NAVIGATING DISRUPTIONS: INDIAN SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article discusses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on fieldwork in social work education in India. Through an online survey of social work students, the authors explore key aspects such as modes of fieldwork, satisfaction levels, application of social work methods, individual and group conferences, and challenges encountered. The study outlines how students completed their fieldwork using online, offline, or blended formats, depending on the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and their satisfaction with these modified fieldwork formats. **Method:** The article attempts to assess how effectively students were able to apply social work theories and methods in these adapted fieldwork environments and the adaptation of individual and group conferences during the pandemic. **Result:** In addition to this, the article identifies specific challenges faced by students, such as reduced face-to-face experience, limited community access, and issues arising from the digital divide. It emphasizes the importance of innovative approaches to fieldwork in social work education and offers valuable insights for educators, practitioners, and researchers. **Conclusion:** The article recommends for a systematic and flexible approach to fieldwork design, ensuring that students receive comprehensive, hands-on training even during global crises.

Keywords: Covid-19, Fieldwork, India, Pandemic, Social Work, Students.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, highly contagious virus identified as COVID-19, emerged and rapidly spread to multiple countries, catching the world unprepared. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic, urging nations to take immediate action. To curb the spread of the virus, governments implemented restrictions on movement, including widespread lockdowns. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns significantly impacted social work education both in India and globally (Mishra et al., 2022; Saumya & Singh, 2022). It reshaped both the teaching and practice of social work, as schools and colleges closed, suspended in-person classes, disrupting students' education

globally and students transitioned to online learning (Azman et al., 2020; Rahman, 2020), presenting a major shift for everyone involved in the field.

Fieldwork is a crucial aspect of social work education, enabling students to acquire the necessary skills and understanding to fulfill their roles effectively. However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges, leading to the suspension of fieldwork for many students until the next academic term. There was rapid digitalization of social work during the pandemic and the growing need for digital competencies in social work education was felt. The shift to remote and virtual modes of learning presented both opportunities and obstacles for social work students engaged in fieldwork. Heinsch et al. (2023) highlighted an 8-week simulation learning experience, "Social Work Virtual," developed to equip students with essential digital skills, combining both online and face-to-face pedagogical approaches under expert mentorship. While digital technologies enabled continued engagement with clients and agencies, the lack of in-person interactions presented significant challenges in developing essential hands-on skills and establishing meaningful relationships with communities.

Non-Government organizations (NGOs), which play a critical role in helping those in need, were also forced to close temporarily. Kourgiantakis and Lee (2020) noted that this disruption particularly affected those working with vulnerable populations, as social workers, educators, and students struggled to adapt to new realities during lockdowns. The disruption had significant mental distress among students, including anxiety and ethical dilemmas, emphasizing the need for improved support systems during crises (Withrow et al, 2023). Many students reported feelings of isolation and uncertainty about their future careers as they were unable to engage directly with clients (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020).

In this background, this article explores how students updated their fieldwork to changing circumstances and evaluates new teaching methods. It aims to explore ways to continue training students despite the pandemic. It also deliberates on the challenges faced by social work students and innovative ways to teach and learn, in India.

Review of Literature

The fieldwork consists of orientation, concurrent fieldwork, block placement, rural camp, study tour and internship. It is the most important part of social work education (Botcha, 2012), offering students a chance to learn from experienced instructors who guide their practical training.

During the pandemic, educational institutions in India and worldwide struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing situation. They faced unique challenges in ensuring continuity and quality of fieldwork experiences for their students. Fieldwork supervisors and students had to quickly adapt to alternative approaches for direct in-person fieldwork and supervision. The sudden transition to virtual platforms posed significant challenges, as it demanded that supervisors modify learning plans, adapt to remote learning activities, implement new evaluation criteria, and shift to online supervision. At the same time, students were required to meet the expected standards of fieldwork practice in this new format (Saumya & Singh, 2022). Social work students adopted innovative ways to complete fieldwork during the pandemic when offline fieldwork was impossible (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020). Virtual platforms were used to facilitate remote client interactions, virtual site tours, and online seminars with practitioners. The various activities included learning to develop proposals, improving academic writing skills, training on publishing research articles, conducting online research,

organizing online events and programmes, raising resources for COVID-19 relief, and creating online awareness about COVID-19 (Morley & Clarke, 2020; Davis & Mirick, 2021; Pawar & Anscombe, 2015). It was witnessed both in India and globally that social work educators demonstrated resilience and creativity in designing innovative fieldwork experiences for their students across various universities.

