



African Journal of Social Work  
 Afri. j. soc. work  
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)  
 ISSN Print 1563-3934  
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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## Field work practice during the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: A case study from Central India

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### ABSTRACT

Field work is the signature pedagogy of social work education. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak created many challenges for fieldwork practice. The article explains the field work practice promoted by the Department of Social Work, Bhopal School of Social Sciences, India and also to showcase the importance of field work practice in social work education. The various components such as online exposure visits, hybrid field work, internships, online social case work, and group work and the challenges faced are precisely shared in the article. The article suggests the need to revisit the practical pedagogy that could be instigated during an unprecedented situation. There is an acute need for a government-recognized body to look into the needs of social work education as per the global standards with reference to India. Although the requirements vary for different states as per the local situation, a uniform curriculum will help to develop parity in social work education. The University Grants Commission of India (UGC), has developed a model curriculum for social work in 2019 which would be helpful for all academic institutions to reframe their curriculum, especially for social work.

**KEY TERMS:** field work practice, online exposure, hybrid field work, internship, online social case work, group work

### KEY DATES

Received: December 2020

Revised: April 2021

Accepted: April 2022

Published: October 2022

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: None

Ethics approval: Not applicable

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/>



### How to reference using ASWNet style:

Sheeba, J. (2022). Field work practice during the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: A case study from Central India. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(5), 223-231.

## INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork practice aids the process of honing as well as developing skills that help in dealing with clients and solve their problems more effectively and efficiently. However, the outbreak of the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic made field work a tough and challenging component of the social work curriculum. Field experience is an important part of the educational process because it teaches students the adaptability and flexibility that are required for success in the field of social work. If students do not get sufficient field experience and develop the skill to overcome pre-placement anxieties, then it may impede professional advancement. It entails the students to integrate the classroom learning into practice. Social work supervision while students are in agency-based practice is an important element of the learning process. Furthermore, the manner in which supervision is used (i.e., structure, content, individual vs. group supervision, relationships, and pedagogy) is critical in this process. Due to the pandemic condition institutions faced a lot of challenges to give field-based practice to students across the globe. The article is based on the field work practice amidst COVID-19 followed by a social work institution in central India. Although it started as a trial-and-error method, the new ways contributed to the learning process of the students.

## BACKGROUND

### Social work education in India

Social Work in India has not been of recent origin. Formally, it is said that professional education and practice of social work in India began only after 1936 with the establishment of Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work. Since then, many educational institutes have started imparting education in social work. The practices heavily influenced by the American model of social work have hardly undergone any drastic change. The debate on indigenization of social work practice has long been in place, yet, no concrete step has been taken so far again, with the existing diversity, skewed growth (Association of Indian Universities, 2020), and the challenge of expansion, equity, and excellence (Qamar, 2021). Adaikalam (2014) has pointed out that social work education in India has experienced multiple realities given the cultural, geographical, physical, social, ethnic and linguistic differences. This situates social work education into a peculiar yet challenging milieu in its journey to ensure the welfare of the people.

### Field work practice in India

Fieldwork combines theory and practice, philosophy and action, and integrates the understanding of people and ways to help them. Therefore, fieldwork is to learn by practice. Simultaneous fieldwork is at the core of fieldwork training. It shows the process of simultaneous, systematic, synchronous and cumulative acquisition of knowledge, skills and values for professional ability. Simultaneous fieldwork provides students with the opportunity to transform classroom learning into hands-on skills. Through Guided Exercise, students develop professional ways to reach out to those in need. Students were placed in selected organizations that have a well-defined and hands-on training program and are prepared to provide facilities for student training. During field work, students are assigned to an approved institution for two consecutive days in a week (determined by the department). Students are required to do 15 hours of fieldwork per week (7.5 hours per day). During pandemic the students attended classes through online mode and after that, they got engaged in agency work. So during the pandemic students were more involved in the documentation and online activities of the organizations rather than onsite visits.

Though the pattern and organization of social work practicum have some universality, the micro-based practice model adopted in the Indian context has led to inappropriately designed field education programmes producing students unsuited to meet the developmental need of the Indian society (Prasad and Vijayalakshmi, 1997). Efforts made to restructure field instruction to prepare students for macro-based practice roles have been too slow to find their way into the educational programme of most of the schools of social work in India. Major problems such as scarcity of field placements, non-availability of qualified agency-based field instructors, the inadequate linkage between classroom teaching and field realities, and poor faculty position still prevail. Crucial areas for change in field instruction are examined and alternative strategies are suggested in the light of the emerging socioeconomic concerns of the country and recent trends in the profession (Prasad and Vijayalakshmi, 1997). There is hardly any study available in the context of social work education in India and problems and challenges are still being faced by students (Amiri, 2018).

