# THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES FACED BY THE SOCIAL WORKERS OF COTABATO CITY AND MAGUINDANAO PROVINCE DURINGTHE CORONA VIRUS 2019 PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

This study focused on the ethical challenges faced by the Social Workers of Cotabato City and Maguindanao Province during the Corona Virus Disease 2019. The respondent of the study are Registered Social Workers from different field of the profession such as Medical Social Worker, Women Welfare Officer, Municipal Link, Crisis Intervention Worker, Case Worker, Child Welfare Officer, Social Work Educator and Human Right Investigator.

The study used the Phenomenological research design and interviewed the respondent on their experienced ethical challenges during this time of pandemic.

The study concludes that Covid-19 and its measures to control and prevent it, have restricted the services and responsibilities usually carried out by Social Workers in addressing the new needs and demands of the clients. Thus, the study recommended that Social workers need to rethink how to apply professional values and principles in new contexts, Social work agencies should ensure all social workers are supported through regular supervision and meetings. Social work associations should intensify their efforts to collect evidence on conditions for Social workers and the Government should recognize the critical role played by Social workers.

Keywords: Ethical Challenges, Social Work, Corona Virus, Cotabato City, Maguidanao

## INTRODUCTION

According to the study of International Federation of Social Workers, COVID-19 radically changed many aspects of people's lives and livelihoods during the first half of 2020. Conditions have worsened for those with whom Social workers usually work. Social isolation has increased and some social services have been reduced. Social workers have struggled to continue to do their work - having to adapt and innovate to meet new needs and re-prioritize the most urgent and important aspect of their roles.

Social workers across all practice sector are witnessing the devastating individual, interpersonal and societal impacts of COVID-19 (Banks et al., 2020). People across the globe have experienced job loss, financial impacts and exacerbated mental health concerns (Abrams and Szefler, 2020). Social workers

and other front line workers have been called to action to address the range of psycho-social crisis emerging from the pandemic (Amadasun et al., 2020). Social work practice brings an expertise groundded in a person-in-environment perspective; a systemic understanding of institutions and policies; an expertise in the social determinants of health and professional skills to support individuals, groups and communities (Skeketee et al, 2020). More than ever, there is an urgent need to ensure that the Social workers are well supported to respond to client's overwhelming psycho-social needs emerging during pandemic (Beaulieu et al., 2020).

In our country, Social Workers are front liners in delivering social services on on highly affected individuals this pandemic. They lead and manage the distribution of relief goods and financial assistance to the most affected communities and assist the vulnerable sectors to exit in situations of abuse, and helping them to access the services they need (Faye Cura, 2021).

Social workers of Cotabato City and Maguindanao are figuring out how to manage their caseload under COVID-19 while also sustaining their health and the needs of their families. Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue, and the need for self-care in this challenging time is a major ethical challenge faced by the Social workers who are providing services on this time of public health crisis (Guia Calicdan-Apostle, 2021).

Based on this reality, the researcher decided to conducted this study to examined the ethical challenges faced by the Social Workers of Cotabato City and selected areas of Maguindanao province during the Corona Virus Disease 2019 Pandemic and in order for the Social worker associations and the government for immediate interventions and hampering the delivery of quality services to the people in need.

**Theoretical Lens**

This study was anchored to the Utilitarian theory on ethics by Jeremy Betham. This theory is based on one's ability to predict the consequences of an action. The choice that yields the greatest benefits to the Social worker's client is the one that is ethically correct. A utilitarian person performs an actions that benefit the most people, regardless of personal feelings or the societal constraints such as laws. It also takes into account the law and is concerned with fairness. Utilitarian seeks to benefit the case of the client but through the fairest and most just means of process (Banks, 2015).

The Utilitarian theory holds the right action if it is promoting the maximum good; historically, it has at least implicitly and served as a justification for many decisions made by Social Workers. This theory states that when Social workers are facing with conflicting duties, one should choose those actions or decisions that will produce a greatest good. A Social Worker should engage in a system or arrangement of intricate to determine which set of consequences will produce the greatest good for the cases of their clients (Reamer, 2019).

The utilitarian theory promotes the greatest good for the greatest number, considering not only the total quantity of goods produced but also the number of people to whom the goods are distributed (Gewirth, 1978). This two forms of the Utilitarianism can be beneficial to Social Workers especially if they distribute a fixed amount of public services in a way that tends to produce the greatest

aggregate satisfaction (which might entail dispensing relatively the large sums money to few people) or greatest satisfaction for greatest number (which might entail dispensing smaller sums of money to a larger number of people (Banks, 2015).

