Part V: International Perspectives

CHAPTER 11
Professional Supervision in Social Work Practice: A Qualitative Study of Three Georgian Agencies

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Introduction

This qualitative study explores the practice and challenges of professional supervision in social work across three public agencies in Georgia: The National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation; the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking; and the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions. Through in-depth interviews with 30 respondents (social workers, professional supervisors, and managerial representatives), the research investigates current supervisory practices, legislative frameworks, institutional consistency, experienced challenges – including online supervision – and perceived strategies for improvement. Findings reveal both shared and divergent supervision models across agencies, with systemic constraints impacting supervision quality. The discussion contrasts local supervision practices with global standards and emphasizes the need for context-specific supervisor training and institutional policy refinement.

Professional Supervision in Social Work: Core Functions

Professional supervision within the field of social work can be defined as an organizationally sanctioned process in which a designated individual assumes responsibility for supporting and overseeing the practice of another professional. The purpose of this relationship is to fulfill a combination of organizational, professional, and personal objectives, ultimately enhancing outcomes for service users (Morrison, 2005). This process engages various stakeholders, including service recipients, practitioners, supervisory staff, institutional partners in health, education, housing, and governmental agencies responsible for implementing social welfare policies.

Supervision contributes to the effective delivery of social work services and is central to ensuring quality assurance and the development of a competent professional workforce (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2008). It contributes to efficient managerial functioning, optimized resource allocation, and adherence to user-centered practice principles. Nevertheless, the structural embedding of supervision within organizational systems substantially influences its scope, functions, and modes of implementation (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). Supervision functions as a bridge between front-line and managerial social workers and requires clearly defined contracts and structurally supported frameworks to ensure clarity, accountability, and the integrity of supervisory relationships.

Traditionally, supervision has been understood to serve three primary functions: (1) administrative, focused on ensuring competent and accountable performance; (2) supportive, aimed at addressing the emotional and psychological demands associated with complex professional tasks; and (3) developmental, concerning the continuous improvement of knowledge, skills, values, and ethical standards (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). A fourth function – mediation – facilitates communication and negotiation between individual professionals and the broader organizational or interdisciplinary environment.

High-quality supervision integrates supportive and developmental components, fostering a climate of reflective practice and professional learning. The exchange of feedback contributes to a secure environment, enhancing practitioner well-being and organizational performance. Adequate supervision should create a learning environment and promote critical reflection (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2008).

Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) propose an integrated supervision model that incorporates reflective cycles linking supervisory practices directly to client outcomes, thereby positioning supervision as an active component of the intervention process.

The influence of supervision on organizational culture is equally significant.

Empirical findings by Kim and Lee (2009) indicate that both job-relevant and relational communication between supervisors and staff are inversely related to levels of burnout associated with role conflict and overload in healthcare social work settings. Moreover, open and constructive communication channels are foundational to employee empowerment, as they facilitate access to organizational resources, information, and emotional support (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Gibbs, 2001).

Supervisory approaches that actively promote participation in decision-making, express confidence in subordinate competence, and minimize bureaucratic restrictions are more likely to produce empowered and autonomous professionals. Such practices not only enhance job satisfaction and reduce stress but also enable practitioners to articulate service user needs more effectively and contribute meaningfully to the mission of social work organizations.

Experience in Georgia

Professional supervision of social workers in Georgia was introduced in 2014. During this period, the Rehabilitation Programs Department was established within the Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation Agency, and the position of professional supervisor – designed to support social workers – was created. Later, professional supervision was introduced at the State Care and Trafficking Victims Assistance Agency and at the Psychosocial Service Center of the Mandatory Service for Educational Institutions. The penitentiary institution and the Juvenile Referral Center also implemented professional supervision.

Professional Supervision in the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation

At the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation, in order to implement a unified practice and ensure the quality of services provided to beneficiaries, professional supervisors of social workers evaluate, monitor, and support the activities of specialists (National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation, 2023).

