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MESSAGE FROM EDITOR

Dear Readers,

Greetings from the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI).

It gives us immense pleasure to present the June 2026 issue of the NAPSWI Social Work Digest, centered on the theme "Digital Futures and Social Work Practice: Exploring Opportunities, Ethics, and Innovation in a Technology-Driven World." As digital technologies continue to reshape societies, economies, governance systems, and human relationships, social work as a profession stands at a critical crossroads. The challenge before us is not merely to adopt new technologies but to ensure that technological advancements remain rooted in the values of social justice, human dignity, inclusion, participation, and ethical responsibility.

The articles featured in this issue collectively explore the transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence, digital platforms, data-driven governance, and technology-enabled interventions on social work practice, education, community development, counselling, disaster management, and social welfare administration. While these innovations offer unprecedented opportunities for expanding access, improving efficiency, and strengthening evidence-based practice, they also raise critical questions regarding privacy, equity, accountability, professional ethics, and the preservation of meaningful human relationships.

Contributors to this issue remind us that technology should not replace the human essence of social work. Rather, it should serve as a tool that enhances professional capacity, strengthens community resilience, promotes inclusive development, and supports vulnerable populations. The future of social work lies in balancing technological innovation with empathy, critical reflection, ethical decision-making, and human connection.

As India advances towards the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 and the global community increasingly embraces digital transformation, social workers must be prepared to engage with emerging technologies while safeguarding the profession's core values. This issue encourages practitioners, educators, researchers, students, and policymakers to critically examine both the opportunities and challenges presented by the digital age.

We sincerely thank all contributors for sharing their valuable insights and experiences. We hope this issue stimulates meaningful dialogue, inspires innovative practice, and contributes to shaping a socially just, inclusive, and technologically responsible future.

Happy Reading!
Prof. Sanjai Bhatt
Editor, NAPSWI Social Work Digest

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"Digital Futures and Social Work Practice: Exploring Opportunities, Ethics, and Innovation in a Technology-Driven World."

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Introduction

The world is witnessing an unprecedented digital transformation that is reshaping how governments, institutions, communities and individuals interact and respond to social challenges. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), mobile applications, cloud-based platforms and digital communication tools are influencing nearly every sector, including social work. As societies become increasingly interconnected and technology-driven, social work professionals are presented with both opportunities and responsibilities to leverage digital innovations for social good while safeguarding the values of equity, inclusion, participation, and human dignity.

Social work is founded on principles of human rights, social justice, collective responsibility and respect for diversity, making it uniquely positioned to address the opportunities and challenges arising from digital transformation (IFSW, 2014). At the same time, communities across the globe are facing complex challenges arising from climate change, rapid urbanization, population growth and increasing disaster risks. These realities demand innovative approaches that combine technological capabilities with community-centered development. Social workers, with their deep understanding of human behavior, community dynamics and social systems are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between technological innovation and human development.

Drawing from experiences in urban flood management, disaster risk reduction, community resilience and stakeholder engagement initiatives in Chennai, this article explores how digital technologies are transforming social work practice and how social workers can contribute to building resilient, inclusive and future-ready communities.

The Evolving Role of Social Workers in a Digital Society

Traditionally, social work has focused on direct engagement with individuals, families, groups and communities to address social problems and improve well-being. While these core responsibilities remain unchanged, the methods through which social workers engage with communities are rapidly evolving. Digital technologies have expanded the reach of social work interventions beyond geographical limitations. Mobile communication platforms enable faster dissemination of information, virtual meetings facilitate stakeholder consultations and online learning platforms support capacity-building initiatives. Digital

documentation systems have improved record management, while data analytics provide deeper insights into community needs and service delivery outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across social and development sectors. Social workers increasingly relied on digital platforms to conduct awareness campaigns, coordinate relief efforts, facilitate community engagement and provide psychosocial support. This experience demonstrated that technology can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of social interventions when applied thoughtfully and inclusively.

Digital transformation is increasingly recognized as a key enabler of sustainable development and inclusive governance, requiring social workers to acquire new competencies while retaining their human-centered approach (UNDP, 2022).

Technology and Community Resilience: Experience from Chennai

The increasing frequency of urban flooding and extreme weather events has highlighted the need for integrated approaches that combine engineering solutions, institutional strengthening, community participation and technology-enabled decision-making. Chennai's experiences with major flood events have reinforced the importance of preparedness, early warning systems and community resilience.

In Chennai, ongoing urban flood management initiatives are increasingly integrating technologies such as GIS-based mapping, hydrological monitoring systems, automated weather stations and decision-support tools to strengthen preparedness improve risk-informed planning and support community resilience. These initiatives are helping authorities improve risk assessment, enhance preparedness, support early warning dissemination and strengthen coordination among stakeholders involved in flood risk management.

Global disaster risk reduction frameworks emphasize that resilience cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure investments but must also include risk-informed governance, preparedness and active community participation (UNDRR, 2015). However, the effectiveness of these systems depends not only on technological sophistication but also on community understanding and preparedness. Information has value only when it reaches the intended audience is understood correctly and prompts appropriate action. This is where social work principles become critical. Community outreach programs, awareness campaigns, stakeholder consultations, training workshops and public engagement initiatives help translate technical information into meaningful actions for citizens. Social workers and community development professionals play a crucial role in facilitating communication between technical experts, government agencies and communities. They help ensure that digital systems remain people-centered and responsive to local realities.

In urban resilience initiatives, technology serves as an enabler while social engagement ensures that communities are empowered to utilize available information effectively. Such integrated approaches are increasingly recognized within urban resilience literature which

emphasizes the role of both technological and nature-based interventions in addressing climate and disaster risks (ADB, 2021).

Opportunities for Social Work Practice in the Digital Era

Digital transformation presents significant opportunities for strengthening social work practice across multiple sectors. One of the most important opportunities lies in improved communication and outreach. Mobile technologies, social media platforms and messaging applications allow practitioners to disseminate information rapidly and engage larger audiences. During emergencies, these platforms can support early warning dissemination, awareness campaigns and coordination efforts. Technology also enhances evidence-based decision-making. Data collection tools enable practitioners to gather information more efficiently while analytics platforms help identify trends, vulnerabilities and service gaps. Such insights support better planning, resource allocation and program design.

Digital technologies are increasingly enabling governments and development organizations to make more informed, data-driven decisions that improve service delivery and public engagement (World Bank, 2021). Digital tools further strengthen stakeholder collaboration. Virtual meetings, online consultations and collaborative platforms facilitate communication among government agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions and community groups. These mechanisms promote inclusive participation and collective problem-solving.

Another significant opportunity is capacity building. Online training programs and digital learning platforms make knowledge more accessible and allow practitioners to continuously update their skills. Communities can also benefit from digital awareness initiatives that improve preparedness, resilience and access to essential services.

The integration of digital technologies thus enhances the ability of social workers to reach vulnerable populations, improve service delivery and contribute to sustainable development outcomes.

Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics: Emerging Frontiers

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data analytics are increasingly influencing development planning and service delivery. These technologies can process large volumes of information, identify patterns and generate insights that support decision-making. In disaster risk reduction, predictive models can help identify high-risk areas, forecast potential impacts and support preparedness planning. In social development programs, data analytics can reveal trends relating to vulnerability, access to services and community needs. Such information enables organizations to design targeted interventions and improve program effectiveness.

Technology-driven governance and predictive analytics are increasingly recognized as important tools for strengthening resilience and supporting proactive risk management (UNDRR, 2022). AI-powered systems can also support knowledge management, automate routine processes and facilitate information sharing. These capabilities allow practitioners to focus more on strategic planning, community engagement and relationship building.

However, social work must approach these technologies with caution. Human experiences, social realities and community dynamics cannot be fully understood through algorithms alone. Professional judgment, empathy, cultural understanding and ethical considerations remain central to effective practice. Technology should therefore complement human decision-making rather than replace it.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges

While digital technologies offer numerous benefits, they also introduce significant ethical challenges that social workers must address. The digital divide remains one of the most pressing concerns. Many vulnerable populations continue to face barriers relating to internet connectivity, device ownership, affordability and digital literacy. Without deliberate efforts to address these inequalities, digital transformation risks excluding those who may need support the most (World Bank, 2021).

Privacy and data protection are equally important. Social workers often handle sensitive information relating to individuals and communities. Ensuring confidentiality, informed consent and secure data management is essential for maintaining trust and protecting vulnerable populations.

The growing use of artificial intelligence also raises concerns regarding transparency and bias. Algorithms may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities if they are based on incomplete or biased datasets. Social workers must advocate for ethical technology governance that prioritizes fairness, accountability and human rights. Ethical and responsible use of technology is increasingly recognized as a fundamental requirement for contemporary social work practice (IFSW, 2018).

Misinformation presents another challenge. The rapid spread of inaccurate information through digital platforms can undermine public trust, create confusion during emergencies and negatively influence community behavior. Strengthening digital literacy and promoting responsible communication are therefore critical components of contemporary social work practice.

Building Future-Ready Social Workers

As technology becomes increasingly integrated into development processes, social work education and professional development must evolve accordingly. Future social workers will require competencies in digital literacy, data management, technology ethics and climate resilience. They should understand how digital systems influence social outcomes and how technology can be applied to enhance community engagement, service delivery and advocacy efforts.

Educational institutions should incorporate emerging themes such as artificial intelligence, digital inclusion, disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and information management into social work curricula. Professional bodies can further support practitioners through specialized training programs, knowledge-sharing platforms and continuous learning opportunities. The need for digitally empowered professionals capable of navigating complex

social and environmental challenges is increasingly emphasized within global development frameworks (UNDP, 2022).

Equally important is the need to preserve the human-centered nature of social work. Technological competence should strengthen rather than diminish the profession's commitment to empathy, participation, dignity and social justice.

Way Forward

Digital technologies are transforming the way social workers engage with communities, deliver services and address complex development challenges. From disaster preparedness and urban resilience to community outreach and capacity building, technology offers unprecedented opportunities to strengthen social work practice and improve development outcomes.

Experiences from technology-enabled urban resilience initiatives demonstrate that while digital systems can provide critical information and decision-support capabilities, sustainable change ultimately depends on informed, empowered and engaged communities. Technology alone cannot build resilience. It must be complemented by trust, participation, social inclusion and collective action, consistent with the principles promoted by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015).

The future of social work lies in successfully integrating technological innovation with the profession's enduring commitment to human dignity and social justice. As societies continue to navigate an increasingly digital future, social workers will play a vital role in ensuring that technology serves people, strengthens communities and promotes inclusive and sustainable development.

Technology may provide the tools but it is social work that ensures these tools serve people, strengthen communities and promote inclusive development.

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TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE FOR INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE VIKSIT BHARAT 2047: A SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract:

In India's vision of Viksit Bharat at 2047, India envisages it as a developed nation by the centenary of independence, which requires a paradigm shift in the relationship between practice of social work and digital technologies. This article uses a quantitative secondary data analysis (SDA) approach to explore the nexus between technology in social work, social development outcomes and digital inclusion in India. The study is based on three empirical fields – digital infrastructure and inclusion, application of technology in social service delivery and structural barriers, dormancy issues and ethical risks – which were analysed based on empirical data from government databases, international organisation reports and industry research between 2022 and 2026. Key findings include internet subscribers (active users) reaching 958 million in 2025, with 57% of India (548 million) being active from its rural population, and another 579 million of population, or 38% active on the internet, but not perhaps in an online service (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026). As per DataReportal (2026), there have been 1.03 billion total internet users with a penetration rate of 70% as of October 2025. Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has registered 561.6 million beneficiaries so far by August 2025 and deposits have been made worth Rs. 2.68 lakh crore, Although 23% of the accounts were lying dormant with 130.4 million dormant accounts (Ministry of Finance, 2025, Business Standard, 2025). In the financial year 2025–26 approximately 241.62 billion transactions were made through UPI, compared to 2016–17 which saw just 20 transactions (PIB, 2026), a growth rate of around 12,000-fold. The social protection coverage in India rose to 64.3% of the population, or more than 940 million people, up from 19% in 2015, according to statistics in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) ILOSTAT database (PIB, 2025b; ILO, 2025). The Indian digital health landscape is projected to grow to USD 106.97 billion by 2033 from USD 14.50 billion in 2024, which will be bolstered by 282 million telemedicine consultations that took place on eSanjeevani and 799 million Ayushman Bharat Health Accounts by August 2025 (Grand View Research, 2026). The article presents evidence-base policy recommendations focused on the integration of digital literacy in social work education, technology deployment in communities, and frameworks for protecting against algorithmic exclusion emphasizing the need for structuring social work with

technology. The article makes evidence-based policy recommendations for the integration of digital literacy in social work education, algorithms deployments in communities, and ethical protection frameworks for algorithmic exclusion, emphasizing the necessity of structuring social work with technology.

Keywords: *Technology-Enabled Social Work, Digital Inclusion, Viksit Bharat 2047, Direct Benefit Transfer, Digital India, Social Development, Digital Divide*

Introduction

India is at a watershed moment in development. The Viksit Bharat 2047 vision, as India's largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity and the country's most densely populated democracy, reflects the holistic blueprint for India to become a developed nation by the milestone of 100 years of independence deeply intertwined with an effort to ensure digital access to this right and the modernization of social welfare delivery in India (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2024). The desired vision involves inclusive growth, economic growth, sustainability, innovation and citizen participation with the goal of reaching a GDP of USD 30 - 40 trillion and per capita income of USD 15000 – 18000 by 2047 (ClearTax, 2026; Indian Institute of Management Mumbai, 2024).

Social work practice fits into this larger dimension of macro-development, but remains largely unstudied. Social workers are front-line actors between state welfare regimes and the marginalised communities and the digitalisation of the interface between these two generates both potential transformative opportunities and also structural challenges. Globally, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are depicted as a change to "technology enabled social work practice" which includes a range of telehealth, paperless case work management, Artificial Intelligence (AI) based assessment technologies, and platform-based community engagement (Reamer, 2023; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2024).

The intersection is a special problem in India. Internet connectivity in rural and marginalised areas is significantly lower than that of the internet users themselves due to its role as a catalyst for incredible development of internet infrastructure through the Digital India initiative. Though the villages are almost covered with 4G network, approximately 579 million people, that is 38% of India's population, are still not part of the active internet users (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026, PIB, 2024). Together, these have been called by scholars as a 'double exclusion', in which marginalised groups are excluded from material support and excluded from the digital systems through which access to material support is increasingly provided (Mathiyazhagan & Patton, 2025).

This article is a quantitative secondary data analysis in nature which systematically discusses the various aspects of technology related social work practice and its contribution towards inclusive development goals of Viksit Bharat 2047. The analysis consolidates empirical evidence from official statistics, worldwide reports, and independent industry research to showcase an India that is multi-dimensional, reflecting digital inclusion and social development. This paper consists of five parts: theoretical background, methodology,

empirical results and statistical evaluation, implications of practice and policy, and conclusions.

Theoretical framework

The underlying theoretical framework for this study is underpinned by three converging theories which are: Social Development Framework, the Digital Inclusion Framework, and the Capability Approach as adapted to the digital age.

Social Development Framework

The social development approach itself, as espoused by Midgley (1995), refined and further described by Patel and Midgley (2024), which forms a normative link between the social interventions at the micro level and the macro level development of the economy. The framework places a strong emphasis on the productive nature of social welfare; that social welfare services should not just be about providing relief but on promoting economic activity and human capital development. In the Indian context, four pillars of Viksit Bharat 2047 youth, women, poor, and farmers in the Indian context reflect this productive welfare approach (ClearTax, 2026). Theorization of Technology-enabled Social Work as a mechanism to deliver products of Welfare efforts in a scalable way by harnessing digital financial inclusion, e-governance, and Telehealth interventions.

Digital Inclusion Framework

Digital inclusion isn't about connectivity alone; actually, it incorporates accessibility, skills, quality of connectivity, and a good outcome (van Dijk, 2020). In the development context, this framework talks of the first order of inclusion in relation to having access to the internet, and the second order in relation to the meaningful social and economic use of the internet. PIB report (2024) also indicates that although 95.15% of the villages in India are connected with mobile technology, 3G/4G, active use of internet and digital literacy – especially among the weakest segments like women, elderly, and people with lower socio-economic status remains significantly lower than the proportion of connected villages. Critically, 23% of Jan Dhan accounts are yet to be activated (Ministry of Finance, 2025), thus presenting yet another 3rd order challenge: Registered account without behaviour activation.

Capability Approach in the Digital Age

Sen (1999) views development in terms of the freedoms people have to attain valued functioning. Incorporating digital capacities, this framework extends to include the use of digital tools, and implies that what matters is the capacity or the subjective freedom of using digital tools in a manner that leads to "satisfaction with well-being in the digital realm," rather than their mere availability. From the perspective of Indian social work practice, this means that the use of technology should go beyond mere symbolic to actual capability enhancement and incorporate elements of literacy, cultural localization and grievance.

