



## Problems and Prospects of Social Work Research as an Auxiliary Method of Social Work in Bangladesh

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### Article History

Received: 12.10.2025

Accepted: 08.11.2025

Published: 30.11.2025



**Abstract:** This study examines the challenges and future opportunities for social work research in Bangladesh, with a focus on its role as an auxiliary method for enhancing social work practice. Social work in Bangladesh has a 70-year history of education and practice, but the state has been slow to recognise it as a profession, resulting in limited institutional support. Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has significantly expanded its social service workforce. Despite the growth in the workforce, research remains underdeveloped. Key obstacles include inadequate funding, limited research capacity, and weak links between academia and practice. On the positive side, the rapid proliferation of social work educational programs and greater international support offer new prospects: more institutions now offer B.S.S. & M.S.S. programs and technology-enabled training. This article uses government and NGO reports, academic studies, and institutional data to analyse these issues and suggests strategies to strengthen evidence-based practice in Bangladesh. This study will explore the multifaceted role of social work research as an auxiliary method of social work practice in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** *Field Practicum, Evidence-based social work, Social work education, Social welfare, Social service.*

## Introduction

Bangladesh faces deep and complex social problems – including poverty, illiteracy, poor health, unemployment, gender inequality, violence, corruption and frequent natural disasters – that impede the well-being of its population. Professional social work emerged in Bangladesh in the mid-20th century precisely to help address such challenges, yet the field remains under-recognized. Indeed, more than half a century of social work education has still not yielded a nationally recognized profession. As Bangladeshi social workers do deliver welfare services toward development goals, but they are not viewed as core agents of national development. In principle, social work is a systematic, science-based dedicated to social change and problem-solving. Thus, a strong research base – a *scientific knowledge* foundation – is essential for effective practice (NASW, 2007). In academic and practice terms, social work research is regarded as an auxiliary method: it supports traditional practice methods by generating evidence

and theory to improve service quality and outcomes. However, in Bangladesh this auxiliary role of research is only beginning to be realized.

Despite curricular emphasis on research, in practice the local research enterprise is still nascent. University programs in social work include courses on methodology and explicitly flag the “problems of social research and social work research in Bangladesh”, underscoring that practitioners recognize gaps in local evidence. In reality, Bangladeshi social work practitioners seldom lead rigorous studies. Hossain & Mathbor (2014) observe that social workers in Bangladesh have not been managed to play a leading role in conducting high quality research; most important development studies have been done by graduates from other disciplines. The Institute of Social Welfare and Research (Dhaka University) pioneered development research in the 1950s, but since the 1980s its momentum has waned. Institutional infrastructure for research is weak: there are few dedicated social work journals or professional publishing venues, so efforts and achievements made by social workers remain unknown... for lack of professional journals. Even students and practitioners often struggle to obtain relevant literature or reference materials on local social work. These deficits hamper the growth of evidence-based practice in the field.

In addition to resource and publication gaps, the broader professional context creates hurdles. Bangladesh has no single strong social work regulatory body or licensing system, so there is no organized forum insisting on research standards or ethical review in practice. Many non-governmental organizations deliver social services using social work techniques, but these NGOs are typically led by professionals from other fields and “the prospective fields of applied research are also under their control”. In other words, much of the program evaluation and applied research in poverty, health or community development is carried out outside the formal social work sector. Consequently, research questions that arise in front-line social work may go unstudied. In the absence of a thriving research culture, practitioners rely heavily on anecdote and imported models. As one curriculum guide put it, social work helps people scientifically. So, it requires a scientific knowledge base – but the current system falls short of providing that base.

Despite these challenges, there are promising trends and calls for strengthening research in Bangladeshi social work. Academics emphasize that locally grounded research is essential to develop effective methods. Bangladeshi social work scholars and practitioners must innovate culturally relevant approaches and demonstrate how trained social workers can make a greater difference in bringing change than informal actors. Comparative research in the local context is of great importance in finding the best-suited approach to social problems. In practice this view is reflected in curricular reforms: field practicums now explicitly integrate research components (DU, 2023). International partnerships are also bringing methodological training and research attention. Moreover, Bangladesh’s drive towards evidence-based policy in other sectors creates incentives for social work to contribute reliable data and analysis to multi-disciplinary efforts.

