

# Social Workers Response to Covid-19 Pandemic: Learning's, Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

COVID- 19 pandemic posed many challenges to human existence. It accounted its first instance in India on January 30, 2020. The Indian Government then on took a prudent stride of declaring the lockdown which halted everything in the nation. As other human service professionals were dealing with people those who were in need and crisis. It was equally assumed and expected that the social work professionals should also respond to challenges efficiently and effectively while fostering the values of acceptance and service towards needy. It has been observed that social work practitioners were also facing the brunt challenges in carrying out their duties towards the society during pandemic. This article is an outcome of study which was conducted to understand and explore the issues and challenges faced by the social work practitioners in diverse settings. The social work researcher had conducted in-depth interviews of social work practitioners which include both males and females. The nature of study was qualitative and captured the first-hand narratives from the practitioners through in-depth interviews. The researcher has found that the social worker professionals.

**Key words:** Social Work Practice, Social Work Education, Pandemic, Skills and Competencies,

## Introduction

*Social work* practice comprises of the professional application of social standards, and strategies to at least one of the accompanying ends: assisting individuals with getting substantial services; guiding and psychotherapy with people, families, and groups; helping networks or groups give or work on social and wellbeing services and partaking in legislative procedures. The act of social work requires information on human turn of events and conduct; of social and financial, and social establishments; and the communication of all these elements. (National Association of Social Work, 2002)

Social Work began with charitable intentions, with the possibility that people were performing their responsibilities to those in trouble. This depended on the thought that the assistance delivered ought to be negligible to keep individuals active and, simultaneously, avoid death and hunger. Over the time few of the ideas got re-modified with changing of priorities according to the new developing world. Professional Social work can be traced back to the 1880s, and in the prior stages, it was driven by charitable aims, attempting to address the issues of the western culture going through large scale of urbanization and industrialization. Gore traced the historical backdrop of Professional Social Work to the time of change in Britain when agriculture-based networks were separating and a middle class was arising. This period saw relocation of the populace for a huge scope and Social Work arose to help the "*lone Individuals, of waifs and strays, of unattached women, of the abject poverty of low paid workers and the unemployed.*" (Kumar, A., N.D. 2017)

Social workers offer various types of assistance to individuals in need. Since by definition, social work incorporates identifying and tending to difficulties in arenas like home life, employment, finances and connections. Coronavirus has affected them all. Since several low-wage labourers despise the capacity to securely telecommute, they keep on bearing an expanded danger of exposure to the Covid-19 infection. The Coronavirus might have likewise prompted monetary insecurity because of the brief or long-lasting cutback of an employment; in these cases, social workers assist individuals with getting to unemployment wages, food, and medical care. Social workers connected people and families to government, state, and local help programs for this support. Social confinement, monetary troubles, and anxiety about the coming times are on the whole critical stressors that can worsen existing depression or anxiety. Social workers frequently gave a protected spot to people to communicate their feelings of misery, hardship, and disarray. (Gwynedd Mercy University, 2020)

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The Covid infection of 2020 pandemic has challenged the social service task force to securely convey services for youngsters, families and different networks in a phenomenal circumstance. As per Brown (2020), during COVID-19, social workers strived to guarantee access to required services for people who were contaminated, provided remote counselling and coordinated approaches to conquer isolation. Likewise, they managed disseminating genuine data to scatter myths and fears, contacted organizations to help with readiness, guaranteed comprehensive planning endeavours and advocated to governments for expanded help. (Ben-Ezra, M., & Hamama-Raz, Y., 2020)

Coronavirus has driven large numbers of these help settings into an online mode, or somewhat on the web, communications with clients and networks. Most would agree that social workers accept that physical human communications are the "highest quality level" for building the human connections that are fundamental for help and change – regardless of whether that change is about individual working, or powerful community organizations or organizational achievement. What COVID has reminded us, in any case, is that individuals are wired to make associations and connections, and on the web/virtual instruments, for example, video conferencing, phone contact, visit and message, will be utilized to propel connections. (Schumann, M., 2020)

Therefore, since 2020 has been a year of unknown, social workers were working in new conditions coming about because of the worldwide spread of the Covid-19 infection. The pandemic, and the limitations carried out to control it, affected on each part of our lives. As part of its response, we conducted interviews reconnoitering the impact of working during the pandemic for social workers. This report thus presents the initial findings related to the issues and challenges social work practitioners faced during the ongoing pandemic.