## METHODS

The researcher used qualitative methodology where the ethical challenges experienced by Social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic is investigated through interviews. Qualitative research allows the construction of meaning for phenomenon experienced by certain individuals or groups capturing valuable insights from people live experience and interpretation of social world (Cresswell, 2007). The particular method of qualitative research used in this study is Phenomenology. A researcher applying Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being research (Green et al., 1997).
Therefore, the used of phenomenological method is seen relevant to the present realities of Social workers facing ethical challenges during this Covid-19 pandemic. This method helped the researcher to understand the specific situation of the Social workers this pandemic by describing their stories and perceptions on ethical challenges (Groewald, 2004)

This study was conducted in Province of Maguindanao and Cotabato City where the Social workers are currently working. There are 5 Social workers from the province of Maguindanao while another 5 from Cotabato City. Most of the Social workers in Maguindanao are employed in Ministry of Social Welfare and Development while the respondents from Cotabato City is from different agencies since Cotabato has both government and non-government institutions.

Gaining broader insights about certain phenomenon rather than developing generalization is the focus of qualitative research (Sandelowsky, 1995) hence it is accepted that even small and non-representative sample gives valuable findings and meaning (Mc Millan and Weyers, 2004). Purposive sampling was applied to reach the target of Ten Social workers for interviews. While purposive sampling allows the researcher to carefully select sample which can adequately contribute to the understanding of the case being studied (Ritchie, et al., 2015).

The respondents of the study are Social Workers from different field of Social work profession. The Researcher selected Social Workers from Academe, Medical, Crisis intervention program, Community, Case management, Administration, Child and Women Welfare Program and in Human Rights Commission. These Social work practitioners are working in micro, mezzo and macro practice.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

## 1. Role of respondents on their current position

The respondent number 1 and 2 shared that their role as a Medical Social Worker is to assess a patient's social, emotional, environmental, financial and support needs; Also, informs other members of the health care team about the factors, which may affect the patient's health and well-being. They also work with family of patients and other service provider agencies to develop a plan for care of the patients in his or her home or other living arrangement.

The respondent number 3 stated that her role as a Woman Welfare Officer is to conduct a Social case study report to walk-in clients through intake, collateral interview, home visit and referrals. She also disseminate and implements projects and other activity proposals for women.

The respondent number 4 and 5 shared that their role as a Municipal Link is to conduct the Family Development Session, ensure the implementation of Support Service Intervention and monitoring of pupils/students for compliance in education and health. They also prepare a Social Case Study Report of the beneficiaries.

The respondent number 6 stated that her role as a Crisis Intervention Worker is to facilitate the clients who are seeking assistance for Individual in Crisis Situation (AICS) and provide assistance based on their presented problem. Tap resources that will help and benefit the clients in resolving their crisis situation. Encourages creative ways of working to resolve the problem/challenge vulnerable people face and aims to promote empowerment , enabling to take action to improve their lives.

The respondent number 7 stated that his role as a Case worker is to conduct and prepare Social Case Study Report on assigned decommissioned combatants based on designated geographical area and agreed mechanism. Undertakes field monitoring for continuing case management and provision of technical assistance to stakeholders. Prepares referral letter, reports and other related documents.

The respondent number 8 stated that her role as a Child Welfare Officer is to conduct interviews, home visits, jail visit, case counselling, case management conferences, handled-court related cases, attends hearings and testifies.

The respondent number 9 cited that his role as a Social Work Educator is to teach courses in the discipline area of Social Work. Develops and design curriculum plans to foster student's learning, stimulate class discussions and ensure student engagement.

The respondent number 10 cited that her role as a Human Right Investigator is to prepare logistical support in the conduct of human rights violation investigation. Prepares necessary documents for financial assistance. Conducting initial

interview for investigation report research and coordinate with the correctional institution for jail and inmate visitation.

## 2. Ethical challenges faced by the Social worker this COVID-19 pandemic

Ethical challenges are situations that create professional concern and difficult to decide on what is the right action to take. If we consider the form of ethical challenges, a distinction can be made between ethical issues, problems and dilemmas (Banks, 2012).

The 10 respondents from different field of Social work profession have encountered various ethical challenges during this time of COVID-19 pandemic. These ethical challenges are divided into six key themes. Every theme has corresponding ethical principles based on National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics.

