Combating Covid-19: A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of Frontline Social Workers in the Health sector, Kerala

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ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic has created an immense burden in society, and more than a pandemic, it became a social event that disrupts the social order as a whole. Professional social workers are engaged worldwide at all levels to save humanity from the public health crisis. The study aimed to gain qualitative insights into social workers' experience and perceptions regarding the COovid-19 response. The research explored the current roles and challenges of frontline social workers in the health sector using an empirical phenomenological approach. The research sample consisted of fifteen social workers working in Kerala, India's healthcare institutions. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The significant themes revealed during the data analysis and the respondents' perceptions are presented as the findings. The three main themes that emerged are multidisciplinary skills to tackle multidimensional pandemic impact, perceived challenges in the pandemic practice, and barriers and blemishes in service provision. The research highlights the suggestions for advancing the social work efforts and illuminate how contemporary social work can add value to healthcare in combating the pandemic.

Keywords: social work, healthcare sector, covid-19, pandemic response

The Covid-19 pandemic is seen as a social event that disrupts the social order as a whole (Teti et al., 2020). In order to prevent the spread of infection, billions of people were quarantined and locked down, which resulted in social isolation. The pandemic raises many personal, professional, and political challenges for healthcare providers globally (Banks et al., 2020). While discussing the role of public health workers in the pandemic, the contribution and capabilities of a critical public health workforce: social workers, are often unaddressed (Paul et al., 2020). Professional social workers are engaged worldwide at all levels- micro, mezzo, and macro to save humanity from the public health crisis (Roy & Kaur, 2020). Social workers are skilled in providing psycho-social care and support, counselling, and referral needs to the patients and their families. During this public health crisis, health social workers are uniquely positioned to promote health education, assist in care management, work as health navigators, and help with mental health concerns.

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Health social work covers the subdiscipline that integrates the healthcare sector into contemporary social work practices (Ruth & Marshall, 2017). The studies assessing healthcare providers' experience emphasized health professionals, such as doctors and nurses, and less about social workers in the frontline (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). Although there are a few studies regarding the social work profession amidst the pandemic, such studies focused on the pandemic impact on the social work profession rather than exploring how the health system has utilized the social work competencies to combat the pandemic.

The current study aimed to gain qualitative insights into health care social workers' engagement in the pandemic in Kerala. This study discusses the experience and perceptions of the social workers regarding the Covid-19 within a phenomenological approach. In the context of pandemic response, the researchers explored the current roles and specific challenges of frontline social workers in the health sector. The research highlights the suggestions for advancing the efforts of social workers and illuminate how contemporary social work can add value to public health in combating the pandemic.

Methodology

Study design and participants

Qualitative inquiry is valuable in elucidating experiences while providing visibility to complexities, values, perspectives, and health situations (Teti et al., 2020; Webber-Ritchey et al., 2021). The study used an empirical phenomenological approach to obtain detailed descriptions of the experiences of frontline social workers in the health sector of Kerala during the COVID19 pandemic. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The following criteria were used for the inclusion and exclusion of study participants.

Inclusion criteria:

- Social workers in the healthcare sector (private/Government), Kerala.
- Those who have a minimum of one year of experience in the field.

Exclusion criteria:

- Those who refuse to participate
- Those who tested positive for Covid-19 and are undergoing treatment.

The sample size was determined through data saturation – i.e., the point where new themes were not emerging from the respondents.

Data Collection

The data was collected from various health social workers engaged in Kerala's healthcare institutions using a semi-structured interview guide, and the interviews were in the Malayalam language. Fifteen in-depth telephone interviews were conducted from April 20 to April 28, 2021. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and the recordings were used to analyse the data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was guided by the report titled "Qualitative thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology" (Sundler et al., 2019). The research follows a descriptive phenomenology approach based on participants' spoken words. The audio recordings were

transcribed, translated into English, and cross-checked against the original recordings.

The authors read the transcript repeatedly to gain consensus on the meanings and identify patterns of these meanings and significant phrases. The analysis included formulating and validating meanings through extensive discussions between the researchers. The patterns of meanings were categorized under various themes and developed a complete description of themes.

Findings

The research sample consisted of Fifteen social workers working in the health care institutions in Kerala. Two social workers declined to participate due to a conflict in their work schedules. Data saturation was achieved with the thirteenth participant, and two more interviews were conducted to confirm the data redundancy. The significant themes revealed during the data analysis and the respondents' perceptions are presented as the findings in the study. The three main themes that emerged are (1) Multidisciplinary skills to tackle multidimensional pandemic impact, (2) Perceived challenges in the pandemic practice, (3) Barriers and blemishes in service provision.