Covid 19 accounted its first instance in India on January 30, 2020. The Indian Government then on took a prudent stride of declaring the lockdown which halted everything in the nation. The social work practitioners also had to face the brunt of it in carrying out their duties towards the society during that entire period. Coronavirus has coerced workers to re-evaluate how and where they do their jobs, with numerous social workers – who have stayed on the forefronts since the start of the pandemic – moving their services to virtual stages. Given the above situation, the requirement for proficient social workers/advocates who have been in the forefront during calamities and pandemics, organizing and conveying alleviation materials to the affected populaces, fundamentally the vulnerable segments, can't be questioned. The meaning of adjusting the affected with the genuinely necessary psychosocial care that assists them with confronting life can't be thought little of in the current conditions.

Therefore, the paper tends to understand the issues and challenges faced by the social work practitioners during the pandemic.

### **Pandemic & Social Work**

During late March 2020, citizens wrestled with remarkable changes to their everyday lives as transmission of the novel (COVID-19) started to spike and compulsory "shelter-in-place" orders were executed across all nations. Numerous social workers were putting themselves, and their loved ones, in danger of contamination as they kept on playing out their work with client's and associations. However, contrasted and inclusion of other aiding experts, the media has showcased less information about social worker's risks, their access to personal equipment kit (PPE), or expert reactions to the pandemic.

Social work was more imperative than any other time in present situation, and thus, social workers' encounters on the cutting edges of the pandemic deserve profound consideration. (Abrams, & Dettlaff, 2020:1). Direct assistance practitioners are bearing the veracity of the struggles of the most isolated and vulnerable communities. In emergency clinics, as loved ones are not permitted to visit their friends and family, social workers are taking care of the emotional outburst of loss and grief—both related and inconsequential to COVID-19. Social work practitioners additionally know that they will see their clients get contaminated, needing access to quality medical care, and die without acknowledgment. This is the situation for the social workers leading psychiatric street outreach for homeless individuals in LA's famous 'Skid Row'. This social worker arranged her group for the truth that they might be the last individuals to observe and respect their clients core humankind. She expressed that because of the unparalleled pattern of the pandemic, social workers are "building the extension as they are crossing it." Social workers are likewise mindful of other genuine damages that vulnerable or clients exposed to the virus are presently at more risk than others. (Abrams, & Dettlaff, 2020:1)

Social service associations are impacted by the pandemic in astounding and frequently opposing manners. On one hand, social assistance foundations are burdened with request; then again, some are deficient with regards to references and sitting vacant, holding up out the fleeting tranquillity before more issues happen. Social workers are seeing the bigger implications of the services they give and, while amidst emergency, fearing for the fate of their clients and associations. Some fundamental services, for example, those managing giving out food, protecting the homeless, or taking care of emergency clinic cases are for sure overwhelmed and strained by request. This somewhere makes sense—considering that such countless individuals need access to food and livelihood, services for essential requirements will be at or above limit. (Abrams, & Dettlaff, 2020:2)

## **Role Played Social Work Professionals during Pandemic**

The social workers played an important role in addressing the emerging needs of the epidemic, such as risk assessments, crisis management, advanced care planning, individual and group therapy, case management, systems navigation, problem-solving, resource allocation, and community mobilization. The recognition of social work's key competencies has led to calls for their increased involvement in policy decisions to address more expansive systems and social determinants of health. During the pandemic, social workers enacted several advocacy initiatives involving social services during lockdown times, ensuring that social services were readily accessible. During the pandemic, mental health problems have become more prevalent due to social isolation. Due to their expertise, social workers are critical providers during pandemics since they follow standards of practice that include specialised interventions for individuals, groups and families, and by ensuring accessible service delivery. (Ashcroft, R., Sur, D., Greenblatt, A., & Donahue, P., 2021).

### **Challenges Faced by Social Work Practitioners:**

In the context of a pandemic, we are only just beginning to gain an understanding concerning the impact of virtual care on front-line workers. A growing body of evidence indicates that health care workers may suffer or experience mental health problems during the outbreak. Workers on the front lines are not able to deliver care as usual, but are nevertheless required to perform their already challenging tasks with greater restrictions. Front-line workers face a variety of challenges, including inadequate resources and fear for their own health. They are also often faced with guilt, shame, grief and an inability to cope with their changing roles, which puts them at risk for moral injury. An employee may experience moral injury when actions or inactions violate a person's ethical or moral principles, and this can occur if staff feel ill-prepared for the consequences of decisions made and have little social support. (Ashcroft, R., Sur, D., Greenblatt, A., & Donahue, P., 2021).

