together diverse sections—feminists, media producers, writers, and other stakeholders—would generate new ideas that could shift gender representations in popular media and orient media houses towards representations that have the potential to spark conversations about gender roles and stereotypes.

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Civil Society and its Impact on Curbing Communal Violence: A Study on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar Riots

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Abstract

Communal riots are not new to India, but the Muzaffarnagar communal riots in 2013 breached the scholarly wisdom of the past. The riots did not follow any of the precedents of wisdom established by scholars. Comprehending the Muzaffarnagar riots using a theoretical framework is extremely difficult because no single theory can embrace all the variables of the Muzaffarnagar riots. Muzaffarnagar riots are the culmination of all the social, political and economic events that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. This article attempts to understand Muzaffarnagar using three major theoretical frameworks: Pual Brass's Institutional riot system, Varshney's Civil society theory and Wilkinson's Electoral incentive theory. Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 culminated all the social, political, and economic changes that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. This paper tried to gain insight into the Muzaffarnagar riots using the local sociological context.

Introduction/Background

Social contracts implicitly understand living in harmony with each other. However, India posits a different picture, where heterogeneity and diversity are the norm. Amidst all of this, there arises a possibility of in-group and out-group formation based on ethnicity, and this rigid demarcation leads to fraught relations between communities. Civil societies, i.e., a separate sector that does not fall under the governmental and even the business/market sectors (Petra Ahrweilera, 2019). Often, they are known to act as a curbing mechanism for ethnic unrest or conflicts. The government can only cater to the various communities to a certain extent. With the growing intersectionality, some groups are bound to face a certain level of alienation

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or exclusion. Therefore, the role of civil society is essential to maintain peace and tranquility in society.

Historically, western Uttar Pradesh has been prone to volatile communal conflict; the unique socio-political aspects of the regions where Muzaffarnagar is situated are prone to communal conflict due to unique socio-political factors. Land disputes, economic inequalities, and religious conflicts are significant factors contributing to past riots in the regions (Anwar, 2023). In 2013, Muzaffarnagar city experienced one of the deadliest riots India has experienced after the 2002 Godhra riots, killing more than 62 people and displacing more than 50,000 people. About 30 children froze to death in the refugee camp (Singh, 2016). A fight between two individuals triggered the incident and gave it a communal colour, leading to the death of one Muslim and two Jat farmers. The commonality of the riot can be traced back to other riots that occurred in the past. An alleged incident caused the riot, a minority community was targeted, and the state machinery was a dumb spectator and mute. Despite similarities, this riot is distinct (Singh, 2016). Unlike the past riots, this riot mainly occurred in the rural areas of western Uttar Pradesh. Social media played a vital role in the riot, and most importantly, the post-green revolution and the sociological phenomenon played significant roles in creating a fertile ground for the riots. This riot can be localized using the contextual phenomenon of Muzaffarnagar. Varshney (2013) believes that the Muzaffarnagar riot partly breached scholarly wisdom. A higher level of income and the centrality of minority vote banks are instrumental in reducing communal tension, but the same has departed from the past trends. Muzaffarnagar has increased economically, and the Minority votes were central for the Samajwadi government. The Samajwadi govt, which heavily depended on minority votes, could not protect minorities (Varshney, 2013). These are significant factors that distinguish the Muzaffarnagar riots from the past trends of riots and compel scholars to understand the uniqueness of the riots using the existing theoretical frameworks.

This article attempts to understand the integral link between civil society organizations and communal violence using Paul Brass's (2004) Institutional Riot System and Varshney's (2001, 2002) theory of Civil society. The article demonstrates the relevance of Institutional and Civil society theories in understanding the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. The nuances of civil society and the instrumental approaches were attempted to realize the Muzaffarnagar riots in its social, political, and economic context. Civil societies create an equilibrium, holding authority figures accountable and demanding a just and all-encompassing nation (Fukuyama, 1999). However, it might only sometimes be accurate. This article will delve deep into civil societies' intricacies, history, relation to ethnic conflicts, and the

way forward.

Communal Violence in the context of civil society engagement theory

Social scientists have tried to propose theories for collective violence. Paul Brass (2001) explains the riots as an instrumental approach by political forces. However, the uniqueness of the geography is the paramount factor in employing an institutional approach to communal tension. Varshney (2001) starts the theory from the other end of the spectrum and highlights the civil and economic engagement of the community of cities that helped to sustain peace. Only civil and economic engagement does not help sustain peace; instead, it has to be inter-communal. Varshney (2001) explained how relevant civil society has become to studying ethnic contracts. History has showcased many times that places with much diversity still manage to keep ethnic conflict out of the purview and vice versa; there are places where ethnic peace gets disrupted quickly and suddenly. In his paper, Varshney discusses how ethnic conflicts are not widespread. Instead, they can be localized, and upon dissection of the conflicts in the rural and urban setting of India, it indicated that about 82% of the urban population had not been a part of a prone area.

Eight cities contribute to 46% of all Hindu-Muslim brutality, although making up just 18% of the urban population. These towns are also the epicentre of urban riots. To ensure comparable Hindu-Muslim demographics, researchers paired three cities that were susceptible to riots with three that were not to understand this better. This was carried out because of the contention made by social scientists, legislators, and both Hindu and Muslim groups that Muslim demography has a significant influence on political behaviour and intergroup conflicts. The study sought to determine the local causes underlying community violence by looking at cities with comparable demographics but varying degrees of violence.

Varshney identifies two ways in which civil society and ethnic conflicts are connected. Firstly, people from various ethnicities, backgrounds, races, castes, etc., communicate with each other to promote peace and harmony. Peace communities have become a very efficient mechanism for maintaining a check-and-balance system. It also creates an equilibrium amongst various ethnic groups. However, this is not possible in a highly segregated and demarcated group. Various associational forms of engagement also become an effective mechanism to foster a good relationship between ethnicity and groups. Welcome and secure, and the propagation of interaction creates a sense of trust within ethnic groups.

Intercommunal civic networks are more effective at withstanding

external communal shocks, such as partitions, civil wars, and desecration of holy sites. Additionally, they help to limit the strategic behaviour of local politicians. Vote bank politics often play a significant role in creating a drift between communities. The effectiveness of civil engagement is proportional to the ineffectiveness of the political forces operating in the region. Brass believes that despite strong civil engagement forces, it is difficult to withstand the power of political forces that employ community violence.

Electoral phenomenon of communal violence

The employment of the IRS system often dismantles the effectiveness of civil forces as the civil society organization ruptures when the electoral process is intense. Wilkinson's (2004) votes and violence locate the collective violence within the context of electoral incentives. The same has also explained that the proportionate competition in electoral elections is directly linked to the protection of minorities by the incumbent government. The theoretical relationship between electoral performance and the incidence of communal conflicts can be seen through the Wilkinson-Varshney data set. That has compiled the data set of communal violence since independence. The above dataset is about the Hindu-Muslim Violence between 1950 and the 1990s, compiled by Varshney and Wilkinson. It was compiled using the Times of India report, one of the leading newspapers in India. The dataset provides information about the number of deaths and the date of the incident of the riots. It also highlights the proximate cause and the spatial variation of riots nationwide.

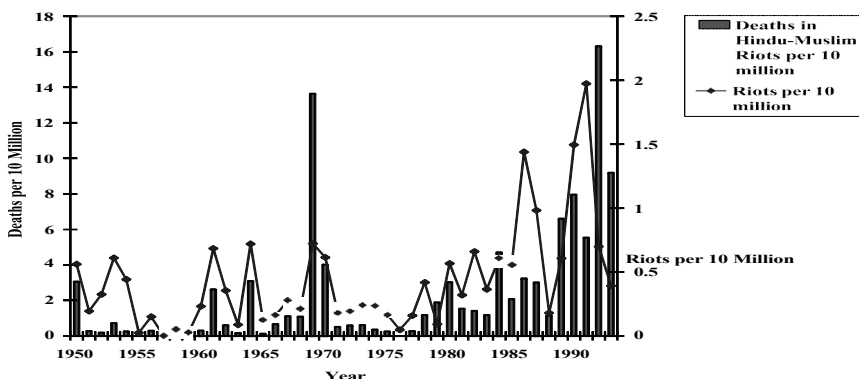


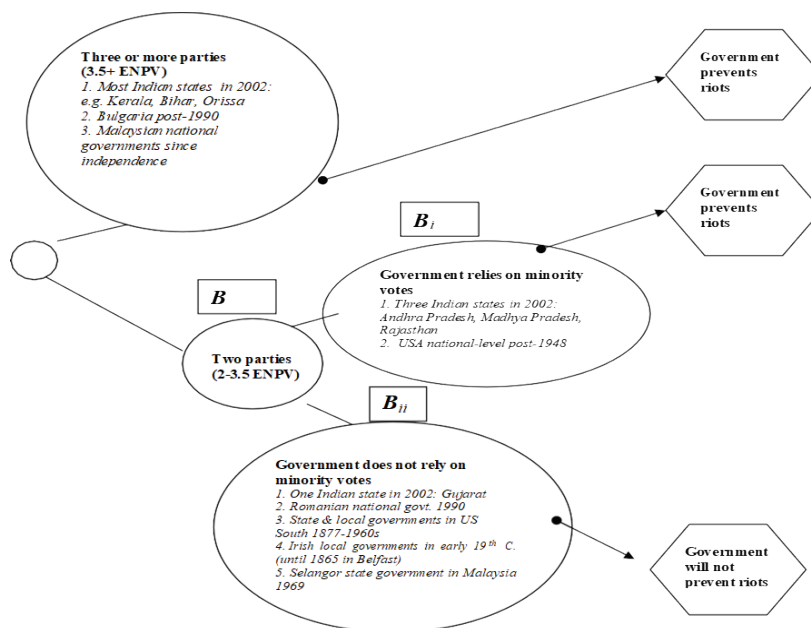
Figure 1.2 *Hindu-Muslim riots since independence (data from Varshney and Wilkinson)*

According to the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset, close to 1200 communal conflicts were reported by the Times of India between 1950-1995, with more than 7000 people reportedly killed in these 1200 communal conflicts. However, the interesting fact is that between 1950 and 1981, the average

number of killings in communal conflict was around 16 per year, and from 1982 to 1995, the average number of killings increased to 48 per year. In fourteen years, the number of communal violence was about 674 riots, causing around 5000 deaths (Sergenti, 2010). Out of the total number of reported riots, around a maximum number occurred in these 14 years, and the intensity of riots significantly sharpened from 1950-1980 to 1982-1995. The political changes in the late 1980s and the early 1990s contributed to the same. The sudden rise of communal incidents in India in the early 1980s to late 1990s can be seen using economic and political factors that emerged.

The Ram temple movement, Mandal and Kamandal politics, and the emergence of the green revolution are some of the significant social and political changes India experienced from the 1980s to 1990s. Singh (2016) believes that the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 are the culmination of the political and social changes that happened in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes allowed the political forces to create fertile land for political forces to employ the IRS. The economic and political dimensions of the 1980s contributed to the significant surge in communal tensions. The Ram temple movement and the employment of the IRS by the political forces created a volatile political atmosphere across the nation; this period also experienced a positive relationship between the economic growth rate and communal violence. The pattern for the same is observed by the Varshney and Wilkinson dataset.

