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

**Introduction**

The transition to adulthood is a challenging task. For young women facing complex situations of social exclusion, this transition becomes far more complicated. Nonetheless, there is a lack of 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 the research presented in this article 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 crisis in society.

The Transition to Adulthood for Socially Excluded Women

The transition to adulthood is a major developmental stage for every young person. During this period, a person’s social duties and roles alter dramatically. Unquestionably, poverty affects young people’s experiences of leaving home, marriage, and parenthood. Low-income youth are at greater risk of leaving home at an early age but are less likely to leave after the age of 18. Although they are more likely to become parents before the age of 25, they are less likely to marry. Taken together, these outcomes can lead to unfavorable directions for young adults or set the stage for adverse developments in their lives throughout adulthood, potentially limiting their opportunities for an extended period of emerging adulthood (Guldi, Page & Stevens, 2007).

In recent years, there has been evidence of the phenomenon of young adults “boomeranging” back to the parental home (Stone et al., 2014). However, not all populations have the option to do this, especially when the parents’ home is a source of adversity. Young women without family support face a more challenging transition to adulthood, as they lack the usual support that customarily provides a security net and a place to live until they attain financial self-sufficiency (Kendig, et al., 2014).

Young women lacking family support suffer from high rates of poverty that increase once they have left 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 they often marry and start families at a younger age, which further impedes 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 community responsibility is relatively scant, and social context is often not viewed as a significant factor in many of these studies, despite today’s widespread acknowledgment that community plays a key role in the integration and reintegration of socially excluded people and populations (Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014; Walker, et al., 2016). Liu et al. (2020) found that people who suffer from higher levels of social exclusion are more influenced by community support in general, especially when participating in health-related interactions.

During the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), women found themselves at home caring for children or infirm relatives at higher rates than men, and many lost their employment as a result (Alon et al., 2020). Consequently, their pandemic-induced decline in earnings and occupational status was greater than that of men (Kabeer et al., 2021; Kristal, Yaish, 2020). Staying at home also increased the incidence of serious injury, even death, among women suffering gender-based violence (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Solórzano, et al., 2020). Women who experience social exclusion and poverty are regularly prone to harsh consequences during pandemics. This daunting dual impact is aggravated by gender inequalities, social exclusion, and patriarchal dominance. Bourgault et al. (2021) emphasize the extreme extent of the domestic distress of women during a pandemic. After gathering data from 16 countries concerning social work practices and policies during COVID-19, Dominelli et al. (2021) concluded that: “The most damaging effects of the pandemic resulting from various state responses to it have impacted most on children and vulnerable families” (Dominelli et al., 2021, p. 5). Given that we are still vulnerable to experiencing large-scale emergencies, it is worthwhile to study the coping mechanisms that women who experience social exclusion developed during the recent pandemic using the lens of feminist community social work (FCSW).

**Feminist Community Social Work**

Community Social Work

Community-based social work was first conceived in the 1950s 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, it strives to develop community members’ critical awareness and knowledge (McCusker, 2020). Throughout the years, women have been involved in refining community social work and have integrated feminist social work into community social work. They have contributed to the adoption of the notions of praxis, which express critical approaches to understanding and analyzing the changing reality and changing speech norms, and to articulating a unique voice for the struggle for change and recognition of 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 that emphasize 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).

Another important concept in feminism, which is also central to feminist social work, is intersectionality. Intersectionality emphasizes that when a person exists on the fringes of society in one sphere, there is a significant chance that this individual will be on the fringes of other spheres as well. Consequently, there is a multiplicity and diversity of life experiences and lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Rooted in Black feminist thought and scholar-activists 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 sheds light on the intertwined nature of different types of social inequality and power. Collins (2015) defines it as “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” (p. 2). A radical social worker’s perspective extends beyond the obvious problem to analyze the forces that facilitate communities’ current situations. In contrast to the narrow view of the gender lens, observation via the intersectional lens offers deeper insights into how dimensions of power, historically structured inequality, and life experience help construct gender-responsive work in general, and, in the case of this study, concerning the pandemic in particular (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 both theoretical and activist orientations. The feminist approach posits that the purpose of social services is to resist the social replication that underpins suppressive 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 reducing these barriers and social exclusion (Komem, 2006; Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006)

Feminist Community Social Work

Feminist community social work (FCSW) strives to take a holistic approach and to encourage the participation of the community in which the social workers are involved 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, of the threats and opportunities in their environment, and of the strengths and weaknesses of the community. Applying the critical ideas of praxis, FCSW calls for 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 the intersectionality that women experience.

