

Social workers' experience working with refugees during Covid-19: Case of Austria

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Abstract. Global pandemic, *Covid-19*, started at the end of 2019 and until today we are facing the consequences of it on a daily basis. The *Covid-19* virus has made the situation more difficult for both social workers and refugees and the ignorance has been more visible both theoretically and practically. On the other hand, professional activities of social workers were significantly influenced during *Covid – 19*. It made their job harder and more challenging than before. *Research goal* – To disclose Austrian social workers 'experience working with refugees during *Covid – 19*. *Research strategy* - qualitative research. The study was conducted in November - December of 2021 among social workers in Austria. *Data collection method* - semi-structured interview (8 social workers). *Data analysis method* - content analysis method. *Main findings* - the restrictions imposed during the *Covid-19* pandemic exacerbated the isolation and vulnerability of refugees and created confusion. During the *Covid -19* pandemic, social workers working with refugees faced the following challenges - significant alterations in routine of social workers and struggling to preserve and keep clients.

Key words: refugees; social work with refugees; social workers experience, *Covid-19*.

1 Introduction

When *Covid – 19* started, everything became more difficult for refugees. They have been dealing with many unexpected problems, such as mental health, economic hardship, domestic violence, lack of pandemic rules information, and isolation [1-3]. In addition to having a significant impact on refugee children's educational opportunities, the COVID-19 pandemic has put their families at a disadvantage, increasing already existing inequities [4]. According to several surveys, many school-aged children do not have access to digital learning resources and opportunities.

Refugees are the focus of social work in a broad challenging global context as the number of people displaced and forced to flee their homes has reached unprecedented levels. *Covid-19* pandemic and effects of social crises have increased emotional needs of refugee clients, necessitating additional attention [5-6]. Social work with refugees includes a wide variety of services, such as assistance with advocating, support for social exclusion,

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mental health and information, helping with searching job, financial issues and obstacles to education, among many other services. Social workers have unique challenges in dealing with the pandemic's various spheres of intervention. In contrast to health care providers, educators, and other professionals whose knowledge is limited to a specific topic, social work's multi-faceted and individual approach is essential for global epidemic response [7]. Anxieties caused by the *Covid - 19* are worsened by long-standing discrimination towards refugees [8]. Social work approach beyond organizational rules is needed in this period of *Covid - 19* and light of refugees and vulnerable populations. The pandemic's impact on social workers' work with refugees required a deeper understanding of the profession. Direct social work with refugees must see the individual and pay attention to health, family, financial insecurity, and positions like race and sexual orientation [9-10]. When it comes to *Covid - 19*, there were expectations that social workers should be creative, fearless, and committed in their communities to fight the systemic inequities and racism that exist. Interactive techniques to social work may be ideally suited to reach and serve immigrants who are typically left out because of their ethnicity or nationality [11-12]. Austria was struck by the last significant tidal wave of refugees in 2015; 89,000 Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis requested asylum [13]. In 2020, Austria became the fifth country (after Germany, France, the United States, and Sweden) in terms of refugees granted asylum. This number was 141,866 which was the highest between 1960 and 2020 (Macrotrends, 2021). Research goal – To disclose Austrian social workers' experience working with refugees during *Covid – 19*.

2 Materials and methods

Research strategy was qualitative research. Data collection method - semi-structured interview (non-probability sampling, 8 social workers). Data analysis method - content analysis method. The study was conducted in November - December of 2021 among social workers who work with refugees in NGO of Austria. Interviews have been done both face-to-face and online (due to the massive lock-down in the country). The informants were chosen according to the following criteria: social workers with University degree; must have been working since the beginning of *Covid – 19*; have professional experience of working in Austria with refugees more than 2 years. The participants received an email with the interview questions in English in advance of the interview. They were free to switch to the German language whenever they felt more at ease throughout the individual interview, however, all participants answered totally in English. Content analysis is a method of analyzing trends and patterns in documents. It was used to evaluate interview data because it provides simple data coding and classification. All interviews were transcribed and then coded, which helped analyze and interpret the data in an organized manner [15].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Impact of Covid – 19 on Refugees (social workers' perspective)

Social workers mentioned the most remarkable issues that refugees and asylum seekers have struggled with since *Covid – 19* started - 1) **confusion**; 2) **excessive vulnerability**; 3) **isolation** and 4) **mistreats from government**. The first issue that most of them noted was **confusion** regarding *Covid - 19* as they could not get correct information (Fig. 1).

