Organizational and Legal Aspects of Changes in Social Work Management During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Analysis in the Perspective of Qualitative Research in the Example of Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant changes in the functioning of social services in Europe and in the world, and these changes affected both developing and developed countries. The aim of this article is to answer the question of how these changes are evaluated by social workers themselves.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The basis for the article was the analysis of: 1/ the results of the original research project 'Social work during the Covid-19 pandemic' conducted in 2020-2021 in the Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland, 2/ legal regulations regarding the organisation of work in social welfare institutions. 12 social workers from various institutions of the social welfare sector took part in the qualitative research. The interviews focused on two main areas, i.e. 1/ the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the organisation of work (including the emerging of changes in legal regulations) and 2/ the impact on the psychological comfort of work, stress level and possible changes in interpersonal relations of the employees and their charges. Conclusions resulting from the second of the mentioned research areas have been shown in this article.

Findings: The introduced legal and organisational regulations resulting from sanitary restrictions significantly influenced the methods of social work in social welfare institutions. These changes enabled the implementation of key tasks of social workers towards their charges and at the same time ensured a relatively high level of health security. By means of the research, thinking of maintaining the continuity of the support provided, the organisation of social work during the pandemic can be evaluated as positive. Nevertheless, the experience of the first waves of the pandemic shows that it is necessary to develop methods of remote social work in those areas where it is possible.

Practical implications: In the light of the analysed research material, three recommendations are particularly important. The first one is methodological, it is recommended to treat the analysed qualitative research as a pilot study for research projects with a nationwide (in relation to Poland) and European area, taking into account the differences and similarities in the organisation of social assistance systems in particular countries. The second concerns a deep evaluation of the effectiveness of the introduced legislative regulations regarding the methods of providing support, and at the same time protecting social workers against epidemiological threats. The last of them is educational: it is recommended to develop and organise standardised training for employees of the social welfare sector, including social workers 1/ in the area of sanitary and epidemiological procedures that should be

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implemented in emergencies, 2/ in the area of application and adaptation of ICT technologies for remote social work, 3/ in the area of dealing with stress.

Originality/value: *The article draws attention to the experiences of employees of social welfare institutions in the pandemic. Interpersonal relations with charges, personal meetings, face-to-face communication are one of the most important tools in social work. The Covid-19 pandemic inevitably led to a situation in which the health security of employees and their charges was in some way opposed to the social security of the latter. The introduced rules of social distance made it difficult, and often prevented, the use of useful methods and techniques used in social work. In order to analyse the organisational and legal solutions used in Poland during the first waves of the pandemic, the results of the original qualitative research with social workers (Pomeranian Voivodeship) were used.*

Keywords: *Social work management, organizational changes, social services, Covid-19 pandemic.*

JEL classification: *I18, N30, L38, Z18.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

1. Introduction

Social work is one of the most important spheres in which the state provides its citizens with help. Many European countries introduced new regulations in order to regulate social work during COVID-19 pandemic. For example, British government instituted new laws concerning house visits and remote working of social workers. Conterminously, Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy issued a recomendation for welfare institutions to provide services remotely and, at the same time, prepared a plan of action in the event of a facility closure.

On the other hand, in Spain social workers were considered crucial workers and were given speacial guidelines regarding their work during the pandemic. Generally speaking, many countries, not only European, had to adapt laws regulating the organisation and management of social work, adjusting them to new circumstances and challenges connected with the pandemic.

The key objective of these decisions was to ensure the continuity of the social services and at the same time health protection of both social workers and their clients. Changes in legal regulations were mainly dictated by essential epidemiological protection of social workers and clients, and therefore has influenced changes in the way social services are managed and ways in which social work services could be provided.

Most of the necessary legal and organisational changes required social workers to adapt quickly to new conditions in terms of communication with clients, organisation of work time and adapting social work methods to the dynamics of the health care sector. Social assistance systems, not only in Europe, not only in Poland

but also all over the world – had not been previously prepared for such radical changes.

2. The Need to Change the Organisation of Social Work During a Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social work has become even more crucial as the pandemic has affected people's daily lives in many ways. It also touched those people who had already needed help and support. In response to the pandemic, the Polish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy has introduced several regulations that regulated issues related to social work.

The most important of them include: Covid law (Act of March 28, 2020), Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy of March 31, 2020 on the organisation of social work during the time of epidemic threat and Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy of April 23, 2020 on detailed rules for granting and paying assistance benefits in connection with the occurrence of COVID-19.

