



Fieldwork in the Times of COVID-19: A Case Study of IGNOU

Saumya¹ Tushar Singh²

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent lockdowns and protocols with social distancing policies impacted social work education, especially fieldwork globally. Students and fieldwork supervisors had to find alternate solutions for direct face-to-face fieldwork practise and supervision. Moving from face-to-face settings to virtual platforms overnight was not easy; it required supervisors to adapt to remote activities, change learning plans, shift to virtual supervision, formulate different parameters to evaluate the students; and the students to demonstrate satisfactory levels of practise.

The article is a case study of the learners enrolled in the Master of Social Work (MSW) open and distance learning (ODL) programme of the Indira Gandhi National Open University and explores the challenges faced by them vis-à-vis fieldwork practise in social work, the scope and opportunities of fieldwork during COVID-19, and the implementation of fieldwork activities digitally. This article is based on data collected through the use of Google Forms amongst the 253 students enrolled in the MSW programme to understand the fieldwork activities carried out by them and the challenges they faced during the pandemic. The results obtained depict the changes made, the new activities the learners engaged themselves in, and the difficulties they faced in executing the new fieldwork activities whilst under nation-wide lockdowns. Furthermore, changes introduced in the fieldwork practicum of the MSW programme have also been depicted in the article.

Keywords: fieldwork; covid-19; social work; master of social work (MSW); IGNOU



©2022 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented crisis that continues to reshape society in profound and potentially enduring ways. In India, both the first wave and the second wave have necessitated extended lockdowns. Educational institutions have remained closed for prolonged periods. As a result, there has been a marked shift towards reliance on digital platforms, which have emerged as the primary means for teaching and maintaining communication.

^{1,2} Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India

There is now a marked and widespread dependence on technology not only for teaching students but also for managing various academic and administrative responsibilities. The lockdowns imposed due to COVID-19 have had a profound impact on social work education globally (Amadasun, 2020, 2021; Baciú & Trancă, 2021; Banks et al., 2020; Berger et al., 2021; Csoba & Diebel, 2020; El Refae et al., 2021). An urgent need emerged to reconfigure fieldwork practices and learning plans for virtual implementation, without compromising the foundational principles of social work education—namely, learning to think and act as professional social workers.

During this critical period, both educators and students grappled with fundamental questions about the viability of the fieldwork practicum: Where does it stand in a virtual context, and how can it be meaningfully practised? These concerns were widely discussed by social work academicians in various webinars conducted across India. Students expressed uncertainty about their evolving roles as social workers, the completion of academic requirements, the awarding of degrees, and their transition into the professional world. They faced significant concerns regarding their ability to develop essential skills in an environment that was rapidly changing. Many worried about whether they would be able to complete their social work programs at all. The disruption extended to nearly every aspect of life, including the learning process itself.

The situation during the second wave of COVID-19 in India echoed the first, with renewed challenges and uncertainties. However, this time, institutions and individuals were better equipped to continue the educational process through technological means. Despite these adaptations, the crisis remained unprecedented, and there were no definitive answers about when a return to 'normalcy'—particularly in-person fieldwork—might be possible.

In early 2021, India experienced a devastating second wave, surpassing the impact of the first. As the pandemic stretched into its second year, hopes for recovery were again tempered by the emergence of new variants, such as Omicron. Clear solutions remained elusive. Students found themselves confronting the same hardships as their fieldwork supervisors, including job losses, increased caregiving responsibilities at home, illness or death of family members due to COVID-19, and the ongoing struggle to balance personal health concerns with academic and professional obligations. Compounding these difficulties was the academic pressure of navigating disrupted classes and fulfilling mandatory fieldwork requirements.

In response to these extraordinary challenges, the School of Social Work at IGNOU introduced innovative fieldwork practices that could be carried out both in situ and through digital platforms. These included activities such as surveys, resource mapping, case studies, the development of emergency response strategies, virtual peer-support systems, and social marketing. These adaptations proved invaluable and were widely embraced by learners in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.

