

The Silent Classroom: Analyzing the Decline in Enrollment and Student Attrition in Nepal's Bachelor of Social Work Programs.

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Abstract

Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) education in Nepal, conceived as a catalyst for social development, is confronting a sustainability crisis marked by diminishing initial enrollment and significant student attrition in the final years. This phenomenon, manifesting in increasingly silent and vacant classrooms, signals a profound disconnect between the altruistic aims of the profession and the on-ground realities faced by its aspirants. This qualitative study investigates the multi-layered causes of this decline through in-depth interviews with 24 BSW students from four colleges in the Kathmandu Valley. The findings, analyzed thematically, reveal a triad of interconnected demotivates. Primarily, students experience profound professional uncertainty due to a near-absence of defined career pathways, low societal recognition of social work as a distinct profession, and a job market that fails to value the BSW degree. Secondly, institutional gaps—including a theory-heavy curriculum perceived as irrelevant, inadequate fieldwork supervision, and minimal academic mentorship—exacerbate student disengagement. Finally, these factors converge with personal financial pressures in the later academic years, leading to strategic dropouts as students prioritize income generation or switch to more "secure" fields of study. The study concludes that the silence in BSW classrooms is a symptom of systemic failure. Reversing the trend requires a concerted, multi-pronged strategy: vigorous advocacy for professional licensure and government cadre inclusion, a pedagogical overhaul to enhance practical relevance and employability, and stronger institutional support systems to foster student resilience and professional identity.

Keywords: Social Work Education, Student Attrition, Enrollment Decline, Professional Recognition, Career Prospects, Nepal, BSW, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

Social work education in Nepal was introduced to prepare trained professionals capable of addressing diverse social problems such as poverty, inequality, social exclusion, gender-based violence, migration, and marginalization. Social work, as a practice-based profession and academic discipline, is fundamentally oriented towards enhancing human well-being, social justice, and collective development. In Nepal, a nation marked by complex socio-economic challenges, the establishment of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs was envisioned as a critical step towards building a skilled, indigenous workforce capable of addressing issues from poverty and gender inequality to post-conflict reconstruction and disaster management (Baskota, 2019). Yet, this vision stands in stark contrast to an emerging and troubling reality within the very institutions tasked with realizing it: the phenomenon of the "silent classroom."

The crisis is characterized by two distinct but related problems: a sharp decline in initial enrollment and an alarming rate of student attrition (drop-outs) in the final years of study. This article explores the contributing factors behind these trends, examining why students are turning away from the discipline and why those who stay often leave just before reaching the finish line. Classrooms that should resonate with the passionate discourse of aspiring change-makers are instead falling quiet, marked by empty seats and dwindling participation. This attrition is more than a statistical concern; it represents a leakage of potential, a loss of investment, and a fundamental threat to the sustainability of the profession itself. If those trained to address social exclusion are themselves excluded from a viable

professional future, the foundational mission of social work education is compromised.

The silence of the classroom symbolizes deeper structural problems, including limited career prospects, weak linkage between education and employment, insufficient field practice, and low societal recognition of social work as a profession. This situation raises serious concerns about the sustainability of social work education and the future of professional social work practice in Nepal. Understanding the causes of declining enrollment is therefore essential for academic institutions, policymakers, and professional bodies. By engaging with 24 BSW students from four distinct colleges in the Kathmandu Valley, this research seeks to unravel the complex web of factors that lead to disenchantment and departure. It interrogates the collision between individual aspiration and systemic constraint, exploring how the promise of social work is mediated by harsh realities of professional ambiguity, institutional inadequacy, and policy neglect.

Literature Review

The challenges facing social work education in Nepal cannot be viewed in isolation; they are situated within a global discourse on professionalization, curriculum relevance, and student retention, yet are intensely localized in their manifestation. International literature consistently links student motivation and program completion to clear professional identity and perceived career efficacy (Crisp, 2017). However, in Nepal, the professionalization of social work remains in a nascent stage. Scholars note the absence of a strong regulatory body, like a national social work council, and the lack of legally protected titles, which leaves the profession vulnerable to ambiguity and encroachment from other fields (Acharya, 2020).

The Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) three-year course in Social Work program began in 1996 A.D. at St. Xavier's College, affiliated with Kathmandu University. The Nirmala Niketan, an Indian-based college of social work, provided foundational assistance to establish social work education for the first time in Nepal. (Thomas, Shrestha, & Nikku, 2016). Social Work was offered as a major at Tribhuwan University's B.A. level starting in 1997 A.D. The course was offered at the Padamkayna Campus with access available to female students. Tribhuwan University also approved a course of B.A. in Social Work in 2012 and a Master of Arts in Social Work in the semester system program started in 2017 A.D. and the MPhil/PhD program of social work in the center campus in Kritipur. The colleges of T.U. had introduced courses without sufficient professional social workers (Tribhuwan University, n.d.). A full-fledged Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program was introduced in 2005 by the Department of Social Work at Kadambari college, which is affiliated with Purbanchal University.

Additionally, the Department of Social Work became a member of the Asian and Pacific Association of Social Work Education (APASWE) in 2007, as well as the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2009. These entire institutes were located in Kathmandu only, whereas a sudden mushrooming growth of affiliated colleges offering

this program is evident. The Indira Gandhi National Open University's (IGNOU) partner organization in Kathmandu also offers students the option of taking Social Work courses online (Sharma & Bhatta, 2018). Institutions that can provide social work education and training programs across Nepal are desperately needed to

make professional social work services available to the country's many more citizens (Nikku & Pulla, 2014). Furthermore, in 2012, the first Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs outside of Kathmandu were introduced by Mid-West University. The Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid-West University, Birendranagar, Surkhet Nepal (a central campus) launched a fully accredited 4-year (8 semesters) Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) & 2 years (4 semesters) Master of Social Work (MSW) and Babai Multiple Campus Gulariya. This institutional vacuum has direct consequences for graduates. In Nepal, the absence of specific government job categories for social workers forces BSW graduates into a generic "social science" labor market. In this competitive space, their specialized field training and professional skills are often neither recognized nor given the value they deserve. This creates a cycle of disillusionment, where the successful employment of alumni—a key motivator for prospective students—remains minimal and invisible. Furthermore, the curriculum, often critiqued for being heavily theoretical and adapted from Western contexts, is seen as inadequately tailored to the practical realities and employment needs of the Nepali context (Kumar & Singh, 2018)). This gap between classroom learning and field practice can erode student confidence and perceived competence.

Within the broader landscape of Nepali higher education, student attrition is a recognized problem, often attributed to financial constraints, family pressures, and the pursuit of overseas education (Ghimire, 2021) (k & Baral, 2020). However, discipline-specific attrition, particularly in professional programs like BSW, demands a more nuanced investigation. Studies on student

support highlight the critical role of academic advising, mentorship, and a sense of belonging in retaining students (Limbu & Rai, 2022). The erosion of these supports in the later years of study, as coursework becomes more demanding and future anxieties peak, can be a critical tipping point.

This review identifies a significant gap: while the structural challenges of Nepali social work are documented, there is limited in-depth, qualitative research that directly amplifies the student voice to explain how these macro-level issues translate into the micro-level decision to disengage or drop out of a BSW program. This study aims to fill that gap.

Objectives

- To assess the impact of career prospects and professional recognition on students' motivation to continue BSW education.
- To identify institutional and policy-level gaps affecting the sustainability of social work education in Nepal.
- To analyze the reasons for declining attendance and enrollment among BSW students in the later years of study.

