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Smriti Shrestha

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**Social Work in Nepal: A Quest for  
Identity**

by

Smriti Shrestha

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of St. Cloud State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree Master of Science  
In Social Work

August 2023

Thesis Committee:  
Sara DeVos, Chairperson  
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### **Abstract**

The thesis focuses on the lack of clarity in the understanding of social work as a professional and an academic curriculum in Nepal. The broad terminology and understanding of social work have led to sporadic roles and responsibilities of Nepali social workers. The lack of legal recognition of social work roles and positions and the profession per se not being given formal recognition by the government of Nepal has led to disputes in the definition of being a social worker in Nepal and failed to protect service users, families, and communities. The proposed research question is: What are the challenges of being a social worker in Nepal? The research will explore this question through the lived experiences of social work graduates in Nepal, using semi-structured interviews as the method. The research aims to understand the roles and responsibilities that social work graduates find themselves in and the challenges that come along with being a social worker in their personal and professional narratives. The study will call for the significance of regulating the body or at least recognition of social work in Nepal.

## **Acknowledgment**

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Firstly, I would like to extend my sincere respect and appreciation to my thesis committee for constantly guiding me throughout the research by providing me with feedback and helping me understand my ideas. Their ability to make me understand the depths of any subject matter with their direction and knowledge is absolutely noteworthy and has helped me become a critical learner and complete this research by exploring, understanding, and embracing the multi-dimensionality of a learning process.

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Smriti Shrestha

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The issue that I have selected for my thesis is the lack of clarification in the understanding of the term 'social work' as a profession and an academic curriculum in Nepal. The broad terminology and understanding of social work leads to sporadic roles and responsibilities of Nepali social workers. In the context of Nepal, the lack of professional association, and moreover, the government not recognizing social work as a profession has made it challenging to impart social work education and training. However, it also provides its share of opportunities and challenges for a young profession like social work to establish itself in Nepal (Nikku, 2010). The lack of legal recognition of social work roles and positions and the profession per se not being given formal recognition by the government of Nepal has led to disputes in the definition of being a social worker in Nepal and also failed to protect service users, families, and communities (Dangal et al., 2021). It has been acknowledged by social work educators that in order to promote and prosper towards the internationalization of social work in Nepal, alliance building is an important feature that is yet to take its initial form (Nikku, 2010). Upon the government's recognition of social work as a profession there could be improvements in the social work sector through factors such as public financing and making the association of social work strong and active (Dangal et.al, 2021). There has been very little research conducted and the researches that are already there, focus more towards the establishment of social work as a profession and have excluded the experiences of those who have a social work degree which leads to this qualitative research.

My proposed research question is: *What are the challenges of being a social worker in Nepal?* In a country where the methods and approaches of social work rely on Western context, without the existence of its own model of social work, there is a loophole and lack of accountability and credibility in the development of social work in Nepal (Dangal, et. al,

2021). Since social work does not have either a regulating body in Nepal or its curriculum accredited by either national or international governing bodies or institutions, it is important to understand the roles and responsibilities that social work graduates find themselves in with this degree. This leads to understanding the challenges that come along with being a social worker in their personal and professional narrative. Since the research is trying to explore this question through the lived experiences of social work graduates in Nepal, this will be a phenomenological study that will use semi-structured interview as the method. By describing experiences of social work graduates through the roles and responsibilities that they have witnessed and been a part of- in the context of Nepali society, this research will call for the significance of regulating the body or at least recognition of social work in Nepal.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), the global definition of social work is, “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.”

The origin of social work in Nepal is associated with religious and cultural institutions which are established upon the notion of charity to please the gods not only in this life but many lives after. Some of the important social reforms that had a far reaching impact on current social work practice in Nepal are (a) launch of National Development Plans in 1956 (b) initiation of Social Service Act in 1978, and (c) the establishment of the Social Service National Coordination Council which is now known as Social Welfare Council (Nikku, 2010). Furthermore, even though people did not have social work degrees, they were known as “social workers” because they were involved in establishing and running non-governmental organizations since 1990 after there was restoration of multiparty democracy in the state. The distinction between professional social workers and social service practitioners hasn’t been recognized by either the state or majority of the population in Nepal even though the distinction has been made in a professional setting (Nikku, 2010). Since there is no evidence, it has been assumed that the mushrooming of international agencies, and political turmoil in the country might have influenced the initiation of the first social work program in an undergraduate level at St. Xavier’s College, through Kathmandu University, in 1996.

