

Role of Social Workers in Promoting Environment Sustainability in Urban Settings

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability within urban settings in Sri Lanka. Utilising key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, the study reveals diverse initiatives undertaken by social workers and their varying levels of awareness regarding environmental issues. To the author's best knowledge, except for a few pilot studies, there have been no distinct attempts to examine the practice of social workers specifically for environmental sustainability within the context of the Sri Lankan urban environment. The study objectives are to evaluate the knowledge of environmental sustainability amongst social workers, review the activities and programs for implementing and advancing sustainability, look at the barriers encountered in the process, and review community involvement and awareness. By conducting an exploratory study with ten social workers, the study reveals that the participants have a range of understanding of environmental sustainability from highly aware to lacking understanding and requesting cultural training and development. Social workers participate in sustainable practices, campaigns and partnerships within communities, authorities, and organizations. However, there are challenges such as; lack of funds, the institutional framework, competing agendas and policies, and policy deficiencies that prevent the efficient realization of this goal. The study demonstrates the involvement of the community and the importance of empowering it to find proper solutions to environmental problems in terms of the contribution of social workers. They become as the core components of awareness raising and campaigning for policies adoption to mainstream environment sustainability in social work education. These findings call for improved educational preparation, organizational backing, and policies to prepare social workers for overcoming current environmental obstacles and advocating for environmentally sustainable commitments in urban communities.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Environmental sustainability, Policy reform, Social work

Introduction

Urbanization and globalization have significantly transformed the dynamics of contemporary society, posing mainly challenges to environmental sustainability. In urban area's population and complexity, there is a pressing need to examine the role of social workers in fostering environmental sustainability within these settings. The nexus between social work and environmental sustainability is an emerging field that warrants exploration, given the potential of social workers to contribute to sustainable development (Little & Green, 2009; Middleton & O'Keefe, 2001). The concept of sustainable development, as defined by Munasinghe (2009), emphasizes the interdependence of environmental, social, and economic dimensions. The urban environment, characterized by rapid industrialization and consumption patterns, demands a holistic approach to address the intricate challenges posed by unsustainable practices. Corporate initiatives and community development interventions have been explored in the context of sustainable development (Muthuri, Moon, & Idemudia, 2012). However, the specific role of social workers in this context remains under-explored. While there is a growing recognition of the need for sustainable development, the role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability in urban settings is not well defined. The existing literature predominantly focuses on broader perspectives, overlooking the specific contributions that social workers can make. This gap in understanding impedes the development of targeted interventions and strategies to use the potential of social work in addressing environmental challenges in urban areas.

Research Objectives

- To assess the awareness and understanding of social workers regarding environmental sustainability in urban settings.
- To explore social workers' existing practices and initiatives in promoting environmental sustainability.
- To identify the barriers and challenges faced by social workers in effectively contributing to environmental sustainability in urban areas.

Research Questions

- What is the level of awareness and understanding among social workers regarding the concept of environmental sustainability in urban settings?
- How do social workers currently contribute to promoting environmental sustainability in urban areas, and what initiatives have they undertaken?
- What are the key barriers and challenges social workers encounter to enhance environmental sustainability in urban settings?

Literature Review

The literature on sustainable development and social work in the context of urban settings, particularly in developing countries like Sri Lanka, provides valuable insights into the intricate relationship between social work, sustainable development, and community empowerment. Aladuwwa and Momsen (2010) highlight the intersection of sustainable development, water resources management, and women's empowerment in the Wanaraniya Water Project in Sri Lanka. The study underscores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in sustainable development initiatives and the crucial role of social workers in advocating for women's participation and empowerment within water resource management projects.

