# “We were lucky, we have built a strong community around us.” A Case of Feminist Community Social Work During COVID-19 Crisis

**Abstract**

Young women facing complex situations of social exclusion find the challenging transition to adulthood even more complicated than other young people. Nonetheless, there is scant research on the work of welfare organizations that support young women during their transition to adulthood in times of crisis. The coronavirus epidemic provides a case study of how an organization for socially excluded young women copes during an emergency. The purpose of this research is to examine how a framework for young women optimizes the social and community network it has built to provide an effective response to a societal crisis.

Findings

[fill in]

Applications

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Keywords [fill in]

**Introduction**

The transition to adulthood is a major developmental stage for every young person. During this period, social duties and roles alter dramatically. Poverty can undoubtedly affect the experiences of leaving home, marriage, and parenthood. Compared to their higher-income peers, low-income youth are more likely to leave their childhood home before age 18, but once after reaching 18, are *less* likely to leave (CITATION NEEDED). Although they are more likely to become parents before reaching age 25, they are less likely to marry (CITATIONS). These outcomes can lead to adverse effects and potentially limit opportunities throughout life (Guldi, Page & Stevens, 2007). While in recent years, the phenomenon of young adults “boomeranging” back to the parental home has been observed (Stone et al., 2014), not all populations have the option to do this, especially when the parents’ home is a source of difficulties.

Among low-income youth, young women without family support, including a security net and place to live, face more challenging transitions to adulthood, affecting their ability to attain financial self-sufficiency (Kendig, et al., 2014). Furthermore, such women experience higher rates of poverty that increase once they leave home (Aassve et al., 2006). They also face unstable employment, more incidents of violence, and higher arrest rates. They find it difficult to complete their education and often marry and start families younger than do their peers, further impeding their educational and professional advancement. Finally, having less familial and social support, they tend to suffer more emotional difficulties (Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Matud et al., 2020).

Research addressing the role of the community in young women’s lives is relatively scant (CITATIONS), and even when studied, social context is often not considered a significant factor (CITATIONS) despite widespread acknowledgment that community plays a key role in integrating and reintegrating socially excluded people and populations (Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014; Walker, et al., 2016). For example, Liu et al. (2020) found that people suffering from higher levels of social exclusion are more influenced by community support in general, especially when participating in health-related interactions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women were likelier than men to find themselves at home caring for children or infirm relatives, and many consequently lost employment (Alon et al., 2020), leading to pandemic-induced declines in earnings and occupational status greater than those of men (Kabeer et al., 2021; Kristal, Yaish, 2020), as well as gender-based violence (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Solórzano, et al., 2020). For women who experience poverty, the isolation of widespread emergencies like the pandemic can aggravate the already harsh consequences of gender inequalities, social exclusion, and patriarchal dominance (Bourgault et al., 2021). Such impacts are well-documented. After gathering data from 16 countries concerning social work practices and policies during COVID-19, Dominelli et al. (2021, p. 5) concluded that: “The most damaging effects of the pandemic resulting from various state responses to it have impacted most on children and vulnerable families.”

Given the special vulnerability of women, particularly young women experiencing social exclusion even outside large-scale emergencies, it is worthwhile to consider how feminist community social work (FCSW) can offer needed support. Using [INSERT METHODS], this study explores how one organization for socially excluded young women mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the young women it serves.

**Feminist Community Social Work**

[intro needed]

**Community-based Social Work**

Community-based social work was first conceived in the 1950s [in any place in particular?] and its development has accelerated since the 1960s and 1970s. As a complement to individual and group counseling, it is a field of expertise based on holistic observation and action, on the participation of the community in which the social workers practice, and on social activism and policy change. Conceptually based on Freire’s critical education [REFERENCE FREIRE?], it strives to develop community members’ critical awareness and knowledge [FOR WHAT PURPOSE?] (McCusker, 2020). Women have continually been involved in refining community social work and have integrated feminist social work into it. They have contributed to the adoption of the notions of praxis, which express critical approaches to understanding and analyzing changing realities, including changing speech norms, to articulate a unique voice in the struggle to recognize power and empowerment in processes of change. In addition, they have emphasized the need for political involvement, the integration of the idea that “the personal is political,” and the struggle to reduce oppression (Fook, 2022).

