



Pandemic in Iran: Psychosocial Issues and Social Work Response

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Iran has been among the first countries to be struck by coronavirus which has affected different sections of society in Iran particularly the vulnerable sections who are also the social work target groups. The evidence in Iran suggests higher levels of anxiety experienced by women, corona news trackers, infected families as well as those who are 21 to 40 years old. Since the beginning of COVID-19, social workers in Iran have taken various measures to respond to the crisis at the policy and practice levels. Social workers have made multiple efforts including production of corona virus content and using its specialized knowledge to help service providers; stigma reduction; cooperation in developing protocols on psychosocial care for the people diagnosed with coronavirus in hospitals and those recovered; providing service resources; using advocacy for designing appropriate and effective interventions for prisoners, street children and the homeless; and holding specialized meetings with local or national authorities. Iran Association of Social Workers (IASW) was directly involved in holding meetings with social workers on the ethical aspects, launching “I Have Good News” campaign, and acting as an intermediary between charities and donors. IASW also initiated a volunteering social work professional supervisory plan targeting the field social workers. Due to the geographical, ethnic and cultural diversity of Iranian society, IASW based on the ecological perspective, has used the capacity of provincial branches whose social workers offer services in hospitals both for staff and their families and individualized services to the clients. Several hotlines have been set up to offer psychological and counseling services by social workers and psychologists. There are challenges including insufficient workforce of field professionals trained to work in crisis situations as well as absence of research on their efficiency. Overall, we have confronted an unprecedented situation which can be an opportunity for social work profession in Iran to use all existing capacities, strengths and resources to engage with the underserved individuals, families and communities.

Key words: *COVID-19, social work, Iran Association of Social Workers, psychosocial interventions*



Introduction

It seems that with the appearance of Ebola virus, HIV/AIDS and SARS in the past decades, new diseases are spreading in the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has highlighted that over the past two decades, health of about hundreds of millions of individuals have been affected by at least thirty new diseases (Tian et al., 2020). COVID-19 which is highly contagious, quickly spread to almost every country including Iran and on March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Abebe, Dejenie, Shiferaw, & Malik, 2020).

The concern arising out of such infectious diseases is not only on account of the high mortality rate but also the undesirable impact the disease burden in the society. For example, in Africa, mortality rate due to infectious diseases accounts for only part of the problem. Infectious diseases cause disability and abnormality, loss of efficiency, and the pressure on the health infrastructure on account of care and treatment of those affected by the diseases. In addition, these diseases adversely affect human development including income, education and social issues (Chen & Hoffman, 2017).

Accordingly, social determinants of health - poverty, physical environment (such as exposure to smoking, homelessness, etc.), race or ethnicity - are becoming increasingly important. The fallout of Corona virus is likely to be far more damaging on the lives of those individuals, families, communities, and societies which are already vulnerable. (Abrams & Szeffler, 2020).

The elderly, women and children, people with disabilities, the homeless, sex workers, the marginalised, and the displaced are at the highest risk of adverse consequences of COVID-19. Public health emergencies such as those arising out of COVID-19 have the tendency to increase inequality and discrimination. Thus, social workers need to be vigilant and support the rights of the underserved who have little or no voice. They have an important role to play in serving and protecting the most marginalized individuals (Murenje & Porter, 2020; Walter-McCabe, 2020).

COVID-19 as a public and global humanitarian emergency has not only challenges but also significant opportunities for social workers to leave a great impact on the victims and survivors of the infection.

In addition, COVID-19 pandemic has provided social workers with a rare opportunity to plan and make cost-effective interventions during a serious health crisis which has socio economic and psychological implications.



Thus, the purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of psychosocial interventions provided by IASW during COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the challenges they have faced.

1.0 Covid-19 in Iran

From the time when two persons were diagnosed with COVID-19 on February 19, 2020, the virus quickly spread across the country (WHO, 2020a). To control the rapid spread of corona virus, the National Corona Committee was organised along with a sub-committee at each province.

Iran ranks 10th and 11th in the world in terms of corona mortality and morbidity respectively (Worldometer, 2020) and it seems to be one of the first countries to experience the second wave of pandemic.