Intervention through group and community social work has helped generate resources that promote a participatory way to meet 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 (food banks, healthcare, and more) that dignify and strengthen people; these people are then seen as part of the solution rather than as the problem. Changing the focus of intervention requires considering how different social problems affect women and their situations of vulnerability, risk, and exclusion. Intervention through group and community social work empowers disenfranchised women and endows them with dignity, while bypassing paternalistic practices (Morales-Villena, 2021).

Cheney (2014) has identified key elements to delimit alternative organizations: first, individual autonomy, implying 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 demand to ensure that each individual can contribute to decision-making. These three key elements can be associated with internal inclusivity as presented in our conceptual framework (see above) based on Goodin (1996). The fourth key element, solidarity, and connection, refers to how alternative organizations act in solidarity with their members and with the broader community and the natural environment, a feature that 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). Finally, the fifth key element, practices, and policies arising from these values, reflects how alternative values are implemented within the organization (Bendl et al., 2022).

Another characteristic of FCSW organizations is conceptualized as a home-place, Inspired by Hirsch et al., (2000) who developed this idea following her research with young women (Hirsch et al., 2000): the creation of a home-like space that enables the development of self via 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 in relationships with adults and peers from diverse backgrounds… a place where girls can be connected to each other and to their inner selves. (Hirsch et al., 2000, 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). As we can see , even though the basics of Feminist community SW are practiced in all the "yards", the differences in populations (Palestinians, immigrants from Ethiopia, Immigrants from the former USSR, etc.) influence each community differently. FCSW thus seeks to promote women's empowerment and social justice through consciousness-raising, collective action, and the transformation of social structures and power relations (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999), and as we saw in this study – the young women and girls from the yards, who are often "the black sheep" in their family, were empowered and often used their partnership to help their families during the pandemic.

Community social work in Israel faces several challenges that community social work in the Western world also faces, among them the transition to a society with individualistic values, the impact of globalization on the community and the need to strengthen localization, the withdrawal of the welfare state and the strengthening of privatization, and also challenges unique for Israel - the withdrawal from the "melting pot" policy that strove to unify values among all Israelis, and the impact of the security situation on the internal social fabric.

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

"The Women’s Courtyard” is a non-institutional, alternative, critical, multicultural, edge space that exists within existing communities and creates its own community that is involved and supported by the community in which it is located. In this sense, The Women’s Courtyard is a space from which we can learn about community social work that is based on and applies critical and feminist approaches. It was founded in Israel in 2003 by a social worker and a criminologist seeking a new and different way 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 the lives of Courtyard service users, mapping the nature of the actions, and trying to employ alternative measures within these power structures. The first Women’s Courtyard was founded in Jaffa and offered, free of charge, a hairdresser, an open space structured like a large living room, a kitchen to prepare meals, and two smaller rooms for private conversations. The Women’s Courtyards organize regular recreational activities and classes, and free employment, welfare, finance, health care, and self-advocacy services for their visitors. Adolescents and young women can choose with which staff member they want to speak. Some adolescents and young women visit to participate in an activity, and others come to spend time at the Courtyard and eat. Courtyard staff members are women only, mostly social workers. Currently, there are three Courtyards, in Jaffa, Haifa, and Netanya, providing services for girls and young women experiencing extreme poverty and social exclusion. Each has a unique character within the application of critical social work principles. For example, all the yards are financed and run by an N.G.O and normally are only partially regulated by the ministry of welfare and the city councils.

The populations using each Courtyard’s services differ somewhat, although all Courtyards are ethnically mixed. Jaffa and Haifa are mixed towns with both Jews and Arabs, Netanya is mainly a Jewish city with a large immigrant population, some coming from Ethiopia in the 1990s, and most recently from France. 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 supportive women and recently established a Board of Directors, all reflecting the institutionalization of the organizational processes.

Each Courtyard works with approximately 50–70 women who visit regularly, and many dozens more who visit intermittently. The Courtyards lack complete data concerning the length of service users’ stays there and their demographic characteristics. Women learn about the Courtyards by word of mouth. Several specific communities have become the Courtyards’ target population, and the Courtyards have consequently become branded as social services for young women suffering from poverty, violent homes, social exclusion, and various adversities. The women who attend the Courtyards lack formal education, some are in “dead-end” employment, and some are unemployed. All experience poverty and various other adversities and live in violent and insecure environments. Some are mothers, and the fathers are usually not active or in contact with their children.

The experiences of both socially excluded women and staff during the pandemic are little understood, as are how empowerment and togetherness can materialize during such periods. The research questions focus on minority women and the ways of empowering them during a major crisis;

Our research questions were:

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

In that, we followed Van Manen’s phenomenology of practice, which draws from many phenomenological models to provide varying ways of “seeing” a social phenomenon (van Manen, 2014) as it is perceived and described by the interviewees in the verbatim quotes presented below.