**Feminist Social Work**

Feminist social work is based on critical feminist theories emphasizing the influence of gender on inherent power relationships as a material factor in the experience of women suffering social exclusion (Adams, et al., 2009; Dominelli, 1995; Fook, 2016; Orme, 2009). It further emphasizes intersectionality, positing that when a person exists on the fringes of society in one sphere, there is a significant chance that they are on the fringes of other spheres as well [REFERENCE?]. Consequently, there is a multiplicity and diversity of life experiences and lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991).

Rooted in Black feminist thought and scholar-activism and introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality has advanced feminist studies beyond a gendered perspective of women’s experience that considers only gender and race. Intersectionality broadens the lens to shed light on the intertwined nature of different types of social inequality and power, constituting “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2). This view emerges from a radical social worker perspective that extends beyond considering obvious problems to analyzing the forces that facilitate communities’ current situations. As Ryan et al. (2020) demonstrate, in contrast to a more narrow gender lens, observation via the intersectional lens can offer deeper insights into how dimensions of power, historically structured inequality, and life experience help frame the experience of community-wide disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic (Ryan et al., 2020).

Feminist social work combines the professional, theoretical approaches of social work aimed at helping people attain a decent standard of well-being with feminist approaches grounded in theoretical and activist orientations. The feminist approach claims that the purpose of social services is to resist the social replication underpinning oppressive power relations. Critical thinking about social services has evolved from the understanding that socially excluded people, who generally require the help of social services, possess unique knowledge relevant to forming optimal working approaches for addressing the barriers to social inclusion (Komem, 2006; Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006)

**Feminist Community Social Work**

Combining elements of both community-based social work and feminist social work, FCSW strives to take a holistic approach to social exclusion and to encourage the participation of the community in which the social workers are involved, as well as to engage in social activism and policy change. As a basis for developing strategies for change, it also seeks to develop community members’ critical awareness and knowledge of their social, economic, and political situation, their environment’s threats and opportunities, and the community’s strengths and weaknesses. Applying the critical ideas of praxis, FCSW seeks the recognition of power and empowerment in change processes, emphasizes the need for political involvement, and integrates the idea that “the personal is political” — that the struggle to reduce oppression requires focusing on women’s experienced intersectionality.

Social work intervention with groups and communities has helped generate resources that promote a participatory way of meeting the needs of those requiring primary or community assistance from social services (Morales-Villena et al., 2021). The creation of community resources by and for the people who need them helps instill support practices (e.g., food banks, health care) that dignify and strengthen people, viewing them as part of the solution rather than the problem. For women, changing the intervention’s focus requires considering how different social problems affect women and their situations of vulnerability, risk, and exclusion. Interventions can empower disenfranchised women, endowing them with dignity, while bypassing paternalistic practices (Morales-Villena, 2021).

Cheney (2014) and others have identified key elements characterizing FCSW organizations: First, a focus on individual autonomy implies that members can influence organizational issues that affect them. Second, equality/equity promotes the notion of a “shared opportunity and stake.” Third, participation and democracy ensure that individuals can contribute to decision-making. Together, these three key elements can be associated with internal inclusivity, based on Goodin (1996). The fourth key element, solidarity, and connection, refers to how alternative organizations act in solidarity with their members, the broader community, and the natural environment, which Cheney (2014) links to ongoing debates around organizations’ “triple bottom line.” Accordingly, we conceptualize solidarity and connection as encompassing an organization’s social and natural environment (Etzion, 2007). The fifth key element, practices, and policies arising from these values, reflects how alternative values are implemented within the organization (Bendl et al., 2022).

Finally, FCSW organizations are conceptualized as a homeplace. Inspired by Hirsch et al., (2000) who developed this idea following her research with young women, the creation of a home-like space enables the development of self that emerges from organizational responsiveness to young women’s voices, strong bonds between young women and staff, adaptive peer friendship cliques, and the development of programs that bring together the interests of young women and adult staff.

Such a home-place would include a comforting and safe environment as opposed to the constricting environments they might find elsewhere, a space for resistance against constraining social and political norms, and a place to develop relationships with adults and peers from diverse backgrounds… a place where girls can be connected to each other and their inner selves. (Hirsch et al., 2000, p. 215).

