Career Choice Among Social Work Students at a Regional University in Gujarat, India: The Relative Influence of Internal and External Factors

[1]Dipali Vaniya, [2]Dr. Jignesh B. Tala, [3]Dr. Chirag P. Patel, [4]Kumarsawan Shakya, [5]Harpalsinh Jadeja, [6]Vishvaraj Vala, [7]Vaishali Amliyar, [8]Dipti S. Kapuria, [9]Jahanvi Dave

[17]Researcher, [23]Assistant Professor, [4568]PhD Scholar, [9]Consultant

[1-8]KSKV Kachchh University, Bhuj-Kachchh, India, [9]Paryavaran Mitra, Ahmedabad

***Abstract*—Career choice among social work students is shaped by an interplay of internal dispositions and external incentives, yet research in non-Western and regional educational settings remains limited. This study examined the factors influencing career choices among social work students at Krantiguru Shyamji Krishna Verma Kachchh University, Gujarat, India. Internal factors (family and society, academic environment, and altruistic motive) were distinguished from external factors (economic stability, peer influence, and industry trends). A cross-sectional survey administered through Google Forms yielded responses from 49 Master of Social Work (MSW) students and PhD scholars. Item-level endorsement was tested against a 50% baseline using exact binomial tests, with Holm-adjusted p values reported alongside unadjusted values. External factors were endorsed more uniformly (mean item endorsement 61.4%, range 46.9–75.5%) than internal factors (55.4%, range 28.6–75.5%), whose influence was polarized: family encouragement and the usefulness of the academic environment were each endorsed by 75.5% of respondents, whereas family background and perceived demand for social workers were endorsed by fewer than 40%. Economic stability and job security (67.3% each) and peer-driven entry (75.5%) were among the most strongly endorsed external items. Career preferences clustered around human resource management (36.7%), government services (22.4%), and corporate social responsibility (12.2%) rather than direct practice. Emotional and psychological job demands (24.5%) and low salary (22.4%) were the most frequently cited reasons for reconsidering a social work career. Instrumental considerations appear at least as prominent as values-based motives in this cohort, with implications for curriculum design, career counselling, and workforce retention.**

***Index Terms*—career choice, social work education, internal and external factors, career decision-making, India**

I. Introduction

Social work education occupies a distinctive position within Indian higher education. It prepares graduates for roles that are both service-oriented and, increasingly, market-mediated, spanning non-governmental organizations, government welfare departments, corporate social responsibility (CSR) divisions, and human resource management (HRM). Yet the pathways through which students enter, and remain in, the field are still under-theorized, particularly outside metropolitan institutions. Understanding why students choose social work bears directly on the quality of the workforce that delivers welfare services, on the curriculum that shapes its competencies, and on the retention of skilled practitioners in a profession often described as emotionally demanding and modestly remunerated.

Scholarship on career choice has been dominated by Western psychological models, including trait-and-factor approaches (Holland, 1959; Parsons, 1909), social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), developmental models (Super, 1957), and the theory of circumscription and compromise (Gottfredson, 1981). These models foreground individual dispositions and cognitive processes; although

some acknowledge contextual barriers, they say comparatively little about the structural and economic constraints that may be especially salient in developing-country labor markets. Research on social work career choice, in turn, has tended to emphasize intrinsic and altruistic motives, such as the desire to help others and effect social change (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Csikai & Rozensky, 1997), even though career-related considerations are also documented (Stevens et al., 2012).

This paper addresses that gap by examining the relative weight of internal and external factors in the career choices of social work students at a regional Indian university. It asks which kind of factor students endorse more strongly and what the answer implies for social work education and professional retention. The findings suggest that external, instrumental considerations are endorsed at least as consistently as internal, values-based ones, a pattern that may speak to wider debates about the professionalization and sustainability of social work in the global South.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

2.1 Theories of Career Choice

The study of vocational choice rests on several enduring theoretical traditions. Parsons's (1909) trait-and-factor theory framed career selection as a rational matching of individual traits to occupational requirements, an assumption later systematized in Holland's (1959) theory of vocational personalities and work environments. Super's (1957) developmental model approached career choice as a lifelong process unfolding through identifiable stages. More recent frameworks, notably Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and its extension in social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), foreground self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental supports and barriers. Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise is particularly instructive here because it explains how individuals narrow their occupational aspirations in light of perceived accessibility, social standing, and gender norms.

