**Young Female Current and Former Service Users and Female Staff Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of the Women’s Courtyards**

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**Abstract**

Young women suffering from distress and social exclusion have little access to vital social resources. If in ordinary times they endure poverty and distress, during a pandemic, their circumstances deteriorate considerably. “The Women’s Courtyard,” a social service operating in three Israeli cities – Jaffa, Netanya, and Haifa – is designed specifically for young and adolescent women, mainly from the Arab Muslim and Jewish Ethiopian communities, facing these challenges. It maintains an “open space” and offers a variety of activities and pro bono services, including employment, welfare, healthcare, and self-advocacy.

The aim of this paper is to portray the challenges and practices service users and providers faced in coping with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study, consisting of semi-structured interviews with young women and staff from all three “Courtyards,” was based in grounded theory, combined with critical research.

As an essential service, the Courtyards functioned as a safe and stable space during the pandemic and its prolonged lockdowns. The staff’s familiarity with situations of extreme distress made it easier for them to cope with pandemic-related distress, despite the latter showing marked differences from routine stress. Staff highlighted the crucial role played by the social resources and networks the Courtyards had in place prior to COVID-19: strong social and volunteer networks, as well as other organizations the Courtyards customarily cooperated with before the pandemic.

This article focuses on the strength of open community spaces that are applying critical feminist practices. It also emphasizes the need to establish stable and strong social networks for service providers working with women in extreme distress.

Keywords: Critical social work; feminist social work; lived experience knowledge; social exclusion; young women; Women’s Courtyard

**Theoretical Background**

***The Transition to Adulthood for Socially Excluded Females***

The transition to adulthood is a major developmental stage for every young person. During this period, the ground rules tend to change, as do social expectations. Society sets youngsters many new goals when they come of age, including building an independent life, choosing a professional path and establishing financial self-sufficiency, and developing the skills needed for success in adulthood. The latter include the ability to search for employment and accommodation, personal budget management, and interpersonal and social skills (Amitay, Raanan, Kahan-Strawczynski and Rivkin, 2011). While over 80% of young people up to the age of 24 in Israel (Einhorn, 2005), and a third of young people aged 25–34 still live with their parents (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), there is a segment of young people who, on the one hand, lack family support, but on the other, receive little aid from the state, as they are legally adults.

For young females without family support, the transition to adulthood is more challenging, as they lack the support that usually provides both a security net and a place to live until they attain fiscal self-sufficiency. Moreover, a family can provide the young with needed skills, such as how to search for employment or choose an educational path; the family can also offer vital emotional support (Kendig, Mattingly, & Bianchi, 2014). Compared to other women their age, young women who lack family support find it harder to begin living independently and generate stable employment. They also suffer more incidents of violence and higher arrest rates, find it difficult to complete their education, and marry and start families younger, which further impedes their educational and professional attainments. Finally, having less family and social support, they tend to suffer more emotional difficulties (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010).

Studies and reports on transitioning to adulthood tend to focus on institutional barriers, mainly in the fields of employment and education, as well as barriers resulting from policy, and those emanating from the young people’s own personalities. However, research addressing the community dimension is relatively scant, and the social context in the majority of studies is rarely considered a significant factor. This is despite today’s widespread acknowledgement that community is a significant basis for integration and reintegration of socially excluded people and populations (Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014; Walker, Pann, Shapiro, & Van Hasselt, 2016).

***Gender and Pandemic – Theory and Findings***

During the coronavirus pandemic, women found themselves at home caring for children or infirm relatives at higher rates than men, many losing their employment as a result (Alon, 2020). Consequently, their pandemic-induced decline in earnings and occupational status in the context of the pandemic was greater than that of men (Kristal & Yaish, 2020). While women amount to 39% of the global labor force, they constituted approximately 54% of the working population who lost their employment during the pandemic (May 2020) (Mahajan, 2020), and young women made up the population segment that was most harmed professionally during this period (Caselli, et al., 2021), particularly non-white young women (Pirtle & Wright, 2021). Staying at home also increased the incidence of serious injury, even death, among women suffering gender-based violence (GBV] (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Solórzano, et al., 2020).