The growth of social work education has been expanding but lack of regulation has restricted it from the potential that it has to heal and shape communities based on the

foundation of social justice. Even if people have their social work degree, it has not been accredited by any social work association (national or international), which leads to questioning of the subject in itself.

If we look at the voices from countries within South Asia, to an extent of SouthEast Asia, and within the Asia Pacific region, they are yet to come to terms with both the identification and recognition of social work as a profession. The concept of social work is seemingly under the control of state politics and blooming non-government agencies that are mostly dependent on donations and charities especially from developed countries (Nikku & Pulla, 2014). The representation of these countries matters a great deal but still is a struggle to incorporate in the Global Agenda even though they have been constantly committed to the process of Global Agenda and vocal about their interests in international social work and development (Nikku & Pulla, 2014).

Not all people working as social workers or have the identity tag of being a social worker in Nepal have required training or qualifications. Anyone can become a social worker in Nepal if they provide some financial help either in the form of donation or providing to social service organizations or do some charity work (Dangal et.al, 2021). It is the reality of developing countries like Nepal that social workers are not able to exercise their professional power to the fullest and resolve eminent issues pertaining to social justice and basic human needs such as education, health, clean drinking water and so on. In the context of Nepal, the cases of child abuse, sexual abuse, children safety, and violence fall under legal jurisdiction without the direct intervention or involvement of social workers (Palattiyil et.al, , 2019). The

deteriorating relationship between 30,000 non-government organizations and social workers are prevalent in Nepal given that even with this huge number, they have not been able to make significant changes or sustainable development with an impact. One of the reasons behind this has been, lack of regulation or licensure of the profession giving access to people trained in management, science or any other social sciences disciplines to work as social workers which is adding up to more chaos and lack of trustworthiness in the profession (Dangal et al., 2021; Dhakal & Burgess, 2021).

There has been very limited research or none at all when it comes to trying to understand and explore the experiences of social workers in Nepal. The issues need to be explored and given a platform considering there is no space for them to share. The voices of social workers in Nepal could provide unique insights into the challenges they face while working with marginalized populations in the country or just working as social workers in general. Shrestha et al. (2018), emphasizes the roles of social workers in Nepal in addressing social issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, and human trafficking. The authors suggest that social workers can play a critical role in advocating for marginalized communities and promoting social justice in Nepal.

These challenges have not been fully explored in previous research, and could potentially inform policy and programmatic interventions to better support social workers and the population they serve. In addition, by centering the perspectives of social workers in Nepal, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and contextual factors that may influence their work and the outcomes for their clients. Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has emphasized the importance of centering voices of those most affected by social issues in research. By doing so, we can gain a more nuanced and accurate understanding of complex issues and develop more effective solutions. If the social work profession is to be made credible in the context of Nepali society, it needs to be remodeled right from its education to

its recognition. And who better to reach out to than the people who have already been in the field with their knowledge and expertise just trying to find the right channels or still trying to find an identity for themselves as social workers? Including the voices of social workers in Nepal in research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face and inform interventions to better support both social workers and the populations they serve.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

#### **Summary**

The community that I am working with is social work graduates who have completed their bachelor's or masters of social work degree in Nepal. I have chosen this sample because my research question is trying to explore the challenges that these graduates go through in their identity as a social worker including their roles and responsibilities. Since the demographic information allows us to better understand certain background characteristics of our participants, the demographics are social work graduates from the universities or colleges affiliated to universities in Nepal. To further explain, they will be Nepali people who have a social work degree, be it bachelors or master's degree and working in Nepal. As a researcher, I conducted my role by communicating the idea and concept behind my research and establishing the idea of the power that strong narrative documents can hold in shaping future experiences of upcoming generations. My participants were social work graduates who work in different roles and have different responsibilities (not necessarily as "social workers") shaped by their social work education. They took part in in-depth interviews and played the role of respondents. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. I have chosen this method because this research question demands me to explore, understand and explain my participants' opinions and experiences which will be achieved via mostly open-ended questions. I used thematic analysis (narrative analysis) to analyze my data because identifying themes means identifying patterns in data that are important and using these themes to address the research question.