Multidisciplinary skills to tackle the multidimensional pandemic impact

Along with the direct impact of Covid-19, it has created profound collateral damage on almost all aspects of human life. In order to address this multidimensional public health crisis, a collaborative approach and a multidisciplinary skilled workforce are needed. The roles and functions of the social worker in the health sector become vital at this point. Professional social workers are competent in the multidisciplinary approach to tackle problems. They are trained to work in healthcare settings, where multiple practitioners are involved in healthcare delivery.

Nine of the respondents in this research were from the private health sector, and six were from the government health sector. The frontline health social workers from both health sectors were actively carrying out diverse roles as per the pandemic needs of their respective organizations. These roles included health educator, healthcare manager, counsellor, patient relation coordinator, public relation officer, and medical social worker in emergency care. The participants reported that they had to adapt to meet the novel healthcare needs and reprioritized the various aspects of their roles to combat the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, the social workers from the government sector were an active part of testing, tracing, and tracking Covid cases. This vigorous tracing of cases helped reduce cases during the first wave. Because of the tremendous increase of Covid instances in the second wave, tracing and monitoring is no more feasible. Now, most healthcare social workers focus on support services and mental health, treatment coordination, referral services, discharge and transition planning of covid patients, pre-death and post-death preparedness, grief counselling, and community sensitization through virtual media. At the local level, social workers contributed to educating people, preventing the spread of the virus, and providing timely interventions to the needy. The social workers are in the frontline to offer psycho-social support services and counselling through helplines.

> *"There is a huge rise in the number of people contacting us through the helplines. The pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of people of all ages. We are here to help them." - S.W. 10*

Medical social workers in the clinical setting are involved in screening and assessing the

patients, documenting the case history, and allocating doctors for the covid patients based on their co-morbidity. They also have a substantial role in discharge management and health navigation.

> *"When a Covid patient comes here, I have to do the bio-psycho-social assessment and document a case history of the patient. I am responsible for referring them to the aptest doctors according to the health conditions of the patient."- S.W. 7*

They work as a communication channel between the patient and family members to provide clear and concise information about the pandemic.

> *"I was in charge of the international patient care management. After the pandemic, there was a decline in patients from outside India. I also noted the increased counselling needs of the covid patients and their bystanders. I suggested that the management give me an additional role as a counsellor. They were reluctant initially, but after a one-month trial, they realized the effectiveness, and I am providing mental health support since then". -S.W. 13*

It was noted that the social workers are carrying out these clinical social work roles mainly in the private sector. Some hospitals use social workers to mobilize the resources, including medical equipment, blood and plasma requirements, and ambulance services. Social workers' fundraising skills and their knowledge on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a less utilized area. Even though the participants were reported their multiple roles in the health care system, almost all of them pointed out the under-utilized skills and functions of social workers in combating the pandemic.

Theme 2. Perceived challenges in pandemic practice

The study explored the challenges confronted by the healthcare social workers during their practice response to the pandemic. These challenges are mainly related to ethical practice, pandemic-induced role changes, resource constraints, follow-up issues, and self-care. Ensuring ethical practise is a core value of the social work profession, and it emphasizes service, social justice, the dignity of the person, and competence. The most pointed out ethical challenges are providing just services and addressing the health inequities during the pandemic response. Some practitioners from private hospitals shared the concern that they are compelled to compromise on the fair service provisions. Allocating the limited resources, including the treatment facilities and support services, are very challenging for social workers, especially in the private sector. Convincing the patients and their families about the resource constraints and navigating them to another hospital is also a big deal for the social workers.

> *"Sometimes patients come here, and we do not have ventilator facilities or rooms left for them. We have to convince the families, but some will not easily be convinced. If the patient is in a critical situation, we inform the doctors, give the emergency first aid, and then send the patient to another hospital". – S.W.2*

The social work ethics values patients' self-determination, and they strive to assure the right of a patient to make their own choice about the treatment. However, in the case of Covid patients, it is not possible at times due to the limited resources or the patient's health condition. During these circumstances, the practitioners were unable to adhere to the social work profession's code of ethics and values.

Social workers faced challenges in understanding and adapting to the new needs and being flexible in practice. Practitioners in the mental health sector have shared that social distancing requirements demand a considerable change in their approach. Telehealth was a new experience for many, and creating a rapport and maintaining empathic relationships via phone or in-person with protective equipment became a deal. Teleworking or even the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) impeded non-verbal communication and the possibility of using touch as a gesture of reassurance. As the number of covid cases is rising, ensuring care to each is complex. In this scenario, maintaining follow-up of patients is almost impossible. Many patients are dying even after covid recovery and discharge; in such cases, there is no way to know the efficiency of care management. The same scenario exists in the case of telehealth counselling as well. A counsellor is getting as many as a hundred or more clients within a single day. Follow-up and evaluating the effectiveness of counselling is not feasible now.