Pryor and Outley (2014) suggest that such home-places “become important islands of hope for marginalized youth,” yet “additional research is needed to understand how these spaces assist youth in responding to larger political and economic forces in their communities” (p. 272).

This approach is very relevant to Israel because it recognizes the intersectionality of oppression, acknowledging how gender interacts with other factors like race, class, and sexuality to shape women’s experiences in communities (Hyde, 2013; Mehrotra, 2010). We can observe that although the basics of FCSW are practiced in all the “Courtyard,” the differences in populations (e.g., Palestinians and immigrants from Ethiopia and the former USSR) influence each community differently. In this study’s context, FCSW can be seen as seeking to promote women’s empowerment and social justice through consciousness-raising, collective action, and transforming social structures and power relations (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). As we saw in this study, the young women and girls from the yards, often their families’ “ black sheep,” were empowered and often used their partnership to help their families during the pandemic.

Community social work in Israel faces several challenges typical in Western contexts, among them the transition to a society marked by individualistic values, globalization, the withdrawal of the welfare state, and the emphasis on privatization of services. There are also challenges unique to Israel, chief among them the withdrawal from a “melting pot” policy aiming for unity, and the impact of the security situation on the internal social fabric.

**The Research Context**

This study focuses on the staff and service users of an Israeli organization known as “The Women’s Courtyard” A non-institutional, alternative, critical, multicultural, edge space for young women established within three different communities, the Courtyardalso creates an internal community, involved with and supported by the surrounding community. As such, the Courtyardprovides an opportunity to learn about community social work characterized by FCWS.

The Women’s Courtyardwas founded in Israel in 2003 by a social worker and a criminologist seeking new ways to work and interact with young and adolescent women coping with extreme social exclusion, poverty, hardship, and danger. Its unique approach relies on social work critical theory (Adams et al., 2002) to understand how social power structures are reproduced in Courtyard service users’ lives, to map the nature of the actions, and to try to employ alternative measures within these power structures.

The first Women’s Courtyard, founded in Jaffa, offered, without charge, a hairdresser, an open space structured like a large living room, a kitchen to prepare meals, and two smaller rooms for private conversations. Now operating in three cities (Jaffa, Haifa, and Netanya), The Women’s Courtyards organize regular recreational activities and classes and offer free employment, welfare, finance, health care, and self-advocacy services for girls and young women experiencing extreme poverty and social exclusion. They can then choose whether they want to speak with the staff and with whom. Some participate in an activity; others come to socialize and eat. Staff members are exclusively women, mostly social workers.

Each Courtyardhas a unique character following critical social work principles. For example, all the Courtyards are financed and run by an N.G.O. and normally are only partially regulated by Israel’s Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and municipal councils. However, the populations in each community differ somewhat, although all are ethnically mixed. Jaffa and Haifa are mixed towns with both Jews and Arabs, while Netanya is mainly a Jewish city with a large immigrant population from Ethiopia, the former USSR, and, most recently, France. Every Courtyard has a regional coordinator, a social worker, an employment coordinator, and permanent volunteers.

Although data on length of service use and demographics is limited, approximately 50–70 women visit each Courtyardregularly, and many dozens more visit intermittently. Women learn about the Courtyards by word of mouth. Some Courtyards are known to offer social services for young women suffering from poverty, violent homes, social exclusion, and various adversities. Most visitors lack formal education, are in “dead-end” employment, or are unemployed. All live in poverty and other adversities, and in violent, insecure environments. Some are mothers; the fathers are usually not involved with their children.

The COVID pandemic, during which freedom of movement and social gatherings were severely restricted, offers an opportunity to better understand how n FCSW responded to internal and external challenges during such an acute crisisThe primary research questions are:

1. What were the challenges and practices of coping with COVID-19 among the Women’s Courtyards’ service users and service providers in the first year of the pandemic?
2. What were the lived experiences of service users and staff while coping with COVID-19?
3. What were the Courtyards’ organizational challenges and strengths during the crisis that helped them to reorganize internally?
4. What were theCourtyards’ organizational challenges and strengths during the crisis that helped them to reorganize and communicate with other neighboring organizations, communities, and establishments?