***Feminist Social Work***

Since the start of the millennium, there have been significant developments of new critical approaches to working with socially excluded people, which have also been applied in feminist social work (Adams, Dominneli, & Payne, 2009; Fook, 2016; Orme, 2002; 2009). Critical theory espouses that people suffering extreme social exclusion experience the power relationships expressed in their daily activities as oppressive social barriers that replicate their peripheral social status (Adams, Dominneli, & Payne, 2009; Fook, 2016; Orme, 2002; 2009; Shwartz-Ziv & Strier, 2020;). Feminist social work emphasizes the influence of gender on the power relationships inherent in it as a material factor in the experience of women suffering social exclusion. Another important conceptualization in feminist social work is intersectionality, which emphasizes that when a person is on society’s fringes in one sphere, there is a significant chance that that individual will be on the fringes of other spheres as well. This observation generates the recognition that there is a multiplicity and diversity of life experiences and lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). To understand the variety of female experiences in various social situations, one must observe the intersection of social situations which they inhabit, which both affect and dictate their life experiences. In contrast to the narrow perspective of the gender lens, observation via the marginal location intersection lens offers deeper insights into how dimensions of power, historically-structured inequality, and life experience help construct gender-responsive work in general, and in relation to the pandemic in particular (Dasgupta et al., 2020; 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 and a good life together with feminist approaches grounded in both theoretical and activist orientations. According to the feminist approach, the purpose of social services is to resist the social replication underlying suppressive power relations. Komem and Eyal-Lubling’s (2020) conceptualization of the working principles of feminist social work identify the following: (1) removing bureaucratic barriers to interpersonal assistance; (2) securing resources and providing concrete help; (3) Cooperation between traditional care approaches (such as welfare), and care structures and female professionals acting according to critical-feminist approaches; (4) support, solidarity, and standing by the client as a way to provide her with the strength to cope with her emotional challenges; and (5) framing coping methods in power concepts which in other cases can be understood as expressing pathology (Komem and Eyal-Lubling, 2020).

***Critical Orientation to Social Services Research***

As mentioned, new critical approaches to working with socially excluded people have been changing over the past two decades (Payne, Dominelli, & Adams, 2009; Fook, 2016). Socially excluded people interact with society through its official representatives, as well as its education, welfare, health care, and therapeutic services, and through interactions with various social supervision practices. Critical thinking about social services and the experiences of service users has evolved from understanding that listening to socially excluded people, who generally require social services, is meaningful in establishing their social status, particularly considering that people coping with social barriers also possess unique knowledge relevant to forming optimal working approaches for reducing these barriers and the social exclusion itself (Komem, 2006; Krumer-Nevo and Barak, 2006; White, 2009). Furthermore, listening to socially excluded service users is also important, as it can expose gaps between social services’ stated intentions and how service users actually experience the services provided to them. Listening to service users in an authentic manner is possible by establishing a partnership in which a safe space is created for expression, thought, and shared initiative for the service users and social service providers (Marsh & Fisher, 1992 in Shemer & Schmid, 2006).

***The Research Context: The Women’s Courtyards – An Alternative Critically-Oriented Service***

“The Women’s Courtyard” was founded in 2003 by a social worker and a criminologist who sought a new and different way to work and interact with young and adolescent women coping with extreme situations of social exclusion, poverty, hardship, and danger. The Women’s Courtyard offers a unique approach to working with such young women, relying on social work critical theory (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002), seeking to understand how social power structures are reproduced in the lives of the Courtyard service users, mapping the nature of the actions, and trying to employ alternative action within these power structures. The first Women’s Courtyard was founded in Jaffa, and offered a hairdresser, an open space structured like a large living room, a kitchen to prepare meals, and two smaller rooms for private conversations, all free of charge. Female staff at the Courtyard are mostly social workers. The Women’s Courtyard organizes regular recreational activities and classes, as well as free employment, welfare, finance, health care and self-advocacy services for its visitors. Women can visit the Courtyard without any obligation in terms of arrival hours and participation in the yard activities. Adolescent and young women can choose with which staff member they want to speak. Some adolescent and young women visit for an activity, and others come to stay in the Courtyard and eat. The kitchen is always open, and access to it is free; either a professional cook or one of the female staff prepares lunch for all the girls. Courtyard staff members are mostly social workers who are familiar with, and learn in the course of their work, both the terminology and the practice of critical social work at team meetings, the Society’s training programs, and from personal mentoring sessions. Currently, there are three Courtyards – in Jaffa, Haifa, and Netanya. These provide services for girls and young women experiencing extreme poverty and social exclusion, and each has a unique character within the application of critical social work principles, according to which the Courtyards operate: an open space, an alternative space, humanitarian aid, partnership, critical incident management, and active advocacy (Sidi & Krumer-Nevo, 2020). Each Courtyard works with approximately 50–70 women who visit the Courtyard on a regular basis, and many dozens more who visit irregularly.

