

In the International day of Social Work: Social Workers Fighting Covid-19 Virus in Palestine and in the world

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Every year in the 17th of March; social workers are celebrating the “International day of Social Workers”. In many countries; social workers try to promoting the importance of their profession among their communities in such occasion. This time of the year 2020, social workers are working hard side by side with other professionals to fight against COVID 19 virus in all over the world. As this virus is rapidly spread around the world; all professionals, doctors, nurses, activists, volunteers and social workers are in emergency situation to help their community in all possible ways.

In Palestine; people are still living under Israeli occupation for more than 70 years by now. The reality of life here is very similar to “living in big prison” because of occupation. The apartheid segregation wall is surrounding west bank and isolating all Palestinian cities from each other, and isolating the Gaza strip completely from the whole world. Palestinians used to live under restrictions on movements, curfews and discrimination since 1948. Being at house for long time and dealing with movement restrictions is a familiar situation to Palestinian people, but this time the restrictions are because of the Corona Virus. It is a new situation for everyone and new experience with new challenges for many.

Social workers have been working under such circumstances since 1948, they tried hardly to reach people who are not able to move due to Israeli collective punishments such as curfews and checkpoints that handicap the movement of people around all Palestine.

Relating to the crisis of the Corona virus; the situation in Palestine is a little bit fortunate comparing with other “red zone areas” such as Italy, USA, UK and other countries. But specialists here in Palestine are expecting that the situation will be worst if people did not commit to regulations and rules that related to emergency situation such as staying at the house, social isolation and using sterilizers.

Today, the number of infected persons in Palestine raise up to 239 persons ⁽¹⁾, and more than 14,000 people are under quarantine. Most cases are quarantined in Bethlehem governorate, and the rest are from other places around west bank and Gaza. The government spokesman, Mr. Ibrahim Melhem confirmed recently that the health of infected people is stable. (Maan news, 2020).

Bethlehem was the first city in Palestine to experience the corona virus outbreak. This happened because we welcomed and hosted a group of tourists from Greece who were carrying the virus. Despite the fear of the virus, Bethlehem continued to welcome all visitors until the last moment in an attempt to keep the pride of the city and because tourism accounts for 70% of the local economy (Rimawi & Butcher, 2015)

Due to the emergency situation in Palestine; all schools are closed, universities, banks, theaters, gyms, bars and restaurants are all closed. Only hospitals and healthcare centers are functioning in addition to shops that provide food and grocery in addition to vegetables markets. all gatherings and no public events are forbidden in addition to cancel all public events and celebrations.

COVID 19 has generated serious human crisis. The number of mortalities is very high in various countries. In Palestine, many people face stress, poverty, trauma, physical and psychical suffering. Many of them are experiencing fear and uncertainty of the future. They are afraid about their children and elderly who are the most vulnerable to affect by the various. Many social workers and psychosocial consultants expressed their concern about families under quarantine. Parents are worry about their children and afraid of being infected. Therefore, many social workers try to approach these families and try to offer their help through networks and collations that formed to help in the crisis.

As soon as Bethlehem was the first infected area by the virus; all the pressure was allocated in this town to prevent the spread of the virus among citizens. Therefore, plenty of specific procedures were taken to help the formal bodies to control the situation. Since day one; the government in collaboration with local and national bodies have established a supportive committee led by the civil defense forces to help people not to freak out and to control the situation. Social workers who work in various local organizations in addition to the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and

¹ <https://corona.ps/details>

Psychologists were part of this body in addition to other counseling and family support groups who involved in this process.

By the end of the day there was an emergency plan for facing the Corona virus in Bethlehem area and the social workers were essential part of this plan. Social workers worked hard to help people of Bethlehem focusing on the counseling and promoting health care procedures and spread out many advices, online sources, posters, guidelines, manuals, information, short videos and articles that everyone can easily read in order to learn about the virus and to be able to understand how to protect themselves and their families. Moreover, many social work groups provided 24/24 hotline services with numbers of consultants to provide advices and counseling for those who in need. Which the PUSWP in Bethlehem took the lead to organize this process and facilitate the orientation and control for all social workers and psychologists who involved in this effort.

Social workers did not only provide consultations for people, but they also worked side by side with decision makers to fill the gaps with information, and make sure that all people are aware of the protection rules, hygiene information and making sure that sanitizers are available and from where to get it, how to use it, how to deal with children and other issues during the quarantine.

Also, they contact the infected persons to make sure that they are alright, and they are able to continue the isolation in good and healthy wellbeing. Moreover, the social workers try to reach the families of infected patients, and help them to overcome this hard time, in addition to consult them on how to deal with this situation on the social and psychosocial levels.

The nature of Palestinian families is based on strong ties. Anyone who visit Palestine will notice the structure of the families here. The relations between family members is very strong and they have daily contact and daily activities even with the extended family. They visit each other on daily bases and have common activities related to social events and social gatherings which related to traditions and local habits. Sons should visit parents almost everyday if they live in same town or in the weekend if they live faraway. In some families there are many sub-families are living together such as married sons and their children. This situation needs more efforts from social workers to help families commit to the medical rules that related to quarantine. From other hand, living together in very crowded environment will cost the family social and psychological pressure. Which might result stress and anxiety and other psychosocial problems.

This emergency situation affecting the Palestinians in many ways; economically, socially and psychologically. Therefore, the role of social workers in facing these obstacles is very hard. Many Palestinians are living under the poverty line, and not able to offer their basic needs, and due to the fact that they are not able to work and has no income due to closure and house quarantine especially in Bethlehem area. In spite of the fact that many people and organizations tried to support Bethlehem area with basic needs such as health tools, food, water and other medical needs and hygiene sanitizers, but not all people are able to reach or receive these services, which added a lot to the burden of Palestinian social workers. That's why social workers played mutable roles in contacting groups and individuals on various levels to make sure that all people are able to receive services equally.

If we are talking about the slogan of this year's social work day "Promoting the importance of human relationships" then we can see this happening/promoted in facing the crisis of Corona virus. I saw this in Palestine; I so solidarity, voluntary, trust and strength of community members in the past 2 weeks. People are helping each other and everyone is concern about the health of each other. People call each other and offer their readiness for any help. Myself and many other people around received phone calls from professional, old friends, old neighbors proposing their readiness for any help. **This reflects the human relationships in times of crises.** Corona virus united people, and promoted the Chinese saying: "we are all waves in the same sea" which is very true indeed.

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