The present study concentrates on the challenges and strengths of an organization for young women who experience social exclusion. It uses the crisis of a world pandemic to illustrate how feminist organization dealt in a community-related context.

**Method**

The research method deployed is grounded ethnography combined with critical research. We used this specific method because it enabled us to give voice to different members of the Yard's community. The research was constructed using the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005). Based on critical approaches, this study views every person as possessing knowledge and abilities (Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006). We see the young women and staff at the Women’s Courtyards as possessing important, unique knowledge for establishing a successful and relevant learning space for themselves. We purposefully interviewed users and staff, volunteers, managers, and social workers both to see the phenomena from different perspectives and to flatten hierarchies and dichotomies, in the spirit of the Yards’ ideology. Conducting semi-structured interviews with the young women and staff members facilitated the mapping of the main difficulties they were experiencing at that time.

It is important to note that during the first wave of COVID-19, Israel restricted the movement of most of its population. This caused many women to experience loneliness and deprivation along with physical hardship.

Participants

The sample group consisted of three young women who are current users of the Women’s Courtyards’ services, as well as eleven current Women’s Courtyards’ staff, both social workers and volunteers: the Courtyards’ CEO (chief executive officer), three directors of the three Courtyards, social workers by profession, three volunteer therapists and three social workers. The young women were 18, 19, and 25 years old; the youngest of them was a high school student. The Courtyards’ staff ranged from 29–62- years old and had been at the Courtyards for between ten months and eight years, with a mean of 3.5 years at the Courtyards. Eight of the staff members were married and had children. The participants were recruited with the help of the CEO and by snowballing. Due to the recurring waves of coronavirus that caused much unemployment and financial hardship, many Courtyard users struggled to find time to be interviewed (due to shift work, temporary jobs, and caring for children and seniors). However, we made an effort to include their voices as they represent a valuable standpoint.

Measures

The current study is qualitative, using descriptions and interpretations of study participants’ lived experiences.

Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with young women and female staff from all three Courtyards. The interviews were conducted by the principal researchers and by research assistants with master’s degrees. The interviews were conducted primarily at the Courtyards, some by Zoom, with most lasting around an hour. No compensation was proffered, but we offered to present the findings to the women and staff of each Yard. The interviewer opened with a general request that the interviewee tell us about herself, followed by questions about the Courtyard’s role in the woman’s life and about the coronavirus pandemic and the difficulties it caused. Questions focused on the interviewee’s coping strategies (or lack thereof).

Data analyses

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using initial content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) and initial categories and sub-categories were then established. Thematic content analysis was designed to identify 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 following the texts to be analyzed, that is, the wording that emerged from the field; (4) classification of text into the categories; (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 both 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 were anonymous, that the recordings would be saved in a password-locked computer and used by the researcher alone, that they 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 conveyed her consent to participate in the study in writing, as well as in an audio recording at the beginning of the interview. All data were stored on the first author’s computer, protected by a two-level password scheme. After the interviews had been transcribed, their recordings were erased, and the transcripts were saved anonymously in the author’s password-protected external hard drive. The study was approved by the Co-CEO, the organization’s founder, and by the current CEO. Approval was obtained by the Academic Institute's Ethics Committee (approval no. XXXX 2020-92).

**Results**

Our major findings point to the crucial role of the community networks generated by the Courtyards before COVID-19. We seek to describe and demonstrate the application of these four principles at the Courtyards during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) a **holistic approach** addressing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, spatial, and other needs by building a supportive community; (2) a **partnership of service users**, which sees the service users as partners in the Courtyards just as they are in their own homes, a place where they are encouraged 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 Courtyard community 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, concerning the Yards’ (5) **conflict with authorities**.

We present how these principles were manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic by quoting 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 adolescents and young women 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 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, how they want to be helped; they’re partners in setting their own goals.

Director, Netanya:

On the first day [of the lockdown], there were, like, let’s say, 80 girls, and we divided them up among the three of us and we called each one. We asked what was happening at home, and we mediated solutions from the welfare services, from the city, and 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.

As these two quotes were chosen because they illustrate the holistic partnership within a context of a community. The girls are “partners in setting their own goals,” in the sense that the solution lies in constant negotiation with each individual. The staff mainly used their experience and community connections to “mediate solutions.”

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

This theme was combined from several sub-themes that describe the role played by the Courtyards for service users: (a) the Courtyards as a home; (b) the Courtyards as a safe community for women; (c) the Courtyards as a place to satisfy material and emotional needs; and (d) the Courtyards 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. Social services are not the ultimate function of Courtyard activities; rather, the Courtyards also provide an experience of home, of sitting in the living room, chatting, eating meals together, pots full of food waiting on the stove. And, of course, women who ask newcomers “how they’re doing.”

