



Reimagining Social Work Practice in the 21st Century: Technology, Structural Inequality, and Workforce Sustainability

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Abstract

Social work stands at a critical inflection point, grappling with three intersecting forces: the rapid acceleration of digital and artificial intelligence technologies, the deep entrenchment of systemic poverty and inequality, and an escalating crisis of practitioner well-being and workforce sustainability. Drawing on a comprehensive review of recent international literature (2019–2026), this paper argues these challenges present an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine the profession's conceptual foundations. It first examines how evidence-based practice has evolved to embrace heterogeneity of treatment effects, moving beyond one-size-fits-all models. Second, it analyzes the profession's renewed engagement with macro-level structural change, confronting poverty, environmental injustice, and systemic oppression through intersectional and rights-based frameworks. Third, it synthesizes research on organizational determinants of burnout, proposing structural interventions over individualized coping strategies. The paper concludes with an integrated framework addressing technological innovation, structural inequality, and workforce sustainability, grounded in participatory ethics, collective care, and redistributive justice.

Keywords: Social Work Practice, Evidence-Based Practice, Inequality, Burnout, Technology, Structural Intervention, Workforce Sustainability, Social Justice

Introduction

The social work profession has historically been defined by its responsiveness to shifting social, economic, and political landscapes. From its origins in the settlement house movement to contemporary engagements with mental health and child welfare, social work has continuously adapted its methods while holding steadfast to core values of human dignity and social justice [1, 2]. Yet the current moment presents challenges of a different magnitude, and opportunities of unprecedented promise [3, 4].

Three intersecting forces are reshaping social work practice. First,

the digital revolution has brought artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and automated decision-making into human service delivery. Social workers increasingly navigate systems where algorithms influence risk assessments and resource allocation [5, 6]. Research reveals both significant opportunities, enhanced risk analysis and improved service accessibility, and substantial challenges, including the potential loss of human-centered approaches and grave ethical concerns [7, 8]. The question is no longer whether technology will shape social work, but how the profession will shape technology to serve its relational foundations [9, 10].

Second, the past decade has witnessed both an intensification of structural inequalities and renewed scholarly commitment to addressing their roots. Poverty remains intractable, with millions of children in high-income countries living in poverty [11, 12], while climate change and financialization have created new vectors of precarity [13, 14]. Macro social work, long relegated to the margins, is being urgently reimagined as central to advancing environmental justice and transformative change [15, 16].

Third, the social work workforce is in crisis. Practitioners worldwide report heightened occupational stress, with burnout and compassion fatigue emerging as defining features of contemporary employment [17–19]. High turnover intentions and pervasive distress are markers of systemic dysfunction, not individual frailty [20, 21]. The well-being of social workers is central to quality service provision [22, 23].

This paper advances three central arguments. First, evidence-based practice must move beyond narrow conceptions of efficacy toward frameworks attending to heterogeneity in treatment effects [24, 25]. Second, social work must recenter macro-level practice as a core competency, embracing coalitional, rights-based approaches to systemic change [26, 27]. Third, workforce sustainability requires structural interventions, manageable workloads, adequate resourcing, and collective care infrastructures, rather than reliance on individualized resilience training [18, 28].

The Evolution and Nuance of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has been a transformative, if contested, force in social work over the past three decades [29, 30]. Originating in medicine, EBP promises to replace intuition with rigorous empirical guidance, offering a systematic methodology for selecting interventions that have demonstrated positive outcomes under controlled conditions [31]. However, accumulating evidence reveals that translation of EBP ideals into practice has been far more complex than early proponents envisioned [32]. Research examining counseling for children and young people finds that existing studies often fail to adequately support practice, raising fundamental questions about the role and value of effect studies in social work research [33]. Similarly, literature on fidelity and adaptation provides limited guidance on managing tensions between maintaining intervention fidelity and making necessary contextual modifications, leaving practitioners without clear protocols for adapting evidence-based programs to local circumstances [34].