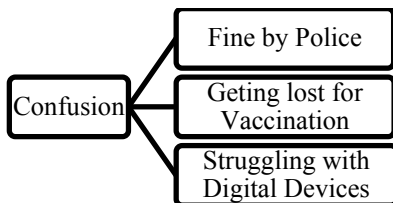


Figure 1. Refugee confusion in the Covid-19 period.

Refugees had **trouble with police and fining**. *“It is very hard for refugees to get information and during Covid-19 it became more difficult because it changed daily and weekly. I remember some refugees who thought they could go out based on law but once they were caught by police because they didn’t know.”* (SW2) *“...well there was always delay in getting information by refugees especially at the beginning of Covid – 19, and it was of course because of the language. There were many cases that refugees were caught by police outside because they didn’t know exactly whether they can go out or not due to lack of information for them.”* (SW4), *“...they got fined by police as they didn’t know how many people were allowed to be next to each other in street.”* (SW7) The next issue related to confusion was about **vaccination**; *“...Also about vaccination, they didn’t know what to do. There was lack of information. Those who had problem with the language and just were able to talk in Arabic, Farsi or Somali couldn’t be updated because it was only in German.”* (SW2), *“...for vaccination, although they really wanted to get vaccine they didn’t know how to get information.”* (SW6) *“...There were many problems regarding vaccination of refugees and again it is because of language which made them confused.”* (SW5) Moreover, working with **digital devices** was another issue for refugees during Covid – 19. A social worker explained: *“They didn’t know how to work with digital platforms like Ms team, many of them don’t have personal laptop, for example.”* (SW6) *“Most of them neither have computer nor knowledge of using it, so they use their cell phone and those who live in camps have very bad connection”* (SW8), *“...they didn’t know how to ask it online”* (SW7).

Excessive Vulnerability was obvious among refugees as interviewees explained (Fig. 2).

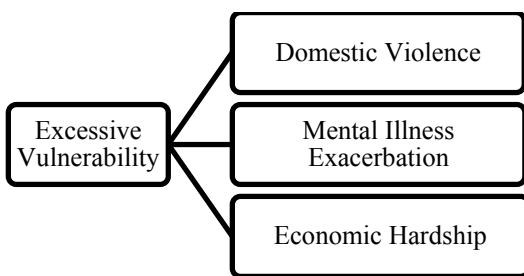


Figure 2. Increased vulnerability of refugees in the Covid-19 period.

Violence against women during Covid - 19 was major topic of concern mentioned by social workers: *“...violence against women increased significantly. And you know, it happens always in poor families which many refugees are included in these families.”* (SW3) *“...we have German teachers; some of them reported that some female participants in German courses were under violence of their husbands.”* (SW2) Another point that informants mentioned was **economic hardship** for refugees. They also criticized employers regarding that: *“After Covid-19 a lot of people lost their job, and some just had to work in short term contract. Employers cut the payment also.”* (SW1) *“...Covid - 19 made it worse. There were many cases when refugees lost their jobs and wanted to apply for social*

assistance. Most of employers are racist. It is not just about refugees, it is about all foreigners. Many foreigners were exploited by employers without logical reason. They are discriminated, employers fire foreigners without any reason, they don't care if you are sick or not. (SW4) "...losing job among refugees was common. I would say that as they didn't have secure job." (SW6) "...they should have waited more than usual to get their money as they couldn't go to ask for it during Covid-19 in person." (SW7) **Mental health** problem during Covid – 19 was highly possible and visible among refugees. "Personally, I could see some problems in them like headache or psychological problem." (SW1) "Stress is the main thing for all of them. I could see that this stress came out from other stresses like being locked in houses." (SW2) "Psychologically they were under pressure." (SW3), "...so he got depressed... depression comes very fast when you are alone." (SW5), "...stress was the thing that I noticed well among them." (SW6) "I can say that their level of stress became very higher than before." (SW7) "...this chaotic situation affected their mental health in a very bad way." (SW8)

The next category was about **isolation** of refugees, which caused challenges for them as informants mentioned during interviews (Fig. 3).