Review of Literature

Fieldwork, considered the 'signature pedagogy' of social work (CSWE, 2015), faced a significant disruption when national governments across the globe imposed lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work, distinct from many other disciplines due to its deep-rooted commitment to human rights and social justice, was particularly affected. The consequences of the pandemic were acutely felt among marginalised and excluded populations, and those with limited resources (Ahsan Ullah et al., 2021; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2021; Kumar, 2021).

Amadasun (2020) viewed the pandemic as a direct threat to the values central to the social work profession, warning that the discipline risked losing its relevance. To counter this, he suggested that social workers—as service providers—could assume roles such as educators, counsellors, and referral agents, thereby promoting resilience and relationship-building strategies to support communities (p. 755). He further advocated for social workers to engage in both short- and long-term advocacy, research, and support services. In the short term, this could involve providing financial aid or medical supplies; in the long term, it could mean strengthening health infrastructure and housing. He also emphasised the importance of studying service user coping mechanisms, social worker responses, and broader socio-economic impacts, while continuing to offer conventional support (Amadasun, 2020).

Baciu and Trancă (2021) conducted a SWOT analysis of fieldwork practicum programs delivered both online and on-site at the Buziaş Educational Centre in Romania between 2019 and 2021. They acknowledged that each format had unique strengths and challenges. On-site practicum enabled empathy-building and the fostering of positive interpersonal relationships, while online practicum encouraged creativity, saved time, and provided access to enriched digital resources (p. 184). However, online delivery was highly dependent on internet connectivity,

appropriate digital tools, and technical proficiency. A loss of connectivity for one participant could lead to increased stress for others involved (Baciu & Trancă, 2021).

Regarding opportunities, Baciu and Trancă (2021) noted that on-site practicum promoted solidarity and professional networking, whereas online practicum offered the comfort of working from home and allowed the development of previously underemphasised skills such as digital literacy and troubleshooting. They concluded that although the nature of skills acquired differed, both modalities were successful in achieving fieldwork objectives.

Morley and Clarke (2020), from Queensland University of Technology, highlighted the range of adaptations introduced in Australia by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), such as reduced placement hours, remote work, identification of non-traditional placements, and adjustments in supervision (p. 1050). Among the innovative examples was a community-led project supporting asylum-seeking refugees. Social work students engaged through arts-based methods, including theatre and dialogue, taking on roles such as artistic directors and facilitators to support the refugees' political engagement and the expression of personal narratives (Morley & Clarke, 2020, p. 1051).

Morley and Clarke (2020) also observed that the crisis brought about by COVID-19 led to an expansion in the scope of field placements. Students were able to engage in national and international human rights campaigns, facilitated by the widespread adoption of remote supervision and online engagement. This broader acceptance of distance-based fieldwork placements was a silver lining amidst the challenges (p. 1051).

At Stony Brook University, Morris et al. (2020) described an innovative action learning model dubbed Gifts of Gab, which promoted critical thinking and reflexivity. Students participated in weekly phone conversations with isolated older adults to mitigate the impact of lockdown-induced loneliness. This initiative not only supported community needs but also allowed students to fulfill their fieldwork requirements (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Panwar et al., 2014, as cited in Morris et al., 2020, p. 1130).

Malka (2021) explored the use of the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1994, as cited in Malka, 2021) as a creative tool for fieldwork reflection among social work students. Rooted in critical pedagogy and feminism, this method allowed students to share their lived experiences and challenges through photographs and narratives, empowering them in the process. Sixteen undergraduate students produced 66 photovoices reflecting their experiences with fieldwork during the pandemic.

Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020) examined how the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) turned the 'tsunami' of the pandemic into an opportunity for innovation. They highlighted the development of a self-directed field practicum that integrated coursework with volunteering and virtual learning, tailored to support students in rural and remote areas. This approach broadened the scope of social work education and fostered new learning modalities, enabled by technological platforms (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020, pp. 1011–1012).

Methodology

This study employed both primary and secondary sources for data collection, using an exploratory research design aligned with its objectives. Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to Master of Social Work (MSW) students who had completed their fieldwork during 2020 and the first half of 2021. The questionnaire was emailed to participants using a convenience sampling method. Respondents were given 20 days to complete and submit the form, and only responses received within that time frame were included. In total, 253 responses were considered for analysis.

