

Plights and Suggestions on the Construction of Social Work Talents in Western China's Remote Areas

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Abstract

On the background of national strategies of China called rural revitalization and poverty alleviation, the role of social work received attention. However, due to the inadequate development of social work in remote areas, the shortage and in-stability of social work talents, poor professional quality of social workers has become major plights affecting the development. Through a field study based on county sociology in remote areas, where called National key rural revitalization counties of Chongqing Municipality, we found a huge shortage of social-work talents manifested not only in whole municipality but extremely in remote areas. Public service authorities want to establish a comprehensive social work service system covering urban communities, towns and villages, but recruiting and maintaining social work talents is difficult. Moreover, the present social work services are faced with a series of talent team construction problems, such as low degree of professional, incongruity between full-time and part-time staff and high turnover frequency. In response to these plights, we propose a series of concrete measures to attracting local social workers who go out for study and employment to return, and transforming local public sector workers and social service agency employees into indigenous social workers, then accelerating the indigenization of social work talents in remote areas, and achieve self-sufficiency in talent supply.

Keywords: social work talents' construction, rural revitalization, poverty alleviation, county sociology, Chinese remote areas.

1. Introduction

Since the reports of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China firstly proposed “Rural Revitalization” strategy, a major historical task in modernizing China, Great achievements have been made in recent years. As the authorities believe that rural revitalization and poverty alleviation have entered a new stage, another new concept, National key rural revitalization counties, has been put forward. After eight years of continuous efforts, under the current standard in China, all the rural poor have been lifted out of poverty, all poor counties take off their poverty hats, all the poor villages have been excluded, and the regional overall poverty has been solved, according to official report. But some counties lifted out of poverty have poor natural conditions, large historical debts, and relatively weak capacity for self-development. They remain a prominent weak link in the development of all regions in the country. The task of consolidating and expanding the achievements in poverty alleviation and comprehensively promoting rural revitalization remains daunting. Chinese government made a strategic arrangement to provide centralized support to a number of counties in the western region that have been lifted out of poverty. Ten provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in the western region have identified 160 counties that have been designated as the national priority for rural revitalization, called National key rural revitalization counties, which are key areas to prevent the return of poverty to poverty and consolidate and expand the achievements already made in poverty alleviation during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (NRRA, 2021).

2. County Sociology: A Unique Research Object

County Sociology is a new sociological branch proposed by Chinese scholar recent years (Di, 2020; Tian, 2020; C. Wang, 2020; Yang & Ouyang, 2020). Their study demonstrated that Chinese county is a unique social unit compared with other societies. They concluded that, in Europe, there are almost no such systems as counties, and even if there are relevant equivalents or counterparts, the history and culture are apparently different with China. Therefore, in European theory, there are communities, societies, occupations, families and individuals. Certainly, there must be social stratum and structure, etc. But the only thing missing is the county society. As a consequence, since its birth, there has been no such cognition and concept as “county society” in European sociology. Although Japan has such a system as a county, the county in Japan’s governance structure is between the central government and the city, and the governance position of China’s county is very different, because China’s county is between cities (municipalities) and towns, if we have to go to category, rather than the Chinese “county” level, Japan’s county is equivalent to the level of China’s provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. The United States also has a “county,” but it is the lowest level in the federal, state, and county structure while there are towns and even administrative villages below counties in China (C. Wang, 2020). The constituent elements of county in China include village & community, township and county seat. The connection of these three elements constitutes the regional social characteristics which cannot be presented by a single village and township (Di, 2020).

Furthermore, more importantly, in the 2,600-years history of county development, China's counties have formed their own culture, society and economy. A county in China is more than just an administrative unit. Nowadays, county performed not only as an economic gemeinschaft, welfare gemeinschaft, and eventually social gemeinschaft, but also a social governance gemeinschaft. Rural social governance has gone beyond the boundaries of villages and towns, and is spread out in the county area. First of all, more and more social needs are difficult to be met within villages and even towns, such as basic welfare needs, development needs, environmental and ecological protection needs, and social service needs. Second, more and more social problems transcend the boundaries of villages and towns and have to be solved at the county level and beyond. Such as pollution problems, ecological damage problems, safety and order problems, industrial development problems. Finally, the above two aspects are closely related to the limited or insufficient capacity and resources of villages and towns, and more social resources can be mobilized within the county to solve the problems and difficulties faced by villages and towns (C. Wang, 2020). The marginal return of knowledge accumulation from the traditional field study carried out by village & community, rural area and grassroots market community has been decreasing. Consider the county as field study unit can not only grasp the correlation between different elements and research units in a larger overall perspective, but also transcend these elements and research units at a higher level, to examining the unique picture of economic development, social structure and administrative operation mechanism of county-level society, and comparing how the economic structure, social and cultural structure affect the development of county economy, social governance and administrative operation in different regions (Di, 2020). Therefore, the field study in Chinese remote areas, especially the objects including villages & city communities and towns, could try regard county as research unit.