2.2 Career Choice in Social Work: Internal Versus External Factors

A recurring theme in the social work literature is the tension between altruistic vocation and pragmatic calculation. Studies conducted largely in North America and the United Kingdom identify the desire to help others and a commitment to social change as central motives (Biggerstaff, 2000; Christie & Kruk, 1998; Csikai & Rozensky, 1997), in keeping with the profession's self-understanding as a values-driven field. The same literature, however, documents career-related and instrumental considerations alongside these motives. In a large survey of social work students in England, altruistic motives predominated, but career prospects, pay, and encouragement from family or friends were also frequently reported (Stevens et al., 2012). The authors cautioned that a mismatch between students' motivations and the realities of practice may contribute to stress and burnout among practitioners.

Evidence from India is more limited. A qualitative study of postgraduate social work students in India and China identified gaps in admission policy and in career guidance (Baikady et al., 2023), but, to the authors' knowledge, little quantitative evidence is available on the relative weight of internal and external influences in regional Indian institutions.

This study adopts a simple but analytically useful schema that sorts these influences into two groups. Internal factors comprise family and societal influence, the academic environment, and altruistic motive: forces rooted in the student's immediate social world and value system. External factors comprise economic stability, peer influence, and industry trends: forces that emanate from the labour market and the student's instrumental environment. Operationalizing career choice in this way allows the study to test whether the traditional, altruism-centred account of entry into social work holds in a contemporary regional Indian context, or whether instrumental and market-driven considerations have assumed greater prominence. The study thereby contributes an empirical account from an underserved educational context.

2.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Two research questions guided the study. First, which factors, internal or external, do social work students endorse more strongly as influences on their career choices? Second, what implications do these influences hold for social work education and professional retention? Two hypotheses structured the analysis:

- H1: Internal factors (family and society, academic environment, and altruistic motive) influence career choices among social work students.
- H2: External factors (economic stability, peer influence, and industry trends) influence career choices among social work students.

Because the survey measured self-reported endorsement of influence rather than behavioral outcomes, each hypothesis was evaluated through the pattern of endorsement across the items of its domain (Section 3.5).

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, appropriate to the aim of systematically describing and testing the factors that influence career choices in a defined population. Survey methodology was selected for its capacity to generate standardized, comparable data on attitudes and influences across a dispersed group of respondents.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population comprised social work students (currently pursuing or having completed the MSW) and PhD students and scholars in social work at Krantiguru Shyamji Krishna Verma Kachchh University, Kachchh, Gujarat, India. Simple random sampling, a probability sampling method in which every member of the target population has an equal chance of selection, was employed. The final analytic sample comprised 49 respondents (Table 1). Most were aged 20–24 years (65.3%), the gender distribution was approximately balanced (49.0% male, 51.0% female), a slight majority lived in rural areas (55.1%), and 83.7% were currently pursuing the MSW.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristic	n	%
Age (years)		
20–24	32	65.3
25–29	9	18.4
30 or above	8	16.3
Gender		
Female	25	51.0
Male	24	49.0
Residence		
Rural	27	55.1
Urban	22	44.9
Programme status		
Currently pursuing MSW	41	83.7
Completed MSW	4	8.2
Pursuing PhD	4	8.2

Note. N = 49. MSW = Master of Social Work.

3.3 Instrument and Data Collection

Primary data were collected with a structured questionnaire constructed in Google Forms and distributed electronically. The instrument covered the respondent's profile, career interests, and the six hypothesized factor domains (family and societal influence, academic environment, altruistic motive, economic stability, peer influence, and industry trends), together with items on challenges and on factors that might prompt reconsideration of a social work career. Factor items used agreement-type response options (agree, neutral, disagree). Secondary data from journals, research papers, and prior theses informed the conceptual framing and the literature review.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits before taking part. Responses were anonymized, and the data were kept confidential.

3.5 Data Analysis

Responses were coded as endorsement (agreement with the item statement) or non-endorsement (neutral or disagreement). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were computed in JASP. For each item, the proportion of respondents endorsing it was compared with a 50% baseline using a two-sided exact binomial test, which is preferable to the asymptotic chi-square goodness-of-fit test at this sample size, and Wilson 95% confidence intervals were calculated. Because 18 items could be tested, Holm-adjusted p values are reported alongside unadjusted values, and unadjusted results are treated as exploratory. A domain was considered to receive consistent support for its hypothesis when a majority of its testable items were endorsed significantly above the baseline and none was endorsed significantly below it. The two domains were compared descriptively, using the mean and dispersion of item-level endorsement rates. Because the items were answered by the same respondents and are therefore not independent observations, no inferential test was applied to this comparison. The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$.

