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Beyond Colonial Legacies: Reimagining Industrial Social Work through Decolonial Frameworks in Pakistan

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Abstract

Despite increasing industrial expansion and labor precarity, Pakistan's labor welfare system remains anchored to colonial-era frameworks that prioritize control over care. This qualitative study reimagines Industrial Social Work (ISW) as a decolonial practice that can transform worker welfare beyond bureaucratic and managerial legacies. The study draws on 15 anonymized semi-structured interviews conducted in early 2025 with stakeholders, including industrial managers, HR professionals, labor welfare officers, social work academics, and union representatives. It examines institutional gaps, cultural dissonance, and policy inertia that hinder ISW's emergence. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, reveals six interlinked themes: the absence of formal ISW roles in law and policy; limited organizational understanding shaped by colonial welfare logic; underused CSR and mental health resources; systemic legal and institutional fragmentation; educational disconnects; and new opportunities in Special Economic Zones. The study frames these findings within decolonial social work theory, which asserts that ISW is rooted in indigenous ethics, Islamic care traditions, and participatory governance. This creates a culturally resonant and structurally liberating model for labor welfare. The recommendations highlight legal recognition, curriculum reform, CSR-based pilot programs, and cross-sectoral partnerships as ways to institutionalize ISW as a tool for socio-industrial transformation. Future researchers should view worker welfare through a decolonial lens and see ISW not only as a service but as a path to justice in Pakistan's industrial sectors.

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Introduction

Industrial social work (ISW) addresses human needs and enhances well-being in industrial and organizational contexts. ISW promotes holistic workplace development rooted in social justice, empowerment, and person-in-environment frameworks. This involves safeguarding worker rights, advancing occupational health, resolving conflicts, guiding organizational transformation, and implementing dignity-based welfare programs (Levy, 2022). Through collaboration among companies, governments, and academic institutions, ISW manifests as the work of industrial social workers, employee aid counselors, and welfare officers globally.

Building on this foundation, ISW has helped manage workplace stress, absenteeism, occupational illnesses, and turnover in industrialized nations. Its success is attributed to combining psychological therapy with organizational measures to boost productivity and harmony. In some countries, such as India, South Africa, and Bangladesh, ISW responsibilities are codified through law, curriculum integration, and business policy changes. However, despite this progress elsewhere,

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Pakistani ISW remains undeveloped. In the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which have contributed to Pakistan's manufacturing sector expansion over the past two decades, unsafe working conditions, minimal mental health care, poor conflict resolution, labor conflicts, and insufficient employee representation persist alongside this growth. These ongoing deficiencies underscore the need for institutionalized ISW in Pakistan's labor governance and corporate cultures.

Problem Statement

Pakistan lacks a formal structure or policy to include professional social work in industrial settings. Workforce dynamics are becoming more complex. The psychological needs of industrial workers are rising. Labor welfare laws, such as the Factories Act (1934), the Industrial Relations Act (2012), and some provincial funds, exist. However, these do not require or promote hiring qualified social workers in manufacturing units. Welfare officers hired under current rules are usually administrative staff. They often lack training in counseling, mental health, or employee advocacy (Khan & Raza, 2023). Furthermore, the institutional fragmentation caused by the devolution of labor regulation following the 18th Constitutional Amendment has led to inconsistent implementation across provinces. Labor inspectorates vary in capacity, budget, and compliance protocols, reducing oversight and weakening the delivery of meaningful welfare services.

Another problem lies within academia and professional training. University-level social work curricula in Pakistan largely focus on health, education, and community development, with limited attention given to industrial, organizational, or occupational contexts (Qureshi & Siddiqui, 2022). As a result, social work graduates are ill-prepared for engagement with industries, and industries in turn lack awareness of the profession's potential to address workplace challenges. At the corporate level, most firms do not recognize or prioritize ISW roles. Many consider welfare a peripheral activity limited to annual staff events, CSR donations, or legal compliance through minimal provision of canteens or medical rooms. This reductionist view overlooks the broader, long-term benefits of integrating social work into human resource management, occupational health, and industrial relations.