Secondary data were obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant literature published during 2020 and 2021, focusing specifically on pedagogical practices in social work fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

Part A: Profile of the Learners

Out of the 253 responses received from MSW students, 163 (approximately 64 per cent) were female and 90 (approximately 36 per cent) were male. The average age of the respondents was 30.35 years, with a standard deviation of 7.31 years.

A total of 250 students responded to the question regarding employment status. Among them, 111 reported being employed full-time, 32 were employed part-time, and 107 were not employed at the time of data collection.

Part B: Fieldwork During and Post COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the School of Social Work (SOSW), IGNOU, revised the guidelines for fieldwork in May 2020 to help MSW students continue their practicum activities under significantly altered conditions. When asked whether they were able to follow these revised guidelines, 195 students responded affirmatively.

According to the fieldwork structure under the SOSW, MSW students are expected to make

a minimum of ten contacts with their respective fieldwork supervisors. This includes at least five Individual Conferences (ICs) where students discuss their learning strategies and challenges. In addition, although not mandatory, five Group Conferences (GCs) are recommended to facilitate peer-sharing under the guidance of the supervisor. The majority of students confirmed meeting these requirements, while the remaining indicated otherwise.

Out of 253 students, 218 reported participating in Individual Conferences and 210 in Group Conferences with their fieldwork supervisors.

Students were asked to identify the tools and techniques they initially used to carry out fieldwork during the national lockdown period. A majority indicated using telephone surveys (154), followed by online data collection tools (142). Other frequently mentioned resources included newspapers (113), documentation tools (100), case study methods (99), and journal articles (84).

In describing the changes they experienced in their fieldwork practice during and after COVID-19, students provided a wide range of responses. Among the common challenges reported under the broader theme of "difficulty in doing fieldwork" were the fear of contracting the virus, the need to combat misinformation, lack of transportation, difficulty in understanding people's problems fully, rejection by NGOs, technological issues on the part of service users, limited contact with fieldwork supervisors, reluctance among people to meet social workers, restrictions from authorities, scarcity of resources, lack of public awareness, mental health issues, the challenge of meeting people's basic needs such as food and medicine, communication problems with NGOs and study centres, and the inability to verify facts firsthand. These aspects have been tabulated in the section on challenges faced during the outbreak.

Students also indicated engagement in a variety of new fieldwork activities. The least undertaken among these were resource mapping and mobilisation for agencies aiding COVID-19 patients. Similarly, the creation of advocacy materials related to pandemic response was reported by few students. Slightly more students were involved in developing training curricula for agencies assisting vulnerable populations, while designing content for use in Group Conferences was relatively more common.

When asked about their overall experiences with the new forms of fieldwork, several students shared reflections. One student stated: "Even in the time of [the] pandemic the curriculum helped me to become more productive. It not only helped me to overcome my own struggles but also encouraged me to apply the classroom theories in real life critical situations and be present for others. I came to know about the migrants ... I came to know about their lifestyle,

struggle, and how COVID-19 has [had] nearly no effect on their lives as they have bigger struggle[s] to face...”

Another student expressed appreciation for the opportunity to explore alternative avenues of fieldwork and data collection, stating: “As the pandemic is closing off [the] traditional fieldwork options, it is opening others. In a world of social distancing, cyberspace is “the field.” With COVID-19 pushing an array of interactions to the virtual space on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram, the online population has become increasingly representative of society as a whole and therefore considerably more interesting to scholars.”

When asked to identify the primary obstacles they encountered in carrying out fieldwork, students cited a variety of difficulties. The most frequently mentioned issue was being personally impacted by COVID-19 infection (81 students), followed by responses marked as not applicable (61), inability to contact the fieldwork supervisor (45), lack of guidance (39), and inadequate access to internet connectivity (26).

Revised Guidelines for Fieldwork During Covid-19: The Case of IGNOU

Fieldwork constitutes the most crucial component of any social work programme and is often referred to as the backbone of the social work curriculum. In May 2020, amidst the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the School of Social Work at IGNOU, like many other universities worldwide, introduced revised guidelines for its fieldwork practicum. These adaptations were designed to ensure that students could complete their academic requirements without significant hindrance.