Critically, recent systematic reviews have illuminated significant gaps concerning for whom interventions work, under what conditions, and with what unintended consequences. Greenburgh and colleagues [24] conducted a systematic review of social interventions for mental ill health, identifying 266 relevant studies across 34 countries. Their findings are sobering: participant characteristics were poorly reported, limiting understanding of inclusiveness and generalizability; only 8% of papers reported stratified results; and statistical reporting standards were generally poor, constraining the ability to determine what works for whom. Evidence indicated that interventions were less effective for those in lower socioeconomic groups, a finding that challenges the implicit assumption that EBP uniformly benefits all service users and underscores the urgent need for equity-focused analyses in intervention research [24]. Evans and colleagues [25] reached complementary conclusions in their review of mental health interventions for care-experienced children and young people. While finding no clear evidence of overall inequitable impacts, they identified tentative indications that individuals with lower exposure to maltreatment, fewer care placements, and greater baseline mental health problems might be more responsive to intervention. This carries troubling implications: those with the most complex needs and the most extensive system involvement, precisely the population social work is mandated to serve, may be least well served by existing evidence-based protocols [25].

These findings compel a fundamental reconceptualization of EBP in social work. Rather than treating evidence-based interventions as standardized technologies to be implemented with fidelity regardless of context, the field must embrace approaches that systematically attend to heterogeneity and adaptivity. This includes: (a) embedding stratified analyses into intervention research as a routine practice rather than an exceptional one, enabling researchers to detect differential effectiveness across social locations [35]; (b) developing frameworks for contextually responsive adaptation that preserve core active ingredients while accommodating local circumstances, service user characteristics, and implementation constraints [36]; (c) integrating participatory and community-based methodologies that center the expertise of service users and frontline practitioners in intervention design and evaluation, thereby ensuring that research questions and outcome measures reflect what matters most to those with lived experience [37]; and (d) expanding the scope of evidence to include implementation outcomes, cost effectiveness, and service user experiences alongside traditional efficacy measures, recognizing that an intervention proven effective in a tightly controlled research setting may fail to produce benefits in real-world practice [38].

Confronting Systemic Inequality: The Return of Macro Social Work

If EBP has pushed social work toward methodological rigor and

outcome accountability, it has paradoxically also contributed to a narrowing of professional vision [2]. The focus on individual-level interventions, manualized treatments, and measurable clinical outcomes has tended to eclipse the structural determinants of the very problems that bring people into contact with social services. Poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, discrimination, and environmental degradation are not merely background conditions to be managed while individual therapy proceeds; they are primary causes of distress and primary targets for intervention in their own right [39, 40].

Recent scholarship has forcefully argued for a reorientation of social work toward macro-level practice, moving beyond the clinical-casework paradigm that has dominated much of the profession in recent decades [41]. Chan [15] explores macro social work's relevance in addressing poverty and inequality, examining radical, structural, anti-oppressive, developmental, and critical social work approaches. The chapter highlights how macro social work has evolved and diversified to address the needs of underprivileged and marginalized populations, advocating for social justice, empowerment, and transformative change at community and societal levels. Critically, Chan emphasizes that macro social work requires collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including community organizations, policymakers, and individuals with lived experience of poverty, a recognition that structural change cannot be imposed from above but must emerge from collective action grounded in local knowledge [15]. The climate crisis provides particularly urgent impetus for this reorientation. Albarus [42] discusses the limitations of conventional macro social work in addressing climate-induced social and public health crises, proposing a reimagining of macro practice through intersectional and interdisciplinary lenses to interrogate the structural roots of these crises. This reimagining moves beyond traditional environmental social work, which has often focused on localized concerns such as disaster response or community gardening, toward a politically engaged practice that confronts disaster capitalism, food insecurity, and the financialization of essential resources as interconnected manifestations of global structural violence [13].

The rights-based approach offers one promising framework for operationalizing macro social work. Asenjo Palma and Verity [43] examine how the rights-based approach can help social work deliver social justice outcomes, drawing lessons from housing rights activism in Scotland. Their analysis demonstrates that rights-based frameworks provide a powerful tool for shifting social work discourse from individual deficit to systemic entitlement, from charity-based provision to justice-based claims. By framing adequate housing, healthcare, and social protection as enforceable rights rather than discretionary services, social workers can align their practice with human rights principles and support service users in claiming what they are due [43]. Gibson and colleagues [26] provide empirical grounding for these theoretical arguments through a qualitative study of organizational and service leaders supporting system-level change in Logan, Australia. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: the need for community-led and co-designed approaches; service contracts flexible to community need; culturally specific and culturally safe models; and resources commensurate with community needs. These findings highlight the practical necessity of trialing flexible contract models, needs-based funding, community-directed program contracts, and models designed by and for marginalized populations [26].