Professional supervision is also mentioned in the Order of the Minister of Justice of 01/06/2021 – "On Approval of Professional Standards of Social Work, Organizational-Technical and Infrastructural Provision of Social Workers and the Rules for the Safety of Social Work." The Order states that through active professional supervision, the Agency helps practicing social workers increase their self-esteem, professional competence, and knowledge, strengthen their skills, and overcome stereotypes (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

According to Article 15 of the Order, professional supervision involves activities carried out by a professional supervisor using educational, administrative, and supportive functions. Supervision is conducted both individually and in groups, helping social workers to self-reflect, identify strengths, and determine areas for improvement. The supervision process also includes developing a professional development plan with the joint involvement of the social worker and the professional supervisor, which contributes to strengthening identified skills within the framework of existing resources.

Professional supervision of social workers is conducted regularly, focusing on strengthening the practitioner. This subsequently impacts the social worker's activities, knowledge, and competence, as well as the beneficiaries and the quality of services provided to them. As a result of participating in individual and group professional supervision, social workers improve case management with beneficiaries and the overall quality of services provided. They also meet deadlines, produce necessary documents and reports, address other administrative issues, cope with work-related stress, and regularly assess the relevance of their skills, knowledge, and methods in relation to service effectiveness and work requirements.

According to Article 15, Part 4 of the Order of the Minister of Justice "On Approval of Professional Standards of Social Work", the service provider organization must develop a procedure for implementing professional supervision activities. This procedure further regulates the roles of both the professional supervisor and the social worker in the supervision process. The organization also defines qualification requirements for professional supervisors, assists them in improving their qualifications, and ensures appropriate working conditions and infrastructure to support the supervision process (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Professional Supervision in the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking

Based on the Order of the Director of the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking, the "Rule on the Implementation of Professional Supervision of Social Workers/Senior Social Workers of the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking by the Professional Supervision and Project Design Department" was approved on 05/06/2023. This Rule de-

fines the main functions, tasks, objectives, responsible persons, frequency, and necessary tools for implementing professional supervision of social workers and senior social workers in the Agency.

The goal of professional supervision is to ensure beneficiary-oriented and high-quality services by social workers. Professional supervision establishes a supportive professional relationship between the supervisor and the social worker. It is conducted through regular meetings, focusing on practitioner well-being, competency development, and accountability.

Professional supervision is carried out through four main functions:

1. *Administrative function* – ensures that the practice of social workers is conducted in accordance with organizational procedures, rules, legislation, and policies, contributing to the creation of an effective work environment.
2. *Developmental function* – promotes the professional development of social workers by deepening their knowledge and enhancing their skills.
3. *Supportive function* – provides emotional support for social workers; professional supervisors help them cope with professional burnout and work-related stress, thereby ensuring the provision of ethical, beneficiary-oriented services.
4. *Mediation function* – connects social workers and organizational management through the mediation of the professional supervisor. It also involves advocacy for improving organizational policies, procedures, and culture.

Of these functions, the professional supervisors of the Professional Supervision and Project Design Division perform the developmental, supportive, and mediation functions, while administrative supervision is carried out by the heads of the Tbilisi city and regional centers and department heads.

Tasks of Professional Supervision:

- Introduction of unified and best practices in service delivery;
- Promotion of ethical practices and practices oriented toward self-reflection;
- Identification of difficulties arising in the work process and development of ways to overcome them;
- Raising awareness of the social worker's responsibilities and role within the organizational context;

- Supporting the development of social workers' competencies;
- Providing emotional support to social workers.

The purpose of individual professional supervision of social workers is to support practitioners in their professional activities. Individual professional supervision is conducted through one-on-one sessions, at least once every four months, on a planned basis. For social workers whose work experience in the Agency does not exceed one year, individual professional supervision is carried out once every two months, and additional unscheduled sessions may also be held if necessary. During individual professional supervision, attention is focused on professional growth, improvement of practice, awareness of ethical dilemmas, discussion of challenges and difficulties in the work process, development of competencies, and planning further activities.

The purpose of group professional supervision of social workers is to support teams of practitioners, based on the needs and strengths of their work. Group professional supervision is conducted through group sessions, held twice a year. For a group supervision session to be effective, the number of participants should not exceed ten. During these sessions, participants discuss problematic issues and challenges, agree on working principles and standard practices, share professional and practical experience, and express mutual support – helping to prevent professional burnout.