## **Introduction**

Research Methodology is the specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, process and analyze information about a particular topic. In a simple manner, it is a systematic plan for conducting research. Furthermore, it allows the reader to critically evaluate a study's overall validity and reliability.

## **Participant Sample**

The participants are students who have a social work degree from Nepal and are working in Nepal. They come with different experiences with their bachelor's and master's degrees and have their opinions regarding how there have been challenges to being a social worker in the context of Nepal.

## **Research Design**

A research design is the plan of attack: what approach to the problem will be taken? What methods will be used? And what strategies will be most effective? (Creswell, 2014). The design of this research is a qualitative phenomenological study. Prashant Kumar Astalin (2013) states that a qualitative research design is probably the most flexible of the various experimental techniques, encompassing a variety of accepted methods and structures. Since the aim of this research is to understand and explain the experiences of social workers in Nepal and the challenges as they perceive them, the approach of this study is purely qualitative in nature, my research approach will be phenomenological which will help the researcher understand and explain the experiences of social workers and their challenges as they give meaning to their definitions on their own terms with the help of their perceived world. Phenomenological investigation is well-suited to examine the meanings and viewpoints of participants in research. The primary objective of phenomenological analysis is to comprehend how the everyday, shared world is created from the participants' point of view, according to Schwandt (2000). The fundamental philosophical assumption behind this

investigation is frequently exemplified by Husserl's (1962) declaration that our knowledge is limited to what we have personally experienced.

### **Method**

In qualitative research, interviews are a common method of data collection that allows researchers to gain in-depth insights into participants' perspectives and experiences (Smith, et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants via zoom to obtain their experiences from three participants, with an average duration of 45 minutes. The interview questions were developed based on the research question and the relevant literature. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility to explore relevant topics while still ensuring consistency across participants (Smith, et.al, 2009). The privacy of the interview setting was also essential to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences.

### **Sample Design**

The samples for the research were gathered through non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling involves non-random selection of participants based on convenience or other criteria that the researcher has. The researcher used purposive sampling in which the researcher selected the participants who happened to have a social work degree because they aligned with the research purpose. Purposive sampling is used to select participants who are best suited to provide the information needed to answer the research question. It is used to obtain a more complete and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied by selecting participants who can provide most relevant and informative data (Kumar, 2019).

**Data source**

Data required for the research were collected through two different means i.e. primary means and secondary means. Primary data source: Primary data are original data gathered by the researcher for the research project at hand.

In the research, the primary data was mainly collected through:

1. Interview

**Data Analysis**

The research did not endeavor to yield just one conclusion. Instead, this research was able to generate emerging themes and ideas from the three interviews. The researcher used thematic analysis for data analysis through the process of data familiarization, identifying important concepts and patterns in the data to searching for themes, reviewing them, and finally naming and describing them. From the transcribed interviews, patterns of special experiences were listed. Then, the transcriptions were read for ideas that were both common and contradicting across the participants. The patterns were derived from direct quotes or by paraphrasing common ideas. Then, the transcripts were read for passages that seemed significant, relevant, and unique to the research. The patterns were then identified and coded which is a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments (Schwandt, 2000). The information that was coded was used to generate three different themes. These themes that emerged from the experiences and stories of the participants were brought together to form a comprehensive picture of their challenges.



## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

### **Themes**

This chapter includes the qualitative analysis of the data collected through the three participants who were interviewed by the researcher. The researcher asked a series of predetermined questions to the participants which were recorded during the data collection process with the permission of the participants. The recorded data were transcribed, identified and labelled and segregated into three different themes by the researcher. The themes were generated on the basis of commonality and contrast between the responses, related to the methodology that has been used to analyze the data and on how they relate to responding to the research question. The major themes generated from the collected data according to the social workers in Nepal were a) difference between social work and social service b) roles of social workers c) recognition of social work as a profession.

#### **Difference between social work and social service**

The first and foremost priority of the researcher was to comprehend the understanding of the places that the social workers were coming from. All of the participants had distinct understandings relative to their personal experiences and how they have been exposed to the diversity of social work practice. All of the participants emphasized on the importance of people being aware to understand the difference between social work and social service. However, one of the participants said that,

Even though people are educated and aware- in the context of Nepal, they are still defining social work in a wrong way. They cannot differentiate who is a real social worker and who are paraprofessionals. They think that even para professionals are professionals- that is a challenge in itself

The participant further stated that it is sad how even people who are actually working in the social field and are educated and literate enough to understand the difference between

social work and social service, they tend to overlook it completely. When talking about her aspirations for social work in Nepal, another participant stated that,

For people to know the difference between social work and social service. That is it. Because, in Nepal, the majority of the people do not know the difference between social work and social services and they are not aware about the kind of services that they can get from social workers.

When talking about the changes that can be achieved in social work field for its professional recognition in Nepal because that might be one of the reasons he thought people were not able to differentiate between social work and social service, one of the participants said,

I feel like when defining social work, there shouldn't be such flexibility in the definition of social work as it is now. If we can concretize it, particularly, the definition of social work because the definition of social work in itself is so vague. And as we start to study, there's always a bit of this and that from everywhere.

All of the participants had their own notion and sense of how there should be distinction between social work and social service along with some solutions of how it can be possible to achieve them.

### **Roles of social workers**

One of the studies by Gurung and Sapkota (2020) revealed that the lack of recognition and support for social work in Nepal has led to inadequate resources and limited opportunities for social workers which has resulted in a significant gap in the provision of social services in the country, and marginalized communities are often left behind. Therefore, when the students shared about the frustrations of this profession not being recognized as it should, the researcher could get an insight on the importance of social work being recognized as a profession. Even though they all strongly believe in the idea of social work being

recognized as a profession, all of the participants had a different story to tell, shaped by their experiences. One of the participants shared about how social workers are not able to provide and people are not able to take advantage of social workers since social work has not been recognized as a profession. She said,

I think, because people are not aware about what social workers can do, there are a lot of people who need help, but are not able to reach out to the right resources. And also, even non-government organizations and international non governmental organizations do not have a social worker who has a proper social work degree. If social work was recognized as a profession, they wouldn't have hired just any service provider or other degree holders for that matter- to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of a social worker.

In terms of social work being recognized as a profession, another participant stated that, It is about making people aware that they have social workers as resources to help them because the people of Nepal do not know resources such as police and they feel helpless....So, during that time, people should know that there are social workers who can help them reach out to the needed resources as mediators.

Furthermore, another participant said,

In Nepal, social workers have crucial roles and responsibilities in addressing social issues and promoting social justice; however, there lies a challenge in implementing them if there are no platforms where these skills are recognized as needed.

Another participant did try to bring forth the roles of social workers in the context of political scenario and said,

For instance, social workers can play the role of political analysts because we look at the people at the grassroots level- the people who are marginalized, whose voices are not being heard, how that can be done, is by using proper tools and kits that can identify the needy population first which falls under the skills of a social worker.

When it comes to the challenges- especially when there's limited platform but one is still making an effort to practice, one of the participants stated that,

The first thing, people do not know that social work is not incorporated with the government. They feel like, in a way, even though social workers are independent, but when you talk about social work, people feel like it is always government associated and that they won't be helped- since the government in general or any government offices have not been very effective when it comes to dealing with people's problems. So that stereotype is one of the challenges of being a social worker. When trying to perform one's role. I also want to back this up by sharing my personal experience. Because I worked in a police station via an international non-government agency, I worked for a child abuse, sexual assault organization, when we would go and ask those victims if they wanted help, they would not consider it, because they thought we were associated with government or the police...

