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Research Article

Professional Volunteerism among Social Work Students as a Response to the Pandemic Crisis

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The COVID-19 crisis halted traditional field training in social work education. However, as educators of a profession with roots in philanthropy and volunteerism, the social work schools in Kerala encouraged students to take up professional volunteerism (PV) in response to the crisis as an alternative to the pre-structured field practicum activities. This study explored the various voluntary activities the social work students are involved in as budding professionals. They voluntarily dedicated their professional skills, ethics and competencies through a continuum of five domains of services such as concrete and practical services, psycho-education and psychological support, restoration and rehabilitation services, welfare administration and self-reliance and sustainability programmes. This study's results highlight the significance of PV in social work education to socialise students with diverse needs in society and capacitate them to ethically help the individuals and community achieve well-being.

Keywords
Professional volunteerism, social work education, field training, COVID crisis, community engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Social work is a practice-based profession that helps individuals, small groups, families and communities improve their social functioning by connecting needs with resources, upholding and promoting values of social justice and empowerment (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] & International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014). The defined nature of social work itself provides insight into the importance of field immersive learning practices. Confirming this, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) noted that field education is the signature pedagogy in social work education (CSWE, 2015). The field is where students think and act as professional social workers; therefore, field practicum allows the practical application of theories, skills and values learned in the classroom (Bogo, 2015). Moreover, field education enables students to socialise with the profession (Boitel and Fromm, 2014). It encourages students to go beyond memorising theories to search for meanings and present novel ideas, exploring the implications for social work practice (Amadasun, 2021).

Historically professional social work evolved from philanthropy (Skehill, 2000) and modern social work incorporates neo-philanthropy (Villadsen, 2007). Experiential or student philanthropy can boost students' social work competencies by helping them actively understand the community's needs (Cencula and Kim, 2021). Similarly, a discernible relationship exists between volunteerism and social work (Sherr and Straughan, 2005). The ethical principles set by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) encourage social workers to volunteer a particular portion of their professional skills without expecting a financial return (NASW, n.d.). Professional social workers embrace volunteering as an ethical value, which can be called professional volunteerism (PV). PV applies professional ethics, skills and competencies to unpaid work (Danastri, 2018). Moreover, researchers identified student volunteerism as a tool for community engagement (Chetty and Bhagwan, 2021). Therefore, social work education integrates PV into students' field engagements.

Field engagements or fieldwork practicums provide social work students with an opportunity for in-depth learning; Scientific knowledge is applied through various methods, tools and techniques in different practice settings. Learning by doing enables them to be professionally

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competent and demonstrate a high skill, expertise and work ethic. When PV is adopted as a strategy in field practice, both the renderer and the receiver benefit from an unremunerated scientific service; The renderer gains practice wisdom and the recipient receives professional service free of charge.

As social vulnerability has engulfed people from all levels, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and its aftermath invoked the need to be mindful of people's predicaments. Humanity responded to help their brothers with resources, but the scientific approaches differed. Different treatment modalities make professional social work unique in its interventions, which have been sensed, understood and reiterated during the pandemic (Okafor, 2021; Yu *et al.,* 2021). Against this background, this study explored the professional volunteering undertaken by social work students in Kerala during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHOD

This qualitative research collected data from selected students of six social work colleges in central Kerala. The researchers interviewed the participants after obtaining informed consent for data recording and publication of the results, which preserved the participants' privacy. Participants were asked to share their reflections on their fieldwork during the pandemic. Without traditional structured field training, social work students were engaged in voluntary field services to meet the pandemic-induced needs of individuals and society. As their activities were supervised and guided by their faculty supervisors, they could bring professionalism to the volunteer services they performed. Thus, participants reflected on their experience of professional volunteering as adopted as professional social work practice.

Ten students from each selected college were interviewed online and recorded the sessions. Researchers listened to each interview repeatedly to transcribe data and analysed the transcribed data to identify the participants' professional volunteering activities during the pandemic. In addition, the nature and effectiveness of volunteer activities and the experiences, gains and concerns of students were analysed.

