



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN CASE RESOLUTION BASED IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

The digital era has brought significant changes to various aspects of life, including the legal case resolution system. Amid this transformation, the role of social workers has become increasingly crucial as a bridge between clients and judicial institutions that now operate based on digital technology. This study aims to analyze the role of social workers in the case resolution process in the digital era, including assistance, mediation, and advocacy. The method used is qualitative research with a case study approach through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies. The results show that social workers have a strategic role in facilitating access to justice for vulnerable groups amidst the digitalization of justice, despite facing various challenges such as the digital divide, technological literacy, and resource capacity. Strengthening the capacity of social workers in the field of information technology is needed, as well as adjusting regulations to accommodate their formal role in the digital justice ecosystem.

Keywords: *Social Worker, Case Resolution, Digital Era, Mediation, Access to Justice*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought fundamental changes to various sectors of life, including the legal and judicial systems. Digitalization is not merely a technical phenomenon; it has become an integral part of the modernization of state governance, including the resolution of disputes and legal cases. Indonesia, as a nation governed by the rule of law, is actively pursuing digital transformation in its judicial system. The Supreme Court of the Republic of Indonesia has initiated the e-Court program as an effort to modernize judicial services, enabling litigants to access online services, from case registration and down payment of fees to electronic hearings (e-Litigation). This transformation has significant consequences not only for legal practitioners but also for all stakeholders in the justice ecosystem, including social workers.

Social work is a profession mandated to improve social welfare and empower individuals, families, groups, and communities. In the context of case resolution, social workers have long been recognized for their role in various capacities, ranging from victim advocates and mediation facilitators to expert witnesses in court. Law Number 11 of 2009 concerning Social Welfare explicitly recognizes the role of social workers in various service contexts, including situations involving the justice system. However, amidst this massive digital transformation, fundamental questions arise: how can social workers adapt and play a role in a case resolution system that is now migrating to the digital realm? Are existing capacities and regulatory frameworks sufficient to accommodate the role of social workers in an increasingly digital environment? These questions are particularly relevant given that the majority of clients served by social workers are marginalized and vulnerable groups who often experience the greatest difficulty in accessing digital-based services.

Previous studies have extensively examined the role of social workers in the conventional justice system, but studies on their adaptation and role in the digital age are still very limited, particularly in Indonesia. This knowledge gap prompted researchers to examine in-depth how social workers perform their functions and roles in resolving cases in the digital age, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study that attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the role of social workers in digital-based case resolution.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of the social work profession and the improvement of an inclusive justice system in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Role of Social Workers in Digital Era-Based Case Resolution

Studies on the role of social workers in resolving cases in the digital age cannot be separated from the development of the concept of restorative justice, the digitalization of law, and the transformation of social work practice itself. Existing literature indicates a paradigm shift from a retributive approach to a more humanistic, participatory, and recovery-based one.

a. The Concept of Restorative Justice in the Criminal Justice System

Restorative justice (RJ) developed as a critique of the conventional criminal justice system, which emphasizes punishment over restoration. This approach emphasizes dialogue between the perpetrator, victim, and community to achieve a just resolution and restore social relations. Other research shows that RJ is effective as an alternative case resolution because it is able to accommodate the interests of victims and encourage the perpetrator's moral and social responsibility. In the Indonesian context, the application of RJ is also closely related to local wisdom values such as deliberation and peace, which are the foundation for non-litigation conflict resolution.

b. The Role of Social Workers in Restorative Justice

Social workers play a strategic role in the implementation of RJ, particularly in the juvenile justice system and social cases. This role includes mentoring, social assessment, and facilitation of the diversion process. In practice, social workers act not only as companions but also as social mediators, bridging legal interests with the psychosocial needs of the parties. This demonstrates that the success of RJ depends heavily on the social worker's professional capacity to manage conflict and build constructive communication.

c. Digitalization in Case Resolution

The digital era has brought significant changes to the legal system, including in case resolution mechanisms. Digitization has enabled the use of online platforms for mediation and criminal dispute resolution, including the implementation of digital-based restorative justice. Furthermore, advances in information technology have also given rise to new forms of crime, such as cybercrime, which require adaptations in legal and social approaches to address them. The RJ approach has proven effective in cases of digital violations such as hate speech, defamation, and the spread of false information.

d. Transforming Social Work in the Digital Age

Digitalization is not only impacting the legal system but also social work practice. Technologies such as telehealth, digital applications, and artificial intelligence are beginning to be used in client assessment and support. However, this transformation also presents challenges, including:

- 1) technology access gap (digital divide),
- 2) data privacy and security issues,
- 3) limitations of emotional interaction in digital services.

e. Challenges and Opportunities of Legal, Social, and Digital Integration

Literature shows that the integration between legal systems, technology, and social approaches still faces various obstacles, such as suboptimal regulations, limited human resources, and resistance to change.

