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THE RIGHT TO LIVE IN THE REAL WORLD AS A FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL WELFARE NEED AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

Social work, as a life-saving profession in the digital age, plays a crucial role in meeting basic human needs, reducing deprivation, and promoting social welfare. Traditional welfare needs such as housing, healthcare, education, insurance, transportation, and recreation have long been recognized as fundamental pillars of social well-being. However, in today's increasingly digitalized world, a new social welfare need is emerging: "the right to live in the real world". This right arises from the emergence of new and disguised inequalities that stem from the dominance of advanced technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, over various aspects of social and cognitive life. One of the new dimensions of inequality in the digital age is the divide between AI producers and processors and those who are merely consumers of these technologies. This gap not only affects people's access to technology but also leads to deepening knowledge and cognitive disparities within societies. Unlike previous revolutions - agricultural, industrial, and digital - where societal transformations were relatively transparent, the dominance of AI over thought processes, the power to analyze reality, and the understanding of truth pose a significant challenge for social work. Under these circumstances, social work must go beyond its traditional service provision role and actively defend individuals' right to control reality, understand truth, and enhance their critical thinking abilities. Achieving this goal requires a fundamental revision of social work curricula and the preparation of students with knowledge and skills tailored to the digital era. Specialized training in future studies, AI fundamentals, data-driven decision-making, analysis of modern social policies, and an understanding of the impact of technological advancements on social welfare systems and digital justice are essential areas that must be integrated into social work education.

Keywords

Social work education, digital transformation, digital justice, and Artificial Intelligence.

1. Statement of the Problem

A review of social work curricula in Iranian universities reveals that both theoretical and practical training have largely overlooked the impact of technological advancements and the requirements of the digital era. In the field of technology, social work students primarily receive basic instruction, such as computer fundamentals and research software like SPSS. Additionally, during internships, social workers rarely engage with online service centers. This indicates a significant misalignment between social work education and the rapidly evolving societal and technological landscape (Dominelli, 2020).

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On the one hand, the rapid growth of technology and the widespread integration of tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) have significantly influenced all aspects of social welfare, including education, healthcare, housing, insurance, and employment. On the other hand, social workers seem to struggle with analyzing these changes and understanding their broader implications. This delay in adaptation can pose a serious threat to the "right to live in the real world", as societies that fail to keep pace with these transformations may become increasingly vulnerable to digital inequality and technological disparities (Jönsson, 2021).

Therefore, social workers must adopt a preventive approach to mitigate future crises stemming from technological disruptions. By formulating appropriate policies and educational programs, they can safeguard "the right to live in the real world" as a fundamental aspect of social welfare. Achieving this goal necessitates fundamental reforms in university curricula and the preparation of social work students to navigate the challenges of the digital age effectively. This study critically examines existing literature and documents to highlight the urgent need for such curricular revisions.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a documentary review approach combined with critical content analysis to examine social work curricula. In this regard, the syllabi and educational programs of social work in various Iranian universities - including Allameh Tabataba'i University, Kharazmi University, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Shahed University, Yazd University, and other academic institutions - have been systematically reviewed and analyzed. A documentary review is an effective method for analyzing educational materials, allowing researchers to examine existing documents in their real-world context (Bowen, 2009).

Using qualitative content analysis with a critical perspective, this research evaluates the extent to which social work curricula align with technological advancements and the needs of the digital society. Critical content analysis facilitates the identification of gaps in curriculum design while uncovering underlying structural, ideological, and institutional barriers to innovation (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2014). This approach is particularly valuable for evaluating the readiness of educational systems to adapt to rapidly evolving socio-technological realities

3. Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to identify deficiencies in social work education and propose recommendations for curricular reforms and updates to address emerging technological challenges. These challenges include the rise of artificial intelligence, online social services, and the digitalization of social welfare systems.

- Critical Content Analysis of Social Work Curriculum in Relation to the Digital Age

The critical content analysis approach examines how concepts, ideologies, and power dynamics are represented in texts. In this study, the social work curriculum in Iran has been analyzed using this method to assess its alignment with the transformations of the digital age.

- Overall Assessment of the Curriculum

A review of undergraduate social work syllabi in Iranian universities indicates that the curriculum primarily focuses on classical concepts of social work, such as social work principles, social work law, social pathology, and welfare policies. While digital technologies are increasingly shaping social, economic, and service structures, the curriculum remains highly limited in addressing technological advancements.

– Lack of Digital Technology Coverage in Course Content

An analysis of the course subjects reveals that technology-related courses are mostly limited to "computer basics" and data analysis software such as SPSS. However, major developments such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analysis, online social work services, and digital welfare platforms are significantly transforming the social work field. Moreover, social work students do not engage with critical topics such as digital justice, technological discrimination, the role of algorithms in social services, or the ethical challenges of technology.

– Field Training and Online Social Work Services

Regarding internships and practical training, the curriculum remains centered on traditional in-person social work practices, with placements in rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and welfare institutions. Online and digital social work experiences are almost absent, highlighting a significant gap between academic training and the realities of digital social services.

– Consequences of Overlooking Digital Transformations

Failing to integrate digital advancements into social work education can lead to several critical consequences, including:

❖ Reduced the ability of social workers to analyze social changes driven by technology.