The Agency also implements individual and group professional supervision of senior social workers. The purpose of individual professional supervision of a senior social worker is to support them in managing the practitioners working in their region or district and in guiding their professional activities. Individual professional supervision is conducted through one-on-one sessions, planned once every three months. Group professional supervision of senior social workers is conducted through sessions held once every six months, supporting them according to the needs and strengths of their work.

Professional Supervision Records:

1. Individual Professional Supervision Record – prepared by the professional supervisor and confirmed by the signatures of both parties;
2. Group Professional Supervision Record – prepared and signed by the professional supervisor.

These records reflect the main issues discussed during supervision, agreements reached and planned future steps. The original documentation is

kept in the Professional Supervision and Project Design Department. A copy is given to the employee involved in the process and to the professional supervisor. In the case of group supervision, a copy of the record can be provided to the employee involved in the process upon request. Records are kept for two years. No third party has access to professional supervision records.

Social workers and senior social workers have the right to submit feedback on the professional supervision process within one month of the records being completed. Social workers address the head of department, while senior social workers address the Agency's director (LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking, 2023).

Professional Supervision in the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions

According to Order No. 57 of the Head of the Mandatory Service of the LEPL Educational Institution dated May 20, 2019, the concept of mentoring/professional supervision of employees of the Psychosocial Service Center (Division) was approved. The same Order also approved the standard record form for mentoring/professional supervision.

The concept defines mentoring/professional supervision as a process in which employees of the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions provide supervision to service recipients during needs assessment and service provision. It also includes measures to prevent professional burnout (through both internal and external supervision mechanisms), advocacy, and employee support.

The concept further outlines the goal of mentoring/professional supervision: to facilitate the provision of quality services, identify and address difficulties in the work process, establish unified best practices in service delivery, assess and strengthen employee skills and resources, and provide professional and administrative support.

It also specifies the required qualifications and skills of a mentor/professional supervisor. Candidates must have: a higher academic degree (at least a master's) in social work; a minimum of three years' experience in social work; at least one year of experience in professional supervision; experience working with the relevant target group and age group; teamwork and communication skills; motivation and the ability to engage colleagues in

implementing positive changes; the ability to provide constructive feedback to specialists, focusing on strengthening practice and solving problems.

The concept also describes the activities of a mentor/professional supervisor. Employees of the Center implement these activities and determine the number of supervisees. One professional supervisor should supervise at least 15 and no more than 25 people. Supervision is carried out through individual and group meetings. If necessary, supervisors may also review documents produced by specialists and observe their activities using both direct and indirect methods. As for frequency, an individual supervisory meeting with a specialist is conducted monthly, in a planned manner, to assess the quality of their work. In the case of external professional supervision, an individual meeting must be held at least once a quarter to discuss problematic cases arising in practice. Group professional supervision is conducted at least twice a year, and all employees of the Center are required to participate.

The purpose of these sessions is to discuss common problems, share professional experience and knowledge, and prevent professional burnout. The professional supervisor keeps a record of each session, documenting the supervision process and identifying problematic areas, issues addressed, outcomes, and recommendations. Records are kept by the supervisor for at least two years, and copies are provided to the employee and the head of the Psychosocial Service Center. According to the concept, both individual and group supervision meetings must be scheduled in advance with the supervisor. Within the supervision framework, employees may share work-related challenges with the supervisor, receive support in managing difficult and complex cases, enhance both professional and personal development, assess workload, discuss areas for strengthening, receive feedback on practice, and share successful cases.

Employees can also provide feedback to professional supervisors after supervision meetings. This not only helps supervisors improve their practice but also ensures that supervision is tailored to employees' needs. All Center employees are required to participate in supervision and to provide the professional supervisor with any requested information and documents.

The concept also outlines the accountability of professional supervisors. They are accountable to the practitioners they supervise. After each supervision meeting, the supervisor must provide the supervisee with a completed record in the appropriate format (individual or group). The supervisor is also accountable to the head of the Center, to whom they must report quarterly on the progress and results of supervision meetings. Additionally,

they are accountable to the deputy head of the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions, to whom they provide an annual report on the composition of supervision activities and agree on central issues.