## FIELD WORK SUPERVISION

Indubitably, field work supervision is very essential in social work education. The term supervision has derived from the Latin words – “super” meaning “over” and “vision” meaning “to see”. Thus, the word supervision means “to oversee” (Fehmerling, 2013 as cited in Magnussen, 2018). Supervision helps to make learning in social work more effective. The relationship between a supervisor and supervisee has been termed a “working alliance” (Mackrill, 2011 cited in Magnussen, 2018) and a “working relationship” based on rapport, trust, and caring (Schulman, 2005 cited in Magnussen, 2018). The result of the social work practice depends on how well the supervisor initiates the dialogue and the supervisee receives the supervision (Schulman, 2005).

Morrison (2005) defined supervision as a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organization to work with other worker(s) to meet certain organizational, professional, and personal objectives. Sajid (2000) described that supervision is the key to the professional development of a social work student. Supervision is a dynamic process requiring the involvement of faculty supervisors, students, peers, and agency supervisors to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes in accordance with the standards of professional social work practice. The supervised nature of fieldwork facilitates professional development. Bogo and Vayda (1987) pinned down the framework of field supervision called the school-agency interface. It outlines three essential components, namely, the faculty supervisor, the agency supervisor, and the supervisee (the student). The coordination and cooperation of all are of paramount importance to provide sufficient training experience.

- Faculty Supervisor – A person who is a qualified and trained social work professional working in an academic institution whose responsibility is to mentor the supervisee from the institution, facilitate the application of theory into practice, conduct fieldwork conferences and give further inputs to the supervisee to gain professional experience.
- Agency Supervisor – A person who is a qualified and trained social work professional working in an agency whose responsibility is to orient the agency functions and ensure adequate training for the supervisee. The agency supervisor coordinates and the faculty supervisor work in coordination to confirm professional training experience for the supervisee.
- Supervisee (Student) – A trainee is a person who intends to learn social work practice from an educational institution as well as an agency to develop and hone the skills and experience required for a social worker.

### Types of supervision in field work practice and its importance

For many years, social work supervision was given as an apprentice-based model, in which students were paired one-on-one with social workers executing a variety of skills in an agency setting. Still the preferable option is individual supervision if the supervisor is given an opportunity to choose the type of supervision modality (Alschuler, Silva, & McArdle, 2015). Whereas in group, the students gain understanding, develop new skills and develop the professional requirements from their peers (Zeira and Schiff, 2010). If encouragement and the use of reflection are not included in supervision, students may miss out on some of their learning potentials. Although some of the supervisors do not like confrontation or criticism, it is necessary for students' skill growth, particularly in the early stage of field work practice (Bogo et al., 2006). Supervisors should not be reluctant to discuss their experiences with students on issues with boundaries, how to attend to the use of self, and management of dual relationships (Alschuler et al, 2015). Good supervisors also foster reflection and expression, as well as the ability to respond rationally and emotionally to support their supervisees (Bogo, 2020; Marc et al., 2014; Nickson et al., 2016). The quality of supervision improves when there is enough time allotted for it (Nickson et al., 2016). When supervisors model the value of time for supervision, students are more likely to perceive it (Alschuler et al., 2015). This includes both preparatory and concrete supervision meetings. As part of the process of supervision, it is effective to use verbal feedback, examine recordings, give direct advice, recommend readings, and provide written comments (Everett et al., 2011). Exercises, games, case presentations, the use of probing questions, cyclical and reflective questioning, feedback, and sharing are also listed as beneficial aids by Osvat et al (2014). Supervisors are encouraged to apply creative tools to facilitate the learning process.