Bangladesh’s strong focus on development goals and its large NGO sector make social work research very important. Studying and recording social work activities can help the field grow and gain respect (Hossain & Ahmad, 2024). Evaluating programs and policies helps improve services and ensures accountability to vulnerable people. Strengthening research is essential for making social work more professional and for creating better social policies. To meet community needs and develop local methods, strong research and evidence are needed (Hossain & Mathbor, 2014). Therefore, studying how research can support social work practice in Bangladesh is both timely and important for researchers and policymakers.

## **Objectives of the study**

This article reviews how social work research functions as an auxiliary method of social work in Bangladesh, identifies problems hindering its effectiveness, and explores prospects for future development.

## **Methodology of the study**

This article is a narrative review based on secondary sources. We conducted a structured literature search (in Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, and publisher databases) for terms related to social work research in Bangladesh. We included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and institutional reports (from Springer, Wiley, SAGE, Taylor & Francis, etc.) that discuss social work in Bangladesh, focusing on research-related issues. Government or media-only sources were also included. Over a hundred relevant documents were identified, of which the most informative were synthesized. Key themes (barriers, gaps, initiatives) were extracted and organized into the two main sections below (“Problems” and “Prospects”). Quotations and data were drawn only from the accepted academic sources found. We also incorporated secondary statistics (e.g. national research output trends) to contextualize findings. The analysis is structured into background on education and workforce, the role of research in social work practice, current research output, specific challenges, and emerging opportunities.

## **Historical Development of Social Work Education and Workforce in Bangladesh**

The foundation of social work education in Bangladesh dates to the late 1950s. The University of Dhaka established the College of Social Welfare and Research Centre in 1958 (later reconstituted as the Institute of Social Welfare and Research [ISWR] in 1973. This institute (ISWR, DU) remains the apex institution for social work education, offering B.S.S., M.S.S., M.Phil., and Ph.D. programs. Around the same time, a social welfare program was introduced at the then-unified East Pakistan, which later became part of Rajshahi University. By 1973, the Dhaka-based college’s counterpart became the Department of Social Work at Rajshahi University (Hossain & Ahmad, 2024). Thus, two major public universities (Dhaka and Rajshahi) have long been the core of formal social work training in Bangladesh.

After independence, more institutions added social work departments. In 1993–94, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST, Sylhet) launched its Department of Social Work to meet regional needs. The first Master of Social Science graduates from SUST completed their degrees in 1997. Some private universities have introduced social work or social welfare curricula, reflecting growing recognition of social work as a field. In sum, social work education has expanded from one program in 1958 to dozens of institutions by the 2020s.

The expanding educational base has corresponded with a swelling social work workforce. A major driver has been government and international support for child protection. In September 2022, the Government of Bangladesh announced recruitment of 6,000 new social service workers (through the Department of Social Services) – raising the total from about 3,000 to 9,000 qualified social workers nationwide (UNICEF, 2022). This 200% increase marked a policy commitment to professionalizing social support. By March 2024, UNICEF reported that an additional 1,239 social workers and 21 psychosocial counselors had been hired for child protection, a 40% increase in that workforce (Fariya, 2024). These figures indicate that Bangladesh has gone from only a few thousand social workers to well over 10,000 in the span of a few years. Such growth reflects recognition that trained social workers are essential to implement welfare and protection programs. For example, UNICEF notes that Bangladesh has

about 45 million children under age 14 at risk of abuse, and strengthening the social services workforce is critical to their welfare (Fariya, 2024).

In parallel, non-government organizations (NGOs) have become major employers of social work graduates. Bangladesh is known for a vibrant NGO sector (e.g. BRAC, Save the Children Bangladesh, etc.) that often hires social welfare graduates for program management, casework, and community development roles. However, many NGO roles emphasize direct service delivery rather than research. Thus, while the number of practitioners has increased, the role of research within social work practice remains an area needing development.

