

# Ethical Challenges Faced by Social Work Students in Mental Health Setting

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## ABSTRACT

Social work student's work in a variety of settings, but ethical dilemmas in mental health settings are particularly significant, often impacting their professional development and decision-making. Despite the demand for mental health services rising in Nepal, there is a lack of proper training and guidance on ethical practices in this area. This study aims to explore the ethical challenges faced by social work students in mental health settings and assess their awareness of ethical practice. Understanding these challenges is essential to uphold professional standards, and support future social workers in delivering ethical care. This study uses a qualitative method and an interpretivist approach with data collected from 12 purposively and conveniently selected participants through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The collected data was further analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study suggests that the level of awareness among social work students regarding the importance of ethical practice in mental health settings is generally strong. However, they face many ethical challenges such as confidentiality, informed consent, professional limits, value conflicts, client autonomy, and the concept of no maleficence, mainly because the curriculum focuses more on theory than practice, with inadequate supervision, limited opportunities for independent decision-making, and a lack of hands-on experience. The study suggests enhancing supervision, practical education, and ethical decision-making frameworks as ways to empower social work students. Establishing a safe environment for discussion may lead students in successfully navigate moral dilemmas.

**Keywords:** social work, mental health, ethics, ethical challenges, supervision

## INTRODUCTION

Social work is one of the practice-based professions where ethical practice is essential. (Jayawardana & Nanayakkara, 2018). In social work, ethics refers to the values and norms that direct social workers in their profession to make sure they engage responsibly, with equality, and with respect while safeguarding people's rights and dignity. According to the National association of Social Workers' code of ethics, when ethical dilemmas arise, the code provides a set of values, principles, and standards to direct behavior and decision-making. (National Association of Social Work (NASW), n.d.)

Social work ethics are based on six core values:

1. Service – Social workers are committed to serving those in need
2. Social Justice – Social workers fight against societal injustice.
3. Dignity and Worth of the Person – Social workers protect people's dignity and treat everyone with respect.
4. Importance of Human Relationships – They recognize the importance of relationships.
5. Integrity – Social workers are trustworthy

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## 6. Competence – They continuously enhance their professional knowledge and skills.

Social workers are vital to mental health services because they frequently serve as first responders to those who are struggling with mental health issues. (Triplett, 2017) Social workers are essential to enhancing people's access to mental health services and mental health outcomes. (Allen, 2014). They offer help to people in psychological distress, support, advocacy, and intervention. They are engaged in assessment, counseling, crisis intervention, case management, and policy advocacy. (National Association of Social Work (NASW), n.d.). Students studying social work require fieldwork or internships in a variety of contexts, including mental health organizations. These internships give students practical experience working with people who are experiencing psychological and emotional difficulties. Social work students can be seen working in various mental health organizations such as Hospitals, counseling centers, psychiatric facilities, community mental health centers, substance abuse treatment centers, nonprofit organizations, elderly care, and geriatric centers, etc.

In social work, an ethical challenge is a circumstance in which a practitioner struggles to decide what to do because of conflicts between their moral, professional, and legal obligations. Ethical challenges can take the form of ethical dilemmas (where a social worker must choose between two equally undesirable options, creating a conflict of moral principles), ethical problems (when they know the right action but encounter obstacles in putting it into practice), or ethical issues (when a social worker considers what they ought to do ethically). These difficulties result from conflicting interests, social workers' dual roles as controllers and helpers, and the need to safeguard clients while adhering to ethical and institutional requirements. (Nanayakkara & Jayawardana, 2018). Social work students may encounter ethical challenges related to confidentiality, boundaries, dual relationships, conflicts of interest, cultural diversity, supervision, and organizational boundaries when working in a variety of institutions.

### **Problem Statement**

Although the demand for mental health service is seen globally, ethical challenges in mental health care are common, with about 70% of professionals facing dilemmas worldwide (Austin & Korr, 2007). Similarly, in the context of Nepal, ethical challenges arise due to a lack of proper training and guidance on ethical practices. Social work students work in various settings, where mental health settings present some of the most significant ethical challenges. Social work students in mental health settings frequently encounter ethical challenges that affect their decision-making and professional growth. (Banks & Williams, 2005). Students often struggle with ethical issues because of poor supervision and training, leading to stress and mistakes. The absence of clear ethical guidelines, cultural stigma, and weak mental health systems make decisions even harder. (Luitel & et.al, 2015). While there are studies that suggest social work education should focus on ethical training, there is few research regarding ethical challenges faced by social work students specifically in the context of Nepal. Understanding these ethical challenges is important to improving mental health policies, monitoring, and ethical training and to address the significant research gap in this topic.