3. Social work in Rural Revitalization

With the development of modernization, the early developing countries began to face the problem of rural population outflow and “hollowing out” phenomime. Although they did not come up with a rural revitalization strategy, some countries have been able to revitalize rural areas by implementing a series of rural development revitalization programs (Luan, 2022). Since the 1930s, the United States began to pay attention to the restoration of rural ecology and natural environment, and actively improved its ecological environment by using relevant policies such as returning farmland to forest and building water conservancy facilities (J. Wang & Wang, 2018). With the continuous development of emerging business forms such as rural tourism, homestand and leisure, the continuous influx of social capital led to industrial upgrading and population return, forming a virtuous cycle (Shu, 2018). Japan and South Korea, two early developing countries in Asia, have realized agricultural modernization by implementing the “village Building movement” and the “New Village Movement” respectively, narrowing the income and living standard gap between rural and urban residents, and basically realizing the economic integration of urban and rural areas (Luan, 2022).

China's rural revitalization strategy has become a national strategy since it was put forward in

the keynote report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Chinese scholars have put forward the theory of radical cure of “rural diseases”, the theory of regular development in the middle and later stages of urbanization, the theory of insufficient endogenous impetus, the theory of imported crisis response and the theory of comprehensive factors to explain the reasons for the proposed rural revitalization strategy. Although the perspectives of each theory are different, their common point is that they regard the unbalanced and inadequate rural development as the historical background of the rural revitalization strategy. In fact, the proposal of rural revitalization strategy is not determined by a single factor, but the result of multiplies. Three fundamental patterns of rural revitalization strategy were developed: safety-net development, endogenous development and dependency development. Safety-net development pattern starts from safeguarding the role of rural areas as reservoirs and stabilizers, emphasizing the provision of public goods and public services for the vast majority of traditional agricultural villages and small farmers, and realizing the organic connection between small farmers and modern agriculture. This is the rural vitalization strategy to achieve bottom line equity and regional balanced development needs. Endogenous development pattern emphasizes on stimulating the endogenous motivation of villagers through the construction of their self-organizing ability and the improvement of village pooling ability, which is the key to the smooth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. Dependency development pattern emphasizes the dominance of government and capital in rural revitalization, which has been the inertia of rural development for many years (Ye, Zhang, & Dou, 2018).

Rural Revitalization is of practical significance in promoting rural social harmony and development. As an important professional practice, social work intrinsically fits with the overall goal of the rural revitalization strategy. The introduction of a series of policy systems provides an important opportunity for social work to participate in rural revitalization (Xiao, Liu, & Sang, 2019). Correspondingly, Chongqing Municipality has introduced 25 measures in the civil affairs field to support the development of National key rural revitalization counties. The implementation of social workers professional strength help is one of the 25 measures. It calls for support to speed up the construction of “three-level” social work service system for county-level social work guidance centers, township (sub-district) social work workstations and village (county seat community) social work studios. It also calls for continued implementation of the “Three- Areas “ (Outlying Poverty-Stricken Areas, Ethnic Minority Area In the Borderland, Old Revolutionary Base Areas) social work professionals support plan and the “hand-in-hand plan” for social work service agencies. It also requires to selecting a group of outstanding social work professionals and social work service agencies to help improving social work services quality. Social work services, such as policy publicity, life care, academic counseling, behavior correction, spiritual consolation, psychological counseling, skills improvement, rights and interests’ protection, and resource links, are clearly targeted at low-income people, people living in extreme poverty, rural “left-behind” people, and groups with special difficulties (Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau, 2022b). Social work service has a huge potential in the development of National key rural revitalization counties. Take Wuxi County as an example, One of the National

key rural revitalization counties of Chongqing Municipality, there are 784 projects of consolidated achievements in poverty alleviation and rural revitalization program in 2021, involving 11 categories such as industrial project, rural infrastructure, public welfare job, poverty alleviation through health and education. Nevertheless, only the project of centralized support centers for people with disabilities in Ningchang, a town in Wuxi County belongs to civil affairs field.