Together, these gaps form a systemic barrier to the institutionalization of ISW in Pakistan. In the absence of professional ISW roles, employees face unresolved conflicts, untreated psychosocial distress, and diminished pathways for collective well-being. Meanwhile, organizations miss out on enhanced productivity, reduced turnover, and improved labor-management relations. These conditions demand a critical, evidence-based investigation into how ISW could be contextualized, legitimized, and operationalized in the Pakistani setting.

Study Significance

The literature on Industrial Social Work in Pakistan is extremely limited. Most local studies on social work practice concentrate on child welfare, public health, or disaster response. By focusing on ISW, this study opens a new area of academic inquiry in Pakistani social work and contributes to comparative scholarship across South Asia and the Global South. It also enhances theoretical discourse by applying frameworks such as person-in-environment and organizational systems theory to the industrial workplace. For practitioners HR managers, welfare officers, labor inspectors, and social workers this research provides practical insights into how ISW can address real-world workplace issues. Through empirical evidence and stakeholder narratives, the study illustrates how ISW can support mental health, manage interpersonal disputes, and promote human-centered organizational cultures. The findings provide clear guidance for labor policymakers, regulators, and legislators, revealing the lack of ISW roles in labor law and suggesting reforms, especially in CSR, SEZs, and labor welfare. These insights can help institutionalize ISW roles across public and private industry structures. Integrating ISW into industry supports Pakistan's SDGs, including good health, decent work, and reduced inequalities. ISW can foster sustainable growth, boost social cohesion, and promote respectful, less stressful workplaces.

Study Objectives

1) To understand the perspectives of key stakeholders on Industrial Social Work (ISW), examining how it can be viewed as a decolonial practice aimed at improving worker welfare in Pakistan.
2) To critically investigate the influence of colonial legacies within current labor policies, welfare systems, and professional training structures, exploring how these factors obstruct the development and adoption of ISW.
3) To explore culturally relevant and context-specific strategies for integrating ISW into Pakistan's industrial sectors, with a focus on leveraging Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as potential vehicles for change.

Literature Review

The main argument of this research is that Industrial Social Work (ISW) is essential for workplace health and happiness because it brings together multiple perspectives to address employee well-being holistically. Specifically, ISW integrates the Person-in-Environment (PIE) perspective, organizational systems theory, and a rights-based approach (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Van Hook, 2014; Unrau & Grinnell, 2019; Healy, 2018). PIE views individuals as connected to social, organizational, and environmental contexts, encouraging examination of factors like workplace stress, power dynamics, and social influences. Organizational systems theory sees workplaces as dynamic ecosystems, while a rights-based approach focuses on upholding workers' dignity, access to mental health care, and the right to be heard. By combining these perspectives, ISW is positioned as central to improving psychological, structural, and ethical aspects of industrial relations. Global research underscores ISW's impact.

Levy (2022) finds that ISW can improve productivity, boost workers' emotional health, and enhance worker-manager relations. In Bangladesh, counseling services and committees in garment factories have led to happier workers and reduced absenteeism (Chowdhury, Rahman, & Ali, 2023). Similarly, in India, the statutory position of Welfare Officer under the Factories Act has been studied by Das and Singh (2023) and Saini and Sharma (2022), who found that social workers serving in these roles improved communication between labor and management and addressed workplace harassment. South Africa's experience also serves as a benchmark, where mining companies routinely engage social workers to handle community grievances, provide mental health counseling, and support transitions after retrenchments (Naidoo & Singh, 2022).

Despite being a significant employer, Pakistan's industrial sector lacks formal structures for ISW. While labor laws such as the Factories Act (1934), the Industrial Relations Act (2012), and Workers' Welfare Fund ordinances provide some guidance on worker benefits, they do not integrate professional social work into labor structures (Government of Pakistan, 2024). Scholars like Ali, Javed, Khurshid, Hussain, and Khan (2025) have conducted a critical evaluation of Pakistan's labor policy framework and concluded that it is fragmented, poorly enforced, and often implemented without stakeholder input or social work oversight. The 18th Constitutional Amendment, which devolved labor to provinces, has further complicated regulatory oversight. Saleem (2024) argues that decentralization has led to inconsistent labor welfare enforcement, while Iqbal and Asad (2013) highlight the resulting accountability vacuum across provincial departments.