### **Rationale of the Study**

In the context of Nepal, Mental health is still a stigmatized and underdeveloped sector. Social work students in Nepal face many ethical challenges when working in mental health settings. It is crucial for students to be aware of their ethical responsibilities to navigate these challenges effectively. Without adequate knowledge and guidance, they may struggle to maintain ethical standards, which can affect the quality of work. The study addresses a critical but often overlooked issue in Nepal's mental health and social work education. It not only contributes to academia but also has practical implications for improving mental health services and strengthening social work professionalism in Nepal. Academically, the study fills a gap in existing research by focusing on ethical issues in mental health practice from the perspective of social work students. It can help strengthen the curriculum by connecting theoretical knowledge with real-life practice. Practically, the study offers valuable insights into the real-world ethical challenges that the students face during fieldwork. These insights can guide colleges, institutions, and field supervisors in designing better training, supervision protocols, and support systems. The study aims to strengthen ethical awareness and professionalism among future social workers while supporting the next generation of social workers in providing ethical services.

## Objective of the Study

- To assess the level of awareness among the students regarding the importance of ethical practice in mental health settings.
- To explore the ethical challenges faced by social work students in mental health settings.

## Research Questions

1. What is the level of awareness among the students regarding the importance of ethical practice in mental health settings?
2. What are the ethical challenges faced by social work students in mental health Settings?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In social work, ethics are crucial because they provide professional norms that safeguard social workers and client's rights and dignity. Both experienced social workers and students can use the NASW Code of Ethics as a guide when making morally right professional decisions. (Limestone University, 2021). The fundamental foundation of the social work profession is ethics, which helps social workers navigate the complicated and frequently difficult situations they encounter. Social workers assist those in need, address systemic issues, and prioritize service over personal gain while continually developing their skills to deliver effective and responsible care. (National Association of Social Work (NASW), n.d.)

Social workers have an ethical obligation to put their clients' welfare first, respect their autonomy, and get their informed consent, all the while making sure that the services they provide are within their professional scope and culturally sensitive. (National Association of Social Work (NASW), n.d.) Social worker's frontline role in mental health settings often places them in complex ethical situations requiring sound judgment and supervision (Triplett, 2017). No other professional group in community mental health clinics offers as many services as social workers, regardless of the power granted to the medical field. Instead of providing therapy that is only focused on improving mental status, community mental health facilities give social workers the chance to address the needs of the "total" human. (Segal & Baumohl, 1981) Social workers serve in mental health teams as case managers, social rehabilitation specialists, social support facilitators, and social reintegration specialists. (Neszméry & Mačkinová, 2020)

In social work practice, an ethical dilemma occurs when a social worker is unable to uphold ethical standards or when doing so requires working contrary to one's own ethics. (Proctor, Morrow-Howell, & Lott, 1993). The following are a few ethical challenges faced by social workers.

### Informed Consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical medicine, safeguarding patient rights, promoting transparency, and fostering trust between patients and providers. (Shah, Thornton, Kopitnik, & Hipskind, 2024) As mental illness can affect a person's ability to make decisions, acquiring informed consent in the field of mental health has special ethical and practical difficulties. (Furkhan, Gajera, Gowda, Srinivasa, & Gowda, 2019) According to studies, certain patients from particular cultural backgrounds might not be familiar with the notion of permission; consequently, healthcare professionals must introduce and explain it to them. It is crucial to ensure that consent is given voluntarily and without excessive pressure or force. However, the voluntariness of consent may be jeopardized by emergency conditions, involuntary admissions, or the power dynamics between patients and healthcare personnel. (Dalal, 2020)

### Confidentiality

According to the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics, social workers should uphold their clients' right to privacy and only divulge information when required by law or with their clients' express

consent. (National Association of Social Work (NASW), n.d.) This ethical commitment creates a secure setting where clients may divulge private information without worrying about it being exposed. Even though confidentiality is emphasized, social workers frequently face circumstances in which they need to balance this duty against other ethical commitments, such as protecting clients or others safe. Social workers must provide comprehensive care while avoiding confidentiality violations by being clear about what information may be disclosed and under what conditions. (Reamer, 2016) The growing use of digital technologies in social work brings up more privacy and data security issues. It is essential for social workers to adhere to relevant data protection rules and safeguard electronic information against unwanted access. (Schneider, 2022)