Apart from the Instrumental approach and civil society theory. The riots need to be studied using the political context. Wilkinson's central argument is that higher electoral competition safeguards the interests of minorities. Effective electoral competition between a more significant number of political parties reduces the occurrence of riots. Varshney argues otherwise and cites India's electoral history since independence. Until 1967, Congress was the most dominant party, losing a few state elections, and by 1977, Congress lost Delhi due to an emergency. Contrary to Wilkinson, the Maximum riots occurred between the 1980s and the 1995s.



The relationship between party competition and a state's response to anti-minority polarization and violence: Indian and non-Indian examples (ENPV adequate number of parties (Wilkinson S. , 2004) Source: Steven Wilkinson, Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Violence in India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004),

Wilkinson observed five central states, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, in the context of the 2002 riots. The ruling party in Gujarat in 2002 did not depend on the Muslim votes, so less was incentivized to protect the Muslims. Still, the adjective states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh were ruled by a congress party that needed Muslim votes to compete with the rival parties. However, this argument is flawed because Congress in Gujarat failed to protect minorities in 1982, 1984, 1987, and 1991. The BJP only came to power in 1995. (Varshney, An Electoral Theory of Communal Riots?, 2005) The Samajwadi government also failed to protect Muslims in the 1989-1990 riots. The Varshney Wilkinson dataset can be analyzed through three major theoretical frameworks; Wilkinson argues that the higher party competition often compels the incumbent political party to protect minorities. Varshney disagrees with the theory of ENPV (adequate number of parties); Varshney argues that ENPV is ineffective in deciding the effectiveness of riots. The Varshney Wilkinson dataset provides the geographical location of the communal riots between 1950 and 1995. An interesting geographical fact about the communal riots are that they are not uniformly spread nationwide. The number has excellent variation following the state. Nevertheless, Wilkinson's theory,

which states the importance of minority votes and electoral competition as a shield against discrimination, does not seem convincing. Despite several limitations, Wilkinson's theory on the ENVP and the importance of electoral competition in protecting minorities against communal violence is one of the significant milestones in peace studies.

Muzaffarnagar riots did not follow the past trends

Scholars across various disciplines approached Hindu-Muslim riots from different perspectives. Mitra and Ray (2014) used economic phenomena to understand the Hindu-Muslim conflict. The growth rate between the 1950s and 1980s was 1.7 %, and the average growth rate between the 1980s and 2000 was around 3.8 % (Sergenti, 2010). The positive relationship between the surge of communal violence and economic growth is established. This relationship needs to be seen through the spatial analysis. The increase in per capita Muslim expenditures leads to a significant rise in communal conflict in the short and medium run. In contrast to this increase per capita, Hindu well-being is insignificant in religious conflict.

On the other hand, Wilkinson (2004) explored the integral link between the impact of Minority vote in the containment of Hindu-Muslim communal violence. Varshney (2003) examined the effect of social capital and civil engagement in the containment of communal violence. Paul Brass has taken a different perspective and explored the relationship between political process and communal violence. Brass maintains that the other actors preplanned the riots for electoral gains. However, the riots in Muzaffarnagar are unique and have not changed the trends that have happened in the past. Any theoretical framework is highly problematic in understanding the riots. It is essential to understand the Muzaffarnagar riots using different theoretical frameworks because no theoretical framework can comprehend the Muzaffarnagar riots. Varshney (2013) argues that the Muzaffarnagar riots departed from the past trends of riots studied by scholars. Muzaffarnagar riots were rural riots, and conventionally, civil war tends to be rural, and the riots tend to be urban. Secondly, Indian villagers majorly experienced caste-based violence, and urban India experienced the Hindu Muslims riots. Thirdly, the Minority voting power did not incentivize the Samajwadi party to protect minorities in Muzaffarnagar. Singh (2016) argues that the culmination of social, political, and economic events of the 1980s eventually contributed to the Muzaffarnagar riots.

The social dimension of western Uttar Pradesh changed after the Green Revolution, and the economic interdependency between JATs and Muslims was reduced. This eventually weakened the inter-communal engagement. The new class emerged in the post-green revolution society and changed the civil relationship in the villages. The Muslims who were earlier dependent

on the JAT economically migrated to the cities for employment. This employment search reduced their dependency on the JAT. The reduction of interdependency was due to the rapid expansion of urbanization and industrialization in Muzaffarnagar post-green revolution. The lack of interdependence challenged the political dominance of the Jat in western UP, especially in Muzaffarnagar. (MAJMA, 2015, p. 6-7; Rao, Mishra, Singh, & Bajpai, 2013, p. 35-37; TISS, 2013, p. 12-13). The JATs are economically powerful and hold a maximum amount of land. However, the inter-communal associational relationship between Jat and Muslims was affected due to the reduction of economic interdependence between these communities—politicians often exploit this lack of inter-communal association. The Muzaffarnagar riot resulted from the socio-economic changes that occurred in the mid-1980s. The changing economic and social relationship allowed the Political forces to employ the IRS as the village's economic and social profile changed post-green revolution agrarian society.

H Zeynep Bulutgil and Neeraj Prasad (2022) argue that the IRS system illustrates two Villages in Muzaffarnagar, Hussainpur and Mohammadpur Raisingh. These two villages are adjacent to each other, and these two villages have sizable Muslim Populations and were vulnerable during the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. Still, Mohammadpur Raisingh experienced severe riots, and Hussainpur was peaceful. H Zeynep Bulutgil and Neeraj Prasad (2022) believe that employing the IRS was politically fruitful in Mohammadpur because it has a sizable JAT population, which is not valid for Hussainpur Villages. However, Hussainpur did not experience riots primarily because of the solid civil engagement between the communities. Hussainpur remained peaceful during the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. This example shows that the political forces tend to employ the IRS where they have a great Structure to support. Civil engagement can be instrumental in countering the IRS, as demonstrated by the Villagers of Hussainpur. Like Gyan (2013), in his article "Why Meerut has not gone the Muzaffarnagar way" he explains why Meerut has not seen a significant outbreak of communal conflict since 1987. Gyan (2013) supports the civil association theory proposed by Varshney and explains that the civil solid association of Meerut diffuses most communal clashes. The Western Uttar Pradesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, based in Meerut, is a solid inter-communal association that significantly controls communal riots in the region. (Varma, 2013) A similar kind of solid association is absent in Muzaffarnagar and the green revolution in Muzaffarnagar, and the emergence of a new social group broke the inter-communal association that existed before due to the economic interdependence between the Muslims and the JAT. The lack of communal association allowed the riot specialist to employ the IRS. (H Zeynep Bulutgil, 2023)

Conclusion

Varshney's (2001) theory of civil society, Wilkinson's (2004) theory of electoral incentives, and Paul Brass's theory of the IRS system are the major theories used to explain the Muzaffarnagar communal riots. This paper also tried to look into the socio-economic changes in Muzaffarnagar and their effect on the peace and tranquillity of the city. This study examines the structure of civil society and the absence and presence of the same in communal riots. Varshney believes that the stronger the civil association, the better the peace. The stronger the inter-communal engagement, the better the capabilities to stand the IRS system. To sum up, civic societies are vital players in reducing ethnic tensions in India. They contribute significantly to peacebuilding initiatives by promoting inclusive policies, encouraging communication, and creating a trusting environment. The research points to a high association between sturdy civil society networks and decreased ethnic tensions, notwithstanding the complexity of the relationship between ethnic identities, the state, and civil societies. Nevertheless, civil societies have enormous potential to heal rifts and foster social harmony despite ongoing difficulties. Developing successful ways to foster ethnic peace and cohabitation requires a consciousness of their temporal history, significance in solving disputes, and the unique setting of India.

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Gender Dynamics and Sustainable Development in Melghat: A Comparative Analysis of Livelihoods and Environmental Governance

Prashant Vikas Karale¹

Abstract

This study looks into the role of gender in sustainable development by focusing on women's empowerment in Melghat, India's environmental management system. Inspired by Amartya Sen's concept of "Development as Freedom" and Bina Agarwal's insights in "Gender and Green Governance," this research assesses the impact of enhancing women's abilities and participation in environmental decisions. It aims to uncover how these efforts can lessen gender inequalities and foster sustainable growth. The study analyzes primary and secondary data to identify socio-economic and cultural obstacles hindering women's involvement in environmental governance. It also discusses how these barriers affect sustainable practices in Melghat. The paper calls for comprehensive policies that consider the overlapping issues of gender, caste, and economic involvement. It suggests practical strategies to significantly boost women's empowerment and ensure active engagement in developing fair and sustainable environmental policies.

Keywords: *Gender Perspectives, Environmental Governance, Sustainable Development, Capabilities Approach, Community Forestry*

Introduction

Sustainable development aims to balance economic growth with social inclusion and environmental protection, ensuring that present needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations. This is especially important in regions like Melghat in Maharashtra, India, which boasts rich biodiversity but faces complex socio-economic challenges. In such areas, the intersection of gender and sustainable development presents unique challenges and opportunities. Women, often central to

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resource management and agriculture, encounter barriers that limit their decision-making roles and access to resources. This gender disparity not only impedes sustainable development but also perpetuates socio-economic inequalities.

This research is inspired by seminal works such as Bina Agarwal's "Gender and Green Governance" and Amartya Sen's "Development as Freedom." Agarwal (2010) underscores the crucial role women play in environmental sustainability and advocates for governance systems that recognize their contributions. Similarly, Sen (1999) describes development as a process that expands the actual freedoms people enjoy, focusing on enhancing capabilities and removing barriers, particularly for women.

The Melghat region, known for its ecological sensitivity and the indigenous dependence on forest resources, is an ideal setting to explore these dynamics. Integrating gender perspectives into environmental governance not only promotes fairness but also improves the effectiveness of sustainable development initiatives, ensuring more comprehensive and inclusive environmental management.

Research Problem

Despite the recognized need to integrate women into sustainable development, significant gender disparities persist in Melghat. These disparities hinder women's participation in environmental governance due to limited education, inadequate healthcare, and entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Such barriers significantly diminish their ability to engage effectively in governance and sustainable practices, ultimately impacting the region's resilience and sustainability.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to critically examine the role of women in environmental governance in Melghat, identify the socio-economic barriers that restrict their participation and empowerment, and propose strategies to effectively integrate gender perspectives into sustainable development policies. By employing Sen's capabilities approach, this research seeks to understand and enhance the freedoms and capabilities of women in Melghat, supporting more inclusive and effective environmental governance and sustainable development practices.

Research Questions

1. How do socio-economic and cultural barriers influence women's participation in environmental governance in Melghat?
2. What roles are currently played by women in the sustainable

management of Melghat's natural resources?

3. What strategies could effectively overcome gender-specific challenges in Melghat to enhance sustainable development and environmental governance?

NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Melghat, gender disparities manifest as limited access to necessary resources and exclusion from decision-making processes, which are critical to sustainable development. This study focuses on how these gender barriers impact the region's environmental governance and sustainable practices.

Rationale of the Study

Addressing the gender-specific challenges in Melghat is crucial for developing policies that not only narrow the gender gap but also enhance the effectiveness of sustainable development strategies. This study will provide valuable insights into the benefits of empowering women in environmental governance roles, potentially leading to broader social and ecological improvements in Melghat and similar environments.