Methodology

Research Design: Quantitative Secondary Data Analysis : This research uses a quantitative secondhand data analysis approach (SDA) that uses a systematic collection, synthesis and then statistical interpretation of data sources that already exist to produce brand

new empirical conclusions (Heaton, 2008). Quantitative SDA can be especially useful in studying structural uses of the method at the national level, e.g., analysis of social welfare delivery or digital inclusion, where collecting primary data would be impractical and where quality, rich and detailed government and institutional data are available. The approach is descriptive statistical analysis, trend analysis over time, cross-demographic and cross-area analysis.

Analytical result of this study consists of statistics, proportions, growth rates, trend curves based on the official data units. If the literature is included, then it serves the function of interpreting and contextualizing the quantitative evidence presented, but not as such as evidence itself. Such clarity is crucial for methodological clarity and rigor.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The sources of data were categorized into six secondary sources and books, journals and IPAB's documents of the Government of India were considered as the most important sources, which include: (a) Government of India databases and Press Information Bureau release (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, National Payments Corporation of India, Press Information Bureau); (b) international organizational statistical database (International Labour Organization ILOSTAT, World Bank); (c) industry research reports (IAMAI and Kantar Internet in India Report 2025, Data Reportal Digital 2026: India, Grab On UPI Statistics 2026, Grand View Research); (d) peer-reviewed academic publications from Scopus-indexed journals (2022-2026); (e) statutory policy document (Viksit Bharat 2047 vision documents, NITI Aayog DPI 2047 Strategic Roadmap); (f) credentialed institutional analysis (BlueKraft Digital Foundation DBT Assessment, India Policy Hub). All the sources were chosen according to their recentness, institutional credibility, data traceability and relevance to the three analytical areas of the study.

Analytical Approach

Three processes were used to analyse the data: (1) data compilation and verification; making sure that the data computed is reliable and valid by cross-referencing figures compiled from different reliable sources; (2) descriptive statistical synthesis; calculation of proportions, growth rates, and trend trajectories from each indicator; and (3) comparative analysis; examination of differences along rural urban, gender and socioeconomic aspects. Construct validly was aided by data triangulation with data from various independent sources. Where there is any discrepancy between sources (e.g., ILO ILOSTAT estimates and Ministry of Labour estimates) both are provided with source attribution.

Empirical findings and statistical analysis

Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion in India (2025–2026)

India's digital infrastructure expansion over the past decade represents one of the most rapid in the Global South. The most recent authoritative datasets, published in late 2025 and early 2026, reveal a picture of substantial aggregate progress alongside persistent structural inequities.

Table 1 : ***Key Digital Inclusion Indicators for India (2025–2026)***

Indicator	Value / Status	Source
Active Internet Users (2025)	958 million (~8% YoY growth)	IAMAI & Kantar (2026)
Rural Internet Users	548 million (57% of total)	IAMAI & Kantar (2026)
Urban Internet Users	410 million (43% of total)	IAMAI & Kantar (2026)
Offline Population	579 million (38% of population)	IAMAI & Kantar (2026)
Total Internet Users (Oct 2025)	1.03 billion (70.0% penetration)	DataReportal (2026)
Cellular Mobile Connections (Oct 2025)	1.06 billion (72.5% of population)	DataReportal (2026)
Social Media Users (Oct 2025)	500 million (34.1% of population)	DataReportal (2026)
Villages with 3G/4G Coverage	612,952 / 644,131 (95.15%)	PIB (2024)
Women as Share of Internet Users	46% (narrowing gender gap)	GrabOn (2026)
Aadhaar IDs Generated (June 2025)	1.42 billion	PIB (2025b)
5G District Coverage	99.6% of districts	PIB (2025b)
Multi-Device Internet Users (2025)	193 million (20% of all active users)	IAMAI & Kantar (2026)

In the last 10 years, India has seen one of the fastest growth of its digital infrastructure in the Global South. The latest official figures, released towards the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, show big gains on the back of these aggregate gains and that structural inequities remain.

According to the India Active Internet Users Report (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026) released at the Digital Summit 2026 in Bengaluru, India made it to the list of the world's largest digital markets with 958 million active internet users which is around 8% Year-On-Year growth. The Internet now has 57% of its users from rural areas, which is about 548 million, and is increasing 4 times faster than in urban areas, marking a substantial change in the geography of users of digital devices on the Internet.

This gives us another side of the coin with data reporting that India has a total of one billion and 33 million internet users (and 70% of its people have access to it), up from the 886 million user count reported in the 2024 edition (DataReportal, 2026). The two figures are both valid and complementary measures underpinned by different approaches to data on internet users - with Data Reportal reporting an internet subscriber base of 1.03 billion as against IAMAI's reporting of 958 million 'active' users. Significantly, while this progress has been made, 38% of the Indian population, 579 million people, continue to fall outside the active internet user base (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026) which makes them the target population for which social work must advocate for social inclusion through accessing the Internet.

One finding that reflects an important aspect of social work practice is the extent of shared device use: 18% of the internet users connect to the internet as part of another user's

mobile device, and around 80% of those who are using their mobile devices on behalf of others are females (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026). The structural dependency has direct consequences for the privacy of women who want to be able to access welfare, health or legal services in a digital way, and for their autonomy, analytically at the heart of the social work ethics of rights.

AI use is becoming another facet of digital engagement 44% of Indian Internet users have interacted with the Internet via AI functions like voice search, image-based search, chatbots and AI filters (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026). The ramifications of this direction for social work practice are noteworthy, since AI-powered Welfare systems have become more common in India's governance landscape.

Technology Applications in Social Welfare Delivery

Financial Inclusion and the Jan Dhan Ecosystem for India.

Inaugurated Aug 2014, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) is the biggest initiative on financial inclusion worldwide. As on August 13, 2025 after 11 years of implementation, there are 561.6 million beneficiaries of PMJDY of which 31.31 crore are women in whom holding accounts and 37.48 crore accounts (in rural and semi-urban) are expected as few as. The amount of total deposits was Rs. The price of the materials has risen by 12 times, to Rs. 2.68 lakh crore. The number of accounts increased to 0.22 lakh crore in August 2015, while the average per account jumped to Rs. 4,768 a 3.7-fold increase over the decade (PIB, 2025a).

But 2025 data shows an important factor that has not been previously identified: dormancy of accounts. 130.4 million (23% of the overall total of 560.4 million) PMJDY accounts were inoperative as of 31 July 2025, meaning that they had no transactions for more than two years (Business Standard, 2025a). The state level data shows the concentration of the inoperative accounts in Uttar Pradesh (27.5 million), Bihar (13.9 million), and Madhya Pradesh (10.7 million) states, which are also home to a significant rural population, a portion of which is marginalised, and infrastructure challenges. (Business Standard, 2025a) The inoperative rate in public sector banks increased to 26% in September 2025 from 21% of banks one year prior (Business Standard, 2025b). For social work analysis, it is a crucial nexus between formal financial inclusion and substantive activation, which is a "newly conceived, three-dimensional financial exclusion" (Bennett and Allen 2020).

Table 2 : ***Digital Welfare Delivery: Updated Key Programmatic Indicators (2025–2026)***

Program / Indicator	Key Achievement	Date	Source
PMJDY Accounts (Total)	561.6 million; Rs. 2.68 lakh crore deposits	Aug 2025	PIB (2025a)
PMJDY Inoperative Accounts	130.4 million (23% of total)	Jul 2025	Business Standard (2025a)

DBT Cumulative Transfers	Rs. 50 lakh crore; 176.4 crore beneficiaries (16x from 2013)	2026	India Policy Hub (2026)
DBT Leakage Prevention	Rs. 3.48 lakh crore saved; WEI score 0.91	2026	PIB (2025c)
UPI Annual Transactions (FY 2025-26)	241.62 billion; Rs. 314 lakh crore value	Apr 2026	PIB (2026)
UPI Monthly Peak (Jan 2026)	21.7 billion transactions; Rs. 28.33 lakh crore	Jan 2026	GrabOn (2026)
e-Shram Registrations	313.8 million unorganized workers	Dec 2025	ILO (2025)
Social Protection Coverage	64.3% (19% in 2015); 940 million beneficiaries	2025	ILO (2025)/PIB (2025b)
Aadhaar Cards (June 2025)	1.42 billion issued	Jun 2025	PIB (2025b)
Welfare Efficiency Index (WEI)	0.91 in 2023 (vs. 0.32 in 2014)	2025	PIB (2025c)

Unified Payments Interface: Scale, Dominance, and Welfare Implications

The Unified Payments interface (UPI) has become a scale that goes beyond the mere payment system, becoming a crucial social infrastructure. For Financial Year (FY) 2025–26, UPI has processed 241.62 billion transactions, amounting to Rs. in gross value. This would be an increase in transactions by a near 12000 times of FY 2016-17 (PIB, 2026). This was the highest monthly volume of January 2026, which saw 21.7 billion transactions valued at Rs. 28.33 lakh crore (GrabOn, 2026). Currently, UPI has become the backbone of digital transactions in India, processing nearly 50% of all the real-time digital payment transactions worldwide and about 85% of all such transactions in India (News on Air, 2025).

The social welfare aspects of this scale are tremendous. UPI is linked with the JAM Trinity, as the channel to deliver Government's welfare transfer programmes such as PM-KISAN farmer income support, MGNREGS wage payment, and scholarship disbursements to beneficiaries. By 2023, the Welfare Efficiency Index (WEI)–made up of leakage savings, subsidy rationalisation and beneficiary expansion–had risen to 0.91, as compared to 0.32 in 2014 and 0.35 in 2020; that is, with 91 paise of every welfare rupee reaching its intended beneficiaries directly (India Policy Hub, 2026). Cross 450+ schemes cumulative DBT was made available at Rs. The target is to leak-proof 50 lakh crore and achieve a cumulative leakage of Rs. 3.48 lakh crore including Rs. Just 1.85 lakh crore has been saved via the Aadhaar-based biometric authentication in the Public Distribution System alone (PIB, 2025c; India Policy Hub, 2026). Coverage has gone up 16 times as of 2013 to 1.764 billion cumulative beneficiaries in 2025 (India Policy Hub, 2026).

Technological innovations have helped UPI go to the ‘last mile’ and serve ‘last mile consumers' – namely those who are reliant on ‘feature phones' and don't have internet connectivity and those who can transact offline for low value payments through UPI Lite. As

per the as on date of Feb' 25, 694 banks are now operational on the UPI platform (GrabOn, 26). This architecture affords social workers new opportunities to engage in financial empowerment for their clients, and to develop social work mandates regarding financial literacy and advocacy for financial fraud protection, specifically with older, lower income, and first-generation digital users.

Social Protection Coverage: Expansion and Architecture

The expansion of social protection in India is some of the most statistically extraordinary policies highlighted in this analysis. A decade later, more than 940 million people are now covered by at least one social protection benefit, a jump of 45 percentage points and an increase in coverage rate from 19% in 2015 to 64.3% in 2025, by the ILO's ILOSTAT database (PIB, 2025b; ILO, 2025). India is also the first country in the world to get its data on social protection coverage for 2025 updated to the ILOSTAT database, further solidifying its position as a leader in digital governance transparency (PIB, 2025b).

Given this, it is noteworthy to note that stricter definitions, such as those presented in the World Social Protection Report 2024–26, show the reality of only 48.8% coverage. (PIB, 2025d) The Ministry of Labour and Employment recognises this gap and claims that India has a better coverage rate when food security (PMGKAY), housing, administration schemes managed by the state etc. are also considered (PIB, 2025d). According to PIB (2025d), 806.7 million people were provided with free food grains by PMGKAY as of December 2024. Seventy-three percent of these figures are 48.8% and 64.3%, which are considerable advances from the 19% baseline, and are included here for purposes of scholarly transparency with the definitional parameters.

e-Shram is the digital platform to extend the welfare to the huge informal sector of the nation. As of December 2025, there were unorganised workers registered on the platform, and 13 key welfare schemes had been in-built on the platform (ILO, 2025; British Safety Council India, 2025). Built in February 2025, a mobile app and multilingual feature launched in January 2025 with support for 22 Indian languages has made a big difference to accessing the product by a wide variety of communities (British Safety Council India, 2025). These are manifestations of operationalised digital inclusion – from sign up to participation itself, provided in a manner that is accommodating language and technological barriers.

Digital Health and Telemedicine in Social Work Practice

The digital health landscape has not just expanded in India, but revolutionized, where its practice areas are directly related to social work. According to the digital health market in 2024 is estimated at USD 14.50 billion and is projected to reach USD 106.97 billion by 2033 with CAGR of 25.12% till 2033 (Grand View Research, 2026); the tele-healthcare accounted for highest share of revenue of 44.98% in 2024.

India's flagship telemedicine platform, eSanjeevani, has delivered 282 million telemedicine consultations between April 2023 and November 2025, has successfully provided 282 million telemedicine consultations thereby facilitating an estimated 12 million consultations with the help of AI and Clinical Decision Support Systems (CDSS) (Organiser,

2026). A total 799 million Ayushman Bharat Health Accounts (ABHA) digital health IDs have been created by August 2025 with 670,000 health professionals and 410,000 healthcare facilities registered on digital repositories (PIB, 2026b). As of February 2025, there were 341.8M health consultations (P4I) against 490.6M health records linked with ABHA across these three categories.Within this total of 490.6M health records linked with ABHA, there were 341.8M health consultations (P4I) till February 2025.

Adoption of AI among healthcare providers is rapid: One in every four Indian clinicians uses an AI tool (Tata Tele Business, 2025), and the number of adoptions has risen threefold in one year. Incorporating non-specialist TB screening in community settings, AI-based TB screening products have shown a 27% reduction in TB adverse outcomes (PIB, 2026b). This environment demands a shift in professional learning for social workers, especially within community health and mental health, concerning technology-supported referrals, online mental health services, and ethical challenges with AI-based screening instruments.

Table 3 : ***Digital Health Indicators Relevant to Social Work Practice (2025–2026)***

Indicator	Value / Status	Date	Source
India Digital Health Market Size	USD 14.50 bn (2024) → USD 106.97 bn (2033); CAGR 25.12%	2026	Grand View Research (2026)
eSanjeevani Telemedicine Consultations	282 million (Apr 2023–Nov 2025)	Nov 2025	Organiser (2026)
AI-Assisted Consultations on eSanjeevani	12 million (via CDSS)	Nov 2025	Organiser (2026)
Ayushman Bharat Health Accounts (ABHA)	799 million digital health IDs	Aug 2025	PIB (2026b)
Health Records Linked to ABHA	490.6 million records	Feb 2025	P4I (2025)
Clinicians Using AI Tools	>40% of Indian clinicians (tripled in 1 year)	2026	Tata Tele Business (2025)
UPI AutoPay Mandates	1.27 billion mandates (Nov 2025; 10x from Jan 2024)	Nov 2025	Coinlaw.io (2026)

Structural barriers, account dormancy, and ethical risks

The Structural Digital Divide: Persistent Disparities

The digital divide in India serves multiple intersecting and structural dimensions in spite of the growing digitization of the aggregate. Active penetration of the rural internet is still much lower compared to the urban internet: 95.15% of villages are covered by 3 & 4G (PIB, 2024) but the active penetration percentage is low. As shown in IAMAI and Kantar

2026, 12% of villages and 31% of cities are using AI.Based on IAMAI and Kantar 2026, the adoption of AI in rural areas is 12%, and in urban areas, it is 31%. Multi-device use, which is an indicator of digital sophistication, is at 20% nationally, and there are significant differences between urban and rural populations. The 579 million people who have no internet access are deeply wedded into rural regions, lower quintiles in terms of income and the old age groups, and women have representation in these groups in large numbers.

The gender factor calls for quantitative accuracy. Women accounted for 46% of internet users as per the aggregated data from GrabOn (2026), which results in a shrinking gender divide from 31% in 2023; however, this aggregate does not reveal structural mediations. On an average, shared internet users make up about 80% of the women in rural India (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026) reflecting implications of lack of privacy and autonomy in using household devices in accessing welfare services which are controlled and operated by men. In a sector where social workers are providing services on gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health or working with clients that have a high mental health requirement, this structure raises ‘safeguarding concerns’. In this module, we will explore the third-order exclusion problem also called account dormancy and its potential solutions.

Account Dormancy: The Third-Order Exclusion Problem

The 2025 information regarding dormancy of PMJDY accounts highlights a crucial research gap in previous inclusion assessments. The results of this study, as quoted by Business Standard (2025a), reveal a 'third-order exclusion' issue with 130.4 million inactive banking accounts as of July 2025, representing a 23% inoperative account ratio on the total. The impressive score of 0.91 for the Welfare Efficiency Index falls short of the reality of Jan Dhan account holders who do not use their accounts or are unable to access them 23%. Government reporting suggests power supply instability, financial and technological literacy shortcomings, network gaps in remote locations and the lack of proper training for Business Correspondents as reasons for this.Main reasons cited in government reports are power supply inconsistencies, financial and technological literacy gaps, network reliability issues, and lack of Business Correspondent (BC) network training (Vision IAS, 2025).