1.1 Psychosocial consequences of COVID-19

The needs for mental health care of people afflicted with the virus has been overlooked despite special attention being paid to the measures taken to identify people diagnosed with COVID-19 (Xiang et al., 2020). Research suggests people may have symptoms of suicidal ideation, anxiety, psychosis, trauma, depression and panic at the time of the spread of communicable diseases (Taylor, Agho, Stevens, & Raphael, 2008; Tucci et al., 2017; WHO, 2020b). Social isolation and loneliness are other major adverse consequences of COVID-19 and have a strong correlation with psychological problems (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). These concerns have surfaced in Iran as well ((Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020). In our recent study we assessed the anxiety level of Iranian general population during the COVID-19 spread, the authors found that almost one fifth of the respondents had severe/very severe anxiety levels and that women felt more anxiety than men (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020). Additionally, the level of anxiety among inhabitants of provinces with a high prevalence of coronavirus infection was higher. The more the individuals followed COVID-19 news, the more anxiety they felt, and the anxiety level among people close to someone who had contracted COVID-19 was higher (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020).

In the study, the anxiety rate was also directly related to the high prevalence of this infection. Although it is maintained that the old age enhances the risk of COVID-19-related disease and mortality, our findings indicate that the anxiety level is significantly higher in the 21–40 age group, which raises concerns for the future as also the economic impact since this age group is the main work force in the society and is most likely to be affected by unemployment, inflation, and business closures (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020).

The evidence suggests that the mental health and psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may be particularly serious for at least four groups of people: a) those who are already vulnerable



to biological or psychosocial stressors (including people affected by mental health problems); b) those who have been directly or indirectly in contact with the virus; c) health professionals including social workers; d) even people who are following the news through numerous media channels (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020).

2.0 Experiences of social workers in crisis

Increasing the accountability and efficiency with respect to catastrophe relief and efforts aimed at recovery, offering social and mental health services to the survivors, and paying sufficient attention to support needs, stress management, and training of public emergency workers in their position as survivors and victims are some of the interventions that professional social workers can make. (Golightley & Holloway, 2020; Javadian, 2007; Murenje & Porter, 2020).

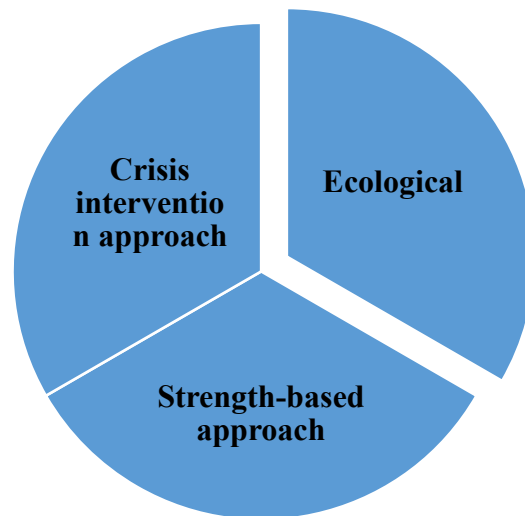
Iran has frequently confronted serious catastrophes including earthquakes and floods in the last century. Of the forty observable types of natural disasters, thirty one have been identified in Iran (Hadafi & Fallahi, 2010). Especially in recent years when floods and earthquakes occurred in several provinces in the northern, southern and western parts of the country, IASW and its members were part of the crisis intervention teams, and worked with the affected individuals, families and communities and as a result learnt lessons and developed best practices for conducting appropriate interventions in crisis situations.

3.0 Social work activities during covid-19 outbreak

IASW and its members, since the outbreak of COVID-19, together with governmental and non-governmental organisations, have played main roles in most of these activities. Measures taken have generally been at both practical and policy levels. Before elaborating on the interventions made, it is pertinent to present some aspects of practice framework on which the interventions were initiated.

