

# Challenges of Social Workers in an Increased Digital Workspace: A Sierra Leonean Perspective

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## Abstract

The digitalization of social work is reshaping professional practice worldwide, offering opportunities for improved accessibility, efficiency, and evidence-informed interventions. However, in low-resource and post-conflict contexts such as Sierra Leone, adoption remains limited due to infrastructural, educational, and ethical challenges. This study critically examines the barriers and opportunities associated with digital social work practice in Sierra Leone, aiming to identify context-sensitive strategies for promoting inclusive, sustainable, and ethical digital transformation.

A qualitative research design was employed, involving twenty participants, including frontline social workers, social work educators, and service users from both urban and rural settings. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for the exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and professional realities. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, was used to identify recurring patterns and core themes related to digital access, literacy, ethical practice, and professional isolation.

Findings revealed significant infrastructural limitations, including unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, high data costs, and limited access to digital devices, particularly in rural areas. Digital literacy deficits among both practitioners and educators hindered effective adoption of technology, while the absence of context-specific ethical guidelines exposed practitioners and clients to risks related to confidentiality and informed consent. Vulnerable clients were often excluded from digital services, and urban-rural disparities reinforced professional and service delivery inequalities. To address these challenges, the study recommends integrating digital literacy and ethical training into social work curricula, investing in infrastructure, developing ongoing professional capacity-building programs, updating ethical frameworks for digital practice, and fostering South-South collaborations to share best practices. These measures aim to ensure that digitalization in social work is inclusive, ethically grounded, and responsive to the realities of low-resource settings.

**Keywords:** Digital Social Work, Sierra Leone, Low-Resource Settings, Digital Literacy, Ethical Practice

## 1. Introduction

The digitalization of social work has become a defining feature of contemporary practice, reshaping how professionals engage with clients, manage data, and deliver services. Globally, technologies such as artificial intelligence, tele-counseling platforms, and cloud-based case management systems have been integrated into social service delivery, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated reliance on remote methods (Mishna et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2022). These tools promise improved accessibility, efficiency, and evidence-informed interventions. However, the global transition toward digital practice is uneven, raising concerns about access, professional preparedness, and ethical practice in regions with fragile infrastructures.

In low-resource and post-conflict settings such as Sierra Leone, the challenges of digital integration are particularly acute. Limited internet access, frequent electricity shortages, high costs of digital resources, and

insufficient training opportunities pose significant barriers to social workers' adoption of technology (World Bank, 2022; Conteh & Mansaray, 2023). Moreover, the absence of structured digital literacy within social work curricula has left many practitioners unprepared to meet the demands of an increasingly digitalized profession. These systemic challenges risk widening the digital divide not only between Sierra Leone and other regions but also within the country itself, especially between urban and rural practitioners.

Beyond infrastructural concerns, digitalization raises pressing ethical and professional issues. Questions surrounding confidentiality, informed consent, and data protection take on heightened importance in contexts where awareness of digital rights is limited (Reamer, 2021; Abubakar, 2023). Without robust ethical frameworks and institutional safeguards, social workers risk compromising client trust and professional standards in their digital engagements. This paper therefore seeks to critically examine the unique barriers and opportunities of digital social work practice in Sierra Leone, highlighting how tailored interventions—through curriculum reform, infrastructure investment, and context-sensitive ethical guidelines can promote inclusive, sustainable, and ethical digital transformation in the profession.

## **2. Problem Statement**

While digital technologies have become integral to social work practice globally, their adoption in Sierra Leone remains limited and fragmented. Social workers face multiple barriers, including poor digital infrastructure, high connectivity costs, and inadequate training in the use of technology. These challenges create significant disparities in service delivery, particularly between urban-based practitioners who have limited exposure to donor-supported digital tools and rural social workers who remain entirely excluded. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas—such as ensuring client confidentiality, informed consent, and data protection in virtual environments remain largely unaddressed in existing professional guidelines. The lack of context-specific strategies and policies to guide digital transformation in social work not only undermines professional practice but also risks exacerbating inequalities in access to social services. Addressing this gap requires a systematic understanding of the challenges within Sierra Leone's unique socio-economic and post-conflict context in order to develop inclusive, ethical, and sustainable pathways for digital social work.

