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Research Article

Assessing Environmental Competencies among Social Work Students: Implications for Integrating Green Social Work into Higher Education

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Abstract: Green social work sees a relationship between environmental sustainability, social justice and human wellbeing. Vulnerable communities continue to be the first to suffer the impact of environmental problems such as climate change, pollution and water insecurity, leading to a greater demand for social workers who are able to respond in an environmentally competent way. This study tries to assess the environment knowledge, attitudes and utilization of skills in social work practice among the students of social work in Tamil Nadu, India. It is proposed that a quantitative, cross sectional, description and correlation research design will be used for the collection of primary data through the use of a structured questionnaire with undergraduate and postgraduates social work students. The study will explore exposure to curriculum and the relationship of this with competencies in the environment. The research aims to highlight the gap between awareness of the environment and readiness for the labor market and to guide curriculum development and community engagement/social work practice in the environment.

Keywords: Green Social Work, Environmental Sustainability, Social Justice, Environmental Awareness, Environmental Knowledge, Social Work Students

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INTRODUCTION

Green social work is aware of the interconnectedness of human well-being, social justice and ecological conditions. Pollution and climate change, water insecurity and extreme weather events are not only conservation challenges and they can also lead to increased poverty, displacement, ill health and unequal access to livelihoods. These harms are structured, with those in poverty and those on the margins being more affected and less able to cope. Social workers should not only be aware of issues in the environment but should also be knowledgeable, have ethical judgment and effective skills in evaluating vulnerability, assisting affected communities and promoting equity in responses. Environmental challenges are compounded by socioeconomic inequities in India, making this challenge relevant here. Education in social work in Tamil Nadu should enable the students to understand these relationships and put them into action. Awareness, however, is not the same as competence - students must be aware of environmental issues but not necessarily know how to develop interventions or shape policy. This study measures the environmental competencies of the social work students in the State of Tamil Nadu.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Green Social Work and Environmental Justice: Green social work is an application of social work that goes beyond the focus on human-centred interventions to integrate ecological sustainability, social inequality and human rights [1].

It frames environmental degradation as a structural justice issue as under-resourced communities are often disproportionately affected by pollution, resource scarcity and displacement arising from climate change [1]. This view has questioned the traditional practice models that see environmental situations as external to social issues. Rather, ecological vulnerability needs to be related to community development, social protection and professional advocacy.

Environmental competencies among social work students

The current empirical studies have shown that there has been a rise in academic interest in environmental awareness in social work. Chonody and Olds Sultzman [2] explored students' perceptions of environmental justice. Likewise, Lesić *et al.* [3] investigated the environmental awareness of social work students, while Gallagher *et al.* [4] investigated environmental perceptions and educational experiences. These studies taken together demonstrate relevance of environmental issues but do not necessarily reflect the ability to make practical interventions.

Research Gap

Although there is evidence from around the world, Tamil Nadu social workers' environmental abilities are yet to be studied with primary data collected in the region. This study attempts to bridge the geographical and educational divide by exploring the environment, environmental knowledge, environmental attitudes and competencies in practice as discrete parts of the professional preparedness.

Aim and objectives

Aim: Empirically assess environmental knowledge, attitudes and practical competencies among social work students in Tamil Nadu, India, and examine the extent to which social work education prepares them for environmentally informed professional practice.

Objectives

- To evaluate students' knowledge of green social work and environmental justice
- To examine attitudes towards environmental sustainability and professional responsibility
- To assess students' perceived and demonstrated environmental intervention competencies
- To investigate environmental content within social work education
- To identify differences in competencies according to educational and demographic characteristics

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study was conducted using quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive and correlational research design, which was used in the study of the environmental competencies of social worker's students [5]. The respondents of the study will be approached in the given study period to collect the direct primary data using a structured questionnaire. The level of environment knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills will be determined using the descriptive approach, while the relationship between the curriculum exposure and the competence is determined using the correlational approach. This configuration enables the systematic contrast of student profiles and student characteristics and is cross-sectional, so it is not easily interpretable in terms of causation.

Study Area and Population

The research will be carried out in Tamil Nadu, India with selected social work institutions in Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli. The geographical selection takes into account the relevance of environmental challenges such as the urban pollution, water insecurity and sea level rise. The target population are undergraduate (BSW) and postgraduate (MSW) students in recognised institutions. The participants eligible for this study are age 18 years or older, enrolled in the selected programme and able to give informed consent [6].

