

THE FRONT LINE WORKER & THE PERSON WITHIN

Reminiscences of relief work during Covid-19 pandemic, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every person's life, mainly emotionally and financially. Being confined indoors in itself was one of the most unnerving feelings and everyone had to face it during the lockdown brought on by the pandemic.

On 23rd March 2020, the Government of India had called for a nation wide lockdown. The first fear that people had was - what of their livelihood? Millions lost their jobs, many reached out for their savings, but for people with low resources, daily-wage workers, small business owners who earned daily and survived on it (pocket-to-mouth) lockdown made them vulnerable to starvation, unable to access healthcare, and a deterioration of mental health that barely has any record.

To support people, organisations and networks of citizens came forward to provide relief and social care services. A larger challenge stood in front of community and social care workers who were already practicing intensive case management with vulnerable persons and community-based programmes focussed on empowerment.

The persons who provided care and support to help others deal with the economic, social and medical impacts of COVID-19 have been commonly called COVID Warriors – warriors fighting the war against the pandemic that seems to be attacking the most vulnerable, beyond the respiratory system. But are they really warriors attacking an enemy, or are they

persons with warmth and compassion who come forward to uphold the essence of humanity? Are they equivalent to an army in a battle or to a Florence Nightingale upholding their calling to reduce human suffering, with their burning lamp of empathy and service?

Who are these people? Why were they involved in activities that required them to be on the ground, interact, touch and closely communicate with people in the middle of a pandemic that requires distancing? Are they fearless? What has been their experience as social workers, as people who have seen struggle, pain and relief?

In March 2020, Iswar Sankalpa conducted a residential workshop with 24 frontline workers of the organisation. The major objectives of the workshop were to acknowledge the contributions of the social workers who have pushed themselves to be on the frontlines during the initial fear of the pandemic; to keep them engaged, connected and optimistic while they have personal, societal, professional, health and family issues to deal with during a pandemic, hold up a mirror, so that participants are able to recognize their own strengths; and to highlight the struggle of the most vulnerable and neglected population of our society – the homeless with psychosocial disabilities.

In the course of the workshop, the participants shared their experience, and delved into their thoughts and beliefs to identify the source of strength in them. The workshop was held in 2 groups, each workshop was conducted across 3 days, facilitated by Sarbani Das Roy, coordinated by Tapan Prodhan and reported by Adrita Ghosh and Sriyanka Roy.

In this document, we explore some of the motivations, challenges and learnings shared during the workshop, mostly raising questions and sharing personal experiences.

Is it a sense of Duty?

Hirak, a community outreach social worker, was unable to get the required permission to travel from Howrah district, where he resides, to Kolkata which is just across the river. He was thus unable to meet his clients and follow-up on whether they were relocated to a safe shelter by the local police or whether they had relocated themselves to a place where food and water was available. Not having this information disturbed him greatly. Driven by compassion and a moral duty to serve persons in need, Hirak was actively engaged in relief distribution around his neighbourhood. After continuous follow-ups with the Police, he was able to avail permission to take his bike to Kolkata. He shared that he did not consider the work as a commitment but he knew that it was his duty, and he was responsible for his clients. A duty beyond his job description, a duty as a care provider, a human being.

Who really comes first- the client, my family or myself?

The *Naya Daur* or the outreach team worked under the most challenging circumstances by engaging in an incessant dialogue within themselves and with the organisation. Majority of the strategies and approaches to the street programme no longer served them, pushing them into deep states of dilemma-

"Should we walk that extra mile in the hope that that missing client will be found or is it a futile attempt which will only eat into our precious field time? Can we extend our caring touch when the client needs it or refrain from doing so for it could be potentially infectious and violate norms of social distancing? Can we stop to breathe some fresh air without the mask or continue marching under the glaring heat in drenched masks? Should we carry the client who is physically ill to the hospital or avoid it for they could have contracted the infection? Should we continue supporting the community caregivers who express their dire need in these tough times or reconsider requests for they could become dependent?"

Are we genuinely unwell or experiencing somatic manifestations of

inherent fear and stress after completing field work?

Nayanika shared, "When I would go to the field, run around, carry heavy relief kits, travel all day wearing a mask, in the heat - at the end of the day I would have a headache. Instantly, I would become paranoid, recounting every activity in the past week, remembering all interactions I had, asking myself 'Was I wearing a mask? Did I use enough sanitizer? Should I have dinner with the family?' It was difficult to balance these fears and still be rational. I think that tiredness has physical manifestations, and we have to feel tired without being paranoid. Over the period of a few months of working during the pandemic, I was able to put these fears away. Be careful and surrender—what will happen, will happen— that is probably the only way to stay sane."