Our research followed Van Manen’s (2104) phenomenology of practice, which draws from many phenomenological models to provide varying ways of “seeing” a social phenomenon. The interviewees’ perceptions and descriptions reflect this in the verbatim quotes presented below.

**Methods**

The qualitative research method used here was grounded ethnography combined with critical research—a method that enabled us to give voice to different Courtyard community members. The research was constructed using the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005), which, based on critical approaches, views every person as possessing knowledge and abilities (Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006) and visitors and staff as possessing important, unique knowledge for establishing a successful and relevant learning space for themselves. Using semi-structured interviews, we sought to elicit the different perspectives of service users and staff, volunteers, managers, and social workers to flatten hierarchies and dichotomies, in the spirit of the *Courtyard’s* ideology. The interviews, conducted in [WHAT YEAR?} facilitated the mapping of the main difficulties in order to understand what they were experiencing at that time. It is important to note that during the first wave of COVID-19, stringent restrictions in Israel caused many women to experience loneliness and deprivation, along with physical hardship.

**Participants**

Study participants included three service users, as well as 11 current Women’s Courtyards’ staff, both social workers and volunteers: the Courtyards’ CEO, the directors of each Courtyard (all social workers), three volunteer therapists, and three social workers. The young women were 18, 19, and 25 years old (the youngest was in high school). Staff ranged from 29 to 62 years old and had been at the Courtyards for between ten months and eight years, with a mean of 3.5 years. Eight of the 11 staff were married and had children. The participants were recruited with the help of the CEO and by snowballing. Although we made an effort to include their voices, due to the recurring waves of lockdowns that caused unemployment and financial hardship, many young women struggled to find time to be interviewed.

**Procedure**

The hour-long, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the principal researchers and by research assistants with master’s degrees, primarily at the Courtyards with some by Zoom. No compensation was proffered, but we offered to present the findings to each Courtyard’s women and staff. The interviewer opened with a general request that the interviewee tell us about herself and then asked about the Courtyard’s role in the woman’s life and about challenges related to the pandemic, and their coping strategies.

**Data Analyses**

The transcribed interviews were initially analyzed using content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) which identified preliminary categories and sub-categories. Thematic content analysis identified patterns (themes) that emerged from the data. The initial units of analysis were the units of meaning produced by each participant with her words. Subsequently, data analysis was conducted in five stages: (1) continuous reading of all the content collected; (2) identification and open coding of key themes; (3) refinement of a map of core categories, named using the wording that emerged from the interviews; (4) classification of text into the categories; and (5) construction of principles, metaphors, and practices from the categories and an attempt to understand the relationship between them. We analyzed the transcriptions of service users and staff individually and jointly to gain a holistic view of their experiences during the pandemic. In interpreting the interviews, we strove to structure potential actions and solutions applicable to future crises (Lavie-Ajayi, 2014) using the research methods of knowledge extraction and knowledge merging.

**Ethical Issues**

We explained that all interviews and data were anonymous, that the recordings would be saved in a two-level password-locked computer used by the principal researcher alone, that participants could cease participating in the study at any stage – even after the interview was completed, and that they would receive the gift voucher in any case. Each participant provided written consent to participate in the study, as well as in an audio recording at the beginning of the interview. After the interviews were transcribed, their recordings were erased, and the transcripts were saved anonymously in the principal researcher’s password-protected external hard drive. The study was approved by the current CEO and the Co-CEO (the organization’s founder). Approval was obtained by the Academic Institute’s Ethics Committee (approval no. XXXX 2020-92).

**Findings**

Five major themes emerged that highlight the crucial role that the essential elements of FCSW organizations played during the pandemic. These included the importance of: (1) a **holistic approach** to addressing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, spatial, and other needs by building a supportive community; (2) a **partnership of service users**, which views the service users as partners in the Courtyards just as they are (ideally) in their own homes, empowered to make their voices heard and to describe their needs, and where they receive support in advocating for themselves; (3) **community involvement**, i.e., viewing the communities and people neighboring the Courtyards as potential partners in the Courtyardcommunity and enlisting them for the good of this community; (4) **activism and change in policy to reduce oppression** as a natural continuation of social action in the environment in which the Courtyards exist; and lastly, their (5) **conflict with authorities**.