At the end of each year, supervisors prepare a quality assessment and recommendation report for Center employees, based on the following competencies: record keeping, professional knowledge, teamwork, case management, and the ability to identify service recipients' needs and plan appropriate interventions (Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions, 2019).

Thus, professional supervision is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of effective social work practice. It supports social workers in their clinical and administrative roles, provides space for reflection, ensures ethical compliance, and helps prevent burnout (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2013). In Georgia, the supervision framework is relatively new and varies across institutions. This study seeks to evaluate how professional supervision is currently implemented in three key agencies, identify challenges, and suggest areas for development.

Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative design to capture in-depth perspectives on supervision practices. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 professionals – 18 social workers, 9 professional supervisors, and 3 managerial representatives – from the three target agencies (seeTable 1). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across both urban and regional contexts. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What supervisory practices are currently employed across the three public agencies in Georgia?
2. How consistent are these practices across different agencies?
3. What rules and conditions guide the implementation of supervision in each agency?
4. What challenges do social workers and professional supervisors face in supervisory processes?
5. What strategies do professionals perceive as effective in addressing these challenges?
6. What are the challenges of online supervision?

Participants were drawn from the following agencies: The National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation; the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking; and the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions.

Table 1: Respondents

Agency Name	**Supervisors**	**Social Workers**	**Managers**
Crime Prevention and Probation Agency	3	6	1
State Care and Assistance Agency	3	6	1
Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions – Psychosocial Services Center	3	6	1

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Ethical Considerations Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. All personal identifiers were anonymized. Confidentiality of supervision records and interview content was upheld in line with ethical standards for qualitative research (Dewane, 2007).

Results

1. Main Supervisory Practices

All three agencies implement professional supervision using both individual and group formats. However, the structure, frequency, and delivery of supervision differ significantly across institutions. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions and the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking provide monthly individual supervision and occasional group sessions, often facilitated by internal or external professionals. In contrast, the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation employs less structured practices, with individual supervision typically

occurring only twice a year. The following table 2 summarizes the main supervisory practices across agencies:

Table 2: Main Supervisory Practices Across Agencies

Agency	**Individual Supervision Frequency**	**Group Supervision**	**External Supervision**	**Notes**
Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions Service	Monthly, plus on-demand	Quarterly	Occasionally used	Structured policy in place
State Care Agency	Monthly	Irregular, often replaced by team meetings	Occasionally used	Clear internal procedures
Probation Agency	Biannual or on-demand	Rare	Rarely implemented	Practices vary, no finalized policy

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Narrative data from respondents enrich this comparison:

> *"I can request supervision anytime I need it. It's not limited to the schedule, and my supervisor always finds time for me."* (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> "*We have even had supervisors observe our sessions and give feedback afterward. It helps a lot.*" (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> "*In our agency, it is sometimes hard to know when the next supervision will happen. It depends on staffing and what emergencies come up.*" (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> "*We have monthly supervision, but sometimes it becomes more of a team meeting than reflective supervision.*" (Social Worker, State Care Agency)

Supervision formats also adapt to context and demand. Some supervisors from the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions provide ad hoc sessions in response to complex cases. In the State Care Agency, supervision sometimes shifts into a group problem-solving format when individual sessions cannot be scheduled.

Overall, while supervision is acknowledged as essential across all three agencies, its implementation is shaped by available resources, institutional priorities, and staff capacity. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions stands out for its responsiveness and structured framework, whereas the Probation Agency's practices reflect a transitional state toward more formal supervision. These inconsistencies underscore the importance of standardizing core supervision components across agencies to ensure equitable professional support for social workers (see Table 2).

2. Consistency of Supervision Practices

There is substantial variation in how supervision is delivered across the three agencies, particularly regarding frequency, documentation, mode of delivery, and expectations surrounding the supervisory relationship. These inconsistencies are most evident between urban and rural offices, and between agencies with structured frameworks versus those still developing internal guidelines.