The impact of this dormancy trend on benefits delivery is real: Paying out benefits to any dormant accounts continues, but they won't be delivered to any mayors that may lack digital literacy or necessary infrastructure to access. Social workers are well placed to fill this gap through identification of dormant account holders in their communities, digitisation camps for opening new accounts (99,753 camps in the first month of the 2025 Financial Inclusion Saturation Campaign opened 660,000 new accounts, PIB 2025a), and by delivering training on digital literacy to help with insightful account usage.

Algorithmic Exclusion and Biometric Authentication Failures

One of the major ethical challenges for tech-enabled social work in India is ‘algorithm exclusion', in which welfare benefits are denied when welfare services are unreachable due to an automated process of authentication failure. Aadhaar-linked biometric authentication has decreased the overall leakages by Rs. The fact that 3.48 lakh crore has records of people with disabilities (PWD) and manual workers with worn fingerprints being denied food subsidies

and welfare benefits, an inequity disproportionate to elderly people's vulnerability is unprecedented. As there are 316+ schemes and 56 ministries involved in the DBT system, there were complex exclusion risks generated at each of the authentication nodes.

For social workers, this creates a novel profession, Digital Grievance Redressal, which entails carving out a new space of advocacy as part of automated welfare systems to uncover login issues, set up human review processes, and push structural design changes. In addition to technological aspects it also demands traditional social work skills such as advocating for clients, managing cases and practice based on rights. Similarly, the UPI (Coinlaw.io, 2026) fraud detection systems are also using artificial intelligence which demands social workers to be aware of and comprehend the implications of algorithmic decision making on access to welfare for clients.

Data Privacy and Informed Consent in Digitized Welfare Systems

The data provided in a digitized Welfare System must be kept private and must comply with the principle of informed consent. Aadhaar has been linked to all welfare schemes occurring across all platforms, including PMJDY bank accounts, e-Shram registrations, ABHA health records (799 million), and any other data aggregation platform has raised major privacy concerns for data owners in India. Health, financial, employment and identity data all come together within a single ecosystem that gives rise to surveillance threats and scope creep risks that social workers' ethics frameworks must deal with. In the International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IFSW/IASSW, 2020) Global Standards, social workers not only are obligated to protect the confidentiality of their clients but also to secure meaningful informed consent, which requires new procedures and protocols in the digitally connected welfare system.

Considering the issue of informed consent with respect to non-English special needs, there are positive steps such as multilingual expansion of e-Shram (22 Indian languages as of January 2025) and eSanjeevani interfaces in regional languages as of now.Positive developments towards informed consent with regards to those that do not speak English include the multilingual expansion of eShram (currently 22 Indian languages) and eSanjeevani interfaces in regional languages as of now (British Safety Council India 2025). But there are also digital consent forms, like checkboxes, digital signing and biometric authentication, which could be meaningless informed consent for populations unaccustomed to digital reading and comprehension. As part of documenting digital data practices, social workers need to possess competencies to explain the practices to their clients and to promote ways for consensual access to digital data, wherever possible, in the design of systems.

Discussion: Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy in Viksit Bharat 2047

Technology-Enabled Social Work as a Structural Necessity

Despite the inaccuracy in one's observations or experiences sometimes, the findings of this study lend credence to fundamental reorientation of technology mediated social work as not something that is an add-on but something that is almost a fundamental need to attain inclusive development goals of Viksit Bharat 2047. The Indian digital welfare framework

encompasses a high number of active internet users, Jan Dhan user accounts, Jan Dhan accounts of e-Shram workers and over 3 lakh insurance policies, all of which add up to Rs. The shift to the digitization of welfare delivery is now a core component in the design of welfare delivery, with 50 lakh crore in transfers via digital platforms in India Policy Hub, 2026, and 940 million people said to be under social protection via digital platforms (PIB 2025b). Social workers who are unable to function in this world are structurally incapable in their mainstream jobs.

The quantitative information also shows where the solution lies, not in technology. The 23% dormancy rate for Jan Dhan accounts, the 38% offline population, and the urban-rural mark 80 within the context of dependency on shared devices and the algorithmic exclusion cases demonstrate that there remains a considerable gap between the digital architecture and digital actualization in India. Social work's unique contribution to human-centred practice is its capacity to be between people and systems, to shift people's behaviour as well as structural changes, and to lobby for system design that puts the most marginalised people at the centre of systems all of which fills this gap very well.

Digital Competency as a Core Professional Requirement

The NASW Technology Standards (2024) define digital competency as a core professional requirement, with 87% of social workers globally using digital tools daily (Social Work Degrees, 2025). In the Indian context, this imperative is amplified by the depth of welfare digitization. Specific competencies required include: e-governance and DPI literacy (navigating DBT systems, Aadhaar authentication, e-Shram registration, ABHA health ID processes); digital grievance redressal (identifying and appealing authentication failures); telehealth practice ethics; AI literacy (understanding how AI-assisted welfare systems make decisions); data privacy advocacy; and digital financial literacy facilitation. These competencies must be systematically integrated into India's social work education curricula through University Grants Commission (UGC) curriculum guidelines.

Addressing Account Dormancy: A Social Work Intervention Opportunity

A particular quantifiable social work intervention target are the 130.4 million dormant PMJDY accounts. The government's Financial Inclusion Saturation Campaign from July-Sep 2025 added 660K accounts, alone in the first month, and 473,000 KYC details were re-validated (PIB, 2025a). Social workers in the community are best equipped to push this process forward by: talking to dormant account holders in their case management work; coordinating documentation of the documents required for the renewal of accounts with the banks; arranging trainings in digital literacy focusing on mobile banking skills; counselling/banking correspondents to strengthen account opening and other last-mile services; reporting on issues to banks regarding barriers to account opening for policy advocacy purposes.

Policy Recommendations for Inclusive Digital Social Development

Based on the statistical findings of this analysis, the following evidence-based policy recommendations are proposed for advancing technology-enabled social work practice within India's Viksit Bharat 2047 framework:

(a) Digital grievance redressal cells with trained social workers with the authority to override the exclusion decisions made through automation and resolve failures in biometric matchmaking must be made mandatory in all the welfare schemes of DBT.

(b) Embed social work knowledge driven by technology into the national social work syllabus of the University Grants Commission including sections on navigating e-governance, digital privacy ethics, and understanding AI and how it applies to social work practice alongside a section on telehealth.

(c) Invest in a multilingual and low bandwidth digital welfare platform, which is able to function on feature phones with templates of multilingual e-Shram, 22 languages.

(d) Require disaggregated disclusion by caste, gender, disability etc for specific social work interventions at the sub-groups. Incorporate and implement mandatory Social Work Impact Assessments for all new welfare digitization projects, which will include social workers in the ethical review of algorithms systems of decision making.

Conclusion

This article has used an approach of quantitative secondary data analysis to explore the ground of technology enabled social work practice, digital inclusion and the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 keeping most recent data available on the subject. The evidence is clear: far more than academic achievement, there is a rather great amount of systemic achievement and structural challenge. Today, 958 million users are using the internet on active basis as per IAMAI and Kantar 2026, while 70% of the population has the internet, with 1.03 Billion users total (DataReportal, 2026), and the PMJDY has achieved enrolment of 561.6 million users with Rs.. DBT has transferred Rs. 2.68 lakh crore (PIB, 2025a) into deposits. Social protection coverage has increased from 19% to 64.3% in 940 million persons through UPI and eSanjeevani has provided telemedicine consultation services to 282 million people (ILO, 2025; Organiser, 2026; PIB, 2026, 2025b).

These successes are complemented by the fact that 579 million people are not active internet users; 130.4 million Jan Dhan Bank accounts are inactive; only 12% of rural Indians use artificial intelligence and 80% of users of shared devices in rural India are women who have limited autonomy of access.These successes complement the fact that 579 million people are not active internet users, 130.4 million Jan Dhan Bank accounts are inactive, and only 12% of rural Indians use AI, with 80% of the latter segment being women with low access autonomy. It's not a coincidence these are contradictions, but a systemic feature of a digitization process that has been focused on usefulness at the expense of equity.

The imperative for social work practice in India and for social work as a profession is: in a world where welfare delivery is at its core digital, technology-driven social work is not a specialty, it is indeed a profession at its very core. Continue on the journey that the Welfare Efficiency Index (0.32 in 2014 and 0.91 in 2023) shows is possible, when digital infrastructure meets welfare policy: put to use in a human centred social work practice, filling the remaining 9 paise in each welfare rupee at the intersection of technological systems and

farthest reaches of India's most marginalised communities (India Policy Hub, 2026). The realization of Viksit Bharat 2047 depends on this bridge.

Future studies should involve longitudinal design studies to follow up outcomes of digital inclusion and the access to digital welfare services as part of the social work intervention studies, rely on mixed methods studies combining the patterns revealed on this study with qualitative reportages from social workers and welfare service users involved with a digitised welfare system, as well as explore the equity effects of the integration of welfare systems with artificial intelligence, using disaggregated data by caste, gender and geographical location.

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GLOBAL AI GOVERNANCE: BUILDING ETHICAL AND RESPONSIBLE FUTURES

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Abstract
As artificial intelligence increasingly influences economies and societies around the world, the need for effective governance and ethical oversight has become more important than ever. AI governance aims to ensure that technological advancements are developed and used responsibly, addressing concerns related to privacy, safety, transparency, fairness, and accountability.
This presentation examines global efforts to establish responsible AI governance frameworks, highlighting key policies, ethical principles, and regulatory approaches shaping the future of AI. It also explores the challenges of balancing innovation with the protection of human rights, public trust, and societal well-being. By encouraging international cooperation and stakeholder collaboration, AI governance can support the development of trustworthy, inclusive, and human-cantered technologies that maximize benefits while reducing potential risks.
Keywords: AI governance, international cooperation, ethical principles, safety, societal values

AI GOVERNANCE, ETHICS, GLOBAL POLICY, RESPONSIBLE AI, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Definition of AI Governance

AI governance refers to the policies, regulations, ethical principles, and institutional frameworks that guide the development and use of artificial intelligence. Its purpose is to ensure that AI systems are safe, transparent, accountable, and beneficial to society while minimizing potential risks. For example, the European Union's AI Act classifies AI applications according to risk levels and imposes stricter requirements on high-risk systems such as healthcare technologies and autonomous vehicles.

Significance of AI Governance

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into sectors such as healthcare, education, finance, employment, and public services, effective governance is essential to protect human rights and promote fairness. Without proper oversight, AI systems can produce biased or discriminatory outcomes. For instance, an AI recruitment tool developed by Amazon was found to Favor male applicants due to biased training data and was eventually withdrawn.

Similarly, concerns have been raised about predictive policing systems that may reinforce existing social biases. These examples highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and ethical safeguards in AI development and deployment.

Scope of the Discussion

This paper explores major developments in global AI governance, including international initiatives, regulatory frameworks, and ethical considerations. It also examines key challenges and real-world examples to understand how responsible governance can encourage innovation while protecting societal values and public interests.

GLOBAL INITIATIVES IN AI GOVERNANCE

India's National AI Strategy

India's approach to artificial intelligence focuses on using technology as a catalyst for inclusive growth, economic development, and social welfare. Through its national AI initiatives, the country seeks to harness AI solutions in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, education, smart mobility, and public services. A key objective is to ensure that AI technologies are developed and implemented in a manner that is ethical, transparent, and beneficial to all sections of society.

One notable example emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when AI-powered digital platforms and chatbots were deployed to provide citizens with reliable information, symptom assessment services, and access to telemedicine support. These tools proved especially valuable in rural and remote regions where healthcare resources and medical personnel were limited. Government-supported AI applications enabled millions of people to obtain timely guidance, demonstrating how technology can improve access to essential healthcare services.

In the agricultural sector, AI is increasingly being used to support farmers through data-driven decision-making. Advanced systems analyze satellite imagery, weather patterns, and soil conditions to identify crop diseases, predict pest infestations, and recommend appropriate interventions. For example, AI-based platforms have helped farmers detect crop stress at an early stage, reducing crop losses and minimizing excessive pesticide use. Such applications contribute to sustainable agricultural practices while enhancing productivity and farm incomes.

India has also emphasized the importance of responsible AI through policy recommendations that encourage fairness, accountability, and transparency. In education, AI-driven learning platforms provide personalized instruction tailored to students' needs, helping improve learning outcomes while promoting equitable access to educational resources.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR AI GOVERNANCE

European Union (EU)

The European Union is a leading force in AI regulation through initiatives such as the EU Artificial Intelligence Act. It follows a risk-based approach, placing stricter controls on high-risk AI systems. For example, biometric identification technologies used at airports and border crossings must meet strong requirements related to privacy, transparency, and accountability. Similarly, AI systems used in healthcare must undergo thorough testing to ensure safety and reliability before deployment.

United States

In the United States, agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) focus on fairness, transparency, and consumer protection in AI applications. Companies are encouraged to assess AI systems for bias and explain automated decisions. For instance, financial institutions use AI to detect fraud and strengthen cybersecurity, while AI-based credit scoring systems are monitored to ensure fair and non-discriminatory lending practices.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD AI Principles provide global guidance for the responsible use of AI, emphasizing human-cantered values, transparency, accountability, and sustainability. Many countries apply these principles when using AI in public services such as welfare programs and benefit distribution. The OECD also promotes international cooperation, encouraging countries to share best practices and develop common standards for ethical and trustworthy AI governance.

CORE DIMENSIONS OF AI GOVERNANCE

Core Aspects of AI Governance

1. Policy Development

Governments and organizations create policies to promote the ethical and responsible use of AI. These policies focus on transparency, fairness, privacy, and accountability. For example, Singapore's Model AI Governance Framework helps organizations assess risks and reduce bias, while Canada requires impact assessments before using AI in public services.

2. Regulatory and Legal Frameworks

Laws and regulations establish standards for the safe use of AI and protect individual rights. A key example is the European Union's GDPR, which requires organizations to handle personal data transparently and securely. Similar data protection measures are being adopted in countries such as India and Brazil.

3. Accountability and Transparency

AI systems should be explainable, auditable, and subject to oversight. In sectors such as healthcare and the justice system, AI-generated recommendations must be supported by clear explanations so that experts can review and validate decisions.

4. Ethical Safeguards and Bias Mitigation

AI systems can unintentionally produce biased outcomes if trained on unfair data. To address this, organizations use fairness assessments and bias-detection tools. For example, developers of facial recognition systems continuously test and improve their models to ensure accuracy across diverse populations.

5. Human-Cantered Design

AI should assist human decision-making rather than replace it. Human oversight remains essential in areas such as recruitment and healthcare, where AI can support analysis and

recommendations, but final decisions are made by qualified professionals to ensure fairness and ethical responsibility.

THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI as a Driver of Transformation

Artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the most influential technologies of the twenty-first century. Its ability to analyze large volumes of data, recognize patterns, and support decision-making is transforming industries and creating new possibilities for economic and social development.

Healthcare

AI is revolutionizing healthcare by improving diagnosis, treatment planning, and patient care. Advanced systems can analyze medical records, laboratory reports, and imaging data to support clinical decisions.

For example, IBM Watson Oncology has been used to assist oncologists in identifying treatment options based on extensive medical research and patient-specific information. AI-powered imaging tools can also detect diseases such as breast cancer, lung cancer, and diabetic retinopathy at early stages, enabling faster intervention and improved health outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AI technologies were employed to track infection patterns, support vaccine research, and provide virtual healthcare assistance to patients in remote areas.

Education

In education, AI enables personalized learning experiences by adapting instructional content to individual student needs and learning styles. Platforms such as Duolingo use AI algorithms to tailor language lessons based on learner progress, while intelligent tutoring systems provide customized feedback and recommendations. AI-based educational tools can identify learning gaps and suggest targeted activities, helping students improve their understanding and academic performance.

Furthermore, AI-powered accessibility features, including speech recognition and text-to-speech applications, support learners with disabilities and promote inclusive education.

Finance

The financial sector has adopted AI to improve efficiency, risk assessment, fraud detection, and customer service. AI-based credit evaluation systems analyze a wide range of data to assess loan eligibility, expanding financial access for individuals with limited traditional credit histories. Financial institutions also employ machine learning algorithms to detect unusual transactions and prevent fraudulent activities in real time.

For example, banks use AI-powered chatbots to handle customer inquiries, while investment firms apply predictive analytics to support portfolio management and market forecasting.

Transportation

Artificial intelligence is transforming transportation through the development of autonomous vehicles, intelligent traffic management systems, and logistics optimization. Companies such as Tesla and Waymo are advancing self-driving vehicle technologies that use sensors,

cameras, and machine learning models to navigate roads and respond to changing traffic conditions. These innovations have the potential to reduce accidents caused by human error and improve road safety.

AI is also being used in public transportation systems to optimize routes, reduce congestion, and improve fuel efficiency. In logistics, AI-driven platforms help companies plan deliveries more effectively, lowering costs and enhancing operational performance.