The capital of this project was up to 5.1 million RMB, but just accounting for 0.35% of total capital in this program. The number of these projects which connect most closely with social service relationship amounted to 92, accounting for 11.7%, and capital scale was up to 84.45 million RMB, accounting for 5.81% (People's Government, 2022). Potential and space of social work service are even very huge. Simultaneously, in 2021, Chongqing municipality comprehensively promoted the construction of a three-level service system for social work, setting up social work guidance centers in county seats, social work stations in towns (sub-districts) and social studios in villages (county seat communities). By building a three-level service platform for social work, a social work service system with horizontal integration and vertical linkage has been formed. Wuxi County and Chengkou County have set up social work guidance centers in the county seats, social work stations in the towns (sub-districts) and social work studios in the villages (county seat communities) (Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau, 2020; C. C. Civil Affairs Bureau, 2021).

However, facing the rapid development of social work service under the background of rural revitalization, plights of the construction of social work talent team have become the bottleneck restricting the development. This study plan to uncovering the plights on the construction of social work talents in rural areas of western China, and then, put forward suggestions to improve the current situation.

4. Method

This study takes field study as main method to revealing the plights of the construction of social work talents in rural areas of western China. We chose National key rural revitalization counties as our field. As we reviewed above, China's unique county society system functions to connect grassroots society with the whole society (C. Wang, 2020). A field study focus on villages and town could rely on the methodology of county sociology. Moreover, as mentioned above, National key rural revitalization counties are the key areas to prevent the return of poverty to poverty and usually have poor natural conditions, large historical debts, and relatively weak capacity for self-development (NRRA, 2021). They are the most suitable fields to study. Wuxi county and Chengkou county are the only two National key rural revitalization counties in Northeast Chongqing Municipality. We plan to visiting relevant public departments and social work service agencies in these counties, talking with the local officials, the head of relevant agencies and the local social workers. In addition, Literature research will also be used. We plan to asking the local government to providing documents and data about the development of local

social worker.

5. Result

5.1 Interviewee & Literature

We had spent the summer of 2022 to Wuxi County and Chengkou county and interviewed the local Civil Affaire Bureaus, talked to local officials and clerks. We had visited the Social Work Guidance Centers in county city, 5 Social work Service Agency and several Social Work Service Stations (Studio) in towns and villages (county seat communities). We give the semi-structured interview to every head of these stations and almost every social worker. (Table 1)

Table 1. List of Interviewee Information

Visit Place		Number of Interviewee	
Public Department	Civil affaire bureaus of Wuxi	A Section Chief	
	Civil affaire bureaus of Chengkou	A Section Chief	
	Social work guidance center of Wuxi	A Center Director	
		The Head of Agency	Social Worker
Social Work Service Agency	QH	2	4
	RB	1	4
	XLX	1	5
	NH	2	4
	LY	1	6

Otherwise, we have obtained some reports about the achievements of the construction of the three-level social work service system, which could help us understanding the current state of the local social work service. We have got *The Project Library of Consolidating the Achievements in Poverty Alleviation and Rural Revitalization*, which contains a lot of financial data of the investments and costs about improving people’s livelihood and welfare in these counties. These documents help us analyze the plights of the development of local social work talent from the capital level. The other key documents including *The “14th Five-Year Plan” of Chongqing social work professional talent team construction*, which provides us with a wealth of information for our research.