IV. Results

4.1 Career Preferences and Sources of Information

Career interest was sharply concentrated. HRM was the most frequently preferred field (36.7%, n = 18), followed by government services (22.4%, n = 11) and CSR (12.2%, n = 6); together these accounted for 71.4% of respondents (n = 35). Students reported learning about the profession predominantly through peers (57.1%, n = 28), with professional career counsellors a distant second (20.4%, n = 10).

4.2 Internal Factors

Item-level results are shown in Table 2.

Family and societal influence. A clear majority (75.5%, n = 37) reported that their family had encouraged them to pursue social work. By contrast, only 36.7% (n = 18) endorsed a family background in social work as the reason for their choice, while 63.3% disagreed, and on a parallel item 34.7% (n = 17) agreed and 65.3% disagreed that family background was their motive; only the second of these two items differed significantly from the baseline before adjustment. A majority (61.2%, n = 30) expressed a desire to bring change in their community or society, which did not differ significantly from the baseline.

Academic environment. The academic environment was rated important by 61.2% (n = 30) and useful by 75.5% (n = 37), and fieldwork or internship areas were rated beneficial by 68.3%. Of the two items that could be tested, only the usefulness rating differed significantly from the baseline.

Altruistic motive. Altruistic values influenced 69.4% (n = 34) of respondents, and 63.3% (n = 31) reported a motive of bringing positive change in others' lives, although the latter did not differ significantly from the baseline. However, the "strongest motive" item, which combined the desire to help others with interest in

social change, was endorsed by only 34.5%, and rising demand for social workers as a personal motive by just 28.6% (n = 14), significantly below the baseline before adjustment (p = .004). Altruism therefore operated unevenly rather than uniformly.

Table 2 Endorsement of Internal-Factor Items Against a 50% Baseline

Item	n	%	95% CI	p	p (Holm)
Family and societal influence					
Family encouraged pursuit of social work	37	75.5	[61.9, 85.4]	< .001	.008
Family background in social work was the reason for choosing it (item a)	18	36.7	[24.7, 50.7]	.085	.683
Family background was the motive (item b)	17	34.7	[22.9, 48.7]	.044	.488
Desire to bring change in community or society	30	61.2	[47.2, 73.6]	.152	.914
Academic environment					
Academic environment was important	30	61.2	[47.2, 73.6]	.152	.914
Academic environment was useful	37	75.5	[61.9, 85.4]	< .001	.008
Fieldwork/internship areas were beneficial	–	68.3	–	–	–
Altruistic motive					
Altruistic values influenced choice	34	69.4	[55.5, 80.5]	.009	.132
Motive of bringing positive change in others' lives	31	63.3	[49.3, 75.3]	.085	.683
“Strongest motive”: helping others combined with social change	–	34.5	–	–	–
Rising demand for social workers (as a personal motive)	14	28.6	[17.8, 42.4]	.004	.057

Note. N = 49. Endorsement is agreement with the item statement; neutral and disagreeing responses are treated as non-endorsement. CI = Wilson 95% confidence interval for the endorsement proportion. p values are two-sided exact binomial tests against a 50% baseline; Holm-adjusted values are adjusted across all 18 testable items in Tables 2 and 3. Dashes mark items whose reported percentages (68.3% and 34.5%) do not correspond to a whole number of respondents out of 49; they are shown as recorded, and no counts, intervals, or tests are reported for them.

4.3 External Factors

Item-level results are shown in Table 3.

Economic stability. Economic stability and job security were each endorsed by 67.3% (n = 33) of respondents and economic benefits by 65.3% (n = 32), with only 12.2–14.3% neutral. All three exceeded the baseline before adjustment but not after it.

Peer influence. Peer-driven entry was the most strongly endorsed external item: 75.5% (n = 37) reported pursuing social work because their friends were doing so, and this item remained significant after adjustment. In addition, 61.2% (n = 30) acknowledged that friends influenced their career choice, and 49.0% (n = 24) valued friends’ opinions; neither differed from the baseline.