There is a need to permeate the feeling of compassion, commitment, dedication, and motivation among students towards alternative modes of fieldwork training in social work education. By creating a collaborative developmental social work learning model, the experiences of academicians and practitioners could be shared through articles, discourses, webinars, and social media, as it is already being initiated by various professional associations, developmental organizations, and educational institutions in India. The new Reaccreditation Framework Manual of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, 2019), gives great scope for field-

based activities to boost the academia-community interface. The pandemic situation put many academic institutions to revisit the field work structure so that collaborative events, field visits, internships, student exchange, and extension activities could be carried out. Throughout the pandemic, NAAC guided the academic institutions to initiate outreach and extension activities with great diligence. With this background, the article tries to ascertain the importance of field work practice in social work education. Also to understand the fieldwork modalities practiced by the Bhopal School of Social Sciences, India during COVID-19 pandemic and also to explore the ways to improvise field work practice in India.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Field practice is an integral component in the social work curriculum to increase the quality of services provided by professional social workers, Littrel (1980). The quality of social work rendered by the worker depends on the availability and efficacy of field practice opportunities provided in the schools of social work (Kanno and Koeski, 2010). However, there are studies that state that students often enter their placements with apprehension, stress, anxiety, unclear expectations, and negative emotions that may interfere with their effective learning (Barlow & Hall, 2004; Barlow et al, 2006; Gelman, 2004). It also provides an opportunity to connect and test the acquired theoretical inputs with the professional aspects of the workplace (Tsui, 2005). The curriculum developed should provide opportunities for the students for applying their learning to real-life situations and make them autonomous and competent in terms of usage of skills and abilities. This in turn should make the trainees responsible for the workspaces (Bates, 2003).

Historical evidence states that most theories evolve from practice, specifically from the experiences of people with their environment over the years (Ebue and Agwu, 2017). On one hand practice validates theory and builds upon theoretical base while on the other hand there can be no practice possible without theory. Thus, theory and practice are inter-dependent and cannot survive in isolation (Ajibo, Mbah and Anazonwu, 2017). Tanga (2011) also notes that fieldwork is an arena for students' empowerment and community consciousness-raising and that it assists them to link theory with practice.

Dhemba (2012) has discussed the issues and challenges related to the course content, training, and fieldwork practice. Focus is also on the role of fieldwork in social work education and training. The author has also stated that as the social work curriculum is based on theory and practice, this may sound scary, but the provision of sound scary is critical as is fieldwork experience. The study is based on the current knowledge on fieldwork, including but not limited to the fieldwork curriculum, the management of fieldwork, and the needs and challenges faced by students, fieldwork agency, fieldwork supervisors, and training institutions. The author has attempted to establish the nature, form, and content of fieldwork practice and to ascertain whether fieldwork is treated as being equally important to its very counterpart at the selected social work education institutions. The author has attempted to assess the requirements and challenges faced by social work education institutions, fieldwork agency is, supervisors and students on fieldwork. The author has concluded that fieldwork in social work education is marginalized there are indeed very promising prospects of raising its effectiveness and the quality of training will stop. He has concluded that institutions, fieldwork agencies, faculty members, and students should have the coordination for the professional preparation of the social work students Chaugale (2010).

A study conducted among university students in Gujarat, India came out with the findings that the curriculum of social work education has not been adequately modified to meet the local and cultural needs. The fieldwork practice is not useful to improve the ability to link theory to fieldwork practice. Lack of conclusive fieldwork practice environment is the major negative influencing factor., absence of proper guidance and proper supervision by the fieldwork instructors made a negative impact on the student's ability, and the fieldwork agency has assigned them irrelevant work or job which is not related to their course work. This also negatively impacted the student's ability. Fieldwork supervisors or instructors are responsible to develop a student's field work ability to translate theory into fieldwork practice, nevertheless, 38% of respondents have stated that lack of clear expectations of fieldwork agencies he's also one of the major negative factors (Amiri, 2018).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The case study of the Bhopal School of Social Sciences (BSSS), India is presented to share the methods of field work adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The standard operating procedure followed by BSSS helped to provide students with fieldwork exposure in this challenging situation. Being the faculty supervisor, the author interacted with the supervisees during the fieldwork conference twice a week through online field work conferences.