A young woman from Netanya:

 It’s like a second home, it’s like… 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; 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 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…being 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 limitless, unconditional entrance to all young women using the service – became a closed and then selective place, 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. It made us captives; it turned our meals into something much more difficult and rigid. It just went against… went against the Courtyard telling girls “Four of you, go.” That’s not how it worked out ever, it just didn’t work out.

*c. The Courtyards as a provider of material and emotional needs*

The Courtyards provide their users with services that meet 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, as well as a place to consult about future positions in the army, and someone “who 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, 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 is a major need, and we realized 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 Yards have many ways of approaching service users’ different needs. Combining the understanding that the users’ needs are not solely psychological or material, but are unique to each young woman, the Yards’ staff project the fact that the service users are seen, and thus empowered.

**3. The Surrounding Community Involvement in the Yards**

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 reflect the condition of the general society, which is tied to their lives and the opportunities afforded to them.

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 they ran into greater financial trouble. But also, 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 [neighborhood], 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 communal 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 to confront 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 the Courtyards’ users’ welfare and advancement.

Director, Netanya:

The prerequisites to get into school were more flexible… We took advantage of it and pushed them in that direction, telling them, “Apply *this year*…” And, in business, … she’s 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 demonstrates 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, also in terms of connection with the girls when there was no Courtyard, also offering hands-on support that was sometimes needed concerning medical things when there was no Courtyard. …. 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 partnerships with community stakeholders, organizations, and the municipality. In addition, the Courtyards had worked together and generated added value, both professionally and emotionally, long before COVID-19. These joint endeavors intensified during the pandemic and proved of great importance 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, … they approached a council member and thanks to them, [the city] started to make this place a little nicer. … 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 the 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. …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. … 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 mentions the dual message the Ministries sent out to them regarding their place in the social services landscape:

I think it’s 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 services the Courtyards provide are limited and mostly afford the users access to municipal and national social services. Therefore, training clients in self-advocacy is critical so that young women can best take advantage of these services effectively and efficiently. This issue was mentioned in several interviews. For example, the Courtyards CEO refers to the importance of imparting self-advocacy skills to the young women who come to the Courtyards so they can cope with the relevant social services:

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, this is, like, a service to contact the welfare authorities from a different angle. Because it’s not as if we’re telling 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 here indicate that the principles of feminist community-based social work were preserved at the Courtyards even during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic period. This is despite the many difficulties that the crisis caused for services such as the Courtyards, which is not an institutionalized organization and is supported mostly by independent fundraising and volunteers. The community that has been built – both internally at the Courtyards and externally with neighborhoods, other organizations, and between 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), was extended during the COVID period. On one hand the pandemia crisis 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 made it possible to help service users as well as employees and volunteers: they could engage in activities that were both meaningful and provided important human contact amid enforced isolation and physical distancing.

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

A key recurring topic in FCSW is working hand-in-hand with the surrounding communities: other organizations, the neighborhood in which the Courtyard is located, the 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 of FCSW that surfaced in the interviews is 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 all the principles that inform FCSW in general and those of the Women’s Courtyards in particular. Classification and labeling, constricting movement and space, isolation, and lockdown all 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 by the restrictions and lockdowns was no less serious (and possibly more so) 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, their human community continued to function even when the physical sphere was closed to them. The wide-ranging network that the Courtyards created around them, including reciprocal support between Courtyards, neighborhood relations, the Courtyards’ circle of donators and supporters, and established relationships with municipal and state institutions, along with their ability to swiftly improvise solutions to the crisis enabled this flexibility and agility.

As non-formal institutions, the Courtyards suffer from the authorities’ ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, the Courtyards are perceived as a crucial service that succeeds in working with women with whom formal institutions cannot communicate, with the Courtyards managing a handful of referrals from the formal services. On the other hand, the fluidity that enlarges their capacity to be inclusive and provide flexible and versatile responses have 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 see 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.

Creating various social networks with local communities, local volunteers, local organizations and other Courtyards is a complicated, time-consuming but highly rewarding practice. This practice of bonding with various and even unusual organizations and individuals generates broad, diverse, flexible, and dynamic responses during pandemics and in stressful times generally, facilitating creative and rapid adaptation to unexpected developments.

**Limitations of This Study**

The study is based mostly on interviews with Courtyard staff members rather than service users who were difficult to locate and, even once located, difficult to enlist in this study. This circumstance is partly presented in the findings. The perspective of other stakeholders that operated around and together with the Courtyards is also missing from the complete picture. Furthermore, the study does not compare the pre- and post-pandemic periods, but only provides a snapshot of a given time, meaning that it is based on employees’ testimony that reflects their subjective impressions of an experience during 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.

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