Industry trends. Current trends in social services influenced 65.3% (n = 32) of respondents, growing opportunities 55.1% (n = 27), and growing demand for social workers 46.9% (n = 23). Only the first exceeded the baseline, and not after adjustment.

Table 3 Endorsement of External-Factor Items Against a 50% Baseline

Item	n	%	95% CI	p	p (Holm)
Economic stability					
Economic stability	33	67.3	[53.4, 78.8]	.021	.277
Job security	33	67.3	[53.4, 78.8]	.021	.277
Economic benefits	32	65.3	[51.3, 77.1]	.044	.488
Peer influence					
Friends influenced career choice	30	61.2	[47.2, 73.6]	.152	.914
Pursuing social work because friends were doing so	37	75.5	[61.9, 85.4]	< .001	.008
Values friends' opinions	24	49.0	[35.6, 62.5]	1.000	1.000
Industry trends					
Current trends in social services	32	65.3	[51.3, 77.1]	.044	.488
Growing opportunities in the field	27	55.1	[41.3, 68.1]	.568	1.000
Growing demand for social workers	23	46.9	[33.7, 60.6]	.775	1.000

Note. N = 49. Endorsement is agreement with the item statement; neutral and disagreeing responses are treated as non-endorsement. CI = Wilson 95% confidence interval for the endorsement proportion. p values are two-sided exact binomial tests against a 50% baseline; Holm-adjusted values are adjusted across all 18 testable items in Tables 2 and 3.

4.4 Domain Comparison and Hypothesis Evaluation

Mean item-level endorsement, calculated from the percentages in Tables 2 and 3, was 55.4% (SD = 18.0 percentage points) across the 11 internal items and 61.4% (SD = 9.4) across the nine external items (Table 4). The domains therefore differed less in how strongly they were endorsed on average than in how uniformly they were endorsed. External items ranged from 46.9% to 75.5%, and none was endorsed significantly below the baseline. Internal items ranged from 28.6% to 75.5% and included three items significantly above the baseline and two significantly below it.

Table 4 Summary of Item-Level Endorsement by Domain

Indicator	Internal factors	External factors
Number of items	11	9
Mean endorsement (%)	55.4	61.4
SD of endorsement (percentage points)	18.0	9.4
Range of endorsement (%)	28.6–75.5	46.9–75.5
Items significantly above 50% (unadjusted)	3	5
Items significantly below 50% (unadjusted)	2	0
Items not different from 50%	4	4

Indicator	Internal factors	External factors
Items not tested (no whole-number count)	2	0
Items significantly above 50% (Holm-adjusted)	2	1
Items significantly below 50% (Holm-adjusted)	0	0

Note. Means, standard deviations, and ranges are calculated from the item percentages in Tables 2 and 3 and are descriptive only; items are answered by the same respondents and are not independent observations. Significance refers to two-sided exact binomial tests against 50%.

H1 (internal factors) was partially supported. Three of the nine testable internal items (family encouragement, usefulness of the academic environment, and altruistic values) were endorsed significantly above the baseline. Two (family background as motive and perceived demand for social workers) were endorsed significantly below it, and the remaining four did not differ from it. The two items without whole-number counts showed the same split descriptively (fieldwork or internship, 68.3%; "strongest motive," 34.5%). Internal factors therefore did not operate as a coherent, uniformly influential block. After Holm adjustment, only family encouragement and the usefulness of the academic environment remained significant (adjusted $p = .008$ for each).

H2 (external factors) received qualified support. Five of the nine external items (economic stability, job security, economic benefits, peer-driven entry, and current trends) were endorsed significantly above the baseline, the other four did not differ from it, and none fell below it. After Holm adjustment, only peer-driven entry remained significant (adjusted $p = .008$). The pattern indicates consistent but, given the sample size, modest evidence of external influence.

4.5 Challenges and Reconsideration Factors

Asked which factors might prompt them to reconsider a social work career, respondents most frequently cited emotional and psychological job demands (24.5%, n = 12), followed by low salary relative to other fields (22.4%, n = 11) and financial issues combined with extra workload (20.4%, n = 10). Psychological burden and financial inadequacy thus emerged as the leading retention-risk factors.