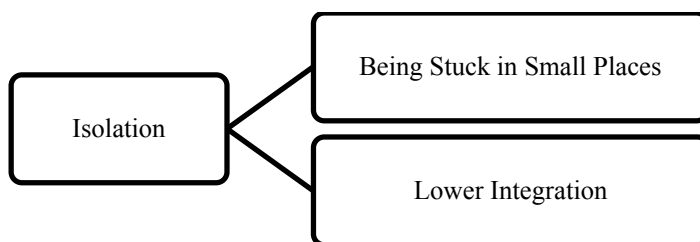


Figure 3. Isolation of refugees in the Covid-19 period.

According to social workers' answers, refugees were **stuck in small places** next to each other because of Covid – 19. "One thing that happened in Austria was that due to government's decision about (I think month or more) these people were that they were not allowed to go out of their places. Authorities believed that they were not easy to be controlled for pandemic." (SW2) "...basically asylum seekers are in jail and Covid-19 made this jail smaller for them. Before Covid-19, they at least could walk around their camps or meeting someone." (SW8) "...most of refugee families live in small apartments and they are usually big families, so it was very hard for them to be stuck in small area with each other." (SW4) "...So all the time they should be in same place together. I had a client who said there is no room for me to be alone and everything has become frustrated." (SW1) "I had family clients with 4 little children (kindergarten and primary school) and usually they live in small places." (SW7) **Lower integration** level was another issue during Covid – 19: "Covid-19 has made their integration level lower. During Covid-19 they were always in distance and all places were closed." (SW1) "...during Covid-19, I think integration became worse but not just for refugees, for all people who belong to low level of society, so refugees are included." (SW3) "In the beginning it was difficult for them as everything, especially German courses, was closed." (SW4) "Before we had chance to participate in international events, being with many people from different cultures, and nationalities, but after Covid-19 it was stopped and it stopped the process of integration." (SW5) "Many of those, who were on good way of learning before Covid-19, lost their progress and their level of German became worse due to lockdown." (SW6) "During Covid-19 refugees didn't have enough possibility to meet local people, and it, for sure, decreased their integration level." (SW7), "During Covid-19 I could see their efforts through phones to stay connected with each other, but it really became worse" (SW8).

Another big issue for refugees was mistreats from **government** and politicians (Fig. 4).

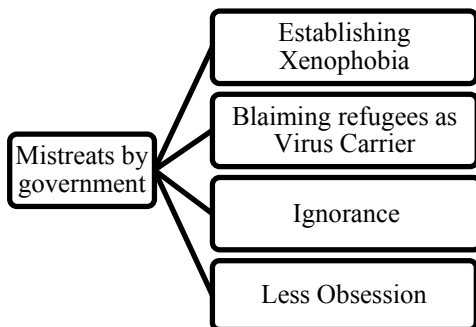


Figure 4. Government mistreatment of refugees during Covid-19.

Informants blamed government as they (politicians) influence society in negative ways towards refugees and tried to cause **xenophobia**: “They (government) are always against refugees. They are responsible for making horrible pictures of refugees into society, society get influence from the government. They make people in an emotional way to think that refugees come to take Austria’s money.” (SW4), “I would say that the attitude of people in Austria is directly connected to political decisions, they get easily influenced by government, and their attitudes cause discrimination from society to migrants and refugees which is not their fault. One example is vaccination. Those migrants who wanted to come back to Austria and they were not vaccinated, had a lot of restrictions, but those local people with same situation could enter country without any restrictions.” (SW6) “Generally, politics and society are connected to each other, I mean even those people who claim that they are not political, get influence from politics.” (SW7), “Those from old generation who don’t know English and haven’t travelled much, are scared of refugees and media worsens this situation, of course. They feed people with fear of refugees all the time.” (SW8).

Due to Covid – 19, government **ignored** refugees more than before and at the same time **blamed them for bringing Covid – 19** to the country: “May be I am too negative, but they are either hostile or ignorant, and it also depends on different authorities, because there are always different political parties behind these authorities. There is no effort to see in order to reduce refugees` problem. They just try to prevent refugees from coming to say later-yeah we have few refugees now.” (SW1) “They (Government) think they come and go and bring Covid-19 with themselves.” (SW2) “Generally, they blame refugees for everything even Covid – 19, because it is easy to do that as they are in weak position.” (SW8).