Washington and colleagues [44] push this analysis further, arguing for a fundamental transformation of social work itself. Their paper examines "carceral seepage", the infiltration of punitive logics into social work practice across child welfare, education, and the juvenile legal system, and advocates for non-carceral models such as community-led crisis response, restorative justice, and mutual aid. This abolitionist social work framework challenges the profession

to move beyond reform of oppressive institutions toward their wholesale dismantling and replacement with community-based alternatives that prioritize healing over punishment and collective care over surveillance [44]. What unites these diverse contributions, from radical macro practice to rights-based approaches to abolitionist frameworks, is a shared recognition that social work cannot achieve its stated mission of promoting social justice while operating primarily within the confines of individual-level, deficit-focused, and system-reinforcing practice [45].

The Workforce Crisis: From Individual Resilience to Structural Sustainability

The third force reshaping contemporary social work is the escalating crisis of practitioner well-being [46]. Social work is consistently identified as a high-stress profession, characterized by work with people experiencing abuse, domestic violence, substance misuse, and crime. Important sources of occupational stress include excessive workload, working overtime, role ambiguity and conflict, workplace dilemmas, unmet personal expectations, and negative public perception of the profession [47, 48]. These stressors are compounded by insufficient support, lack of understanding from supervisors and colleagues, and the emotional labor inherent in bearing witness to human suffering day after day [48]. The consequences are severe and well documented. High levels of turnover intentions and low job satisfaction have been reported across multiple national contexts, with the interaction between high demands, low levels of control, and poor managerial support consistently emerging as predictors of stress and related outcomes [19, 20]. High levels of sickness, depression, and burnout among social workers have been confirmed in Western countries, and these patterns are not confined to the Global North.

Stanley and Sebastine [18] found significant manifestation of compassion fatigue and burnout in a sample of 73 social workers in two cities in south India, alongside high levels of stress and resilience. Notably, the interaction effect between resilience and stress significantly explained the manifestation of compassion fatigue, suggesting that resilience, while valuable, may not be sufficient to protect against workplace adversity when organizational conditions are unfavorable. This finding challenges the common assumption that building individual resilience is the primary solution to workforce distress; instead, it suggests that even highly resilient practitioners will experience compassion fatigue when faced with chronic stress and inadequate organizational support [18, 49]. Stanley and Sebastine [18] extended this analysis by exploring the manifestation of burnout, perceived social support, and work-life balance in the same sample. Results indicated high levels of burnout and low levels of social support and work-life balance. Both social support and work-life balance were extracted as significant predictors of burnout. The authors argue that issues related to burnout and compassion fatigue must be incorporated within the social work curriculum, and that a focus on maintaining healthy work-life balance and self-care must be emphasized in both education and practice [17].

However, a growing body of scholarship cautions against over-reliance on individualized coping strategies and resilience training as solutions to workforce distress [50]. While self-care and stress management are undoubtedly important, framing burnout primarily as a problem of insufficient individual resilience risks obscuring the organizational and systemic determinants of practitioner distress. High caseloads, inadequate resources, poor supervision, role conflict, and exposure to secondary trauma are not personal failings; they are structural features of under-resourced and poorly managed human service organizations [51]. When organizations respond to high burnout rates by offering mindfulness workshops or resilience training without addressing excessive workloads or inadequate staffing, they risk placing the burden of coping on individual practitioners while leaving the root causes intact, a pattern that has been critiqued as "victim-blaming" at an organizational level [50].

