

Role of the Georgian Association of Social Workers in supporting the Covid-19 response in Georgia

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Abstract

The Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW) provides professional expertise and support to the Government of Georgia, social service providers and social workers, and is also active in responding to challenges facing the country and requiring social work expertise. GASW has been active in supporting professionals and advocating for their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency declared by the country in March 2020. GASW prepared a guidance note outlining roles and responsibilities of social workers and self-care tips and conducted a rapid assessment of the challenges and needs of social workers. These included lack of professional supervision, stress and burnout, fear of contracting the virus, transport problems, IT difficulties and disruption in functioning of the Regional Councils of Guardianship and Care responsible for decision making regarding children's cases.

Keywords

COVID-19, social workers, Georgia, Georgian Association of Social Workers

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Georgia is an ancient country in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. Located at the crossroads of the Western Asia and the Eastern Europe, the population of the country is about 3.7 million, around 300,000 of which has been internally displaced due to the occupation of 20 percent of the Georgian territories.

After regaining independence in 1991, Georgia engaged in diverse reform initiatives, aiming to overcome the legacy inherited from the socialist regime. The Government of Georgia (GoG) embarked on large-scale reforms, many of which demonstrated an urgency in introducing the profession of social worker.

Establishment of the Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW) in 2004 was one of the key steps in increasing awareness and profile of social work in the country. Being established by a small group of academically qualified social workers in the country, GASW has been playing a key role in developing social work practice, education and a regulatory framework in Georgia.

Currently the Georgian Association of Social Workers has over 600 members and is a part of the global social work professional community. Besides providing professional expertise and support to the GoG, social service providers and social workers, GASW is also active in responding to challenges facing the country and requiring social work expertise.

Starting from mid-March 2020 Georgia had up to 800 COVID-19 cases and 13 deaths (48 cases and four deaths per million people). The strict measures planned by GoG to contain the new Coronavirus outbreak were considered as timely and adequate by many national and international experts. However, a full ban on international travel, restricted movement within the country, curfew, closure of most businesses and other measures had significant economic and social impact on the population of the country.

Even though social workers were not considered by GoG as essential workers for the virus response, and hence were not provided with much support and guidance, social workers continued performing their duties to provide support to their client groups. Hence, GASW has been active in supporting professionals and advocating for their needs.

Soon after declaring the state of emergency, the GASW team has prepared a guidance note outlining roles and responsibilities of social workers at the micro, mezzo and macro levels in responding to the life-threatening infection. The document also discussed self-care tips and client support recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to inform decision makers and employers of social workers about improving social work practice during the crisis, GASW conducted a rapid assessment of the challenges and needs of social work practitioners and developed a set of recommendations. In total 20 GASW members participated in research, among them State Care Agency, Probation Agency, social worker representing the Ministry of Education, service providers and non-governmental organisation social workers. The assessment was conducted immediately after the state of emergency was declared in Georgia. The main challenges identified by the social workers were:

- A lack of the practical guidelines for working online with groups with special needs (e.g. older persons, people with disabilities, single parents, large families, children living and working on the streets, etc.).
- Lack of professional supervision of social workers working in state sectors and in service-provider non-governmental organisations. Stress and burnout, fear of contracting the virus, dealing with challenging and unfamiliar circumstances, working remotely, etc.
- Transportation issues, resulting from a full restriction of public transport and the curfew declared in the country. However, due to the nature of their work, statutory social workers still needed to make emergency visits.
- Lack of access to the state electronic databases and programs when working from home, while still requiring this information for prepare case files and managing cases.
- Technological problems related to working from home, resulting from a limited experience of online counseling or communication with other agencies, as well as lack of IT support.
- Social workers are still obliged to work from their offices even in times of restriction of physical communication. They have to get and manage documentation submitted by programme users about new cases, a serious

challenge when having to maintain the required physical distance. The agency should be able to find alternative ways for programme users to apply to new programmes so that the social worker is not at risk of becoming infected or transmitting the infection in the process of physical communication.

- Bureaucratic constraints hindering social workers' flexibility and quick response to the needs of their clients.
- Difficulties in functioning of the Regional Councils of Guardianship and Care, responsible for decision making regarding children's cases. Inability/challenges of the Council to work online left social workers faced with important emergency decisions requiring multi-agency involvement.