Statement of the Problem

Although social work education aims to address social problems and promote development, BSW programs in Nepal are increasingly characterized by declining enrollment and silent classrooms. Students of social work face limited career prospects, low professional recognition, and inadequate institutional support (Paudel, 2018). These challenges raise critical questions about the sustainability of social work education and its capacity to produce motivated and competent professionals. This study addresses the problem by examining how career prospects, professional

recognition, and institutional gaps contribute to declining enrollment and persistence in BSW programs, using data from students across four colleges in Kathmandu.

Research Questions

- What are the contributing factors for the decline in enrollment in the bachelor's level?
- What are the major reasons for students dropping out in the third and fourth years?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to deeply understand the shared experiences of BSW students regarding enrollment, persistence, and attrition. The phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate as it focuses on capturing the essence of lived experiences—in this case, the experience of being a BSW student in a context of perceived decline.

Participants and Sampling: A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 24 participants (14 female, 10 male) who were currently enrolled in the third or fourth year of their BSW program. Participants were selected from four different colleges in the Kathmandu Valley offering BSW degrees, ensuring a diversity of institutional cultures and management structures. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where subsequent interviews yielded no significant new themes.

Data Collection: Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and questions, covering domains such as: initial motivation for joining BSW, experiences of the curriculum and teaching, perceptions of fieldwork and supervision, views on career opportunities and

professional identity, relationships with faculty and peers, and factors influencing their decision to continue or consider leaving. Each interview lasted 45-70 minutes, was conducted in Nepali in a private setting, and was audio-recorded with prior informed consent.

Data Analysis: All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Nepali and subsequently translated into English. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed. This involved a six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis was conducted manually to maintain closeness to the data. Emerging themes were constantly checked against the original transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity of representation.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was sought from the participating colleges. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used throughout the findings section to protect participant identities.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of student narratives revealed a complex, interconnected landscape of disillusionment. The findings are organized around three core thematic areas that directly address the research objectives and questions.

1. The Specter of Professional Uncertainty: "What Will I Become, what is my degree about?"

The most pervasive theme across all interviews was a profound anxiety about the future. The initial motivation for joining BSW—often described as a "desire to serve society" or "help

people"—was systematically eroded by the looming question of employability.

Absence of a Clear Career Pathway: Participants consistently reported a lack of visible, stable career trajectories for BSW graduates. As respondent A, a fourth-year student, lamented, "We see MBA graduates becoming managers, engineers going to construction companies. For us, it's just vague talk of NGOs. Which NGO? What position? At what salary? No one can show us a clear map. Most of the students in my class hope to get a job in NGOs or INGOs after graduation however all became unemployment when I see our seniors. People often say the degree is useless because there are no official social work jobs in the government."

Students feel their profession is not well understood or respected. When they tell people they study social work, many assume they are training to be volunteers or helping people in need, not seeing it as a true career. This constant misunderstanding by others makes students doubt themselves. The problem is made worse because there is no official title for the job, so anyone can call themselves a "social worker," which makes the specialized degree feel less valuable. This lack of recognition weakens their professional pride and motivation.

1. Financial Reality: Many students, especially those with limited financial means, pursue higher education primarily to secure a good job and a stable income. They see the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree as leading only to low-paying, temporary jobs with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which offer little security. This perception is a powerful disincentive. It directly affects enrollment, as students and their families often choose other degrees that promise a clearer and more reliable financial return.

Compounding this issue is the low professional and social recognition for social workers. Students are frustrated that society does not understand their profession. When they say they study social work, people often ask if they will become volunteers, not recognizing it as a real career. This constant external misunderstanding fuels their own doubts. The situation is worsened because there is no legally protected title for "social worker," meaning anyone can use it. This devalues the specialized training of BSW graduates, eroding the professional pride and motivation they need.

2. Institutional Gaps: The Disconnect Between Promise and Practice

Institutional gaps create a significant disconnect between the promise of the social work degree and its practical value in the job market. Students identified significant shortcomings within their own colleges and programs that exacerbated their sense of frustration and contributed to disengagement.