Social workers have battled to continue to their job even during the pandemic – having to adjust and develop addressing new issues and reprioritize the most critical and significant parts of their work. The pandemic raises numerous political, personal and professional difficulties for policymakers, social workers and individuals who utilize social work services. (Banks, Jonge, Shears, Shum, Sobočan, Weinberg, 2020:2)

During May 2020, a gathering of social work scholastics in association with the IFSW directed a study to acquire a preview of the ethical difficulties that social workers underwent universally. Against a background of diversity in the nature and practice of social work, the review occurred at a point in time described by diversity across countries and regions in the effect of the infection and public reactions. A few nations had forced severe stay-at-home orders, while others had partial lockdowns or just restricted careful steps. The respondents, hence, represents social workers in a wide scope of circumstances, albeit the review depends on data given at one point in time.

The study findings reflected six broad ethical challenges that social work practitioners faced during the pandemic.

- Developing and maintaining with trusting, truthful and sympathetic connections by means of telephone or internet with due relevance of confidentiality and privacy or physically with protecting gears.
- Recognizing and managing feelings, exhaustion and therefore the demand for self-care, once operating in dangerous and nerve-racking conditions.
- Focusing on service user necessities and requests, that are additionally distinguished and distinctive because of the pandemic, once resources are extended/inaccessible and full appraisals are often outlandish.
- Adjusting service consumer rights, desires and risks against individual risk to social workers and other individuals, to offer kinds of help further as may well be expected
- Concluding whether or not to follow public and authoritative approaches, strategies and direction (existing or new) or to utilize good circumspection in conditions wherever the arrangements seem to be uncommonly, befuddled or lacking
- Utilizing the examples gained from operating throughout the pandemic to rethink welfare work soon

In their responses to the study questions, most of respondents zeroed in on their immediate ethical difficulties and manners by which frameworks could be improved to help them in the present time and place. Nonetheless, a few utilized the chance to venture back and consider how social work services could be better prepared to work in future pandemics and different emergencies. (Banks, S., et.al. 2020:4-6)

### **Alternative Field Placement**

As customary agency based social work field placements halted, the worldwide pandemic welcomed new opportunities to reconsider the job of field schooling and to consider elective educational models receptive to the requirements arising locally. Across the country, accreditation associations for social workers comprehended that the pandemic would affect education of the students, and started to reexamine their guidelines relating to field hours. However the pandemic addresses an interesting crossroads in ongoing history, a particularly elective way to deal with field education has point

of reference. Many schools of social work have embraced an alternative field placement model that underlines students initiated action learning projects instead of conventional clinically arranged field placements.

Inside this action learning model, social work students are seen as self-directed learners who are given the opportunity to basically engage in with their reality and the issues in the nearby community setting. Besides, this model spotlights intensely on students drive, association, and gathering and cooperation exercises and intently lines up with the local area practice custom of social work with an emphasis on mediations that advance the ethical standards and qualities of social work, including social equity, the poise and worth of the individual, and the significance of human connections. Al-Makhamreh et al. (2016) depicts a field training technique in Jordan that works inside a strengthening worldview in which students led initiative draws in a nearby local area on environmental issues identifying it with sustainable development. (Zachary A. Morris, Dragone, E., Peabody, C., & Carr., K, 2020:1-4)

The Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare, a social work department inside an enormous state funded college in the State of New York. Since the pandemic, the school started searching for elective arrangements for students who couldn't proceed with their original field placements and complete their field prerequisites. Amidst the following cultural and institutional chaos, one students (K.C) was displaced from her field arrangement at an emergency clinic setting. Receptive to the requirements locally and mindful of the negative wellbeing ramifications of loneliness, she saw that there was a wide need to address the developing loneliness and dejection experienced during the pandemic. Empowered by a faculty specialized in community settings and who consented to administer a student's started project, she started to establish the framework for the GiftsofGab.org project which was an initiative she began to address such issues. (Zachary A., et.al, 2020:4-5)

### **Online Mutual Support Group**

The literature of social work recommends that social workers are regularly at the bleeding edge of emergency mediation, offering social services and support through crisis resolving. Dealing with individuals, families, and networks in a tough situation and going with them in expanding their own prosperity is upheld by the worldwide meaning of social function as that which 'connects with individuals and structures to address life difficulties and improve prosperity' (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014) and by the International Code of Social Work Ethics (IFSW, 2018). Social work is an 'crisis calling' by definition, yet during the 2020 lockdown circumstance, social workers have been called upon to settle on troublesome choices about in-person contact with their clients and to reevaluate approaches to keep assisting individuals with getting to required services, giving counseling, and putting together approaches to conquer disengagement. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted exceptional changes in day to day existence, including methods of aiding themselves as well as other people. Corona virus and measures to control and forestall its spread have limited the services and obligations for the most part did by social workers, while creating new requirements and requests.