### 2.1. Concerns on delivery of social services

Social Workers advocate and work towards access and the equitable distribution of social services and resources but the impact of the pandemic has create an situation such as concerns in the delivery of social services. Lockdowns on municipalities hampered the delivery of services to the clients. Infected clients or stakeholders also hindered the delivery of services, an instance for this is the jail visitation and hearings in court.

> *"Due to pandemic, some of the interventions for the clients has been hampered because of the strict boarder lockdown. Our target client for reintegration to their families was postponed because we are not allowed to conduct home visit"* as expressed by respondent number 8.

### 2.2. Concerns on monitoring of clients via phone call.

The Social workers find it difficult to stay in contact with clients on lockdown or with strict protocols places. Some of the client doesn't have access to mobile phone for instance the indigenous people that are living in the Geographical Isolated and *Disadvantaged Areas where signal is very low or not existing.*

> *"I have a beneficiaries that doesn't have access to technology and are I'm not able to monitored them"* as stated by respondent number 4.

> *"I struggled to contact or connect with the Social work students. Not all students can experience high speed internet connection especially for those students who lives in far-flung barangays or even didn't have their own phones for online class"* as expressed by respondent number 9.

> *"I have a client that is being monitored via phone call but it's very hard to assess the conditions without home visitation"* as stated by respondent number 8.

*"Via phone call is very hard because it hampered the ability of the worker to see the non-verbal cues, the experience of empathy and possibility of using touch as a gesture of caring"* as cited by respondent number 1.

*"During the jail visitation, we cannot properly monitor the jail facilities and talk to inmates due to reason of Covid-19 Protocols"* as stated by respondent number 10.

*"We usually have internet interruption during online case conferences and it affects the implementation of services to the clients"* as according to respondent number 7.

## 2.3. Prioritization of Needs, Demands and rights of Clients

Social work is a value-based profession, whose practitioners have a commitment to promote human rights and social justice (NASW, 2005). Ethical challenges arose as Social workers deal with people that are facing difficulties or life-circumstances such as hospitalization and food crisis. The Social workers find it difficult to prioritize the conflicting needs and rights of different individuals, groups and communities.

*"A social worker that is working in Crisis Invention Unit shared that during lockdown there are lot of people are asking for assistance but they cannot catered all of them due to protocols on limitation of numbers in facilities, they need to go revisit again to be prioritize"* based on the statement of respondent number 6.

*"The beneficiary stated that they are more likely to die in starvation instead of the virus"* as expressed by respondent number 3.

*"I have clients who is in need of medical assistance and cannot fully assists or facilitate them due to agency policy of not allowing the staff to visit the clients personally. I instructed them to visit the nearest Crisis Invention Unit to avail a medical assistance"* as stated by the respondent number 7.

*"One of the challenges on the first quarter of the pandemic was the lacking of funds for the relief goods of all the people in the municipality. A lot suffered in crisis since it was sudden, the fund is already allocated to other matters. The effort of LGU in distributing relief goods is not enough to cater the needs of the people"* as according to respondent number 11.

*"We have a colleague that despite of non-travel order he still visited and assisted the in client. Accordingly, the client is in need of medical assistance and cannot accompanied by relative"* as expressed by respondent number 7.

## 2.4. Maintaining of privacy and confidentiality in digital case conferences and mobile phone call monitoring

Social workers worried on the threats that is being brought by digital technology and social media to the practice of many ethical standards including privacy and confidentiality. The interviewed respondents cited that following difficulties in maintaining confidential informations during the Video Conferences and Phone call monitoring with their clients.

*"I also have a client that doesn't have a mobile phone and using only the phone of his neighbor and can hear the personal and confidential informations"* *as stated by respondent number 3.*

*"I have a client who is a victim of abuse by family members and re-engaged in community again. It is really a struggle to monitor via phone since others can hear the statement of the client and might share it to the perpetrator"* as mentioned by respondent.

## 2.5. Adhering to the protocols despite risks for clients and Social workers

The delivery of social services to the clients is very important in this time of pandemic. The respondents have to meet their client in-person and and create anxiety that they might pose a greater risk to the family of the worker and the client. The risk of being infected to the virus create a fear that they might spread the virus to their own household members. They also faced a stigma due to fear that they would introduced the virus to the communities.