TYPES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Understanding the various categories of Artificial Intelligence is essential for appreciating both its current applications and its future possibilities. AI systems are generally classified into three broad categories based on their capabilities: Narrow AI, General AI, and Superintelligent AI.

1. Narrow AI (Weak AI)

Narrow AI refers to systems designed to perform specific tasks efficiently within a limited domain. These systems can excel at particular functions but lack broader reasoning abilities, self-awareness, or human-like understanding. Most AI technologies used today fall into this category.

Examples of Narrow AI include:

- **Virtual Assistants:** Applications such as Siri, Google Assistant, Alexa, and Samsung Bixby can understand voice commands, answer questions, schedule appointments, and control smart devices.
- **Recommendation Systems:** Platforms like Netflix, YouTube, Spotify, and Amazon use AI algorithms to analyze user preferences and recommend movies, music, videos, or products.
- **Healthcare Applications:** AI systems can detect diseases from medical images, assist in diagnosis, and monitor patient health. For example, AI-based tools are used to identify signs of cancer or diabetic retinopathy from medical scans.
- **Autonomous Driving Systems:** Tesla's Autopilot and similar technologies assist drivers by maintaining lane position, controlling speed, and avoiding obstacles, although human supervision remains necessary.
- **Language Translation:** Applications such as Google Translate use AI to provide real-time translations across multiple languages.

2. General AI (Strong AI)

General AI refers to a theoretical form of artificial intelligence that can learn, reason, and perform a wide range of tasks with human-like intelligence. Unlike Narrow AI, which is designed for specific functions, General AI would be capable of adapting knowledge across different situations and domains.

Currently, General AI does not exist and remains a subject of research and speculation. If developed, it could independently solve new problems, learn from experience, and make complex decisions. Examples often portrayed in fiction include the intelligent operating system in *Her* and the human-like robots in *Ex Machina*. While General AI could bring major advancements in science, healthcare, and education, it also raises important ethical, safety, and governance concerns.

3. Superintelligent AI

Superintelligent AI is a hypothetical form of intelligence that would exceed human capabilities in areas such as reasoning, creativity, learning, and problem-solving. Such systems could potentially address complex global challenges, accelerate scientific discoveries, and develop innovative technologies beyond human imagination.

However, superintelligent AI also raises serious concerns regarding control, accountability, and alignment with human values. If its goals conflicted with human interests, the consequences could be difficult to manage. Popular examples from science fiction include the intelligent machines in *The Terminator* series and the advanced AI systems portrayed in *The Matrix*. Although purely theoretical at present, the concept has stimulated important discussions on AI safety and long-term governance.

SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERSTANDING AI TYPES

The impact of AI is already visible across healthcare, finance, education, agriculture, transportation, and public administration. While Narrow AI currently dominates practical applications, ongoing advancements continue to push the boundaries of machine intelligence. Understanding the distinctions among Narrow AI, General AI, and Superintelligent AI helps policymakers, researchers, and society prepare for future developments while ensuring that innovation remains aligned with human values and social well-being.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AI GOVERNANCE

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly influential across societies and economies, governments and international organizations must adopt forward-looking governance strategies that encourage innovation while protecting public interests.

1. Global Coordination and Harmonization

Since AI technologies operate across national borders, international cooperation is essential for establishing consistent standards and reducing regulatory fragmentation.

For example:

- The European Union Artificial Intelligence Act seeks to establish common rules for AI development and deployment across member states.
- The OECD AI Principles provide internationally recognized guidelines promoting trustworthy, transparent, and human-cantered AI.
- The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence encourages countries to adopt shared ethical standards.

International coordination can prevent situations where organizations relocate AI activities to jurisdictions with weaker regulations, thereby maintaining high global standards of accountability and safety.

2. Adaptive and Flexible Regulatory Approaches

Given the rapid pace of technological advancement, regulatory systems must be capable of evolving alongside emerging AI applications.

A notable example is Singapore's Model AI Governance Framework, which provides practical guidance while allowing organizations flexibility in implementation. This approach supports innovation without imposing overly rigid requirements. Similarly, regulations governing autonomous vehicles, drone technologies, and generative AI systems must be regularly updated to address new technical capabilities and emerging risks.

3. Transparency and Explainability

Trustworthy AI requires transparency regarding how decisions are made, especially in areas where outcomes significantly affect individuals. Examples include:

- Healthcare systems that explain the factors contributing to a medical diagnosis.
- Banking institutions that provide understandable reasons for loan approval or rejection.
- Recruitment platforms that clarify how candidate evaluations are conducted.

For instance, explainable AI tools in medical imaging allow healthcare professionals to identify the specific features that influenced diagnostic recommendations, thereby supporting informed clinical decision-making.

4. Capacity Building and AI Literacy

Developing AI expertise among citizens, professionals, and policymakers is crucial for ensuring responsible adoption and governance. Examples include:

- AI4ALL in the United States, which promotes AI education among under-represented groups.
- India's Atal Innovation Mission, which encourages innovation and technology-based learning among students and young entrepreneurs.
- University-led AI training programs that equip future professionals with technical and ethical competencies.

Greater public awareness helps reduce misinformation, supports informed decision-making, and strengthens societal resilience against misuse of AI technologies.

5. Inclusive and Multi-Stakeholder Governance

Effective AI governance requires participation from governments, industry, academia, civil society organizations, and affected communities. The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) provides an example of collaborative governance by bringing together diverse stakeholders to address challenges related to responsible AI development.

Examples of collaborative initiatives include:

- AI applications for climate monitoring and environmental sustainability.
- Ethical guidelines for healthcare AI developed jointly by medical professionals and technology experts.
- Community consultations regarding the use of facial recognition technologies in public spaces.

Such inclusive approaches ensure that AI policies reflect diverse perspectives and promote equitable outcomes.

CASE STUDIES IN AI GOVERNANCE

India

India's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates both the opportunities and challenges associated with AI governance. The Aarogya Setu application used AI-supported analytics and digital tools to assist with contact tracing and public health monitoring. While the platform contributed to pandemic management, concerns emerged regarding data privacy, surveillance, and information security. These concerns prompted discussions about stronger data protection measures and transparent governance mechanisms.

Another example is the use of AI in agriculture, where predictive analytics assist farmers in crop management while raising questions about data ownership and digital inclusion.

European Union

The European Union has adopted one of the world's most comprehensive approaches to AI regulation. A significant focus has been placed on regulating bio-metric surveillance technologies and facial recognition systems. Policymakers have expressed concerns regarding privacy, civil liberties, and potential misuse by public authorities.

For example, debates surrounding facial recognition technology in public spaces have led several European jurisdictions to impose restrictions or require strict oversight before deployment. The EU's broader regulatory framework emphasizes transparency, risk assessment, human oversight, and protection of fundamental rights.

United States

The United States has primarily focused on sector-specific regulation and consumer protection. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has taken action against organizations that deploy AI systems in ways that may mislead consumers or result in discriminatory outcomes. Examples include:

- AI-driven credit scoring systems that must provide fair and transparent evaluations.
- Consumer platforms that use recommendation algorithms and targeted advertising.
- Employment-related AI tools that are increasingly scrutinized for potential bias**.**

These efforts aim to ensure accountability while supporting technological innovation.

China

China has adopted a more centralized approach to AI governance, combining rapid technological advancement with extensive regulatory oversight. Examples include:

- Licensing requirements for generative AI services.
- Regulations governing recommendation algorithms used by online platforms.
- Oversight of facial recognition and surveillance technologies.

China has also invested heavily in AI applications for smart cities, healthcare, and transportation while maintaining strong governmental control over data and digital infrastructure.

Japan

Japan has focused on developing human-cantered and socially beneficial AI applications, particularly in response to demographic challenges such as an aging population. Examples include:

- AI-powered eldercare robots that assist older adults with daily activities.
- Smart monitoring systems that support independent living while respecting privacy.
- Healthcare technologies that help caregivers monitor patient well-being.

Japan's approach emphasizes ethical innovation, human dignity, and the responsible integration of AI into society.

ETHICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF AI GOVERNANCE

The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence has created significant opportunities for innovation and development. At the same time, it has raised important ethical, social, and legal questions regarding privacy, human rights, security, fairness, and sustainability. Effective AI governance must address these concerns to ensure that technological progress benefits society while minimizing potential harms.

Human Rights and Privacy

One of the most significant concerns associated with AI is its impact on privacy and fundamental human rights. AI-powered technologies can collect, analyze, and process vast amounts of personal data, creating risks related to surveillance, discrimination, and misuse of information.

For example, facial recognition systems deployed in public spaces can identify individuals in real time, raising concerns about unauthorized monitoring and loss of anonymity. In several countries, civil rights organizations have questioned the widespread use of such technologies by law enforcement agencies due to potential infringements on privacy and freedom of expression.

Another example involves social media platforms that use AI algorithms to analyze user behaviour and preferences. While these systems help personalize content and improve user experience, they also raise concerns about data collection, consent, and the possibility of manipulating public opinion. These issues highlight the need for strong data protection laws, transparent practices, and safeguards that uphold individual rights.

Autonomous Weapons and Global Security

The integration of AI into military systems has generated intense ethical debate. AI-enabled autonomous weapons can identify, select, and engage targets with limited or no direct human intervention. Such capabilities raise fundamental questions regarding accountability,

responsibility, and the ethical implications of delegating life-and-death decisions to machines. For instance, several countries are investing in autonomous drones and advanced defense technologies that use AI for navigation, surveillance, and target recognition. While these technologies may improve military efficiency, concerns remain about accidental escalation, system failures, and unintended civilian casualties. International organizations and policymakers have therefore called for stronger global regulations to ensure meaningful human control over the use of lethal autonomous systems. Discussions within the United Nations and other international forums continue to explore appropriate governance mechanisms for emerging military AI technologies.

Environmental Sustainability

Artificial intelligence can also contribute significantly to environmental protection and sustainable development. By analysing large datasets and optimizing resource utilization, AI offers innovative solutions to many environmental challenges. For example, AI systems are increasingly used to:

- Monitor air and water quality.
- Predict extreme weather events and natural disasters.
- Optimize renewable energy generation.
- Improve agricultural efficiency and resource management.

A well-known example is the use of AI by technology companies to improve energy efficiency in data centres. Machine learning algorithms can optimize cooling systems, reducing electricity consumption and lowering carbon emissions.

Similarly, AI-supported satellite monitoring helps track de-forestation, wildlife habitats, and environmental degradation, enabling governments and conservation organizations to make more informed decisions. These applications demonstrate how AI can support global sustainability goals when deployed responsibly**.**

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES GUIDING AI GOVERNANCE

The responsible development and deployment of AI should be guided by a set of widely accepted ethical principles that promote trust, fairness, and accountability.

Fairness

AI systems should avoid discrimination and ensure equitable treatment of all individuals and groups. For example, recruitment algorithms and credit-scoring systems should be regularly tested to prevent biases related to gender, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic background.

Transparency

Users should have access to understandable information about how AI systems operate and how decisions are reached. For instance, financial institutions using AI for loan approvals should provide clear explanations regarding the factors influencing their decisions.

Accountability

Organizations developing and deploying AI should be responsible for the outcomes of their systems. Mechanisms such as independent audits, risk assessments, and regulatory oversight help ensure accountability.

Privacy and Data Protection

AI systems must respect personal privacy and ensure that data are collected, stored, and used securely. Compliance with data protection regulations and informed consent procedures is essential for maintaining public trust. Various research organizations, civil society groups, and international institutions advocate these principles to ensure that AI contributes to social justice, inclusivity, and human well-being.

India's Initiatives and Challenges

India has emerged as an important participant in the global AI landscape, promoting the use of artificial intelligence for social development, economic growth, and public service delivery. National initiatives emphasize responsible innovation while encouraging AI applications in healthcare, agriculture, education, and governance. For example:

- AI-based healthcare platforms have supported disease surveillance and telemedicine services.
- Agricultural AI tools help farmers monitor crop conditions, predict weather patterns, and improve productivity.
- Educational technologies provide personalized learning experiences for students across diverse regions.

Despite these advances, India faces several challenges, including:

- Limited AI infrastructure in rural and underserved areas.
- Shortages of specialized technical expertise.
- Concerns regarding data privacy and cybersecurity.
- The need for stronger regulatory and ethical frameworks.

The experience of deploying digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the benefits of AI-driven solutions and the importance of ensuring transparency, privacy protection, and public trust. Addressing these challenges requires continued investment in capacity building, research, and inclusive policymaking.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, policymakers must adopt forward-looking strategies that balance innovation with ethical responsibility.

Global Cooperation and Harmonized Standards

Artificial intelligence is a global technology that transcends national boundaries. Consequently, international cooperation is necessary to establish shared principles and regulatory standards.

Examples include:

- The OECD Principles on Artificial Intelligence.
- UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

- The European Union's AI regulatory framework.

Developing common standards can reduce regulatory inconsistencies, facilitate international collaboration, and ensure that AI systems operate according to universally accepted ethical norms.

Adaptive and Future-Oriented Regulation

Given the speed at which AI technologies evolve, governance frameworks must remain flexible and responsive. Rather than relying solely on rigid regulations, governments can adopt adaptive approaches that allow policies to evolve alongside technological developments. For example, regulatory sandboxes enable organizations to test innovative AI applications under controlled conditions while regulators assess potential risks and benefits. This approach encourages innovation while maintaining appropriate safeguards and oversight.

Enhancing Transparency and Explainability

Transparency is essential for building public confidence in AI systems. Individuals affected by automated decisions should be able to understand how and why those decisions were made. Examples include:

- AI-assisted medical diagnoses that provide explanations supporting clinical recommendations.
- Automated loan approval systems that clarify evaluation criteria.
- AI-based recruitment tools that explain candidate selection processes.

Explainable AI helps users identify errors, detect biases, and hold organizations accountable for automated decisions.

Strengthening Capacity and AI Literacy

Building human capacity is critical for ensuring that societies can effectively manage the opportunities and challenges associated with AI. Governments, universities, and private organizations should invest in:

- AI education and training programs.
- Digital literacy initiatives.
- Professional development opportunities for policymakers and regulators.
- Public awareness campaigns on ethical AI use.

For example, educational programs focused on AI ethics and governance can help future leaders make informed decisions regarding technology policy and regulation**.**

Collaborative and Inclusive Governance

AI governance is most effective when it incorporates perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, industry, academia, civil society organizations, and local communities. A multi-stakeholder approach offers several advantages:

- Broader representation of social interests.
- Greater transparency in policymaking.
- Improved legitimacy and public acceptance.
- More comprehensive identification of risks and opportunities.

Organizations such as the World Economic Forum and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) promote collaborative models that encourage dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Such approaches help ensure that AI policies remain equitable, inclusive, and responsive to societal needs.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is transforming societies by creating new opportunities in healthcare, education, agriculture, finance, governance, and environmental sustainability. While AI has the potential to improve efficiency, innovation, and decision-making, it also raises important concerns related to privacy, fairness, accountability, security, and human rights.

To ensure that AI benefits society, effective governance frameworks are essential. Governments, industry, researchers, and civil society must work together to promote transparency, ethical standards, human oversight, and data protection. International cooperation is equally important for developing shared principles and addressing global challenges associated with AI.

As AI continues to evolve, its development should be guided by the values of fairness, inclusivity, sustainability, and respect for human dignity. Through responsible governance, continuous capacity building, and collaborative efforts, AI can become a powerful tool for social progress, economic development, adnd the well-being of present and future generations.

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BEYOND THE FEAR OF REPLACEMENT: WHY HUMAN–AI COEXISTENCE IS THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK

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Introduction

Every technological revolution has raised the same question- Will machines eventually replace human beings? The rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has brought that question into social work as well. Yet perhaps the profession is asking the wrong question. The real issue is not whether AI will replace social workers, but whether social workers are prepared to learn how to work alongside AI while preserving the values that define the profession. The discussion that follows argues that the future of social work lies not in resisting artificial intelligence but in learning to integrate it responsibly while safeguarding the empathy, ethical judgment, and human relationships that remain central to professional practice.

Looking Beyond the Fear of Replacement

Discussions about Artificial Intelligence (AI) often begin with concerns about employment. Media reports often predict that intelligent machines will replace professionals across different sectors, creating uncertainty about the future of work. While technology will undoubtedly transform many job roles, equating automation with replacement oversimplifies the reality of social work. A considerable part of a social worker's day is devoted to necessary administrative responsibilities. Case documentation, maintaining records, preparing reports, reviewing files, coordinating referrals, and compiling programme data are all essential for accountability and continuity of care. Yet these responsibilities often reduce the time available for direct engagement with clients. Here, AI offers genuine possibilities. Intelligent systems can organise documents, summarise lengthy records, retrieve information within seconds, and assist in preparing routine reports. Such support has the potential to reduce repetitive administrative work and allow practitioners to spend more time doing what drew many of them to the profession in the first place, i.e. working directly with people. The potential becomes clearer in a busy tertiary care hospital where a psychiatric social worker may manage dozens of patients and families every day. Instead of spending hours manually compiling case history summaries or searching through previous records, an AI-assisted system could organise relevant information within minutes. The time saved could then be devoted to counselling caregivers, coordinating rehabilitation plans, or supporting families facing psychosocial difficulties. In this scenario, technology does not replace the social worker. It simply removes some of the administrative burden so that human expertise can be applied where it matters most.

