EDITORIAL

STRENGTHENING HEALTH SOCIAL WORK IN POST-PANDEMIC INDIA

Health social work in India stands at a pivotal juncture. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent societal shifts have both strained and inspired our profession. We have encountered increased mental health needs, the burden of chronic diseases, and persistent health inequities. Yet, the resilience and innovation within the social work community have been remarkable. This editorial outline the pressing issues and promising developments in Indian health social work, setting the context for the articles in this issue.

Emerging Challenges

Mental health concerns have surged. The 2016 National Mental Health Survey revealed that nearly 150 million Indians need mental health interventions, with over 80% not receiving adequate care. The pandemic exacerbated this situation, pushing mental health up the policy agenda and expanding the roles of health social workers in psychosocial support and community-based care.

Chronic diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular illnesses, and cancer have become leading causes of death, accounting for over 60% of mortality. Health social workers are instrumental in disease education, screening, counselling, and support group facilitation, thereby improving disease management and outcomes.

Health inequities persist across regions and social groups. Rural areas face acute shortages in healthcare access, and marginalized communities often lack equitable services. Social workers advocate for justice by facilitating access to health schemes and supporting underserved populations.

Adapting Roles in Community and Crisis

Social workers have expanded their scope beyond hospitals. In community settings, they lead outreach, education, and follow-ups, often working alongside Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). Their collaboration enhances vaccination drives, maternal care, and disease surveillance.

Digital health is another frontier. Initiatives like eSanjeevani and Tele-MANAS have broadened access to healthcare and mental health support. Social workers play a vital role in helping patients use these services, ensuring inclusion and continuity of care.

During disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers have supported contact tracing, relief distribution, and psychosocial care. Their presence in crisis response underscores their role in addressing both medical and social needs.

Policy Developments and Impact

Ayushman Bharat, with its PM-JAY insurance scheme and Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs), has created new opportunities. Social workers assist with enrolment, navigate benefits for marginalized groups, and engage communities in preventive care efforts at HWCs.

The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 reinforced rights-based care. It emphasizes dignity, non-discrimination, and community-based services. Social workers are central to implementing the Act by educating patients, drafting advance directives, and managing cases in District Mental Health Programs.

The National Health Mission (NHM) continues to integrate social workers in health promotion, community coordination, and national programs for TB, HIV, and NCDs. Their involvement ensures effective outreach,

stigma reduction, and better health outcomes.
Education, Collaboration, and Research
Social work education is evolving. MSW
programs now offer health-related
specializations, digital literacy training, and
field placements in hospitals and public health
settings. Interprofessional education fosters
collaboration among future doctors, nurses,
and social workers, essential for integrated
care.

Research is shifting toward practice-based
evidence. Academic-practitioner partnerships
evaluate programs and generate local data.
Topics like poverty's impact on treatment and
the value of caregiver support groups are
being systematically studied. Publications like
this journal are platforms for sharing field
innovations.

CONCLUSION

This issue of the Indian Journal of Health
Social Work delves into themes such as mental
health outreach, policy impacts, and
interprofessional training. Each article
contributes to our understanding of how to
advance health social work in India.

Research, innovation, and community
engagement remain our pillars. We must
continue advocating for humane policies,
implementing compassionate care, and
exchanging knowledge across platforms.
Health social work is key to building holistic,
just healthcare systems.

Thank you for your dedication. May this issue
inspire continued collaboration and
commitment.

(Narendra Kumar Singh)
Chief Editor