*"There are cases that we really need to conduct an interview but we cannot do it due to Covid-19 positive in jail or detention centers and hampered the services for the inmates"* *as stated by respondent number 10.*

*"The agency are not allowing the workers to visit the clients due to risks for for workers and client. We cannot properly assessed the real situation of the client. We can't also refer them due to insufficient data especially for clients with no access to technology"* *as mentioned by respondent number 7.*

*"During the distribution of the Social Amelioration Program and relief goods for indigent, the workers felt so anxious on being exposed to Covid-19 positive since they faced a lot of people"* *as according to respondent number 5.*

## 2.6. Emotional challenges and burn-out for Social Workers

Emotions are always present on Social workers who are working with people that are experiencing pain, loss and injustice. The respondents felt unhappy and disappointed to the other professionals and institutions due to not recognizing and acknowledging the efforts of the Social workers in responding in the needs of people. The overload backlogs and caseloads also give stress and burn-out to the respondents.

*"Despite of the efforts and dedications of the Social workers on helping individuals, groups and communities the profession is still not recognize as frontliners by other professionals"* based on the statement of respondent number 1.

*"The workers are using their own money in purchasing of their masks, alcohol and gloves in pay-out to beneficiaries"* as according to respondent number 5.

*"There are Social workers who are suffering to the psychological effects of pressure and intimidation. There was also workers that are infected by Covid-19"* as mentioned by the respondent number 6.

## 3. Response of the Social workers on the experienced ethical challenges

The Social workers obliged themselves in a manner that is consistent with the philosophy, principles, values, ethics and beliefs of the Social work profession, and should work towards the maintenance and promotion of high standards

*"We worked with community leaders to reinforce message about physical distancing. We also live in the municipality and not going home to our permanent addresses to avoid quarantine of the delays the implementation of services to the beneficiaries"* as shared by the respondent number 4.

*"Due cancellation of home visit, our agency decided to set-up a hotline and virtual meeting through Zoom and Google Meet to monitoring the situation of the reintegrated clients"* as stated by respondent number 6.

*"We provided an online family counselling and ensuring that community leaders understand social hygiene"* as stated by respondent number 9.

## 4. Social workers recommendation to address the ethical challenges

The recommendations of the respondents are intended to assist the Social workers, agencies, associations and government to think of an solutions that will address the ethical challenges that arise whilst practising on period of pandemic.

## 4.1. For Social Workers

*"The Social workers should stick on the ethical principles or code of ethics and make it as a guidelines of practising the profession. It is relevant on this time of crisis"* as stated by respondent number 1.

*"The Social worker should lobby the ethical concerns to some colleagues and program head especially if it brings serious harm and inequity"* as expressed by respondent number 5.

*"Social workers should take care of themselves and avoid too much exhaustion and emotional distress and also do not forget to treat the*

*clients with respect, empathy and compassion" as shared by respondent number 3.*

*"Social workers should address the needs and demands of the client based on the code of ethics and policy of the agency to ensure the delivery of services in a good manner" as cited by the respondent number 7.*

## 4.2. For agencies

*"The agency or employers should ensure that all of Social workers are supported especially those encountering ethical challenges. A closed supervision is a necessary method to help the Social workers" as stated by respondent number 6.*

*"The compensation for Social workers in job order position should be the same to those in regular and contractual. The rendered services in this time of pandemic is also the same and exposed to hazards as well" as stated by respondent number 2.*

*"The agencies should be developing a new guidelines that tackles about operation or working that is safe and ethically acceptable. A guidelines with clients in remote areas is necessary action for privacy and confidential concerns" as expressed by respondent number 8.*

*"The agency should monitor the psychological and moral stress and distress among Social workers and should be given rest and time to bond with family members" as according to respondent number 4.*

*"Any institution should ensure the provision of necessary hygiene equipment and safety measures to enable Social workers to carry out their roles in a way that protects the worker and clients" as shared by respondent number 2.*

## 4.3. For Social worker associations

*"The Social work associations in the country should advocate for the welfare of Social workers this time of pandemic and consolidate all of the ethical challenges and propose a possible solutions" as according to respondent number 5.*

*"The Social work associations should exert an effort in collecting data about the conditions or situation of the Social workers in this time of pandemic" as expressed by respondent number 9.*

*"The Social Work association should also advocate for the same benefits of the Contract of Service and job orders to regular workers especially this time of pandemic that all of the work is same to regulars" as cited by respondent 4.*

## 4.4. For Government

> *"The government should recognize the critical role played by Social workers in providing social services on individuals, families and community  areas"* as shared by Respondent number 1.

> *"The government should acknowledge the social workers as key workers and provide them with necessary protective equipment, materials for monitoring via technology and other resources to do their jobs"* as shared by respondent number 6.

Based on the ethical challenges faced by the respondent Social Workers in this study the following is recommended to address and make an ethical solutions that would in line in the ethical principles of National Association of Social Workers.