### **Religious and cultural hurdles**

According to (Nanayakkara & Jayawardana, 2018) social work practice is greatly influenced by cultural and religious beliefs, especially in South Asian cultures. Dealing with culturally controversial subjects like commercial sex work, abortion, and LGBT rights frequently presents social workers with ethical challenges. Professional work is hampered by these problems, which frequently clash with religious and personal beliefs. Many social workers with Islamic and Sinhala Buddhist origins find it difficult to deal with cases involving LGBT people and abortion since these issues go against their cultural and religious beliefs. The ethical dilemma occurs when professionals continue to work on issues that go against their own beliefs because they are unaware of the situation or lack the appropriate ethical direction. This can have detrimental effects on service users in addition to reducing the quality of services provided.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a qualitative research design aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of the ethical challenges encountered by social work students. Interpretivism served as the research paradigm, enabling an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and the intricate ethical considerations faced by students in professional mental health settings. The universe of the study consisted of the social work students who had undergone field placements or internships in mental health settings inside Kathmandu Valley. A total of 12 participants from different universities were selected as the sample. The area of the study was colleges inside Kathmandu Valley. The study utilized both purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Purposive sampling ensured that students relevant to the study were chosen, while convenience sampling helped select participants based on their availability and location, making the process more efficient.

The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, while secondary data was obtained from existing research, journals, and websites. Data was collected using open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews, allowing participants to openly share their experiences. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying and categorizing emerging themes. Validity was ensured through a well-structured research design, pilot testing, and adherence to ethical guidelines. Similarly, data collection and analysis were conducted in a systematic way to guarantee reliability. Ethical considerations included informed consent, participants' right to withdraw, and maintaining confidentiality through anonymization and secure data storage. The main limitation was the small sample size and focus on Kathmandu Valley, which might have limited the generalizability of the findings.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

#### **Ethical awareness**

The subject of Ethical Awareness illustrates a sophisticated understanding and awareness of the importance of ethical principles in mental health social work. Most of the participants stated that ethical practice in mental health social work involves respecting clients' rights, dignity, and autonomy. They indicated confidentiality, informed consent, non-judgmental listening, and prioritizing clients' well-being above all, especially in vulnerable settings. Some of them said that ethics are guided by personal values that guide the distinction between right and wrong. They indicated fairness, accountability, and doing the right thing even if it is not convenient, both at work and in life. Some participants stated that ethical guidelines create limits that protect both the client and the professional. In these boundaries, actions are valuable and meaningful, but stepping across



them destroys trust and effectiveness. A few referred to the necessity of adhering to formal ethical guidelines, such as those of NASW, and tailoring interventions to each client's specific needs. Likewise, Others pointed out that ethical sensitivity is about maintaining empathetic and humanitarian boundaries so that clients can feel heard, respected, and safe.

Most participants emphasized confidentiality as the most important ethical principle in mental health social work. They highlighted how maintaining privacy helps build trust and ensures that clients feel safe and respected throughout the process. Several participants also mentioned informed consent, noting its role in empowering clients to make decisions about their own care with full understanding. Some participants identified respect for dignity as central, emphasizing the importance of treating every individual as valuable and worthy, especially those who often feel judged due to their mental health challenges. A few participants stressed the importance of being non-judgmental, stating that acceptance and empathy are key to forming meaningful, supportive relationships. Others also mentioned autonomy, do no harm, and maintaining professional boundaries as essential to ethical decision-making.

### **Ethical Preparedness through Education:**

Participants had varied perspectives on how effectively their education prepared them to handle ethical dilemmas in mental health settings. While some felt that their coursework provided a strong theoretical foundation, many expressed that real-life situations were far more complex than classroom discussions. Several participants emphasized the need for more practical exposure, such as real-life case studies, role-plays, simulations, and scenario-based learning to build confidence in applying ethical principles. Many agreed that their understanding remained mostly theoretical, geared toward exams rather than practical application. Internships and fieldwork were commonly cited as key learning experiences where ethical principles became more tangible with the help of supervisors. In terms of staying updated on ethical guidelines and best practices, participants mentioned relying on supervisors, academic rounds, reading journal articles, attending webinars, and occasionally following professional discussions on social media. However, some admitted they did not actively stay informed unless updates were introduced through their institutions or peers. This highlights a gap in consistent engagement with evolving ethical standards and the need for structured, ongoing exposure to ethical discourse in both academic and field settings.