Although the state has institutionalized welfare funds and employee social security mechanisms, these remain underperforming. For example, SDPI and Agha (2013) found that the Workers' Welfare Fund lacked transparency in fund allocation and failed to employ trained social work professionals. A recent study adds that safety net programs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa suffer from geographic inequity and institutional inertia. These findings illustrate how welfare in Pakistani industry remains transactional and inconsistent, absent of case management, psychological support, or organizational social diagnosis roles that ISW would naturally fulfill.

The gap in Pakistan's educational institutions exacerbates the policy shortfall. Social work education in Pakistan remains heavily centered on community development, family counseling, and health services, with minimal attention to occupational social work (Qureshi & Siddiqui, 2022). While global best practices encourage experiential learning and industry internships, universities in Pakistan do not offer modules in industrial practice or partnerships with HR departments or welfare units in factories. Iqbal and Asad (2013) historically traced the evolution of social work education post-partition and noted the influence of Western models, which were not localized to industrial realities. A Springer analysis (2020) echoed these concerns, emphasizing the need for decolonizing and contextualizing curricula to prepare students for ISW practice (Das & Singh, 2023).

Mental health studies reinforce ISW's urgency. Ahmad and Aziz (2023), in their work on occupational stress, found that a significant proportion of industrial workers in Pakistan reported symptoms of anxiety, burnout, and domestic spillover stress, with little to no support services available on-site. These findings resonate with global research—Brown, Smith, and Johnson (2020) compiled a meta-analysis of workplace social work interventions and reported declines in stress-related absenteeism and turnover when ISW practitioners were embedded in companies. Similarly, Jones, Kapoor, and Zhang (2021) linked ISW to enhanced conflict mediation, grievance handling, and workforce satisfaction.

Further literature draws from innovation and governance perspectives. Pyke and Lund-Thomsen (2015) examined industrial clusters in developing countries and introduced the concept of "social upgrading," wherein welfare systems, skill development, and human rights improve alongside economic development. They argue that social upgrading must parallel economic upgrading, and ISW can be a primary conduit for this transformation. Complementary insights from Holzmann (2003) and the ILO (2012) introduce Social Risk Management (SRM), a conceptual framework that advocates for managing vulnerabilities (e.g., income loss, occupational injury, job displacement) through proactive policies. ISW's integrative, preventive, and participatory nature makes it uniquely suited to deliver SRM at factory and cluster levels.

In terms of linking research, education, and policy, the Triple Helix Model offers additional insight. Ye, Yu, and Leydesdorff (2012) emphasize that sustainable innovation depends on the symbiotic relationship between universities, industry, and government. In countries like China and Brazil, social innovation centers within universities have collaborated with factories to develop training programs, counseling modules, and participatory governance models roles that ISW can replicate in Pakistan. Cortés, Guix, and Carbonell (2021) note that in the Global South, university-led innovation for sustainability and social cohesion remains fragmented, and that embedding ISW into industrial education and governance structures could bridge this gap.

Comparative literature also includes regional case studies. In Lahore, Karim et al. (2021) documented inequality and unsafe working conditions in steel factories, finding that despite existing welfare mechanisms, psychosocial stressors were unaddressed. The same pattern emerges in SEZs and industrial parks across Sindh and Punjab, where Ali et al. (2025) found that CSR initiatives were limited to infrastructure provision (e.g., school buildings) without follow-through on employee well-being. These studies reveal how Pakistani industries neglect emotional and social labor domains well within the reach of ISW practice.

Emerging trends suggest that now is a strategic time for ISW integration. The expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under the CPEC framework, combined with corporate CSR pressure, opens windows for institutionalizing ISW. Financial Times (2024) reported on the rising global acceptance of mental health counselors in industries, especially in low- and middle-income countries through task-sharing models such as Friendship Benches. These models allow trained social work professionals to support mental health in affordable, culturally congruent ways.