❖ A growing disconnect between welfare systems and technological transformations.

❖ Lack of essential skills for delivering digital and online social services.

❖ Inability to address digital inequalities and social justice challenges in virtual spaces.

This analysis highlights the urgent need to revise and modernize the social work curriculum to equip future professionals with the necessary digital competencies for an evolving world.

1. Suggested Revisions for Social Work Education in the Digital Age

2. Enhancing Knowledge Competencies Required for Social Workers in the Second Quarter of the 21st Century

3. Understanding Social Work Theories and Their Application in the Context of Technology. Social workers must develop a deep understanding of new social policies and the impact of technological advancements on vulnerable populations. The emergence of digital technologies, big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and online platforms has fundamentally redefined social welfare and supportive services. Social workers should be able to comprehend how these changes are reshaping basic welfare needs and assess their implications on social policymaking, digital justice, and support for vulnerable groups. AI, with its remarkable capabilities in data analysis, pattern recognition, and decision-making, has the potential to revolutionize various aspects of social welfare, ranging from healthcare and education to poverty alleviation and disaster response (Rathore, 2024). The widespread adoption of AI-powered business analytics applications has revolutionized decision-making. Yet, it has

also introduced significant challenges related to algorithmic bias, data ethics, and governance (Kiesse Bahangulu & Berko, 2025).

4. Required Skill Competencies for Social Work in the Second Quarter of the 21st Century

– Specialized Training in Futures Studies, a key skill for social workers, is the ability to engage in future studies. Social workers must be able to anticipate the impacts of emerging technologies, such as AI and the metaverse, on different social groups, cultures, and communities. These changes may not affect all communities uniformly and could lead to new social divisions. For instance, AI may lead to the formation of new minority groups or exacerbate existing social inequalities. Social workers need to be well-versed in these developments to design appropriate intervention strategies. In this regard, social work curricula must be significantly updated to include methods of future studies. It is recommended that at the undergraduate level, at least one course be dedicated to the foundations of future studies in social work. In the master's program, the topic should be explored more extensively, with six units covering the subject. Furthermore, doctoral programs should approach future studies in a specialized and research-focused manner, allowing students to integrate advanced future studies, such as:

– Scenario writing and trend analysis;
– Analysis of macro trends;
– Utilization of big data and AI;
– Participatory future studies;

– Machine learning enables predictive analytics for identifying at-risk populations, while automation streamlines administrative tasks, enhancing direct client interactions. Big data guides decisions and interventions, while telehealth improves remote mental health access. Mobile apps strengthen engagement, monitoring, and communication but raise ethical concerns about human connection, data privacy, and equitable access—familiarity with Artificial Intelligence and Data-Driven Decision Making. In the digital era, social work based on data and AI has become an essential skill. Social workers must be familiar with the fundamentals of AI, machine learning, and data analysis methods to better understand the impact of these technologies on their clients' lives. This requires interdisciplinary studies in social work, data science, and information technology. Master's and doctoral programs should guide students toward these areas, creating opportunities for cutting-edge research in these fields.

Overall, social work in the age of the metaverse and AI needs to redefine skills and educational standards so that social workers can play a more active and effective role in supporting individuals and communities in the digital world. A key prerequisite for this process is an understanding of the historical genealogy of these technologies. According to the International Science Council (ISC) (Science Council, 2024), AI was officially founded at the Dartmouth Conference in 1956, marking a significant turning point in the emergence of impactful technological waves across various disciplines, including social work.

– Technology-Based Skill Development in Social Work Internships with a Focus on Online Services. In the digital age, social workers need to develop skills in providing online services, analyzing social data, and employing new technologies in social work processes. This shift requires the updating and modification of social work education programs so that students can acquire the necessary skills in real-world settings under the supervision of experienced mentors (Wang, 2025). These courses should not only teach how to use technology in delivering social

work services but also emphasize critical thinking and rethinking traditional and digital social work methods.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the alignment of social work curricula with digital transformations and contemporary societal needs, and it revealed that current educational programs in Iranian universities face several limitations in this regard. While technological transformations, particularly advancements in artificial intelligence, have had a profound impact on all aspects of social welfare, social work programs remain largely focused on traditional and classical concepts, neglecting crucial topics such as digital justice, technological discrimination, the role of algorithms in social services, and online services.

This misalignment can lead to several negative consequences, including the reduced capacity of social workers to analyze technology-driven social changes, the growing disconnect between welfare systems and technological advancements, and the lack of essential skills in delivering online and digital services. Moreover, overlooking digital transformations can result in an inability to address digital inequalities and social justice challenges in virtual spaces, posing a significant threat to the right to live in the real world.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to revise social work curricula and prepare students to navigate the challenges of the digital age effectively. Proposed changes include integrating future studies, introducing artificial intelligence foundations, data-driven decision-making, developing online services, and deepening understanding of contemporary social policies. Only with these approaches can social workers effectively engage in today's digital world and defend the right to live in the real world as a fundamental aspect of social welfare.

This research underscores the necessity of fundamentally revising university curricula, especially in the field of social work, to equip students with digital competencies and technological skills. This will help improve social services and reduce social harm in the digital age.

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