FINDINGS

For Kerala, high development indices significantly reduced the impact of Covid-19 on its population. Innovative and comprehensive responses by key stakeholders helped the state to bring things under control. These stakeholders included policymakers, government officials, health care providers, paraprofessionals, local authorities, professional social workers and professional volunteers (professional social work students). Proactive surveillance, establishing district control rooms for monitoring, capacity building of frontline health workers, risk communication, robust community engagement and addressing the psychosocial needs of vulnerable populations were some of the critical strategic interventions implemented by the state government (WHO, 2020).

Exploring the services provided by student social work trainees (professional volunteers) found that multiple activities deployed in micro- and macro-practice settings utilised a wide range of knowledge, skills and abilities for scientific service delivery. Competencies acquired from professional social work education and training differentiated professional volunteers in their services from regular volunteer activities and services. Professional voluntary services and engagements of social work educators and practitioners in training, research and policy-making have given them high recognition in the participating fields of professional social work, leading to the formalisation of social work services and the establishment of the profession in a larger context.

This study identified that the professional volunteer response to the pandemic includes a continuum of services across five categories (Figure 1).

The pandemic-responsive activities of professional volunteers recognised in this study are shown in Table 1.

Concrete and Practical Services

Social work as a problem-solving process affirms the application of concrete and practical services while working with individuals. This is one of the primary treatment modalities that aims to match the client's needs with the resources and the other two are direct treatment and environment manipulation. In times of adversity, fundamentally, this approach resolves clients' problems firsthand, meets their immediate needs and relieves the client from acute tension and chaos. Therefore, professional volunteers addressed the predicaments and emergencies created by the global health crisis by applying concrete and practical services. The various services rendered were addressing patients' needs in Covid-19 care centres,