### Definition of Social Work Research

Social work research is a systematic, applied, and emancipatory inquiry—often participatory and co-constructed with practitioners and service users—that investigates social problems (noting that only about 15% of published studies focus on interventions (Rosen, Proctor, & Staudt, 2003)), preventive and remedial interventions, client needs, organizational practices, and social policies, with the goal of generating context-sensitive knowledge and evidence (aligned with social work values of social justice and empowerment) to inform effective practice, policy development, and social change (Teater, 2017), (Sobočan, Bertotti, & Strom-Gottfried, 2018), (Rowan, Richardson, & Long, 2018).

### Role of Research as an Auxiliary Method in Social Work Practice

Social work practice is inherently multi-methodological. The International Federation of Social Workers definition highlights that social work “utilizes theories of human behavior and social systems” and “intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments” (IFSW, 2014). In practice, social workers employ six methods: casework (micro practice), group work, community organization, social action, administration, and research. Thus, research is officially recognized as one of the “practice methods” of social work.

**Table 1:** Research in Social Work Knowledge

Dimension/Quadrant		Methodological Assumption	Knowledge Form	Reasoning Process
Subjective Solver	Problem	Pragmatic/ Intuitive	Practice intuition, Consensual agreements, Practice heuristics	Inductive/ Experiential
Objective Solver	Problem	Observable Experience	Practice wisdom, Principles based on empirical data	Inductive/ Reflective
Subjective Scientist		Scientific Method/ Systematic Observation	Single-subject observations (introspective), Theory-based generalizations	Deductive/ Theoretical
Objective Scientist		Scientific Method/ Deductive	Research heuristics, Data-based generalizations from nomothetic designs	Deductive/ Scientific

This is adapted from conceptual frameworks regarding knowledge usage in social work practice. This framework illustrates how research functions as an auxiliary method, pushing intuitive practice toward objective, verifiable science (LeCroy, Ashford, & Macht, 1989).

Figure 1: Role of Social Work Research



Research in social work practice serves multiple essential functions, including need assessment, program planning and development, monitoring and evaluation, policy advocacy, and practice-based evidence. Need assessment involves identifying specific needs of individuals, families, or communities through methods such as surveys, interviews, and data analysis, enabling social workers to tailor interventions effectively. Program planning and development rely on research to design evidence-based programs that allocate resources efficiently and ensure cultural appropriateness. Monitoring and evaluation use ongoing research to assess intervention effectiveness, refine practices, and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders. Policy advocacy is grounded in empirical research, providing data on social issues like poverty, domestic violence, and mental health to influence legislation and funding priorities. Finally, practice-based evidence emerges from social workers documenting their experiences and outcomes, complementing academic research with real-world insights. Together, these functions highlight the integral role of research as an auxiliary method in social work practice.

Social work research serves multiple auxiliary functions. It generates knowledge to guide interventions, evaluates program outcomes, and informs policy. Research can uncover root causes of social problems, identify gaps in services, and recommend improvements. For example, a community assessment study might reveal that a target population needs livelihood training more than temporary aid, shaping program design. In this way, research acts as an *auxiliary method* that complements direct practice (casework, group work, etc.) by providing data-driven insight. In theory, social work researchers in Bangladesh could work alongside frontline practitioners to develop culturally relevant models of practice. However, in practice many

Bangladeshi social workers have limited opportunities to engage in systematic research; instead, anecdote and observation often guide their work.

Evidence-based social work is still an emerging concept in Bangladesh. Policymakers and administrators often rely on international models or limited local data when designing welfare programs. For example, social safety net programs are evaluated by some governmental agencies, but independent social research is sparse (Siddiqui, 2025). Advocacy groups may conduct surveys (e.g. on child labor or elder care), but these are usually project-specific. Systematic *social work research* – meaning rigorously planned studies within academic or professional frameworks – remains relatively rare. This gap means that much valuable local knowledge (community customs, informal support networks, etc.) is not captured in written research that can be shared and built upon.