The approach we took is illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 1



3.1 Ecological approach:

Social Work has always been concerned about mobilising and acting on behalf of communities that have been at risk of marginalisation or in poverty (Pulla, 2014). In the present context of the pandemic, the IASW considered it important take an ecological perspective and also include with it the dimensions of cultures within Iran. The Persians, Arabs, Azeris, Balochis, Lors, Kords, Turkemens etc. that reside in Iran offer a rich understanding of the culture and spirituality in the wake of a crisis. Whether it is safe distancing or living frugally with limited supplies and with constant prayers and spiritual awareness, the communities have offered much tacit support to and respect to the official interventions. Cultural and ecological frameworks help us to understand how communities transcend and find spiritual answers during crises (Pulla, 2014) Interventions depend on the nature of the crisis, local conditions and traditions, and the environment in which people reside. In Iran, according to the existing culture, ethnicity linguistic and geographical context, applying a single and inflexible approach cannot work for everyone. Therefore, due to the environment in which people live, they need community based interventions that are appropriate to their context which is highlighted in social work parlance as being person centred in environment (Pardeck, 1988; Zapf, 2009). We utilised the capacity of the provincial branches of IASW to respond effectively to this issue. They have offered interventions based on their awareness and knowledge of local culture, language, resources and special facilities and capacities. This understanding provided crucial support during interventions related to mourning, hospitals



staff, training of self-care on COVID-19 prevention while connecting with families and individuals, especially rural women and children.

3.2 Strength-based approach: The common view is that in times of crisis, social worker's job is to provide assistance and help to the clients. This view encapsulates clients who may simply seek help regardless of their possessions (Pulla, 2012, Pulla 2017). But, during the pandemic, it was suggested to social workers to provide services taking cognisance of their client's assets and environment.

Due to its hospitable culture and strong family and kinship ties, Iranian society has a rich capacity to provide social support to the person diagnosed with COVID-19. Social workers take advantage of this cultural context when they make psychosocial interventions especially in the case of the survivors of deceased. In addition, altruism, giving alms and helping the poor have a deep root in Iranian culture, and this capacity has been used to provide basic livelihood and health supplies to the poor and vulnerable individuals, groups and families.

3.3 Crisis intervention approach: everyone who is exposed to a traumatic experience is affected to some degree. In some people, these effects are resolved quickly and people regain resilience. However, some people may develop a condition called Bella Syndrome. Social workers utilize crisis intervention approach (Iravani & Parast, 2014; Roberts & Ottens, 2005; Turner, 2003) especially in case of the the survivors of COVID-19 generally through four steps: a) At this stage, the severity of the crisis, the conditions of support and assistance, the types of treatment methods and the possible risks to clients are reviewed and evaluated. b) In order to create a support network, the available resources such as friends, social support and the capabilities of clients are reviewed and strengthened. Assisting in getting over the mourning for coronavirus survivors is an important part of this step. C) Emotional release, relief, activation, and improvement of coping skills are steps taken by social workers to orient the individuals. Some of the survivors of the deceased face loss, some have impaired perception and feel trapped, and may use irrational responses such as suicide. Therefore, at this stage, the treatment method applied is to introduce mechanisms so as to discourage them from using irrational solutions such as suicide. D) Social workers encourage their clients to take action on life goals and set new goals, and to avoid irrational methods.

4.0 Activities – Micro Level

Social workers have taken practical measures to provide support to the target groups including the underserved who live in the marginalized areas, women headed families, the homeless , labor and street children and survivors of the deceased. The social support provided includes instrumental, psychosocial and informational support.



Mobilising donors for supply of cleaning gels and liquids, masks and gloves, mineral water bottles, grains, rice etc., acting as an intermediary between charities, donors and the target group have been the instrumental support activities undertaken by the social workers.

One of the psychosocial support activities encompasses grief counseling. Considering the nature of infection and its transmission routes, funeral ceremonies are often not held which may lead into guilty conscience, suppressed emotions as mourning ceremonies are not held. With a view to remove the lessen the sadness and grief and to highlight the importance of being positive and hopeful in the tense and overwhelming environment, a campaign, #I_have_good_news was launched to share good news during the outbreak. This campaign was the outcome of the close collaboration of International Federation of Social Workers with Social Work Associations of different countries.

Phone-based services through free hotline (4030) was yet another activity which was carried out by social workers. IASW voluntarily recruited 220 social workers for this purpose who were trained to work during crises. By connecting with individuals and families, listening to their concerns, responding to their questions and offer information. to the emotional support and counselling appeared to have contributed to the reduced anxiety and fear and also appeared to have enhanced over all sens of hope and to an extent, positivity.