5.2 The Main Plights

5.2.1 The Huge Shortage of Social-Work Talents in Remote Areas

By the end of 2020, the number of social-work talents in the whole municipality was up to 0.063 million. However, the share of the staffs who possess vocational certificates was only 26.9%. According to 14th Five-Year Plan, by 2025, it is necessary to increase more than 0.02 million social-work talents in the whole municipality and the certificate holding ratio should rise by 10.6%, that is, should be up to 37.5%. However, in Chongqing, the number of the universities which focus on cultivating professional social-work talents amounts to 10. Not only there are 5 master of Social Work training sites which incorporate Chongqing university, Southwest University etc., but also there are 7 undergraduate talent training points such as Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing University of Science and Technology etc. At the same time, there are 3 higher vocational level training points, represented by Chongqing Urban Management College. While these higher education institutes are able to supply about 700 social work graduates to the society each year, compared with the aim, there is a shortage of more than 16,500 individuals. (Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau, 2022a). What's more, nowadays the social work graduates who directly choose the occupations of social work take a comparatively little proportion in all graduates each term. Take Chongqing University of Science and Technology as an example, from 2017 to 2021, the social work graduates who directly choose the occupations of social work only averaged about 3% each year (School of Commerce and Social Studies, 2022). There is no doubt that it enlarged the shortage, and worsen the situation on absorbing the professional social-work talents in remote regions.

In the background of the construction of “three-level” social work service system, the talent gap is even worse. By the end of 2020, with the coverage rate of district (county) social work guidance centers reaching 31.7%, the construction of the three-level social work service system in the city had achieved remarkable results. Meanwhile, the coverage rate of social workstations in towns (sub-districts) reached 2.5%, and the coverage rate of social work services in villages (county seat communities) reached 25%. According to the requirement of 100% coverage of the three-level service system by 2025, more than 500 social workers are needed to only meet the 100% coverage of social workstations in towns (sub-districts) (C. M. Civil Affairs Bureau, 2022).

In remote areas, these situations become worse. At present, a three-level service system has been initially formed in Wuxi County and Chengkou County. By July 2022, the coverage rate of social workstations in 24 towns (sub-districts) in Chengkou County has reached 96%. Wuxi County is expected to achieve full coverage of 32 township social work stations by August 2022. To maintain a long-term and stable team of full-time social workers, 56 professional social work talents are needed just to meet the social work stations in towns(sub-districts) of the two counties, and at least 679 full-time social workers are needed to complete 100% coverage of social work studios set up in villages (county seat communities) of these two counties.

5.2.2 The Poor Professional Quality of Social Worker in Remote Areas

Social work service agencies in Wuxi County and Chengkou County are generally new and immature. At present, there are 6 local agencies in Wuxi County. The earliest Wuxi Dashan Volunteer Association was founded in 2013, and the others were founded more than three years ago. In Chengkou County, there are only 3 local agencies, all of which were established in 2018. These agencies in both two places are generally had plenty of problems such as the lack of experience and professional, not outstanding brand positioning and characteristics etc. In general, the poor professional quality of social work service, which mainly results from difficulties of professional social worker recruitment.

Reported by almost all agencies, it's hard to attracting social work talents, especially the graduates of social work major. First of all, the channels for recruiting full-time social workers are narrow. Counties in northeast Chongqing are far away from urban colleges and universities, around 450 kilometers, so it is not convenient for them to participate in campus recruitment mutual selection fairs and other recruitment activities in universities. They usually recruited people through posting of recruitment information online or introduction by acquaintances. Secondly, these agencies generally reported that it was difficult to recruit full-time social workers with professional training, who acquired academic qualifications in social work, and most of the current staff were part-time social workers and volunteers. In the 5 agencies sampled, there are 23 full-time social workers, of whom only 4 are trained, accounting for less than 20%, and all of them come from this locality or nearby areas. As a result, it is difficult to ensure a high quality local social worker team. Local social workers who come from a variety of occupations, have different levels of education, and are mostly part-time workers. Due to without official and professional training, ethics and value conflicts often occur in their work.

5.2.3 The In-Stability of Social Work Talents Team in Remote Areas

Result from solely funds originate, usually found by Civil affair department, and insufficiency the society invest, these agencies' profits margins are very thin, then, the salary of these local social workers correspondingly are also very low. The salary, average 3000 RMB per month after tax and pay the social security fee, can only maintain their basic living standers in these counties. Once there is another better choice, a higher salary or an urban work place, local social workers would change their career developmental trajectory for a better live.

Besides, the local officials, usually party cadres of CPC (Communist Party of China) and committee members of village and community know little about social work. Their cognition about function of social work, how does it work and the role of social workers is very vague. They, especially, these chairman and secretary of these village (county seat community) committees, unconsciously regard social worker in their village (county seat community) as helper who send by government to their region to help them with their regular affairs. Some heads of agencies complained that most villages (county seat communities) require their social workers to help them deal with non-social work issues, which crowds out the time and energy of

social worker should have been devoted into professional social service. It calls a lot of complaint from these social workers of the agencies and makes them feel they couldn't get promotion not only on service skill but also on career.