### Current Status of Social Work Research Output

However, when it comes to social work and social science research specifically, formal metrics are harder to obtain. There is no single indexed repository for social work as a field in Bangladesh. Some related fields (sociology, psychology, education) are tracked in Scopus, but social work is often indexed under broader categories (social sciences, humanities, public health). Few Bangladeshi journals focus purely on social work. For example, the *Journal of Social Development* (published by ISWR, DU) and the *Bangladesh Journal of Social Work* exist, but their international visibility is limited. Many social work faculty publish in interdisciplinary journals (e.g. on child rights, mental health, gender studies). There has been a recent move to establish local journals but this movement is nascent.

Empirical data on Bangladeshi social work research output are scarce. Anecdotally, only a small fraction of social work graduates pursue M.Phil./Ph.D. or publish in peer-reviewed journals. Nonetheless, some university programs now mandate thesis work (MSS/Ph.D.), which generates theses and occasional journal articles. The research content may address topics such as rural development, disaster management, or mental health in local communities. In recent years, a few bibliometric analyses have begun to assess social science outputs from Bangladesh, but none focus exclusively on social work. Thus, quantitative measures of social work research output remain an area in need of development.

### Problems in Social Work Research

Although social work research is crucial for evidence-based practice, Bangladesh faces significant obstacles in developing it effectively. The key problems include:

Table 2: Problems in Social Work research

Barrier Category	Specific Impediments Identified	Source
Organizational & structural	Lack of administrative support; EBP is a low management priority; Lack of dedicated facilities and resources; Insufficient access to resources (e.g., internet, technology); Lack of sophisticated infrastructure	(Lee, 2015)
Professional & cultural	Negative attitudes toward research; Research perceived as irrelevant to daily practice; Lack of buy-in and ownership of EBPs among stakeholders; Inadequate pre-service preparation	(Bannigan & Bryar, 2002)
Logistical & cognitive	Lack of time for reading research and implementing findings; Difficulty understanding and interpreting complex research findings; Translation of research into user-friendly tools is inadequate	(Bellamy, Bledsoe, & Traube, 2006)

A key obstacle is the widespread unfamiliarity with professional social work, leading to a lack of formal and legal recognition. This absence of acknowledgment is especially evident in policymaking, where social work's specialized knowledge and functions are poorly understood, and policymakers remain largely "unconvinced" of its necessity and professional value, weakening its authority. Qualitative studies reveal that although core social work values—such as empowerment and respect for human dignity—shape many public service programs, professional methods and strategies are mostly ignored. As a result, services tend to address only immediate needs while neglecting psychosocial support, client participation, and long-term empowerment. Consequently, even when research identifies systemic problems, institutions are often unprepared or unwilling to implement sound recommendations, rendering research efforts ineffective (Jalil & Hussain, 2023), (Hussain & Jalil, 2025).

The weak academic position of social work is made worse by its ongoing confusion with sociology. Many educated people think social work is either the same as, or less important than, sociology, instead of seeing it as a separate and specialized profession that needs specific academic training. This long-standing confusion puts social work at a serious disadvantage when competing for institutional resources, recognition, and academic respect compared to well-established fields like sociology (Das, 2021), (Alam, 2022).

The continued reliance on the wholesale adoption of Western research paradigms presents a major methodological barrier. This dependency often forces the adoption of research questions and methodologies that are fundamentally ill-suited for the nuanced, complex cultural dynamics of Bangladeshi society. This approach makes academic findings less actionable and difficult to integrate into local practice models. Curricular modifications undertaken in the name of 'standardizing' or 'internationalizing' social work education have, paradoxically, often increased the disconnect with local culture and context, hindering the development of relevant auxiliary research.

These problems become worse because of limited funding. Although exact research funding data are scarce, the overall lack of institutional resources makes it difficult to build a stable research environment. In addition, the high publication costs—especially Article Processing Charges (APCs) for well-known open-access journals—create financial barriers for researchers in low-income countries, even when some fee waivers are available. Overcoming these financial challenges is essential to improve the visibility and impact of social work research.

