



Asian Social Work Journal (ASWJ)

Volume 6, Issue 6, December 2021

e-ISSN : 0128-1577

Journal home page:
www.msosialwork.com

Challenges of International Social Work Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learnt from A Bilateral Collaborative Study

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a profound impact on people's lives around the world, has also affected international social work practice and research on social issues. This article explores how international social work research can draw lessons from bilateral research collaborations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2021, an international collaborative research project was commenced to examine the practical experiences of social workers in Sri Lanka, with the overall purpose of contributing to development of socio-culturally relevant social work training. Trial semi-structured interviews were conducted using remote tools with five social workers in government or private organisations. The narratives of the interviewees were qualitatively analysed to identify their personal backgrounds of social work education and practice, their experiences of working during the pandemic and their perspectives and values as social workers. Lessons learnt were discussed focussing on the objectives and perspectives of the study, the preliminary arrangements for the research, the methods and considerations. In a context where it is important for social work researchers to promote international studies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper provides an example of a feasible international cooperative study.

Keywords: international collaboration; remote survey; online interviews; information and communication technology (ICT); triangulation; pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global phenomenon, seems to have had a devastating impact on the lives and activities of the clients with whom social workers are expected to be engaged at the grassroots level. In addition, it has had a range of impacts, including constraints on international social work research and practice. Given that social workers' responsibilities include research development, knowledge creation and practical innovation, the impediments posed by the COVID-19 pandemic can create further disadvantages both globally and locally, or 'glocally' (Gray, 2016). Therefore, glocal action by social work stakeholders in practice, education and research is called for (Amadasun, 2020). As it is still difficult to predict when the pandemic will be completely over (or whether people need to live with it), it is imperative to consider how we can conduct international social work research in this uncertain world (Afrouz, 2021). This paper examines these issues through a case study of bilateral cooperation on international joint research between Sri Lanka and Japan.

Various reports and recommendations have addressed social work practice for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including issues of inequality for the most marginalised people (Balestrery,

2021; Banks et al., 2021; Dominelli et al., 2020). In the Asia Pacific region, reports have been issued by practitioners and researchers. In Sri Lanka, for example, reports have investigated the impact of the pandemic on people's lives, both physically and psychosocially (Patabendige et al., 2020; Perera et al., 2020). In Japan, researchers have reported on clients' living conditions during the pandemic (Nakamura, 2021) and voluntary 'social work' practice (Ohta & Yata, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 on international social work research has been profound, but the question is how to facilitate further research under the given conditions. Although some cross-border travel has resumed, it has still been substantially limited by travel restrictions and quarantine regulations. As a result, bilateral and multilateral face-to-face and field-based international exchanges and research activities have faced various difficulties (Dahdouh-Guebas & Vandebroek, 2020). At the same time, the global spread of information and communication technology (ICT) has been transforming communication methods in social work education and research (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020). In the variety of these simultaneous contexts, there is a need to discuss how international social work research can be realised.

Topics of international social work research under the COVID-19 pandemic have also been discussed, with suggested priorities given to specific research themes in the COVID-19 pandemic (Carson, 2021). It has been of importance to examine the challenges in people's lives and social work actions to address them (Amadasun, 2020). In addition, it is necessary to consider how international collaboration on topics that had been examined before the pandemic can be advanced even during and after it, considering the impact of the pandemic (Gavin et al., 2021). This research note aims to draw lessons on how international social work research can be promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic based on a case study of bilateral research collaboration.

Methods: Case of a Collaborative Study

This international collaborative research is part of a three-year study scheduled to begin in April 2021, entitled 'Exploring indigenous and professional social work in developing countries and its relationship with international cooperation'. This paper describes a pilot study initiated by a Japanese researcher with the Sri Lanka Association of Professional Social Workers (hereafter, the Association). The objective of this collaborative study is to explore the practical knowledge of Sri Lankan social workers from the perspective of culturally relevant practice.

The authors were acquainted prior to the start of the project, including a meeting in Sri Lanka in December 2017. In April 2021, the application for the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research was approved in Japan (Grant Number JP 21K13477), and the research-related activities started in earnest. After the grant and ethical review procedure in the same month, the authors discussed the research plan in detail through online meetings and emails. Finally, a research agreement was signed electronically by the first author and the Association in June.

Remote interviews with Sri Lankan social workers were conducted as a trial study. Research participants were mainly recruited in June 2021 through the Association. A total of five social workers were interviewed between June and August 2021: three Social Service Officers (SSOs) at the divisional level, one Village Officer (Grama Niladhari) and two NGO or volunteer workers; three were men and two were women. Interviews were conducted by the first author in Sinhala or English based on the participant's request. The interviews were recorded on the basis of an oral and written consent form. Interviews lasted between about 45 and 90 minutes per session. After each interview, the verbatim interview data were translated into English for analysis.

A thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo analytical software. The analysis included the educational and practice background of Sri Lankan social workers, their experiences of working, including practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their perspectives and values as social workers. It is expected that this study will have implications for practice and education that might be influenced by Western social work discourses but are rooted in Sri Lankan social culture.

Using the findings and implications as well as dialogues with Sri Lankan stakeholders, we plan to conduct activities towards developing social work training and reciprocal exchanges. Although the details could depend on the pandemic situation, we plan to share the research findings and discuss initiatives to strengthen the capacity of frontline social workers in Sri Lanka.

Lessons learnt

Although this study is in the process of being carried out during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, some lessons for the post-Corona (or with-Corona) world will be discussed in this section. The focus will be on reflective discussions on the objectives and perspectives of the study, the preliminary arrangements for the research, the methods and considerations.