Review of the Literature

The literature review examines how gender perspectives are incorporated into environmental governance, focusing particularly on the Melghat region in India. This review discusses theoretical approaches, empirical research, and specific case studies.

Theoretical Frameworks

Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach: Sen's model views development as expanding the freedoms people enjoy (Sen, 1999). It's crucial for sustainable development because it stresses enhancing individual abilities and eliminating obstacles that prevent people from achieving their desired lives. Sen suggests that freedom is the ultimate goal and a vital means of development. This idea supports the integration of gender perspectives in environmental policies, advocating for the empowerment of women as essential contributors to sustainable results.

Bina Agarwal's Gender and Green Governance: Agarwal (2010) discusses the role of gender in environmental management, emphasizing that gender inequalities impede effective governance and the sustainable use of natural resources. Her key work, "Gender and Green Governance," argues that involving women in natural resource governance not only promotes gender equality but also improves the conservation and

sustainability of these resources. Agarwal notes that women, often the main users of communal resources in rural areas, introduce diverse and more sustainable management practices (Agarwal, 2010).

Empirical Research on Women's Roles: Research from various global contexts shows that involving women in decision-making processes usually leads to more effective and sustainable governance of natural resources. Meinzen-Dick's (2014) findings support this, demonstrating that women's involvement results in better conservation and more equitable resource distribution. Additionally, projects in areas like Melghat have proven that gender-inclusive initiatives not only address gender-specific barriers but also provide wider community advantages, such as better biodiversity conservation and decreased resource depletion (Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999).

Gender Disparities and Environmental Policies: Gender disparities are evident in environmental policy and management, with women typically having less access to resources and decision-making than men. These disparities are intensified by institutional and socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's participation in public and political arenas. Agarwal (2001) points out that such inequalities can lead to inefficient and unsustainable environmental practices. Policies overlooking these gender-specific barriers often lead to poorer outcomes, which could be improved through more inclusive governance that involves women at all decision-making levels (Agarwal, 2010).

Case Studies: The Melghat region serves as an insightful case study for applying gender-focused theories to environmental governance. Known for its rich biodiversity and tribal population, Melghat faces challenges common to global sustainable development and gender equity. Research in this area indicates that including women in forest conservation not only boost the sustainability of these efforts but also elevates women's social status in the community, leading to wider socio-economic benefits (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2008).

Future Directions and Theoretical Implications: The field of integrating gender perspectives in environmental governance is still developing and requires more empirical research and theoretical refinement. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of gender-inclusive policies and delve into how gender interacts with other socio-economic factors affecting environmental governance. There is also a need for more thorough policy frameworks that explicitly incorporate gender analyses to ensure effective and fair environmental governance. Such efforts should strive to turn theoretical insights into practical guidelines for policymakers, aiming

to establish more inclusive and sustainable environmental management strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the qualitative research approach used to examine the influence of gender on environmental governance in the Melghat region, specifically focusing on women's experiences and perspectives within this context.

Research Design

Our study was structured around purposive sampling from five villages in Dharni taluka: Chaurakund, Ranamalur, Bod, Nanduri, and Forest Malur. These locations were chosen due to their active engagement in community-led environmental governance and existing conservation efforts. The aim was to gather in-depth insights from these specific settings.

Participant Demographics

The study participants were women aged 18 to 50 from the Korku tribe, the dominant ethnic group in the area. We formed focus groups of 8 to 10 women from each village to facilitate rich and detailed discussions. This strategy was employed to ensure a broad representation of experiences from various age brackets and socioeconomic statuses, particularly from the economically disadvantaged segments.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through structured focus group discussions held in each of the selected villages. These sessions were designed to delve into the women's roles, perceptions, and personal experiences regarding the management of local environmental resources. The composition of the focus groups was carefully considered to create an environment conducive to open and unbiased sharing of thoughts and experiences.

Analytical Framework

We applied thematic analysis to interpret the data gathered from the discussions. This approach was instrumental in identifying recurring themes and patterns among the different focus groups. It proved effective in uncovering the challenges that women face in environmental leadership roles and the effects of enhancing their participation in these decision-making processes.

Findings

In-depth research involved focus group discussions and interviews across five villages: Chaurakund, Ranamalur, Bod, Nanduri, and Forest Malur, the last of which has seen significant displacement due to a Tiger Reserve.

1. Role of Women in Environmental Governance: Chaurakund and Ranamalur

Women's involvement in environmental governance has significantly boosted the sustainability and management of natural resources in their communities. In Chaurakund and Ranamalur, women have assumed leadership roles in water resource management and forest conservation.

Transformative Roles in Chaurakund: In Chaurakund, located in Melghat's Dharni block, local Korku women spearheaded the development of a low-cost, sustainable water filtration system using sand, charcoal, and gravel. This innovation not only improved water quality but also empowered them by engaging them directly in solution development.

A Korku woman shared at a community meeting: *"Ham log paani ke liye bahut door jaate the, sukh mausam me. Ab, hum apna kuan ka paani saaf karte hain, aur bacchon ko seedha pilate hain. Humne khud se yeh manage kiya!"* ("We used to travel far for water during the dry season. Now, we filter our well water, and it's directly drinkable by our children. We managed it ourselves!")

Forest Conservation Leadership in Forest Malur: In Forest Malur, women lead a community forest management group, focusing on rehabilitating areas damaged by overharvesting. They introduced a rotational system for collecting firewood and other forest products, promoting regrowth.

During a community meeting in Forest Malur, a Korku woman remarked: *"Humne dekha ki kuch ped aur paudhe ghayab ho rahe the. Yeh sirf humare baare mein nahi hai, hamare bacchon ke future ke baare mein bhi hai. Isliye, humne decided kiya ki purab disha se ab koi kaatne nahi hoga jab tak yeh dobara na uge. Hum log rotation me kaam karte hain, aur sabko niyam ka palan karna padega. Hum apne jungle ki raksha apne bachon ki tarah karte hain."* ("We noticed that certain plants and trees were disappearing. It wasn't just about us; it was about our children's future. So, we decided no more cutting from the eastern section until it grows back. We rotate the areas, and everyone must follow the rules. We watch over our forest like our children.")

These initiatives underscore the capability and motivation of women to

lead and manage environmental resources sustainably.

2. Socio-Economic Barriers

Despite their critical roles, women in Melghat face significant socio-economic obstacles that limit their active participation in environmental governance. These include deep-rooted educational disparities, traditional gender roles, and limited access to economic resources and decision-making platforms.

FGD from Bod and Nanduri:

Bod: Here, traditional gender roles deeply embedded in the community significantly limit women's participation in decision-making processes, particularly in environmental committees.

During a focus group discussion in Bod, a local Korku woman stated: *"Jab bhi hum gram sabha me jaate hain, lagta hai jaise hamari awaaz hawa me kho jaati hai. Aadmi bolte hain, aur lagta hai jaise sab pehle se decide ho chuka hai. Ye jaan kar dukh hota hai ki apke paas vichaar hain par kabhi share nahi kar sakte."* ("Whenever we go to the gram sabha, it feels like our voices just vanish into the air. The men speak, and it's like everything is decided in advance. It's disheartening, knowing you have ideas but might never get to share them.")

Nanduri: Here, educational barriers notably highlight the differences in opportunities available to men and women. Women's lower levels of formal education affect their confidence and ability to engage in technical discussions on environmental management.

A Korku woman shared during an interview in Nanduri: *"Main madad karna chahti hoon, hamare ped-paudhon aur paani ko behtar banane ke liye, par jab meeting hoti hai, aur baat technical ho jati hai, to main khud ko bahar khada hua mehsoos karti hoon. Kaise contribute karun jab unke shabdon ka pata hi nahi chalta. Aisa lagta hai jaise bahar khade ho kar andar dekh rahe ho."* ("I want to help, to improve our trees and water, but when there's a meeting, and the discussion turns technical, I feel like an outsider. How can I contribute when I don't understand their words? It's like standing on the outside, looking in.")

These insights from Bod and Nanduri illuminate not only the external barriers faced by women but also the internal struggles they endure due to societal expectations.

3. Benefits of Gender-Inclusive Policies

Integrating women into decision-making processes has proven to significantly enhance environmental governance. Women's unique perspectives, often grounded in sustainability and community well-being, ensure more comprehensive and effective environmental policies and projects.

FGD from Rana Malur:

In Rana Malur, a gender-inclusive water management work highlighted the impact of including women in environmental planning. Women's indigenous knowledge of water sources played a critical role in the project.

During a community meeting in Rana Malur, a Korku woman said: *"Hamari maaon ne humein sikhaya hai ki jungle aur nadiyon ki suno; agar dhyaan se suno to ye humse baat karti hain. Hum jaante hain garmiyan me paani kahan chhupa hota hai. Kyun na wahan isse bacha ke rakhein jab humein sakht zarurat ho?"* ("Our mothers taught us to listen to the forest and the streams; they speak to us if we listen carefully. We know where the water hides when the summer scorches the earth. Why not save it there for when we desperately need it?")

The inclusion of women led to the adoption of sustainable practices that improved water supply and ecological stability throughout the year. This case study from Rana Malur vividly illustrates the benefits of gender-inclusive policies in environmental governance, emphasizing the need to respect and integrate women's knowledge and perspectives. By doing so, communities address immediate environmental challenges and contribute to the creation of resilient, sustainable systems that benefit all community members.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings This study underscores the vital role that women from the Korku community in the Melghat region play in managing the environment. Using feminist political ecology and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach as frameworks (Agarwal, 2010; Sen, 1999), our findings reveal that including women in decision-making significantly boosts sustainable management of resources and supports equitable governance. Women's extensive knowledge of local ecology, demonstrated in the Chaurakund and Ranamalur case studies, is crucial for successful resource management and conservation efforts.

Our research confirms that excluding women from these roles hinders gender equality and misses a critical chance to enhance sustainability. Their in-depth understanding of local natural resources and commitment to sustainable practices is invaluable for effective environmental planning

over the long term.

Comparison with Other Regions The situation in Melghat shares similarities with other regions like the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand, India, and the role of women in conservation efforts in East African grasslands (Shiva, 1989; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996). However, Melghat differs as the inclusion of women in environmental governance is sporadic and informal, pointing to a gap between local customs and formal policy enforcement.

Comparative Analysis By placing our study in a broader comparative context, such as examining similar scenarios in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India, and the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil, where local communities are integral to conservation, we gain further insights. This comparison enhances the relevance and depth of understanding of how gender dynamics influence environmental governance across various global settings.

Policy Recommendations and Practical Implications The study illustrates the critical role women, especially those from marginalized groups like the Korku in Melghat, have in environmental governance. It suggests practical steps to capitalize on this potential:

- **Legal Framework Enhancement:** Amend the Forest Rights Act to ensure equal land and resource rights for women, including joint ownership by spouses and equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons (Agarwal, 2010).
- **Implementation of Gender Quotas:** Mandate a minimum of 40% female participation in all environmental decision-making bodies at every level (Cornwall, 2003).
- **Capacity Building Initiatives:**
 - **Skill Development Workshops:** Establish workshops to enhance women's skills in sustainable farming and conservation, taking into account the linguistic and cultural nuances of tribal communities (Kabeer, 1999).
 - **Educational Scholarships:** Offer scholarships for women in Melghat to study environmental sciences, thereby boosting their qualifications and expertise (Duflo, 2012).
- **Economic Empowerment Strategies:**
 - **Microfinance and Credit Access:** Provide microfinance options and low-interest loans to women starting sustainable businesses, such as organic farming or eco-tourism (Nussbaum, 2000).
 - **Market Access Support:** Assist women in accessing broader

markets for eco-friendly products like organic food and sustainable handicrafts (Patel, 2019).