Making Better Use of Information

Another promising area is evidence-based practice. Social welfare organizations generate enormous quantities of information through assessments, programme reports, demographic surveys, and service records. Analysing these data manually can be difficult, especially where

there are limited resources. AI can process such information quickly and identify patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed. It may reveal trends related to school dropouts, substance use, domestic violence, or protection concerns. These insights can help organizations identify vulnerable populations earlier and plan preventive interventions before situations deteriorate. Similarly, a welfare officer responsible for hundreds of children across multiple communities could use an AI-supported system that flags repeated school absences, missed follow-up visits, or recurring reports from different agencies indicating that a child may require urgent attention. Such information would help practitioners prioritise visits and allocate limited resources more effectively.

Even then, technology provides only part of the picture.

When a social worker visits the child's home, they may notice protective factors that no database records such as a supportive grandparent, a caring teacher, or a resilient sibling who plays a stabilising role within the family. They may also recognise risks that no algorithm could detect, such as fear reflected in body language or tension between family members that becomes apparent only through direct observation.

The data can guide attention, but understanding remains a profoundly human process.

AI and the Indian Social Work Landscape

The discussion around AI is particularly relevant in India, where social workers often operate in contexts characterised by high caseloads, limited resources, and considerable social diversity. Delivering services across different languages, cultures, and geographical settings requires flexibility and innovation. Government departments and voluntary organisations have increasingly adopted digital platforms for beneficiary registration, welfare administration, grievance redressal, and service coordination. AI may further strengthen these systems by supporting multilingual communication, organising records, processing applications, and analysing programme data. For instance, an AI-enabled multilingual interface could help an elderly beneficiary understand the documentation required to access a social security scheme in their preferred language. Such tools can reduce barriers to information and improve administrative efficiency.

India's diversity itself demonstrates why technology must remain adaptable to human realities. A solution that works effectively in a metropolitan hospital may not be equally useful in a remote tribal village or an urban informal settlement where digital access remains limited.

Human Qualities That AI Cannot Replicate

For all its computational power, AI has clear limitations when applied to social work. The profession is not merely about solving problems or processing information. It is about understanding people in the context of their relationships, cultures, communities, and lived experiences. Such understanding is shaped by empathy, professional experience, and sensitivity to context rather than by data alone. Many practitioners can recall moments when the most significant intervention involved saying very little. Sitting quietly beside a grieving

parent after the loss of a child, allowing an adolescent enough time to disclose abuse, or accompanying an older adult through loneliness without rushing to offer solutions are experiences that rely on presence rather than technology. AI can generate responses based on language patterns, but it cannot genuinely share another person's emotional world. This distinction is fundamental. Social work is not only about delivering services. It is about standing with people during some of the most difficult periods of their lives.

Ethical Reasoning Cannot Be Delegated to Algorithms

The ethical challenges encountered in social work rarely have straightforward answers. Professionals routinely make decisions involving confidentiality, informed consent, self-determination, child protection, safeguarding, and competing rights. A decision that appears appropriate in one situation may not be suitable in another because every situation is unique. Consider an adolescent who confides thoughts of self-harm but asks the social worker not to inform their parents. The practitioner must carefully weigh confidentiality against the duty to protect life and safety. The final decision involves ethical reasoning, legal knowledge, assessment of risk, and professional accountability.

AI can retrieve relevant policies or summarise previous cases with similar characteristics. It may even suggest possible courses of action based on available information. What it cannot do is assume responsibility for the moral consequences of those decisions. For this reason, AI should remain an aid to professional judgment rather than a substitute for it.

Recognising the Risks of AI Integration

Alongside its potential benefits, AI introduces challenges that social work cannot afford to ignore.

One of the most widely discussed concerns is algorithmic bias. AI is trained using existing datasets, and those datasets may reflect social inequalities that already exist within society. If historical information contains biases related to poverty, caste, gender, disability, ethnicity, or geography, automated recommendations may unintentionally reproduce those inequities. For a profession committed to social justice, this possibility requires serious reflection. Human oversight is essential to ensure that technology does not reinforce discrimination against the very populations social workers seek to empower.

Privacy and confidentiality present another challenge. Social workers are entrusted with deeply personal information about health, trauma, finances, family relationships, and legal circumstances. As organisations adopt AI-enabled documentation and data management systems, protecting this information becomes even more important. Confidentiality is more than a legal obligation. It is the foundation of trust. Clients who fear misuse of their personal information may hesitate to disclose experiences of violence, abuse, addiction, or mental illness. Therefore, any technological innovation must be accompanied by strong safeguards for data security and transparent governance.

The digital divide also deserves attention, particularly within the Indian context. While digital services have expanded considerably, access remains uneven. Older adults, people living in

remote rural areas, economically disadvantaged families, and individuals with limited literacy may struggle to engage with technology-based systems. During field visits, practitioners often encounter families who own a mobile phone but lack stable internet connectivity or confidence in using online platforms. In such circumstances, replacing face-to-face services with AI-enabled systems could unintentionally increase exclusion instead of improving access.

Finally, there is the risk of overreliance on automated recommendations. A computer-generated risk score should never replace careful assessment by a trained professional. Social workers must continue to question, verify, and interpret technological outputs rather than accepting them uncritically. Technology should support critical thinking, not diminish it.

Partnership Between Human Expertise and AI

Perhaps the most constructive way to approach AI is to recognise that humans and machines possess different strengths. AI excels at processing large amounts of information, identifying trends, automating repetitive tasks, and supporting evidence-based planning. Social workers bring something entirely different to the partnership: empathy, ethical reflection, cultural understanding, advocacy, creativity, and the ability to build trusting relationships. These strengths are complementary rather than competing. Consider a community mental health programme responsible for supporting hundreds of service users. AI might assist by organising follow-up schedules, highlighting individuals who have missed appointments repeatedly, summarising previous interventions, or identifying patterns across programme data. The social worker, however, still meets the client, explores the reasons behind disengagement, understands family circumstances, assesses motivation for treatment, collaborates with multidisciplinary teams, and develops an intervention plan that respects the individual's preferences and dignity. In other words, technology can help practitioners work more efficiently, but meaningful change continues to depend on human engagement. The same principle applies across fields of practice, whether in hospitals, schools, correctional settings, child welfare agencies, rehabilitation centres, or community organisations. AI can enhance professional capacity, but it cannot replace the relationships through which social work achieves its greatest impact. The future of social work is not a choice between humans and AI. It is a future in which AI augments professional practice while social workers continue to provide the empathy, ethical judgment, cultural competence, and human connection that no technology can replace.

Conclusion

My own experience in psychiatric social work has reinforced my belief that meaningful change often begins with something remarkably simple a trusting relationship. Clients rarely remember every assessment tool or procedural step, but they remember whether someone listened, respected their dignity, and remained present during moments of uncertainty.

AI may analyse thousands of case records within seconds, but it cannot recognise the courage it takes for a survivor to speak for the first time, sit quietly beside a grieving family, or restore hope to someone who believes they have been forgotten. The future of social work, therefore, lies not in choosing between people and technology but in ensuring that technology

strengthens the compassion, ethical judgment, and human relationships that have always been at the heart of the profession. If approached with wisdom and responsibility, AI will not diminish the profession of social work; instead, it will enable social workers to devote even greater attention to what has always mattered most people.

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STUDENT SUPPORT IN A DIGITAL AGE: REFLECTIONS FROM A COLLEGE COUNSELLOR

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Introduction

The scenario of higher education has faced significant transformation during the past decade. Mainly this can be due to the rapid technological advancements and the changes in the needs of the students. As a counsellor working in a college with more than six years' experience, I have seen a substantial change from the traditional face-to-face sessions with the heavy burden of stigma carried by the students in the counselling room to the hybrid models of student support using digital interventions and both in-person. This change in the situation has not only extended the scope of counselling services but has also offered new prospects, challenges, and ethical dilemmas also. The stigma connected with attending counselling services also has lessened in this technological era.

By the emergence of digital technology, the way students link, communicate, seek aid and support, obtain information, and thrive in their personal and academic life has changed a lot. Counselling professionals must also familiarize themselves with changes in student requirements and attachment in this digital era and adapt their practices accordingly.The core values required for counselling, like empathy, confidentiality, and genuineness, should be upheld by the counsellors at this time for student-oriented support.

This article tries to reflect some of the key lessons learned from the emerging role of counselling centres in higher education. Along with these findings, the study shows how combined student support programmes can assist the needs and requirements of today's student community.

The evolving student population

The 1990s marked the early stages of a digital shift that reshaped higher education in India (Mhlanga, 2024). Following the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, there was a growing interest in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its place in academic life (Erumban & Das, 2015).

The present-day youngsters have been entirely dependent on the digital technology. Smartphones, social media, and online learning platforms have become a vital part of their daily routine. These mediums influence them in their communication, learning, building and maintaining relationships and seeking care and support. Even though the technology has advanced a lot, at the same time it introduced many stress factors to the lives of the students because of the influence of these mediums. Some of them are distraction and attention issues,

information overload, cyberbullying, overdependence on screens, lack of sleep hygiene, and social isolation, to name a few.

Compared to the previous generations, our students are more conscious and stressed about their mental health. The tolerance level in handling and facing stressful situations of our students is getting lessened day by day. First, they depend on online resources to seek information about anxiety, stress, relationship issues, depression, and emotional wellbeing. In addition to these, they consult their stressful situations with their peers before considering professional support. AI tools often misguide their concerns, and this adds another stressful episode. Our society still considers support for mental health a taboo, and a lot of stigma is attached to it. Despite the growing awareness classes and motivational talks about the need for taking assistance from professionals in case of mental health conflicts, the stigma attached to counselling still continues among the students. These hesitations can disturb help-seeking, even when professional intervention is beneficial. At this point the dependence on digital platforms works as an early bridge that boosts students to seek professional help.

Student support beyond the counselling room

In colleges, the counselling service is usually face-to-face. The student takes an appointment with the counsellor and walks in. Along with these, there are cases referred by the teachers, management, and, of course, their parents. This style, while still appreciated, no longer adequately meets the diverse needs and demands of modern student populations in higher educational institutions.

The emergence of integrated student care associates traditional face to face counselling with digital communication and intervention strategies. With my experience, students often make their first contact through messaging services. These channels decrease inhibitions to help-seeking and produce prospects for early intervention.

The integrated student care has proven particularly useful for:

- Academic learning and mentoring activities
- Crisis intervention and Emotional support
- Wellness initiatives
- Follow-up sessions
- Mental Health Education programs and awareness sessions for large student groups.

Digital tools complement and enhance existing face-to-face counselling support systems.

Expanding student support in the digital age

Advancement in Mental Health Awareness

AI tools, webinars, digital educational materials and social media have largely enhanced consciousness regarding mental health and wellbeing and physical fitness among the youth. Nowadays students are keener to discuss emotional challenges and explore opportunities to get support than ever before. Many students now identify that looking for mental health support during times of crisis is a significant footstep toward construction a brighter future.

Increased Accessibility

Many students who hesitate to approach a counsellor in person find it easier to seek support through digital communication platforms. Students who are worried about stigma, are naturally introverted, experience peer pressure, or struggle with social anxiety often feel more comfortable taking the first step through online channels. These platforms offer a fewer hostile way to reach out, helping students access support when they may otherwise avoid seeking help.

Early Detection of Student Apprehensions

Through Counselling services, faculty mentoring programmes, digital wellness surveys, and online feedback systems will help students identify challenges at an early stage. Through wellness surveys and assessments, student feedback, and regular interactions with teacher mentors during mentoring process, concerns related to students' emotional and mental wellbeing can be recognized sooner. This enables mentors to refer students to counsellors when needed, allowing timely support and intervention before difficulties become more serious.

Wider accessibility of Wellness Programs

In higher education sector the student to counsellor ratio is usually very high. Through online platforms, webinars, virtual workshops and digital wellness programs, technology helps counsellors meet and support large number of students at the same time. So these valuable platforms have become a great blessing for students as well as counsellors for promoting mental health awareness and student wellbeing in this technologically advanced state. These approaches make support more accessible and permit counsellors to interact with students in ways that are both timely and effective.

Ethical challenges in digital and face-to-face counseling

Online counselling has different security concerns from face-to-face counselling since it involves communication via computers or mobile devices. While technology proposes numerous benefits it also raises important some ethical and legal issues more challenging

Confidentiality

While counselling, it is the primary responsibility of the counsellor to protect the student information. Online communication demands more cautious consideration to data security, case record management, and privacy protection.

Professional Boundaries

Without clear boundaries, digital communication can distort messages and may create professional challenges in the counselling field. These distorted communications may end up in misunderstandings and stress. So, the counsellors should try to create well-defined, clear boundaries that foster trust and respect as well as clarity in their communications.

By defining clear limits, respecting and understanding each other’s needs, and indicating clearly when boundaries are crossed, counsellors can promote both mental health and the quality of your relationships with their students in the digital era.

Informed Consent
Students must know how their information will be stored, shared, and used while participating in digital counselling sessions,

Equity and Access
Not all students may possess the same level of digital access or literacy. The institution should also take these vulnerable groups into account when pursuing technological innovations.

Crisis Management and Duty to Report
In a face-to-face counselling setting, counsellors have many resources at their disposal to intervene in crisis and emergency situations. Unfortunately, this isn't the case with digital counselling sessions, which can create challenges for the counsellors. Often, counselling professionals may also have a harder time defining when they have a responsibility to report certain issues, especially since evaluating a person's mental state through a digital therapy session can be challenging.

The effect of social media on student wellbeing
College students face many challenges like academic pressure, social relationships, and personal issues. The extensive dependence on social media can significantly affect their mental health. Social media platforms provide a platform for college students to connect with family, friends, and peers. Social media provides provisions for college students to stay informed about various current events, mental health issues, self-care techniques, and resources for seeking help. For college student's social media platforms can serve as creative outlets to express themselves through art, music, writing, or video. At the same time, it contributes to many concerns frequently encountered in counselling practice.

Common issues include:
- Anxiety related to social comparison.
- Comparison
- Fear of missing out (FOMO).
- Cyberbullying and online harassment.
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Sleep disturbances caused by excessive screen time.
- Addiction and Time Management
- Filtered Reality

Counsellors play a great role in supporting students develop healthy digital habits and awareness of online activities.

Transformation in counselling practice
The future of counselling is not only dependent on technologies but also relies on the ways that sincerely help and assist students. No doubt technology can assist counsellors in reaching out and supporting students effectively and responsibly by using proper ethical practices.

Some innovative approaches include:

- Digital counselling models that combine online and face to face sessions.
- Digital wellness initiatives promoting physical, emotional, and academic wellbeing.
- Online psychoeducational workshops and awareness programs.
- Digital and face to face mentoring systems that strengthen student engagement in academics
- AI Tools for Early Support and Guidance

Technology can never replace the human relationship between the client and the counsellor. Empathy, trust, confidentiality, active listening and acceptance will remain as excellent agents of support for effective counselling.

Key Lessons Learned

Six years of counselling experience have taught me several important lessons:

When supported by digital communication systems, early intervention is more effective.

- Students are always attracted to flexible and accessible support systems.
- Ethical practice is more important and more complex in digital contexts.
- For overall student wellness across the world, digital well-being should be recognized as an important component.
- Continuous education for professional development is crucial for keeping up with rapid technological advancements.

Conclusion

The change from face-to-face counselling to digital student support systems reflects the broader digital transformation occurring across higher education. Modern technology has also supported accessibility and innovation in counselling practice. At the same time, it also brings out different types of new ethical responsibilities and challenges which requires careful involvement.

Counsellors must preserve and follow the core values of the profession in this digital era, at the same time accepting the new transformations in the higher education field. The need of the hour is the blending of both technology and human interaction. The future of the higher education lies in developing responsive, ethical, and student-centred support systems in the colleges.

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DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY
A NEW FRONTIER FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Introduction

Technology has become an inseparable part of our daily lives. From the moment we wake up until we go to sleep, we interact with digital platforms for communication, information, work, education, and entertainment. Unsurprisingly, people are now turning to the digital world for mental health information and support as well.

Today, a person experiencing emotional distress is more likely to search online before approaching a professional. A teenager may learn about anxiety through social media. A worker struggling with stress may use a mobile application for relaxation. A parent concerned about a child's behaviour may watch videos or read articles to understand what is happening. While this easy access to information has created new opportunities, it has also raised important questions. How reliable is the information people are receiving? Can they differentiate between professional guidance and misinformation? Are digital resources helping or confusing them?

These questions highlight the growing importance of digital mental health literacy. As social workers, we cannot ignore this changing reality. Instead, we must understand it, engage with it, and help people navigate it safely and effectively.

Understanding Digital Mental Health Literacy

Mental health literacy traditionally refers to a person's ability to recognize mental health concerns, understand available supports, and seek appropriate help. In today's technology-driven world, this understanding must extend into the digital space.

