



RESEARCH PAPER

Experiences of Professional Social Workers in Women-Centered Practice in Sargodha: A Qualitative Analysis

¹Shajiah Qursam, ²Dr. Beenish Ijaz Butt and ³Nimra Shafi

1. Assistant Director, Council on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Social Welfare and Bait-ul-Mal Department, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan
3. MPhil Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: beenish.ijaz@uos.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Social Workers play a critical and crucial role in women-centered practice in Pakistan. Review of literature reveals that they provide long and short-term assistance to women suffering from distressed circumstances. However, several frequent obstacles prevent them from providing efficient services. This article aims to describe and explain experiences of professional Social Workers in women-centered practice through qualitative research. The social workers working in women-centered practice were the research population of the current study to meet the inclusion criteria. Seven respondents were interviewed and selected by purposive sampling until the saturation point came. The researcher has used an interview guide as a tool for data collection. Major themes derived from data analysis were the My Problems or Clients' Problems: experiences of Professional Social Workers, Gender as Socio-cultural construct and Barrier for Social Workers, Institutional and Structural Challenges and Coping Mechanisms and Strategies. It was concluded that professional Social Workers in women-centered practice face certain challenges during their service which needs to be addressed by the government. It is recommended that efforts should be made to establish alliances with local organizations, spiritual figures, and non-governmental organizations.

KEYWORDS Social Workers, Women-Centered Practice, Challenges, Coping Mechanisms

Introduction

A larger initiative to combat gender related issues and offer crucial assistance to women in need includes the creation of women-centered practice. Women centered practice in Pakistan is an interesting and challenging field of practice. It is challenging as it provides social workers with an evidence-based practice where they interact with professionals from various women agencies. However it is challenging due to some cultural constraints and geo-political position of the country that conflict with the ideology of the profession.

Growing crime situation about honor-based crimes, domestic violence, and other types of abuse against women led to the establishment of these women-centered practice institutions. In Punjab, this practice began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, led by the Government of Punjab in conjunction with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international donors. (Jabeen, 2022). They play a pivotal role in navigating complex issues such as gender-based violence, women's subjugations, and their economic hardships. The Punjab government is deeply concerned and has the strongest and quick response infrastructure regarding gender-based violence. (Glickin, 2010).

According to the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (2021), a large number of women in Punjab are facing domestic violence, harassment, honor killing, and various types of assaults which shows the inevitable need for women's crisis centers and correspondingly its frontline staff. Social workers are providing leading services to combat these issues while working as forefront officers within limited resources their challenges

and struggles are unexplored academically. Most of the studies revolve around the victim's issues rather than the service providers (Ahmad, 2023).

Professional Social Workers in women-centered practice play a critical and crucial role in Punjab, Pakistan. They provide long and short-term assistance to women suffering from distressed circumstances. However, several frequent obstacles prevent them from providing efficient services. These officers are confronted with high caseloads and limited human and financial resources that compromise the quality and scope of their services. There is another domain of the challenge of facing threats and pressure from the abuser's family which puts psychological pressure and affects their mental and emotional well-being. Besides, the safety concerns, these officers have poor comprehension of the legal framework due to insufficient training which hinders the speedy and efficient process of services. Additionally, these insufficient training and lack of capacity-building programs prevent them to deal with women having sensitive traumas such as sexual assault or rape (Tabassum, 2016).

Literature Review

The welfare system of Pakistan is gripped by systematic and structured barriers such as policy gaps, lack of infrastructural development, and a delayed system of institutional bureaucracy which puts pressure to hinder the decision-making and speedy delivery of services. In addition to the above, continuously providing services to the victims these officers suffer from compassion fatigue and high level of physical and emotional burnout (Vadapalli, 2009).

A variety of review of literature shows that social workers have to tackle cultural barriers such as taboos and stigmas associated with social issues like divorce, the status of rape victims, and their reintegration in their resistant families which challenge their effectiveness of the services delivery and cause professional dissatisfaction (Przeperski & Baikady, 2024). Along with this, many operational challenges like lack of standardized procedures to deal with victims, understaffing, and less access to remote areas are also involved in hindering the process of services (Gonçalves, et al, 2022). Altogether, these obstacles cause physical and emotional distress to the social workers which compromises their emotional and physical well-being, a serious plight to causes dissatisfaction and discomfort regarding their personal and professional domains (Ibid). The social workers provide psychological and incorporated emotional support to advocate the rights of the marginalized women of the country. Their work environment is influenced by cultural stigmas, socially constructed norms and values, and inadequate resources which increase their problems in their professional domains.