The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions was most frequently cited by respondents as having a consistent and well-organized approach. Its structured model – with monthly supervision sessions, clear documentation protocols, and accessible support from supervisors – stood in contrast to other agencies. Supervisors at the Office were described as approachable and engaged, offering both scheduled and ad hoc meetings in response to the evolving needs of social workers.

In contrast, the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation displayed marked inconsistency. Many respondents reported that supervision occurred irregularly or with unclear purpose. Some participants noted that documentation forms were still in draft stage or inconsistently applied. A lack of clarity around the role of supervision – whether intended for evaluation, emotional support, or administrative follow-up – was repeatedly mentioned.

This inconsistency was compounded by frequent changes in supervisors. In the Probation Agency, high staff turnover disrupted continuity, forcing

social workers to adapt to new expectations, styles, and interpretations of policy.

> *"Every few months we have a new supervisor with different expectations."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> "*We used to have supervision every few weeks, but after the staff changes, we never know when it will happen."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Meanwhile, the State Care Agency fell somewhere in the middle. While monthly supervision was generally available, its format varied. At times it resembled a formal review session; at other times, a broader team discussion. Documentation was reportedly more consistent than in the Probation Agency, but several workers still noted ambiguity about the goals and expected outcomes of supervision.

Geographic differences also played a major role. Workers based in Tbilisi or other central offices were more likely to receive in-person, scheduled supervision. Regional staff, by contrast, often relied on remote or informal contact.

> *"In Tbilisi, we get more in-person supervision. In the regions, it's mostly online and less frequent."* (Social Worker, State Care Agency)
> *"Sometimes it's just a phone call or an email. There's no space to really reflect."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Some respondents also highlighted a disconnect between policy and practice. Although internal documents might outline regular supervision intervals, actual practice often depended on workload, supervisor availability, and institutional priorities.

These disparities not only affect the perceived value of supervision but also hinder the development of trusting, reflective relationships between social workers and supervisors. The findings emphasize the need for clearer policies, sustained implementation, and supervisor training to ensure a more uniform and effective supervisory experience across agencies and locations.

3. Legislative and Policy Frameworks

The presence or absence of formalized supervision frameworks significantly shapes the implementation and effectiveness of supervisory practices across agencies. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions

and the State Care Agency have developed internal documents – such as concept papers, policy briefs, and guidelines – that define supervision structures, frequency, and objectives. These frameworks establish clear expectations for both supervisors and supervisees and contribute to greater consistency in implementation.

For example, the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions adopted a 2019 concept note that outlines the scope of supervision, the competencies expected of supervisors, and protocols for documentation and confidentiality. Respondents from this agency referred to this document regularly, noting that it serves as a reference point in their day-to-day practice. One supervisor shared:

> "*The concept note helps us stay on track. If there's confusion, we go back to it. It's not perfect, but it creates accountability.*" (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

Similarly, the State Care Agency adopted a directive in 2023 that provides guidelines on the structure and frequency of supervision. Though more recently introduced, it was cited by several respondents as a step toward systematizing supervision:

> "*We finally have a written document. Before that, supervision was based on good intentions. Now there's something to refer to.*" (Social Worker, State Care Agency)

In stark contrast, the Probation Agency lacks a finalized internal framework. Supervisory practices there are largely dependent on ministry-level instructions or pilot drafts, which are inconsistently applied. Supervisors often operate with ambiguous expectations, and documentation tools vary by individual or region.

> "*We're still testing formats. Nothing is officially approved yet.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)
> "*We have a form, but the way we fill it changes depending on who's in charge.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)

The absence of an institutionalized policy has practical consequences. Supervisors are often left to define their own roles, blurring the line between administrative oversight and reflective support. Several supervisors expressed discomfort at having to both evaluate and mentor the same employee without clear guidance on how to balance those functions.

This policy gap also undermines continuity. When supervisors change, there is no standardized orientation or procedure to ensure consistency. One social worker shared:

> "*When my supervisor left, the next one didn't know anything about our past meetings. It's like starting over every time.*" (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Furthermore, in the absence of protected time for supervision – as recommended in most supervision standards – some agencies reported that sessions were frequently postponed or absorbed into broader administrative meetings. This undermines the purpose of supervision as a space for reflection and professional growth.