- **Community Engagement and Awareness:**
 - **Gender Sensitization Campaigns:** Conduct campaigns throughout Melghat to challenge traditional gender roles and emphasize the importance of women's contributions to environmental sustainability (Sharma, 2017).
 - **Collaborative Management Models:** Promote management models that guarantee women's equal involvement in both the planning and execution stages of resource management (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2008).

Limitations and Future Research Directions This study focuses primarily on the Korku community in the Melghat region, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings to areas with different socio-economic and environmental conditions. The reliance on qualitative data, while providing rich insights, might not fully represent broader, quantifiable impacts that are essential for widespread policy application.

Future Research Directions:

- **Broader Geographic Scope:** Future research should include a variety of locations and communities to test the replicability of these findings in other settings.
- **Quantitative Measures:** Employ quantitative methods to obtain more definitive data on the impact of women's involvement in environmental governance.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Long-term studies can help observe the enduring effects of integrating women into environmental governance.
- **Comparative Studies:** Examining different levels of female involvement in various regions can highlight the direct benefits of active participation by women in environmental decision-making.
- **Policy Implementation Studies:** Investigating the actual application of gender-inclusive policies in environmental governance can help assess their effectiveness and recommend necessary adjustments.

Conclusion

This research paper has examined how gender perspectives are integrated into sustainable development, focusing specifically on environmental governance in the Melghat region of Maharashtra, India.

Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Amartya Sen's "Development as Freedom" and Bina Agarwal's "Gender and Green Governance," this study highlights women's essential role in managing the environment sustainably and the significant obstacles that prevent their full involvement. The findings confirm that empowering women in environmental decision-making supports the sustainable use of natural resources and leads to fairer governance structures. Women's participation results in more thorough and lasting environmental benefits, as they bring unique insights and traditional knowledge crucial for the long-term preservation of resources. The situation in Melghat reflects broader global challenges and opportunities in weaving gender considerations into sustainable development. Similar to movements like Chipko in India and conservation projects in East Africa, Melghat's experiences show the potential for improved sustainability and community welfare when women are engaged in governance. However, Melghat also faces substantial challenges due to systemic barriers that restrict women's involvement in environmental governance.

This study offers several policy recommendations to address these barriers. These include formally recognizing women's contributions to environmental sustainability, enhancing capacity through education, creating inclusive policies, establishing support structures for women, and implementing community programs to encourage gender inclusivity. These measures are vital for achieving gender equality and the success of sustainable development goals in the region and beyond.

In summary, this research emphasizes the importance of including gender perspectives in all aspects of environmental governance to promote comprehensive, sustainable, and equitable development. By improving women's capabilities and involvement in environmental decision-making, places like Melghat can foster more robust and sustainable ecological and social systems. Future research should continue examining the long-term effects of gender-inclusive policies and work to turn theoretical ideas into practical, effective strategies, paving the way for more inclusive and sustainable environmental governance globally.

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Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract

This article reflects critically on some of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead concerning Early Childhood Care and Education in India from a perspective of social work in the context of NEP 2020. It projects the crucial role a social worker may play in mitigating some of these systemic inequities and ensuring equitable access to quality services in ECCE. It advocates that there needs to be a social work perspective imbued within both the inclusionist and qualitative objectives set out by the NEP on early childhood education, examining, through a lens of the social determinants of learning, how diverse child populations are affected by cultural contexts and socio-economic disparities. Analyses in the paper stand on the shoulders of research and available policy frameworks with an understanding of India's unique socio-cultural context. It points out the need for the sensitization of practice that addresses the specific needs of excluded groups of children and therefore the creation of an effective, sustainable system. Finally, the article calls for incorporation of the principles of social work in the development and execution of policies on ECCE at both national and state levels, positioning social workers as agents of change in the transformation of early childhood education in India.

Keywords: *Early childhood care and education, perspective of social work, inequities, equitable access, quality services, National Education Policy.*

Introduction

The socio-economic landscape of India is very diverse, with a rapidly growing population that presents both significant challenges and opportunities for early childhood development (Li et al., 2016). The early childhood period is critical for cognitive, emotional, and social growth; thus,

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Early Childhood Care and Education programs are highly important to lay a proper foundation for the future well-being of children (K & SHUBHRA, 2019, pp. 1-11). Despite their importance, these aspects have often been largely overlooked from a social work point of view; even as they bear immense relevance for children, their families, educators, and society in general, equal opportunity in accessing quality ECCE services is also one of social justice. With their holistic perspectives and commitments to social justice, social workers are in a privileged position to contribute to the enhancement of research, policy development, and administration of the ECCE system in India for effectiveness and sustainability.

The National Education Policy-2020 envisions transforming India's education system into one that provides holistic development and equal opportunity, especially in the field of early childhood education. The new structure of 5+3+3+4 will have a robust component of Early Childhood Care and Education for children from age three to eight that shall focus on play, activity, and inquiry-based learning for the holistic development of children. The third year of Early Childhood Care and Education will be a preparatory class called Balvatika. In the process, it's envisioned that the approach toward education at the Early Childhood Care and Education level would be flexible, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based. In general, the overall aim of ECCE is to ensure optimum development outcomes in diverse domains like physical and motor, cognitive abilities, socio-emotional and ethical development, and cultural, artistic, communication, early language, literacy, and numeracy skills. Foundational Stage covers five years of learning experiences of children in the age group of three to eight years with flexibility for play and activity-based learning inherent in the ECCE curriculum and pedagogies. Additionally, the medium of instruction (MOI) will prioritize the home language, mother tongue, or regional language until at least Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8 and beyond, thereby ensuring that this approach is uniformly applied in both public and private schools. A multilingual environment will be encouraged, and teachers will be encouraged to adopt bilingual strategies, and use bilingual teaching materials also, especially for those whose home language is different from the medium of instruction. The Action Plan for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Foundational Stage, in tune with the curricular design, focuses on a number of priorities that are vital in ensuring upward curricular continuity and enhancement in learning outcomes from pre-primary to primary. Central to this project is the development of such a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, which eschews any formal instruction in the three Rs, thereby reconceptualizing the Foundational Mission of early learning to go well beyond mere literacy and numeracy. The plan advocates for an integrated curriculum at the level of primary

education, a separate cadre of Foundation Stage teachers, including both preschool and primary teachers, and an increase in training institutions. The quality standards, budgeting, and regulatory systems are also to be specifically designed for the Foundational Stage. This includes, but is not limited to, the availability of adequately trained and committed teachers at the Anganwadi itself for preschool education, mechanisms for seamless convergence with the Ministry of Women and Child Development on matters regarding issues inherent in a two-management system, etc (*Salient Features of NEP, 2020*, n.d.). To further ensure the highest quality of education, all primary heads and teachers shall undertake ECCE training on their own to bring up equitable quality across the four education models. It will finally develop a communication strategy that will raise awareness among parents regarding the importance of quality ECCE and the need to develop good parenting practices (Mandal, 2021).

Recognizing the foundational role of ECCE, the policy thus advocates for its universalization. However, realizing this vision can mean treading through various complexities, involving socio-economic disparities, diversity of cultures, and, finally, infrastructural complications. This paper argues that a social work perspective, with its emphases on social justice, community involvement, and systemic analysis, is intrinsic to the realization of ambitious goals set by NEP 2020. In this respect, social work has much to contribute toward developing equitable and sustainable ECCE systems that meet the diverse needs of the most marginalized and disadvantaged children.

Review of Literature

ECCE is recognized globally as the foundation for lifelong learning and development (Kennedy & Lee, 2018). The National Education Policy 2020 in India has placed a strong emphasis on early childhood education as one of the most critical ways to reduce inequity and ensure inclusiveness in education. This literature review synthesizes extant research on the juncture of social work with ECCE in India in the backdrop of NEP 2020 and explains the challenges and emergent opportunities from this synthesis. Research has repeatedly shown that early childhood education lays the foundation for later cognitive, social, and emotional development; UNICEF estimates that there are huge disparities in accessing early education and its quality, which affect marginalized communities in India more (UNICEF, 2019). Dunder a study in South Asian educational systems and identifies the causes and correlates of student learning outcomes. The study shows that children from poorer backgrounds typically start primary school with significant delays in their overall development, further increasing inequality in a generation (Dunder, 2014). Addressing such disparities,

therefore, through effective ECCE programs should be of the highest order in fostering equal opportunities for educational outcomes. NEP 2020 has laid down a vast framework of reforming the educational scenario in India, with a strong emphasis on early childhood care and education. It advocates for an integrated system of health, nutrition, and education. The cross-sectoral collaboration among education, health, and social services is required for the successful implementation of NEP 2020 (Singha & Dubey, 2024).

Social work is the backbone that helps in addressing different challenges affecting children and their families when trying to access quality early childhood education. Studies have shown that social workers increase community participation, influence the need for policy changes, and offer direct services to families as they work to navigate the educational system (Gasper & Walker, 2020, p. 56). Besides, social work interventions may facilitate an increase in service use and enhance parenting involvement. Social workers have a better vantage position to raise and challenge inequities in the system. (Lindsay, 2009). Social workers are in a better place to raise and challenge inequities in the system. This is, for instance, documented by showing how social work initiatives have bridged service gaps in the delivery of services related to children with disabilities or those from low-income families (Reichow et al., 2016). By using culturally appropriate approaches, social workers are in a position to provide an enabling environment that embraces diversity in background and needs. Despite the fact that social work has the potential to bring transformative changes in ECCE within India, a number of stumbling blocks continue on the ground. Resource limitations, inadequately prepared social workers, and an overall lack of awareness of the importance of early childhood education obstruct further the development process. Systemic barriers in educational systems are other obstacles that hamper the road to inclusive practice under NEP 2020.

The extant literature highlights that social work may have an important role to play in the reduction of inequities and in the advance of inclusivity within early childhood education in India under the NEP 2020 framework. Though there are many challenges, the collaborative efforts of social workers, educators, policy framers, and communities might have a better chance of creating a more equitable and inclusive ECCE system. Future research needs to be directed at the assessment of interventions by social work in the setting of ECCE to better inform policy and practice. This literature review goes in-depth with the junction of social work and early childhood education in the framing of NEP 2020 in India. It highlights not only the crucial role that social work should play in combating inequalities and advancing inclusivity but also some of the challenges that need to be

overcome for these ideals to be achieved in practice.

Challenges and Systemic Inequities:

Various challenges impede the establishment of robust Early Childhood Care and Education systems in India. These are linked to systemic inequities at different levels that place already disadvantaged populations, especially from marginalized communities, at a further disadvantage. A deeper look indicates that barriers are multidimensional in nature and call for targeted interventions if all children are to have equitable access to quality early education (SWARGIARY, 2024).