This critique finds empirical support in studies examining the role of supervision and organizational support. Basnet [52] examined the perceived effectiveness of supervision for public school social workers in Minnesota, finding that the methods of supervision, types of support, and perceived effectiveness varied substantially, with implications for both practitioner retention and service quality. The study underscores that supervision is not a monolithic intervention; its benefits depend critically on how it is structured and implemented [52]. A study exploring the application of performance management in strengths-based social work supervision in South Africa identified three core themes, strengths-based supervisory practices, the nature and experience of performance management systems, and the experience of motivation and rewards, highlighting how organizational systems shape day-to-day supervisory experiences [53]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that workforce sustainability requires structural interventions at multiple levels: manageable workloads and role clarity, adequate resources and compensation, supportive supervision and collegial relationships, organizational cultures that normalize help-seeking and collective care, and professional development opportunities that address both clinical competence and self-care [54]. Social work organizations have a responsibility to promote measures that address these factors, as their absence compromises not only practitioner well-being but also the quality of service provision to the communities that social workers serve.

Technology and Innovation: Promise and Peril

The digital transformation of social work is proceeding rapidly, propelled by advances in artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and digital communication technologies [8, 55]. Recent scholarship has begun to map both the promise and peril of these developments, offering nuanced assessments that avoid both technological utopianism and Luddite rejection. Boduroğlu and colleagues [7] provide a qualitative exploration of AI integration in social work practice in Türkiye, identifying both opportunities, enhanced risk analysis, rapid intervention capacity, improved service quality, cost effectiveness, and easier access for disadvantaged populations, and challenges, including the loss of human-centered approaches, ethical and privacy risks, insufficient technological infrastructure, and potential employment concerns. Their study emphasizes the need for comprehensive, ethics-oriented AI education and policy development to ensure technological innovation aligns with the profession's humanistic values [7]. A participatory design study with social service practitioners revealed opportunities for AI integration in documentation, assessment, and worker supervision, while highlighting risks related to generative AI limitations, skill retention, and client safety. The study underscores the importance of centering practitioner perspectives in the design and implementation of AI tools for social work, rather than imposing technological solutions developed without frontline input [56].

Challenges in AI-enabled social work are not merely technical but ethical and political [57]. Algorithms trained on historical data may reproduce and amplify existing biases, leading to disproportionate surveillance, risk classification, and service denial for already marginalized populations. For example, predictive risk models in child welfare have been shown to assign higher risk scores to families in poor neighborhoods not because of greater objective risk but because of historical patterns of surveillance and reporting that reflect systemic biases [58, 59]. The risk of deskilling, where reliance on automated systems erodes practitioner judgment and clinical reasoning, must be carefully managed. If social workers come to trust algorithmic recommendations without critical reflection, they may lose the very relational and contextual reasoning skills that define professional social work [60]. The fundamental question of whether algorithmic decision-making can ever adequately capture the complexity, contingency, and relational nuance of human social

work remains unresolved. Yet technology also offers unprecedented possibilities for expanding access, personalizing services, and freeing practitioners from routine documentation tasks to focus on direct client engagement [61]. Digital game-based learning interventions have been developed to address gender-based violence, leveraging technology to create engaging educational experiences. AI chatbots are being explored as tools for understanding disadvantaged groups and facilitating community engagement in social work education, with potential to enhance interdisciplinary education and prepare future professionals for complex societal challenges.

The challenge for the profession is to shape technological development rather than merely react to it [62]. This requires proactive engagement in the design, governance, and evaluation of AI systems for social work; investment in digital literacy and ethics training within social work education and continuing professional development; and the development of professional standards and regulatory frameworks that ensure technology serves, rather than subverts, social work values. Without such proactive engagement, the profession risks having technological systems designed by computer scientists and private corporations imposed upon it, with social work values and ethical commitments treated as secondary considerations at best [55].

Discussion: Toward an Integrated Framework

The three forces examined in this paper, the evolution of evidence-based practice toward greater nuance and equity, the reimagining of macro social work for structural transformation, and the crisis of workforce sustainability, are not separate problems requiring separate solutions. They are interconnected dimensions of a single challenge: how to organize social work practice in ways that are effective, just, and sustainable [1, 16]. An integrated framework for twenty-first-century social work must therefore address all three domains simultaneously, grounded in several core principles.