## **Profile of the institution**

BSSS was established in 1972 with the flagship program Social Work and Management. Since then, as one of the pioneer institutions in Madhya Pradesh, India, they have tried to provide professional training in the field of social work education. It is an autonomous institution declared by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Council NAAC accredited institution offering numerous courses in other disciplines also. The Department of Social Work offers Bachelor of Arts ( Honors in Social Work), Bachelor of Social Work, and Master of Social Work.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The various components included in the fieldwork practice as per the curriculum are exposure visits, concurrent fieldwork, internships, summer placement, involvement in COVID-19 intervention activities, social group work, social case work, and community work. Arranging field work organizations for 102 students of BSW and MSW following the protocol of COVID-19 was a real challenge. The students were given an orientation on the need for an online and hybrid mode of fieldwork practice. To regularly monitor the fieldwork of students, weekly conferences were arranged online by the faculty supervisor. Reports as per the prescribed format were sent to the faculty supervisor before the scheduled conference. Individual and group conferences were conducted online to mentor and monitor the students during field work. Another major challenge was building rapport with the students, who had the opportunity to attend only online classes especially the first year students of under graduate and post graduate programme. A student mentoring program was initiated, and one supervisor was assigned a maximum of ten students for supervision. The mentors took monthly meetings other than the weekly fieldwork conference. The students were also encouraged to contact in person if they face any difficulty with the practical component. The various field work components and how it was offered are mentioned in detail in the following segment.

### **Various field work components and how it was offered**

#### ***Online exposure visits***

First-year students of BSW and MSW come from a variety of disciplines and field observation visits or exposure helps them to get first-hand information about the practice setting. Students are taken for observation visits to government and non-governmental organizations and become familiar with the service rendered to different groups and individuals to meet people's needs. Students are exposed to different disciplines such as disability, health, vulnerable groups, rural communities, and industries. The institution contacted various organizations both nationally and internationally for online exposure visits. The faculty in charge, along with the students joined through Google Meet, and from the organization, staff members explained the structure, functions, and projects of the organization, followed by a virtual tour of the organization. The approach was quite stimulating, and the trainees clarified their doubts about the organization. To ensure the effectiveness of online exposure visits, feedback was taken from the students, and feasible suggestions were converted into action to make this component robust.

#### ***Hybrid field work***

The students placed in various organizations were given opportunities to work both online and offline due to the outbreak of COVID 19 and the lockdown imposed on 24 March 2020 and also in March 2021. The students were oriented by the faculty and agency supervisor regarding the objectives of field work and the challenges they may face. The agency allotted various tasks to the students that could be performed online, such as tele-counseling, preparing reports of various events organized by the agency, conducting activities for various groups through online mode, data entry of the stakeholders, and attending the meetings convened by the organization as rapporteur. Few organizations paid the trainees for data entry of surveys and preparation of reports whereby the concept of Earn While you Learn was continued. Although the students shared that it was monotonous work, due to the prevailing condition, the agency could not send them to the field. After the lifting of the lockdown, students visited the communities and the operational areas of the agency with the animators. It was hardly as few as shared by the students.

#### ***Internship***

The students were provided the opportunity to work with various developmental organizations through internship. They were given the liberty to choose the organization by themselves, and the process of identifying the agency was facilitated by the fieldwork coordinator. The students were also placed in government-initiated projects during



the pandemic. The selected students from medical and psychiatry specialization were oriented by an experienced team of psychologists on how to handle the calls and when to divert a call for further intervention. After that, they were placed at Hamidia Medical College, Bhopal, and initiated tele-counseling for the patients and their family members. The trainees shared that they received an average of 100 calls every day from various places. Many of them were worried about their family, and their anxiety and stress levels were so high due to the death rate reported at that time in Bhopal. The students worked as interns for six months, and that approach was later continued by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Bhopal, and other Human Service Organizations (HSOs). The students received appreciation certificates from the Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC), UNICEF-Bhopal, and the parent institution as an honor for the work they have done during the pandemic along with the frontline workers.

### ***Online social case work and group work***

To mitigate the issues raised due to COVID-19, the students of social work were asked to complete the components of the fieldwork practicum online. Identifying a client and a group for practice was difficult for the students; however, the client and the group were identified with the help of the agency supervisor. The agency and the faculty supervisor made the trainees clear about the objectives and reiterate the process of social case work and social group work. The trainees took up individual cases which people are worried about such as academic issues, stress, and anxiety due to the pandemic, hostel students who were stuck up in the hostel and not able to return home, and children who lost their parents. For social group work practice, most of the trainees dealt with students and youth groups to sensitize them about the importance of mental health and how to stay positive and hopeful, how to deal with the academic requirements in the prevailing situation, adolescent and youth issues both physical and psychological, and legal awareness were few the common topics of social group work performed by the students.