Socioeconomic Disparities

Socio-economic status remains a key determinant of access to quality ECCE services in India. Families from low-income backgrounds often cannot afford the high fees charged by private preschools or daycare centers, which tend to be better equipped with resources and trained staff. For instance, a study done in Uttar Pradesh reported that children from rich families were three times more likely than children from poor families to attend a high-quality early childhood education program. In rural areas, the situation is worse. Most villages lack school facilities or trained educators, so it's either no early education for some children or informal, underregulated child care that falls short of meeting developmental minimums (Kaul & Bhattacharjea, 2019).

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles further complicate the inequalities within ECCE. In most communities, the social expectation foisted on women is that of caregiving, again a serious barrier to their employment and participation in educational programs themselves. For example, in certain regions of Rajasthan, there is an expectation for girls to engage in household chores rather than attend preschool, leading to disparities in education based on gender. This not only inhibits girls' early educational opportunities but also perpetuates the stereotype of women's roles in society by creating a cycle of disadvantage well into future generations (MEHTA, 2023, p. 174).

Quality of ECCE Services

Most often, the quality of services for ECCE has been compromised in India as a result of the gross shortage of adequately trained staff teachers and caregivers. Moreover, most preschools take underqualified staff who remain incompetent in developing a responding and stimulating learning environment at school. According to the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, nearly 60% of preschool teachers in India

do not receive formal training in early childhood education. This deficit directly contributes to the low quality of education imparted to children, especially in far-flung areas with little access to professional training (Jha, 2020).

Inadequate Funding and Infrastructure

The development of effective ECCE systems is further hampered by funding constraints. Government investment in early childhood education remains disproportionately low when compared to other sectors. For instance, while the NEP 2020 stresses a strong foundation for ECCE, the actual budget allocation for preschool education has not increased appreciably so far (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). Accordingly, a greater percentage of the ECCE centers are marked by a general lack of the needed resources and physical provisions, which include teaching-learning materials, space for play that is adequate, and proper sanitation (Kaul & Bhattacharjea, 2019).

Inadequate Comprehensive Policy Framework

India does not have a comprehensive national policy framework on ECCE; this has resulted in poor coordination among various agencies responsible for implementing early childhood programs. The services are fragmented, and such fragmentation leads to inconsistencies in program quality and accessibility (Creches, 2020). For instance, although the ICDS scheme aimed at ensuring comprehensive care for under-six children, it has varied between states because of varying local structures of governance and resource allocation. The result has been confusion among families over the services available, weakening the efforts to have an integrated system of ECCE.

Accessibility and Inclusive Issues

Accessibility and inclusivity remain some key concerns in the ECCE landscape. Most significantly, children with disabilities represent serious systemic barriers to get them into appropriate educational settings. According to a survey carried out by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), only 20% of children with disabilities attend any form of early childhood program. Children of diverse linguistic backgrounds may also find it very challenging to adjust to the mainstream settings of ECCE where regional languages or English are predominantly used in instruction, further marginalizing them. It calls for responding to the challenges that are interrelated with each other in creating a system of equity for ECCE to support the development and learning of all Indian children. Targeted interventions should ensure not only accessibility and enhancement of service quality but also inclusiveness

in social policy. In addition, in order to ease the burden of socioeconomic disparity, cultural norms, unprepared educators, lack of funds, fragmented policy frameworks, and accessibility issues, stakeholders should create an inclusive early childhood education landscape where every child truly benefits (NCPEDP, 2021).

The Social Work Perspective of ECCE in India

This paper adopts a social work framework in the critical analysis of the issue of ECCE in India, with the core values underlined for social work: social justice, equality, and empowerment. By anchoring the analysis within these principles, we will be better able to grasp the various complexities and challenges inherent within the ECCE landscape in India.

Perspective Person-in-Environment

At the core of this analysis, there is a person-in-environment perspective that highlights how the individual child needs, family circumstances, and general socio-economic situations within diverse and multi-dimensional Indian landscapes are all linked with each other. Take the instance of a young boy coming from a family living in poverty in the countryside area of Bihar State: clearly, his possibility to be guaranteed quality ECCE will not only depend on his own, such as preparedness for entering primary school, or parental assistance in child upbringing. Instead, it is deeply shaped by systemic issues of poverty, a lack of trained providers, and infrastructure. It was also revealed that most children in poverty usually attend informal childcare arrangements with little or no scope of educational frameworks, thus impacting their overall development opportunities.

Through the person-in-environment framework (Karls & O'Keefe, 2008) a, we avoid simplistic, individually based explanations for the shortcomings within families. This perspective encourages an integrated understanding of how socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and local policies interactively determine the access and quality of ECCE services. The articles in this issue critically analyze the systemic factors that influence the ECCE landscape in India. For instance, the ICDS program, though envisioned to offer integrated services for children below six years of age, in practice falls short because of poor implementation across states. A case study from Madhya Pradesh showed that though anganwadi centers are supposed to provide supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, and early childhood education, most function with inadequate infrastructure and poorly trained workers. This systemic failure is reflected in findings of the National Institute of Nutrition, which report that nearly 40% of the ICDS centers lack basic educational materials and safe areas for playing. This

has consequences not only for children's immediate learning experiences but also for their overall long-term development.

Importantly, these articles also discuss how often the work of ECCE has been essentialized and considered as "women's work" even as it requires so much sophisticated knowledge and expertise to do well. In the process, it subsumes the professional status of educators and caregivers involved in the services. For example, a qualitative study among women educators in Tamil Nadu revealed that many female educators felt undervalued and underappreciated for their roles in shaping young minds. These educators often have advanced degrees and specialized training but are frequently relegated to the lower status because of belief in gender roles.

This analysis challenges the existing framing that reduces ECCE into a domestic chore, creating room for a more equitable framing of the work. It draws attention to the need for recognition of the competence needed in early childhood education and calls for improved working conditions and professional development for educators. This paper is a call to action through advocacy and collaboration across various groups, from providers and parents to academics, funders, policymakers, and activists, for the betterment of existing systems and practices in ECCE. Social workers are the crucial policy practitioners who can facilitate the communication between these diverse groups; building the bridges (Thomas, 2024).

Social Work Values and the Imperative for Equitable Early Childhood Care and Education in India

While the prevalence of non-parental childcare prior to formal schooling varies globally, the worldwide trend demonstrates increasing participation. This reality, linked with the prevalent part-time or full-time employment of parents in most families, underlines the practical need for Early Childhood Care and Education systems. However, beyond the logistical necessity, provision of ECCE is an issue of critical social and economic justice. As in other parts of the world, early childhood education and care are provided in India by low-waged, precarious workers; these workers are largely female, migrant, and of racial/ethnic minorities—a trend that perpetuates existing inequalities. Poorly paid carers who are likely to be poor themselves may feel demotivated and excluded, leading to negative implications for young children's quality of care. Moreover, the very families who are poor or geographically isolated and thus need quality early childhood programs the most are usually the last or least served. This disparity raises a fundamental question: is Early Childhood Care and Education a public good or a private resource?.

The Indian government has not based its approach on solid research

towards ECCE, nor is it unified, and publicly subsidized as many countries in the developed world have. In the present regime of fragmentation, coupled with underfunding and a paucity of programs, inequities have evolved with great significant. Programs across the country do not equally serve all Indian children like a majority of the developed countries who achieve nearly universal access in ECCE. Such contrasts reveal enormous gaps between highly available resources and pressing public needs for vulnerable children to come from disadvantaged sections in society and rarely getting served quality programs. This failure to guarantee comprehensive high-quality ECCE services to all children indicates a crucial social justice issue that is in dire need of address.

Social Work Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in India

As in many other contexts, ECCE in India is embedded in complex interpersonal relationships. These connections make a difference in the discourses of ECCE often implicitly rather than explicitly. Closeness between children, families, and providers can be highly beneficial but also brings several challenges. The personal nature of contact in ECCE often sustains the facilitation of a distributed leadership model, as was evident in the recent discussions. The same personal nature of this contact often incidentally reinforces that caregiving is a private issue rather than a critical public issue (Ponnuswami & Francis, 2021).

Due to its roots in professional helping relationships, social workers are notably quick at analyzing complex nuances involved within the ECCE. Historically, early social reformers focused on family dynamics and relationships impelled by humanitarian and pragmatic interests. For example, though the need for childcare among poor families was recognized, it often was constructed as a residual need that diminished the value of non-parental care and the worth of caregivers. From a social work perspective, understanding ECCE dynamics requires examining the interplay between individual choices, workplace conditions, cultural norms, community structures, and broader social policies. In the context of India, this now suggests that there is another tension in the policies: Caregivers may find wages increased on many occasions at the cost of reduced hours for staff and/or compromised staff-to-child ratios-features that may make for a compromised quality of care and affecting the welfare of children. To deal with such a contingency, this situation calls urgently for policies in comprehensive childcare, as also encompassing the related interests of children, their families, and providers themselves under one broad-based framing, including society as a whole. A strong policy approach would therefore need to investigate the complex relationships within

ECCE settings and also focus on the broader social, economic, and cultural conditions that shape these relationships and their consequences. This holistic approach is a dire need for creating equitable and quality ECCE systems for all children and their families in India (S. Khanra Jha, 2024).

The Critical Role of Social Workers in Fostering Equitable Early Childhood Care and Education in India

Social workers will therefore be the crucial workers to address the challenges of ensuring equitable access to quality ECCE in India. The multidimensional skills will thus help them in addressing systemic inequities and empower families through a variety of strategies:

1. **Advocacy and Policy Reform:** Social workers can become active in policy reform by advocating for a policy framework that ensures all children receive quality ECCE. It includes, but is not limited to, addressing infrastructural bottlenecks and increasing fiscal allocation toward such programs.
2. **Community Participation and Empowerment:** The social workers could engage the families and communities so that identified needs are directly addressed; hence, making the program culturally sensitive and relevant for ECCE programs.
3. **Inclusive Practices:** Social workers work to ensure that children with disabilities, those from different linguistic backgrounds, and other marginalized groups are also welcome in the inclusive environment of the ECCE programs.
4. **Workforce Strengthening:** The entities have been very instrumental in providing training, support, and mentorship for ECCE professionals, something that acts as a very vital component to delivering quality and culturally appropriate care.
5. **Understanding Social Determinants of Learning:** Social workers understand that socioeconomic factors, community structures, and family support systems create an ecology for the young child's development. These insights will be invaluable in the formulation of evidence-based policy and equitable ECCE programming.
6. **Interdisciplinary Approaches and Coordination:** Social workers will coordinate government agencies, NGOs, families, and the community to ensure that efforts toward ECCE are unifying and efficient.

The unique perspective of social workers definitely enriches the field of ECCE. They emphasize a holistic approach, which not only looks at the individual in the community but also the policy linkages. Their key competencies rest in ensuring that collaborative and

participatory decision-making on behalf of diverse stakeholders lies at the heart of an effective ECCE, whether it comes to the execution or the sustainability of interventions. Additionally, it is also hoped that sharing these experiences will strengthen efforts to create just and equitable opportunities for all children in the realms of early childhood development. Social workers could, therefore, play a transformative role in the field of early childhood education in India through advocacy, community engagement, inclusivity efforts, workforce strengthening, attention to social determinants, and collaborative approaches that shape a more equitable future.