First, **participatory and relational ethics** must guide all domains of practice, from intervention design to technology implementation to organizational governance [63]. Service users, practitioners, and community members are not passive recipients of expert knowledge but active agents with valuable experiential expertise. Participatory methodologies, including co-design, community-based participatory research, and service user involvement in evaluation, are not merely methodological niceties but ethical imperatives [37]. This principle applies equally to the development of evidence-based interventions, the design of AI systems for social work, and the restructuring of social service organizations to support practitioner well-being. When service users and frontline practitioners are excluded from these processes, the resulting interventions, technologies, and organizational systems are likely to be poorly suited to real-world needs and may perpetuate the very hierarchies that social work seeks to dismantle.

Second, **structural analysis** must be embedded within all social work practice, not reserved for specialized macro roles [64]. Every clinical assessment, every case plan, every referral decision is shaped by, and potentially reproduces or challenges, structural inequalities of class, race, gender, disability, and geography. A practitioner who understands that a client's "noncompliance" with treatment may reflect structural barriers such as lack of transportation, unaffordable childcare, or unsafe housing conditions is better positioned to advocate for systemic changes rather than blaming the individual. Social work education must equip practitioners with the conceptual tools to identify structural determinants of individual distress and the practical skills to address them through advocacy, coalition building, and systemic intervention alongside direct service [39]. This does not mean abandoning clinical or casework skills; it means situating those skills within a structural analysis that recognizes the limits of individual-level intervention in the face of systemic oppression.

Third, **collective care** must replace individualized resilience as the dominant framework for addressing workforce sustainability [51]. While self-care remains important, the primary responsibility for practitioner well-being rests with organizations and systems. Manageable workloads, adequate compensation, supportive supervision, professional development opportunities, and organizational cultures that normalize help-seeking are not luxuries but necessities for sustainable practice. Collective care also extends to mutual aid among practitioners, peer support networks, and union organizing to address systemic working conditions. When social workers come together to advocate for better working conditions, they are not only protecting their own well-being but also ensuring that the communities they serve receive consistent, high-quality services from practitioners who are themselves supported and sustained.

Fourth, **equity-oriented evidence** must guide intervention development and evaluation [65]. This requires routine collection and reporting of stratified data to assess differential effectiveness by social location; inclusion of marginalized groups in intervention research in sufficient numbers to enable subgroup analyses; attention to implementation and adaptation in real-world contexts rather than controlled research settings; and incorporation of service user-defined outcomes alongside standardized measures. An intervention that produces positive average effects but harms a particular subgroup, or fails to benefit those most in need, cannot be considered truly evidence-based. The evidence base itself must be interrogated for its representativeness and relevance to the diverse populations that social work serves.

Fifth, **technological humility** must temper enthusiasm for digital innovation [55]. AI and other technologies should be adopted only when they demonstrably improve outcomes for service users, enhance rather than replace practitioner judgment, and do not exacerbate existing inequalities. The default presumption should be skeptical: technology must prove its value, not merely its novelty. Where technology is adopted, it must be accompanied by ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation, with clear mechanisms for service user and practitioner input and grievance. Technological systems should be designed to support relational practice, not to substitute for it, and when they cannot be so designed, they should not be deployed in social work contexts.

Conclusion

Social work in the twenty-first century faces unprecedented challenges: persistent and deepening structural inequality, climate crisis, technological disruption, and a workforce in distress [1]. Yet these challenges also present opportunities for fundamental reimagining, to move beyond narrow conceptions of evidence, recent macro-level structural change as a core professional competency, build sustainable working conditions that honor the dignity of practitioners alongside the dignity of service users, and shape technological development in service of human flourishing rather than efficiency and control [16, 46]. The reimagined compass proposed in this paper, grounded in participatory ethics, structural analysis, collective care, equity-oriented evidence, and technological humility, provides guidance for navigating this uncertain terrain. It is not a manual or a checklist but an orientation, a set of principles to inform decision-making across the diverse contexts in which social workers practice. Faithful application of these principles will not resolve all tensions or eliminate all contradictions. But it will help ensure that social work remains true to its core mission even as it adapts to changing circumstances: to promote human dignity, advance social justice, and support transformative change for individuals, communities, and societies. The stakes could not be higher. For the vulnerable populations who depend on social work services, for the practitioners who carry this work forward, and for the broader project of building a more just and compassionate world,

the choices made in the coming decade will have enduring consequences. The compass is reimagined; the course must now be charted.

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