1. Social workers need to: rethink how to apply professional values and principles in new contexts; engage in ethical deliberation with colleagues; be aware of impact of exhaustion and emotion on their capacity to see the full ethical implications of situations and to treat people with respect, empathy and compassion; and raise with employers, professional associations and policymakers the serious harms and inequities experienced by people during the pandemic, the difficulties in delivering Social work services and proposals for improvements.

2. Social work agencies should: ensure all social workers and students on placement are supported through regular supervision and team meetings; develop guidance with frontline workers about how to operate safely and ethically; monitor levels of stress among staff and ensure adequate rest and recuperation: provide necessary hygiene equipment and safety measure; advocate to governments and draw attention to gaps in welfare systems and the need for improvements.

3. Associations of Social Workers have key roles in: highlighting systemic factors putting some populations at risk and the vital role of social safety nets; intensifying efforts to collect evidence on conditions for Social workers and service users; advocating strongly with employers and governments to recognize Social work role and provide better guidance for maintaining services; and continuing to develop ethical guidance for Social workers and employers and spaces for peer support and learning about ethical dilemmas in practice.

4. Government needs to: recognize the critical role played by Social workers in providing and supporting social and community-based care during pandemic; acknowledge Social workers as key workers; ensure provision of the necessary hygiene and protective resources; issue clear guideline on how to maintain Social Work services during the pandemic, keeping services open while operating as effectively and safely as possible.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

## Summary of the study

The Covid-19 pandemic has many similarities with other national crises which create risks in delivering services and need to find other ways of working. However, a distinctive feature of this global health pandemic is the requirement for social distancing (maintaining a 1-2 meter distance between people), the risks of shared space (e.g. visiting people), and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) when closer contact is unavoidable. This strikes at the heart of social work: the quality of the relationship between social workers and clients and the importance of face-to-face and personal contact. It challenges social workers' abilities to practice with respect, empathy and confidentiality. The ethical challenges of the study summarized as follows:

Social Workers advocate and work towards access and the equitable distribution of social services and resources but the impact of the pandemic has create an situation in which the workers cannot adhere to the ethical standard in delivering of services to the people in need.

The Social workers find it difficult to stay in contact with clients on lockdown or with strict protocols places. Some of the client doesn't have access to mobile phone especially for clients living in Geographical Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas where signal is very low or not existing.

The Social workers have commitment to promote human rights and social justice. Ethical challenges usually arise as Social workers deal with people that are facing difficult life-circumstances and have to prioritize the conflicting needs and rights of different individuals, groups and communities.

Social workers must be aware that digital technology and social media might pose threats to the practice of many ethical standards including privacy and confidentiality. The interviewed respondents cited that following difficulties in in maintaining confidential information during the Video or Phone call monitoring with their clients.

The delivery of social services to the clients is very important in this time of pandemic. The respondents have to meet their client in-person and as a result it posed a greater risk to the family of the worker and the client. The risk of contracting the virus create a fear that they might infect their own household members. They also faced a stigma due to fear that they would introduced the virus to the communities.

Emotions are always present to Social workers who are working with clients that are dealing with pain, distress and injustices. Some respondents felt sad and disappointed to the other professionals and agencies of not acknowledging the efforts of the Social workers in responding to the needs of people.

## Implications of the study

The study implies that Covid-19 and its measures to prevent and control, have restricted the services and responsibilities usually carried out by Social workers, while generating the new needs and demands of the clients. Social workers have both struggled and worked creatively to meet needs in risky and uncertain situations, and to respect people's rights to privacy and involvement in important decisions about their lives. Policy and practice should be recommended to create better conditions for ethical practice of Social workers during pandemic and crisis situations.

The social workers, associations and government should make a way to address the ethical challenges being encountered by the Social workers this COVID-19 pandemic. The idea of ethical vigilance reminds us of the need to be constantly alert and aware, not only of all the ethical implications of a situation or decision, but also of our own capacity to see the ethical issues at stake, make a considered choice or decision about what to do, and carry it out carefully. It requires what we call 'ethics work'. While it may be very hard to take time to reflect, to have a rest or consult colleagues, it is important to make some time. Some of the ethical challenges faced by individual workers are caused by inadequate, ill thought out and discriminatory policies and guidance and a failure to understand and appreciate the role of social workers. Governments and policymakers also have a responsibility to recognize the vital but often invisible part played by social workers, as key workers, in maintaining the social services and advocating for social development.

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