Will I be carrying the infection back to my family once I return from the field or am I overthinking and shunning my duty and responsibility as a social worker?

Debarpiya, a community outreach social worker shared that he would go to the field everyday but wouldn't interact with his family members when he came back. He has a young nephew of seven years in the house, for the longest time he wouldn't play with him fearing that he would risk his nephew's health. It disturbed him greatly. Since his nephew had been born, Debarpiya's days ended with his nephew jumping all over him, playing and laughing together. The distance is new and the consideration is high.

Nadim, a community outreach social worker, echoed the same thought, the price to pay during the pandemic as a frontline worker has been to maintain distance from the family. "Maybe, if I stayed the weekdays at a place away from my family, I would be more at peace." The thought is to keep the family safe. "I had to enter a COVID ward as one of my patients was quite unwell. While going into the ward, I did not even think about it. I had my face shield, gloves, masks etc. But I

didn't want to go back home. That night I slept in a separate room. I had long conversations in my head, and the next morning I held my son again."

The constant conversation in the mind - rationalising fears

Many of the social workers at Iswar Sankalpa shared a common thought, "*ei bhoy ta ke niye cholte hobe*" (We have to live with this fear). The conversations and dilemmas are constantly playing in the head. **Mrinmoyee**, shared that she had rationalised the fear, "*I would have to go out of the house for household chores as well. I could contract the virus from there. I have had to go to the hospital multiple times in the past year. I could contract the virus from there. I would have to leave the house either way, and my work is for people who have no family. We are their family, there is really no question of being selfish here. I practice safety protocols that is all I am confident about.*" As the team coordinator she had stressed on creating a space for her team members to share their fears in team meetings as their ventilation was important. The team had supported each other when these dilemmas had arisen, providing words of encouragement, caution, rationalisations and sometimes, solution.

Tapan Proadhan, the reintegration officer and Women's Collective coordinator, shared, "*Just before I leave home I think intensely about the risk I posed to my family members. I have elderly parents and in-laws, my son is a toddler, am I doing them right? What if I bring the virus back home? But then I remind myself that I have a responsibility towards other people as well, they may not be "my family" but they are my family - they are a son longing to go back home to his parents, a mother to her children. Then I leave home.*" He smiles. He then adds, "*Once I am out of the house, I forget about everything. I wear my mask and keep my hands clean. I wouldn't call my work a duty, it is a calling! I have to serve people, which I do through my work in the organisation. I am clear about that, it gives me faith and guides me, eta amar manushikgota (this is my mentality). While going back home, I start the conversation*

in my head again, 'Am I risking my family?'. Sometimes I think that maybe I should rent a house somewhere close to my workplace and stay here, go back only during the weekend."

But he knows that there is no way to balance his roles, he needs to be careful and be in equal parts a social worker, a father, a husband, a son, and take care of his mental health as well.

He stresses, though, that his mental health was also related to the wellbeing of his clients. "*So I play these thoughts in my head and keep doing my work. My work is also to think about these things.*" he says smiling. Perhaps the smile is one that says that there is no answer to the risk-taking behaviour that every person feels obligated to take during the pandemic whether it is for work, or for household chores.

How has this period of social and physical distance defined the relationship of a service provider and their client?

Debapriya, believes his clients, who live on the streets with mental illnesses, are his friends first and clients later. His relationship with them is defined by smiles, laughter and other means of non-verbal communication. Since the pandemic he has had to maintain a significant distance while interacting with the clients, concealing his smile with a mask, which has led to a downgrade in the friendliness that he used to show. After the Lockdown, many of his clients didn't recognize him as they were displaced during the Lockdown which led to a discontinuation of their treatment and eventually, relapse. He shared that he needs to relearn how to build relationships during the pandemic as his methods from the last four years stand severely challenged now.

Basanti, a vocational skills trainer, has been providing training in stitching, sewing and soft skills for mental and social recovery to residents of Sarbari, Marudyan, and clients of the Urban Mental Health Programme. During the Lockdown, she saw, with her own eyes how self-

sufficient the women residents of Sarbari were. She witnessed their capacity to take responsibility grow manifold when the residents carried out complex tasks with exceptional efficiency, which perhaps before the pandemic they were not trusted with.