Aslam and Awang (2015) explore the role of rural tourism in fostering sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Their study emphasizes the potential of enterprising rural tourism as a catalyst for economic development and community empowerment. Social workers facilitate and support such initiatives, aligning with the broader goals of sustainable rural development. Atapattu (2001) critically examines the concept of sustainable development under international law and Sri Lankan law. The study delves into the legal frameworks and challenges associated with implementing sustainable development practices. This provides a foundational understanding for social workers to navigate legal contexts and advocate for policies conducive to sustainable development. Chitereka (2009) offers insights into the challenges and opportunities for social work in developing continents, focusing on the case of Africa. While not specific to Sri Lanka, the study provides a broader perspective on the role of social work in addressing the unique challenges faced by developing regions, thereby informing the discourse on social work in the Sri Lankan context.

Daskon and Binns (2010) investigate the interface between culture, tradition, and sustainable rural livelihoods in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The study explores the impact of cultural factors on development and underscores the importance of culturally sensitive social work interventions in promoting sustainable rural livelihoods. Dayaratne (2018) draws lessons from vernacular settlements in Sri Lanka, contributing to the discourse on sustainable development. The study emphasizes the need for an integrated approach that considers local architectural and cultural practices, suggesting implications for social work interventions in urban areas with diverse cultural contexts. DE Silva, Ranasinghe, and Abeykoon (2016) examine the achievements and challenges of Sri Lanka in achieving universal health coverage and the health Sustainable Development Goal. Understanding the health-related aspects of sustainable development is essential for social workers engaged in community health initiatives and underscores the interconnectedness of social and health outcomes. Ife, Soldatić, and Briskman (2022) explore the intersection of human rights and social work, providing a theoretical framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of social work practice in the context of sustainable development. This perspective is crucial for guiding social workers in advocating for the rights of communities and individuals affected by unsustainable practices.

This comprehensive literature review establishes a foundation for understanding the diverse facets of sustainable development and the role of social work in addressing the complex challenges faced by urban settings in developing countries, with a specific focus on the Sri Lankan context. The insights gained from these studies inform the theoretical and practical dimensions of the study, guiding the exploration of the role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability in Sri Lankan urban settings.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability in urban settings, specifically within the context of Sri Lanka. Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of social workers' experiences, perceptions, and practices, contributing to a rich and contextualized analysis. The sampling method utilized in this study was purposive sampling, sampling technique that involves selecting

participants based on their expertise, relevance to the research topic, and ability to provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The sampling population consisted of experienced social workers actively engaged in urban settings across diverse regions in Sri Lanka. This deliberate selection ensured the inclusion of professionals with diverse perspectives and experiences related to environmental sustainability and social work. Key informant interviews were conducted with social workers identified as key stakeholders in the field. These interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, experiences, and insights related to the role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to share their unique insights. Focus group discussions were organized with groups of social workers to facilitate interactive and dynamic conversations. This method encouraged participants to share and discuss their views, fostering the exploration of shared experiences and diverse perspectives within the group setting. Focus group discussions provided a platform for participants to reflect on collective practices, challenges, and potential strategies for integrating environmental sustainability into their work. Observational methods were employed to complement the insights gathered through interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for data analysis. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and the development of a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of social workers in promoting environmental sustainability. Qualitative methodology aimed to capture the complexities of social work practices within the setting of environmental sustainability, providing valuable insights that contribute to the existing knowledge base and inform future interventions and policies in Sri Lankan urban settings.

Findings

The findings of the current qualitative study provide insights into the defying role of social workers to foster environmentalism within the urban context of Sri Lanka. Five overarching themes are identified and the findings discussed in relation to the study objectives.

Theme 1: The Environmental/Sustainability Education Knowledge and Comprehension domain

The participants' awareness and understanding of environmental sustainability as social workers was unequal. Some participants demonstrated good knowledge of the link between social work and the environment, while others demonstrated a need to undertake more studies in this area. Participant A said "Concerns about environment have to be met, but sadly, we are not trained enough to solve issues relating to the environment adequately." The lack of common environmental awareness in social work curricula emerged as the definitive contributing factor towards the variability of the level of environmental consciousness. This was in line with the objective of the study to establish areas of ignorance and professional training gaps about child abuse among social workers.