GASW has also identified an ongoing need for consultations and direct communication with social workers to identify emerging needs and eliminate problems. Recommended priority actions for the safety and wellbeing of social workers proposed by GASW were based on the above findings, as well internationally developed guidance on this topic.

GASW recommendations were shared with the State Care Agency and UNICEF Georgia Country Office and were widely considered in developing the emergency plan to protect children from different problems for the duration of the pandemic in Georgia.

Ongoing support will be required for child protection social workers, as well as the child protection field in general, as the COVID infection had significant impact on the vulnerable children, as well as existing (and already challenged) social work practices. According to the reports from social workers, children in alternative care were significantly touched by the pandemic, as during this period they were unable to meet their parents. In addition, being left without interaction with their classmates and other children, confronted with difficulties of on-line schooling and other restrictions imposed on them, affected children's behavior and reduced their interest in school activities. Foster carers and caretakers in the small group homes, had difficulties in planning children's daily activities, faced challenges in ensuring their meaningful engagement in educational activities and ensuring safety (at home and on-line). These difficulties were confounded by the fact that due to restrictions imposed on social workers' visitations, social workers had challenges in supporting burned out caregivers, and monitoring children's conditions.

GoG imposed restrictions on public movement and presence in public spaces had major implications for street connected children and youth as well. According to the State Care Agency, the number of the state mobile services have increased and street connected children and youth were placed in crisis centers. According to the service providers, due to their special attachment to the streets, it was very difficult to keep them in the buildings. To support the children GASW in collaboration with Ilia State University Research Center for Advancing Science in the Social Services and Interventions, prepared psycho-educational YouTube video channel¹, aiming to make lives of street connected youth more productive and enjoyable while staying in the 24-hour centers.

The pandemic once again emphasized the value of strengthening social work services and importance of emergency preparedness for protecting children in the times of unexpected difficulties.

The Association has set up an information hub, serving as a forum for COVID-19 related information. A group formed of more than 150 professionals and 13 GASW practice students from Ilia State University and Tbilisi State University gather and share relevant research findings, professional handbooks, information kits, training and webinar links developed within Georgia and abroad. A GASW team supports translation of the relevant materials into Georgian, as the use of non-Georgian literature is seen as challenging for many practitioners. To tackle the language issue, the team conducted a national webinar in Georgian, led by the head of the GASW board and discussed challenges of the pandemic. During the webinar international experiences were also shared with Georgian colleagues. These experiences were based on the 'Social Work in Times of Uncertainty: Discussion of Challenges and Innovative Solutions' webinar, participated in by representatives of different countries and the International Federation of Social Workers Europe. GASW also conducted a 'Social Workers' Club' meeting which considered the particular challenges of the deaf-blind, deaf and people with hearing problems during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of the social worker.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UClpSPTQeQ8qZ-cNU3BEVPgQ>

Apart from providing technical support and guidance, GASW has been providing support to the selected families in the remote parts of Georgia, identified having severe need for food and hygienic products.

The Georgian social work professional workforce is keen to learn about promising international practices and sharing country experience with the International Federation of Social Workers and other interested partners.

About the authors

Ketevan Gigineishvili holds a MSW degree and is a PHDc from Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. She has served as a visiting lecturer at Palacky University in Czech Republic and Ilia State University. Ketevan has been a director of the Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW) since 2019.

Dr. Natia Partskhaladze has earned MD, MSc and MSW degrees from the leading schools in Georgia, Europe and the United States, and is a PhD candidate in social work. She is a founder and board member of the GASW, and has played a key role in establishing the academic programme in social work in Georgia. Natia has a proven track record of providing strategic support to governments in several countries in developing effective child and social protection systems. She serves as an international consultant in child protection and social service workforce strengthening.

Professor Shorena Sadzaglishvili, MSW, PHD is head of the board of GASW, Ilia State University. She holds a MSW from Columbia University (USA) and a doctorate in psychology from the Dr. Uznadze Institute of Psychology at the Georgian National Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, Georgia. She is the founder of the first MSW programme in Georgia (in 2007), and the co-founder of the GASW in 2004, and its chair since 2019. Shorena is director of MSW and PhD programmes and the Social Work Research Center at Ilia State University.