### **Role of Supervision in Ethical Decision-Making**

Supervision played a key role in helping participants understand and navigate ethical decision-making in mental health settings. Participants consistently highlighted the essential role of supervision in helping them understand and practice ethical decision-making in mental health settings. Supervision was described as a supportive and non-judgmental space where students could openly discuss confusing or challenging situations. It helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, especially when students were unsure about how to handle real-life dilemmas.

Many noted that supervisors acted as guiding lights, offering practical advice, emotional support, and safety, particularly in difficult or harmful situations. Supervisors also helped students balance personal emotions with professional ethics and provided insight into managing confidentiality by guiding discussions without revealing client identities. Regular supervision sessions encouraged reflection, strengthened ethical awareness, and made students feel more confident and equipped to navigate ethically complex situations in their fieldwork. Overall, supervision was seen as a critical component of ethical learning and professional development.

### **Participant's advice and insights**

**1. Regarding social work education:** Participants suggested several improvements to social work education to better prepare students for ethical decision-making in mental health practice. A key suggestion was incorporating more practical, hands-on experiences, such as role-plays, simulations, and real-life case studies, to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Participants emphasized the need for training that focuses on ethical dilemmas, client behavior, and mental health terminology, with a practical approach rather than just theoretical learning.

Guest lectures and sessions with experienced mental health professionals were also recommended to offer insights from the field. Several participants highlighted the importance of field visits, vestibule training, and in-depth discussions on real-life ethical issues to ensure students are adequately prepared before entering the field. It was also noted that teachers with specific mental health experience could provide more relevant guidance in ethical practices. These changes were seen as essential for building confidence and competence in handling ethical challenges in mental health settings.

**2. For future social workers:** Participants shared various recommendations for future social work students in handling ethical issues in mental health practice. A common theme was the importance of seeking guidance from supervisors when facing ethical dilemmas. Many emphasized staying updated on ethical principles, maintaining clear professional boundaries with clients, and always prioritizing confidentiality.

Several participants highlighted the emotional challenges of the work and suggested that students prioritize their own mental health, seek support when needed, and not be afraid to make mistakes as part of the learning process. It was also recommended that students practice patience, be considerate of clients' needs, and maintain professionalism in emotionally charged environments. Other recommendations included regularly reflecting on ethical principles, trusting instincts when something feels ethically wrong, and continuously learning from experiences and supervisors. Some participants also stressed the importance of understanding the ethical guidelines specific to each organization and being mentally prepared for the emotional toll the work may take.

In summary, students should focus on building emotional resilience, seeking support, maintaining boundaries, and always applying ethical practices to ensure effective and compassionate social work in mental health settings.

### **Ethical challenge faced**

**1. Confidentiality:** The data collected from participants during their field placements in mental health settings revealed several recurring ethical challenges. A prominent theme was confidentiality, where participants experienced tension between maintaining client trust and the obligation to report sensitive information, particularly in cases involving suicidal ideation or intrusive thoughts. Another challenge was when they needed to share information with supervisors for guidance or to ensure the client's safety. This created a conflict, as they wanted to respect the client's privacy but also had a responsibility to make sure the client was receiving the right support. Participants also mentioned the difficulty of maintaining confidentiality when family members requested personal information, but most responded by sharing only what was necessary to protect the client's privacy.

**2. Informed Consent:** Participants often faced challenges in obtaining informed consent, specially when clients had difficulty understanding different aspects of the process. For instance, some clients struggled not just with understanding treatment options, but also with the goals or procedures of their sessions, which made it hard to ensure they fully understood what they were agreeing to. Another challenge was when clients, particularly those from vulnerable groups, felt pressured to agree to things, raising concerns about whether their consent was truly voluntary. Language barriers or cognitive impairments also made it tough for participants to tell if clients really understood what they were consenting to, whether it was related to treatment, sharing personal information, or participating in certain activities. When working with minors or clients who had guardians, participants also had to make sure both the client and their guardian were fully informed and aware of any potential risks.