Below we present how these principles were manifested during the pandemic using quotations from the study participants.

1. **A Holistic Approach to Community-Based Social Work**

Before the pandemic and even more so during it, the Courtyards made a concerted effort to provide holistic solutions for young women, particularly during the lockdowns. For this, they focused on the context of the response, the way it was provided, and its suitability for the specific needs of every service user. For example,

CEO of the Courtyards:

The approach is holistic, which is unique to us; it’s like a one-stop shop where they can do it all. What’s unique is that they are helped as much as they want to be helped, [the way] they want to be helped. They’re partners in setting their own goals.

Director, Netanya:

On the first day [of the lockdown], there were [about] 80 girls who were regular visitors. We divided them up among the three of us and called each one. We asked what was happening at home, and we [when needed] mediated solutions from the welfare services, from the city. [We did this] also for their families. The forms, the computers, the… I don’t know, even down to food baskets; we got stuff like that and handed it out.

These two quotes illustrate the holistic partnership the Courtyardsmaintain within the context of a community. The girls were “partners in setting their own goals,” in the sense that any solution to challenges they raised was reached with each individual. The staff mainly used their experience and community connections to “mediate solutions.”

**2. The Courtyards as an Empowering Place**

Several sub-themes describe the role played by the Courtyards in empowering service users, including the Courtyards: (a) as a home; (b) as a safe community for women; (c) as a place to satisfy material and emotional needs; and (d) as a place to restore belief in oneself. The theme’s organizing principle is the Courtyards’ empowering function.

***a.*** ***The Courtyards as a Home***

Users and staff view the Courtyards as a home, not a service. They are an extension of a safe, secure place, and at times even a substitute for a safe or secure home. Providing social services is not the ultimate function of Courtyard activities; rather, services are provided within the context of home, of sitting in the living room, chatting, eating meals together, with pots of food waiting on the stove, and a priority of asking newcomers “how they’re doing.”

A young woman from Netanya:

It’s like a second home … If you’re down in the dumps, you still don’t stay in bed. I get up, get myself together, and go to the Courtyard. You don’t even have to get dressed; you can come in your pajamas. I can sit here and cry or spill my heart out to one of the girls on staff. I feel like doing it here because I don’t have a place [or] there’s no space for me at home.

Social worker, Netanya:

Here I do things just like I do at my own house.

***b.*** ***The Courtyards as a Safe Community for Women***

As an all-women community, the Courtyards are free of the threats that many young women experience in mixed-gender environments. This is especially critical for many attendees who, according to staff, have been and continue to be harmed by men in their lives.

Young woman, Netanya:

I think that what makes this place so special is that it’s just for women… Other places [the community center, school] weren’t at all significant or genuine the way it was here.”

Temporary director, Haifa:

First, security. They enter the gates and they’re safe. And that’s not self-evident, because many of them don’t live in spaces that are secure for them…[It allows you to] be able for a second to let go of your issues, your problems, all of that, . . . is itself significant.

However, despite the security the Courtyards provide, the COVID pandemic changed things overnight. The Courtyards, an open place with limitless, unconditional entrance to all young women using the service, became closed and then selective, granting entrance only in small groups and by pre-registration. This was a change to the Courtyards’ foundational essence.

Director, Netanya:

All that “Just come, come as you are,” the ostensibly personal – that was really, hard. [The lockdowns] made us captives; it turned our meals into something much more difficult and rigid. It just went against… went against the Courtyard [principles]…. That’s not how it worked out ever.

***c. The Courtyards as a Provider of Material and Emotional Needs***

The Courtyards provided their users with services that met their material, emotional, and mental needs in a variety of ways. This is evident in interviews both with staff members and users.

Young woman, Haifa:

What do I receive at the Courtyard? Everything. Support, love, help, even food, clothes, whatever pops into your head. I was on the edge, no food, nothing. They made sure that food was brought to me, they went shopping. They took care of me in every way. And they didn’t even know me.