In addition, the current quantitative assessment-based performance evaluation system is not conducive to long-term stability of these team. Although quantitative indicators can effectively compare the service quantity of social workers, it is difficult to reflect the quality of service. Some professional social workers devoted a lot of work to actually help clients, and got good results. But the present performance evaluation system does not measure the quality of service, which greatly damps the passion of professional social workers to serve and undermines the recognition of their current work.

Finally, serious attrition happened. Many social workers quit after less than one year of service, and the proportion of permanent professional social workers is very small.

6. Suggestions on the Construction of Social Work Talents

Through the above analysis of their current plights of social work talents construction in Wuxi County and Chengkou County, there are two main suggestions. Firstly, it is necessary to properly increase the efforts of colleges and universities in training social work professionals and guiding graduates, especially who are come from remote areas, returning to their hometown for employment. Secondly, it is necessary to accelerate the social work professionalization of local community workers, volunteers and other social service practitioners. As a result, it can attract the return of social work professionals from outside those remote areas, at the same time, accelerates the transformation of local social service-related talents into social workers. Rely on the indigenization of social work talents to break through the plights of talents construction in remote areas. In order to achieve this fantastic vision, we put forward three specific proposals.

6.1 Continuing to Increase the Supply of Social Work Talents in Remote Areas

6.1.1 Continuing to Optimize the Training of Social Workers in Colleges and Universities

Relevant departments should optimize the training structure of social work talents. On the one hand, the important role of higher vocational colleges in supplying social work talents in the remote areas should be given more attention, on the basis of vigorously developing applied undergraduate education in social work. On the other hand, emphasis should be placed on the important role of On-the-job education of MSW (Master of Social Work) in transforming local social service management talents, like staff of village (community) residents committee or clerk of public institutions, into social work management talents while developing high-quality full-time MSW education in campus.

Besides, we need to create an oriented training system. Learning from the public education system of normal university students directly under the Ministry of Education, we could to establish the public education system of social work major college students in remote areas. The

student, who participates in public education of social work, has to sign an agreement with the school and the education administrative department of the place where the student comes from before entering the school, and has to engage in social work field for more than 10 years after graduation. During the study period, tuition and accommodation fees will be exempted, and living allowances apparently will be provided. The graduate, who had enjoyed preferential policies of public education of social work, should generally go back to work in the corresponding region where he/she comes from. During the service period stipulated in the agreement, they are allowed to change their position freely in the social work institutions, like social work guidance center, social work agencies, and social service organizations, like charitable organization, in the areas where the students come from. The local social work service guidance center is responsible for organizing the two-way selection between employment agencies and graduates, arranging and implementing working agencies for each graduate to ensure that there are jobs and tasks. Graduates of public education in social work who do not engage in social work, according to the agreement, shall return the public education fees they have enjoyed, pay liquidated damages, and be recorded in the integrity file.

6.1.2 Exploring Ways to Build a Indigenous Social Worker Talent Team

First of all, we have to conscientiously implement the Pre-existing plan for construction of social work talent team. On the basis of continuing to implement the Plan to Support Social Work Professionals in “three areas”, which launched by the Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau, aims to help local social work professionals and foster social work service agencies (Chongqing Civil Affairs Bureau, 2022a), we should add the new principle of giving priority to graduates coming from their locality. Social worker graduates, who came from remote areas, should be given priority, and the educational requirement had better be reduced to junior college. Second, social work professionals should be included in the return training program of rural talents in the county and the “Leading Goose” program for the cultivation of rural youth leaders to become rich, which both are rural personnel training program at the national level (CYLC, 2014), so as to cultivate local applied social workers. The third is to encourage the return of native social service talents in remote areas. Earnestly implement the administrative measures for allowing civil servants who meet the requirements to return to their hometowns to take up posts, and open up channels for social work talents to return to their hometowns to take up posts. In addition, we should establish an effective incentive mechanism to attract talents in the field of social services to serve rural revitalization by working in remote rural areas as volunteers, social worker, managers of agencies or center, and supervisors of social work institutions.

Furthermore, a digital platform for professional talent database of social work needs to be establishing. This digital platform shares information of all graduated social work major students, and even the professional talent resources of all social work in the city, so as to facilitate the accurate hiring of returning talents in the remote areas.