Successful delivery of services is hampered by operational shortcomings like a lack of funding, congestion regulatory hold-ups, and undertrained employees. They also frequently suffer from anxiety and depression as a result of their ongoing exposure to the terrible circumstances of those they support, which is exacerbated by difficulties at work and an inadequate supply of psychological treatment (Tufford & Dylan, 2022). Their duties are made more difficult by sociopolitical hurdles, such as ingrained prejudices and social standards, which further prevent victims from accessing aid. In addition to lowering the standard of care, technical barriers including insufficient equipment, insufficient educational training, and governmental bottlenecks also cause employee discontent and excessive replacement of the jobs. After studying the provided literature in detail, it was found that there is a gap in literature regarding challenges faced by social workers in women-centered practice. This study aims to provide a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of these officers which will uncover the hidden nature of the obstacles and the challenges they face in women crisis centers. This study aims to identify the personal experiences of Professional Social Workers in Women-Centered Practice in Sargodha.

Material and Methods

This study aims to identify the personal experiences of Professional Social Workers in Women-Centered Practice in Sargodha through qualitative research. The social welfare officers and their associates working in all women-centered practice institutions were the research population of the current study to meet the inclusion criteria. Out of 11, the 9 respondents were interviewed and selected by purposive sampling until the saturation point came. The researcher utilized an interview guide, a recorder for recording the answers of the respondents, and a note-pad for taking the visuals and non-verbal data. The data was analyzed qualitatively by using rigorous steps of qualitative data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Theme- I- My Problems or Clients' Problems: experiences of Professional Social Workers

The respondents working in women-centered institutions reported a comprehensive range of the experiences that they are facing on daily basis. The challenges categorized as operational, psychological and emotional, socio-cultural and professional difficulties. A list of open-ended questions were asked about their lived experiences. One of the most urgent issues these institutions encounter is operational difficulties. One significant problem is the absence or shortage of sufficient resource allocation according the required need which restricts access to basic necessities like food, shelter, healthcare, and counselling. Respondents were of the view that,

One of the biggest obstacles we confront is coping with unanticipated events, including whenever a woman enters in the midst of the night requesting immediate safety because of domestic abuse. We must be ready for these crises at all times, frequently with little funding. The most challenging part is to rescue a female in a critical situation.

They were of the view that they have to deal with the women who are victim of psychological and physical abuse therefore the officers often face a deep psychological stress due to the victim plights. Frequent exposure with stressful events including rape assault, domestic violence, honor killing survivors, psychological and emotional abused might give rise to stress, depression, compassion fatigue, sadness and emotional strain. Furthermore, taboos are associated with psychological and emotional health at workplace so, absence of mental health services regarding workplace stress are leading to worse situation. The conversation about their mental and emotional well-being digs out the following comments,

Managing incidents of maltreatment or domestic assault is extremely delicate and calls for a great deal of compassion and sensitivity. My main strategy is to provide the victim with a secure and accepting atmosphere. I make sure they are understood and acknowledged while constantly listening and offering emotional assistance.

The people working in high stress environment can have the symptoms of the decline in the capability of feeling compassions for the victim due to prolonged exposure with the traumas and miserable situations. The respondents reported that,

Being appointed at a center which is dealing with schizophrenic and abused women for many years. It's been couple of years of dealing with this kind of delicate situations, working with these women it is seems now I am running empty. Sometimes, its feels bless and most of the time I feel guilty to consider it as a routine matter of the center.

They also have to act as a mediator among the victim and their families. Most of the women come there for filing divorce because of economic and physical abused. So, families

of both sides (parents, in-law) arrive there to forbid them. Because of the head of the institution and particularly being women, it is tough for themselves to be a mediator. They were of the view that

In fact, among the most challenging aspects of my position is serving as a mediator among someone who is victimized and their immediate family. On a few times, relatives have threatened me because they thought I was intervening in their private affairs. Even though these conditions are frightening and anxious, I consistently make effort to adhere to established rules to protect me, including calling in the police or getting protection on hand if needed.

The majority of the respondents were facing the difficulties to manage their work-life balance. From rescue of the victim to prepare their discharge sheet, the welfare officers have to present in all domains. The respondents explained about it as,

My personal life is at stake from the day, after declaration of the organization as a women crisis center. I am neglecting my family most of the time, the family events are happening without me.

Respondents expressed their experience and suffering while managing stressed work-life balance by contributing that, dealing with a lot of scenarios, while the incidents and circumstances that were highly complicated and mentally demanding. They also explained that they used to carry all of the pressure home with me, which disrupted my connections and caused it difficult to unwind.