Young woman, Haifa:

A sympathetic ear when you just want to talk with someone, or just to come and rest, eat. I’ve made several friends here. Also, in terms of school, for instance, let’s say I needed lessons in math, English, whatever, they’d pair me up with someone who can help me.

By understanding the array of needs, Courtyard staff was able to devise an emergency plan. As seen in the above quotes, the women’s needs are many and diverse: food, a rehabilitation package, a place to go, a place to consult about future positions in the army, and a place where someone “sees you.”

Director, Haifa:

[During the pandemic] I think we realized it was a “to be or not to be” situation, so we immediately started to map needs, basically by making phone calls, leaving messages, [hourly] Zoom meetings with the girls to gain an understanding of the need, what is now unavailable to them, and what we can still do given the current situation. We realized that food was a major need and that the loneliness was terribly difficult.

Social worker, Haifa:

The girls hear one another’s stories or stories about other people. And it’s as if their feelings are validated.

As this theme indicates, the Courtyards have many ways of approaching service users’ diverse needs. Combining the understanding that the users’ needs are not solely psychological or material, but are unique to each young woman, the Courtyards’ staff project the fact that the service users are seen, and thus empowered.

**3. Involvement with the Surrounding Community**

The third theme refers to the importance of the neighborhood and the relationships that were built with the local community before the crisis. The neighborhood, then, is presented as the encompassing structure of the Courtyards and as a crucial partner in their survival during the pandemic:

***a. The Personal is Political***

The interviews revealed that young women’s situations reflected general society’s condition, which was tied to their lives and opportunities.

Director, Netanya:

The worse the country’s situation got during COVID, in Heftzibah [neighborhood], things got even worse. It’s a poor neighborhood. It got bad for our young women, and even worse for the men [there]; I think the situation was much, much, much worse and they [the women] have far fewer resources…

Social worker, Haifa:

I think it’s possible that the Arab women and girls were a little more resistant to the COVID regime, like, with the masks and distancing and all that. … Lately, in terms of the difficulties around COVID, it may be [that] they ran into greater financial trouble, [especially] because they came from a lower starting point.

***b. Relationship with the Community and the Neighborhood***

The interviews elicited many descriptions of the connection between the Courtyards and their local neighborhoods and communities.

Temporary director, Haifa:

We’re on Ben-Yehuda, the trashiest street in Hadar, which is, in general, a pretty trashy neighborhood, and we’re really at home here. …. It’s a very marginal community and that’s why there’s no dissonance between us and the physical environment. … I think that for some of the girls, the fact that this is an environment they are familiar with and feel comfortable with is important. It’s very accessible.

Director of Claims Take-up and Community Relations:

Lots of the clothing comes here as donations; if the stuff isn’t suitable for our girls, they bring it down there. We bring them stuff several times a week. Sometimes it’s food donations; people bring us leftovers from Elbit [tech company]. We have very good community relations, and we’re very “connected” and on good terms…

Interim director, Haifa:

The Haifa network that C. manages here is super significant and super momentous and super strong. And COVID was exactly the kind of situation to test that. All we needed, from tampons and paper plates and masks and gloves and a thermometer to a learning space – in terms of responses from the community, we’re well-connected. Whenever something is needed, it’s always a phone call [away].

**4. Activism of Staff and Volunteers to Reduce Oppression**

Drawing on feminist community-based social work, the Courtyards’ primary way of confronting the pandemic challenges was activism. They took advantage of the state’s emergency benefits to support the young women, recruited the Courtyards’ network of volunteers to create an active virtual network, and strengthened the goodwill of the Courtyards’ volunteer community.

***a. Leveraging the Pandemic Situation for Young Women’s Benefit***

The pandemic led to a series of lenient policies regarding acceptance into educational settings. In addition, many turned to local entrepreneurship to generate income. The staff took advantage of the opportunity to optimize and update policies for Courtyard users’ welfare and advancement.

Director, Netanya:

The prerequisites to get into school were more flexible [during the pandemic]… We took advantage of it and pushed [our girls] in that direction, telling them, “Apply *this year*…” [There were also unique opportunities] in business . . . [One woman] is doing great with a cake business… Demand for such things really went up.