**3. Professional Boundaries:** Many participants talked about ethical challenges they faced while trying to maintain professional boundaries during their internships. Several shared how clients, specially children and teens, often grew attached and wanted to stay in touch through social media or personal contact after sessions. One participant even found themselves in a difficult spot when they were assigned a client with ties to someone they personally knew, making it hard to remain neutral. Participants shared that they faced judgmental attitudes during placements and felt uncomfortable in unhygienic work environments, which affected their focus. Some experienced burnout, specially when client progress was slow. Others reflected on how emotionally invested they became in their client's well-being. While caring deeply helped them connect, it sometimes made it difficult to stay grounded in their role. In more intense moments, like when dealing with aggressive clients, some

participants admitted they felt the urge to react strongly, only to later realize the importance of staying calm and not crossing boundaries.

**4. Value Conflicts: Personal vs. Professional:** Several participants reported encountering conflicts between their personal or cultural values and professional ethics during their placements. A common instance involved clients or families preferring traditional healing methods over psychological therapy. Some participants also described internal challenges. For example, they found it difficult to remain neutral when clients expressed views such as patriarchal beliefs that conflicted with their own. There were also instances where participant's personal beliefs and preferences influenced how they connected with clients. One participant who shared spiritual interests with a client was advised by a supervisor to step back, to avoid potential bias. Some also faced institutional limitations, such as wanting to use creative, client-centered approaches for client engagement, such as games or expressive activities that were not accepted by the organization, similarly some clients were older and displayed challenging behaviors, which made it difficult for participants to consistently maintain a respectful attitude which was their core value.

**5. Client Autonomy:** Several participants shared that respecting client autonomy was a challenging part of their internship experiences in mental health settings. One example that came up often was the structured daily routine in residential facilities, which included activities like reading, exercise, and group games. While these routines were meant to support client's mental and emotional well-being, many clients simply preferred to rest or sleep. In those moments, participants felt conflicted; they wanted to encourage participation for the client's benefit, but didn't want to cross a line or make anyone feel forced. Other participants spoke about moments when clients refused medication or skipped therapy sessions. Even though this could impact their recovery, interns had to learn to respect the client's right to choose, even when it went against what they believed was best.

**6. Non-maleficence (Do No Harm):** Several participants highlighted ethical challenges related to the principle of non-maleficence. Participants noted that in their placement, helping staff, who spent more time with clients than counselors, were often undertrained, especially in working with children with special needs. As a result, some staff would scold, speak harshly, or show frustration toward emotionally vulnerable clients. Although the intent wasn't to harm, participants felt such behavior caused emotional distress and violated ethical standards. They emphasized that "do no harm" includes emotional safety, not just physical well-being. This created ethical dilemmas for participants as they felt responsible for upholding the principle of "do no harm" but had limited authority as interns. They were distressed by staff behaviors like scolding or speaking harshly but unsure how to intervene without overstepping their role. This tension between protecting clients and respecting workplace dynamics left many feeling conflicted and helpless.

## Major Findings

1. Participants were generally aware of ethical practices and had their own understanding of doing what is right, often guided by empathy, fairness, and personal values. However, many admitted to not actively keeping up with evolving ethical standards unless required, indicating a need for regular, structured updates.
2. The most common ethical challenges faced by the participants in mental health settings are Confidentiality, Informed Consent, Client Autonomy, Professional Boundaries, Value Conflicts: Personal vs. Professional, and Non-maleficence (Do No Harm).
3. Most participants stressed confidentiality as central to trust-building, especially in sensitive cases, but struggled when needing to share information for safety or supervision purposes.
4. Participants faced challenges ensuring clients fully understood the process, especially with language barriers, cognitive impairments, or when clients felt pressured to agree.
5. Participants experienced difficulty maintaining boundaries, especially with clients seeking personal contact or when they had prior connections with clients. They also struggled to balance between respect for autonomy and promoting well-being.

6. Participants experienced conflicts between personal or cultural beliefs and professional ethics, particularly regarding traditional healing methods, patriarchy, and spiritual biases.
7. Participants often felt conflicted and powerless during ethical challenges due to limited authority, emotional involvement, or unsupportive environments.
8. Supervision was seen as vital, offering emotional support, clarity, and ethical guidance in challenging situations, helping bridge classroom learning with field realities.
9. Many participants felt education was too theoretical and failed to reflect real-life complexities. They recommended more case-based, hands-on training, simulations, fieldwork, and involvement of experienced field experts and teachers with mental health backgrounds for better ethical preparation.