6.2 Improving Professional Quality of Social Workers in Remote Areas

Above all, we should strengthen the construction of professional teachers for social work. In universities and colleges, the “double skill” team of teachers, which combining full-time and part-time, well grounded in the specialized theories and abundant practice experiences, should be established. Besides, the channels for college teachers to participate in social work practice should be unimpeded and institutionalization, and social workers with rich practical experiences should be encouraged and supported to give courses in colleges and universities, so as to promote social work practical ability and guide students’ employment values, could corrects their biased perception of social work in remote areas.

Second, we should continue to improve the capacity of staffs in village (county seat community) committee and effectively transform a batch of them to become indigenous social workers. It’s not only necessary to organize staffs and clerks in village (county seat community) and young party members of CPC to take part in the national vocational assessment examination for social workers, but also to set up training courses for improving the professional ability of social work, so as to improve the passing rate of the vocational assessment examination for them, raising the certificate holding rate, and improving the professional quality of social work in staffs of village (county seat community) committee.

Finally, the social work management personnel training program need to conscientiously implementing. Through vocational assessment, professional training, special lectures, practical training and other forms, we should not only cultivate an indigenous team of managerial talents with professional concepts of social work and familiar with the development law of social work, but also support outstanding talents in administrative management, industrial management and institutional management to participate into the on-the-job MSW Program. As a result, opening a channel for in-service personnel to enhance their professional ability and indigenization of social work through academic education.

6.3 Cohesion of the Social Workers Team in Remote Areas

First, we need to diversify access to fund. Local government or provincial administration department should optimize the sources of funding for social work agencies when compiling public expenditure budget. In the form of institutional documents, it should clearly stipulate that in addition to the civil affairs department as the main body of purchasing social work service projects, the Communist Youth League, women’s Federation, disabled persons’ Federation and other relevant departments also need to have a certain percentage of the purchase budget every year. Second, Social workers serving in remote areas need to be paid more. On the one hand, relevant authorities need to make it clear that the minimum wage stander for social workers in remote areas should be slightly higher than the local minimum, and other hand local government and provincial administration department should jointly provide subsidies to social workers returning to their hometowns for employment.

In addition, we should to create a good environment for the indigenization of social work professionals. The knowledge of social work must be included in the training courses for leaders of CPC and local government, for committee members of village (county seat community) in the remote areas, so as to popularize the professional concept and knowledge of social work and improve recognition of main personnel at each level.

Finally, we need to improve the performance evaluation system in order to stabilize the local talents team. We should pay more attention to how committed they are to their job, and invite those clients to be served to participate in the evaluation, as well as reduce the evaluation by indicators. As a result, the evaluation fully reflects the service effect and quality.

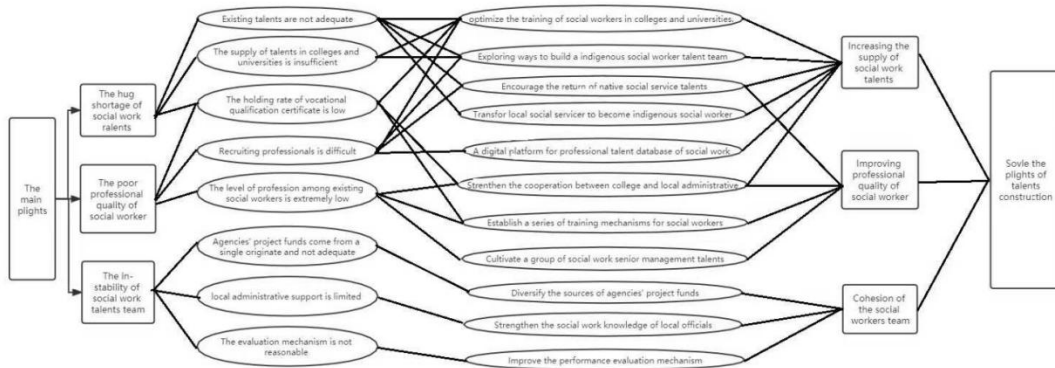


Figure 1 The structure of social worker talents team construction plights and suggestions

*This figure was self-organized by the researchers according to the contents of this study.

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Declarations

Competing Interests and Funding:

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Financial Interests:

The authors declare they have no financial interests.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the

ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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