The Women’s Courtyards were chosen for this study as a social service provided to under-studied groups of socially excluded women, which has been studied previously and proven to be unique and effective in its cultural responsivity, and in its gender-sensitive and poverty-oriented work (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012; Sidi, 2009). Even with this, it should be noted that the issue of young women lacking family support has been studied primarily in the context boarding school graduates.

The purpose of this study is to examine the coping mechanisms employed by the young women and female Courtyard staff to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. To investigate this, we chose to concurrently also study how “graduates” of the Women’s Courtyards are coping to determine how their stay at the Courtyards contributed to their adult lives today. Specifically, the goals the study are to describe the coping practices of the young women and the staff in its work in extreme situations in general, and the impact of the coronavirus on the daily lives of young women who face social barriers and many hardships and how the young women and the Courtyards staff coped – or failed to cope – with supporting the young women facing the unique difficulties arising from the pandemic.

Main Research Questions:

1. What role does the Courtyard play, and what impact does it have on its users’ lives?
2. What are the main challenges following the coronavirus pandemic, and how are they experienced by the current young service users and by the young women who previously visited the Courtyards?
3. What resources are the young women able to obtain and what social barriers do they face?
4. How did the young women’s experiences during the corona crisis differ from that prior to the

crisis?

1. What coping methods do the professional staff and female volunteers employ at the Women’s Courtyard to address the crisis caused by the pandemic?
2. What resources and courses of action can be effective and meaningful for coping with future emergencies?

***The Research Method***

The research method is grounded ethnography, combined with critical research. The process of constructing the research was carried out using the Grounded Theory Approach (Charmaz, 2005). Based on critical research approaches, this study considers every person, even if socially excluded, as possessing knowledge and abilities (Krumer-Nevo, 2008; Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006). We view the young women and staff at the Women’s Courtyard as women possessing important and unique knowledge for establishing a successful and relevant learning space for themselves.

The study’s guiding principles were pluralism and variety, expressed by respecting and listening to the differing points of view proffered by all study participants, even if these opinions did not correlate with the researchers’ own opinions (Zellermayer, 2016; Kinney, 2006). Therefore, by using semi-structured interviews with the young women and staff members, the main difficulties they were currently experiencing and those they experienced in the pre-vaccine period of the pandemic will be mapped. During this period, Israel experienced lockdowns and restricting movement and access for most of the population, causing many women to experience loneliness and deprivation. In interpreting the interviews, we will try to structure possibilities for action as well as solutions applicable to future crises (Lavie-Ajayi, 2014), using research methods of knowledge extraction and merging of knowledge.

The sample group consists of women, current and former users of the Women’s Courtyards’ services, as well as current Women’s Courtyards’ staff, both social workers and volunteers. There are three Courtyards – in Jaffa, Haifa, and Netanya, and the population that uses the services of each is slightly different. Whereas Jaffa and Haifa are mixed towns where both Jews and Arabs live, Netanya is mainly characterized as a city with a large immigrant population, from Ethiopia in the 1990s, and most recently from France. In general, since 2003, several hundred women have stayed at the Women’s Courtyards ( “Alumni.”). Today, each Courtyard is regularly visited by about 40 girls. Every Courtyard has a regional coordinator, a social worker, an employment coordinator, and permanent volunteers. The Women’s Courtyard Society has a permanent group of supporting women, and recently established a Board of Directors, reflecting the institutionalization of the organizational processes. The study was approved by the Co-CEO, who founded the organization, as well as by the current CEO, and was approved by the Yezreel Valley College Ethics Committee (Approval No. EMEK 2020-92).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the entire sample group: young women, Courtyard Alumni, and female staff from all three Courtyards. The interviews (which were recorded and transcribed) were conducted both by the principal researchers, and by research assistants with masters degrees, all skilled in performing this type of interview, on the one hand, and in working with socially excluded young women, on the other.