However, one interesting thing that informants mentioned was that because of Covid– 19, **refugees were not in the centre of attention as they were in the past**. “..., they are not in the centre of attention that much, everything is about Covid-19 now.” (SW1) “Well, since 2020 when Covid-19 started, all Europe started to control borders in a very strict way. I want to say that refugees are not the topic of media in comparison with past. Now everything is about Covid – 19.” (SW2) “...but since Covid -19 started there has been a change, refugees are not in the centre of topic anymore, and they are not the biggest problem now as they were before. Actually, our work during Covid–19 became easier because everything now is about Covid – 19 and there is no populism, propaganda against refugees on media anymore in comparison with the past. So, I don’t have to explain everything to other people as I did before.” (SW3) “I believe Covid-19 was useful for the matter of refugees in society, because people were so busy with Covid-19, they did not talk about refugees anymore, so refugees became out of topic.” (SW7)

Analysis of the survey data revealed Impact of Covid – 19 on Children and Youth Refugees in an Educational Way (Fig. 5).

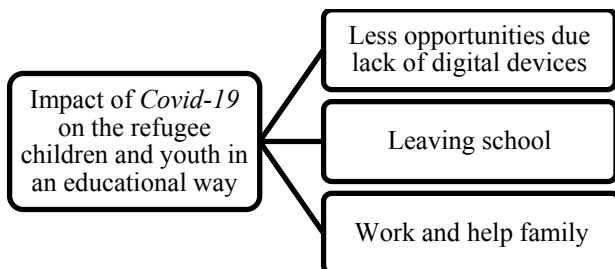


Figure 5. Impact of Covid – 19 on Children and Youth Refugees in an Educational Way.

According to social workers, a very important barrier for refugee children and youth to study during Covid – 19 was **lack of digital devices**: “...it is hard because they have poor life level, they don't have their own laptop and camera, and it is in a small house with other voices.” (SW2) “...How should they follow their education if they don't have appropriate digital devices?” (SW6) “...Neither they had enough digital devices for their children nor could they help them in their subjects.” (SW7)

Following this problem, **leaving school** by children and youth happened: “They already had hard situation in an educational way, and Covid – 19 made it worse and some lost their education and dropped out of schools (SW3)”.

Two informants mentioned that children and youth had to **work and help their family** either on their own interest or by force: “They have to work also to support families and there are many obstacles for them to study.” (SW4) “...some of them prefer to work as they have to earn money and support their families.” (SW6)

3.2 Challenges of social workers during Covid – 19 pandemics

There were two categories of main challenges that social workers faced them once Covid – 19 started - **significant alterations in routine of social workers** and **struggling to preserve and keep clients** (Fig. 6).

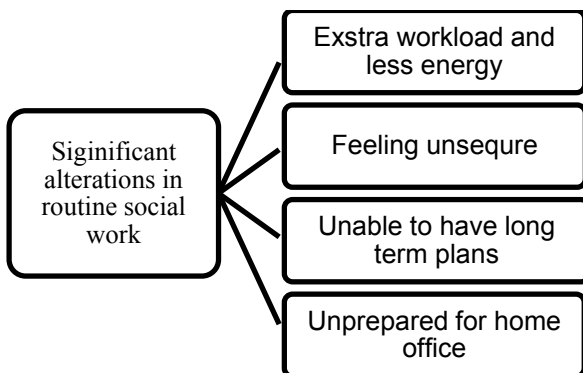


Figure 6. Impact of Covid – 19 on Children and Youth Refugees in Education area.

Informants mentioned that during Covid – 19 they had **more work** than before pandemic, and sometimes they were **out of energy** because of that: “They came to my office to print out application form, to fill it out, etc. The thing that had changed is that I became

the person who was doing everything. Before I was just guiding them through everything, empowering them like a real social worker, telling them to just come to me when they had problem, but for those cases the situation became totally changed and I was doing all on behalf of them which was too much.” (SW3) “There were many people outside the building waiting for coming inside. We never closed even a single day, so more work and, at the same time, we had to follow Covid – 19 rules. We had to do a lot as other offices went to home office and just accepted emails, so most of clients were not familiar with digitalization and came to us to do for them, yeah a lot of work. Afterwards it became so exhausting for us that it affected quality of our job.” (SW4) “...And people in offices (governmental) said that they (refugees) can do these things online, but they can’t! In addition, when they go for their appointments anywhere, especially to the doctors, they need translator at the same time. An additional issue was Covid - 19 test, so we regularly were checking who was tested and who was not! So instead of empowering them to be in their own way, I was doing many things for them because they really couldn’t do that.” (SW5) “Another common issue was that because many procedures became online, we couldn’t tell clients- OK, this is the link, and go for it by yourself, So we had to either explain it to them or do it by ourselves.” (SW6) “Another thing during Covid-19 was that we were doing many things on behalf of them, because it was easier and faster, so I can call it another disadvantage. Instead of empowering them, I was mostly doing their needs by myself (some of them). I knew it is wrong as a social worker, but I did it as it was faster and better to do.” (SW7)

