

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Isolation on the Clients' Experiences in Counselling and their Access to Services: Perspectives of Violence Against Women Program Staff - A Qualitative Study

Authors : Habiba Nahzat, Karen Crow, Lisa Manuel, Maria Huijbregts

Abstract : Background and Rationale: The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Shortly after, the Ontario provincial and Toronto municipal governments also released multiple directives that led to the mass closure of businesses both in the public and private sectors. Recent research has identified connections between Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and COVID-19 related stressors - especially because of lockdown and social isolation measures. Psychological impacts of lengthy seclusion coupled with disconnection from extended family and diminished support services can take a toll on families at risk and may increase mental health issues and the prevalence of IPV. Research Question: Thus, the purpose of the study was to understand the perspective of the Violence Against Women (VAW) program staff on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; we especially wanted to understand staff views of restrictions on clients' counseling experiences and the ability to access services in general. The study also aimed to examine VAW program staff experiences regarding remote work and explore how the pandemic restriction measures affected the ability of their program operations to support their clients and each other. Method: A cross-sectional, descriptive qualitative study was conducted with a purposive sample of 9 VAW program staff - eight VAW counselors and one VAW manager. Prior to data collection, program staff collaborated in the development of the study purpose, interview questions and methodology. Ethics approval was obtained from the sponsoring organization's Research Ethics Board. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with study participants using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. Brief demographic information was also collected prior to the interview. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data and qualitative data was analyzed by thematic content analysis. Results: Findings from this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions had an adverse impact on clients seeking VAW services based on VAW staff perspectives. Program staff reported a perceived increase in abuse among women, especially in emotional and financial abuse and experiences of isolation and trauma. Findings further highlight the challenges women experienced when trying to access services in general as well as counseling and legal services. This was perceived to be more prominent among newcomers and marginalized women. The study also revealed client and staff challenges when participating in virtual counseling, their innovations and clients' creativity in accessing needed counseling and how staff over time adapted to providing virtual support during the pandemic. Conclusion and Next Steps: This study builds upon existing evidence on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on VAW and may inform future research to better understand the association between the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and VAW on a broader scale and to inform and support possible short-term and long-term changes in the client experience and counselling practice.

Keywords : COVID-19, pandemic, virtual, violence against women (VAW)

Conference Title : ICSWR 2021 : International Conference on Social Work Research

Conference Location : Toronto, Canada

Conference Dates : June 15-16, 2021