A Social Work Perspective Aligned with NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 emphasis on holistic child development and equitable access is in perfect sync with the crucial role that social work plays in shaping appropriate ECCE systems in India. Social workers are needed at the forefront of implementing these guiding principles of NEP into practice within the cultural landscape of India, in that they are specially trained for creating supportive environments, maintaining emotional well-being, and recognizing the social determinants of learning. A truly inclusive system of ECCE would have to recognize and then address the entrenched diversity in Indian society. This would mean meeting the special needs of children with disability, children from diverse linguistic groups, and those from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Social workers are well-placed to lead the way in practices that are inclusive beyond mere recognition, acting in the creation of culturally responsive environments which allow all children to feel a sense of belonging.

This requires consideration of the various cultural norms, values, and traditions within India. The culturally sensitive ECCE programs should, therefore, actively include these aspects and look at them as strengths that enhance the learning environment rather than something to be avoided in order to prevent conflicts. Most importantly, this calls for challenging harmful stereotypes, especially those feeding into gender inequalities. Social workers can concretely help provide equal opportunities for all children by analyzing and dismantling deeply ingrained, gendered expectations and roles of each community. This presupposes a critical look at the power dynamics and how the preexisting structures either perpetuate or work against these stereotypes. Engagement with families and communities in program development is a necessary condition for the latter to be responsive to particular needs. It involves the participation of community members in the design and delivery of programs, consideration of cultural diversity in designing curriculum and pedagogical approaches, and linguistic diversity.

Effective communication and collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries are critical for the establishment of inclusive environments. The goal, finally, would be to see an environment in ECCE showcasing rich cultural diversity, where each and every child gets the opportunity to prosper fully. The NEP 2020 framework has some great length; this warrants continuous effort by social workers-coming together-to assure translated vision for quality Early Childhood Care and Education across the breadth and width of the nation.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020 presents a seminal opportunity to reframe ECCE in India; how far this actually succeeds depends on a nuanced understanding of the multi-layered challenges that come inherently with the Indian context. Whereas the NEP 2020 rightly recognizes the imperative of equitable access and holistic development, the realization of this vision requires much more than mere policy pronouncements. The active engagement and expertise of social workers are the significant elements for this transformation. Social workers, with their deep understanding of social justice, community engagement, and cultural sensitivity, are uniquely positioned to address the systemic inequities that currently hinder equitable access to quality ECCE. This requires a nuanced understanding of the intricate connections between socioeconomic status, cultural contexts, and the diverse developmental needs of children. Effective ECCE programs need to move away from purely logistic approaches and adopt a more holistic perspective in their work, considering the complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors.

Social workers can be very important in making this happen by advocating for equitable policies, fostering inclusive practices, and empowering communities to take part in shaping their children's futures. This would involve direct work with marginalized communities, addressing cultural sensitivities, and supporting families through the complexities of accessing quality ECCE. It is also important that culturally responsive environments be created that celebrate diversity, recognize the needs of children with disabilities, and actively challenge harmful gender stereotypes. What can ultimately ensure the realization of the NEP 2020 is ongoing collaboration among social workers, educators, policymakers, and communities. Further research into the specific needs of the various communities in India becomes important in informing policy decisions, program design, and strategies for implementation. By prioritizing the linked socioeconomic factors, cultural contexts, and child development through continued interdisciplinary collaboration, it would be possible to enable India to create an ECCE system that will foster the whole development of each and every child, forming a sounder basis for a high-

quality future. The NEP 2020 sets out that framework; the dedicated and collective effort by social workers, educators, and communities in general are what will fulfill this aspiration.

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From the Iron Law of Oligarchy to Building a Heart of Inclusion in the Schools of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores disability-inclusive practices within global social work education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to promote equitable and quality education for all. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the Iron Law of Oligarchy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and backward curriculum design, the paper identifies barriers such as lack of safe spaces and ableist practices within social work institutions. It critically examines implicit and explicit curricula, highlighting the intersection of social justice, inclusive pedagogy, and equity in professional training. The authors propose the HEART inclusion check framework, which emphasizes holistic learning spaces, equity in engagement, accommodative assessments, reflection-based realignment, and transformative curriculum to foster effective inclusion. Practical strategies like reflective teaching, creative learning spaces, and non-discriminatory implicit structures are discussed to empower students with disabilities while sensitizing future social workers to anti-oppressive practices.

Keywords: *anti-oppressive practices, disability-inclusion, sustainable development goals, social work education, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world, accounting for approximately 16 percent of the global population (World Health Organization, 2024). The medical model of disability defines a person with impairment as a condition that needs to be cured, eliminated or prevented (Kim & Sellmaier, 2019;

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DePoy & Gilson, 2004). However, it is the debilitating social structures which reinforce the oppression and bias, giving leeway for ableist narratives to grow. This bolsters the superiority of ability by establishing disability as inferior (Campbell, 2008).

The profession of social work emerged as a charity model to reinforce the belief that individual problems were due to moral fallacies and therefore, they must be strategically segregated based on race, caste, ethnicity, and physical abilities. The social worker was to ‘civilize the communities’ (National Association of Social Workers, 2024). With the growing conscientiousness among practitioners, the demand for social workers with a human rights approach increased (Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016). Social work education soon became a critical gateway to empower the incoming generation of social workers to understand how to democratize the oppressive forms of socio-economic and political systems they aspire to work with whilst acknowledging their privilege and biases. Although social justice is reinforced in the profession’s guiding principles (National Association of Social Workers, 2024), the philosophical ideologies adopted by social work education en masse is yet to align with the profession’s Code of Ethics (Atteberry-Ash, 2023; Kattari et al., 2019, p. 5).

This study draws on the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ developed by Michels (1962) which is an equivalent of an ‘acid test’ for organizations or professions that claim to be democratic. Using this measure, Baron et al. (1996) opined that social work is the one discipline that might be expected to embody an enabling ethos while training new recruits (Baron, Phillips & Stalker, 1996). This could be extrapolated into an argument that if social workers do not feel empowered as practitioners, the ‘empowerment’ tradition that the profession claims to have, cannot stand true anymore (Goldberg et al., 1985; Baron et al., 1996). Furthermore, if there are significant barriers for students with disabilities within social work institutions, then the situation would be far worse in non-social work training settings (Baron et al., 1996). In the light of this evidence, the authors felt the need to understand the extent of inclusion that can be consciously designed by the social work institutions to balance the rights of students with disabilities and the professional development of all student social workers.

As there is a limited body of research involving student social workers with disabilities (Baron et al., 1996; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007; Poole et al., 2012; Ting, 2013; Hartrey et al., 2017; Kattari et al., 2019; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2020; DeZelar et al., 2022; Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023), this paper shall attempt to understand ableism in the context of social work education and further, map the inclusive practices that can be adopted by social work institutions globally, particularly in addressing the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities enrolled in these

institutions. The article will attempt to capture these best practices in the form of an inclusion check framework that can be further extrapolated by social work institutions to gauge their efficacy of inclusion in their implicit and explicit curricula. To adhere to the disability advocacy parlance, the authors will use person-first language (eg: 'students with disabilities' instead of 'disabled students').

Understanding Ableism in the Context of Social Work Education

A United Nations academic impact report states that learners with disabilities in higher education are consistently under-represented, marginalized, and excluded on campus (United Nations, 2020). Mackelprang (2010) argues that disregarding or diminutively viewing disability as 'something to be fixed or overcome is an implicit form of ableism' (p. 92). When it comes to social work institutions, studies revealed that most social work programs include a finite representation of disability-inclusive content in their curriculum, and they are designed in a deficit-model method (Kim & Sellmaier, 2019), resulting in ableism caused by omission. Kattari et al. (2019) further note that various forms of ableism are evident in higher education institutions, including schools of social work, such as having limited representation of persons with disabilities within teaching or non-teaching staff, classroom design and fieldwork placements for neurotypical/able-bodied individuals, and following conventional teaching and learning methods (Kattari et al., 2019). Considering the volume of students who enter the social work programs with an intention to 'help' their communities, aligning the social work education to view disability merely from the medical model lens is not just disempowering (Morgan, 2012) but also disenfranchising for students with disabilities who join the program assuming it is a non-judgmental space.

Sensitizing social workers to view discrimination through an anti-oppressive lens allowed for institutions like NASW to create safer spaces for honest reflections about social justice and equity. However, the finite references to inclusivity in a social work institution's implicit curriculum is partly due to the systemic inequalities of the higher education system (Jack, 2019; Yee, 2016), wherein the ecosystem is flooded with 'aging institutions' (Tillotson et al., 2021) that move away from social justice and march towards a clinical trend (Specht & Courtney, 1994). The social work profession has received criticism for being a double-edged sword for people with disabilities, and critical disability scholars have encouraged the profession to relook at how it engages with disability (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). In spite of this domain seeking individuals who demonstrate resilient adaptation in the face of the adversities encountered by individuals, groups, and communities they serve (Morrison, 2007; Collins,

2007; Beddoe et al., 2014), it is astonishing to note that our social work educational practices often fail to take disability into account and there is barely any effort by the social work curricula to bring disability into the forefront in a profession that otherwise embraces inclusion and diversity (Mackelprang, 2010; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019). Poole et al. (2012) explained how students with disabilities are often made to comply with institutional norms in order to 'it' (their disability) not being a threat to their academic and professional standards (Poole et al., 2012). An example of this is evident in the study conducted by Sellmaier & Kim (2020) with students who were enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), Master of Social Work (MSW), and PhD programs in CSWE-accredited social work schools in the United States. The students selected for the study were the ones who identified as having a disability. Out of the 262 respondents surveyed, 14.3 percent reported negative experiences while requesting field accommodations (Sellmaier & Kim, 2020, p. 881). This is similar to the findings of Ting (2013) and X (2023) where BSW students revealed that they experienced barriers in seeking support for their mental health needs, which primarily included a scarcity of resources (Dreyer, 2021), lack of training (Moriña & Fernández, 2017), negative attitudes (Charles et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2017), and fears about breaches of confidentiality (Kerschbaum et al., 2017; Moriña, 2022). Although there are studies that have evaluated the implicit curriculum of social work institutions to explore the invisible patterns of oppressive practices (Baron et al., 1996; Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007; Ogden et al., 2017; Kiesel et al., 2018; Kim & Sellmaier, 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2020; Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023; DeZelar et al., 2022), there are few that have focused on the opportunities leveraged by higher educational institutions (HEIs), including social work institutions, to enhance the experiences of students with disabilities. This study discusses the possibilities that can be explored by these institutions as inclusive practices in their implicit as well as explicit curriculum to support students with disabilities, thereby translating the rhetoric into much needed systemic transformations.

Following the Heart of Inclusion

The right of individuals with disabilities to an inclusive education at all levels, free from discrimination and with equal opportunity, is recognized in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), social work is a 'profession that promotes social change and individual empowerment by applying the values of social justice, human rights, and respect for diversity. That being said, as the number of students with various visible and invisible disabilities entering higher education

expecting support needs increases, social work institutions are obliged to protect the rights of not just the end users but also the students who take up this profession as a means of livelihood. With the institutional policies and practices being both explicit and implicit, the schools of social work ought to have a balance between maintaining their educational standards that meet myriad accreditation criteria, as well as being truly inclusive in their implicit and explicit curricula.