> *"It was tough in the beginning. In most cases, we are not seeing the service users; we are not getting much time to build a rapport, and follow-up is tough. However, the number of service users approaching us is rising, and we started adapting our practice according to their needs". – S.W.6*

The increased workload and inadequate staffing are other challenges pointed out by many. There are very few social workers in hospitals, just a single social worker post in many. Some of them take charge of all the pending paperwork and reports, even if it is not their job. Two participants reported that the private hospitals are cutting the salary irrespective of the workload due to pandemic-induced profit loss.

> *"We are doing a lot more work than before, but It has been months that I got my full salary. Covid has created a huge burden, and we are all in this together."- S.W.11.*

The participants shared that self-care becomes secondary for many frontline workers when a public health crisis happens. It is a big challenge for social workers to protect themselves from infection. They have to isolate themselves from their families to ensure the protection and safety of others. The work stress and handling emotions while seeing pandemic struggles have resulted in burnout in a few practitioners. Ensuring one's health by taking all the necessary precautions and supporting others to cope with their problems is a double responsibility in the pandemic situation.

Theme 3. Blemishes and barriers in service provision

The social workers are well-positioned to work on micro, mezzo, and macro levels to combat the pandemic. Even though they are equipped with enough skills to support and coordinate the multidisciplinary health squad, various factors limit them from adequate service provisions. The primary thing is the lack of proper recognition of the social work competencies and the roles in the healthcare setting. Most participants shared that the interdisciplinary team members do not know or about the functions of a social worker in the health sector. Therefore, at times even the colleagues would not consider the suggestions provided by the social workers. This conflict mainly happens in the private sector.

> *"Some of my colleagues are like, I thought social work is about helping patients with their insurance, but you are doing grief counselling now; that is the job of a psychologist!". – S.W.14*

As the social workers are not functioning independently, they have to fit into the organization's structure and mode of services. It limits them from the ethical practice of social work, especially when the private hospitals choose money and power over equitable provision of services. When the organization discriminates against patients based on their financial status, individuals' dignity and worth are not protected.

"There were times I thought of quitting the job. I have pointed out a couple of unjust practices to the management, but it was in vain. It is not comforting to work in such situations. However, the pandemic is not the time to quit. I have a lot to do for those in need." -S.W. 11

The participants from the government sector expressed more job satisfaction and acceptance of their practice in the health sector. However, almost all the participants perceived that the health sector is not fully utilizing social workers to combat the pandemic. In private hospitals, the social workers and other health professionals got basic training on self-precautions and service delivery. Nevertheless, no participants were part of any specific discussions on social work practice regarding the pandemic. Even though social work associations have provided guidelines to practice during the pandemic, most practitioners are not involved in any productive discussions or evidence synthesis regarding social work practice. This lack of guidance and unity is a barrier to the efficient utilization of social workers in pandemic response.

Discussion and conclusion

Social workers are demonstrating appreciable work on the frontlines to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. The current study highlights the roles, barriers, and challenges experienced by healthcare social workers during their pandemic practice in Kerala. Due to the lack of recognition in the health sector, the social workers remain underutilized even during this public health emergency.

As a global humanitarian crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic challenges and opens substantial opportunities for social workers to leave an indelible imprint on the health care sector (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). Social workers could practice ecological, clinical, and biopsychosocial methods to tackle multi-layered pandemic issues. Healthcare Social workers shall promote collaboration among the healthcare squad and organizations to enhance effective delivery of services to covid patients and their families. They could provide leadership and advocate for effective services among organizations and institutions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of financial constraints caused by the pandemic, social workers in the Ministry of Health and other departments could advocate for getting more funds to healthcare settings.

According to this study, the social work practitioners did not get opportunities to engage in public debates or policy discussions to address the impact of the pandemic. A study conducted in Albania suggests that social workers must be involved more rigorously in political spaces where decisions on social policies and programs are made (Dauti et al., 2020). Government must recognize the critical role played by social workers in healthcare. Social workers' place in tackling the virus outbreak can be highlighted by sending action plans to the Government. As most participants suggested, the healthcare system could recruit more social workers with better pays to coordinate interdisciplinary teamwork. A review article pointed out the pandemic as an action call for social workers. It warned that unless we draw connections between social work and the

global pandemic, the profession's relevance will be questioned in the future (Amadasun, 2020). The present study urges all social work practitioners to expand their professional practice and learn from the pandemic response.

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