The research objectives were explained to each research participant, including issues of anonymity and confidentiality, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any stage. Moreover, the researchers promised to present the findings to Courtyard staff, and to any interested young women.

**Findings**

The findings indicate that the Women’s Courtyards were significant for the young women and female staff in the pandemic’s first phase, as felt both in their activity, and in the absence of activity during lockdowns. The findings focus on three main themes: (1) the Courtyard’s significant role in daily life and satisfying the young women’s various needs; (2) the difficulty in operating the Courtyard and implementing the Courtyard’s role as a unique space; and (3) the Courtyard’s strengths as highlighted during the pandemic’s first phase.

**(1) The Courtyard’s Significant Role for the Young Women**

1.1 “I really believe that loneliness is above all else” – Solitude

Both young women and staff reported feelings of boredom and loneliness during lockdowns, when the Courtyards were closed. For example, see the following two quotes:

*You’re locked in a room and can’t leave. When I was in quarantine, I really became sort of depressed. It was very, very difficult. I found it hard to talk about, hard to communicate. It pushed me into a very, very tight spot. And when I came out of quarantine, like, I thought it would last forever, really. It feels like you’re in isolation in a room with four walls, and you like feel as if it will never end, as if it is forever. I really believe that loneliness is above all else* (Young woman).

*I believe we need to understand how few supportive social circles these young women have, which the pandemic highlighted prominently. I believe that women in general, and young women at our Centers are affected economically and in terms of family violence and other injuries, more than other population groups. I think they are less visible, more transparent... the need for basic goods has unequivocally risen sharply. We definitely had four times the number of referrals to us than in ordinary times* (Manager, Haifa).

**1.2 *“The situation is much, much worse” – Financial Pressure and Domestic Violence***

The lockdowns caused many households to lose employment, and created a situation in which a single space was occupied together by a number of people for extended periods of time, which intensified pre-existing family pressures in the lives of the Courtyard’s youngsters. This was reflected both in increased economic hardship (we are dealing here with young women who suffer economic hardship in any event), as well as familial pressures and domestic violence, which intensified as a result of circumstances.

*[You] do nothing at home. Listen, I had a hard time. Being with my younger siblings at home, with my mother at home, it’s hard, because you feel like you want your own quiet corner, but you don’t have it. And you have nowhere to go. You’re not even allowed to go. It wasn’t easy. But in all this, I did manage to work a little at various different places with a good friend of mine. I worked in all kinds of places. In this way, little by little, I worked, I was between jobs, every time I worked doing something else, just to keep me from becoming depressed, like people who have no money*” (Young woman).

*On the margins, as a minority, we had those who faced real violence. I believe there’s a lot more...Now I hear less about it, but in the first few months, when many were furloughed, there was a lot more drinking, a lot… As the circumstances of the entire country deteriorated, in [the neighbourhood] it became worse, our young women were suffering, for the men in [the neighbourhood] it was a lot worse, for the boys compared to the girls,… the situation is much, much worse for them, and they have fewer solutions* (Netanya employee).

***1.3 “Sometimes This is the Only Place in the World (For Them)” – A Safe Space to Go***

When the Courtyard was recognized as an essential service, and reopened, it was experienced by the young women and staff as a safe space to go to. On the matter of a lack of any safe space during the lockdowns, one of the young girls said:

*I often wanted to go, but couldn’t. Or I needed something, I had to talk to someone, but there was no one*” (Young woman).

One of the volunteers added:

*I think there is no substitute to our physical presence here, I think we understood and managed to convince whoever we needed to, that they can’t close the Courtyard; it’s destructive, it’s dangerous, it’s a question of life and death, we have to be here. It’s possible to think about how, we could create “bubbles,” but we must be here, because it really is sometimes the only place in the world. I think the personal connections are very significant.*

*For me it was more essential than the supermarket. It’s like, it’s the soul, it’s beyond basic necessities. It’s the need to be normal just for a moment, and be somewhere that breathes, where you can live and eat together, even laugh there. As if this normal moment, the area is...ordinary*” (Social worker, Haifa).