### ***Community work***

One of the biggest challenges faced by several institutions was to do community work online. The trainees were given instructions to create a group of thirty or more members and work with them online. Quite a number of students expressed their inability to do community work online, although a few did. It was not a great success due to the absence of a physical interface. An alternate was suggested to initiate social media campaigns to sensitize various social and health issues. The students opted for diverse topics such as the importance of menstrual health, depression among youth, saving the environment, saving animals, cybercrime, and acid attack: A new form of gender-based violence. The campaign received wider attention since the students used WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

### ***Involvement in covid-19 intervention activities***

During the lockdown, with the special permission of the state government, the faculty members along with four students from MSW with the help of the support staff of the institution went to distribute groceries to the labour camps located in the urban pockets of Bhopal. The migrant workers who lost their job and could not return to their native place were in need of acute support from others. It was a very frightening situation all across, but with great optimism, the team moved along with the Bhopal Municipal Corporation staff and distributed groceries for three months. At the same time, students who returned to their native place distributed masks and sanitizers with the help of local organizations in their neighborhood communities. They also sensitized the people about the importance of following the COVID-19 protocol for the well-being of all.

At the end of the fieldwork, the department conducted individual and group presentations by the trainees that helped them share their experiences related to online fieldwork practice. From the experience-sharing forum, a few feasible suggestions the author has enlisted as suggestions.

### ***Challenges in field work practice in India during pandemic***

The most important challenge is that many schools of social work in India do not have a separate theoretical paper on fieldwork. Fieldwork learning needs to be taught both as theory paper and practice training to learn the essence of field work practice. However, the National Education Policy (2020) of India has created great options to introduce new curricula for all disciplines. The Learning Outcome Based Curriculum (LOCF) of Social Work, 2019 introduced fieldwork practice both as a theory and practical paper in the first year of the BSW programme. The main aim of LOCF is to enhance the quality of higher education in India and to encourage students to gain the best skills and knowledge during their student journey. Another challenge was those students from low

economic backgrounds found it difficult to purchase a laptop or smartphone to continue the practice online especially during the pandemic. The students were given opportunities to get involved in the commissioned projects to scale up the concept to earn while they learn, which was considered the best practice of the department until the occurrence of COVID-19. Eventually, due to the fund crunch, the practice could not be continued. Another aspect is the lack of visit/s to rural areas to interact with the beneficiaries of various projects. Most of the Bhopal-based human service organizations work in the rural pockets of the nearby districts such as Sehore, Bhopal and Raison. The gap became much wider due to the lack of network coverage and the inability to use smartphones.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- The model of social services offered by different social organizations to mitigate the adverse impacts of a global pandemic, such as COVID-19, can be taught to students.
- Various journals and other publications can incorporate fieldwork practice experiences, particularly documenting experiences dealing with disasters/pandemics, which can be provided to students as learning materials. Institutions can come up with initiatives taken by them during pandemic in their newsletters.
- A compendium of field work experiences with best practices, unsuccessful practices, and challenges could be published, which will be a ready reckoner for students.
- The students could be given a choice to decide the agency in the final year if the institution has many linkages/collaborations.
- Rotational field work (RFW) could be introduced in place of a single agency for a year especially in undergraduate programme which is offered in a yearly pattern. That will help them to get varied experiences.
- A properly structured field work manual needs to be developed by all institutions, considering global standards. The objectives, outcome, duration, hours, and activities to perform during practice need to be mentioned categorically in the fieldwork manual.
- In a country such as India, where a uniform curriculum does not exist, the need to reconsider or revisit the manual of fieldwork and the curriculum has become utmost importance.

### CONCLUSION

The pandemic created many challenges for social work educational institutions, especially in the area of field work practice. The institutions were forced to explore new ways to offer field work practice. It cannot be claimed that the modes adopted by all educational institutions are successful, but at the same time, in the new normal novel ways to be adopted have become the need of the hour. This study illuminated the challenges experienced by field instructors in providing corrective feedback through online mode. It is imperative that schools of social work should provide strategies for the training and support of field instructors that address the needs in the evaluation process. Although there were many apprehensions regarding the practice which are offered through online, the few suggestive measures will help to overcome the challenges and make the field work practice fit to face any pandemic or disaster situation. This brief experience of the institution may not be unique, but the new ways helped us to revisit and revamp the existing fieldwork structure.

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