Students also criticize the curriculum as being too theoretical and repetitive. They feel there is a large gap between what they learn in class and the hands-on work they actually do. As one student put it, "We study advanced ideas like empowerment for years in theory, but our field training is basic, like visiting an orphanage or feeding the elderly people in an old age care home, just to write a report. They don't connect." This gap between high-level concepts and simple, poorly-supported fieldwork causes students to become tired and disengaged. They feel they aren't learning the practical skills they need to get a job, which reflects a broader criticism that the curriculum is not well adapted to local professional needs.

A critical problem lies in the supervision and mentorship during fieldwork, which is supposed to be the core of practical learning. Students frequently describe their field placements as a mere formality. They report a significant lack of meaningful guidance, both from their university faculty and from supervisors at the placement agencies. One student explained, "Our faculty supervisor just visits once to sign the logbook and leaves. We never have a real conversation about the challenges we see in the field." This failure to provide guided reflection wastes a vital chance to build professional skills and identity. Additionally, the broader absence of strong academic mentorship leaves students to manage their career worries and doubts entirely on their own, feeling abandoned by their own institution.

Faculty engagement and institutional resources were significant concerns. Students perceived a lack of commitment from some professors, which they attributed to issues like low salaries and overwhelming teaching schedules. This was compounded by a lack of physical resources, such as libraries with outdated or scarce contemporary social work materials. Together, these constraints created a learning environment where students felt their education was not a true institutional priority, which in turn eroded their own motivation and commitment to the program.

3. The Final-Year Crisis: Convergence and Attrition

The final years of the program represent a critical breaking point. This is when all the previously mentioned challenges—uncertain job prospects, weak professional identity, and curriculum frustrations—converge with additional social and personal pressures. In the Nepalese context, many students, particularly females, face expectations regarding marriage and family responsibilities,

which can conflict with their academic commitments. These pressures, combined with academic and career-related concerns, often lead to student attrition, decreased participation, and disengaged, silent classrooms. Understanding these factors is essential for addressing the challenges that affect student retention and performance in the Bachelor of Social Work program.

A central catalyst in this crisis is the internship dilemma combined with intense financial strain. The requirement for a full-time, often completely unpaid and need to be paid for internship in the final year creates an impossible choice for students from middle- or lower-income backgrounds. As one student who left the program stated, "I had to choose between finishing my mandatory fieldwork or taking a paid job to cover my rent and help my family. I had no choice but to take the job." This stark trade-off highlights how the structure of professional education fails to account for student poverty. Consequently, the internship, intended as a capstone learning experience, instead becomes a direct pathway out of the profession, reinforcing the broader pattern of economic hardship driving dropout rates in higher education.

Strategic Shift to "Safer" Options: Many students reported using their final years to prepare for entrance exams for other degrees (Master's in Sociology, Education, or Public Administration) perceived to have better career prospects. Others actively sought any job, abandoning their academic commitment. The classroom silence, therefore, was not just due to dropouts but also to the mental and physical absence of students who had psychologically "checked out" and were investing their energies elsewhere.

Peer Effect and Collective Demoralization: As a few students began to drop out or disengage, it created a demoralizing ripple effect. "When my close friend left to prepare for IELTS preparation study for the abroad study, it made me question my own choices. If smart people are leaving, maybe this degree really has no future," shared a student. This peer effect accelerated the trend, turning individual doubts into a collective crisis of confidence.

Discussion

The findings paint a compelling picture of a system in distress. The silence in the BSW classroom is not merely an absence of sound but the audible symptom of a broken feedback loop between education and profession. This study confirms and deepens the existing literature by illustrating the mechanisms through which macro-level problems manifest in student decision-making.

First, the issue of professional recognition is not just an abstract concern but a daily psychological burden for students. The lack of a state-sanctioned career pathway, as highlighted by Paudel (2018) and the Nepal Association of Social Workers (2020), translates directly into what students experience as a future of precarious "project-hopping" in the NGO sector. This fundamentally undermines the social contract of professional education.