## DISCUSSIONS

In social work practice, an ethical dilemma occurs when a social worker is unable to uphold ethical standards or when doing so requires working contrary to one's own ethics. (Proctor, Morrow-Howell, and Lott, 1993) There are various ethical challenges faced by social workers, especially in mental health settings, among which confidentiality serves as the primary ethical challenge and mechanism for establishing and maintaining trust in therapeutic relationships (Martindale et al., 2009). The study revealed that the meaningfulness of confidentiality discussions and informed consent processes could be significantly improved when psychologists emphasized choice, control, autonomy, and individual preferences while actively involving users in repeated dialogue. These findings align with this research, where participants emphasized the importance of confidentiality in building trust with clients. Maintaining confidentiality is essential because it demonstrates respect for clients and creates a sense of safety. This trust encourages clients to be more open, which can improve the effectiveness of support and intervention.

It can be challenging for trainees and practitioners to work in ways that are consistent with their values because of the hierarchical nature of clinical and organizational settings. (Hwu and Pai, 2025) discovered that students commonly felt helpless when faced with ethical dilemmas, especially because of the strict authority structures in clinical settings. They were frequently unable to put their personal and professional principles into effect because of this sense of helplessness. According to Wu et al. (2020), students frequently disagreed with agency priorities because they believed that these organizations put their own reputation or internal growth ahead of the demands of their clients. These findings closely reflect the experiences of participants in this research. Some reported institutional limitations hindered their ability to apply creative, client-focused strategies such as using games or expressive activities to engage clients. While the participants respected the organization's structure, they still felt that they had to compromise their values in order to comply with the organization. This highlights how hierarchical and inflexible organizational cultures can cause ethical challenges

According to Huang and Zheng (2017), social workers frequently encounter ethical and value-based dilemmas in these kinds of situations, particularly when attempting to strike a balance between cultural norms and professional values. These conflicts often place interns in difficult positions where respecting cultural practices may seem at odds with professional ethical mandates, such as client self-determination and non-discrimination. (Shdaimah & Strier, 2020). This demonstrates the ethical conflict between professional responsibility and cultural sensitivity. Traditions should be respected, but when a client's access to proper mental health care is restricted by such beliefs, practitioners may find it difficult to provide effective therapy.

According to research by Falender (2020), regular feedback sessions give supervisors significant opportunities to talk about ethical challenges, reinforce appropriate conduct, and help interns improve their professional judgment by learning from the behaviours of their supervisor (Pettifor et al., 2011). In the same way, Barnett (2023) emphasizes that supervisors help interns grow ethically by giving them access to relevant literature, ethical rules, and continuous instruction that improves their capacity for making ethical decisions. Several participants stated that their ethical decision-making was greatly influenced by their regular interactions with their supervisors. Regular supervision plays a crucial role in shaping trainee's ethical decision-making by providing guidance and a safe space to discuss challenges. Ongoing updates and resources from supervisors also



ensure that trainees remain informed about current ethical standards and best practices, ensuring their ability to act responsibly in complex scenarios.

The current social work education system focuses heavily on theory but often fails to prepare students for real-world ethical challenges. While theories and principles are taught, the lack of practical, scenario-based training leaves students feeling unprepared for fieldwork. This gap limits their ability to apply knowledge effectively, affecting both their confidence and professional growth (Woli, 2023). This study is congruent with the results of our study because participants suggested incorporating more practical, hands-on experiences, such as role-plays, simulations, and real-life case studies, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In mental health settings, ethics stands out as a fundamental principle that ensures the client's dignity and well-being. It is crucial to be ethically responsible; however, social work students in mental health settings frequently encounter ethical dilemmas due to various reasons. It is important to identify the ethical challenges faced by those students to support ethical decision-making and to provide compassionate, respectful, and culturally sensitive mental health services in Nepal. This study highlights the major ethical issues that social work students in Nepal encountered as they navigate complicated dilemmas concerning confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries, value conflicts, client autonomy, and the concept of nonmaleficence. Although students have a strong theoretical grasp of ethical principles, their actual implementation is still difficult because of a lack of adequate training, oversight, and mental health resources. The findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced educational approaches that prioritize experiential learning, practical exposure, and ongoing ethical discourse. Addressing these gaps would better prepare future social workers to maintain professional standards, promote client dignity and trust, and make a meaningful contribution to Nepal's expanding mental health sector.

The overall study recommends building strong support systems for social work students through mentorship, field simulations, and structured learning on ethical decision-making frameworks. Future initiatives should concentrate on enhancing ethical training and support for social work students in mental health settings. Furthermore, establishing safe spaces for open discussion and ongoing guidance may help students in resolving ethical dilemmas.

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