They regulated the organisation of social work and introduced changes in the rules for granting social benefits. The changes concerned e.g., possibility of remote or rotating work (Ornacka and Mirewska, 2020; Khan *et al.,* 2020), or the method of verifying eligibility for benefits. Continuity was an important message for the introduction of the new regulations providing assistance by institutions appointed for this purpose.

Similar activities were also undertaken in other European countries. During the Covid-19 pandemic, France has made several changes to social work to meet the challenges of the health crisis. Social workers had to adapt to social distancing, restrictions on public gatherings and new health legislation. Social services also tried to maintain close contact with their beneficiaries, using remote communication technologies (Grima *et al.,* 2020).

In addition, actions to protect the social workers themselves have been taken, including ensuring appropriate personal protective equipment (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Sante, 2020a; 2020b). In Germany, social workers, on the one hand, had to follow the rules to contain the pandemic, such as distancing rules and hygiene measures. On the other hand, in order to maintain contact with clients, alternative forms of support, such as telephone or internet advice, have been used increasingly. As N. Meyer and E. Alsago (2021) point out work from home was a particularly important form during the first and second lockdown.

Special measures have also been taken to protect and support groups particularly vulnerable (Heising, 2020), such as the homeless and the elderly. There was also a discussion on the ways of educating social workers during the pandemic, in such a

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way to prepare them for the use of new tools and methods, useful during the time of a public health crisis (Hohmann, 2021). As social work researchers emphasise, also in England 'the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a major transformation of health and social care' (Kingstone *et al.,* 2022), including in management and organisation of social work.

The changes introduced included increased use of technology for remote support and services, and necessity of adaptation of social workers to new regulations and safety measures such as social distancing and personal protective equipment. The key objective of changes in the management of the social assistance system, not only in the countries mentioned above, was to enable social workers to continue their work and maintain public trust in the profession of social worker. It is also worth mentioning that since the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, most countries have made vaccinations compulsory for healthcare workers, but not always for social workers.

3. Research Methodology

The research project 'Social work during the Covid-19 pandemic' was carried out in Poland in 2020-2021, in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The study was conducted in a qualitative strategy, with 12 social workers, using the In-Depth Interview (IDI) technique, using an original research tool. The respondents were recruited from various social welfare institutions: Social Welfare Centers (OPS), Municipal Family Support Centers (MOPR) and Social Welfare Homes (DPS). Due to the pandemic, the study was carried out online.

Social workers shared their experiences on everyday work in the sanitary regime. The aim of the study was to identify their experiences during the first and second waves of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Thematic analysis revealed that there are many important areas, of which this article focuses on two: 1/ organisation and management of social work in the context of new legal regulations introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2/ mental burdens of social workers resulting from the pandemic itself and/or changes in facility management.

The collected data was analysed referring to the assumptions of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2022) using the Constant Comparative Analysis Method (Glasr and Strauss, 1967; Fram, 2013). As a result of using the CCA method, new topics which emerged as a result of coding were compared and verified in a recursive process.

The data analysis was partly carried out by means of the MAXQDA® software from VERBI Software GmbH. The participation of social workers in the study was voluntary, non-commercial, and the respondents were informed about the possibility of quoting their (anonymized) statements in scientific studies of the collected material.

4. Evaluation of Changes in the Management of Social Work by Means of the Opinions of the Respondents

According to the majority of surveyed social workers, the introduced regulations facilitated work with clients to some extent, and in smaller towns the work was smoother, also because of better familiarity with the charges.

> *Legal regulations partially facilitate work with the client. We are a much smaller unit than in cities, many people know each other, so work flows quite smoothly. OPS-01*

There were also much more critical opinions, emphasising the incomplete effectiveness of the new legal regulations. According to some of the respondents, the changes were introduced too quickly and chaotically, and the provisions of the Anti-Crisis Shield were not always in line with the laws, which was confusing. Social workers expected the introduction of more tailored regulations, which could facilitate their work in a situation of a pandemic crisis.

> *I have the impression that the legal regulations introduced 'quickly' were not effective in any way. There were too many of them introduced too fast. The provisions of the anti-crisis shield were often inconsistent with the act we are working on [the Social Welfare Act of 12 March 2004], which started chaos and confusion. These regulations were quite incomprehensible, and when some Training Center prepared appropriate training on them, a new anti-crisis shield was introduced in a short time, which made the information already incomplete. I expected a clear and tailored change in the regulations. OPS-04*

Social workers appreciated the possibility of participating in backgroud survey over the phone, introduced in the Act of March 31, 2020 (Art. 15o), mentioned before, which gave them a chance to provide help without exposing themselves to illness.