Digital mental health literacy is the ability to find, understand, evaluate, and use mental health information available through digital platforms. It is not simply about accessing information online. It is about knowing which information is trustworthy, understanding its relevance, and using it responsibly.

A person may have access to thousands of mental health posts, videos, and articles, but without the ability to critically evaluate them, information alone does not lead to informed decisions. Digital mental health literacy therefore becomes an essential life skill.

The Growing Digital Influence on Mental Health

Over the past few years, digital platforms have significantly influenced how people understand mental health. Online counselling services, telehealth consultations, mental wellness

applications, support groups, podcasts, webinars, and artificial intelligence-based tools have made mental health resources more accessible than ever before.

This shift has brought many benefits. Individuals living in remote locations can connect with professionals without travelling long distances. Those who hesitate to seek face-to-face support due to stigma may feel more comfortable accessing services online. Educational content can reach thousands of people within minutes.

At the same time, digital spaces are filled with unverified advice, self-diagnosis trends, sensational content, and misleading information. The challenge is no longer the lack of information; it is the ability to identify credible information.

Why This Matters to Social Workers

Social work has always focused on empowering people, strengthening communities, and promoting social justice. These responsibilities remain unchanged, but the context in which we practice is evolving.

In many of our interactions with individuals, families, students, employees, and communities, we encounter people whose understanding of mental health is shaped by digital content. Some arrive with accurate knowledge, while others may be influenced by myths, misinformation, or incomplete understanding.

This creates a new responsibility for social workers. We are no longer only helping people access services; we are also helping them navigate a complex digital environment.

Our role includes encouraging critical thinking, promoting responsible use of digital resources, and helping individuals make informed choices regarding their mental well-being.

The Role of Social Workers in Strengthening Digital Mental Health Literacy

Social workers can contribute in several meaningful ways:

1. We can promote awareness about reliable sources of mental health information. Community members often struggle to determine which online content is trustworthy. By guiding them toward credible resources, we help reduce confusion and misinformation.
2. We can support digital inclusion. Many vulnerable populations continue to face barriers related to technology access, digital skills, language, and affordability. Social workers can advocate for equitable access and ensure that technological advances do not leave anyone behind.
3. We can address stigma in both physical and digital spaces. Social media has the power to challenge stereotypes and encourage open conversations about mental health. Social workers can use these platforms responsibly to promote awareness and foster supportive attitudes.

4. We must uphold ethical practice in digital environments. Confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, professional boundaries, and data security remain fundamental principles regardless of whether services are delivered online or offline.
5. Social workers can embrace technology as a tool for engagement and empowerment. Digital platforms can be used for awareness campaigns, psychoeducation, support groups, outreach activities, and professional collaboration.\

A Reflection from Practice

In my work with expatriate employees living in company accommodation camps, I have observed that many workers regularly use smartphones to stay connected with their families and to access information online. For many of them, digital platforms have become the first source of support when they experience stress, loneliness, financial worries, or family-related concerns. However, despite having access to technology, their understanding of mental health information is often limited. Many rely on social media posts, forwarded messages, or advice from friends, which may not always be accurate. Limited digital literacy, Language barriers, and Fear of stigma can further prevent them from seeking professional help. These experiences have reinforced my belief that social workers have an important role in promoting digital mental health literacy among vulnerable populations. By providing accurate information, creating awareness, and helping workers identify trustworthy sources of support, we can empower them to make informed decisions about their mental well-being.

Balancing Innovation with Human Connection

As artificial intelligence, virtual support systems, and digital interventions continue to evolve, social work practice will inevitably change. Technology can increase efficiency, improve accessibility, and expand reach. However, technology should never replace the human connection that lies at the heart of social work.

Empathy, compassion, active listening, and genuine human relationships cannot be automated. Technology should be viewed as a tool that strengthens practice rather than a substitute for professional judgment and human care.

The future of social work will require professionals who are both technologically competent and deeply grounded in social work values.

Conclusion

Digital transformation is reshaping the way people access mental health information and support. While technology offers unprecedented opportunities for awareness, education, and service delivery, it also presents challenges related to misinformation, ethics, and unequal access.

As social workers, we witness firsthand how technology is influencing the lives of individuals and communities, including vulnerable populations who may have limited access to reliable mental health information. By promoting digital mental health literacy, supporting ethical use of

technology, and advocating for inclusive access to digital resources, we can help ensure that technological progress contributes to human well-being rather than widening existing inequalities. The future of social work lies not in replacing human connection with technology, but in using technology responsibly to strengthen the values of empathy, dignity, inclusion, and social justice that define our profession.

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THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

In the era of increasing influence of digital technology and social media, the social work profession is also undergoing rapid transformation. There is no integrated digital platform available for social work students, job-seeking professionals, voluntary organizations (NGOs), researchers and social entrepreneurs that can meet their diverse needs in one place. This article discusses the need for developing a specific social media channel or digital platform for the social work sector, its potential components, benefits and challenges. The article suggests that such a platform can give a new direction to the networking, knowledge exchange, employment, institutional development and research of social work professionals.

Keywords: *Social work, digitalization, social media, professional networking, NGO development, employment, digital platform.*

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, digital technology has affected every aspect of human life. The importance of information and communication technology is constantly increasing even in human-centered professions like social work. In today's times, social work students, teachers, researchers and professionals have to use various media to get information, employment opportunities, research materials, training and professional connections. But all these services are not available on a single platform.

The creation of a dedicated social media channel or digital ecosystem for the social work sector has become the need of the hour. Such a platform can become not only a means of information exchange, but also a tool for professional development and social change.

2. Current Challenges in the Social Work Sector

Although social work is a professional and knowledge-based field, its professionals and students face several practical challenges. Especially in the areas of employment, professional development, institutional capacity building and access to knowledge. A large number of students graduate from social work courses every year, but information about the employment opportunities available to them is not available in a consolidated form. As a result, many youth find it difficult to find jobs that suit their qualifications and interests. In addition, due to the lack

of skills in preparing an effective resume, cover letter and professional profile, they are unable to properly present their capabilities in the job market.

Information about various donors, CSR companies, government schemes and international funding agencies is also not easily available for voluntary organizations and professionals working in the social sector. Often, despite having excellent work and innovative ideas, organizations are unable to expand their programs due to lack of timely information about funding opportunities. Similarly, those who want to start a new voluntary organisation face a lack of guidance on registration of a trust, society or Section 8 company, tax provisions, administrative procedures and legal framework, due to which many social initiatives face difficulties in the initial stages.

Significant challenges are also seen in the academic and research sector. Social work students and researchers often find it difficult to access quality study materials, research articles, case studies and literature available in regional languages. As a result, the development of knowledge and the quality of research are affected. On the other hand, the process of sharing experience, knowledge and opportunities among individuals and organisations working in the field of social work remains limited due to the lack of a strong and comprehensive platform for professional networking. There is a significant information gap, especially between social work professionals working in rural areas and the resources available in urban areas. The opportunities, training and information that are easily accessible to those working in urban areas often do not reach practitioners in rural areas. Keeping this situation in mind, the need for a centralized digital platform that can integrate the various needs of the social work sector at one place is clearly felt.

3. Such a platform can provide several benefits:

3.1 Digital support for employment and career development

After completing social work studies, many students and young professionals find it difficult to get suitable employment information. Information about available positions in various institutions, required qualifications and application process is often scattered. A social media platform specific to social work can fill this gap. Through such a medium, employment opportunities in various government, non-government and CSR sectors can be available at one place. In addition, expert guidance can also be provided for preparing resumes, preparing for interviews and career planning, which can contribute significantly to the professional development of the youth.

3.2 Funding and project opportunities for voluntary organizations

Although many voluntary organizations do excellent work, they find it difficult to reach donors and funding agencies. Often, despite the availability of suitable grants for projects, the organizations are unable to take advantage of them due to lack of information. Information about various foundations, CSR companies, government schemes and international donors can be

shared regularly through a dedicated digital platform. Along with this, guidance on things like project proposal writing, logical framework, monitoring and evaluation can also be available, which will help in increasing the efficiency of the organizations.

3.3 Guidance for setting up a new organization

Many youth and social workers who want to start a new organization for the purpose of social service do not have sufficient information about the legal and administrative procedures. Many initiatives are stalled at the beginning due to lack of clear guidance on registration of trust, society or Section-8 company, PAN, 12A, 80G, CSR eligibility and other regulatory procedures. If all this information is made available in simple language on a digital platform, then the new organizations can start working in a more organized and transparent manner.

3.4 Knowledge repository for social work study and research

Quality study materials, research articles, case studies and practical experiences are extremely important for social work students and researchers. But many times this material is not easily available, especially in regional languages. A dedicated digital platform can act as an e-library, research repository and academic discussion forum. Students can benefit from curriculum-related guidance, understanding of research methodology and the experiences of experts, which will help in improving the quality of education.

3.5 Professional networking and collaboration opportunities

Though there are thousands of professionals and institutions working in the social work sector, there is not enough connectivity among them. As a result, opportunities for collaborative initiatives, joint research and collective advocacy remain limited. Through an integrated social media platform, social work professionals can share their experiences, ideas and best practices with each other. Such networking can prove useful not only for personal development, but also in making the entire social work profession stronger and more organized.

3.6 Use of digital technology and artificial intelligence

Modern digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are creating new possibilities in the social work sector. Services such as preparing resumes, developing project proposals, finding research materials and getting answers to career-related questions can be easily available through AI-based tools. In addition, information related to jobs, training and funding can be delivered to users in a timely manner through mobile applications and digital notification systems. This technology can help make the social work profession more accessible, efficient and modern.

3.7 Building a digital community for social work

The fundamental basis of social work is based on human relationships, collaboration and social responsibility. Therefore, a digital platform that brings students, teachers, researchers, professionals, voluntary organizations and donors under one roof can prove to be transformative for the entire field. Such a digital community will not be limited to just sharing information, but can develop into an active platform for knowledge, collaboration, leadership development and

social change. Such initiatives are the need of the hour to make the social work profession more powerful and influential in the digital age.

4. Challenges and Limitations

The creation of a digital platform specific to social work professionals offers many opportunities, but some important challenges may also arise during its implementation. First, the issue of digital literacy is significant. Not all people working in the social work sector are equally skilled in using technology, especially professionals working in rural areas, small voluntary organisations and senior workers may find it challenging to use digital tools effectively. In addition, maintaining the reliability and quality of information available on the platform will also be of utmost importance. If incomplete or misleading information related to employment, funding or research is disseminated, it can have a direct impact on the decisions and performance of users. Therefore, a robust system for verification and quality control of information will be required.

Another important challenge relates to data privacy, security and the long-term management of the platform. It will be necessary to ensure the secure management of personal and professional information of social work professionals, institutions and students, as cybersecurity risks in digital media continue to increase. In addition, adequate financial resources and professional management will be required for the development, maintenance and continuous updating of such a platform. The need to make content available in different languages is also an important issue in a multilingual country like India, as an English-only platform may not be equally useful to all social work professionals. Although all these challenges are serious, they can be effectively addressed through proper planning, professional policies, technological security arrangements and collaboration of various stakeholders. Such efforts can lead to the creation of an inclusive, reliable and sustainable digital platform, which can make a significant contribution to the overall development of the social work profession.

5. Conclusion

The creation of a dedicated social media platform for social work professionals in the digital age is not just a technological initiative, but an attempt to make the entire social work profession more organized, empowered and effective. Such a platform can provide guidance to students, employment to professionals, funding to institutions, knowledge to researchers and a strong professional identity to the entire social work sector. If social work education institutions, professional associations, voluntary organizations and technology experts jointly strive in this direction, then in the near future a digital ecosystem can be developed for social work that can become a center for knowledge, collaboration and social change. In this era of Digital India, the social work sector also needs its own unique digital identity and a strong professional network, and such a platform can prove to be an important step in that direction.

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DIGITAL FUTURES AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES, ETHICS AND INNOVATION IN A TECHNOLOGY -DRIVEN WORLD''

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Key theme of this Special Issue is that the future of social work education lies not in technology alone but in its thoughtful integration with traditional human-centred skills. All emphasise the vital importance of maintaining a holistic approach that balances technological competence with foundational social work values and skills, in particular, empathy, communication, and relationship-building. The overall message is that educators must help students understand the potential and limitations of technology while preserving the irreplaceable value of human connection in social work practice.

The insights gathered in this Special Issue provide guidance for social work educators attempting to meaningfully integrate technological innovation into their teaching practice. Going forward, there is a clear objective: we must prepare social work students to be both technologically adept and ethically grounded practitioners. By embracing these advancements with critical awareness and ethical consideration, in conjunction with a focus on the human and relational aspects of practice, we can equip our students to harness the potential of technology for social good while remaining true to our profession's core values and commitment to social justice. This is not merely about adapting to technological change; it is about leading with wisdom, ethics, and a steadfast commitment to human dignity.

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the perspectives of social workers on the digitalization of their field, particularly in terms of opportunities and challenges for both practitioners and clients. The data was collected through an online survey using a Likert scale to assess various aspects of digital tool usage in social work. The sample consisted of 173 participants, primarily female (79.2%) and male (20.8%), who were professionals working in the field of social work. The majority of participants held a Bachelor's or Diploma degree in Social Work (84.4%), while 15.6% had completed a Master's degree. The average years of experience among participants was 5.0 years, with a median of 5 years. The participants were employed across various sectors, with 28.9% working in residential group settings, 30.1% in child and youth services, 31.2% in outpatient family support, and 9.8% in educational institutions such as kindergartens and schools. The survey was distributed electronically to social workers via professional networks and social work associations. The questionnaire included both demographic questions and a series of items related to digitalization in social work, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The questions aimed to capture participants' preparedness for digital tools, perceived impact on service quality, concerns regarding data security, and the adequacy of workplace technical support. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions,

to understand the general trends in the data. In particular, the analysis focused on identifying patterns in participants' readiness to integrate digital tools into their practice and their views on the future impact of digitalization. The demographic and professional background of participants was also cross-referenced with their responses to investigate potential correlations between experience, sector, and attitudes toward digitalization. This methodological approach provided a robust framework for assessing the diverse experiences of social workers across different fields and educational backgrounds

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the current state of digitalization in social work, reflecting both opportunities and challenges faced by practitioners. This section will explore the broader implications of these results, drawing on various scholarly perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the issues. The discussion will critically examine the reasons behind the identified trends and consider the potential consequences of continued digitalization in the profession. It will also address the ethical, practical, and systemic challenges that need to be considered to ensure a balanced and effective integration of digital tools into social work. One of the most notable findings of this study is the low level of preparedness social workers feel regarding the use of digital tools. With a mean score of 2.92, the data suggests that a significant portion of social workers lack the confidence to effectively integrate digital technologies into their practice. This finding aligns with previous research that has identified a skills gap in the profession, particularly when it comes to digital literacy (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Many social workers have not received sufficient training during their formal education, and ongoing professional development opportunities may be limited depending on their organizational context (Mishna et al., 2020). One possible reason for this gap is the rapid pace at which technology evolves. New tools and platforms are frequently introduced, leaving many professionals struggling to keep up with the latest developments. For instance, the use of telehealth and virtual counseling has grown exponentially, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hussein, 2021). Yet, many social workers, particularly those working in traditional settings such as residential care or outpatient family support, may have had little exposure to these tools before the pandemic (Reamer, 2021). Additionally, organizations may not have the resources to provide adequate training on the use of digital tools. Smaller agencies, which often operate on limited budgets, may prioritize direct client services over technology investments, leaving social workers without the necessary support to develop their digital competencies (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). This creates a risk of uneven access to digital tools and training, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities within the profession. Furthermore, critical perspectives highlight that the emphasis on digital tools may lead to an over-reliance on technology, which could diminish the relational aspect of social work. Banks (2020) argues that digitalization, while beneficial in some areas, must not replace the human-centered approach that is at the core of social work practice. Social workers may feel underprepared not only because they lack technical skills but also because the digital shift challenges the fundamental principles of their profession, which emphasizes personal interaction and empathy. The study reveals mixed opinions regarding the impact of digital technologies on the quality of social work, with a mean score of 3.06. While some practitioners view digital tools as beneficial, others