Table 1: Levels of Awareness Among Social Workers

Awareness Level	Description	Example Statement
High	Comprehensive understanding of environmental issues	"Environmental sustainability is central to social welfare."
Medium	Basic awareness with limited practical knowledge	"I understand the issues but lack tools to address them."
Low	Minimal awareness or understanding	"This is a new area for me."

Theme 2: Actions and Strategies for Environmental Sustainability

Methods and Measures for Environmental Conservation Thus, environmental sustainability efforts in which social workers are concerned include the following. These efforts encompassed:

- **Community-Centered Initiatives:** Examples include campaigns for recycling and community gardening.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Organized to educate communities about environmental conservation.
- **Partnership with Local Authorities:** Sustainable initiatives with city councils on how to adopt sustainable approaches.

All the participants stressed how concerning contextual factors in the environment could be integrated into modern frameworks for social work. This aligns with the need to identify methodological approaches supporting sustainable urbanism.



Figure 1: Key Initiatives for Environmental Sustainability A diagram illustrating community-based projects, awareness campaigns, and collaborative efforts, visually representing the interconnectedness of these activities. Source: Author's findings

Theme 3: Obstacles and Difficulties in Execution

Challenges and Hurdles faced in implementation Some of these positive changes mentioned, however, highlighted major areas of concern that the participants identified. The counterforces include resource limitation in the form of inadequate funding and shortage of staff, lack of organisational support to environmental initiatives in the institution, prioritization of social issues that often overwhelm environmental endeavours, and policy gaps, especially the absence of a more coherent policy framework to address environmental sustainability in social work. According to Participant B, "We tend to focus on today's social issues while giving environmental issues a raw deal." Therefore, such outcomes underscore the need for structural and policy changes addressed in the study goals.

Table 2: Identified Barriers and Proposed Solutions

Barrier	Description	Proposed Solution
Limited Resources	Insufficient funding and personnel	Increase funding and recruit specialized staff
Institutional Constraints	Lack of organizational support	Develop institutional policies supporting environmental initiatives
Competing Priorities	Balancing immediate needs with sustainability	Establish clear priorities and allocate dedicated resources
Policy Gaps	Lack of cohesive frameworks	Advocate for integrated environmental-social policies

Source: Author's findings

Theme 4: Involvement and Empowerment of the Community

Community Participation and Overall, Power of the Community The level of participation from the community was considered as an essential section of the practice of social work entailing the conservation as well as the protection of the environment. The representatives of social workers stressed the need for engagement with the community to enable them to seek sustainable resolutions with regard to the needs of their community. Examples of effective community-led initiatives included:

- Community Clean-Up Initiatives: Worked with other neighbors.
- Recycling Initiatives: Fostered with the support from educational institutions and local facilities.

On his/her part Participant C stated thus, "In most cases we have seen that when communities own environmental processes more sustainable outcomes are achieved". This discovery aligns with one of the aims of this study, which is to understand the role of social workers in facilitating sustainable community development.