**(2) Second Theme: The Difficulty in Operating the Courtyard and Performing the Courtyard’s Role as a Special Space**

2.1 “*Bubbles are so Unsuitable to the Courtyard!*”

The young women experienced difficulties in maintaining social distancing, as well as difficulties concerning the need to visit at pre-planned times, in arbitrary groups or bubbles, and not spontaneously. In fact, the regulations that dictated social distancing and limited the number of visitors at any given time, were completely contrary to the Courtyard’s *modus operandi,* and complicated resuming activities:

*Every girl came when she was registered. I couldn’t see the girls I wanted to. Although I have relationships with everyone here, but there were specific girls I used to see, sit with them, eat with them* (A Young Woman).

*We tried options of limiting the number of girls visiting, to devise a specific bubble-list. This is so not suitable to the Courtyard. It’s the antithesis of what happens here. The whole point is for the girls to come and go as and when they please. Yet suddenly, we had to place limitations, and choose who could come at what times* (A social worker).

2.2 “*As if Everything Stopped Breathing*” – A Double Emergency

Female staff describe an experience of a “double emergency,” both with regard to their families in their personal lives, and with regard to the girls and the need to find solutions and cope with two fronts simultaneously.

*The coronavirus caught me at the beginning of my pregnancy, and no one knew, except for a few…which was also...it was an issue, because suddenly there was also a health concern, and nobody, like, except for one person, no one knew my secret, so it was also like something I kept inside my own head...Suddenly, they started to talk about a lockdown, and the directives from the Ministry of Welfare were not clear, and the instructions from the Society were also not clear. It was obvious that we needed to be active in this, otherwise we would stop working. And I felt as if I was between a rock and a hard place. I felt that everyone was saying something different...and then there was panic. There was panic from above, which makes it very difficult to remain calm. But there was also panic from below, from the girls, who were very anxious that the Courtyard would close, and what would happen. And then the first step was in fact to close, like, just a moment, there was a lockdown, and it was not clear that we would receive our financing. [The CEO] started to talk about furloughing staff, and that she herself was going on furlough. It was as if everyone stopped breathing* (A Courtyard manager).

*At the time, I was taking care of two children who were at home on Zoom meetings. One, who suffers from ADHD, had to attend Zoom meetings. In fact, the kindergarten teacher kind of neglected them. He was at kindergarten, then, and she stopped organizing Zoom meetings. She didn’t organize any Zoom meetings at all; she didn’t keep in touch at all...and I’m with the kids, and I also need to keep the organization running* (CEO).

2.3 Dilemmas Concerning Availability for the Courtyard’s Adolescent and Young Women

Female staff talk about a multiplicity of dilemmas concerning their availability to the young women and the Courtyard, when they were at the same time coping at home, which demanded a significant time investment from them due to the lockdowns; children and family staying at home, commitments to care for elderly parents, and more. Moreover, questions arose concerning the need for physical proximity in the face of a pandemic that demanded social distancing.

*The challenge was really that ultimately, when we all returned quickly to operating full time, one child remained alone at home all year on Zoom meetings. I mean, so the challenge was at home. I must say that, relatively, we succeeded, made efforts, obtained some accommodations in my role, and made some family decisions, and I managed to be at least two days around the house and with him. On days on which the Courtyard was closed, I did administrative work from home, phone calls, things that always need to be done, then I was at home for two days, so that was also a significant...As a freelancer, I admitted defeat, because of a child and the coronavirus, so it was giving something up professionally* (Employee, Haifa).

*When they started to vaccinate everyone over sixteen, there were a few here who consistently campaigned against vaccination, and preached coronavirus denial, etc. I admit, that was my limit. It was a matter of being responsible, since I went home every day to unvaccinated children, and I help an elderly mother* (Employee, Haifa).

2.4 “Cases were being handed down to us left right and centre [...] there is much more violence and poverty” – Organizational Level Challenges.