### **Recognition of social work as a profession**

All of the participants believed that most of the challenges that social workers are and have been facing in the context of Nepal has been due to the lack of recognition that social work has as a profession. One of the participants clearly stated that,

Recognizing social work as a profession would provide a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of social workers, which is essential for ensuring that the quality of services provided is consistent and standardized. Therefore, it is crucial for Nepal to recognize social work as a profession and invest in building the necessary infrastructure to ensure that social workers can effectively address social issues in the country.

While some participants mentioned this recognition from educational institutions to government bodies, some prioritized the collective effort of all of the governing bodies including the individual social workers themselves. All three participants did mention

something about educational institutions but from three different lenses and perspectives. One of the participants focused on there being a proper degree map and stated,

If this degree has a proper map, this degree is going to be one of the most functioning and effective degrees in the context of Nepal and we are going to have a good amount of licensed social workers working in different sectors and making the right kind of changes.

Another participant centered his opinion around the curriculum and said,

In the coming generation, if the curriculum that is taught in social work schools in Nepal is tightened, if it can be looked at from various angles, and if proper changes can be made then a lot can be done.

One of the participants, who is also a lecturer of social work, summarized the importance of collective effort in order for social work to be recognized as a profession in such an eloquent manner. He said,

Talking about professional recognition, firstly, universities need to make an effort because they design the course but there is no initiation from the university level for the recognition. Universities are the bodies of government- they should put an effort to help social work be acknowledged and recognized at the professional level. If the universities put in that effort, we who work as social workers, need to put in an effort to. Social work is a new subject and even the government doesn't know anything about it or how we can practice social work from micro to macro level. We need to make a guideline about how it can be practiced, universities should initiate it and with the feedback from us social workers, they should present that to the government. If we do this, I think recognition about social work will take a step ahead.”

## **Chapter-5: Discussion**

This chapter includes the major findings of the research drawn from the analysis. Along with the major findings, it also consists of conclusions and recommendations of the research. The different themes that emerged during the interviews are a basis for understanding the challenges faced by the social workers as shared by the participants.

### **Difference between social work and social service**

As per the analysis, it was seen that, there is a lack of understanding and awareness among the general public and even among some professionals in Nepal regarding the distinction between social work and social service. If one does a google search about social workers in Nepal, all the faces that are prominent figures are people who are into social service. This lack of understanding poses a challenge in the recognition of social work as a distinct profession in Nepal especially when people who are literate and educated enough to understand, fail to do so. Therefore, it has been highlighted that there is a need for concrete and standardized definition of social work that is recognized and understood by all stakeholders, including professionals and the general public. The participants emphasized the importance of people being aware of the difference between social work and social service, and some even expressed their aspiration for this to be a priority in the field of social work.

All of the participants had their distinct way of expressing their concern and therefore had their own stances to support their opinions. Some of them focused on awareness whereas some of them wanted solidarity in the definition of social work per se. One of the participants highlighted how there is a need for increased public education and awareness about the difference between social work and social services, in order to help people access the appropriate services and resources they need. Even though the dimension of their thinking had a distinct importance noted, to sum it up, the participants were aware that one of the

challenges that social workers have been facing in the context of Nepal has been the deeply seated concept of social work the same as social service- in the name of philanthropy and charity, something that anyone can be if they help people especially through financial and societal support.

### **Roles of social workers**

The participants in the study discussed the importance of social work in Nepal to ensure that marginalized communities receive the necessary social services and the roles of social workers while doing so. Social workers are challenged to even practice their roles that they are capable of which results in limited opportunities and inadequate resources, leading to a significant gap in the provision of social services. The participants also expressed their frustration with the misconception that social work is associated with the government, leading people to believe that they would not receive effective help from social workers. The participants further highlighted the roles and responsibilities of social workers in Nepal. They emphasized the need for social workers to play the role of mediators, assisting marginalized communities in reaching out to the appropriate resources- that social workers are. Social workers also play a critical role in addressing social issues and promoting social justice in Nepal. One participant discussed the importance of social workers as political analysts, who can identify the needs of the marginalized population and use proper tools to advocate for them. The participants shared their personal experiences and challenges while trying to fulfill their roles as social workers. They emphasized the need for people to understand and recognize the skills and knowledge required to perform roles and responsibilities of a social worker. Furthermore, as shared by one of the participants, the misconception among the public that social work is government-associated has led to a lack of trust in social workers which makes it difficult for them to perform their duties effectively. The participant cited personal experience where victims of abuse and assault refused help because they thought the