Social workers were **not prepared to change home in an online office**: “Everyone should have stayed home and we did, but we didn’t know how to make home office, many questions without answers at that moment as how we should continue? When a client was calling and screaming, I didn’t know how exactly handle it! It took a long time for us to adapt ourselves to home office.” (SW7) “...the biggest shock was moving to online, we really were not prepared for that! They (refugees) didn’t want to do that and being at home at all” (SW8).

Next issues were **feeling insecure** regarding Covid – 19 rules and **not being able to have a long-term plan** in their work. “Well, we are 3 people in the office and normally we have 5 clients at the same time, somehow we feel insecure, we don’t know should we open the window, should we keep distance like this or that or are they vaccinated or not, I mean before Covid - 19 we didn’t even think about it! We haven’t had home office also and we have been always here.” (SW6) “It is so difficult because you don’t know what will happen, you can’t plan in a definite way and lots of energy can be wasted. Always asking myself what and how should I plan? What if there will be lockdown, you put energy in your plan and you can’t fulfil the plan because of a new regulation from the government. So, there was no long-term plan.” (SW2)

The analysis of the survey data revealed the efforts of social workers to maintain contact with service users (Fig. 7).

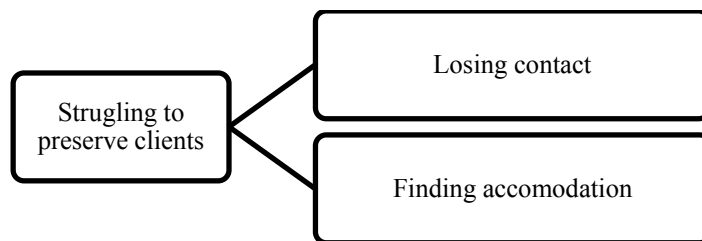


Figure 7. Efforts of social workers to maintain contact with service users.

One of the most challenging issues for social workers during Covid – 19 was **finding flats and accommodations** for refugees. It is mandatory for asylum seekers to immediately move to their own flats after getting positive answer and get refugee status, but during Covid – 19 it was a challenge for social workers. *“Almost all real estates closed their office and it wasn’t easy to connect them. Those asylum seekers, who got their positive answers, had to move to their own flats immediately. It was really hard to handle and find flats for them.”* (SW3) *“...Another problem was housing problem, everything was closed, and moving to other places became so hard.”* (SW4) *“One of the most dramatic issues for refugees during Covid-19 was moving to other houses. When you get your positive answer, you should immediately move to your place. During Covid-19 it was so hard, as there was no real estates, also lockdown, so it was the hardest thing that I can mention.”* (SW6) *“...and it was really hard for them to be in touch with institutions, well, we tried to be open and they could come to us, but how can you find a flat or apply for social welfare when there is no place to go? So, they were stuck in the situation.”* (SW7) Informants also said that they were **losing contact** with their clients. *“It was really hard to be in touch with them. For example, some clients said they couldn’t talk over the phone because their German was not good enough.”* (SW1) *“...And second thing was connection with refugees, for example, if your German level is just A2, it would be possible to sit next to each other and transfer main points but through phone, it was so difficult.”* (SW3) *“...And I could see that we were losing them and I couldn’t let that happen.”* (SW8)

4 Conclusion

During crisis, refugees, along with other groups facing social hardship, are the most vulnerable ones. The restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the isolation and vulnerability of refugees and created confusion. Analysis of the research data revealed impact of *Covid-19* on the refugee children and youth - less opportunities due to lack of digital devices, leaving school, young people had to look for jobs to contribute to their families’ well-being. During the Covid -19 pandemic, social workers working with refugees faced the following challenges - significant alterations in routine of social workers and struggling to preserve and keep clients.

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