A study by Withrow, Holland & Simon (2023) examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work students' field placements during spring 2020. Through a national survey, this study reveals varied support levels from universities and agencies, highlighting ethical dilemmas faced by students. The findings inform policy recommendations for improved crisis response in social work education. It confirms the disruptions in field placements, community outreach, and direct client interactions necessitating an immediate adaptation to remote learning models and virtual interactions (Withrow et al., 2023). Davis & Mirick (2021) points out that many organizations have had to stop in-person services and close their offices, making it difficult for students to gain experience.

Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, Apostol et al. (2023) highlight student perspectives on the shift, emphasizing challenges with practical activities and student well-being. They recommend improving feedback mechanisms, enriching curricula with resilience programmes, and organizing peer mentoring post-pandemic to better prepare students for professional challenges (Apostol et al., 2023).

The pandemic affected the mental health of social work students with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, primarily due to social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and the disruption of practical learning experiences (Hong, 2023). In India, the issue of digital divide posed challenges with some students not having access to smartphones or computers due to financial constraints (Pandey, 2020). Teachers were not trained or certified to teach online, making them hesitant to use technology. Slow internet connections also made it hard for students and teachers to attend online classes (Sharma & Singh, 2021). Teachers who were not digitally qualified could not meet students' learning needs and expectations (Bhowmik, 2020).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) surveyed 197 deans and directors of social work programmes and 235 field directors in 2020, right after the national emergency was declared (CSWE, 2020). The survey found that almost all student placements (97%) were affected by the pandemic. Some students (23.8%) had their placements cancelled, while most students had to adjust their placements and do alternative activities like virtual meetings and projects from home (CSWE, 2020). Another CSWE study found that most social work students (61.1%) felt their learning experience got worse after switching to online learning, and 64.8% of students felt they learned less. Most students (at least 4 out of 5) preferred in-person classes over online classes, even after attending online classes (CSWE, 2020).

In view of few studies on COVID-19 pandemic and social work training in India, this study aims to deliberate on the innovative strategies to manage fieldwork effectively during future pandemics like COVID-19.

Methods

This study seeks to understand how social work schools adapted fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, it aims to explore the challenges and innovative solutions that emerged for doing fieldwork during the pandemic. The data was collected from social work students in different schools of social work across India. Only students who completed their fieldwork during the COVID-

19 pandemic in India were included. To collect the data, an online questionnaire was developed and shared through email lists and social media platforms to reach social work students in India. Secondary data was collected through books, articles, and other published sources. Participating in the study did not pose any harm or risks, and the authors obtained consent from the participants. The authors made sure participants understood their rights in the study. The study was approved by the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC/2022/08). A total of 246 social work students from all over India responded to the study. The data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. However, the authors faced a limitation in terms of the sample size as a relatively small (n=246) number of students responded out of the total questionnaires sent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in India, social work schools had to resort to online methods for conducting fieldwork. Since students could not practice social work methods, alternative training methods were introduced. This led to the emergence of online fieldwork and various activities were included to complete the fieldwork.

General Information about the Respondents Table 1 presents data on the distribution of a sample of 246 students concerning various aspects of their fieldwork engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The table shows the different programmes undertaken by students, with 212 students of MSW and 34 students of BSW. Most of the students (n=230) completed their fieldwork during the pandemic, while only 16 did not. Of those who completed fieldwork during the pandemic, 182 students accomplished their fieldwork objectives, while 16 felt they did not. Additionally, 48 students

were unsure if they had accomplished their fieldwork objectives. Most (n=220) students reported practising social work methods during their fieldwork, while 26 did not. Finally, most of the sample, 108 students, reported engaging in fieldwork for two days per week, 102 students reported engaging in fieldwork for more than two days per week, and 36 students reported engaging in fieldwork for less than two days per week.

Table 1: General information about the respondents

Particular	Distribution of the sample (N=246)
The programme studied/studying.	MSW: 212 BSW: 34
Completion of fieldwork during the Covid 19 pandemic	Yes: 230 No: 16
The accomplishment of fieldwork objectives	Yes: 182 No: 16 Maybe: 48
The practice of social work methods during fieldwork	Yes: 220 No: 26
Days of engagement in fieldwork per week	More than two days: 102 2 Days: 108 Less than two days: 36

Source: The authors.

Activities Performed to Complete the Fieldwork

Table-2 shows the activities undertaken by students to complete the fieldwork during the pandemic. Most of the respondents participated in capacity building activities which were organising online events/programmes (n=194, 78.86%) and online awareness related to Covid-19 (n=196, 79.67%), proposal development and skilling on online research (71.54%, n=176). Getting training in publishing articles had the lowest participation rate by students, with only 51.22% (n=126).