During the lockdown Iswar Sankalpa distributed relief kits to persons in need of food security. These were wholesome relief kits that contained materials to ensure food security, menstrual hygiene, general hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Therefore, each kit also contained four masks which were made at the vocational training unit of Iswar Sankalpa.

In the months of April and May (2020), the vocational trainers were unable to go to the Unit located in the women's shelter and supervise this monumental task, the residents planned and executed the creation of over 3000 masks amongst themselves. Measuring, cutting, stitching, washing, counting, packing were all done by them with occasional guidance over video calls. People management, time management and resource management were all responsibilities the residents carried. Prior to the pandemic all bulk orders were managed by the trainers and the trainees were assigned tasks. This period indeed taught the trainers a lesson of **letting go** and believing in the capabilities of the trainees in its true sense.

Tapasi, a community outreach worker, remembers every little detail about all her clients—whenever they need anything she will reach out to mobilise all her resources to meet those needs. But the lockdown was cruel enough to take Tapasi away from those people who meant the world to her. Tapasi had the hardest time during the pandemic not knowing about her clients' whereabouts. Not only the pandemic but also the supercyclone Amphan made Tapasi lose a few clients who had changed their stay to somewhere else. Her clients are no less than her closest loved ones, and getting distanced from them pained Tapasi the most.

Hirak's greatest loss during this time was one of his clients who died of dehydration. Hirak felt that he could have saved the person if he had had the chance to take him to the hospital in time. He felt—The man couldn't survive because of the care he failed to provide. Hirak took the matter very seriously and was **deeply disturbed**.

Are we driven by a personal agenda?

Nisha has been working in Iswar Sankalpa since 2011. She shared that she has always been available when needed, either during times of crisis at hospitals, having to provide her services when the shelters were short of caregivers, whenever. Even during the Lockdown, when there was an emergency situation in the men's shelter she was present. She felt good and a sense of ownership in her mind when the organisation acknowledged her contributions. She felt her contribution and efforts were valued correctly.

Shamima, the rehabilitation officer of the Urban Mental Health Programme (UMHP), expressed that she felt she could work because of the people; she thought she always carried their *dua* (blessings) with her and because of their prayers she could serve many people. Shamima has shown exceptional service during the Lockdown, she visited the clients of UMHP in her neighbourhood, provided counselling to those in need, coordinated multiple relief distribution around the area, mobilised other resources that Iswar Sankalpa could not provide, and personally provided Eidi to scores of families who couldn't afford it during the month of Ramzan during the Lockdown.

Debapriya was honest enough to say that he did not do his duties just for official purposes but for his compulsion to get out of his home. So, when he saw the chance to go out for relief work and distribute medicines to persons across Kolkata, he grabbed it without a second thought and continued his responsibilities very efficiently. He shared that even though his efforts were appreciated he knows why he did what he did.

Social workers have families, children, households and responsibilities to their clients, pushing boundaries to be all-rounders in the midst of a pandemic.

Nisha, although she had always been a hard-working woman, never realized the extent to which she could push her boundaries to serve the ones in need. She had also learned the art of prioritization while dealing with multiple complex tasks. She had single-handedly executed all her responsibilities in her office, her home and with her family. Nisha looks forward to maintaining such a strong character henceforth in her life. Like all the working parents she was managing household chores, balancing a toddler child's education, engagement and development, and managing professional work wherein living close to the office she often had to step up and bear multiple people's responsibilities.

Mental Health is important - Creativity, friends and family

Before the Coronavirus dominated our lives, many of us may have taken human interaction for granted. Despite the frustrations of daily confinement, it's important to reflect on what our family and friends truly mean to us. As restrictions begin to lift, seeing those we haven't been able to connect with face-to-face will feel that much more special.

During the Lockdown, **Debapriya** found himself in a new light where he was unaware of his creative skills. The boredom of staying inside compelled him to take up a pen and paper and start doodling. Colours, shapes and designs would come to him naturally as he sat with his sketchbook and he explored some more on the internet.

Dipak, who works in the capacity of a cashier at the organisation but has been involved in relief distribution during the pandemic shared that prior to the Lockdown his whole group of friends who have been together since childhood, would meet almost everyday at the end of the day. He says, "We work in different

sectors, but at the end of the day when we meet and discuss our day, familial problems, work-related problems, jokes, politics, sports anything, it provides a kind of relaxation that I was not aware of. Only when we stopped meeting during the Lockdown I realized how much I rely on these meetings for my mental health and peace. We are not associated with any kind of club or group. Just pure friendship. I value it much more today."