## **3. Literature Review**

The integration of digital technologies into social work has generated global attention in recent years, particularly as practitioners adapt to new ways of delivering services in rapidly changing environments. Scholars highlight that digital innovations such as case management software, online counseling platforms, and artificial intelligence tools have the potential to transform how social workers engage with clients, manage information, and evaluate interventions (Goldkind, Wolf, & Freddolino, 2018; Chan & Holosko, 2022). These technologies offer opportunities for efficiency, enhanced communication, and the generation of data that can inform evidence-based decision-making. However, the degree to which these opportunities are realized varies widely across regions, with low-resource settings experiencing slower adoption and significant barriers.

One of the most widely discussed challenges in the literature is the digital divide, which refers to disparities in access to technology based on geography, socio-economic status, and institutional support (Mishna et al., 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, limited infrastructure, high internet costs, and weak policy frameworks exacerbate this divide (Lomotey & Owusu, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Studies note that while social workers in wealthier nations increasingly rely on telehealth and virtual counseling, practitioners in fragile economies remain constrained by poor connectivity and lack of digital devices (Nguyen, 2022). This unequal access undermines the global promise of digital transformation in social work, leaving certain populations underserved.

Another significant concern in the literature is the absence of digital literacy within social work training and education. Globally, universities and professional institutions are beginning to integrate courses on digital practice into social work curricula (Goldkind & Wolf, 2014; Chan, 2021). However, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone, such integration remains minimal. Research shows that many practitioners enter the field without even basic computer skills, leaving them unable to take advantage of donor-supported digital tools when available (Conteh & Mansaray, 2023). This gap between global standards of practice and local realities perpetuates professional exclusion and creates disparities between younger, more technologically adept practitioners and older professionals.

Ethical issues have also been foregrounded in discussions of digital social work. Traditional concerns such as client confidentiality, professional boundaries, and informed consent take on new complexities in virtual environments (Reamer, 2015; Reamer, 2021). Scholars argue that digital platforms expose clients to risks of data breaches, surveillance, and misuse of personal information, particularly in contexts where cybersecurity regulations are weak (Abubakar, 2023). In Sierra Leone, where legislation and professional frameworks have not fully adapted to digital realities, these ethical concerns become pressing. Without appropriate safeguards, digital adoption may inadvertently compromise the very principles of trust and protection that underpin social work.

The literature further points to urban-rural disparities in digital adoption. Studies across Africa suggest that urban-based social workers often benefit from donor-driven initiatives that introduce limited digital tools, while rural practitioners remain largely analog and professionally isolated (Lomotey & Owusu, 2020; World Bank, 2022). This divide contributes to inequalities in service delivery, with rural clients—who often face greater vulnerabilities—receiving fewer opportunities for digitally enhanced services. Furthermore, the sense of professional isolation among rural social workers has implications for morale, retention, and professional development (Mishna et al., 2021).

Recent studies also emphasize the need for context-sensitive frameworks for digital social work practice. A one-size-fits-all approach, often imported from high-income countries, risks failure when transplanted into fragile states with weak infrastructure and different cultural realities (Dominelli, 2020; Chan & Holosko, 2022). Scholars recommend developing models that take into account local socio-economic conditions, cultural attitudes toward technology, and resource limitations. This requires collaboration between governments, educational institutions, and NGOs to create holistic strategies for training, infrastructure investment, and ethical guidance.