Theme- II- Gender as Socio-cultural construct and Barrier for Social Workers

Significant societal barriers hinder the work of welfare experts in women's crisis centers of Punjab. Due to deeply rooted societal conventions that can perpetuate stigma and resistance to seeking help for issues like domestic violence, welfare officers must navigate complex interactions with families in which people are compelled to put family honor before their own safety. Furthermore, because they believe that service providers are interfering in personal matters, people usually criticize or distrust them. This barrier is related to societal norms around discussions of assault, a lack of awareness of the resources available at crisis centers, and the tendency of the community to blame those impacted.

The majority of the respondents were complaining about the normative fabric of the society as a contributing factor in the complications and said that,

The Religious and social norms are at the heart of the difficulties Punjab's women's crisis centers. The widespread stigma attached to getting help for domestic abuse is one of the biggest obstacles. Families frequently put "honor" before personal safety, which makes it very hard for women to move up. A complicated dynamic is produced by this deeply rooted idea of family honor. Many women worry that exposing abuse will embarrass their families, which could result in exclusion or even more abuse.

Some other respondents were of the view that,

Our job moto and regional customs often clash with each other. Our attempts to interact and enlighten others are hampered by the perception that advocating for rights for females is an assault on conventional principles.

The language barriers are other challenges faced by many welfare officers. They are appointed far from their native hometown in which the dialects, slangs and verbal expression are totally different. The language barriers can have the tendency to create communication problems which leads to ineffective rapport building.

Sometimes, women came from other areas to seek shelter and escape. Often women come with other native language like Pushto. They don't know how to speak or understand Urdu which hinders the effective communication and delayed the process of need assessment and legal documentation.

Theme- III- Institutional and Structural Challenges

Social workers at women-centered practice deal with a number of work-related challenges that limit their ability to deliver high-quality services. One important obstacle is the unavailability of appropriate infrastructure, qualified personnel, and funding, which inhibits their ability to satisfy the specific demands of victims. Understaffing often results in strained schedules that lead to physical exhaustion and decreased productivity. Inconsistent training and limited opportunities for professional development further impair their ability to handle the diverse and complex cases they encounter. Bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of departmental cooperation also contribute to delays in decision-making and services. Additionally, officers find it difficult to reconcile the needs of survivors and their families with organizational policies.”

The organization is allocated with personal vehicle to rescue the women in need. But majority of the respondents were complaining about the pathetic condition of the transport as,

The absence of adequate facilities is one of the main problems. A lot of our facilities are either too old or unable to accommodate the victims' demands. Our capacity to provide a secure and encouraging atmosphere is hampered by this lack of enough facilities and assets.

The respondent also stated about the lack and delayed of budget and funds allocated by the government of the Punjab and narrated that:

The absence of suitable shelter resources constitutes one of the main issues. We frequently receive more refugee women compared to we can handle. We are unable to keep up or grow our present facilities to fulfil requirements due to our limited space.

These institutions often get donation by influential people and NGOs which creates a sense of ease for government and organization's stakeholders. The reason behind this the stigma associate with it. As a respondent expressed about the funding and budgeting as,

The stigma attached to our profession is an additional problem. Since these individuals are unaware of the significance of our work, many prospective donors are reluctant to help us. In order to alter this view and engage over more people, it's essential to raise awareness among the general population. The clergy and politician should take personal interest in the fund-raising activity regarding organization and to meet the general requirements of the women in need.

The lack of staff has a big impact on women institutions capacity to offer full support. The remaining staff frequently have to manage several responsibilities at once, and these can be demanding and lower the standard of care for the women and children who are in need. Majority of the centers are facing the short staffing as many of the seats are still vacant to recruit. There is no budget that organization can hire private personnel.

The respondents were complaining about the shortage of trained staff as the many of crisis centers were not having a single psychiatrist, from the couple of the years. Although a large number of the women with schizophrenia and psychological disorder and trauma were admitted there. The welfare officers have to arrange these specialists from district health units on temporary basis. These temporary specialists are often switch and transferred which cause many problems for existing patients. The officers reported many

negative consequences of the shortage of staff and the appointment of less sensitized staff at crisis centers.

The restricted power to make decisions, we frequently run against bureaucratic roadblocks that hinder our capacity to act independently and swiftly. In times of disaster, this may prove quite troublesome.