Table 2. Activities Performed to Complete the Fieldwork
Source: The authors

S.No	Capacity Building Activities	Frequency (N=246) Yes	Percentage	Frequency (N=246) No	Percentage
1	Proposal Development	176	71.54	70	28.46
2	Exposure to Academic Writing	170	69.11	76	30.89
3	Training in Publishing Articles	126	51.22	120	48.78
4	Skilling on Online Research	176	71.54	70	28.46
5	Organising Online Events/Programmes	194	78.86	52	21.14
6	Resource Mobilisation for Covid-19 Relief	178	72.36	68	27.64
7	Online awareness related to Covid-19	196	79.67	50	20.33

Degree of Involvement of Students in Performing the Fieldwork Activities

Table 3 represents the students' level of involvement in performing the activities as part of their fieldwork during Covid-19. According to the table, the capacity-building activities carried out by the participants were largely organising online events/programmes

(49.59%) and online awareness related to Covid-19 (51.21%). In contrast, training in publishing articles (27.64%) and exposure to academic writing (37.40%) were the least carried out activities. Additionally, many participants carried out skilling on online research (41.46%) and resource mobilisation for Covid-19 relief (45.53%). The table suggests that social work students performed activities directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as online awareness and resource mobilisation. This is in line with the social work profession's emphasis on addressing social problems during times of crisis (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

Table 3. Degree of Involvement of Student in Performing the Fieldwork Activities

Sl. No.	Capacity Building Activities	To Great Extent (N=246)	%	To Some What (N=246)	%	Very Little (N=246)	%	Not at All (N=246)	%
1	Proposal Development	108	43.90	84	34.15	34	13.82	20	8.13
2	Exposure to Academic Writing	92	37.40	102	41.46	34	13.82	18	7.32
3	Training in Publishing Articles	68	27.64	94	38.21	52	21.14	32	13.01
4	Skilling on Online Research	102	41.46	90	36.58	30	12.20	24	9.76
5	Organising Online Events/Programmes	122	49.59	74	30.08	32	13.01	18	7.32
6	Resource Mobilisation for Covid-19 Relief	112	45.53	84	34.15	34	13.82	16	6.50
7	Online awareness related to Covid-19	126	51.21	86	34.96	24	9.76	10	4.07

Source: The authors

Social Work Method Practiced During the Fieldwork

The study shows that social casework was the most commonly practised method, with 87.80% of the respondents reporting that they applied it during fieldwork. Social group work was also widely used, with 85.37% of the respondents indicating that they practised this method. Community organisation was the third most used social work method, with 78.86% of the respondents indicating that they applied it. Social work research was practised by 65.85% of the respondents, while social action was used by 58.54%. Finally, social welfare administration was the least commonly practised method, with only 48.78% of the respondents indicating that they applied it during their fieldwork. Some respondents did not apply any of the social work methods included in the survey.

Innovative Ways Adopted to Complete Fieldwork

During the pandemic, offline fieldwork was not possible for the social work students. Therefore they adopted innovative ways to complete their fieldwork. Table 4 represents the innovative ways adopted by social work students to complete their fieldwork during the pandemic. Most students (n=204, 82.93%) explored innovative methods in fieldwork while 62.60% of the respondents explored fieldwork opportunities in any part of the country. The student could learn new skills, including report writing, proposal development, technical skills, analytical skills, documentation, online research, etc. Other innovations include being economical and time-efficient, the opportunity to connect with international platforms, and being equipped with technical knowledge for online engagement, exploring new societal issues, and addressing people's issues online. Other innovations were adopting online modes of social work practice, adopted by 80.48% of the respondents, and providing online voluntary services during pandemic situations.

Table-4: Innovative Ways Adopted to Complete Field Work

S.No	Learnings/Innovations	Yes (N=246)	%	No (N=246)	%	Don't Know (N=246)	%
1	Explored innovative methods in fieldwork	204	82.93	38	15.44	4	1.63
2	Explored the fieldwork opportunities from any part of the country	154	62.60	70	28.46	22	8.94
3	New skills were learnt by the students (report writing, proposal development, technical skills, analytical skills, documentation, online research, etc.)	202	82.11	36	14.64	8	3.25
4	Economical and time efficient	162	65.85	70	28.46	14	5.69
5	Opportunity to connect with international platforms	160	65.04	70	28.46	16	6.50
6	Equipped with technical knowledge for online engagement	190	77.24	40	16.26	16	6.50
7	Explored the unexplored issues in the society	174	70.73	50	20.33	22	8.94
8	Addressing issues of the people through online	180	73.17	52	21.14	14	5.69
9	Adoption of online mode of social work practice	198	80.48	38	15.45	10	4.07
10	Online voluntary services during the pandemic situations	162	65.85	60	24.39	24	9.76

Source: The authors

Mode of Fieldwork Adopted to Complete the Fieldwork

The study's findings reveal that many of the students (n=108, 43.90%) completed their fieldwork offline. Approximately one-third of the students (n=82, 33.33%) reported using an online mode to complete their fieldwork. The remaining students (n=56, 22.76%) completed their fieldwork using a blended mode, considered the most suitable method during the pandemic.