The most significant challenge faced was the inability to visit individuals, groups, or communities in person. In response, strategies were redesigned to allow students to conduct fieldwork from home using telephones, mobile devices, emails, WhatsApp, and other instant messaging services. Although these revised guidelines were originally intended for the academic year 2020, they were extended into 2021 due to the resurgence of cases during India’s second wave of the pandemic. Students were expected to remain in regular contact with their fieldwork supervisors and coordinators at both the Study Centres (SCs) and the IGNOU Regional Centres (RCs).

In the first year of the MSW programme, concurrent fieldwork included tasks such as documenting the impact of COVID-19 on various vulnerable groups including the elderly, women, children, the critically ill, and migrants. Students were encouraged to use sources such as newspapers, online platforms, and virtual data collection tools to accomplish this. They were also

asked to propose social work interventions to support post-pandemic recovery among these groups. In line with the strengths-based approach fundamental to social work, students were trained to identify the internal resources of individuals, groups, and communities to help them overcome adversity. Fieldwork activities included telephonic and online surveys, secondary research through internet-based content, analysis of news media, participation in IGNOU's Interactive Radio Counselling and Gyan Darshan broadcasts, as well as attending webinars and referring to relevant reading materials.

These revised guidelines were based on the belief that the necessary fieldwork skills could be effectively imparted through the combined support of experienced practitioners and fieldwork supervisors. Their expertise was transmitted through online platforms, webinars, and interactive sessions that brought together social work academicians, researchers, and practitioners to share their field-based experiences. Fieldwork supervisors were encouraged to conduct ICs and GCs via online platforms and to facilitate peer learning by inviting second-year students and alumni to share their own fieldwork narratives with new learners.

For the block placement component in the first year, students were asked to document the effects of COVID-19 on learners across various educational settings—whether in school, college, or distance learning environments. This could be done through phone-based surveys or by drawing on digital and print sources. Another task involved documenting the impact of lockdowns on families, supported by qualitative data and personal narratives.

In the second year of the MSW programme, concurrent fieldwork included the assessment of two articles on online education, with students expected to articulate the role of digital learning during the pandemic. They were also tasked with studying the socio-psychological impact of COVID-19, using both primary and secondary data sources, and documenting the contributions of professional social workers during this crisis. Students were further encouraged to participate in resource mapping activities for any local organisations in their vicinity.

During their internships, students were asked to write case studies on the migrant crisis in India during the pandemic. They documented support mechanisms initiated by individuals, communities, or groups in their local areas and analysed the coping strategies adopted by different segments of the population. Final-year students were also encouraged to engage in online counselling and web-based interventions, using mobile technology and social media platforms to connect with the professional social work community and take part in virtual discussions and planning processes.

For those in the second year who opted for the dissertation course, two topics were suggested. Students could either examine the role of digital platforms in the education sector during lockdown or study how communities supported vulnerable populations during the pandemic. All projects required digital approval from assigned supervisors through email before online submission.

Conclusion

In designing alternative fieldwork practices during the pandemic, social work educators ensured that the core mission of the profession was never compromised. As trainee social workers, students were able to internalise the core values of service, social justice, respect for human dignity, integrity, and the importance of human relationships.

The crisis caused by the pandemic has reaffirmed the relevance of social work and deepened the understanding of its foundational goal—to promote human well-being and support the fulfillment of basic needs. The necessity for adaptable, flexible fieldwork practices has never been more apparent. Online platforms have emerged as the new field of practice, providing previously unimagined spaces for service delivery, learning, and professional engagement. Morley and Clarke (2020) aptly noted that the discipline must now embrace the realities of remote engagement, emphasising that “being able to engage in multimodal service delivery [is] vital to meet the emerging needs of the growing numbers of people ... [who are] now reliant on community support” (p. 1052).

This study has highlighted the broad range of options available for fieldwork practice among Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students. It has also brought to light the complex challenges and shifting dynamics involved in adapting fieldwork for a digital era. Prominent among these challenges are the digital divide and insufficient media literacy, both of which remain significant barriers to effective participation (Nikoreishita & Uppadhayay, 2021; Pandey, 2020; Keelery, 2021). While the digital divide refers to unequal access to digital tools and internet services, digital media literacy denotes the ability to navigate, assess, and use digital content effectively for decision-making (Julien, 2018).