These disparities point to the broader need for a national supervision framework that defines minimum standards across agencies while allowing for contextual adaptation. Institutional policies must clearly outline supervision frequency, confidentiality, responsibilities, and supervisor qualifications to promote both consistency and quality.

4. Challenges in the Supervisory Process

Challenges encountered in the supervisory process differ by stakeholder group – social workers, supervisors, and managers – yet several themes consistently emerge. These include inconsistent supervision practices, lack of emotional support, resource constraints, and systemic gaps in training and policy. The table 3 below summarizes common and distinct challenges by group:

Table 3: Challenges of Supervisory Practices

Stakeholder Group	Common Challenges	Distinct Challenges
Social Workers	Inconsistent supervision Emotional burnout Supervisor turnover	Feeling judged in sessions Limited emotional support Concerns about confidentiality of supervision records
Supervisors	High caseloads	Role conflict (evaluator vs. supporter)

Stakeholder Group	Common Challenges	Distinct Challenges
	Lack of training in supervision	Documentation burden and ambiguity
Managers	Staffing shortages Resource constraints	Difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified supervisors Absence of a national supervision framework

Source: Author's own elaboration.

These challenges are experienced daily and often intersect, exacerbating professional stress and weakening the overall impact of supervision.

Social Workers' Perspectives: Social workers consistently reported feeling unsupported in terms of emotional well-being. Many described supervision as primarily administrative, focused on checklists, and disconnected from the reflective and supportive space they expected. Concerns about confidentiality also limited their willingness to be open during sessions.

> *"I don't always know if my supervisor is evaluating me or supporting me."* (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> *"There's this unspoken rule – not to be too vulnerable. Because you never know who else might read your notes."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> Frequent changes in supervisory staff were also cited as destabilizing:
> *"In two years, I've had three supervisors. I spend more time adjusting than actually getting help."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Supervisors' Perspectives: Supervisors expressed a lack of institutional preparation for their roles. While many had extensive social work experience, few had received formal training in supervision techniques – especially in providing emotional support or managing dual roles.

> "*We don't have structured training – most of what I do is based on instinct and experience.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)
> High caseloads further limited their ability to offer meaningful sessions:
> *"Sometimes I supervise 25 people. I don't always have the capacity to offer meaningful sessions."* (Supervisor, State Care Agency)

Many reported difficulty balancing administrative duties with supervisory responsibilities:
"I spend more time compiling reports than actually talking with my team." (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
Managers' Perspectives: From a managerial viewpoint, the most pressing challenges were systemic: staffing shortages, lack of supervisory training programs, and the absence of a national framework. These factors hinder recruitment, onboarding, and support of supervisors.
"We've tried to hire more supervisors, but the qualified ones are already overloaded. There's just not enough of them." (Manager, State Care Agency)
"We operate without a national standard. Every agency does it their own way – and that makes oversight difficult." (Manager, Probation Agency)

Intersecting Challenges: Several challenges cut across roles. The absence of a national supervision framework not only affects managers' ability to develop systems but also leaves supervisors unclear about their responsibilities and social workers unsure of what to expect. Similarly, emotional burnout – though voiced primarily by social workers – often remains unaddressed because supervisors themselves are overburdened and lack training in providing emotional support.

The shared and distinct perspectives highlight the need for a multi-level response to supervision challenges, one that considers frontline realities while advancing policy and structural reforms.

5. Strategies to Address Supervision Challenges

To respond to the challenges identified in supervision practices, participants proposed a range of practical and systemic solutions. These recommendations reflect their lived experiences and suggest pathways for strengthening the supervisory environment across agencies (see Table 4).

Key Strategies Identified:

- *Establish consistent national guidelines:* Respondents across roles called for a unified framework to set standards for supervision frequency, documentation, confidentiality, and supervisor qualifications. Such guidelines would promote consistency across agencies and regions.