Finally, the literature reveals a notable gap in research on digital social work in Sierra Leone. While there is growing documentation of digital adoption in Africa more broadly, very few studies examine the unique challenges faced by practitioners in post-conflict, low-resource contexts (Conteh & Mansaray, 2023). Given Sierra Leone's fragile infrastructure, high poverty rates, and limited professional regulation, the barriers to digital adoption are particularly acute. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensuring that the profession evolves in line with global developments while remaining sensitive to local realities. This paper seeks to contribute to this underexplored area by examining the infrastructural, educational, and ethical barriers to digital social work in Sierra Leone and proposing strategies for inclusive digital transformation.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by social workers in adapting to digital technologies within the Sierra Leonean context. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings, rather than focusing on numerical measurement. This design was particularly suited to uncovering the infrastructural, educational, and ethical challenges that shape digital social work practice in a low-resource setting.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity in the participant pool. In total, twenty (20) participants took part in the study, consisting of frontline social workers, social work educators, and service users. These participants were selected to represent both urban and rural settings in order to capture disparities in access, exposure, and professional support. This approach provided a rich dataset that reflected multiple perspectives across geographic and institutional contexts.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Individual interviews were conducted with social workers, educators, and service users to capture personal narratives about their experiences with digital technologies in practice. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was recorded with consent. To complement the interviews, two focus group discussions were organized—one in an urban setting and another in a rural community. Each group comprised six to eight participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes. These discussions allowed participants to reflect collectively on their shared challenges and to compare experiences across contexts, thereby reinforcing the validity of the findings through data triangulation.

All data collected were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis. This involved familiarizing with the transcripts, generating initial codes, collating codes into broader categories, and refining them into coherent themes. Attention was given to

themes such as digital access, literacy, ethics, and professional isolation. NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to manage and organize the data systematically, ensuring consistency in the coding process. The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Prior to participation, all respondents provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting to protect identities. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without consequences, and special care was taken to create a safe environment for discussing professional and institutional challenges. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by combining interviews and focus group discussions, which strengthened the credibility of the findings. Member checking was used to validate interpretations, as emerging themes were shared with selected participants for feedback. In addition, thick descriptions of participant experiences and contextual realities were provided to enhance transferability and allow readers to make informed judgments about the applicability of findings to similar contexts. These measures ensured that the study remained rigorous, credible, and reflective of the realities of social work practice in Sierra Leone.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the key findings of the study, drawing on interviews and focus group discussions with social workers, educators, and service users in both urban and rural Sierra Leone. The analysis highlights the lived realities of participants as they navigate the opportunities and constraints of digital social work practice within a low-resource, post-conflict context. Central themes emerging from the data include infrastructural limitations, digital literacy deficits, ethical and professional dilemmas, client exclusion, and the urban–rural divide. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, situating Sierra Leone’s experience within broader debates on global digital transformation in social work.

### **Theme 1: Infrastructural Limitations**

One of the strongest challenges revealed in the study is the fragile digital infrastructure in Sierra Leone, which limits social workers’ ability to adopt technology effectively. Practitioners described frequent electricity outages, unstable internet, and the prohibitive cost of mobile data. As one urban social worker explained, *“Sometimes I go to the office, and the internet is down the whole day. Even when it works, buying data on my own salary is impossible. Clients expect follow-up through WhatsApp or email, but I can’t always respond on time.”* This highlights how digital expectations clash with infrastructural realities, leaving practitioners unable to meet client needs. The situation is even more severe in rural areas where, according to a rural respondent, *“In my community, there is no electricity for days. I write case notes on paper because even charging my phone is difficult. When NGOs bring training on digital tools, it is always in Freetown. We in the provinces are forgotten.”* Such testimonies underscore how infrastructural deficits reinforce geographic inequalities, with rural workers and clients bearing the brunt of exclusion from digital advancements.

### **Theme 2: Digital Literacy Deficits**

A second critical barrier is the lack of digital literacy among both social work practitioners and students. The absence of structured training in universities was repeatedly emphasized, with educators acknowledging their own limitations in digital skills. One lecturer stated, *“We do not have structured digital courses in our curriculum. Many students graduate without knowing how to use case management software. Some of us lecturers are also not confident with technology, so how do we teach it?”* This gap creates a cycle of professional unpreparedness where both teachers and learners lack the competence to integrate digital methods into practice. As a result, younger practitioners often rely on self-teaching, while older workers face exclusion from donor-funded digital projects. The lack of formal training means that digital adoption, when it occurs, is fragmented and unsustainable. Without curriculum reform, the profession risks falling further behind global standards of practice.