*During the lockdown, we observed and experienced an increase in the number of referrals to the Courtyard in general, and particularly with respect to the most difficult cases referred to the Courtyard, which resulted in overload, as well as organizational and emotional difficulties. I believe this is the year in which we received the largest number of referrals from welfare services since the Courtyard opened. They simply threw everything during the pandemic to us, because we were working. We were working from some point in May; they threw cases at us, all the cases were cases that, in essence, were an affront to human dignity, much more so in light of the pandemic, because the incidences of violence increased markedly, as did poverty, and the girls we served felt that no one saw them, which only worsened the situation. And welfare services just kept sending them to us by the dozens. We were like...I mean, we never stopped admissions at the Courtyard, but we can’t work so intensely at the level of efficiency we would want to, with the numbers involved* (Employee, Haifa).

*Moreover, there was a sense that presence in the intersection of multiple fringe positions further exacerbated the young women’s situation; since even in normal times they cope with particularly difficult lives and exclusion. The regulatory demands caused by the pandemic (vaccinations, social distancing, limiting attendance numbers), were especially difficult for the young Arab women.*

*I think that its possible that the Arab women were a little more resistant to the coronavirus regime. Like, in relation to masks and social distancing, and all that. For instance, more fines for failure to mask in the Arab community, greater resistance toward the police, acts of defiance against government, and recently against these laws. Examining the difficulties surrounding the pandemic – it’s possible their financial difficulties were more significant. But that is also because their starting point was lower* (Social worker, Haifa).

**(3) Third Theme: The Courtyards’ Strengths Emphasized During the First Wave of the Pandemic**

3.1 “*We are used to working in extreme conditions all the time*.”

Staff mentioned their coping skills, difficulties notwithstanding, since they were familiar with extreme circumstances as part and parcel of their professional expertise:

*I think one of the reasons the Courtyard did survive this is because we are used to working in extreme conditions all the time. There is not a day that resembles the previous day. We are accustomed to crises; we are used to things not working according to plan, and we always need a “Plan B.” I think that’s what really helped us here, with extraordinary measures, because...it’s not that something… its not that some course of action was ordered on us from up above. It came from the field* (Employee, Haifa).

*On a professional level, I think we knew everything, I mean, it didn’t surprise us like it did others. We knew that our youngsters would be the first to get hurt, we knew it would take time to realize the true costs, we knew that loneliness was more difficult than the economic conditions, the violence, and sexual vulnerability, we knew that their emotional resilience was precarious, and that anything, all the more so something so enormous, is devastating* (Employee, Haifa).

Coincidentally, they – and particularly management – were concerned about resource reductions:

*It was not clear whether the Ministry of Welfare would pay the budgetary allocation per person or not. And indeed, ultimately, for one month they paid 40%, and for a second 70%. I mean, it took time, and there was uncertainty. And the Society didn’t cope well with the uncertainty. The municipality could say, “Carry on as usual,” “just work as usual, don’t spare any expense.” That was the Netanya municipality, such a large entity can handle it, but an NGO can’t. For instance, the Haifa employees were furloughed for a long time. Even more then we were* (Courtyard manager).

*The funding (we received) did not reflect the scope of work, and our importance to the people* (Employee, Haifa).

3.2 “*The Haifa network managed by ‘K’ is truly significant and big and powerful*” – The importance of a supporting community established before the pandemic

Staff stressed the importance of the resources accumulated before the crisis: a strong social network in the area, a lot of work on the part of volunteers who mobilized swiftly to act, gathering all the resources possible, from any and every organization, society, or individuals. Underlying all these one can see the importance of relationships and connections between entities, organizations, authorities, and individuals who constituted the support network.

“*R” also secured significant resources, like, millions, and distributed them and did a lot. First of all, there was a lot of PR, and a lot of things where appearances counted more than...but overall, I was happy to be at that juncture, because of my position I could ultimately make sure, as I said before, that everything would be funnelled into the neighbourhood, and reach the girls. As well as the things I obtained in a roundabout way, which also made a difference in the neighborhood...It was an extremely difficult time at the Society. The stagnation... It was hard to run an organisation without reserves* (A Courtyard manager).

*Connection to concrete assistance [was important]. They were anxious about leaving home, etc. Emotional support was lacking, even if it was just understanding that they were not alone, etc. So, we started to develop all sorts of solutions. We said: Ok, the Courtyard is closed, but...we organized a regular day each week to distribute food. The volunteers would cook at home. We had dry food, but also cooked food. We actually prepared meals for them for several days in advance. They would arrive in turn to pick it up, and by the way inquire “How are you,” etc., meaning a face-to-face meeting. We had a system going, we had a social work student who had to do a project, so we said: “Perfect, build us a system of things they can do online, on Zoom.” So, we had an open group Zoom meeting once a week. We had all sorts of things that the volunteers thought of.* (Employee, Haifa).