Community Engagement Model for Environmental Sustainability

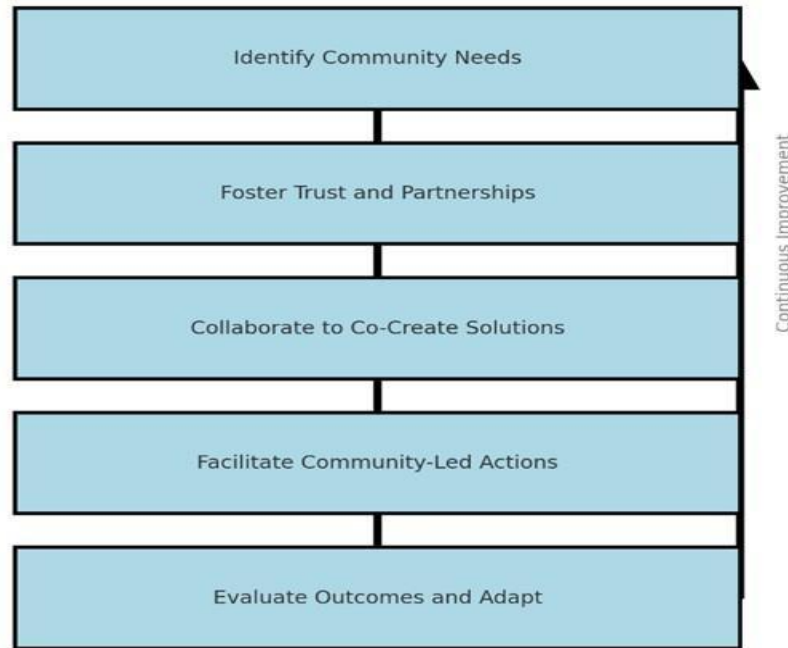


Figure 2: Community Engagement Model A flowchart depicting the steps involved in community- driven environmental initiatives, emphasizing collaboration and empowerment.

Theme 5: Importance of Education and Advocacy

Education and Advocacy and their significance, as well as awareness and training as key processes, were found important for the enhancement of environmental responsibility. Participants emphasized the importance of informing both communities and other social workers regarding:

- Social effects of ecological factors.
- Eco-friendly methods.
- Democracy, rights and the social and environmental justice.

Awareness raising and lobbying activities related to the topics of policy change regarding environmental aspects in social work. According to Participant D, advocacy is helpful to draw people's attention to environmental issues in social work. This theme majors in the research aim of identifying the education and campaigning roles of social workers.

Analysis

Analysis of interest for this section are the actual values that have been provided by the results in addition to conclusions that can be made with regards to the study purpose and objectives set out as well as conclusions that regard the field of social work and environmental sustainability in general. Objective 1: To gauge the extent to which social workers are conversant with environmental sustainability. The finding highlighted a lack of awareness of environmental sustainability among social workers. The participants with adequate knowledge about the link between social work and the environment suggested assertive involvement, and those with inadequate training also recommended the same. This difference calls for the social work curriculum to provide nominal environmental education to compensate for inadequate attention to the same and corroborates the need for capacity-building programs to address certain specific environmental issues. There was a general relation between the absence of awareness of an environmental issue and formal environmental training. Thus, as they advanced, new emergent foundational barriers were systemic, lacking in incorporating sustainability principles into the purpose of education of social workers. This surrounds the present strategies and integration of environmental issues into social works that help enhance the capacity of the profession to address environmental concerns.

In a comparative perspective to reveal the similarities of the approaches and actions concerning improving ecological accountability. The engagement activities included in the study were community intervention, awareness, and partnership at a policy level. Finally, these practices demonstrated how, although there were initial lags in teaching social workers about environmental issues and how to incorporate them into their practice toolkits, they were determined to promote the inclusion of these issues into their contexts. Among them is the significant mainstreaming of environmental objectives in employing social work procedures to nurture sustainable urban development. However, these measures' lack of success and success were still determined by resources, resources, institutions, and capacities of environmental goals and recognition of these goals as significant social ones.

This requires policy and partnership with the provision of adequate funding and indicating the right direction in improving sustainable practices. Objective 3: Some of the challenges of implementing concepts of environmental sustainability – the barriers are non-availability of resources, other pulls, and non-availability of an overall structure of policies are some of the system-level barriers well understood by a social worker. Finally, other institutional factors offered only the kind of environment in which they could not implement sustainable practices to the right level of efficiency. This discovery warrants the implementation of measures that would have entailed the examination of this column in reversing existing policies that run across the social work field. Similarly, other demands were raised, such as placing environmental concerns as an add-on exercise to what social workers should do. Addressing this challenge requires conceptualizations within organizations that establish environmental sustenance as a crucial component of social benefit.