The convergence of these factors' legal mandates, mental health needs, curriculum gaps, labor fragmentation, and industrial expansion calls for a systematic response. Yet, as this review illustrates, no study in Pakistan has yet conducted an empirical, qualitative inquiry into how multiple stakeholders view ISW's necessity or feasibility. This study addresses that gap by bringing together

industry managers, HR professionals, social work academics, welfare officers, and labor activists to offer a comprehensive thematic understanding of ISW's potential role in Pakistani industry.

In summary, while the literature documents both the promise and the limitations of current labor and social work frameworks, there is a critical absence of contextualized, stakeholder-driven research on ISW in Pakistan. The insights drawn here from over thirty scholarly sources provide a robust foundation for the current qualitative investigation and reinforce the study's relevance for theory, practice, and policy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative exploratory design, deemed most appropriate for investigating the emerging and underexplored domain of Industrial Social Work (ISW) in Pakistan. Given the study's aim to uncover nuanced stakeholder perceptions and contextual factors shaping the absence and potential institutionalization of ISW, a qualitative approach allows for deep, interpretive analysis rooted in participants lived realities. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that qualitative research is effective at discerning what individuals or groups believe about a social or human issue. The qualitative approach is both adaptable and thorough, as ISW in Pakistan is a multifaceted subject with diverse stakeholders and limited data.

Data Collection Method

The research employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method for this investigation. This approach balances consistency across interviews with openness to emergent topics, ensuring research questions are addressed while accommodating new insights. Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggest that semi-structured interviews are optimal for exploring emerging fields, where participants' perspectives are crucial for knowledge development. In this study, participants included industrial managers, HR professionals, labor welfare officials, social work academics, and trade union representatives, demonstrating a purposive sampling strategy. Lohr (2019) asserts that this method ensures selected participants have relevant expertise that contributes meaningfully to the topic under study.

Sampling and Participant Selection

The study interviewed fifteen participants, stopping data collection when saturation was reached. At that point, no new codes or themes were identified, so interviews ceased. According to Guest et al. (2020), reaching saturation is essential in qualitative research and serves as strong support for credible studies. Ali et al. (2025) emphasize that ensuring both comprehensiveness and theme depth in sample size is vital, especially in organizational and social work research.

Interview Procedures

The study conducted all interviews during a six-week period. Interviews were held either in person or via Zoom, depending on participants' availability preferences and logistical feasibility, which were the top ethical priorities of this research. Participants followed an interview protocol, and each session lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to share in-depth experiences, institutional insights, and perspectives on the need, obstacles, and opportunities. The interview procedure follows recommendations by Creswell (2013), who asserts that open-ended questions offer greater flexibility and authenticity for complex social studies.

Data Management and Transcription

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and informed consent was taken from respondents. The real verbatim was transcribed and written down during interviews. The importance of transcription is considered essential and brings accuracy for qualitative data (Saldana, 2016). Each interview transcript was anonymized and labeled as a "Participant 7-HR Professional." This data management process secures participants' confidentiality and data anonymity. The practice of ethical

standards for human subject research and sustaining ethical trustworthiness is good performance for sensitive policy and organizational research (Mahmood & Wilkins, 2022).

Analytical Approach: Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that thematic analysis is a good technique for qualitative data analysis. They suggested themes, categories, and a coding framework for qualitative data analysis. The process follows several distinct steps: (1) We first focus on familiarization, repeatedly reading interview transcripts and taking analytic notes. (2) Next, we generate initial codes through an inductive process. (3) Then, we develop a method to capture emerging categories without imposing preconceived themes. (4) In the subsequent step, codes are clustered into potential themes, which are then reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes. (5) Finally, a narrative is generated to connect thematic findings with our crucial objectives that were identified in the previous literature review. Clarke and Braun (2016) claimed that thematic analysis has been widely applied in social work and organizational research to capture nuanced patterns with a clear and concise protocol.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor

Reflexivity is essential for qualitative research, and researchers embed reflexivity in this interpretive process (Berger, 2015). For example, confirmability and reducing the risk of unilateral interpretation were important for qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Likewise, an audit trail was developed for coded transcripts and theme maps. Lincoln and Guba (1985) analytic path and qualitative principles were developed for this research inquiry.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing data and securely storing audio files and transcripts in password-protected devices. These measures conform to ethical guidelines for qualitative research in social sciences, as outlined by the British Association of Social Workers (2022) and the National Bioethics Committee of Pakistan.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

Absence of Formal ISW Roles in Policy and Institutional Frameworks

Stakeholders across sectors unanimously noted the absence of formally defined roles for professional social work within industrial and welfare institutions in Pakistan. *"There is no job title for 'industrial social worker'. Welfare officers exist but are not trained social workers,"* remarked one industrial manager. This deficit parallels the historical structure in Indian industry prior to enactment of Labour Welfare Officer mandates, where social work expertise was not legally recognized (Saini & Sharma, 2022; *Decolonising Social Work in Industrial Settings*, India, 2023). Further, this institutional omission mirrors broader governance weakness in Pakistan; Ali et al. (2025) highlight how existing labor laws mention worker welfare but remain poorly enforced and fail to mandate professional intervention. These converging observations indicate that the lack of policy integration leaves ISW functionally invisible in both corporate and state welfare systems.

Limited Awareness and Cultural Resistance in Organizational Settings

A second theme illustrates how organizational cultures in Pakistan view worker welfare as superficial or tokenistic. *"Many companies think welfare means distributing Eid packages—not holistic well-being,"* reported a trade union representative. This sentiment echoes findings from Bangladesh's industrial clusters, where CSR efforts prioritize bricks-and-mortar investments over psychosocial programs, because management lacks exposure to the full scope of ISW (Chowdhury et al., 2023; Ullah, Anam, 2025).

Similarly, research on Karnataka-based firms in India shows that human resource departments equate welfare with administrative perks when they are unaware of social work's counseling or mediation functions (Purakala, 2019). The lack of experiential familiarity among HR staff accounts for cultural resistance to hiring ISW practitioners.

Underutilized Potential in CSR, Workplace Counseling, and Conflict Management

Despite resources allocated to CSR programs and welfare funds, participants agreed these remain underutilized in addressing worker well-being directly. One academic participant observed: *"CSR programs often fund clinics or schools—but rarely employ someone who integrates these into workforce welfare strategy."* This finding resonates with analyses of Bangladesh garment factories, where CSR investments exist but lack the integration of social work professionals for worker support and grievance resolution (Latifah, 2020).

In India, welfare officer roles that combine organizational mediation and psychosocial support demonstrate the latent value of ISW; when embedded, these roles mitigate conflict and reduce absenteeism (Das & Singh, 2023; Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2014). Participants in Pakistan reiterated that well-designed CSR programs could be enhanced if ISW practitioners were included to operationalize worker-centric interventions.

Institutional and Legal Weaknesses Undermining Welfare Delivery

Interviewees spoke at length about institutional fragmentation and lack of accountability within welfare structures. As one welfare officer remarked, *"Factories Welfare Fund exists, but there's no accountability on how welfare is delivered."* Supporting literature confirms that Pakistan's decentralized labor administration has weakened enforcement, leaving funds unmonitored and welfare programs unstructured (Ali et al., 2025; Saleem, 2024). Studies on worker social development inequality in Pakistan's steel industry emphasize that welfare access is inconsistent across firm types and regions, reinforcing the need for systematic social work engagement to ensure equitable delivery (Karim et al., 2021).

Educational Gaps and Lack of Industrial Practice Exposure

Academic stakeholders voiced concerns over the disconnect between social work education and industrial needs. *"Our curriculum doesn't cover corporate or industrial practice at all,"* shared one social work faculty member. This gap mirrors findings in Bangladesh and India, where curriculum analyses show that occupational social work remains marginalized, and field practicum opportunities in industrial settings are rare (Qureshi & Siddiqui, 2022; Hossain & Ahmad, 2020).