> *When it comes to social workers, it is good to introduce the possibility of conducting a background survey over the phone, because you do not have to expose yourself or the client to the illness, moreover, thanks to this, help can be granted and it does not have to be postponed. OPS-02*

Nevertheless, remote work for social workers or family assistants has not always been possible due to the lack of the necessary infrastructure. The extension of the validity period of disability certificates was positively received (the Act of 31 March 2020, Art. 15h), but it was emphasised that the time for settling individual cases that required interinstitutional cooperation should also be extended.

Some of the respondents also pointed out that although changes in the regulations and management of social work during the pandemic were necessary, they only

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seemingly facilitated it. However, they had a negative impact on the quality of communication with clients and often also on the effects of social workers' activities, as stated in the quote:

> *Changes in judicature, (...) the issue of conducting background surveys over the phone - all these decisions seem to be a facilitation at first glance, but during the proceedings it turned out that the problems did not disappear, but were rather postponed. After all, an interview made on the basis of a telephone conversation is really no interview at all. The social worker, cut off from the client, from their environment, conditions, is unable to determine what is really going on with him. OPS-08*

In the interviews it was also indicated that social workers lacked full access (e.g. from the their home) to the ICT infrastructure of the social assistance system (e.g. POMOST), which reduced the comfort and effectiveness of remote work.

Despite the problems related to the access to technological infrastructure, sanitary rigor and restrictions in contacts with clients, the surveyed social workers unanimously claimed that their facilities (OPS and MOPR) kept their organisational functionality. This assessment appears in all IDI interviews:

> *Actions taken to maintain the functioning of the organisation allowed for the safe provision of help to all the charges. OPS-03*

> *I believe that the facility where I work has managed to withstand a difficult and dynamic situation, and social welfare clients are secured. MOPR-01*

> *Despite the introduced regime and restrictions, there were no problems in the functioning of the centre. All customers received support and help. Background surveys were conducted by telephone. No one was deprived of support from the centre. All benefits were granted and transferred on time. OPS-01*

In the context of social work management in the surveyed social welfare institutions during the pandemic, these statements are representative and particularly worth quoting:

> *During the pandemic, the facility was well prepared – according to the training requirements. DPS-01*

> *The preparation of our facility was and is good. We owe it to the manager, who took care of certain things before the pandemic spread 'for good', as well as to a well-coordinated team in which we support and help each other. OPS-08*

All customer groups were provided with sufficient access to the assistance provided due to the fact that each person reporting to the centre received the assistance they needed. Despite orders and information that clients will be admitted by appointment or only in the case of a 'serious' situation, we accepted all clients, regardless of the case they came to us with (...). OPS-04

This may prove both the high organisational culture in specific facilities, good interpersonal relations between employees, but also the creativity and adaptability of the employees themselves and the management staff. C. Achard comes to similar conclusions when analysing the experiences of social workers in France. In 'Le travail social en France au défi de la crise sanitaire: Ruptures, permanences et (dis)continuités', he writes that: 'professionals in the sector were able to take advantage of the freedom left to them, relying on their expertise in terms of expertise' (Achard, 2020, p. 59).

5. Some Problems Generated by Changes in the Organisation of Social Work

The qualitative nature of the study does not give grounds for formulating statistical generalisations. As B. Smith (2018) states: "Statistical types of generalizability that inform quantitative research are not applicable to use for qualitative research and to judge the value of it. (…) Qualitative research can be generalizable, just not in the same way as quantitative research. (…) Qualitative researchers should not though be obliged to always seek generalizability." In this context, I will refrain from generalising, but it is worth pointing out that there is the convergence of some of the conclusions with the qualitative research conducted in England (Kingstone *et al.,* 2022), as well as with other European and Polish studies of social work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

English social workers have faced several challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main challenges was the lack of resources to do the job effectively, which limited their ability to provide support and services to their clients. In addition, many of them have experienced poor mental health and burnout, especially after making significant sacrifices during the pandemic. The increased use of technology for remote work has also raised ethical issues related to maintaining trust, privacy and confidentiality of interpersonal relationships in social work.

On the one hand, these relationships have been constrained by the measures taken to contain the pandemic, such as distancing rules and hygiene measures. On the other hand, increased demands and stress led to tensions and difficulties at work.