The welfare workers commented about a range of institutional and structural challenges they are frequently faced. The limited decision-making authority about the organizational structure, staffing, budget allocation and related to women safety and security is hampering their performance. According to some respondents, this restricted power and lack of autonomy causing a moral distress among the officers which leads to dissatisfaction with job.

Theme- IV- Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Social workers shared their personal coping strategies learning from the continuous stressed environment. The responses were recorded parallel to the challenges but concluded later. The coping mechanism are divided into two sub groups i.e., the personal coping strategies against the crisis and the governmental support to mitigate these challenges effectively. By integrating these tactics, welfare officials may tackle their problems in a comprehensive way. They can stay productive in their employment while preserving their personal wellbeing if they regularly evaluate on the tactics that are applicable and make the required modifications.

Personal coping strategies are a range of methods and tactics that the social welfare officers consume to navigate thorough stressful events and challenges to overcome physical and emotional burnouts. It is very essential to become adaptive with internal and external environment of the organization to show resilience and productivity against these challenges. There is a range of personal strategies including adopting a healthy life style, seeking social sport, learning time management, setting boundaries, indulge with positive thinking, selecting interests and hobbies. Respondents opined that,

Developing the ability to priorities work constitutes one of the best tactics. This entails determining which situations have to be most pressing and concentrating resources on addressing them immediately. Making a routine for the day will help you optimize your time and make sure you don't miss any important tasks.

Meanwhile, the other respondents found that the best strategy to overcome the challenge is to seek the help of your colleagues and co-workers. They believe that our seniors' colleagues and co-workers can suggest the best solution of these challenges.

The stress of handling several cases may be reduced by working together as a unit and delegating tasks. Personal burden can be decreased and group solutions are accessible through periodic team conferences to talk about tactics and current problems.

The respondents believed upon the methods of continuous learning and adaptation. According to them, the society is continuously changing. The old methods of crisis intervention should be modified and upgraded. They were of the view that,

The officers should acquire new techniques and abilities to better manage operational difficulties by completing courses and staying informed on standards of excellence. Successful operations are ensured through being flexible enough to adjust to unforeseen occurrences or modifications in methods

Social workers accommodate the infrastructural and language challenges through acquiring multiple strategies including learning basic phrases, utilizing local interpreters, visual communication aids for illiterate communities, maximizing the available resources, advocating for better resources on different platforms, seeking the community help through establishing the meetings with influential people of the community.

The all interviewed social welfare officers were reluctant to accept the notion of governmental support regarding the all above mentioned challenges. They were claiming that the majority of the policies are restricting the effectiveness of a hardworking officer. The governmental suggestions for out-sourcing the organizational budget cannot be applicable at every community because the large proportion of the population around organization may not able to donate. So, the government should take some serious legal and infrastructural steps to combat the situations which are challenging in nature. The recreational activities should be provided at the centers rather than to convert it into mini jails. Moreover, a considerable amount should be allocated to the welfare activities of the women. The theoretical along with practical intervention can change the lives of the both the security seeker and the providers.

Conclusion

The present research was an attempt to describe and explain the experiences of social workers working in women-centered practice in Sargodha. A comprehensive conclusion of data highlighted many aspects of the professional life of the officers. These aspects were including operational, psychological, institutional and interpersonal. The findings of the collected data also resonate with literature review and the given dimensions of theoretical framework. The social workers working in women-centered practice were responsible to provide legal and medical aid, counseling sessions, food and shelter to the women in need. The other collaborated tasks are to create awareness regarding women rights against gender-based violence. They have to conduct seminars and public trainings to tackle the prevailing gender-based issues. Their capacity to manage the varied and delicate cases they face is further hampered by inconsistent training and few possibilities for growth as professionals. Delays in decision-making and service are also caused by bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of collaboration across departments. Officers also struggle to strike a balance between organizational policies and the demands of survivors and their families. These work-related challenges not only lower the standard of treatment but also give rise to dissatisfaction regarding jobs and correspondingly high replacement rates.

Recommendations

This study presents the following recommendations.

- Promote the creation of more robust legislative structures that guarantee the full execution of legislation in order to shield women from assault.
- Provide social workers with frequent professional development opportunities to enhance their dispute resolution and counselling abilities.
- Create individualized rehabilitation initiatives for every woman to aid in her social acceptance and mental wellness.
- To enhance reconciliation attempts by establishing alliances with local organizations, spiritual figures, and non-governmental organizations.
- Use awareness-raising and counselling to engage families and the community in reconciliation initiatives.
- Work together with academic institutions as well as study centers to investigate creative approaches to women's challenges.

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