***b. A Network of Volunteers in the Virtual Sphere***

Another activist practice of the Courtyards is maintaining a large network of volunteers. During the pandemic, this network created a significant safety net that enabled the Courtyards to continue providing efficient services to women.

The Director of Claims Take-up and Community Relations reflected on the crucial role of volunteers who could supply food, teaching support, medical assistance, and more when the Courtyards were forced to shut down during lockdown and left unable to provide essential services:

I think that the volunteers are a very, very important resource… in terms of connection with the girls when there was no Courtyard*.* [They] offered hands-on support that was sometimes needed concerning medical [issues]. …. We opened a virtual space for the girls on Zoom three times a week. Some of the volunteers ran them, each focused on her niche.

**c*. Joint Endeavors of Community Resources***

One of the Courtyards’ strengths was their pre-existing infrastructure for joint action since they had previously entered into partnerships with community stakeholders, organizations, and the municipality. Additionally, the Courtyards had worked together, generating professional and emotional added value long before COVID-19. These joint endeavors intensified during the pandemic and proved highly significant during the lockdowns.

Director, Haifa:

We always used to talk with the other Courtyards every week or two, just to ask one another, “So what did you do?” and thereby learn from one another. And it was a feeling that we’re doing something good, that we’re not just treading water and waiting for the crisis of the day to pass.

The Director of Claims Take-up and Community Relations:

The neighborhood was a no-man’s land. Until about two years ago, some young people … approached a council member and, thanks to them, [the city] started to make this place a little nicer. … They contacted Tempo [a large beverage company headquartered in Netanya], proposed a joint project, and renovated the neighborhood. The company gave money. But it would never have happened without the young people.

**5. Mediation between Services Users and Public Authorities**

Although the Courtyards are an integral part of national social services, conflicts with other authorities emerged concerning their target population and the Courtyards’ role and capacity.

Social worker, Netanya:

The conflicts [with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services] are about the target populations… We don’t like to label [people, but] it’s really important for the welfare ministry to define specific populations. For example, there are lots of groups that the ministry doesn’t see as our target population, but we still welcome and support them. … [This means that] the funding doesn’t reflect the scope of our work and our importance to the population.

The Director of Claims Take-up and Community Relations mentioned the dual message the Ministries sent out to them regarding their place in the social services landscape:

I think [2020? 2021? was] the year we got the most welfare referrals in the Courtyards’ entire existence. They threw us pitiful cases that were made even more pitiful because of COVID because there was much more violence and much more poverty. We… never stopped opening the doors, but we also couldn’t work at that level of intensity as effectively as we would have liked to, given the caseload.

In practice, the direct services the Courtyards provide are limited and mostly offer the users access to municipal and national social services. Therefore, training clients in self-advocacy is critical so that young women can cope with application processes and take advantage of these services effectively and efficiently. This issue was mentioned below by the CEO and in several interviews:

We’re an intermediate service connecting users with other services. Most of the young women who come here don’t trust the system. They’ve either been thrown out of certain settings, or they have negative feelings about the welfare system. So, [we are] a service to contact the welfare authorities from a different angle. Because it’s not as if we’re directing them… We don’t *make* them sign up for welfare. But there’s the option to do it, to do something else, to try something new… And, ironically, it’s the informality of this place that makes it possible for us to connect them with the more formal place and teach them how to be consumers of services in a way that works for them. And that’s the whole notion of maximizing rights and providing personal help that happens through this process.

**Discussion**

The findings from our interviews highlighted the importance of the principles of feminist community-based social work preserved at the Courtyards during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic period. This is despite the many difficulties that the crisis caused for services, such as the Courtyards, which are not institutionalized organizations and are supported mostly by independent fundraising and volunteers. The community that has been built – both internally at the Courtyards and externally with neighborhoods and other organizations, and among the Courtyards – proved to be strong and stable.

The FCSW principle of providing a holistic response that simultaneously encompasses physical, concrete solutions (food, computers, help with schoolwork) and emotional and spiritual responses (personal attention, “someone sees and hears me” even if only virtually, dispelling loneliness, and more) (Dominelli, 2021), emerged in particular during the COVID period. On one hand, the pandemic forced adjustments that differed from the Courtyard routine and some of its principles. On the other hand, it preserved and even expanded its services, based on users’ needs and the scope permitted by the emergency rules in play. Undoubtedly, this was possible, despite the lockdown and isolation due to the Courtyards’ pre-existing community. This community facilitated help to service users as well as employees and volunteers: All could engage in activities that were both meaningful and provided important human contact amid enforced isolation and physical distancing.