social worker was associated with the government or police. This highlights the importance of creating awareness about the role of social workers and the services they provide, particularly in marginalized communities where access to resources is limited. Additionally, the stereotype also suggests a need for social workers to establish their identity as independent professionals who are not affiliated with the government, despite the government's important role in social welfare.

### **Recognition of social work as a profession**

As per the findings, all participants believed that social workers' challenges in Nepal are due to the lack of the recognition of the subject. They emphasized the need to recognize social work as a profession to ensure consistent and standardized services. The participants highlighted the importance of a collective effort from all governing bodies, including educational institutions, social workers, and the government, to achieve professional recognition. The participants' opinions on the recognition of social work varied in terms of their focus on educational institutions, curriculum, and the collective effort needed. One of the participants, who is also a lecturer of social work, summarized the importance of universities' effort in designing the course and initiating professional recognition. The lecturer also suggested creating guidelines for social work practices and presenting them to the government with social worker's feedback to achieve professional recognition. The findings suggest that the recognition of social work as a profession in Nepal is crucial for improving the quality of services provided to people. The participants' diverse opinions suggest that different approaches could be taken to achieve this goal, such as creating a proper degree map, tightening the curriculum, and developing guidelines for social work practices. It was also suggested that the recognition of social work as a profession in Nepal could help in overcoming the challenges faced by social workers and ensure marginalized communities receive necessary services.



### **Plan for dissemination**

I want to communicate my findings to the younger generation of folk who are pursuing or thinking of pursuing social work education in Nepal so that they are aware about the reality of this major that might need some changes before it is really out there. Social work education is so important- for the community, nation, and worldwide but we are lagging behind because there's no guarantee to the sustainability of it in the context of Nepal/ Nepali education system. My study will be for those audiences who want to understand the system of social work education and profession better in Nepal so that they can play their part in leading it towards the much needed change, under transformational leadership. I chose this audience because as someone (a social work graduate) who is interested in finding an answer, being the change, I haven't been able to find a study that addresses this particular question. I want to be able to reach out to these people in power and younger generations who are looking for answers and want to be a part of the change process.

### **Implications for the work**

This research will demonstrate the challenges faced by social work graduates in Nepal in their roles and responsibilities upon their graduation. In a wider lens, it will help inform the future research on what are the changes that are to be needed in order to make sure that social work graduates are able to address them. It will also inform the government and educational institutions to look at this matter that is so integral for the future of education of the country Nepal.

### **Ethical Considerations**

My plan of research addresses a social, professional and educational problem that has been prevalent ever since social work as a subject/profession had been established in Nepal. Even though Social Workers Association of Nepal (SWAN) was established as a non-profit member based social organization in 2015 under the Institution Registration Act 2034, there

has not been active roles played by this organization to increase the needs of professional social workers and the website has been inactive since March 2021. I will approach the interviewees with the help of networking that I have built and protect them by getting their approval before publishing their experiences. I will handle the ethical issues that may arise by not interfering with the interviewee's views and perspectives. And if there are questions that might arise that should be triggering for them, or that might make them politically vulnerable, I would give them the 'space' of comfort and silence as needed.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include the places that the participants will be from. It will be limited to Kathmandu city which is the capital city of Nepal. It does not include the experiences of social work graduates who live in other cities in Nepal. Also, people's experiences are different and diverse based on their own context and situation and that is what this study is trying to explore but with thematic data analysis we can find a pattern and prevent the strength of the limitation.

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