Given that human rights and social justice are at the core of social work training, it's only appropriate that the framework comprehensively addresses the strategies that would make the schools of social work conscientiously attuned to those fundamental aspects of the profession. Therefore, to create safe spaces in social work institutions for aspiring student social workers or educators with disabilities, the authors have conceptualized the *HEART framework of inclusion check* (see Fig.1) which identifies five key factors a social work institution can use to measure how inclusive they are: *holistic learning spaces, equity in feedback, accommodative assessments, responsive representation, and transparent actions*. Some key practices identified under each of these five indicators will serve as potential theories of change that can be extrapolated to and adopted by social work institutions to cater to the diverse needs of their students.

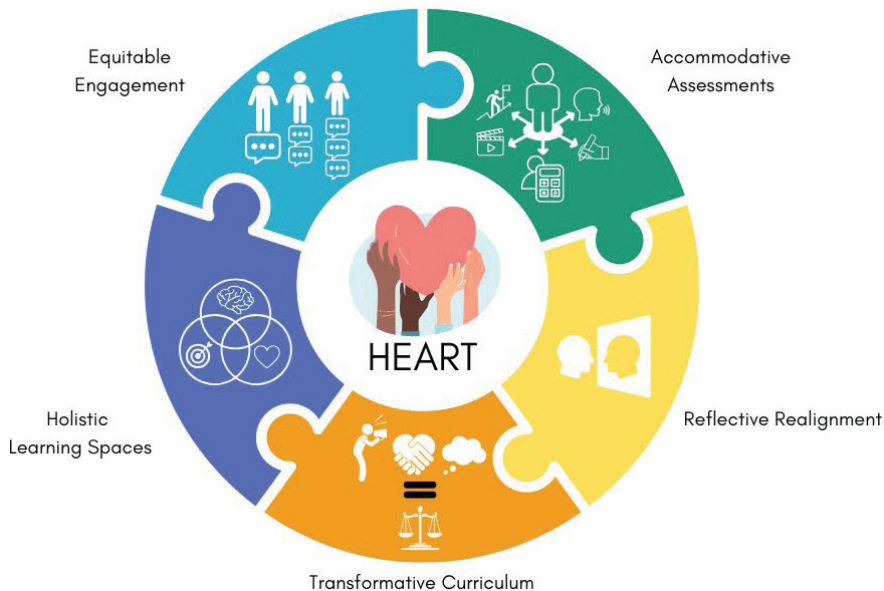


Fig 1: HEART Framework of Inclusion Check

Alt. Text: The illustration depicts the HEART framework of inclusion check which includes five components essential for inclusivity in social work education. Displayed in a cyclical format, the five game-changing

components identified are holistic learning spaces, equitable engagement, accommodative assessments, reflective realignment, and transformative curriculum. There are corresponding icons reflecting each of the components and in the middle, four different hands are holding up a heart, symbolizing the idea of diversity and empathy.

Holistic Learning Spaces

According to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2007), preparing for transitions into higher education demands more than just meeting the needs of academics and rudimentary self-care; it also needs to include preparing for the multiple institutional and social demands that come with participating in activities across the spectrum of campus settings (Kreider et al., 2015). Hence, engaging a student using a holistic approach rather than simply focusing on their cognitive development has become a significant policy shift in higher education. This also recognizes educational institutions playing a pivotal role in aiding and enhancing the well-being of their students, even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies observe that disabled students are at a greater risk of experiencing disconnection and a lack of sense of belonging which prompts them to drop out of their higher education programs compared to their non-disabled peers (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Another undervalued yet critical domain that must be highlighted for having a positive impact on the holistic development of all students in HEIs, regardless of their biopsychosocial abilities, is creative learning spaces (Rampersad & Patel, 2014). A study conducted by Zufferey & King (2015) explored the effectiveness of a 'Social Work Studio' which they developed from the 'good practice' literature of responding to student feedback seeking a hands-on social work program. The three-roomed Studio aimed at improving students' personal and professional identities using a two-way learning mirror segregating the classroom and the learning space. In addition to engaging in role plays and students developing their case studies, the Studio also utilized assistive technology, which encouraged the learners to observe and reflect on their skills from the recordings of these sessions (Zufferey & King, 2015, p. 395).

A similar study by Muraleedharan & PJ (2023) identified the outcomes of co-designing a theater club for and with first-year undergraduate social work students in an Indian social work institution. It demonstrated the relationship between the co-creation of such inclusive creative learning spaces with the students' mental health, which reflected a collective vision for holistic education. It further speaks about shifting from a

traditional learning environment to a dynamic space that mirrors the interdisciplinarity of the social work profession (Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023, p. 92). This study fosters a discussion on expressive arts being a tool through which HEIs become ‘intentional designers’ of classrooms taking into account the diverse learning needs of students, and enhancing their sense of self (Muraleedharan & PJ, 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Zufferey & King, 2015). By moving away from conventional ideas of what higher education should look like and instead, reimagining holistic learning spaces rooted in student needs, HEIs can transition into a culture where students feel a sense of belonging.

Equitable Engagement

Equity in education is a process that is fair and supports students to optimize their potential by removing learning barriers (Schleicher, 2014). However, with the advent of COVID-19, civil riots, and other socio-political issues that have been plaguing the global education scenario, fostering equity and inclusion have become a priority, especially for learners living with physical and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Although seen as a transformational equalizer, institutions often fall short of setting up implicit structures that allow equality of access, services, and outcomes to be achieved. However, when institutions become equity-minded, they can create strengths-based identity-conscious programs that can empower students from diverse backgrounds to embrace their true selves instead of trying to fix their deficits (Pendakur, 2020).

When institutions enhance a learner’s sense of belonging as an equitable form of engagement, they contribute to their sense of self as well. Having a sense of belonging increases a learner’s commitment to their education, thereby enhancing their resilience (Tinto, 1993), and academic engagement (Wilson et al., 2015). For inclusion, one’s needs are satisfied when an ecosystem connects with the individual and vice-versa (Jansen et al., 2014). However, when groups are segregated based on homogeneity, it creates marginalization and exclusionary parameters for belonging.

To overcome such situations, one strategy that proactively seeks to engage students by honoring their individual differences is the universal design for learning (UDL) (Rose and Meyer, 2002). Using the three guiding principles of UDL — (a) multiple means of representation, (b) multiple means of expression, and (c) multiple means of engagement, learners can be a part of inclusive learning environments (Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). For multiple means of representation, social work educators could offer diverse sensory-based information, illustrate examples through multiple media, and highlight patterns for effective information

processing (Capp, 2017). For multiple means of expression, social work institutions can enhance the capacity of the students by providing them with assistive technologies to communicate their knowledge, scaffolded levels of support for continuous learning; and avenues to self-monitor their academic progress (Rose & Meyer, 2006; Capp, 2017). For multiple means of engagement, institutions could create learning spaces that minimize distractions, differentiate resources to challenge the students at their optimal level, foster collaborative activities, provide equitable and quality feedback, and curate avenues for reflection (Rose & Meyer, 2006; Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). By doing so, UDL eliminates the learning barriers and moves away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach (Westerlin & Folske-Starlin, 2024). Studies have also found that the implementation of UDL principles in the classroom results in increased levels of engagement among students with disabilities (Capp, 2017; Florian, 2015). Furthermore, a study conducted by Espada-Chavarria et al. (2023) demonstrated that explicitly stating academic objectives and expected results while proposing academic tasks to college students along with appropriate guidance towards establishing these goals using UDL principles led to higher student scores and improved student engagement. Additionally, by setting up welcoming learning environments to align with the UDL principle of multiple forms of engagement, students became more involved in the subject and felt they could approach their teacher with any issue related to their learning needs (Espada-Chavarria et al., 2023, p. 8).

Another significant practical approach that can be infused into the teaching repertoires of social work programs is the universal instructional design (UID) that shifts from an individual remedial intervention to a student-centric, accessible, and inclusive learning model (Goulden et al., 2023). Studies have shown that UID can support designing curricula to meet diverse learning needs so that there will occur fewer requests for modifications from students with documented disabilities as well as students who are yet to disclose as living with disability (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Goulden et al., 2023). Akin to UDL, UID in social work education focuses on creating a ‘universally accessible educational environment’ for all social work students (Center of Applied Special Technology, 2024). Starting from developing a welcoming classroom and field work setting to setting up a non-discriminatory baseline of skills and knowledge checkpoints to test student mastery in the course or fieldwork to using a diverse range of multi-modal instructional strategies to providing flexible means of evaluation (discussed in detail in the next section on ‘adaptive assessments’) (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Rose & Meyer, 2000). This design comes with the caveat that it requires a high level of time and resource

investment by the faculty (Johnson & Fox, 2003). It also assumes other barriers such as the technological support required to develop such inclusive and differentiated courses from design to evaluation besides the faculty's orientation towards inclusion, budgetary constraints, and administrative mechanisms (Lightfoot & Gibson, 2005; Johnson & Fox, 2003). However, if the social work educators and the social work community can prioritize universally accessible social work curriculum design, the more equitable will be the engagement of the program for all students.

Accommodative Assessments

Hanafin et al. (2006) claims that assessment practices are not prescribed but are designed and developed at an institutional, departmental or educator level. And every practice chosen is symbolic of its preference over other methods of assessments, which may or may not take into consideration the end users but rather succumbs to a largely acceptable norm. Either way, when assessments are not carefully and holistically curated, the consequences of that can be greater for some students than for others (p. 438). Therefore, if the learners and their learning can be variable, the ways they express their understanding must also be variable.

Even though frameworks like UDL pave the way for enhanced inclusivity in learning environments, studies still report assessment as a critical challenge within higher education (Hanafin et al., 2006; Tai et al., 2021). Faced with a scarcity of studies that focus on the grades of students with disabilities, the authors of this article did, however, find articles that talk about flexibility and choice as game changers in inclusive assessments. One such radical study was conducted by Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) who demonstrated the use of UDL to teach a math course by replacing a summative assessment with a summative self-assessment. This self-assessment included a range of formative assessments, peer evaluations, rubrics, and exemplars handed out at the beginning of the course as a part of a digital Moodle environment (Nieminen et al., 2019). Another study rooted in developing a range of assessments was carried out by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2016) which drew on the concept of 'flexible pedagogy' (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013; Tai et al., 2021), and included assessments that were diverse but were also compatible with the larger objectives of the course. One of the assessment outputs was a 'Patchwork Portfolio' that included podcasts, group work, and reflective assignments (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013, p. 20). The formative components of this assessment provided the opportunity for students to be creative risk-takers and empowered them to detach themselves from the fear of failure and judgment. This learner empowerment was then further acted upon by encouraging them to be co-creators of their own learning with their peers, thereby enhancing their

agency and decision-making (p. 21).

To ensure there is seamless integration of inclusive assessment practices, collaborative processes such as co-designing of curriculum and assessments between students, faculty and disability support staff have been considered to be significant (Tai et al., 2021; Nieminen and Tuohilampi, 2020). This includes asking students how they would like to be assessed as it not only provides them with the autonomy of their learning but also places an onus on them to be the creators of their learning process. A similar case was made in the study conducted by Muraleedharan & PJ (2023) where the student social workers advocated in favor of moving from traditional classroom methods to the need for self-directed learning wherein they expected the support of their institutions in creating opportunities to practice and evaluate themselves on what they have learned (p. 91).