- *Offer supervisor training focused on emotional support:* Supervisors emphasized the need for formal training not only in documentation and administrative oversight but also in reflective, supportive supervision.
- *Clarify supervision vs. administrative roles:* Many suggested separating supervision from evaluation and managerial reporting to preserve trust and openness during sessions.
- *Reduce caseloads and increase staffing:* Overburdened supervisors stressed that meaningful supervision is difficult when they are responsible for dozens of staff.
- *Reinstate and expand external supervision opportunities:* External supervision was viewed as an effective way to provide emotional and professional support, particularly in high-stress environments.

Respondent Quotes:

"More structured support and emotional backing would make a difference." (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

"We need training not just in documentation but in how to be supportive." (Supervisor, Probation Agency)

"It would help to have clear boundaries – who's my boss, and who's my support? Right now, they're the same person." (Social Worker, State Care Agency)

"We've seen how much people open up in external supervision. It's safer, more objective." (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

"The number of staff we supervise is unrealistic. Even with the best intentions, you can't support 30 people meaningfully." (Supervisor, State Care Agency)

Examples of Proposed Initiatives: In some agencies, respondents shared ideas for pilot programs and reforms. For example, one manager discussed plans to introduce peer supervision circles to relieve the burden on formal supervisors. Another suggested integrating supervision training modules into onboarding for new social workers.

"We've talked about pairing new hires with senior staff for reflective support – not evaluation, just mentorship." (Manager, State Care Agency)

"We want to pilot a peer supervision model, especially in regions where staff are isolated." (Manager, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

Table 4: Summary of Proposed Strategies by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Recommended Strategies
Social Workers	- Clarify supervisor roles - Improve emotional support - Ensure confidentiality - Reinstate external supervision
Supervisors	- Training in reflective supervision - Reduced caseloads - Clear policy guidelines - Support for documentation practices
Managers	- National supervision framework - Investment in recruitment and retention - Develop onboarding supervision modules - Pilot peer or hybrid models

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Overall, these strategies reflect a shared desire to make supervision not just a procedural obligation but a meaningful, supportive, and growth-oriented part of social work practice. The recommendations also underscore the importance of investing in supervisor capacity, building institutional support structures, and distinguishing supervision from performance management.

6. Challenges of Online Supervision

Remote supervision has become standard practice in many Georgian public agencies, particularly for social workers in regional offices. While online formats offer flexibility, save travel time, and ensure continuity of contact, they present significant challenges that affect the quality and emotional depth of the supervisory relationship.

A recurring theme among respondents was the reduced emotional connection in online settings. Many noted the difficulty of engaging in reflective conversations or feeling supported when interactions were mediated by a screen. Several emphasized the challenge of reading nonverbal cues, which are essential for supervisors to assess emotional states or stress levels.

> "Remote supervision is ticking boxes. It's harder to talk about emotional challenges." (Social Worker, rural)
> "With Zoom, I can't always read their emotional state. I miss the small signals that someone might be overwhelmed." (Supervisor, State Care Agency)
> "Sometimes it feels like a technical task. We just go through the agenda, but no one really opens up." (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Supervisors also highlighted the lack of privacy in home or office environments, particularly in regional areas with limited internet access and shared workspaces.

> *"I can't always find a quiet place for supervision. Sometimes I'm in the field, or I'm using public Wi-Fi. That affects the quality of the conversation."* (Social Worker, regional)
> *"We've had to cancel or cut sessions short because the internet drops or the sound is unclear."* (Supervisor, Probation Agency)

Despite these obstacles, some respondents acknowledged the benefits of online supervision, particularly in terms of accessibility. For those in remote locations or with heavy workloads, the ability to connect virtually enabled more frequent check-ins.

> *"Online helps save travel time, but emotional topics are better in person."* (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> *"We wouldn't be able to talk at all if not for online supervision. So it's better than nothing – but it's not enough."* (Social Worker, regional)

Hybrid models – where supervision alternates between online and in-person sessions – were discussed as a potential compromise. Some agencies had already begun experimenting with this approach.

> *"We try to meet face-to-face once every two or three months and do the rest online. It works better than just remote meetings."* (Supervisor, State Care Agency)

The shift to online supervision highlighted the need for digital literacy training and improved technological infrastructure. Some participants suggested that supervisors should receive specific guidance on how to conduct emotionally supportive sessions in virtual formats.