Accomplishing social work under the conditions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic is testing and full with hardships and dangers. Besides, social workers need to battle against injustice and discrimination happening during the pandemic. During this troublesome time, social workers should remain protected and solid, and getting satisfactory help is fundamental for them. In Italy, the drive 'Social Workers Helping Each Other' was created to assist professionals stay resilient and mutually supportive during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these phenomenal and tempestuous times, social workers have been approached to confront new difficulties and new challenges for service users and for themselves. The drive comprised of online mutual support groups for social workers led through a virtual platform. (Cabiati, E., 202, p1-12). The mutual support groups upgraded social workers reflexive work with respect to their life and work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The central standards of social work of maintaining human rights, advancing social equity, and keeping up with professional integrity turned out to be especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. For most social work associations, this wellbeing crisis has been a test to demonstrate their innovativeness, versatility, and adaptability. Social workers have the chance to revamp their responsibility toward the most vulnerable individuals in the public arena, finding uncommon methods of aiding, along with fortitude with different professionals, residents, volunteers, and neighbourhood networks. (Cabiati, E., 202, p1-12)

### **Methodology**

The present study is qualitative in nature using an exploratory research design. This kind of research design is used to attain awareness with an event, which is not efficiently explored and to gain new vision and outlook. The proposed study was carried out in various parts of India since, the nature of the study was virtual hence, the respondents resided in various states of India at the time of the study.

Snowball Sampling was used for the study. Snowball sampling utilizes a little pool of introductory sources to designate, through their social networks, different members who meet the eligibility criteria and might actually add to a particular report. The expression "snowball examining" mirrors a similarity to a snowball expanding in size as it moves downhill. A total of 11 participants were approached for the study depending on their availability. For this study primary and

secondary data both were collected. Primary Data was collected by using Open ended structured interview & questionnaire and Secondary Data was collected by using Books, articles, journals, videos etc.

## Findings

### Demographics

The participants spanned a range of geographical regions from Central India to North India. All the participants held a Masters in Social Work (MSW) degree, the female participants were in the age bracket of (25- 30 year) and the male participants were in the age bracket of (31 to 40 year). Almost all participants had five plus years of experience in the social development sector. Most of the participants were unmarried and only few of them were married. The participants hailed from diverse social development sector from NGO's to Ed-tech organizations and from Civil society organization to Livelihood sector organization we had a mix bag of participants who made us see the pandemic in a different light.

### Mode of working

The entire work system shifted to an online mode since the pandemic begun, while for some it was relaxing since they could be in the comfort of their family but for others it was taxing enough since the work load had increased and they were not able to get enough time for themselves and their respective families. Almost 45% of the participants had an online mode of work while 18% of them had an offline mode of work and about 36% of them had a blended mode of work where on some days they had to visit the field and on the other days they could work from home.

There were almost 27% of the participants who preferred the online working mode, according to them they were able to release the pressure by being in the comfort of their house.

One of the participants was of the opinion that, *“Work from home was not a problem. Rather field was a bit rigorous for me since I had a busy schedule with being on the field and attending meeting at the office after the field. During the WFH when I used to get saturated I used to shut down my laptop and switch off my phone and that's how I dealt with the work load.”*

Another participant said that their productivity has increased while working from home in an online mode, *“I realized my productivity has increased while working from home. Because when you are on some assignment for three hours while working with other people in office set up but that same work takes hardly one hour to complete at home. So that's an advantage I would say.”*

While 72% of the participants did not like the work from home online mode of work, they felt that their communications skills have reduced since social work is majorly a communicating profession where in person interactions happen often.

One of the participants said that, *“Since everything is virtual and there's no physical meetings in person hence, this is the only issue or area where I feel online working does work that much.”*

While another participant held the view that, *“Yes, I felt my communication skills have been dropped down to an extent. Sometimes you need to contact people physically so that you can understand the nonverbal cues like eye contact or posture somewhere it helps to groom your personality.”*

From communication to productivity social workers somewhere faced that the online mode work was restricting their boundaries of physical interactions with their end users which is extremely essential in their profession.

### Issues Pre Pandemic

Social workers faced a number of issues pre pandemic such as Travelling issues to remote areas, sometimes communication also was problematic, Language barrier and Rapport building issues, Trust building issues, conflicting situations at times, caste issues and issues of work deliverables.