As per the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the social work programs must have a systematic plan to assess the nine social work competencies explicitly using at least two instruments per competency, one of which must be a simulated demonstration of student achievement in their fieldwork (CSWE, 2022). This goes hand in hand with assessing student input and participation in the implicit curriculum as well. When students are empowered to move towards an inquiry approach to envision alternatives to the current scenarios, build trust with their co-creators of knowledge (faculty as well as peers), and test the ideas they have designed (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2016, p. 21), it extends social work education to becoming future-facing. Such layered inclusive way of holistic evaluation strategies lines up well with the internationalization model of social work as it too involves critical thinking, reflection, and a global mindset to innovatively solve modern social problems along with the service users.

Reflective Realignment

With the disclosure of disability likened to ‘coming out’, individuals with disabilities experience limitations in their horizontal and vertical mobility in HEIs (Dolan, 2021). The under-representation of staff with disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Dolan, 2021) poses a risk of limited role models for a student population that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. The impact of such ableist hiring practices is just as pervasive as other oppressive systems that do not center the interests of persons with disabilities (Miles et al., 2017).

When dominant narratives about disability create an illusion of normative experiences within a particular context, marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, challenge those foundational assumptions

and make their voices heard by virtue of owning their storytelling process (White, 2004). This calls for a need to positively represent disability that ropes in critical stakeholders, including students with and without disabilities, along with the faculty and the non-teaching personnel, to put forth the best suggestions on how to address the challenges faced by the students with disabilities in HEIs (Devar et al., 2020). By bringing in every significant stakeholder into setting up implicit structures, the ‘power of gaze’ (Foucault, 1982) can be normalized, thereby creating opportunities to build positive representations that will ensure equitable access to infrastructure, processes, and resources for students with disabilities (Devar et al., 2020, p. 9).

One such authentic approach to building a positive and equitable representation of disability in HEIs is by constant realignment of the aforementioned structures using reflective practices. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as an ‘active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’ (p. 118). The resurgence of this approach came about when Schön talked about ‘reflection-in-action’ in his seminal work on how professionals think in action and solve problems (Schön, 1983, p. 131-132). Reflective practice is an essential component of teaching in higher education (Clegg et al., 2010), one can claim that critical reflection takes precedence over other forms of reflection when it comes to teaching students with disabilities, especially in social work institutions, as it encourages thinking about one’s actions in the context of social, political and/or cultural forces. The outcomes of social work institutions making a responsive effort to develop implicit and explicit curricula through critical reflections with themselves, their students, their peers, and their ecosystem can displace the hegemonic ableist narratives (Freire, 1974; Vodde, 2001). This can further make way for teaching and learning materials that reimagine how disability-specific social constructs are represented in higher education settings, thereby making the whole process empowering for all stakeholders involved. Social work programs that can preemptively design disability-inclusive structures for such reflections to take place can aspire to pass the acid test posed by Michels (1962), and then learn from the analysis to be reflective practitioners who can check their own personal and professional biases for and against supporting students with disabilities in mainstream institutions.

Transformative Curriculum

Unlike children who have finite frames of reference for their learning owing to their exposure, adults have multiple frames of reference (Mezirow, 2003) through which they synthesize new information. And that means,

there ought to be a shift from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to a highly flexible, less rigid and individualized educational experience (Rose and Meyer, 2002). The ability to proactively react and respond to the rapidly evolving best practices specific to teaching and learning in HEIs would better deliver on the rapidly evolving needs of the learners as well. Like all programs, social work education too, can no longer rely on the traditional approaches in the post-pandemic world. What is needed is an approach to learning that advocates for emancipatory practice and does this in inclusive ways of information dissemination. The concept of transformative learning caters to unlearning the ‘problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, open, and reflective’ (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Only when the teacher and students engage in what Freire (1974) calls ‘problem-posing dialogue’ can the stakeholders devote themselves to attaining an emancipatory understanding of the issues being discussed (p. 118). One can even argue that this approach is even truer for the social work discipline as we now march towards the internationalization of this domain. In fact, let us assume that the schools of social work are fieldwork settings—where students are encouraged to integrate their behaviors with social work theory, values, and skills. In this case, the idea of creating a robust implicit curriculum along with an explicit curriculum ideally becomes a natural progression. Behaviors that can be ‘taught’ in a classroom (explicit curriculum) and behaviors that can be ‘caught’ by socialization (implicit curriculum) (Bogo & Wayne, 2013; CSWE, 2022) must, therefore, go hand in hand. In a social work program setting, the emphasis on the intentional design of the curriculum would be reflected in informal cafeteria chats, networking events involving faculty and students, teaching and non-teaching staff modeling professional behavior, or student representations in institution-wide program committees. The learning environment thus created becomes a conduit for students to observe and participate in the culture of human interaction (Bogo & Wayne, 2013).

As the needs of students become diverse, the emergence of difference-blind neoliberal perspectives poses a threat to providing an effective learning environment in which students’ identities, communities, and agency are identified and respected (Price et al., 2023). To address this contextual misalignment, institutions can adopt a backward design process while designing the curriculum (see Fig. 2). Starting with the ‘end in mind’, educators can begin by interrogating and problematizing the ultimate objectives of the course in the light of recognized prior learning (OECD, 2023) of the students as well as their lived experiences and the identities they represent. This should be followed by a translation of the goals and questions into scaffolded resources where learners can make meaning by

comparing the new information that they learned with what they already know all the while ensuring that the scaffolding makes room for equitable growth.

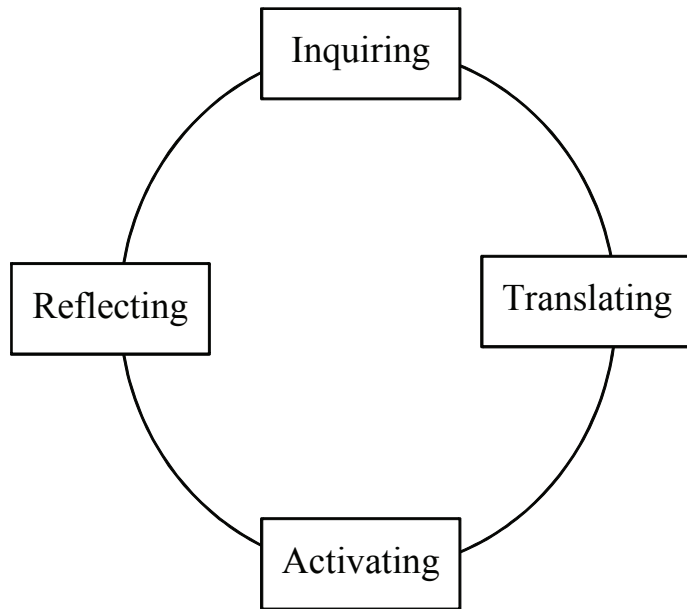


Fig 2 : Price, Smith, and Fox's (2023) backward critical design process cycle

Alt Text: The illustration depicts the backward critical design process as conceptualized by Price, Smith, and Fox (2023). The figure highlights the steps that can encourage educators to respect the diverse identities of the students. The four steps are inquiring, translating, activating, and reflecting.

Once the resources are developed, the educators support the learners in engaging with these materials and encourage them to become agents of their learning. The end of this process is reflection where one evaluates the outcomes and frames or reframes the strategies (Schön, 1983). This critical design process (Price et al., 2023) not only incorporates a Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2000, 2002) approach but also draws from culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), which acknowledges and ties itself to belonging, inclusion, and social justice.

DISCUSSION

As the distance between local and global worlds have been shrinking, there is a push for the social work curriculum to be more globally relevant and to rediscover its rights-based roots (Androff, 2015, p.10). The more social

work becomes more nuanced as a profession, it is important to note that relying solely on institutional rankings and explicit curriculum surveys is not an exact measurement of the campus climate as it may lead individuals to believe that the institution is bustling with positivity and inclusion when it may not necessarily be the case. Making disability truly visible would mean practicing and embodying inclusion in both the explicit as well as implicit functioning of a social work institution. They must refrain from making accreditation a means of social work succumbing to providing mere 'lip service to the values of social justice and equity' (Corley & Young, 2018) by aiming to get an implicit bias audit that makes their invisible tenets discernable (Tillotson et al., 2021).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Using the HEART framework of inclusion check, the schools of social work can consider the following implications:

- Develop inclusion metrics that can be used to substantiate their accreditation indicators along with using that as a barometer for continuous improvement.
- Encourage co-designing of curriculum and assessment with inputs from students with disabilities, fostering ownership and catering to their specific learning needs in social work education.
- Faculty incentivization programs wherein the schools of social work collaborate and adopt innovative recognition mechanisms for faculty members who adopt inclusive practices, emphasizing the HEART framework principles.
- Advancing policy advocacy by utilizing the inputs from implementing this framework to influence national and international educational policies, especially in contexts where social work is yet to be recognized as a profession.

Implications for Social Work Research

The schools of social work can use the HEART framework to expand the scope of social work research in the following ways:

- Conduct longitudinal studies on HEART Framework implementation and investigate if and how it affects student outcomes, faculty perceptions, and institution's implicit policies over time. The disability-inclusion metrics before and after adopting the framework can be compared to check the efficacy of the framework in the schools of social work.

- Consider intersectional and cross-cultural lens and explore how intersectional identities (such as race, gender, socio-economic status, cultural contexts) are addressed within implicit and explicit social work curricula using HEART framework
- Study the efficacy of assistive technology and differentiated strategies such as UDL, UID, and artificial intelligence in fostering engagement, accommodation, and equity in social work education, particularly within the HEART framework's parameters
- Evaluate the impact of HEART framework-based training for social work faculty on their anti-ableist practices, especially while hiring, curriculum designing, course delivery, and curation of assessments

Visualize a social work institution that provides a holistic learning space where multiple forms of engagement are utilized to enhance the sense of belonging of students with diverse needs. Their understanding is then checked based on the assessments of their choice, where they can take accountability of their own learning. Once checked, intersectional critical reflections take place that fosters collaboration and exchange of feedback through a rational discourse. This creates a newly transformed frame of reference which can then be utilized to further enhance the efficacy of teaching and learning practices. Such processes of transformative learning can help reimagine systems that are necessary for anti-oppressive and democratic social work practice, making the process purposeful.

HEIs can prioritize disability-inclusion by creating a non-disabling program and encourage educators to implement a diverse range of strategies that support all students. However, it is critical to note that unless institutions create such programs from scratch, the presence of an explicitly and implicitly anti-ableist program is a far-fetched reality. To fill this void and to conduct a critical self-analysis, they may adopt the HEART framework of inclusion check to reflect on their current practices. This research could serve as an assessment of what are some best practices that the social work institutions can emulate and learn from to move away from becoming yet another set of ableist ivory towers that militates against embracing diversity and inclusion. Clearly, the journey toward disability-inclusive social work education is far from complete, and this study serves as a pivotal step in bridging persistent gaps. The HEART framework establishes a solid basis for promoting inclusion, while also inviting further exploration of the institutional, pedagogical, and experiential aspects of inclusion in social work education. Future research should build upon these insights, moving beyond theoretical premises to produce practical knowledge that transforms institutional behaviours, empowers diverse learners, and redefines the core principles of social work education.

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