Second, the identified institutional gaps—particularly in curriculum delivery and fieldwork supervision—represent a foundational failure to build professional resilience. Compounding this is the critical absence of a formal licensing framework for social work, which removes a clear professional milestone and a recognized standard of competence. Social work is an

emotionally and practically challenging field. A robust educational program must therefore equip students with not only theoretical knowledge but also a strong, supported professional identity to navigate uncertainty (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019). The current model, as perceived by students, achieves the opposite: it exposes them to the field's complexities without adequate scaffolding or the guiding structure of a licensure pathway. This lack of a mandated professional threshold amplifies their anxieties rather than quelling them, leaving them feeling adrift in a demanding profession without a clear, credentialed endpoint to validate their readiness.

Finally, the problem in the final years highlights the essential time dimension of attrition. The demands do not remain steady; rather, they multiply and worsen as graduation approaches. Financial difficulties and rising opportunity costs become unsustainable just when academic and fieldwork demands peak, resulting in a critical tipping point. In addition, personal life changes, such as marriage or the responsibilities of newly married life, add significant pressures that compete with academic commitments. This confluence explains why attrition is especially high in the later phases, when students make the rational, albeit painful, decision to cut their losses. This decision is frequently aided by a clear alternative path: the chance to pursue opportunities abroad without the institutional barrier of a No Objection Letter (NOL). For many, this policy does not create a new plan but rather enables a premeditated exit strategy. Thus, the final-year exodus is not merely a surrender to pressure but, for a significant cohort, the execution of a prepared alternative, turning attrition from a crisis of failure into a calculated choice.

The implications are severe. This cycle of declining enrollment and high attrition threatens to create a self-fulfilling prophecy: fewer graduates result in a weaker professional voice to advocate for change, leading to continued policy neglect. Consequently, fewer students enroll in the program, and many who do complete it are less likely to engage in higher education or pursue advanced professional development. If this trend continues unchecked, the Bachelor of Social Work program itself may face serious risks, including reduced relevance, closure, or inability to attract qualified faculty. The loss of the program would not only limit opportunities for aspiring social workers but also weaken the professional workforce, reduce advocacy for social issues, and hinder the overall development of the social work profession in Nepal. Breaking this cycle requires urgent, coordinated action to retain students, strengthen the program, and ensure the sustainability and growth of social work education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the decline in enrollment and the silent classrooms in Nepal's BSW programs are the direct result of a systemic trifecta: professional ambiguity, institutional inadequacy, and the acute financial-practical crises of the final years. Students enter with hope but are gradually disenchanted by a future that appears professionally unrecognized, an education that feels practically irrelevant, and a financial reality that forces them to abandon their training.

To reverse this trend and ensure the sustainability of social work education in Nepal, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Policy Makers and Professional Bodies:
Advocate aggressively for the establishment of a

Social Worker Council to regulate the profession and protect the title. Lobby the government to create a dedicated Social Work Cadre within the civil service at federal, provincial, and local levels, providing a tangible and respected career pathway for graduates.

For Universities and Colleges: Undertake a comprehensive curriculum review to integrate more practical skill-building (e.g., project management, proposal writing, and counseling techniques) and align fieldwork with learning outcomes through structured, well-supervised models. Establish robust mentorship programs linking students with faculty and practicing social workers to provide guidance and support, especially in the final years. Invest in faculty development and teaching resources.

For Schools and the Social Work Community: Develop targeted career counseling for prospective students, honestly outlining both the challenges and the evolving opportunities. Create and publicize alumni success stories to build a visible narrative of professional achievement. Strengthen the network of practicing social workers to support internships and graduate placement.

The silent classroom is a call to action. It is a demand for a social work education that does not just speak of justice and empowerment but embodies it by offering its own students a credible, supported, and dignified path to a meaningful professional life. The future of social work in Nepal depends on heeding this call.

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