Sampling Method and Sample size

The sampling technique used will be a multistage stratified sampling. Firstly, institutions will be chosen from different geographical areas and then stratified based on academic programme and year of study. Students will then be randomly sampled, if complete sampling frames exist, among those eligible. A sample of 200 respondents is suggested based on the justification of sample size, statistical power and institutional accessibility. If convenience sampling is not feasible, it will be clearly explained, but not incorrectly described as probability sampling [7].

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data will be collected through a structured questionnaire which will contain the following items: Demographic characteristics, Knowledge about the environment, Attitudes towards the environment, Practical skills and environment curriculum exposure. Perceived awareness will be measured differently from applied understanding with 5-point likert scales and objective knowledge questions, as well as situations based on practice.

Reliability, Validity and Ethical Considerations

Clear and content validity of the questionnaires will be determined through expert assessment and pilot testing with around 20-30 students. Internal consistency will be evaluated with Cronbach's alpha for the appropriate multi-item scales. Ethical approval, institutional permission, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality will be adhered to.

Data Analysis

Data will be analysed using SPSS, frequencies and percentages will be used to describe responses, and means and standard deviations will be used for responses that are continuous. Independent-samples t tests and ANOVA will be used to examine differences between groups and Pearson correlation and multiple regression will be used to examine associations between curriculum exposure and environmental competencies, as appropriate. Results will be considered with caution and any causal statements will be avoided.

Proposed Analytical Framework

The study will focus on social work student competencies in the environment along four interrelated lenses: demographic characteristics, environmental knowledge, environmental attitudes, environmental practical professional competencies. First, the characteristics of the respondents will be explored to determine the educational and demographic profile of the sample. Environmental knowledge will then be evaluated by questions related to green social work, environmental justice, climate vulnerability and ecological inequality. Attitudinal responses will provide information about students' perceptions of environmental responsibility in the practice of social work. Practical skills will be assessed through a set of scenario questions relating to the identification of environmental risk and community engagement and intervention planning [8].

Descriptive statistical techniques will determine the distribution and central tendencies of answers. Inferential analysis will explore the differences between the various educational programs and the associations between the level of exposure to the curriculum and competency [9]. Special focus will be paid to the difference between confidence level self-reported and level of understanding demonstrated. This is important because the capacity to intervene professionally cannot be achieved without the presence of positive environmental attitudes. This proposed analytical framework will then serve as a structured framework to assess if the current social work education is sufficient to prepare students to respond to inequities in the environment. Real data and conclusions based on the statistics will be reported after the primary data collection and analysis [8].

DISCUSSION

Environmental knowledge is not sufficient to qualify to practice. Students may be aware of pollution and climate change as environmental issues, but not comprehend their unequal impacts on disadvantaged populations. Comparative evidence for social work students' environmental awareness is presented by Chonody and Olds Sultzman [2] and Lesić *et al.* [3], which indicates that it is worth considering how environmental awareness is related to environmentally relevant skills.

Critical examination of integration of environmental sustainability into BSW and MSW curricula is necessary. Gallagher *et al.* [4] emphasises the importance of environmental aspects in social work education. Inclusion of curriculum should not be limited to theoretical discussions, but also involve fieldwork, the community and environmental interventions.

Dominelli's green social work framework calls into question those elements that divide ecological issues from structural inequity. Vulnerability assessment, community advocacy and equitable resource protection are therefore needed in addition to the individual environmental awareness competencies [10].

Environmental social work education needs to be strengthened in Tamilnadu through the development and integration of a contextual curriculum, environmental justice case studies, environmental vulnerability assessments and placements within the community. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these educational interventions needs to be measured using empirical evidence, and not by inferred from inclusion in curriculum [11].

CONCLUSION

This project points to the need to establish a connection between green social work and professional education, and to make people aware of the interdependence of three elements of environmental sustainability, social justice and human wellbeing. An analysis of the knowledge, attitude and skills in relation to the environment for social work students in Tamilnadu gives an insight into the knowledge gaps that may exist in preparing social workers in the field. Importantly, having environmental awareness is not enough for effective intervention, unless bolstered by applied learning, institutional commitment and community engagement. Professional responsiveness to environmental effects worsened by environmental injustice could be enhanced by augmenting BSW and MSW education with such activities as environmental justice education, hands-on field experiences, and training in climate vulnerability. That will be essential for context-specific education improvements and practice ultimately using primary empirical evidence.

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