V. Discussion

5.1 Principal Findings

The principal finding is that external, instrumental considerations were endorsed at least as consistently as internal, values-based ones. Economic stability and job security (67.3% each) and peer-driven entry (75.5%) were among the most strongly endorsed items, and no external item fell significantly below the baseline. Internal factors, by contrast, were polarized: family encouragement and the usefulness of the academic environment were endorsed by three quarters of respondents, whereas family background and perceived demand for social workers were not. This pattern complicates the profession's altruism-centred self-understanding without contradicting it, since altruistic values were still endorsed by 69.4% of respondents. It is consistent with earlier work showing that altruistic and career motives coexist in varying combinations among social work students (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Stevens et al., 2012). It also resonates with Gottfredson's (1981) thesis that aspirations are narrowed and reshaped by perceived labor-market realism, even within a vocationally committed cohort. Given the small sample and the number of tests, however, only three items (two internal, one external) remained significant after adjustment, and the pattern should be read as indicative rather than conclusive.

5.2 Implications for Education and Retention

Several implications follow. First, the concentration of career interest in HRM, government employment, and CSR, rather than front-line practice, suggests that social work education functions, for many students, as

a gateway to adjacent professional and managerial roles. This may reflect a genuine diversification of the field, a movement away from comparatively under-remunerated practice positions on which welfare systems depend, or both; the present data cannot distinguish between these explanations. Second, because emotional and psychological demands and inadequate pay were the leading grounds for reconsideration, workforce retention may be at risk: students who enter with pragmatic motives may be vulnerable to exit when economic returns or role sustainability fall short. This concern echoes the warning that mismatches between motivation and the realities of practice may contribute to stress and burnout (Stevens et al., 2012). Third, the strong endorsement of the academic environment suggests that educational design, and not only pre-existing disposition, may shape career trajectories, which presents a lever for intervention. Finally, because peers (57.1%) were far more common than career counsellors (20.4%) as a source of information about the profession, institutionalizing career guidance within programmes appears warranted, in line with the call for stronger career guidance in postgraduate social work education in India and China (Baikady et al., 2023).

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The results invite a reframing of dominant, disposition-centred models of career choice. In a labor market in which formal employment of any kind is prized, family encouragement may coexist with instrumentality rather than displace it; one plausible reading is that family support legitimizes economic calculation, although the present data do not test this mechanism. Such a reading challenges the implicit dichotomy between "calling" and "commodification" found in much of the social work literature. The study also offers a transferable internal–external analytical framework and an empirical account from an under-researched regional context.

VI. Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. The sample was small (N = 49) and drawn from a single institution, which limits statistical power and generalizability. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and self-report data carry risks of social desirability and common-method bias. The factor list is not exhaustive, and the assignment of some items to domains is open to debate; perceived demand for social workers, for example, was treated here as an internal motive in one item and an external industry trend in another. Analyses relied on single-item endorsement rates and a 50% baseline rather than respondent-level composite scores, so the comparison of the two domains is descriptive, and the sample size did not permit multivariable analysis by gender, residence, or programme status. Unadjusted significance tests are exploratory, since only three items remained significant after correction for multiple testing. Finally, the questionnaire was developed for this study, and its formal psychometric validation (for example, factor structure and test–retest reliability) lay beyond the scope of this pilot-scale investigation.

VII. Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing career choices among social work students at a regional Indian university. External, instrumental factors (economic stability, job security, and peer influence) were endorsed at least as consistently as internal, values-based ones, whose influence was polarized between strongly endorsed items (family encouragement, the academic environment) and weakly endorsed ones (family background, perceived demand). Students clustered around management-adjacent roles (HRM, CSR, and government employment) and cited emotional demands and low pay as grounds for reconsidering a social work career, which points to a profession in tension: valued for its values but chosen, and potentially sustained, on increasingly pragmatic terms.

The contributions are threefold: a conceptual internal–external framework applicable across contexts, empirical evidence from an underserved regional setting in the global South, and practical implications for curriculum enhancement, career-guidance services, and retention strategy. Future research should extend the framework to multi-institutional and cross-regional samples, use respondent-level scales with established reliability and validity so that the two domains can be compared inferentially, incorporate qualitative

exploration of motivational trajectories, and adopt longitudinal designs to capture how career intentions evolve during and after professional training. Such work is essential if social work education is to reconcile its vocational mission with the economic realities its graduates confront.

VIII. Declarations

- **Ethics:** Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with informed consent obtained from all participants.
- **Funding:** The authors received no specific funding for this work.
- **Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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