

The Role of Social Work in Strengthening Nepal's Adolescent Mental Health System

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Nepal has witnessed increasing recognition of mental health as an important public health issue over the past decade. However, the availability of services remains limited, particularly for children and adolescents.¹ Global and national estimates suggest that 10–20% of children and adolescents experience mental health problems, yet access to specialized services in Nepal remains extremely limited.² The National Mental Health Survey of Nepal (2020–2021) further highlights the magnitude of the challenge, demonstrating a substantial burden of mental disorders alongside significant treatment gaps.³ These challenges are compounded by a shortage of trained mental health professionals and limited availability of community-based child and adolescent mental health (CAMH) services.

In response to these gaps, the Adolescent Mental Health Unit (AMHU) at the Mental Hospital, Lagankhel, established in October 2023, represents Nepal's first dedicated service focusing specifically on adolescents. The unit operates through a multidisciplinary team comprising child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, medical officers, psychiatric social workers, special educators, nurses, and support staff.⁴ While clinical professionals often receive the greatest attention in mental health care, the role of psychiatric social workers within such teams remains relatively under-recognized, despite their critical contribution to addressing the psychosocial context in which mental illness develops and is managed.^{5,6} Psychiatric social work within CAMH services extends beyond supportive functions and operates at the interface of clinical care, family systems, and community structures. In resource-constrained settings such as Nepal, this role is particularly important in addressing systemic and social determinants that cannot be adequately managed through clinical interventions alone.

Roles and Responsibilities of Psychiatric Social Workers in CAMH Services in Nepal

1. Clinical Work

Comprehensive Psychosocial Assessment

A key responsibility of psychiatric social workers is conducting comprehensive psychosocial assessments. In both outpatient and inpatient settings, they work closely with adolescents and their families to understand the broader context of presenting concerns, including family relationships, academic environments, peer dynamics, and socioeconomic conditions. Evidence from Nepal indicates that psychosocial stressors such as family conflict, academic pressure, and bullying significantly influence adolescent mental health outcomes.⁷ These assessments inform culturally appropriate and holistic management plans.

Family Engagement and Psychoeducation

Families play a central role in healthcare decision-making for adolescents in Nepal. However, stigma, limited awareness, and sociocultural beliefs often delay or interrupt treatment.⁸ Psychiatric social workers address these barriers by providing psychoeducation to caregivers regarding the nature of mental illness, treatment options, and the importance of adherence and follow-up. Building trust with families is essential for sustaining engagement and ensuring supportive home environments.

Medication Adherence Support

Psychiatric social workers play an important role in promoting medication adherence, particularly among adolescents with severe mental illness. Caregivers may have concerns related to side effects, dependency, or cultural misconceptions. Through regular follow-up, counselling, and addressing these concerns, psychiatric

social workers help improve adherence and continuity of care.

Inpatient Milieu Therapy

Within inpatient settings, psychiatric social workers contribute significantly to the development of a therapeutic milieu by facilitating structured routines, group processes, and peer interactions. Milieu therapy is a well-established therapeutic approach in adolescent psychiatric care that utilizes the environment itself as a medium for treatment. Evidence suggests that structured therapeutic environments improve social functioning, emotional regulation, and engagement in treatment among adolescents.⁹⁻¹⁰ Psychiatric social workers play a central role in organizing group activities, fostering peer support, and maintaining a therapeutic environment. In Nepal, although structured milieu therapy models are still evolving, psychiatric social workers are instrumental in adapting these principles within existing resource constraints.

2. Community and Systems Work

Care Coordination Beyond the Hospital

Psychiatric social workers act as key intermediaries between healthcare services and social systems. Adolescents may require disability certification, educational accommodations, or access to child protection services. Psychiatric social workers liaise with municipal offices, schools, the National Women Commission, and child protection services such as the Child Helpline (1098), ensuring continuity of care beyond the hospital setting.

Addressing Socioeconomic Barriers

Socioeconomic constraints significantly affect access to mental health care in Nepal. Indirect costs, including transportation, accommodation, and medications, often hinder treatment continuity. Psychiatric social workers assist families in accessing financial support mechanisms, including hospital welfare funds and community resources, thereby improving access to care.

Community-Based and Crisis Interventions

Psychiatric social workers also engage in community outreach and crisis response. Given Nepal's vulnerability to natural disasters, their role in providing psychosocial support and community-based interventions is critical. They collaborate with multidisciplinary teams to deliver psychosocial first aid and extend mental health services to underserved populations.

Despite their wide-ranging contributions, psychiatric social workers remain under-recognized within Nepal's mental health system. Workforce development has traditionally prioritized psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses, with limited emphasis on professionals addressing social determinants of mental health. Opportunities for specialized training in psychiatric social work remain limited, and structured career pathways are lacking.

This contrasts with developments in other South Asian settings, where community-based mental health services and multidisciplinary care models have been more systematically implemented.¹¹ Strengthening the role of psychiatric social workers in Nepal could significantly enhance the effectiveness of CAMH services by addressing social and structural barriers to care.

Policy Implications

Several steps are necessary to strengthen the contribution of psychiatric social workers within Nepal's mental health system.

First, specialized training programs in psychiatric or mental health social work should be developed through collaboration between academic institutions and healthcare facilities.

Second, national mental health policies should explicitly recognize psychiatric social workers as essential members of multidisciplinary teams, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Third, school and community-based mental health initiatives should incorporate psychiatric social workers to enhance psychosocial support, family engagement, and referral pathways. While initiatives such as the "One School, One Nurse" program are important, inclusion of psychiatric social workers could further strengthen these efforts.

Finally, integrating psychiatric social work into mental health services is essential for addressing the broader social determinants of mental illness and bridging the gap between hospital-based care and community systems.

Nepal's mental health system is gradually expanding; however, meeting the mental health needs of adolescents requires a comprehensive approach that extends beyond

clinical treatment. Psychiatric social workers play a crucial role in integrating clinical care with family, community, and social systems, thereby addressing the broader determinants of mental health.

Recognizing and strengthening their role within CAMH services will not only improve patient outcomes but also contribute to a more holistic, accessible, and sustainable mental health system in Nepal.

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