On the other hand, the digital era also opens up significant opportunities to improve access to justice, expedite case resolution, and expand public participation in the legal process. A digital-based restorative justice approach can be an alternative solution that is more adaptive to the dynamics of modern society.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach based on the interpretivism paradigm. This approach was chosen because it aims to deeply understand the meanings, perspectives, and subjective experiences of social workers in carrying out their roles in the digital age. As Moleong (2017) states, qualitative research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects holistically and through descriptive means in words and language, within a specific, natural context. The research design used was a case study. Case studies allow researchers to conduct in-depth investigations of a phenomenon within a real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. In this study, the case study examines the practice of social workers in resolving cases in the digital era, involving several judicial and social institutions in three major cities in Indonesia.

1. Data source

The data sources in this study consist of two types, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants consisting of: (1) social workers who work in judicial institutions or who have been involved in case resolution; (2) mediator judges who work in court; (3) Social Service officials who are in charge of social protection; and (4) clients or parties who have been assisted by social workers in the litigation process. The determination of informants was carried out by purposive sampling based on the criteria of relevant experience and expertise. Secondary data was obtained from various documents, laws and regulations, judicial reports, scientific journals, textbooks, and other relevant literature sources. Library research was conducted to map the theoretical and normative frameworks related to the role of social workers in case resolution.

2. Data collection technique

The data collection techniques used in this study included three main methods. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted both face-to-face and online via video conferencing. Second, non-participant observation of case resolution practices in several judicial and social institutions. Third, a documentation study involving analysis of case files, social worker work reports, and relevant policies.

3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes four stages: (1) data collection, (2) data condensation, (3) data presentation, and (4) drawing conclusions/verification. Data validity was checked through source triangulation and technique triangulation, extended observation, and member checking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Social Workers in Case Resolution

Research findings indicate that social workers perform at least five primary roles in the case resolution process, both in conventional and digital contexts. These roles are: companion, mediator/facilitator, advocate, expert witness, and system linkage.

First, the role of a companion is the most fundamental. In this capacity, social workers accompany clients, particularly those from vulnerable groups such as children, women victims of violence, people with disabilities, and the poor, through every stage of the legal process. In the digital era, this role has expanded to include assistance in operating the e-Court platform, completing electronic forms, and understanding digital court notifications.

Second, the role of mediator and facilitator places social workers in a role of assisting disputing parties to communicate effectively, identify common interests, and reach a peaceful agreement. Mediation in the Indonesian judicial system is regulated by Supreme Court Regulation (PERMA) Number 1 of 2016 as a mandatory procedure prior to the hearing of the main civil case.

In the digital era, mediation can now be conducted via video conferencing platforms, allowing the parties to meet virtually face-to-face. Social workers trained in mediation techniques play a role in facilitating communication between the parties in these online mediation sessions, helping to identify the emotional and social issues underlying the dispute, and ensuring that each party has an equal opportunity to express their concerns.

Third, their role as advocates positions social workers as advocates for clients' interests before various institutions. In the context of case resolution, social workers' advocacy encompasses both case and class advocacy. Advocacy in the digital age also encompasses efforts to ensure clients have fair access to the electronic justice system, including assisting clients who lack adequate devices or internet connections.

Fourth, the role of expert witness places social workers in a position to provide expert testimony in court regarding the client's social, psychological, and needs. In electronic litigation (e-Litigation), expert testimony can be provided via video conference without a physical presence in the courtroom.

Fifth, as system liaisons, social workers play a role in connecting clients with the various resources and services needed during the case resolution process. In the digital age, this role includes connecting with online legal aid services, online psychological counseling platforms, and various social protection programs that are now accessible digitally.

2. Adaptation of Social Workers in the Digital Ecosystem

The digital transformation of the Indonesian judicial system, marked by the launch of the e-Court and e-Litigation programs by the Supreme Court, has significantly encouraged social workers to adapt. Data collected

from the Religious Courts Agency (BPK) shows a 34% increase in the number of cases resolved through electronic mediation between 2020 and 2022, indicating increasing acceptance and utilization of digital platforms in the mediation process. In this adaptation process, social workers face the need to master various digital platforms and applications used in the judicial system, such as the Supreme Court's e-Court application, the court information system, and the virtual communication platform used in remote hearings. Furthermore, they need to understand the technical and procedural aspects of electronic case resolution, which sometimes differ fundamentally from conventional procedures. The digital competencies required by social workers in the digital justice ecosystem include four main dimensions: (1) basic technological literacy, namely the ability to operate digital devices and access the internet; (2) digital information literacy, namely the ability to search, evaluate, and utilize legal information online; (3) digital communication literacy, namely the ability to communicate effectively through digital media in formal contexts; and (4) digital security literacy, namely an understanding of data security and client privacy in the digital environment.