### Figure 1: Mode of Fieldwork Adopted to Complete the Fieldwork
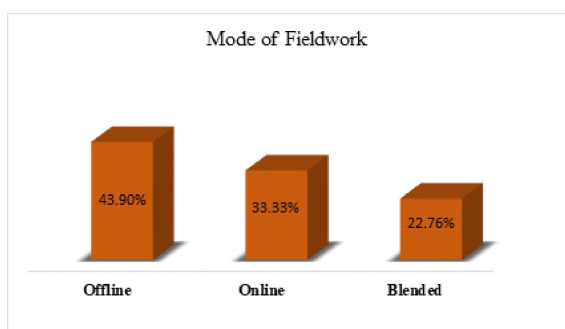
Source: The authors

Level of Satisfaction of Students in the Execution of Fieldwork

Social work students were asked about their satisfaction with completing required fieldwork tasks in accordance with their school/department's fieldwork manual. As depicted in Figure 2, many students (n = 84) expressed a high level of satisfaction, while approximately 33% reported being somewhat satisfied. A small percentage (6%) of respondents expressed no satisfaction with their fieldwork experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2: Level of Satisfaction of Students in the Execution of Fieldwork
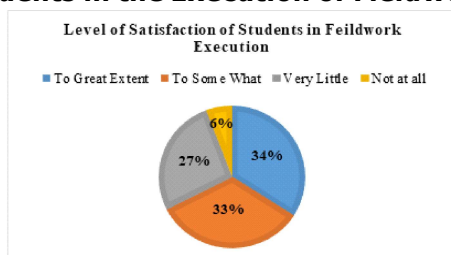
Source: The authors

Challenges Faced During Online Field Work

Table-5 represents the challenges faced by social work students during online fieldwork. The first challenge was applying classroom knowledge into practice, which was experienced by 72.36% of the respondents. The second challenge was gaining hands-on experience, reported by 75.61% of the respondents. Another challenge was not receiving proper supervision by the supervisor, which was experienced by 73.17% of the respondents. Report writing was a challenge faced by 63.41% of the respondents. Ensuring attendance at fieldwork conferences was also one challenge experienced by 68.29% of the respondents. The allotment of agencies based on the student's choice was reported by 66.67% of the respondents. Because of the online learning mode, teamwork among students was also a challenge experienced by 69.92% of the students. 76.42% of the participants reported being unable to provide voluntary services during the pandemic due to government restrictions.

Table-5: Challenges Faced During Online Field Work

S.No	Challenges	Yes (N=246)	Percentage	No (N=246)	Percentage
1	Application of knowledge into practice	178	72.36	68	27.64
2	Gaining hands-on experience	186	75.61	60	24.39
3	Proper supervision by the supervisor	180	73.17	66	26.83
4	Report writing	156	63.41	90	36.59
5	Ensuring attendance at fieldwork conferences	168	68.29	78	31.71
6	Allotment of agencies based on choice	164	66.67	82	33.33
7	Learning teamwork among students	172	69.92	74	30.08
8	Difficulties in learning from each other	184	74.80	62	25.20
9	Rendering voluntary services during pandemic due to restrictions by the government	188	76.42	58	23.58

Source: The authors

Online Fieldwork and Offline Fieldwork

When the respondents were asked about their perception of whether online fieldwork could be a viable alternative to traditional offline fieldwork in social work, the findings indicate that a significant portion of the respondents (n=108, 44%) did not consider online

fieldwork as a substitute for offline fieldwork. The rationale behind this opinion was that social work practicum required direct interaction and engagement with individuals, groups, communities, and organisations. These aspects of social work fieldwork cannot be replicated entirely in an online setting, where there might be limitations to personal interactions and on-site assessments. While online fieldwork can offer new opportunities for learning and innovative approaches to social work, it cannot wholly replace the essential elements of traditional fieldwork in social work.