One of the participants was quoted saying that, *“.....conflict among the students, where I am teaching it's a mixed community school, there is conflict between two tribes so this creates sometimes a lot of trouble during the class.”*

This shows how diverse and challenging situations social workers had to face often and how using social work principals they are able to handle such situations in a calmer and sensible manner.

Another participant said that, *“...sometimes dominant castes don't let us work or implement our programmes efficiently....”*

Even in this fast moving twenty-first century where people think that the world is progressing with all new sorts of ideologies and conceptions there still exist a portion of society for whom belonging from a particular caste equals to having a dominant power over everyone.

For some participants language seemed to be a huge barrier in way of their work, working in an area where you can't understand a community's language can be extremely difficult.

One of the participants had similar experience, *“Language barrier when I work in some other state, stakeholder management, and rapport building challenges with the government, alignment of priorities, management challenges.....”*

### **Issues faced Post Pandemic**

Pandemic created several issues in the lives of the social workers from working in difficult circumstances during the pandemic to having to think of one's own safety, everything happening was in jeopardy. Post pandemic was another big challenge for the social workers since now they had to deal with their work from a virtual space.

One of the participant felt that, *“.....Workload has increased, pressure and expectations have increased”*

Since online mode work for some had no time limitations hence, they were under immense burden post pandemic to deal with the barrage of work coming their way.

Another participant said the following on a very similar line, *“Time management has been destroyed a little, more than 10 hours per day. Since, I am working 24 hours on the laptop hence, less time with my parents and my son is becoming an issue”*

Post pandemic brought with itself the virtual reality which for some was the most unreal form of reality since they felt that their communication skills were at stake and for them social work always meant physical interactions on the field.

One of the participant said that, *“...communication gap I faced mostly during the online mode of work since everything was virtual, also I had to learn about many new software's”*

Therefore, post pandemic and its virtual system was not very well taken by the social workers that we came across.

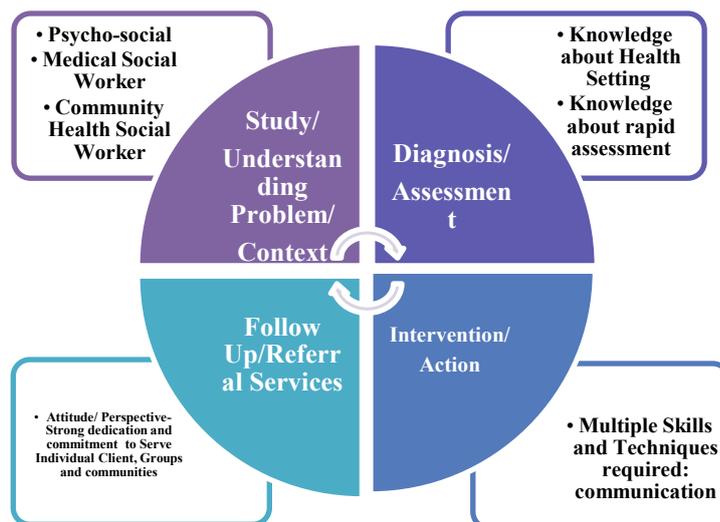
### **Interventions undertaken by the Respondents**

The participants undertook several interventions which are mentioned here:

- Volunteering with local organization thereby providing health check-ups and ration kits.
- Conducted Covid-19 awareness campaign in the villages of Marathwada region, distributed ration kits and helped in counselling activities.
- Distribution of Masks & Sanitizers
- Conducted online campaign to mobilized some crowd funding and through that helping 500 families with ration kits. Virtual talks and events thereby creating awareness about virtual learning
- Arrangement of oxygen cylinders, health kits distribution in the remote areas.
- *“Sahayog Ek Pehe!”* an initiative started to help the migrant workers survive during the lockdown like making of community kitchen, mask making, fund raising campaign for migrant workers.
- Informational posters and videos regarding Covid-19.

The social work practitioner made their interventions systematically during the pandemic. Most of the practitioner followed following steps to address the issues of the clients. This model quite effective in terms of performing their roles in effective manner.

## Intervention Model



**Conclusion:** The world and its eco-system changing very fast and posing challenges to human survival. The Covid-19 pandemic and other many biological disasters creating negative impact on the society at large. The poor and venerable communities are more prone to these diseases due to structural inequalities and poverty. In this context social work profession and its practice need to be more advanced, updated and competent to address these issues. This study reveals that social work practitioners have immense scope to address psycho-social and structural issues. but questions remains how should approach and address these issues. There is no alternative with social workers without engaging themselves with full of competencies which includes having updated local to global knowledge, multi skills, human centric compassionate and sensitive attitude.

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