Kalu shared that being forced to stay home during the lockdown, he learned to be patient and realized the importance of spending time with his family. He has been more involved in his four year old child's education and has seen him grow more closely. He hopes to maintain this habit of spending more quality time with his family, his son, instead of hanging out with his friends, or getting engrossed in community matters during his free time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for some employees to shine and demonstrate the incredible value they bring to our organization. They accepted new challenges that **brought new ideas to the table**, helped push the organization forward during times of crisis and set a positive example for others.

"Confidence esche j ami fore front e thakte pari." (I have gained confidence that I can be on the forefront of things) shared **Manorama**, resident caregiver at the women's shelter. She explained further that before the Lockdown she was dependent on the shelter supervisor for guidance and instructions in the regular functioning of the shelter. But during the Lockdown when no staff member came to the shelter for two months, during which Cyclone Amphan ravaged through the city breaking down a boundary wall and water pipelines in the shelter, she was making decisions on her own, leading the way. She was managing donations that were being sent to the shelter, the logistics of ration utilisation, medical emergencies, her team of four other resident caregivers, apart from engaging the distressed women of the shelter who were collectively reacting to the Lockdown. This

leadership allowed her to see herself as more empowered.

Toton, resident caregiver at the men's shelter, was faced with a serious challenge when two other caregivers of the men's shelter quite literally abandoned him after Cyclone Amphan. They left because they couldn't reach their families in their hometowns. Since Toton had to face the massive challenge alone, the situation made him self-reliant and stronger than ever. He realized that he was more than capable of handling tough circumstances without the help of anyone else. Toton learned how to cook and started cooking regularly for all the shelter inmates. He was also lucky enough to be assisted by Kalu and Debapriya, which he considered significant. Toton is looking forward to retaining his newfound self with a lot of confidence, stamina and mental strength for the betterment of his personal and professional life.

What is the cost of being a social worker?

Nisha witnessed a heavy downfall of humanity during this time. Since she primarily dealt with sick patients, she was cornered by her neighbours and other residents in her area who would change their route if she was passing by and leave the area when she went to collect water at the community water tap. She took it in her stride because she knew that the risks she was taking were for the welfare of other people, therefore, the misinformed judgements of her neighbours were ignored. The stigma and the ostracisation was a price she had to pay for her service during the pandemic, she shared.

Nabanita, coordinator of the Urban Mental Health Programme, contracted COVID-19 in April 2021. She shared that she spent over four months visiting the office of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to follow-up on the renewal of an MoU which was an absolute necessity for the continuation of the programme. She was aware of the risks she was taking, she took all precautions yet when she contracted COVID-19, her 5 year old daughter too

contracted the virus, "I know she got it from me. I was bordering on guilt when I saw her suffering. 'Did my daughter suffer because of me?' I was lucky I didn't suffer much, but to see her was painful."

She further shared, "In the initial months the fear of the virus kept me indoors but when I realised that the Coronavirus was here to stay I realized I had to move out. The work cannot stop. Our clinics are in the Ward Health Units, it is crowded. Some of the COVID testing rooms are right next to our mental health clinics but we have to continue, I have to continuously motivate my team. But when I got COVID I was wondering how risky risk really is, as a social worker you have to take that risk."

What drives a person to continue their service despite personal loss?

Paulina is a resident caregiver at the shelter for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities. She took complete care of the people at the shelter who got sick and never thought twice before taking them to the hospitals. She stayed with them as long as they needed, till the doctors came to attend, or even if the doctors refused, she waited, insisted and returned to the shelter with the patients but never for once gave up on them. She lost her uncle during the pandemic. But since Paulina was responsible for so many people in the shelter, she could not just leave them and visit her home. She felt a great sense of loss for being unable to meet her close ones during their last days. Apart from her immediate family members, Paulina was also the unfortunate witness of the death of one of the residents of our shelter. Being involved day in and day out at the shelter, Paulina developed a strong attachment with people living there, and she was shattered to see one of them pass away. But she did not stop for a day, providing her services of care and support to those recovering.

The social workers of Iswar Sankalpa have shared their experiences of working in the community, with persons with psychosocial disabilities, in the midst of

the pandemic. It has contributed to their growth, but also made them question fundamental realities of their work. We see a person behind the social worker, a person with fears, learnings, motivations, stories, dilemmas and above all a spirit that roams with the burning lamp of compassion, empathy and social responsibility.

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