Rating on Overall Fieldwork Performance

When the survey among social work students asked about their overall experience with fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents (n=114, 46%) expressed good experience. This suggests that despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, many students successfully completed their fieldwork requirements and gained valuable experience in the fieldwork. However, many respondents (n=44, 18%) did not like their fieldwork experience. This could be due to several reasons, such as difficulty adapting to the online mode of fieldwork or experiencing limitations in their ability to directly engage with individuals, groups, communities and organisations. It is crucial to consider the perspectives and experiences of these students to identify areas for improvement and ensure that all students have a positive and meaningful fieldwork experience.

Frequencies of Individual Conferences, Group Conferences and Monitoring

When asked about individual and group conferences, most social work students (71.54%, n=176) reported attending fieldwork conferences weekly, while 17% (n=42) attended once every two weeks. Regarding group conferences, almost all students (95.1%, n=234) attended them, with 73.2% attending once a week and 13.8% attending once every two weeks. Since face to face supervision was not feasible, roughly 83% of students reported that their supervisor used video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Google meet, and Webex for supervision, while 10% were supervised by their agency supervisor.

The Role of Social Work Profession During Pandemic Situations like Covid-19

Social work utilises knowledge and principles from human behaviour and social systems to address social issues and assist those in need. The social work profession has a significant role in raising awareness, providing psychosocial support, and promoting social inclusion for populations that are most at risk (Okafor, 2021). Upon asking, the majority of social work students (65.9%, n=162) strongly agreed, and 26% (n=64) agreed that the social work profession has an important role to play in addressing emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic by raising awareness, providing temporary relief, preventing the spread of the virus, and educating people about vaccination. However, the Indian government restricted social workers during the pandemic, only allowing those engaged in essential services to leave their homes. Social workers were not considered frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, so they could not provide their services (IFSW, 2020; Onalu et al., 2020).

Major Findings

A total of 246 BSW/MSW students responded to this study, out of which most of them have done the fieldwork, accomplished their fieldwork objectives and practised the methods of social work during their fieldwork during COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that innovative ideas and activities were devised to complete fieldwork during the

pandemic. The social work students were actively involved in various capacity-building activities such as organising events/programmes and online awareness related to COVID-19. Training in publishing articles, exposure to academic writing, conducting online research and resource mobilisation for COVID-19 relief were some other activities being carried out by students. These findings align with the social work profession's emphasis on addressing social problems during times of crisis, as highlighted by the International Federation of Social Workers (2020). The study reveals that social work students played a crucial role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by actively engaging in fieldwork activities that addressed the community's needs.

It was found that social casework was the most widely used method, followed by social group work and community organisation, among social work students during online fieldwork. This indicates that most social work students have a strong foundation in traditional social work methods that focus on working with individuals, groups, and communities. Social work research and social action were also commonly used, while social welfare administration was the least used method. These findings highlight the need for a broad-based social work curriculum that exposes students to diverse methods and approaches. Additionally, the students adopted online modes of social work practice, demonstrating their adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity. Overall, these findings highlight the resourcefulness of social work students in adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the potential of technology to enable effective social work practice.

One-third of the students used online mode to complete their fieldwork while some of the students completed their fieldwork using a blended mode. This highlights the need for social work programmes to provide students with the necessary digital skills and resources to conduct fieldwork using innovative modalities. Most social work students were satisfied with fieldwork completion.

It was reported that students faced challenges applying classroom knowledge into practice and gaining hands-on experience. Some reported not receiving proper supervision, facing difficulties with report writing, and ensuring attendance at fieldwork conferences. The allocation of agencies based on student choice and teamwork was also identified as challenge. These findings provide important insights into the challenges social work students faced during online fieldwork and can help develop strategies to address these challenges in the future (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020).

The study reveals that the social work students did not consider online fieldwork as a substitute for offline fieldwork due to the direct interaction and engagement required in social work practicum, which cannot be entirely replicated online. While online fieldwork can provide new opportunities and innovative approaches, it cannot replace the essential elements of traditional face to face fieldwork in social work. Social work students understand the importance and value of the social work profession in responding to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. They recognize that social workers play a crucial role in raising awareness, providing relief, preventing the spread of the virus, and educating people about vaccination (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Lomas et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The study explores the challenges and innovations in adapting fieldwork practices during COVID-19. The pandemic disrupted traditional methods, leading to a shift to online and blended approaches. Students faced difficulties like lack of hands-on experience

and digital access issues but adapted by embracing digital tools and creative strategies, including online events, awareness campaigns, research proposals, and training in publishing. However, despite these interruptions, the foundational values of social work—service, social justice, dignity, human relationships, integrity, and competence—remained central, but the methods for practicing and teaching these values had evolved (Saumya & Singh, 2022). The study highlights the importance of supporting students through guidance and technology, advocating for hybrid models in future crises.

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