This showed that to garner community support for sustainable management of resources, Interviewing and Informing the Community occupied the most important place. To achieve this, they employed people of the community to develop strategies which solve problems expected from the present environmental context. This organisation's efforts are those where the organisation supported actions that it took to enhance efficient work and use of sustainable practices, with ownership from those in the community. The two areas of practice were noted, as were education and advocacy, with the former pointing at its advocates. That is why these knowledge gaps require communities and professions to be trained on how to adapt and continue such works further in future.

Conclusion

Conclusion Social work can be well utilized to do this for organizational development by promoting environmental sustainability. Therefore, through the usage of this paper for the purpose of awareness, practice, assessment of difficulty, and participation in the community, it has been established that there is a need for an integrated approach to environmental issues in social work. It was also found that there is already a partial implementation of sustainable practices by social work students and practising social workers. Therefore, the study revealed the following major barriers to education: structures and policies that negate full environmental sustainability. The level

of environmental literacy of social workers, hence, needs to be improved in training and capacity building on the environment for social workers in the discharge of their social work functions. However, it is also clearly apparent that social workers have stayed committed to working for change towards sustainable concerns such as scarce resources, interests clash, and lack of well-articulated policies underscore the systematic barriers that need to be tackled urgently. It has been most helpful on community engagement and education issues as steps towards promoting sustainability. The efforts of social workers to empower the communities in order to achieve facility-centered goals of localized solutions to environmental problems make environmental sustainability everybody's business, hence the high likelihood of making it succeed in the long run when aligned with community facilities. In conclusion, it is only possible for the social work profession to contribute strongly to environmental sustainability if there is a meaning in the university curriculum and policies and meaning in the practice of the profession. In this way, improved gaps and challenges as described above can be closed, and, in turn, the social workers can be in a better position to foster sustainable practices for the targeted improved sustainable future of societies.

Recommendations

Recommendations Based on the findings and analysis; several key recommendations emerge to strengthen the integration of environmental sustainability within the social work profession:

- **Enhanced Education and Training in Environmental Sustainability:**

Remarkably it is evident that very few of the social work education programs today have a professionally developed environmental training protocol. For this reason, it is necessary to continue capacity building for social workers; in this manner, the profession will enhance the pace of tuning the social workers into the policies of the social and environmental designs. Because of such findings educational institutions have been encouraged to embrace sustainability across curriculum so that future social workers can adequately respond to environmental challenges.

- **Institutional Support and Resource Allocation:**

It issues proves that successful implementation of environmental sustainability programs in a social work context fully depends on the extent of the administrative backing and supplies. This paper submits that it is high time environmental sustainability were adopted by the social work organizations and the government. This may be achieved through policy development which will lead to better resource provision, funding and strategic backing of sustainable practices by the social workers. It necessary to establish certain relations with some agencies and organizations connected with the environment in order to share certain resources.

Policy Development for Sustainable Social Work Practices: To disaggregate these challenges of social work practice, there should be a coordinated policy advocating for moderation of scope of environmental conservation in the social work profession. For social workers particularly, it's their responsibility to participate in the formulation of policies in other to ensure environmental sustainability is not an option. When there is formation of a policy framework at the center of which sustainable policy to define social welfare is cardinal, it will be possible to ensure that social work has parades current Environmental policies.

Community Engagement and Empowerment:

All the members of the society rely on the social workers to organize the environmental program in the society. Environmental ownership it is said has to continue by developing competency of the community members in handling environmental hurdles. Training extension of training programs aimed at providing communities with knowledge and skill towards sustainable activities will build on some of the positive impact of social work interventions on environmental conservation.

Advocacy and Public Awareness:

Environmental sustainability or its absence continues to be a contentious topic, and since the social workers should be protective of the environment, they should continue advocating on it not only

at the community level but also at the policy level. It is a proper and crucial role in informing the people and directing the change of systems. These will involve barrage of awareness campaigns followed by educative sessions which will follow the social workers themselves and the community they serve - this will go a way in filling the gaps in knowledge as identified in this study while creating sustainable behavioral change. On this basis, it is possible to advance further the contribution of social workers with regard to pro-environmental practice and the enhancement of community sustainability.

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