According to research conducted in Poland during the pandemic, social workers had difficulties with performing their work remotely (Boryczko and Dunajska, 2021, p. 67). The research shows that employees of Social Welfare Centres and nursing homes had problems resulting from the lack of direct contact with clients and the

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limitation of assistance in situations of crisis. In addition, remote work has turned out to be difficult for older and disabled people who find it difficult to use modern technologies. The problems resulted not only from digital exclusion, but also, it seems, from fear of infection (Necel, 2021). As indicated by the participants of the study 'Social work during the COVID-19 pandemic':

> *There were situations where families, despite previous cooperation with a family assistant, did not want to let them into their apartments or answer phone calls, despite court orders. OPS-06.*

> *New ways of gaining information should be sought, because some clients ignore social workers' requests. OPS-01*

One of the significant problems pointed out by social workers in various countries was stress. The increase in the level of stress resulted from the pandemic itself - in the health sense - but also from the necessary changes in the organisation of social work. Social workers, as responsible professionals, were concerned about their own health and that of their clients, as well as about the quality of their help.

> *I think that working in a pandemic is involves increased stress, mostly because of the fear of getting sick. OPS-01*

> *Like most people, I have concerns about the threat to my health, and even more about the transmission of the disease to my loved ones. The change in the way work is done, giving up everyday activities, the need for self-discipline, daily checking for dynamic changes in regulations and the fear that I will not catch up with something make me constantly tense. I also sometimes have the impression that the work I do in the recommended way, i.e. limiting contact with clients, has a negative impact on its quality and efficiency. OPS-05*

> *For me, working during a pandemic is very stressful due to general restrictions and those directly related to social work. OPS-02*

Limited or no personal contact with clients, and at the same time fears related to changes in legal regulations, were stressful factors. It should be noted that the methodological standards of social work were not previously adapted to the maintaining of social distance and remote work. In the case of many groups, e.g. helping homeless people, despite the experience from the pandemic period, remote work is simply not possible.

Unfortunately, despite the increase in stress levels, most social workers in Poland have not been covered by professional psychological support and supervision (Necel, 2021; 2022). The participants of the qualitative research I analysed also pointed to the lack of support in this matter. Working in the so-called nursing homes,

where residents are offered not only social support, but also medical and nursing services.

In Poland, such facilities are organisationally subject to the social assistance system, but the sanitary regime implemented in them during the pandemic was the same as in health care facilities. These procedures also concerned the social workers employed there. One of the respondents described it as follows:

> *My and other people's work is exposed to increased stress due to health risks, working conditions, fatigue, etc. Long working hours day and night, constantly wearing hazam suits, masks, goggles, caps and gloves is not a pleasure, wearing the suit is very warm and difficult, let alone performing nursing and caring activities, especially for people lying down who need help all the time. DPS-01*

Social workers pointed to not only the need to change the regulations and adapt the social assistance system to the new circumstances and the need to adapt assistance activities to the new conditions, but also the need to increase psychological support for social workers.

6. Conclusion and Recomendation

By the respondents' statements, the direction of legal and organisational changes introduced in the field of social work and its management can be perceived as positive. It should be recognised that these changes were not always introduced quickly enough. Social work as such is based on direct interpersonal contacts of social workers with their clients - and in this area, the sanitary regime is an enormous limitation, and remote work (even where it can be used) is not an ideal equivalent to a face-to-face meeting. This may have a negative impact on the effectiveness of providing assistance, and at the same time caused an increase in the level of stress in the social workers themselves.

In the context of the study, the following recommendations, which seem important because of the possibility of the occurance of further pandemic in the future, can be formulated.

First of all, it is worth treating the described qualitative research as a pilot study for projects with a national and European scope. In the latter case, it is necessary to take into account the differences in the organisation of social assistance systems in particular countries.

Secondly, it is recommended to carry out an deep analysis and assessment of the effectiveness of the introduced legislative regulations regarding the methods of providing help, and at the same time protecting social workers against epidemiological threats. Such research should be carried out by interdisciplinary

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research teams consisting of sociologists, lawyers, social workers and specialists in the field of health security.

The last recommendation has an educational nature: it concerns the development and organisation of standardised trainings for employees of the social assistance sector, including social workers 1/ in the area of sanitary and epidemiological procedures to be implemented in emegencies of health nature, 2/ in the field of application and adaptation of ICT technologies to remote social work, 3/ in the field of dealing with stress, especially in the face of possible deficits in access to professional psychological help in case of a pandemic.

7. Limitations

Because of the use of non-standardized research tools, the results of the research are exploratory and descriptive, and thus cannot be compared directly with the results of other qualitative research. Nevertheless, it is possible to relate the thematic trends emerging during the analysis to qualitative analysis conducted in other studies, as was done above. They can also be treated as a supplement to quantitative research conducted on statistically representative research trials.

8. Conflicts of Interests

The author declares that he has no personal connections or any competing financial interests that could influence the research described in this article.

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