

REMOTE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN INDIA: NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT:

The idea of remote work has been increasingly popular in a number of industries in recent years. This tendency has also had an impact on social work, a career that has always been based on in-person contacts. The technique of offering social services and assistance virtually is known as remote social work. This article explores the avenues, opportunities and need for the practice of remote social work in India. It goes on to address the challenges associated with remote practices of social work.

Keywords: remote social work, digital social work, remote social work practice, e-social work

INTRODUCTION:

The internet and the development of technology have completely changed how we interact and obtain information. The need for remote employment options has thus increased dramatically. The field of social work, which is committed to assisting people and communities, has welcomed this change.

Remote social work jobs have emerged as a viable alternative to traditional in-person practices. In developed countries like US, Canada, and Australia, work-from-home social work jobs can be found in a variety of areas, such as nonprofit, healthcare, education, and counseling. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (of USA) predicts a job growth rate of 7% for social workers from 2022 to 2032. Nonprofit organizations, startup companies, digital healthcare and tele-health platforms have offered full-time jobs that are remote and has hired for positions with freelance flexibility as well under the job categories like Volunteer Coordinator, Immigration Specialist, Substance Use Counselor, Training Director, Mental Health Therapist, Associate Therapist, Licensed Therapist, Licensed Bilingual Therapist, , Care Manager, Suicide Prevention Program, Licensed Clinical Social Workers (lcsws), Licensed Professional Counselors (lpcs), Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors (lpccs), Licensed Marriage & Family Counselors (lmfts), and other licensed practitioners (Jay, 2024).

NEED FOR REMOTE SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA:

There are several key drivers, avenues which describe why the practice of remote social work in India is needed. Few key drivers have been discussed here.

Remote or underserved areas: India is not a small country. It is considered a subcontinent because it covers an expansive area of land with diverse geographical features. These features do cause various human settlements. They range from a hamlet to metropolitan cities. In India, the pattern of dispersed or isolated habitation appears in the form of lonely huts or small hamlets in remote forests, or on small hills.

Dispersion of settlement in India is caused by the physical features of India such as Northern Mountains: Himalayas, Peninsular Plateau which contains mountain ranges (Aravalli, Vindhyachal and Satpura ranges), and ghats (Eastern Ghats and Western Ghats), Thar Desert and Islands (The Andaman and Nicobar islands and the Lakshadweep islands) (*Geography of India*, 2024). Along with the physical feature (nature of terrain, altitude, climate and availability of water) other factors such as Cultural and Ethnic factors (social structure, caste and religion) and Security factors (defence against thefts and robberies) are responsible for having isolated settlements in India.

Semi desert regions of Rajasthan, forest lands of north east India, shivaliks, (J n k, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh) and parts of peninsular India also have dispersed types of settlements. Remote areas may not have proper roads, transport facilities but have mobile network. Since face-to-face

contact is not feasible, remote technology may be a helpful tool for keeping links with families intact. In these isolated or underserved locations, where it is difficult to be physically present, remote social work enables experts to contact people and communities.

Anonymity-seeking behavior: India is a land of diversity having various types of communities, ethnic and cultural groups. Small or close-knit communities can be found all over the nation. People have a thorough understanding of every individual, including their identity, place of residence, and, at the very least, their actions (Stavrou, 2023). When an individual or a family doesn't want to disclose their issues, problems, and the services they are taking, it's difficult to maintain confidentiality. They consider visibility as a potential source of danger. It is impossible to be anonymous in these communities though they need anonymity in order to feel safe. People may feel more comfortable and uninhibited to talk about humiliating or stigmatizing topics when they are anonymous. "In conversational settings, anonymity may allow people to reveal personal history and feelings without fear of later embarrassment. Electronic conversational media can provide physical isolation, in addition to anonymity. This prevents physical retaliation for remarks, and prevents negative or taboo behavior or discussion from tarnishing the reputation of the speaker. This can be beneficial when discussing very private matters, or taboo subjects" (*Anonymity*, 2024). Online and virtual services can provide anonymity for people in small or close-knit communities. Hence, remote social work is in need.

Disability or mobility issues: In India, out of the 121 Cr population, 2.68Cr persons are 'disabled' which is 2.21% of the total population ("Persons With Disabilities (Divyangjan) in India- a Statistical Profile: 2021," 2021). India's differently abled population increased from 21.9 to 26.8 million from 2001 to 2011 (*Disability in India | Office of Chief Commissioner for Persons With Disabilities*, n.d.). Many of these differently abled populations have mobility issues. They cannot seek service from the service provider where remote services are not available. Due to their immobility nature, they are unable access the services they needed. Remote specialist services may increase access for people with a disability or mobility issues. To reach these people, Remote Social Work has great opportunities.

CHALLENGES :

Social work techniques that have been digitalized come with a lot of concerns. Issues surrounding privacy, confidentiality and professional boundaries are most pronounced (Mattison, 2012), (Mishna et al., 2012).

Privacy and confidentiality issues: Digital practices and social media communication put service users' and practitioners' privacy and confidentiality, as well as those of their friends and family, at danger (Reamer, 2013).

Because social networking sites' security levels are frequently unknown, practitioners cannot always depend on an online forum's built-in security measures to protect confidential information. The absence of regulation around online social work practice causes this issue by creating ambiguity for practitioners navigating the risks associated with digitized practices (Reamer, 2013).

Unclear professional boundaries: An issue commonly highlighted in qualitative research reporting on social workers' concerns regarding digitized practices is the slippery slope of unclear boundaries between practitioner and service user. Online communication, for instance, can cross professional boundaries when practitioners feel obligated to respond to messages on the weekends and evenings. It can also give the impression of being available around-the-clock, which can lead to opportunities for service users to feel rejected when they don't receive a prompt response from a practitioner (Dombo et al., 2014).

Digital literacy and Unequal access to technology: Not everyone has access to or expertise with technology. As our dependence on digitalized practices grows, there is a growing concern that disparities in technical proficiency may increase the vulnerabilities of people and groups that require assistance and intervention. A common complaint from older age groups is a lack of interest in or aptitude for internet communication (Steyaert & Gould, 2009).

CONCLUSION :

The use of video and online communication is becoming more and more important in "face-to-face" social work practice. The practice environment is changing as a result of the growing integration of digital practices into daily life. Social workers may increase their influence and reach by taking advantage of remote alternatives. In India there is a huge opportunity and need to practice Social Work remotely. Greater accessibility and flexibility are necessary for social work while working remotely. To fully utilize the potential of digitized and online practices to improve present services, further study on social work practice and technology is required. Similarly, social work education must incorporate training in emerging technology and online service delivery (Bryant et al., 2015). Comprehending the impact of digital technology and social media on the lives of their clients has become imperative for social workers (Perron et al., 2010). In this regard, social work should consider using digital and online technologies as a means of innovating and fine-tuning therapeutic techniques, instead of to using them as a supplement to traditional service delivery.

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