Bridging the digital divide and promoting digital literacy must now be considered foundational to the practice of fieldwork in a digitized world. Despite the challenges, this new environment offers students the opportunity to develop critical professional competencies such as digital curation and information literacy. These skills are essential for building confidence and ensuring success in both academic and professional realms.

Fieldwork supervisors have played a pivotal role in facilitating students' learning experiences through effective online supervision. Learners are encouraged to participate in webinars to understand the roles played by civil society organisations, NGOs, and professional social workers. Without such exposure, it becomes difficult to fully grasp the depth, scope, and meaning of the discipline of social work in contemporary society.

References

- Ahsan Ullah, A. K. M., Nawaz, F., & Chatteraj, D. (2021). Locked up under lockdown: The COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant population. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), Article 100126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100126>
- Amadasun, S. (2020). Social work and COVID-19 pandemic: An action call. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 753–756. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820959357>
- Amadasun, S. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic in Africa: What lessons for social work education and practice? *International Social Work*, 64(2), 246–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820949620>
- Archer-Kuhn, B., Ayala, J., Hewson, J., & Letkemann, L. (2020). Canadian reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic in social work education: From tsunami to innovation. *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1010–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1826922>
- Baciu, E. L., & Trancă, L. M. (2021). Re-framing challenges as opportunities: Moving a social work practicum program in an online format and making it work. *Revista de Asistență Socială [Social Assistance Magazine]*, (1), 179–191.
- Banks, S., Cai, T., de Jonge, E., Shears, J., Shum, M., Sobočan, A. M., Strom, K., Truell, R., Úriz, M. J., & Weinberg, M. (2020). Practising ethically during COVID-19: Social work challenges and responses. *International Social Work*, 63(5), 569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820949614>
- Berger, R., Mallow, A., Tabag, K., White, C. T., Fiore, C., Schachar, A., & Hirsch, E. (2021). Teaching and learning in a time of Corona: A social work experience. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00804-0>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS)*. Retrieved August 31, 2021 from https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/2015-EPAS/2015EPAS_Web_FINAL.pdf.aspx
- Csoba, J., & Diebel, A. (2020). World wide closed! Social worker field practice during the 'lockdown' period. *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1094–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1829580>
- El Refae, G. A., Kaba, A., & Eletter, S. (2021). Distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Satisfaction, opportunities and challenges as perceived by faculty members and students. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITSE-08-2020-0128>
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2021, April 28). *India: Protect rights, dignity amid COVID-19 crisis*. Author. Retrieved August 31, 2021 from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/28/india-protect-rights-dignity-amid-COVID-19-crisis>
- Julien, H. (2018). Digital literacy in theory and practice. In M. Khosrow-Pour (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology* (4th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 2243–2252). IGI Global. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-2255-3.ch195>

- Keelery, S. (April 28, 2021). Internet literacy index across India in 2021, by category. *Statista*. Retrieved December 17, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1232343/internet-literacy-index-by-category-india/>
- Kumar, S., & Choudhury, S. (2021). Migrant workers and human rights: A critical study on India's COVID-19 lockdown policy. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), Article 100130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100130>
- Malka, M. (2021). Real-time lived experience of social work students in their field training during the coronavirus crisis: Insights from photovoice-based research. *British Journal of Social Work*, Article bcaa240. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa240>
- Morley, C., & Clarke, J. (2020). From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1048–1057. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1836145>
- Morris, Z. A., Dragone, E., Peabody, C., & Carr, K. (2020). Isolation in the midst of a pandemic: Social work students rapidly respond to community and field work needs. *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1127–1136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1809649>
- Nikoreishita, M., & Uppadhyay, I. (August 22, 2021). *India's gendered digital divide: How the absence of digital access is leaving women behind*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved December 17, 2021, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-gendered-digital-divide/>
- Pandey, K. (July 30, 2020). COVID-19 lockdown highlights India's great digital divide. *Down To Earth*. Retrieved December 17, 2021, from <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/covid-19-lockdown-highlights-india-s-great-digital-divide-72514>