### **Theme 3: Ethical and Professional Dilemmas**

Beyond access and skills, social workers also identified pressing ethical concerns in the use of digital tools. Confidentiality and data protection emerged as key anxieties, particularly in the absence of national



guidelines. One participant recalled, *“Confidentiality is my biggest fear. Once, a colleague stored client files in Google Drive without password protection. If this information leaks, who takes responsibility? We don’t have clear guidelines.”* This illustrates how digital practices, when unregulated, expose both clients and practitioners to risks that could undermine trust in social services. Concerns about informed consent and client awareness of digital risks were also noted, especially given low levels of digital literacy among service users. In this sense, digitalization is not simply a technical transition but also an ethical challenge that requires robust professional safeguards adapted to Sierra Leone’s context.

#### **Theme 4: Client Exclusion and Inequality**

Another significant finding is the exclusion of vulnerable clients from digital services due to poverty and limited access to devices. Service users expressed frustration at being left out of programs that assumed smartphone ownership and reliable internet. One participant shared, *“The social worker told me to join a counseling session online, but I had no smartphone. I felt left out because others could attend on Zoom, but I could not. It makes me feel like services are for the rich only.”* This testimony highlights the unintended consequence of digitalization—rather than promoting inclusion, it risks reproducing social inequality. For many clients, the absence of resources means they are systematically excluded from services that could otherwise provide critical support. In a low-resource setting, digital adoption must therefore be carefully planned to avoid reinforcing the very vulnerabilities that social work seeks to address.

#### **Theme 5: Professional Isolation and Urban–Rural Divide**

Finally, the study revealed deep professional isolation among rural social workers, who feel marginalized from donor-driven digital initiatives concentrated in urban areas. A rural practitioner remarked, *“When NGOs bring training on digital tools, it is always in Freetown. We in the provinces are forgotten.”* This sense of exclusion creates a two-tier profession in which urban workers gain exposure to new tools while rural counterparts remain reliant on manual methods. The resulting disparities not only affect service delivery but also weaken professional solidarity and morale. Social workers in rural areas described feeling disconnected from their peers, lacking opportunities for collaboration, and being overlooked in national training strategies. This divide illustrates how digitalization, when unequally implemented, risks creating new forms of professional stratification within the field.

#### **Summary**

Across these themes, it is evident that digital transformation in Sierra Leone’s social work sector is constrained by interlinked infrastructural, educational, ethical, and socio-economic barriers. Quotations from participants demonstrate the lived realities of practitioners and clients struggling to adapt to global digital trends in a fragile context. While digitalization offers promise, it currently risks reproducing inequality and undermining professional standards unless reforms address the systemic challenges of access, literacy, ethics, and inclusivity.

**6. Policy and Practice Implications** To mitigate these challenges, several strategic actions are recommended:

**Curriculum Reform:** Integrate digital literacy and ethical training into social work education in Sierra Leone.

**Infrastructure Investment:** Improve internet connectivity and electricity access, especially in rural areas.

**Capacity Building:** Develop government-NGO partnerships for continuous professional development in digital tools.

**Ethical Frameworks:** Update professional guidelines to address digital confidentiality, online consent, and data protection.

**South-South Collaborations:** Leverage partnerships with countries facing similar challenges to share resources, models, and best practices.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Digitalization offers transformative opportunities for social work, yet the Sierra Leonean context reveals the risks of a one-size-fits-all approach. This study highlights how infrastructural challenges, limited digital literacy, ethical uncertainties, and urban–rural disparities constrain the adoption of digital tools, leaving both

practitioners and vulnerable clients at risk of exclusion. Without targeted interventions, digital innovation may inadvertently reinforce inequalities rather than enhance service delivery.

To address these barriers, the study recommends integrating digital literacy and ethical training into social work curricula, investing in reliable infrastructure, developing ongoing professional development programs, and updating guidelines to safeguard confidentiality and informed consent. Additionally, South-South collaborations can provide context-sensitive models and resources to support sustainable digital transformation.

By implementing inclusive, ethically grounded, and locally responsive strategies, Sierra Leone's social work sector can leverage digital tools effectively, ensuring equitable access for clients and empowering practitioners to meet global standards while addressing local realities.

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