### Prospects for Social Work Research Advancement

Despite these challenges, several positive trends offer prospects for enhancing social work research in Bangladesh. These are-

Table 3: Prospects in Social Work research on strategic alignment with national and global priorities.

Prospect	Areas	Sources
Strategic alignment with national and global priorities	Research in disaster management and climate vulnerability	(Hossain M. A., 2025), (Azad, Haque, & Choudhury, 2021)
	Evaluating and refining poverty reduction strategies	(Sultana & Uddin, 2022), (Ahmed, et al., 2025)
	Addressing psycho-social health and industrial vulnerabilities	(Dreher, Yusuf, Ashraf, Ahmed, & Strümpell, 2022)

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Social work research plays a key role in creating better disaster management plans through community participation. Studies show that involving local NGOs and volunteers can reduce the impact of disasters like flash floods. This aligns closely with the community organization method of social work, turning research into real, life-saving action.

Poverty reduction is also central to Bangladesh's development. Micro-credit and cash transfer programs help, but research shows that combining financial aid with other support leads to longer-lasting results. Social work research examines how these programs affect rural women's empowerment and decision-making, proving that social solutions must go beyond just money.

The fast growth of the garment sector has brought new workplace problems like bullying, poor leadership, and stress. Research links these issues to workers' health problems. For example, bullying increases the chance of poor health, while supervisor support improves it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies also found major knowledge gaps among social workers. These findings show how social work research can solve urgent problems and strengthen the profession's role in society.

Table 4: Prospects in Social Work Research on methodological advancement and ethical practice.

Prospect	Areas	Sources
Methodological advancement and ethical practice	Promoting indigenous research methodologies	(Azam & Mazid, 2022)
	Embracing Participatory Action Research (PAR)	(Dancis, Coleman, & Ellison, 2023)
	Navigating unique ethical challenges in South Asia	(Dahal, 2020), (Fazal, 2021)

To reduce dependence on Western ideas, social work research in Bangladesh needs to focus on decolonizing knowledge and using local culture, beliefs, and social realities. This makes research more meaningful and practical for local communities.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a strong method for this. It values community voices, shared decision-making, and real social change. Since traditional services often ignore client empowerment, PAR creates a more equal and collaborative research process.

Research ethics must fit the local context, not a single global model. In South Asia, researchers face issues like power imbalances, illiteracy, language barriers, and "silent refusal." Ethical research must protect vulnerable groups and use a care-based approach to improve their lives during the research process.

Table 5: Prospects in Social Work Research on strengthening academic infrastructure and collaboration.

Prospect	Areas	Sources
Strengthening academic infrastructure and collaboration	Professionalization and certification	(Jalil & Hussain, 2023)
	Enhancing collaboration (academics and practitioners)	(Sarker, 2023)
	Improving research output quality and visibility	(Khan, 2023)

The future of auxiliary research depends on the professional recognition of social work. Academics, practitioners, and policymakers must work together to build a professional body,

gain state approval, and possibly require certification for practitioners. This would strengthen trust in research and support policy use.

To make research more practical, the gap between academics and practice must be bridged. The success of BRAC shows how strong partnerships can make research useful in the field. When research is relevant and applied quickly, it proves its real value.

Universities should focus on quality research and regular publication to build credibility. Publishing in international databases like Scopus and PubMed can raise visibility. Partnering with global universities and using programs like Research4Life can help overcome financial limits and strengthen the global impact of Bangladeshi social work research.

While social work research in Bangladesh currently faces steep challenges, the overall environment is becoming more favorable. The combination of expanding academic programs, increased societal demand for professional social work, and external support (government and UN) creates a momentum that could foster stronger research culture.

### Conclusion

Social work research in Bangladesh today is at a crossroads. On one hand, it contends with systemic problems: chronic underfunding, limited research culture, and fragmented support systems (Siddiqui, 2025). On the other hand, the foundations for growth are being laid by the rapid expansion of social work education, by government programs and international partnerships, and by emerging social needs. To bridge the gap, stakeholders should take coordinated action.

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