Information support has been provided by social workers by helping people to understand how to keep themselves safe especially by following social distancing norms. Additionally, they have made efforts to reach out to individuals who face higher risk of contracting coronavirus especially people with chronic diseases and the elderly to be delivered with more information and services in State Welfare Organisation and Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation. Translating government policies and protocols to ordinary people especially in rural and suburban areas in easy to understand language is another informational support activity that has been undertaken by the social workers. To facilitate the accessibility of people to social resources, social workers have raised their awareness and facilitated their connectivity to the social services.

Acknowledging the contribution of social workers in these difficult times and appreciating the mental and physical stress that they endured during these critical times IASW being prepared a range of self-care plans and interventions for the social work community. Since these included debriefing with peers and senior social workers and also included s counseling services where required for themselves and their families. during the pandemic. As a result a professional program to deal with burnout and grief and loss was launched throughout the country for which social workers from various fields could access experienced and specialised counselors from their own field. To keep social workers updated, WHO's document titled 'Mental health and psychosocial



considerations during the COVID- 19 outbreak’ was translated into local language and published. Meetings were also held with social workers to share, underscore and reinforce the critical relevance and importance of ethical aspects during crisis intervention.

5.0 Activities - Macro level

Social workers are on the front line of not only service provision but also policymaking. For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, IASW has held meetings with National Corona Committee and its provincial branches across the country on required psychosocial interventions. Moreover, IASW has monitored actions associated with the outbreak to advocate for citizens’ rights. For example, the Ministry of Health had planned to undertake home to home screening of individuals and IASW was the first organisation to express its disagreement with this plan because the plan was not efficient and cost effective enough and might exacerbate the infection rate. Later, three more organisations opposed the plan and the Ministry of Health cancelled the plan despite its previous declaration.

Social workers have also advocated for people with special conditions including prisoners, homeless people, street children, people with disabilities, lonely seniors, drug users etc. through contacting different organisations National Corona Committee, the Judiciary, Ministry of Health and State Welfare Organisation.

Using media in order to attract attention to social dimensions of corona virus has been an initiative taken by the board members of IASW including participation in ten Television programs of 5-minute duration each.

6.0 Discussion and Conclusions

However, there are challenges in the process of generating social work interventions in crisis situations. While Tele-health options protect both the workers and clients from the virus infection and were considered the best to go with the vulnerable groups and key service providers, unfortunately, had very little and in some cases no access at all to smartphones or the Internet. Therefore, advocacy efforts to address this digital divide can be expected to increase. However, to the best of our knowledge, research on the effectiveness of such telephonic interventions has not been addressed in the context of Iran. During the course of our work at the IASW during the pandemic we have also realised the professional need for further instruction and course work in crisis interventions and advanced methodologies of counselling interventions. Currently the undergraduate social work education has a generic focus with broad based community focus. The pandemic alerts us to look at crisis intervention, trauma and also dealing with and grief and loss.



Secondly, social work is a generic course in Iran and there are no specialized social work courses at post graduate level. Also, the concept of crisis intervention has not been seriously emphasized in social work educational curriculum in Iran. Therefore, social workers grasp techniques and skills of working in crisis situations such as epidemic, mainly based on their own understanding, informal educational courses and their own experiences.

Iran is now experiencing economically unfavorable conditions, and these conditions have worsened the situations of lower deciles of our society. On one hand, there is still an epidemic and limited support resources and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups requires intensive and comprehensive interventions. On the other hand, the lack of accurate databases of vulnerable social groups has led to an equity and justice issues in the provision of services. This may lead to a situation wherein an individual, family or a group is supported by several sources and support organisations, and some others may remain deprived of these services.

Overall, these unprecedented times have provided an opportunity for social work profession in Iran to use all its existing capacities, strengths and resources to assist the underserved individuals, families and communities.

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Amir Moghanibashi-Mansourieh is a PhD candidate in social work and a member of the board of directors of IASW. His main areas of work have been working with homeless people who use drugs, substance use harm reduction programs, mental health, and case management. Also, he has experiences as lead/co applicant in conducting research in the context of social harms and vulnerable groups.

Abbasali Yazdani is a PhD candidate in social work and a member of the board of directors of IASW. His main areas of work are families, vulnerable groups including the homeless and community-based programs.



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