Similarly, Purakala (2019) documented that in Karnataka, welfare officers often lacked formal training in social work, even when executing welfare responsibilities, highlighting structural educational deficits that mirror Pakistan's context.

Emerging Opportunities in SEZs and CSR Policy Reforms

Finally, stakeholders expressed optimism about emerging structural opportunities particularly in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and revised CSR mandates. One HR professional commented: *"CPEC zones are opening large factories. There's space for new welfare approaches if policy supports them."* Industrial policy research in Pakistan underlines how frameworks like CPEC can be leveraged for social upgrading, suggesting that strategic roles like ISW could form part of such frameworks (FES Pakistan report, 2019).

Comparative studies from South Africa show that embedding social work roles in mining and industrial zones improves not only worker well-being but also corporate-community relations (Naidoo & Singh, 2022). Participants suggested that pilot ISW programs could prove their worth in Pakistan's growing SEZs similarly.

Conclusion

This revised research underscores the compelling need and evolving prospects for Industrial Social Work in Pakistan. The qualitative findings, enriched by theoretical framing and comparative examples, reveal a structural void: despite legal mandates and CSR growth, Pakistan lacks formal recognition for ISW professionals within welfare systems.

Compared to regional economies where ISW roles are embedded or emerging, Pakistan remains at a nascent stage. Stakeholders express both enthusiasm and frustration: they see emotional well-being, conflict resolution, and CSR alignment as achievable outcomes if backed by role recognition, curriculum reform, and institutional pilots. This research indicates that strategic action through legal reform, educational innovation, pilot implementation, and monitoring mechanisms can create pathways for ISW adoption. Special Economic Zones, CSR policy revisions, and growing recognition of mental health at work offer natural entry points.

It is essential to address academic-practice gaps, operational resistance, and regulatory fragmentation. By developing an integrated ecosystem where academic institutions train ISW professionals, industries employ them, regulators audit their impact, and CSR frameworks reinforce their roles Pakistan can institutionalize ISW effectively. In turn, ISW contributes not only to worker welfare and mental health but also to improved labor-management relations, reduced absenteeism, enhanced productivity, civic welfare, and sustainable industrial growth. The developmental policy perspective is more supportive for ISW in the countries which could improv social and economic prosperity among them.

Recommendations

Launch Awareness Campaigns and Pilot ISW Programs

SEZs under the CPEC initiative should assign ISW practitioners in designated units for six to twelve months, with success measured through quantifiable indicators employee retention, grievance reduction, and mental health service utilization. Successful pilots will serve as practical templates and build the evidence base necessary for broader policy adoption.

Reform Social Work Education and Professional Training

Curricular revision is crucial to prepare future social workers for roles in industrial settings. Currently, social work programs in Pakistani universities lack modules on occupational dynamics, labor law, workplace mediation, or employee counseling. Dedicated coursework and practical placements in industrial settings such as HR departments or government welfare offices should be mandated. In addition, continuing professional development (CPD) modules should be introduced for existing HR managers, welfare officers, and NGO personnel who wish to build competency in psychosocial support, organizational intervention, and workplace ethics. By building this human resource pool, ISW can develop as a recognized and well-prepared professional field.

Establish Legal Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms

The absence of monitoring frameworks contributes to inconsistent and unmeasured worker welfare. Labor inspectorates should be empowered to audit ISW practices within industrial entities. Regulations should require medium- and large-scale enterprises to submit annual social welfare reports documenting ISW activities, number of counseling sessions, types of interventions conducted, and employee feedback. These reports can be assessed during periodic labor audits. Additionally, the appointment and renewal of ISW professionals could be tied to verified performance, ensuring that services delivered are not symbolic but sustained and effective.

Integrate ISW into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Practice

Companies implementing meaningful ISW initiatives could be rewarded with fiscal incentives such as tax credits or preferential treatment in public procurement or regulatory processes. Recognition through CSR awards or sustainability indices would further enhance their social capital

and commitment to inclusive development. Industrial associations, universities, NGOs, labor unions, and government agencies should jointly establish national and provincial ISW platforms for professional identity.

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