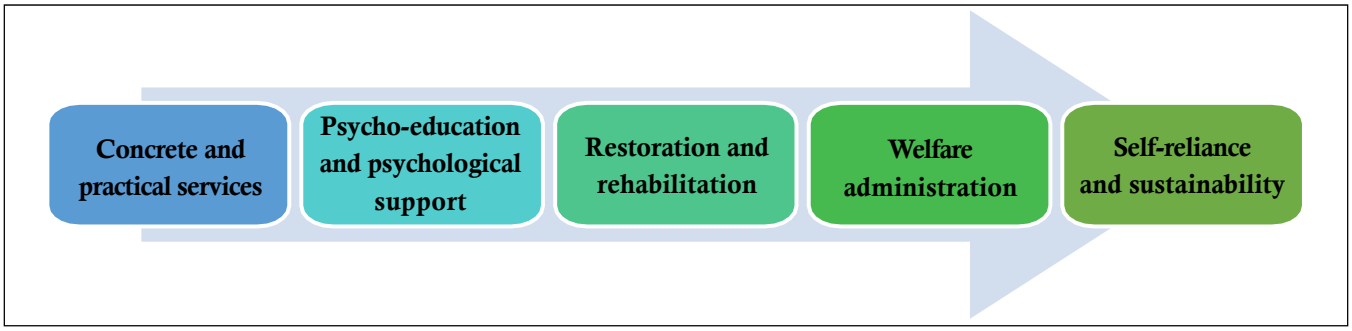


Figure 1. Continuum of Services by Professional Volunteers

Table 1. Pandemic Responsive Professional Voluntary Activities

Concrete and practical services	Psychological first aid and Psycho-education	Restoration and rehabilitation	Welfare administration	Self-reliance and sustainability
Attending to and addressing patients' needs in Covid-19 care centers	Tele-counselling and psychological support	Using language, literature and media as tools to ignite people's thoughts, instill hope and courage to start living in the new normal, blog creation	Stocktaking/ allocation of Covid-19 vaccine	Student volunteers were part of the major development projects initiated during the post-pandemic phase to make communities self-reliant
Distribution of medicines	Youth mental health—awareness and support	Online Community events and programmes for psycho-social rehabilitation	Covid-19 control room	Student volunteers were part of identifying the needs of communities—need assessment surveys
Resource mobilisation/ fundraising to meet communities' needs	DMHP counseling services	Career guidance for marginalised groups	Covid-19 helpline	Formulation of project proposals based on needs and problems identified
Sannadhasena volunteers	Positive Mental health campaigns through virtual platforms	Technical support to meet the educational needs of marginalised communities (Adivasi and Dalit)	Managing and facilitating the functioning of Community quarantine centres	Addressing social problems-adolescent problems communities
Community Kitchen initiatives	Psychological first aid	Linking youth with professional organisations for their carrier (referral)	Volunteering at PHC for testing and other regular services of PHCs	Waste management initiatives collaborating with Haritha Kerala Mission
Hospitalisation of Covid-19 patients—shifting/ transferring to FLTC, hospitals	Engaging small groups of children and adolescents promotes positivity during the lockdown and social isolation	Working with Kudumbashree units, promoting initiatives like Kudumbashree hotels, mobilising their capacities for livelihood improvement.	Facilitating Covid-19 data compilation in IMA and District Hospitals	Institutional programmes—working with blind women

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Table 1 contd...

Concrete and practical services	Psychological first aid and Psycho-education	Restoration and rehabilitation	Welfare administration	Self-reliance and sustainability
Distribution of essentials to patients and families	Engaging with families who are survivors of Covid-19	Online summer school camps	Facilitating Teleconsultation and referral services	Women entrepreneurship projects
Disinfecting and sanitising activities	Engaging with the elderly by providing support and encouragement	Life skill training in ICDS functional areas	Vaccine booking services	DCPU initiatives
Cremation and burial	Counselling for Persons with Disability	Rehabilitation initiatives with street dwellers.	Linking clients with resources and systems—call centers	Community-based projects/Govt. projects, Rebuild Kerala programme
Palliative care services	Services in the psycho-social rehabilitation center in Municipalities	Virtual group engagements on self-care and management	Preparation of IEC materials for mass campaigns	
Coordination of services in Covid-19 First Line Treatment Centres	Psycho-social development programmes among trafficked women in Mahila Mandirs		Administration activities in Panchayat Covid-19 helpdesk	

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distribution of medicines, mobilising resources to meet communities' needs, Sannadhasena volunteers, community kitchen initiatives, hospitalisation of Covid-19 patients, distribution of essentials to patients and families, disinfecting and sanitising activities, cremation and burial, palliative care services and coordination of services in Covid-19 First Line Treatment Centres (FLTC). Through this provision of concrete services, the front-line needs of the people were addressed which helped them restore their personal and social functioning. Professional volunteers took up roles in developing new and tangible resources, linking people to resources and facilitating linkages between resources.

Psychological First Aid and Psycho-education

Psychological first aid can be understood as a first-order intervention addressing any crisis (Fox *et al.,* 2012). It includes providing emotional support, conveying a feeling that they are cared for and accepting and validating the clients' feelings of distress through direct action techniques of counselling and guidance. Providing scientific psychological support requires knowledge, skills and attitudes embedded in professional practice and when it is scientific, it has its advantages.

Professional volunteers have engaged with potential clients, identified through public welfare projects and professional and volunteer networks, providing psychological first aid and helping them overcome their distress. Their engagement with clients in a professional relationship was characterised by positive regard, empathy, non-possessive warmth and congruence. They used techniques of exploration, ventilation and description and in essential contexts took the clients through 'catharsis'—a healing process (Bukar *et al.,* 2019). As part of the case management, they mobilised appropriate support systems for meeting the client's immediate needs. There were instances where people responded with fear and emotional distress or projected their fear and anxiety onto the people in their immediate environment, further escalating family issues and relationships. Several tele-counselling sessions were initiated with current issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, professional engagement with these clients explored and revealed problems of family violence and dysfunctional family dynamics that risked disabling these families. Professional volunteers referred these cases for interventions and follow-up studies.