3. Challenges for Social Workers in the Digital Age

The research findings identified a number of significant challenges faced by social workers in fulfilling their roles in the digital dispute resolution ecosystem. These challenges operate at three levels: the individual/client level, the organizational/institutional level, and the system/regulatory level. At the individual/client level, the primary challenge identified is the digital divide experienced by the majority of social workers' clients. Clients from poor backgrounds, the elderly, people with disabilities, and those living in remote areas often lack access to digital devices, adequate internet connections, or sufficient digital literacy to access e-justice services. This situation creates a paradox: a digital justice system designed to increase efficiency actually has the potential to exacerbate inequalities in access to justice for the most vulnerable groups.

At the organizational level, a key challenge is the limited capacity of social institutions to provide the infrastructure and training needed for social workers to operate effectively in a digital environment. Many regional social services still face limitations in budget, equipment, and internet connectivity, which hinder the integration of social work practice with the digital justice system. At the system/regulatory level, a crucial challenge is the lack of a regulatory framework that explicitly recognizes and regulates the role of social workers in the digital justice ecosystem. The Supreme Court's regulations on e-Court and e-Litigation do not specifically accommodate the involvement of social workers, resulting in their role often operating in a legal gray area. This situation weakens social workers' position in interacting with the justice system and reduces the effectiveness of their interventions.

4. An Ideal Model of the Role of Social Workers in Digital Justice

Based on research findings and a comprehensive literature review, the researchers propose a conceptual model called the Digital Court Social Worker (DCSW) Model. This model is based on four interrelated and mutually reinforcing main pillars. The first pillar is integrated digital competency, which encompasses mastery of information technology, digital literacy, and the ability to operate the e-Court platform. This pillar provides the foundation that enables social workers to operate effectively in a digital justice environment. The second pillar is technology-based inclusive assistance, which emphasizes that technology should be a tool to increase accessibility, not a barrier. In this pillar, social workers play an active role in helping clients without digital literacy maintain access to the electronic justice system, including through providing internet access, loaning digital devices, and technical assistance. The third pillar is human-centered digital mediation, which integrates traditional mediation techniques with the capabilities of digital platforms. Social workers trained in digital mediation can utilize the features of videoconferencing platforms to create a safe, comfortable, and conducive mediation space for all parties. The fourth pillar is regulatory and policy advocacy, which positions social workers as agents of change, actively pushing for regulatory reform to recognize and accommodate their role in the digital justice ecosystem. This advocacy can be conducted through various channels, including involvement in legislative processes, policy dialogues, and research that generates an evidence base to support reform.

CLOSING

Based on the research results and discussions that have been described, several main conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. Social workers play a highly strategic and multidimensional role in the case resolution process in the digital age. This role encompasses assistance, mediation, advocacy, expert testimony, and system liaison. In the digital era,

all of these functions have transformed and evolved to accommodate the increasingly technology-driven judicial environment.

2. Digital transformation in the Indonesian justice system opens up opportunities and presents challenges for social workers. On the one hand, digitalization increases the efficiency and reach of justice services. On the other hand, digitalization has the potential to exacerbate the gap in access to justice for vulnerable groups, who constitute the majority of social workers' clients.
3. Social workers' capacity to operate digital technology and navigate the digital justice ecosystem remains highly variable and generally inadequate. Systematic and ongoing capacity building is needed to ensure social workers can effectively carry out their roles in the digital environment.
4. The existing regulatory framework does not adequately recognize and regulate the role of social workers in the digital justice system. The lack of a clear legal basis weakens the position of social workers and reduces the effectiveness of their interventions in the digital justice ecosystem.

Suggestion

Based on the conclusions above, the researcher makes several suggestions as follows:

1. For the Government and Regulators: There is a need to immediately revise or issue new regulations that explicitly recognize and regulate the role of social workers in the digital justice ecosystem, both within the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Supreme Court. Furthermore, the government needs to ensure the availability of inclusive and accessible digital infrastructure for all levels of society, including those in remote areas and vulnerable groups.
2. For Social Work Professional Organizations: The Indonesian Professional Social Workers Association (IPSPI) and social work educational institutions need to develop specific curricula and training programs that include digital competencies for social work practice in the judicial sphere. Digital competency certification for judicial social workers needs to be formulated and implemented.
3. For the Supreme Court and Judicial Institutions: In the future development of e-Court and e-Litigation systems, it is necessary to integrate formal mechanisms for social worker involvement, including in electronic mediation and e-trial procedures. Joint training between social workers and judicial officials on their respective roles in the digital justice system should be held regularly.
4. For Further Research: Further research using mixed-methods designs is needed to quantitatively measure the impact of social worker involvement in digital case resolution processes on justice outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction. Cross-country comparative studies of social worker integration models in digital justice are also needed to identify best practices that can be adapted in Indonesia.

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