

# Needs, Risks and Personal Safety of Social Workers in The Field

Cindrella Johnson

Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

## ABSTRACT

Social Work is one of the most hands-on occupations one could ask for. Social workers are completely involved in their client's life for better or for worse. Because of which an occupational hazard is that they are highly susceptible to the potential harm. From being employed in the social services department or in a corporate sector, risks or challenges are inherent to the job. In the field, social workers could face health hazards, challenges due to lack of defensive training, mentally unstable clients who cause harms if appropriate safety measures are not taken. Unfortunately, the number of studies pertaining to these risks that a social worker could or do face are rather low, especially in India. Social workers support and take care of the vulnerable, the helpless, the marginalized, and the disadvantaged members of society. However, who supports the very same social workers when they require help themselves?

**KEYWORDS:** Social workers, personal safety, risks, challenges, clients, protective, occupational hazard, safety training, violence.

## DEFINITIONS

Who are Social Workers?

Social workers are creative problem-solvers who champion social and economic justice, helping individuals navigate a complex, evolving world. They serve as my collective heroes, positioned at the intersection of power imbalances, advocating for those with limited resources. (NASW).

What are Needs?

A need can be defined as a “physiological or psychological requirement for the well-being of an organism” (Merriam-Webster). Our needs can also differ depending on the situation. In the pretext of social work, needs refer to the specific requirements, challenges, or issues faced by individuals, families, groups, or communities that require intervention, support, or assistance from social workers (NASW, 2017)

What are Risks?

Risk is the probability of an outcome having a negative effect on people, systems or assets. Risk is ultimately the result of decisions that one makes; decisions about the hazards to which we are willing to expose ourselves (UNDRR).

What is Personal Safety?

This is defined as the implementation of safe work systems in places of employment to ensure that employees are safe and free from harm (Queensland Government, 2016). Every employee has a right to a work environment that is secure and free from violence or threats thereof, inclusive of freedom from psychological harassment (Seneca College, 2020).

## INTRODUCTION

Social work, according to the International Federation of Social Workers, is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Social workers are professionals who are trained to work for the individuals, group or community's needs and address the various social challenges that they face in a systematic manner, so as to improve their well-being.

Social workers work in different settings such as hospitals mental health facilities, child welfare and human service agencies, schools, adoption agencies, corporate social responsibility, prisons, old age homes, orphanages, public agencies etc. These skilled individuals ensure that the needs are met by mobilizing their local resources effectively. However, while ensuring the needs are met and help is ensured, the social workers face their own set of challenges. A 2004 study conducted by the Center for Health Workforce Studies and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) surveyed 10,000 licensed social workers, revealing that 44% of respondents experienced personal safety concerns in their primary work settings. While prioritizing the safety of the client, the safety of the social worker is often overlooked or not given sufficient consideration.

Visiting clients at their homes exposes social workers to various risks including entering potentially dangerous neighbourhoods, being targeted for agency representation, encountering unexpected animals, facing potential violence from clients, and being exposed to health hazards in clients' homes. These safety concerns are important to be prepared for in the social work field.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### AIM:

To investigate on the potential risks and personal safety of social workers in the field.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the possible risks that a social worker face, irrespective of the specialization.
- To comprehend the impact of these risks on the social worker's life.
- To narrow the research gap concerning the risks and personal safety of social workers.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 1. Who are social workers and what do they do?

Social work is a profession that deals with helping to improve people's lives. They assist people by helping them cope with issues in their everyday lives. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were more than 715,000 social workers in the United States in 2020. With an expected growth in jobs of 12 percent by 2030, social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the United States. Social workers also provide support to families experiencing severe domestic conflicts, which may involve incidents of child or spousal abuse. Additionally, some social workers engage in research, advocate for enhanced services, contribute to systems design, or participate in planning and policy development. Social workers help people overcome some of life's most difficult challenges: poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness.

### 2. Why is there a need for social workers?

Social Work is one of those few disciplines that tackles highly intricate and persistent human and social issues, including poverty, mental illness, addiction, homelessness, and child abuse. Furthermore, social

work approaches these challenges by providing exceptional services which is based on ethical considerations (Proctor E, 2017). The capacity to deliver high-quality service is bound by evidence-based documentations which is essential for the advancement and sustainability of the profession. It is the very same quality that makes it distinct from other areas of services while remaining dedicated to meeting the needs of communities and society. In a study conducted in Nigerian, researchers investigated the challenges faced by informal caregivers in Nigerian hospitals, often family members or friends of the patients, due to their caregiving roles. They came to the conclusion that the challenges are exacerbated due to the lack of formal recognition and support from healthcare policies and hospital authorities, which can be addressed by Social workers who play a significant role in improving the coping capacities of informal caregivers by advocating for their needs, providing support, and linking them to resources (Chukwu .N, 2022).

### **3. What is the impact of social workers in the community?**

Social Workers ensure that the individuals in a community is safe and has access to necessary resources. They play an important role in not only improving the quality of life for the individuals, but finds different means to create awareness on new or pertaining issues within the community (Dhavaleshwar, 2016). For instance, in the United States, children are a top priority, and their well-being is given significant attention even when they reside with their families.