remain skeptical about their ability to improve service delivery. This ambivalence can be attributed to several factors. On the positive side, digital technologies offer potential efficiencies. For example, case management software can reduce administrative burdens, allowing social workers to focus more on direct client interactions (Granholm, 2019). Similarly, telehealth services enable practitioners to reach clients in remote areas, providing support that would otherwise be inaccessible (Soska & Johnson, 2020). These benefits are particularly relevant in rural or underserved areas, where access to social work services can be limited. However, the practical application of these tools is not without challenges. Many social workers report feeling that digital platforms can create barriers to effective communication, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as older adults, individuals with disabilities, or those lacking digital literacy (Mishna et al., 2020). For instance, a client who is unfamiliar with video conferencing may find it difficult to engage in virtual counseling sessions, potentially undermining the therapeutic process. This raises concerns about the inclusivity of digital services and the risk of leaving certain client groups behind. Moreover, there is the issue of "technological determinism," where digital tools are viewed as inherently positive or neutral, without fully considering their broader social implications (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Critics argue that the introduction of technology into social work should not be viewed as a simple upgrade, but rather as a shift that alters the nature of practice in profound ways. For example, the use of AI-driven decision-making tools may streamline processes, but it also raises questions about accountability and professional autonomy (Barsky, 2021). If social workers begin to rely heavily on algorithmic assessments, they may be less inclined to use their professional judgment, potentially leading to outcomes that are less tailored to individual client needs. The study's findings regarding concerns about data security are particularly striking, with a mean score of 3.06 indicating that data protection remains a significant issue for social workers. This aligns with a growing body of literature that highlights the ethical dilemmas posed by digital tools, particularly in relation to client confidentiality and data protection (Reamer, 2021). Social workers are entrusted with highly sensitive information, and the digitalization of client records, communication, and service delivery introduces new risks. For example, data breaches could expose vulnerable clients to exploitation or harm, undermining the trust that is central to the social worker client relationship (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Additionally, the use of third-party platforms for telehealth or case management raises questions about who owns and controls client data. Many social workers express concern that they may not have sufficient knowledge of these platforms' privacy policies, leaving them uncertain about whether they can fully protect their clients' confidentiality. Reamer (2021) suggests that while digitalization offers many practical benefits, it also requires a rethinking of traditional ethical frameworks. Social workers must balance the potential advantages of digital tools with the need to maintain high ethical standards, particularly regarding consent, confidentiality, and data protection. This may involve implementing new protocols and safeguards, such as encryption, secure servers, and clear client consent processes, to ensure that digital practices align with the ethical principles of the profession. Another key finding of the study is the uneven distribution of workplace support for digitalization, as indicated by the mean score of 2.96. While some social workers feel that their organizations provide adequate technical support, many do not, reflecting significant disparities in access to resources. This uneven support is often linked to

organizational size and funding. Larger institutions, particularly in urban areas, may have the resources to invest in cutting-edge technologies and ongoing training for their staff. In contrast, smaller agencies, particularly those in rural or underfunded areas, may struggle to provide even the most basic digital infrastructure (Leung & Tsui, 2022). This creates a two-tiered system where some social workers are well-equipped to navigate the digital landscape, while others are left behind, further contributing to professional inequalities. Moreover, the lack of support is not just a matter of technology but also of time and training. Social workers often report that they are expected to adopt new tools without sufficient time to learn how to use them effectively (Granholm, 2019). This can lead to frustration and burnout, as practitioners are left to figure out complex systems on their own, often while managing heavy caseloads. In addition, the quality of digital tools themselves is a factor. Not all technologies are user-friendly or designed with social work in mind. Tools that are cumbersome or not intuitive can hinder rather than help practitioners in their work, contributing to the sense of unpreparedness identified earlier in the study. The final key finding of the study concerns the future of digitalization in social work, with a mean score of 3.04 indicating that social workers are cautiously optimistic about the potential for transformation. While many recognize that digital tools will play an increasingly important role in the profession, there is less consensus about how profound these changes will be. Proponents of digitalization argue that technology will fundamentally reshape social work, making it more efficient, data-driven, and client-centered (Hussein, 2021). For instance, AI-driven analytics could provide insights into client needs that are beyond the scope of traditional methods, allowing for more targeted and effective interventions (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). Similarly, digital platforms could make social work services more accessible, particularly for marginalized groups who may struggle to engage with traditional face-to-face services. However, critical perspectives caution against viewing digitalization as a panacea. Banks (2020) warns that the push towards digitalization must be accompanied by a critical examination of its potential downsides, including the risk of dehumanizing client relationships and reducing social work to a set of technical tasks. Social work is, at its core, a relational practice, and while digital tools can enhance certain aspects of service delivery, they cannot replace the empathy, understanding, and human connection that define the profession. Moreover, the future of digitalization will depend on broader systemic factors, such as government policies, funding priorities, and technological advancements. Without sustained investment in digital infrastructure and professional development, the potential benefits of digitalization may not be fully realized (Leung & Tsui, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial that the profession remains vigilant about the ethical, practical, and social implications of these changes, ensuring that digitalization serves as a tool to enhance, rather than undermine, the core values of social work.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight both the potential benefits and significant challenges associated with the digitalization of social work. Social workers recognize the opportunities that digital tools offer in improving service delivery, such as enhancing efficiency, expanding access to services, and enabling more data-driven decision-making. However, the study also uncovers several barriers to effective digital integration, particularly in terms of preparedness, data security concerns, and unequal workplace support. One of the most critical insights from

the study is the widespread feeling of unpreparedness among social workers, with many reporting that they lack the necessary skills and training to effectively implement digital tools. Additionally, while some practitioners view digital technologies as beneficial to their work quality, others remain skeptical, particularly when it comes to the inclusivity and relational aspects of social work. Data security and privacy concerns also emerged as significant issues, reflecting the ethical complexities introduced by digitalization. The future of digitalization in social work appears both promising and challenging. For digital tools to be fully integrated into social work practice, a concerted effort will be required to address the current gaps in training, workplace support, and ethical considerations. As technology continues to evolve, social work practitioners and institutions must be proactive in preparing for these changes by adapting both their skill sets and organizational structures. In particular, educational institutions must play a pivotal role in preparing future social workers for the digital landscape by incorporating digital literacy into their curricula. Similarly, organizations should prioritize ongoing professional development opportunities that enable current practitioners to stay up-to-date with technological advancements. Furthermore, as digitalization continues to reshape social work, there will be a need for continued critical reflection on its broader implications for practice, particularly regarding the human-centered values of the profession. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to better prepare social workers for the digital future: Comprehensive Training Programs: Social work curricula should include mandatory courses on digital tools and technologies, focusing on practical applications in case management, telehealth, and data security. For current practitioners, regular workshops and online training sessions should be offered to ensure continuous skill development.

Enhanced Workplace Support:
Organizations must provide sufficient technical support and resources to ensure that social workers can integrate digital tools effectively. This includes not only providing the necessary hardware and software but also allocating time for staff to familiarize themselves with these tools without compromising their client workload.

Data Security and Ethical Guidelines:
Given the ethical concerns raised by data security, it is essential for social work organizations to establish clear policies and protocols for protecting client information. Social workers should be trained on data protection regulations such as the GDPR and best practices for maintaining confidentiality in a digital environment.

Addressing the Digital Divide: To ensure equitable access to digital services, social work organizations should develop strategies for supporting clients who may lack the technological literacy or resources to engage with digital platforms. This could involve providing digital literacy training for clients or offering alternative non-digital services when necessary. By addressing these areas, the social work profession can better navigate the challenges of digitalization while maximizing its potential to improve the quality and accessibility of services.

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DIGITAL FUTURES AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES, ETHICS, AND INNOVATION IN A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN WORLD

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Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of healthcare and human service professions, creating new possibilities for innovation, accessibility, and service delivery. As social work enters an increasingly technology-driven era, professionals are challenged to embrace digital advancements while maintaining the core values of empathy, dignity, human relationships, and social justice. The theme *"Digital Futures and Social Work Practice: Exploring Opportunities, Ethics, and Innovation in a Technology-Driven World"* highlights the need to examine how technological tools can strengthen social work practice while ensuring ethical and equitable service provision.

Among the various technological innovations shaping contemporary practice, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful catalyst for change. Although AI is often associated with medical diagnostics, healthcare administration, and predictive analytics, its applications in social work are rapidly expanding. In pediatric medical social work, AI presents unique opportunities to enhance child-centered interventions, strengthen family support systems, improve continuity of care, facilitate resource mobilization, and promote innovative approaches to psychosocial care.

Pediatric medical social workers support children and families facing chronic illnesses, disabilities, prolonged hospitalization, rehabilitation needs, and complex psychosocial challenges. These responsibilities require creativity, effective communication, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continuous engagement with families. In environments often characterized by high caseloads and limited resources, AI offers practical solutions that can augment professional practice while preserving the human-centered nature of social work.

One of the most significant contributions of AI in pediatric social work is its ability to support innovative child-centered interventions. Children experiencing illness and hospitalization often struggle to communicate complex emotions such as fear, anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. Traditionally, social workers have relied on therapeutic storytelling, play therapy techniques, visual aids, and creative activities to facilitate emotional expression and coping.

Today, AI enables professionals to develop personalized therapeutic stories, coping worksheets, emotional literacy activities, social stories, and psychoeducational materials within minutes. These resources can be tailored according to a child's age, developmental

level, diagnosis, cultural background, and emotional needs. For pediatric social workers, this innovation expands opportunities for engagement while reducing the time required to prepare individualized intervention materials. Rather than replacing professional creativity, AI enhances the practitioner's ability to design meaningful and responsive therapeutic experiences.

The potential of AI extends beyond direct work with children. Family-centered care remains a cornerstone of pediatric social work practice, as parents and caregivers frequently experience emotional distress, uncertainty, caregiver burden, and financial strain. Social workers play a critical role in providing counseling, education, advocacy, and resource linkage to support families throughout the healthcare journey.

AI-assisted tools can support these efforts by helping professionals develop caregiver education materials, multilingual resources, counseling handouts, and individualized informational content. By streamlining administrative and documentation tasks, AI enables social workers to spend more time building therapeutic relationships and addressing the psychosocial concerns of families. In this way, technology serves not as a replacement for human connection but as a means of strengthening it.

The digital future of social work also involves expanding access to services and ensuring continuity of care. Many children require long-term follow-up, rehabilitation, repeated hospital visits, and ongoing psychosocial support. Families residing in rural or underserved communities often encounter barriers that limit access to healthcare services. Through telecounseling, digital communication platforms, and AI-supported follow-up systems, social workers can maintain meaningful connections with families beyond hospital settings.

Furthermore, AI-powered predictive tools can assist professionals in identifying patterns associated with treatment non-adherence, missed appointments, caregiver distress, or service disengagement. Such insights allow for early intervention and proactive support, contributing to improved outcomes for children and families while reducing the likelihood of crisis situations.

Innovation in social work is not limited to clinical practice alone. Resource mobilization and fundraising represent essential components of pediatric medical social work, particularly for families struggling with treatment expenses, medications, assistive devices, transportation costs, and rehabilitation services. Social workers often invest significant time in preparing case summaries, donor appeals, grant applications, and awareness campaigns.

Artificial Intelligence can enhance these efforts by supporting content development, case presentation, proposal writing, and communication strategies. Faster and more efficient preparation of fundraising materials can improve access to financial support and strengthen advocacy efforts on behalf of vulnerable children and families. This demonstrates how digital innovation can enhance both direct practice and broader social welfare interventions.

While the opportunities presented by AI are substantial, ethical considerations remain central to its integration within social work practice. Confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, data security, professional accountability, and child safeguarding must continue to guide all technological applications. Social workers must critically evaluate AI-generated information and ensure that professional judgment remains the foundation of decision-making processes.

Equally important is addressing the digital divide. Not all families have equal access to technology, internet connectivity, or digital literacy. As the profession embraces digital transformation, social workers must advocate for equitable access to technological resources and ensure that innovation does not reinforce existing social inequalities.

The future of pediatric medical social work will increasingly involve collaboration between human expertise and technological innovation. Artificial Intelligence should be viewed not merely as a productivity tool but as a resource that enhances creativity, accessibility, efficiency, and responsiveness in psychosocial care. Its value lies in augmenting the skills of social workers rather than replacing the empathy, compassion, and ethical reasoning that define the profession.

As social work navigates a rapidly evolving digital landscape, pediatric medical social workers are uniquely positioned to lead the ethical integration of technology into practice. By embracing innovation while remaining committed to human dignity and social justice, the profession can ensure that technological advancements contribute meaningfully to the well-being of children and families.

Conclusion

Digital futures in social work are not about choosing between technology and human relationships; they are about harnessing innovation to strengthen human-centered practice. Artificial Intelligence represents one of the most promising opportunities for pediatric medical social work, offering new avenues for therapeutic engagement, caregiver support, continuity of care, advocacy, fundraising, and resource mobilization. When implemented responsibly and ethically, AI can enhance the profession's ability to deliver personalized, accessible, and equitable services. In a technology-driven world, the successful integration of AI into pediatric social work practice has the potential to improve outcomes for children and families while preserving the values that remain at the heart of the profession.

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DIGITAL FUTURES AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: WHAT RURAL ASSAM REVEALS ABOUT INCLUSION, ETHICS, AND HUMAN CONNECTION

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Introduction

A woman participant from Bengenabari village, situated in Panikhaiti block of Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of Assam, participated in a study on digital inclusion. She owned a smartphone, used WhatsApp to connect with relatives, used social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram and also watched videos online. Conventionally, she would be classified as digitally connected.

But when asked about her skills in filling up online applications, accessing government portals, banking applications or digital transactions through UPI, she was found wanting. While handling these stuffs, she often turned to her family members or colleagues for help.

Many more instances such as this were found out in the studies conducted in rural communities across Assam. They revealed a gap that often remains hidden in conversations about technology. Access and inclusion are not the same thing. A network tower may reach a village. Smartphones may be present in households. Even so, many people continue to stand at the edge of the digital world rather than participate fully in it.

The transformation process in India from manual to digital has been remarkable. Public services, banking and finance, education, healthcare and communication have all gone virtual. New possibilities have been opened by these developments form many citizens. But it has also introduced to new uncertainties.

Social Work finds itself in the crossroads of this transition. The main focus of social work has always been to reduce barriers of people in effectively participating in the society. Now, those barriers have become increasingly digital. Hence the social workers have to understand a newer environment, shaped by technology, but still grounded in human experience.

When Access Doesn't Lead to Participation

Field studies in various parts of Assam concluded that the concept of digital divide is more complex than connectivity. Majority of the participants had access to smartphones with adequate internet connectivity. But their ability to utilize them with confidence varied. The problem

became more clear when discussions shifted from communication to transaction. There were participants who had no problems exchanging messages or posting contents on social media. However, the same participants hesitated to discuss about online banking, digital payments or accessing e-portals. Few of them worried about making mistakes. Others feared losing money to online frauds and scams and avoided making digital transactions altogether. These barriers were quite common within the elderly population. Few participants viewed digital services as important, but also risky. They trusted the bank employees more than banking applications or UPIs. Hence, the issue wase not merely related to resistance to technology. It was trust.

Research on digital proficiency specially in Kamrup (M) district pointed toward a similar reality. Many participants had moved beyond basic mobile phone usage. Yet digital engagement often remained limited to a very limited range of activities. Tasks that required navigating unfamiliar interfaces, verifying information, or handling financial transactions generated uncertainty.

These observations challenged a popular assumption that access automatically leads to empowerment. In practice, the relationship is more complicated. Technology can create opportunities, but people still need the skills, confidence, and support systems necessary to use those opportunities effectively.

This is where social work can make a meaningful contribution.

The Social Worker's Place in a Digital World

For decades, social workers have helped individuals navigate complex systems. Whether accessing welfare schemes, healthcare services, educational opportunities, or legal support, people often rely on guidance when systems become difficult to understand.

Today's systems increasingly exist online. Applications that once required paper forms now demand digital literacy. Information that was once available through local offices is now accessible through websites and mobile applications. Even routine financial activities like paying electricity bills or LPG cylinder bookings have migrated into digital spaces.

The profession's response should not be limited to learning new software or adopting new platforms. Its deeper responsibility lies elsewhere. Social workers can serve as translators between technological systems and everyday realities. They can help communities understand digital services, identify risks, and develop the confidence needed to engage with technology safely.

This role becomes increasingly important for groups that face structural disadvantages. Women in rural communities, older adults, people with limited literacy, and economically vulnerable households often encounter obstacles that technology alone cannot solve.

Field experiences from Assam repeatedly suggested that digital learning rarely happens in isolation. People learn from neighbors, relatives, community leaders, and trusted intermediaries. They ask questions. They observe. They practice. They make mistakes and try again.

In that sense, digital inclusion remains a social process. Relationships still matter. Social workers are uniquely positioned to strengthen those relationships while supporting digital participation.

What Gets Lost When Services Move Online?

Digital tools have expanded the reach of many services. Counselling can be offered remotely. Information can travel instantly. Assistance can reach communities that were once difficult to access. Yet something important deserves attention. Human relationships remain central to social work practice.

A conversation conducted through a screen does not always carry the same depth as one held face-to-face. Small observations a client's body language, the atmosphere within a household, the dynamics between family members often provide valuable insights. Digital interactions may not capture these nuances.

Questions of privacy also become more complicated. Many service users share devices with family members. Some rely on public internet connections. Others may not fully understand how personal information is collected, stored, or shared online. These realities raise ethical concerns that extend beyond technical security measures.

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence adds another layer to the discussion. Algorithms can assist with decision-making, identify patterns, and improve administrative efficiency. Yet social work has long recognized that human experiences rarely fit neatly into categories.