> "*You have to work twice as hard to create emotional safety online. That should be part of our training.*" (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

In summary, while remote supervision offers logistical advantages, it falls short in delivering the relational and emotional benefits of in-person contact. Without intentional strategies to address its limitations, online supervision risks becoming a procedural formality rather than a meaningful support tool. Agencies must therefore balance accessibility with depth, and consider hybrid models, targeted supervisor training, and improved infrastructure as essential steps toward more effective digital supervision.

Discussion

This study demonstrates both progress and ongoing gaps in professional supervision in Georgia. While agencies have made strides in formalizing systems – particularly the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions and the State Care Agency – significant inconsistencies and role confusion persist, most notably within the Probation Agency. These inconsistencies affect not only the frequency and quality of supervision but also its very purpose: whether it functions as a supportive, reflective process or as a compliance-oriented administrative tool.

A key finding is the disparity in supervision practices both across and within agencies. While some staff benefit from regular, structured supervision with emotional and professional support, others experience infrequent, unpredictable, or purely procedural sessions. This imbalance suggests that without unified guidelines, the potential benefits of supervision are distributed unevenly, reinforcing inequities in professional support.

The role of supervision also remains unclear in many settings. Supervisors are often expected to both support and evaluate their staff, creating a power dynamic that can inhibit open dialog. Several social workers reported feeling judged during supervision or uncertain whether they were in a safe space to express vulnerability. These concerns mirror international debates on the tension between managerial and reflective supervision models (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Dewane, 2007).

Online supervision, though efficient and sometimes necessary – particularly in Georgia's remote regions – can undermine the emotional depth and relational trust essential to effective supervision. Respondents consistently highlighted difficulties in creating emotional safety, sustaining attention,

and reading nonverbal cues in digital formats. While some participants appreciated the flexibility of remote supervision, most noted that emotionally charged topics were harder to explore meaningfully without in-person interaction.

The study also reveals that even where internal policies exist, implementation often depends on leadership, workload, and local interpretation. Respondents from the same agency frequently described very different supervision experiences, suggesting that policy alone is insufficient without monitoring, training, and accountability.

Recommendations proposed by respondents – including training in emotional support, clearer separation of roles, peer supervision, and external supervision options – demonstrate a strong desire for reform and capacity building. These findings align with international best practices that view supervision as a cornerstone of professional development and well-being in social work (NASW, 2013; Warwick et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for a national supervision strategy that sets minimum standards while allowing agencies contextual flexibility. This strategy should include clear role definitions; competency-based training for supervisors; routine evaluation of supervision quality; technological support for hybrid models. When implemented well, supervision can protect against burnout, improve service quality, and reinforce ethical and reflective practice. When implemented poorly – or inconsistently – it can erode trust, create confusion, and exacerbate professional isolation.

In conclusion, supervision in Georgia's social work sector is developing but uneven. With focused policy efforts, targeted training, and structural reform, it has the potential to evolve into a robust and supportive system aligned with both international standards and local realities.

Conclusion

Professional supervision plays a vital role in supporting the effectiveness, ethical integrity, and emotional resilience of social workers. This study highlights the uneven development of supervision practices across Georgia's public agencies: while some institutions demonstrate structured and supportive systems, others continue to struggle with inconsistency, unclear roles, and insufficient policy frameworks.

To move toward a more equitable and effective supervision culture, it is essential to implement a unified national framework that establishes

minimum standards, clarifies supervisory roles, and integrates reflective and supportive approaches. Targeted training programs for supervisors – particularly in emotional support and hybrid supervision techniques – are critical to improving the quality and consistency of supervision. In addition, manageable caseloads, protected time for supervision, and institutionalized opportunities for external or peer-based formats are necessary to embed supervision as a core element of professional development.

The integration of hybrid supervision models, supported by appropriate technology and training, can provide flexibility without compromising the relational depth that in-person supervision offers. Ultimately, investing in a comprehensive and contextually grounded supervision system will strengthen the social work profession in Georgia, improve service delivery, and promote workforce sustainability and well-being.

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