### **4. What are the prevailing safety protocols used by social workers to mitigate risks during fieldwork?**

Social workers prioritize safety with thorough risk assessments before home visits to identify hazards. They develop safety action plans, outlining pre-departure steps, preventive measures, and emergency actions. Training in de-escalation techniques helps manage conflicts peacefully and personal protective equipment like sanitizer, gloves, masks, and booties minimize health risks. Guidance on street safety and agency-provided safety devices further ensure worker safety (Zimunya. S,2020).

### **5. What challenges might social workers encounter when deployed to a war zone vicinity?**

Safety concerns arise when social workers operate in war zones, exposing them to violence and potential harm. They engage with refugees who share traumatic experiences, impacting the workers' mental health. Limited resources challenge service delivery, ethical dilemmas, cultural and language barriers require nuanced approaches. Burnout and compassion fatigue are prevalent due to highly stressful environment which makes support systems insufficient for coping with these challenges (Hagues. R, 2021).

### **6. What were the specific issues faced by social workers due to COVID-19?**

Social workers faced significant challenges during the pandemic. They had to adapt to rapid changes, increased workload, and restrictions on client interactions. Uncertainty about the future added stress and decision-making dilemmas. Ambiguity surrounding the virus and organizational decisions created difficulties for the social workers. The level of job stress was completely heightened by workload, management pressure, chaos, and role ambiguity for them. Social workers lacked sufficient support, recognition, and resources to cope effectively. They also contended with fear and health risks for themselves and their clients. Overall, these factors contributed to high levels of job stress and burnout among social workers (Dima. G, 2021).

### **7. What are the problems that social workers face in their professional life?**

A study that was conducted in England highlights the need for social work professionals to address issues of race and racism more directly and to incorporate Black perspectives and experiences into social work practice and education. The findings reveal that Black female social workers face racism, invisibility, and

hypervisibility, affecting their professional roles and advancement opportunities. High workloads and complex caseloads, poor communication of organizational changes to social workers, reduced core administrative support causing social workers to allocate more time to paperwork rather than direct client interactions are some among many issues that they face (Obasi. C, 2022). Facing verbal or physical assault by clients, being exposed to communicable diseases, being targeted for representing a specific agency and safety for their life etc are some risks that social workers take when working in these service-oriented sectors (Zimunya. S,2020).

#### **8. How do social workers cope with stress and anxiety related to safety concerns in their job?**

Means of spirituality, planning, goal-setting, time-management and positive thinking were found to be the most common coping strategies. The least frequently employed coping strategy, when a study on coping mechanisms was investigated on North Ugandan social workers, was substance abuse (Kabunga. A, 2014). A study by Litman and Lunsford (2009) for coping strategies among 450 workers found out that acceptance and planning led to greater general health.

#### **9. Is there a prevalence of work-life balance in a social worker's occupation?**

There exist low levels of work-life balance for social workers. It can be attributed due to the demanding nature of their work, which often leads to an imbalance between work responsibilities and personal life. This imbalance can result in increased stress, burnout, and reduced overall quality of life. Factors such as work-family conflict, role ambiguity and its conflict contribute to the challenges of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Additionally, the lack of adequate social support and coping mechanisms can also lead to the low levels of work-life balance experienced by social workers. These factors collectively impact the ability of social workers to effectively manage their work responsibilities while also attending to their personal lives (Stanley. S, (2023).

#### **10. What are the possible stereotypes faced by social workers in the field?**

Social workers face various stereotypes that impact public perception. They are often viewed as judgmental, bureaucratic, or even labelled as "child catchers" reinforcing the perception that they are involved in removing children from families. Female social workers, in particular, may face stereotypes related to sexual availability or physical appearance, diverting attention from their professional expertise and responsibilities rather than their professional skills and responsibilities. These stereotypes undermine the essential work of social workers in supporting individuals and families in need (Leedham. M, 2024).

#### **11. Who will take care of the social workers, at the end of the day?**

Organizations and management in the social work sector must prioritize social workers' wellbeing by addressing their unique stressors and challenges. Key actions include providing adequate resources, training, and support, implementing fair workload management, and fostering positive working relationships. Open communication, transparency in decision-making, and strategies to address negative behaviours are also crucial to address and help social workers. Mental health support, work-life balance initiatives, and wellness programs are essential for preventing burnout and promoting overall wellbeing. Ultimately, creating a supportive work environment is vital for social workers to thrive and continue their essential services to the community (Ravalier. J, 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

Social workers are trained to identify their clients' strengths, advocate on their behalf, and provide hope. However, they typically receive less training in assessing potential risks of harm from clients and advocating for their own safety needs. Public trust towards social workers is essential for legitimacy and

accessibility of the social services, as well as for help-seeking behaviour. While prioritizing the safety of the client, the safety of the social worker is often overlooked or not given sufficient consideration. The need for mandatory safety training based on risks experienced in the field by social workers thereby ensuring safety training should be focused more in college curriculum as well as agency field preparation. There is also the presence of female social workers expressing a need for initial safety training as they face higher risks in the field than males. Some of the various coping strategies that the social workers used as way of dealing includes - speaking to a supervisor, colleagues, friends, or a therapist; using their personal faith; remaining calm and withdrawing from the unsafe situation; and enlisting the help of the police or ensuring that they are accompanied by colleagues when doing fieldwork. Violence that is directed towards social workers can undermine their effectiveness in carrying out their professional duties. It is much crucial and essential to prioritize the safety and well-being of social workers to ensure they can continue providing essential services effectively.

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