A system may process information quickly. It cannot always understand context. A person's struggles often emerge from a combination of circumstances, relationships, and lived experiences that resist standardization. Social workers therefore need to approach technological innovation with curiosity as well as caution.

The goal should not be to reject technology. Nor should it be to embrace every new tool uncritically. The more useful question is: does a particular innovation strengthen people's ability to live with dignity and exercise choice?

Looking Ahead Without Leaving People Behind

The future of social work will undoubtedly involve technology. The question is not whether digital transformation will continue. It already has. What remains uncertain is who will benefit from it. Experiences from rural Assam suggested that inclusion cannot be measured solely by the number of devices distributed or the availability of internet connections in the locality. Genuine inclusion appears to depend on whether people feel capable of using technology in ways that

improve their daily lives. This requires more than infrastructure. It requires digital literacy. It requires trust. It requires support systems that recognize different realities people bring with them.

Social work education needs to adapt accordingly too. Future practitioners must understand digital environments, but they should also retain the profession's traditional strengths: empathy, critical thinking, relationship-building, and advocacy. These qualities are not becoming less relevant in a technology-driven society. They may become even more important.

The villages, towns, and communities that featured in recent studies across Assam offered a simple reminder. People rarely talk about digital futures in terms of artificial intelligence or emerging technologies. They talk about whether a payment went through, whether an online form was submitted correctly, or whether they can trust the information appearing on a screen.

Their concerns are practical. Their expectations are human. Social work has always begun from that point. As societies become more digital, the profession's challenge is not to keep pace with technology for its own sake. It is to ensure that technological change remains connected to the people it is meant to serve.

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DIGITAL NATIVES AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: STRUCTURAL INTERVENTIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

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The article explores the role of social workers as catalysts for systemic change, bridging the gap between digital exclusion and educational equity through the lens of open schooling.

Introduction: The Paradox of the Digital Native

In the global discourse of the twenty-first century, the term "Digital Native" typically refers to a generation born into a world of ubiquitous connectivity and technological fluency. However, in the Indian context, this term masks a profound paradox. While the nation pivots toward a digital future, a staggering **30 million out-of-school children (OOSC)** aged 6 to 17 remain on the margins of the formal education system (National Statistical Office, 2018; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). This population, roughly equivalent to the entire population of Texas, represents a structural failure where geographic barriers, gender, caste, and income compromise the fundamental right to education.

For social work practitioners, the challenge is no longer just providing individual support to dropouts; it is about designing and implementing **structural interventions** that dismantle the barriers to entry. Educational justice requires us to move beyond viewing the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) as a "second-best" alternative and instead champion it as a site of **transformative innovation**. Studies also show that the students who engage in open schooling develop transversal skills such as critical thinking and collaboration (Okada et al., 2025).

The Structural Crisis: Barriers to Digital and Educational Inclusion

The **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)**, published by the **Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD] (2020),** specifically recommends strengthening NIOS to reintegrate these millions of children into the educational fold. Despite this, the system remains critically underutilized, serving only approximately **1% of the total OOSC population**. The "Digital Native" in rural or impoverished urban India faces three primary structural bottlenecks identified in recent literature:

i. **The Digital Divide and Online Challenges:** While the pandemic accelerated some digital literacy, data from the **National Statistical Office [NSO] (2018)** indicates that only **24% of Indian households** have internet connectivity, and only **40% of surveyed individuals** know how to use the internet effectively. Furthermore, researchers like

Agrawal and Pandit (2022) have highlighted that the transition to online education during COVID-19 revealed persistent logistical challenges, such as lack of bandwidth and power outages, which continue to hinder marginalized learners.

ii. **Linguistic Gatekeeping:** A profound linguistic barrier exists. At the same time, only **0.02% of India's population** speaks English, and the NIOS admission information is primarily available in that language, rendering the process opaque to the vast majority of eligible families.

iii. **Infrastructure Deficits:** Formal schools often fail to retain students due to inadequate facilities, with **57% of rural elementary schools** having fewer than four classrooms, a constraint that necessitates the expansion of open and distance learning pathways.

Social Work Practice as a Structural Intervention

Social work innovation in this technology-driven world involves mobilizing existing government resources rather than inventing new ones, through strategic, social-justice-oriented collaboration. As discussed in a National Webinar hosted by the Press Information Bureau [PIB] (2020), there is an urgent need to develop economic and effective alternative systems to meet the challenges of schooling for the "last unreached". This article proposes a multi-stakeholder model of **institutional collaboration** to bridge these gaps:

The B.Ed. Ambassador Program: Social workers can facilitate the integration of final-semester Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students from institutions such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) as enrollment ambassadors. By incorporating enrollment drives into their credit-bearing practical curriculum, we create a workforce that provides human agency to the digital process. This intervention reduces marginalized families' reliance on **exploitative brokers**, thereby lowering out-of-pocket expenditures (Gupta, 2023).

Leveraging Rural Infrastructure: Structural interventions transform the **1.3 million rural Anganwadi Centers (AWCs)** and **22,000 Post Offices (POs)** into localized digital support hubs. These centers already possess the necessary computer facilities and internet access to support parents with online admissions in remote areas.

Community-Led Digital Mediation: Drawing on successful precedents in states like Jharkhand, where **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** were instrumental in COVID-19 awareness, social workers can train tech-savvy local women to staff these AWC and PO hubs. This not only provides technical assistance but also professionalizes local women as digital mediators, ensuring community trust in the system. As identified by Haseloff (2005), such public access points - including cybercafés - have significant potential as community development tools when they are leveraged for social ends rather than just commercial ones.

Ethics and Innovation: The CARE-KNOW-DO Framework

To ensure that "Digital Natives" become more than just consumers of technology, social work practice must adopt a pedagogical driver. The **CARE-KNOW-DO** model, synthesized with **UNESCO's AI Competencies Framework** (Okada et al., 2025), offers a roadmap for this transformation.

- **CARE (Ethical Engagement):** Social workers must foster "affective engagement," helping students and families understand that technology is human-led and must be human-controlled to protect rights. This includes implementing **"Visual Nudge Checklists"** to ensure that parents using public internet cafes purge their sensitive data immediately after registration.

- **KNOW (Epistemic Competence):** Beyond basic digital literacy, social workers encourage "deep epistemic learning," where students use technology to tackle real-world challenges like the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. This moves learning from rote memory to knowledge construction.

- **DO (Responsible Agency):** The ultimate goal is **"Scientific Citizenship,"** where students translate knowledge into action. By creating solutions - such as AI-powered forest fire detection or renewable energy campaigns underserved students move from being marginalized to being active co-creators of their future.

Economic Outcomes and Social Justice

The importance of this structural intervention is validated by empirical evidence. A tracer study of nearly 1,000 academic graduates by Jha, Ghatak, and Mahendiran (2017) found that **81% were gainfully employed**, with the NIOS system helping them secure more stable and secure government jobs. By facilitating re-entry into education, social workers are not just providing a service; they are enabling long-term **economic justice**.

Conclusion: A Call for Recognition

The transition from an "alternative" to a "transformative" education system requires social workers to be the bridge-builders between policy and pedagogy. We must advocate for the **mandatory translation** of admission portals into regional languages to bypass linguistic gatekeeping and the **formalization of community-led hubs** as permanent fixtures of the educational landscape.

Educational justice for India's 30 million children is not a matter of inventing new techniques, but of mobilizing existing infrastructure - from B.Ed. curricula to rural Post Offices. In a technology-driven world, the role of the social worker is to ensure that the "Digital Native" tag is not a privilege of the few but a fundamental reality for all, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

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NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL TURN: TECHNOLOGY, ETHICS, AND THE SOUL OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Introduction

Social work has always been shaped by the conditions of its time. Social workers have continuously adapted to changing social and economic realities. The current moment is different in character driven not by ideology or policy alone, but by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies restructuring how people connect, access services, and understand themselves. For social work, this carries both genuine promise and real risk, and the profession must engage critically rather than uncritically.

In India, digital integration is uneven but accelerating. The BharatNet broadband initiative, near-universal mobile phone adoption, and the digitalisation of welfare delivery through the Unified Payments Interface and Aadhaar-linked benefit transfers have created new entry points for social work intervention. Alongside these gains, deep structural inequalities around access, literacy, and trust have become more visible. Understanding this duality is essential for social work practice.

Digital Transformation of Social Work Practice

The integration of digital tools into social work is an ongoing evolution rather than a sudden rupture. Case management software has replaced paper records in many agencies, enabling systematic documentation, inter-agency coordination, and outcome tracking. Communication has shifted toward messaging applications and video calls. Referral pathways are increasingly digitally mediated, and a growing number of psychosocial interventions are now delivered, at least partially, online.

When a social worker conducts an assessment via video call rather than in a family's home, something changes in what can be seen, heard, and felt. When case notes are stored in shared digital systems, questions of who accesses sensitive information and under what conditions become more pressing. The profession cannot adopt new tools as if they were neutral extensions of existing practice; it must ask what is gained and what is lost in each transition.

Opportunities for Practice

Tele-counselling represents one of the most visible opportunities. For people in geographically remote areas, or for those whose mobility, stigma, or caregiving responsibilities make in-person appointments difficult, digital mental health platforms have opened access that was previously unavailable. Services such as iCall and the Vandrevala Foundation helpline in India have demonstrated that telephone and online counselling can reach populations historically excluded

from mental health care migrant workers, tribal communities, and persons with disabilities among them (Chandra et al., 2021).

Digital advocacy offers another significant avenue. Social media, community radio, and crowdfunding have enabled civil society organisations to mobilise public attention, document rights violations, and press for policy change with speed and reach previously unimaginable. Several online campaigns in India demonstrate the advocacy potential of digital platforms. Online learning platforms have improved access to continuing education for social workers.

Emerging Technologies: Possibilities and Cautions

Artificial intelligence and data analytics are entering social work through risk assessment tools, predictive child protection systems, and algorithmic welfare eligibility platforms. Some research indicates that machine learning models can improve early identification of at-risk children when trained on appropriate datasets (Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2017).

The limitations of these tools are serious. Algorithmic systems trained on historical data reflect historical biases they can entrench racial, caste-based, or economic discrimination in decisions affecting people's access to services or family integrity. High-profile cases in the United States found that predictive child welfare tools flagged poor families at disproportionately high rates simply because poverty correlates with prior system involvement (Eubanks, 2018). Mobile applications can similarly widen gaps between digitally fluent users and those without smartphones, reliable connectivity, or the confidence to navigate complex interfaces. Technology can also deepen inequalities.

Ethical Dimensions

The ethical challenges of digital practice sit at the heart of the profession's commitments. Confidentiality becomes significantly more complex when assessments are conducted over unencrypted video platforms, case notes stored in cloud systems with opaque data-sharing agreements, and clients communicating via personal messaging applications. Practitioners may have limited ability to control who can access the digital information they generate.

Informed consent in digital settings requires more than a signature Clients must understand how their data is collected, stored, and used. For many service users in India older adults, first-generation literates, and those unfamiliar with digital systems this understanding cannot be assumed. Social workers must invest time in genuine consent processes rather than treating consent as a procedural formality.

Professional boundaries in virtual settings also require fresh thinking. Social workers receiving distressed messages on personal devices at midnight, clients locating practitioners on social media, or organisations expecting constant digital availability these are not hypothetical scenarios. Professional bodies must develop clear, workable guidelines for digital boundaries that protect both practitioners and service users (National Association of Social Workers, 2021).

The Indian Context: Disparities and Directions

India's engagement with digital technology in social welfare cannot be read apart from the country's structural inequalities. TRAI data reveals persistent urban-rural divides in internet access, with rural households significantly less likely to have reliable broadband despite national connectivity schemes (TRAI, 2023). Gender gaps remain pronounced: women in many states are less likely than men to own smartphones or to have been taught to use them a pattern that intersects with their role as primary users of welfare services.

The digitalisation of welfare delivery through Aadhaar-linked systems has produced efficiency gains in direct benefit transfers, but it has also generated exclusion errors the profession must attend to. Documented cases of people denied food rations, pension payments, or maternity benefits due to biometric authentication failures have disproportionately affected older persons, manual labourers, and those with physical disabilities groups whose fingerprints may not register reliably (Khera, 2019). Social workers are often closest to these exclusions and best positioned to document and challenge them. The Personal Data Protection framework, still evolving legislatively, will have significant implications for how agencies store and use client data; the profession must engage actively with this policy environment.

Innovation and Future Directions

Social work education must equip students for digital practice as a routine competency, not a specialisation. Digital literacy should be integrated across field practicum, research methods, policy analysis, and direct practice curricula not confined to a standalone module. Students must critically evaluate the impact of digital tools (Raffoul et al., 2020).

Employing organisations must provide practitioners with secure, professionally managed platforms; ensure that tools are adequately explained to service users; and protect staff from expectations of round-the-clock digital availability. At the policy level, social work bodies should contribute to the regulation of algorithmic systems in welfare pressing for transparency in automated decision-making and accountability when those decisions cause harm.

The Human Core of a Digitised Profession

There is a temptation to treat technology as an autonomous force that the profession must simply respond to. But technology is a human product, shaped by human choices, and social work whose defining commitment is to human dignity and social justice has both the right and the responsibility to shape those choices. The question is not whether social work will become digital, but what kind of digital social work it will become.

It can extend reach and reduce certain barriers. What it cannot do is replicate the quality of attention a skilled social worker brings to a room the capacity to hold uncertainty, to be genuinely present with suffering, to convey through one's whole being that a person's life and worth are taken seriously.

Digital tools deserve a considered and critical welcome in social work adopted thoughtfully, evaluated honestly, and always measured against whether they strengthen or weaken the relationships, the empathy, and the commitment to justice that give this profession its meaning. The risk is not technology itself but the slow displacement of professional judgment and human connection by the seductive efficiency of digital systems.

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DIGITAL FUTURES AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES, ETHICS, AND INNOVATION IN A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN WORLD

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Introduction

The digital revolution is transforming the way societies function, communicate, and deliver services. Social work, a profession rooted in human relationships and social justice, is increasingly influenced by digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), tele-counselling, mobile applications, cloud-based systems, and data analytics. These innovations are creating new opportunities to improve service delivery while also raising important ethical questions. This article explores how technology is shaping the future of social work practice, the opportunities it offers, the ethical challenges it creates, and the innovations that are likely to define the profession in the years ahead.

Digital Transformation in Social Work

Digital technologies are now widely used in case management, online counselling, documentation, community outreach, and professional collaboration. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual services, demonstrating that social workers can effectively support individuals and communities through digital platforms. Today, technology is no longer an optional tool; it is becoming an integral part of professional practice.

Opportunities in a Technology-Driven World

Technology expands access to services for people living in remote areas, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and vulnerable populations. Online counselling, video consultations, and mobile support applications allow social workers to reach clients who might otherwise struggle to access assistance.

Digital tools also improve communication and responsiveness. Social workers can provide timely support, monitor client progress, and maintain professional engagement through secure online platforms.

Another major advantage is data-informed decision-making. Digital systems help organizations identify trends, evaluate program outcomes, and allocate resources more effectively. These capabilities strengthen evidence-based practice and improve service quality.

Social media and digital campaigns have also become powerful instruments for awareness

building and advocacy. They enable social workers to amplify marginalized voices, mobilize communities, and promote social justice initiatives on a broader scale.

Ethical Considerations

Despite its benefits, digital practice presents several ethical challenges. Privacy and confidentiality remain critical concerns because sensitive client information can be exposed to cyber risks if not properly protected.

Informed consent is equally important. Clients must understand how their information is collected, stored, and used. Social workers have a responsibility to explain digital processes clearly and transparently.

The digital divide is another concern. Many individuals still lack reliable internet access, digital literacy, or suitable devices. Ethical practice requires ensuring that technology does not create new forms of exclusion.

Professional boundaries in online environments must also be carefully managed. Clear guidelines are needed regarding communication, social media interactions, and the use of digital platforms.

Innovation and the Future of Social Work

Artificial intelligence is emerging as a valuable support tool in social services. AI can assist with documentation, data analysis, and identifying patterns that may help professionals respond more effectively to community needs. However, AI should complement rather than replace human judgment.

Virtual reality is being used for professional education and training, allowing social workers to practice complex scenarios in safe and immersive environments.

Mobile mental health applications, digital welfare platforms, and online support communities are expanding access to care and information. In labour and employment sectors, digital platforms can connect workers with opportunities, training resources, and social protection services.

Building Digital Competence

As technology becomes more integrated into professional practice, social workers need strong digital skills. Training in digital literacy, cybersecurity, ethical technology use, online communication, and AI awareness should become part of professional development. Educational institutions and organizations must prepare practitioners to work confidently and responsibly in digital environments.

Conclusion

The future of social work will be shaped by technology, innovation, and human-centered practice. Digital tools can increase accessibility, strengthen service delivery, improve efficiency, and support evidence-based decision-making. At the same time, ethical principles such as privacy, equity, dignity, and social justice must remain central. The most successful future for social work is one in which technology enhances, rather than replaces, the human relationships that define the profession.

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