Purpose and perspective

We were required to reflect not only on research ethics in the narrow sense, but also on the overall purpose of the research. While there were specific contexts, such as increasing global attention to indigenous and postcolonial social work (Gray et al., 2010; Noyoo & Kleibl, 2019), it was also important to ask ourselves questions such as ‘Should we plan and conduct this theme at this difficult time?’ The debate was not only about whether or not to directly benefit from the study of COVID-19 issues, but also about how social workers should be involved in addressing social issues which might be more serious under the pandemic (Amadasun, 2020). In addition, it was important to focus on the overlap of social issues and social work practice, which had been observed before the pandemic, with the changing contexts during and after the pandemic. We have attempted to address the research theme through such internal reflection and discussion.

Preliminary arrangements

One reason this study was able to commence was perhaps that the members were acquainted prior to its start. For an international team in the social work context, mutual understanding of diverse aspects, including socio-cultural background, is needed. The first author’s experience of practical research in Sri Lanka and his ability to communicate in the local language may have contributed to the success of this preliminary communication. In other words, the possibility of conducting a study by an international team consisted of strangers online, without face-to-face pre-interaction, could require alternative arrangements which this note does not touch upon.

In addition, due to the physical restrictions posed by the pandemic, remote tools have become increasingly popular worldwide. For instance, in the pre-coordination of this study, we improved efficiency by using remote tools for meetings and signing agreements online. While these tools had already been used in a variety of contexts, such use indicates that they can also be used in international social work research after the pandemic.

Research methods and considerations

Flexibility in the design and planning of the study was important. In the preliminary planning of this study, the authors had included plans for overseas fieldwork. However, since many countries and regions have imposed conditions and restrictions on entry due to the pandemic, this study, perhaps like many others around the world, had to be conducted by alternative means. It was therefore necessary to revise the design of the study to adapt to the external conditions. This included postponing the overseas trip and discussing whether or not the field survey could be carried out in a timely manner if the end of the pandemic was in sight.

In terms of data collection methods, because this research has focussed on the subjective experiences of social workers, methods for obtaining narrative data were selected. As a practical approach, we decided to use an online tool for semi-structured interviews. Other methods, such as online questionnaires, were also considered for inclusion.

In the course of the research, we needed to take into account the events and situations related to the pandemic. First, it was important to gather information about the different situations due to the pandemic at the community level. It would be problematic if this study puts an unnecessary burden on those who are busy with field activities due to the pandemic or has a negative impact on their activities. In this study, some interviewees agreed to be interviewed in a way that they might not have been able to do before the pandemic, as their activities might have been restricted by lockdowns or other factors. Hence, these aspects and episodes indicate that it is necessary to look at a variety of forms of information, including online information and confirmation through communication with people at the grassroots level.

Second, it was necessary to deal in advance with possible problems in conducting remote surveys. For example, internet access was not necessarily good in rural areas, and internet costs were an issue. Therefore, through discussions in the research team, the option of international telephone calls via a remote tool (at the expense of the researcher) was created so as not to be a financial burden for local participants. This suggests that efforts should be made to hold dialogue and resolve any inconveniences in the implementation of the study between the stakeholders.

Survey implementation and limitations

The Sri Lankan interviewees were willing to participate in this study despite the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to their past experiences of social work education, training and practice, several interviewees were willing to talk in detail about their practices in relation to the pandemic. Indeed, some of them expressed that there was a need for them to share their experiences of social work practice. In other words, this study indicates a significance for sharing and discussing the study theme because of the pandemic. A frontline social worker, for instance, narrated the following:

Yes, I have implemented a good programme for COVID-19 as a social worker. Actually, I'm the one who initiated that programme in the district... Since it had been difficult for me to deal with the issues of all the residences at once, I allocated all the families, about 3,000 families, in the village into committees. I also appointed 34 leaders to 3,000 families in the division. I informed the leaders about the process and said they had to be in touch with their allocated area: 'Are there any new COVID patients reported?', 'Is there any quarantined family?', 'Does any quarantined person need any assistance or any other help?', 'Do they get proper electricity supply and water supply?' etc. All these things should be taken care of by the committee leader. After that, I gathered all the team leaders and formed an SNS group. This made it easier for every leader to connect easily. We can discuss and share problems throughout the group and as a result of that, I could deal with the pandemic situation well and a control system was established in the division... As I had studied social work well, I could do a huge work during the COVID-19 situation in order to control it well.

However, it is important to note that research conducted only remotely has many limitations. While the online communication in this study revealed the advantages of being able to make extensive contact with people despite their limited mobility in the pandemic, it has also highlighted the challenges. For instance, remote research forced the authors to rely on verbal communication, which made it difficult to obtain a full feeling of the site and have co-experiences with the local people. This means that substantial intersubjective interactions, which are fundamental in fieldwork and ethnography, were limited. This can be one of the major limitations in intercultural and international research activities. Triangulation by alternative means, such as remote video and literature, was important, but the analysis process and findings need to be carefully interpreted with these limitations in mind. These limitations point to the need for a more careful discussion of multicultural and transnational events in international social work research in the pandemic context compared to normal times.

Conclusions

Even though international social work research and practice has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers and practitioners have been called upon to address the various challenges of this difficult time, through activities that correspond to the values and ethics of social work. In the context of international social work research with bilateral cooperation, for example, travel has not been completely unrestricted yet, and there may be significant constraints on substantial activities at the field level. Nevertheless, it is necessary to be creative in the means of research and to discuss feasible methods, including effective technology that might not have been well-utilised across the globe before the pandemic.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to all the people who participated in this study. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP21K13477.

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