*We have 120 volunteers here, it’s a multi-generational team* (Employee, Haifa).

*There’s an entire group of 25 women inside all of this, and every day whatever is needed, food delivery, bring this to some girl… It also kept some sort of routine going, that, I think, was very important to me personally, but also to the girls. And it also gave us a sense of power, that we can rise to the challenge, that the joint effort is...*(Employee, Haifa).

*The network maintained in Haifa by “K” is super important, and vast, and very strong. And the pandemic was exactly the situation in which to test it. Everything we needed, from tampons to single-use utensils, masks and gloves and thermometers, to a learning space that cost 9,000 shekels, driving the girls around, nothing was neglected, everything worked, the entire support network came together, all the organizations; we received a Courtyard of tens of thousands of shekels. I think it raised demand, people’s need, perhaps I’m wrong, for mutual support. It’s also really about maintaining the relationships, personal, professional, and in the community… From the perspective of community solutions, we are very well connected. Haifa is a very feminist place, many of the first feminist organisations were founded here, and there is a very broad range of committees, communities, and forums, and we are involved in all of them. And again, it’s also very personal, and it is very much “K*” (Employee, Haifa).

*We obtained computers. There were many used, second-hand computers that we had to put to use with the help of our volunteers* (Employee, Netanya).

*A feeling of partnership. And other partnerships and volunteers. Ohh... there’s a torrent of volunteers, many want to volunteer, and I need to turn some away... I really feel that the “Courtyard” is being embraced. People want to do good* (Manager, Haifa).

**Discussion**

The work of the female staff at the Women’s Courtyards, in the three places where the Courtyards operate, is work amid tension, being together but apart, of establishing a spontaneous space that had to became structured during lockdown. The staff, all female, also coped with a state of dual emergency, both at the Courtyards with the young women who experience extreme hardship all year round, and the added emergency associated with the pandemic. Moreover, they had to cope with policies that were not always suitable and adjusted to the Courtyards’ needs and circumstances. Another double marginality experienced by staff was coping with the double emergency in their own homes – caring for children and parents, which overnight became more intense due to the pandemic, and at the same time, having to be more present, and finding creative solutions to the distress of the young women and the needs of the Courtyards as an organization.

The findings illustrate the role of urban and community support networks. With the establishment of the Women’s Courtyards, groups of women who support them also formed, offering manpower, resources, and the possibility of weaving broader ties within the communities. The Courtyard’s communal and organizational network of contacts was an anchor for finding lacking resources, the need for which only intensified during the pandemic. The power and importance of the communal social network is referred to extensively in social work research literature. Beneficial communality is an empowering factor for socially excluded communities, and all the more so feminine communities.

To conclude, one can see that organizations like the Courtyards operating on the basis of critical feminist social work faced paradoxical situations during the coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, they (as well as all other systems), were subjected to rigid regulation and rules that often contradicted the Courtyards’ basic operating principles. On the other, the professional skill demonstrated by Courtyard staff and volunteers, based on understanding the multiple marginal circumstances, the complexity of distress and exclusion, and the need to find unique solutions for each young woman tailored to her own needs, all prepared them for the difficult and complex management that the pandemic forced on their daily routine.

Repeatedly, in a large number of interviews, participants expressed appreciation and emphasized the importance of constructing a dedicated group of volunteers, as well as maintaining reciprocal relationships with the immediate vicinity (neighbourhood), and the wider environment (welfare, municipality, other organisations). The ability to rely on, and be supported by, these networks, was what ultimately “compensated” for the lack of institutional resources.

In conclusion, on the policy level, there is material importance to creating sustainable communal and municipal support networks as a safety net for times of emergency. On the professional knowledge level, to successfully cope with an emergency, one must develop the ability to act from humanistic and professional considerations, and sometimes juggle several different observational and decision-making methods; a significant strength of the female staff at the Courtyards was ultimately their ability to be simultaneously weak and strong, to be experts with knowledge, yet at the same time lacking in knowledge and control of the situation.