Psycho-education approach used information and education to change behaviour, whether it is irrational

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anxiety, fear, or anything that disturbs clients' daily physical and social functioning. Rather than a remedial strategy, professional volunteers have engaged with diverse groups of clients through preventive psycho-educational sessions. They facilitated professional engagements with small groups of children and adolescents, families, persons with disability, the elderly and specific groups of institutionalised women. The sessions on the right information about the virus and the transmission modes, self-care during the pandemic, healthy living and how to foster mental well-being in them and others, helped these target groups sail through the difficulties of the pandemic crisis. With their vast repertoire of skills and technical knowledge, these professional volunteers made the interventions meaningful and scientific, which, when done by laypersons, are less likely to reach the expected goals.

Restoration and Rehabilitation

Restoring individuals' social functioning is one of the primary goals of direct practice in social work. In a crisis, it is restoration and reintegration, restoring the client's personal and social functioning to pre-crisis conditions. Professional volunteers have facilitated restoration and rehabilitation, not only by mobilising tangible resources but also by mobilising clients' strengths and capacities to overcome challenges.

The major activities of professional volunteers include blog creation—using language, literature and media as tools to ignite people's thoughts and instil hope and courage to start living in the new normal, online community events and programmes for psycho-social rehabilitation, career guidance for marginalised groups, technical support to meet the educational needs of marginalised communities (Adivasi and Dalit), referral services for youth employment, working with *Kudumbashree* units, promoting initiatives like *Kudumbashree* hotels, mobilising their capacities for livelihood improvement, online summer school camps, Life skill training in Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) functional areas, rehabilitation initiatives with street dwellers and virtual group engagements on self-care and management. These services helped people to reintegrate positively into the new normal.

Welfare Administration

Albeit the grass-root level services professional volunteers have engaged with, in their attempts to respond to the pandemic crisis, they were instrumental in providing administrative support for healthcare administration and delivery. They have demonstrated true professionalism, establishing professional and ethical behaviour, observing and analysing situations objectively and upholding the values of social justice and equality in coordinating and executing administrative services.

Major activities included supportive service in the Covid-19 control room, Covid-19 helpline, Stocktaking/ allocation of Covid-19 vaccine, managing and facilitating the functioning of community quarantine centres, volunteering at PHC for testing and other regular services of PHCs, facilitating Covid-19 data compilation in Indian medical association (IMA) centres and District Hospitals, facilitating Tele-consultation and referral services, vaccine booking services, linking clients with resources and systems—call centres, preparation of Information, education and Communication (IEC) materials for mass campaigns and supportive administration in Panchayat COVID-19 helpdesk. These activities based on scientific knowledge of guidance, planning, organising, coordination, implementation, monitoring and supervision made their service efficient.

Self-reliance and Sustainability

Professional volunteers were part of the programmes in the post-COVID phase to rebuild the pandemic-affected communities. Social work trainees were part of sustainable projects initiated by the government and voluntary organisations. They participated in developing and strengthening the livelihoods of persons of concern, reducing their vulnerability and promoting long-term reliance. Moreover, professional volunteers engaged in field surveys, need assessments, project planning and implementation to ensure the sustainable development of society. They worked with waste management projects of Haritha Kerala Mission, child protection projects and women entrepreneurship programmes, promoting self-reliance among the people.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering is necessary for social capital and civil society and has become a fundamental component of social policies (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx, 2018). Therefore, social work education needs to socialise students through PV that equip them to respond effectively in crisis situations. Professional volunteering can fulfil social work

objectives during pandemics by responding to the community's immediate needs and restoring well-being. Increased commitment to social work values and altruism are predictors of volunteering (Plummer *et al.,* 2008).

Social work students in this study were involved in volunteerism during the COVID-19 pandemic and they found the best ways to provide meaningful contributions to society. Volunteering exposed students to diversity and made them understand the need for cultural competence. Moreover, the COVID-19 responses showcased PV across many sectors, reiterating the importance of recognising social workers' practice skills in diverse settings. However, due recognition and acknowledgement of professional volunteering are essential to boost the morale of students to engage their potential in the welfare of society. Furthermore, the social work curriculum needs to redefine the practice field in the context of volunteerism in the academic matrix.

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