Another principle of FCSW that emerged is the view of the Courtyards as a space that provides a safe place for women, especially women who experience social exclusion (Hirsch, 2000). The role of the Courtyards as an alternative or additional home had to be maintained even when the physical space was closed. The circumstances including isolation, distancing, the “pods,” the need for registration, and limitations on the number of participants created conditions that differed from the Courtyards’ normal operating principles. Yet, the resilience of the community made it possible to preserve (at least for a while) the sense of safety and belonging.

A key recurring theme was the importance of working hand-in-hand with other organizations, the surrounding neighborhood, various welfare institutions, and the municipality. The interviews indicate that connections and collaborative work with private, public, and nonprofit associations as well as with neighborhood residents were critical to the Courtyards’ survival and functioning in this crisis.

Another important dimension that surfaced in the interviews was activism designed to reduce oppression stemming from poverty, otherness, and marginalization. It would never occur to the women of the Courtyard to close the Courtyard community, even when it was forced to close as a physical space: the communal sphere breaks the bonds of the physical space. Yet in the interviews, we noticed very few elements of knowledge recognition or joint learning with or from the young women.

As evidenced by the interviewees, the strength of the community was a central motivating factor during the pandemic. At first glance, the lockdowns and isolation imposed on the entire population were the very antithesis of the principles that inform FCSW in general and those of the Courtyards in particular. The lockdowns posed challenges for most people, but for young women suffering economic hardship, social ostracism, and often violence within the family, the risk posed to their health and well-being was no less serious than that of contracting COVID. All the women at the Courtyards – users, employees, and volunteers – realized this very quickly. As people used to improvising, finding emergency solutions rapidly, and building a community both inwards and outwards, the community continued to function even when the physical sphere was closed. They relied on the wide-ranging network they created with others around them, including reciprocal support between Courtyards, neighborhood organizations, their circle of donors and supporters, and established relationships with municipal and state institutions, along with their ability to swiftly improvise solutions to the crisis.

Finally, the interviews noted that, as non-formal institutions, the Courtyards are perceived, on the one hand, as a crucial service that succeeds in working with women with whom formal institutions have not successfully communicated. On the other hand, the fluidity that enhances their capacity to be inclusive and provide flexible and versatile responses resulted in the Courtyards being viewed ambivalently by the formal authorities. As a kind of outcast among the social services, the Courtyards employ networking strategies to avoid the ramifications of the intersectionality they experience as a result.

Following Cheney (2014), who highlighted solidarity and connection with the broader community and the natural environment as an element of feminist social organizations, we view the Courtyards as a social service that applies care practices that involve the women and the community. They can therefore be considered as part of the solution and not as elements of the social problem.

The interviews observed that the process of creating various social networks with local communities, local volunteers, local organizations, and other Courtyards is complicated, time-consuming, but highly rewarding. The practice of bonding with various and even unusual organizations and individuals generates broad, diverse, flexible, and dynamic responses during pandemics, and presumably in stressful times more generally, facilitating creative and rapid adaptation to unexpected developments.

**Conclusions**

[fill in]

**Limitations of the Study**

The study is based mostly on interviews with Courtyard staff rather than service users who were difficult to locate and, even once located, difficult to enlist in this study. A complete picture, requiring also the perspective of other stakeholders, awaits further study. Furthermore, the study does not compare the pre- and post-pandemic periods, but provides only a snapshot at a given time, relying on employees’ testimony reflecting their subjective impressions of a difficult period. Lastly, the study refers to just one service of many that young women use and therefore does not offer a comprehensive assessment of responses.

We will conclude with the poet John Donne’s immortal words (Donne, 1624):

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend’s  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

**Acknowledgments**

[fill in]

**Ethical Considerations**

[fill in]

**Consent to Participate**

[fill in]

**Declarations of Conflict of Interests**

[fill in]

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