

The role of healthcare organizations in activating self-care systems and responding to emergency situations

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Abstract— *Background: Self-care refers to the individuals' ability to promote and maintain their health. The first requirement for self-care is raising awareness of healthcare issues. In this regard, healthcare non-governmental organizations can play a significant role. The present study was carried out in order to investigate the role of an active health organization in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in activating self-care practices and responding to emergency situations.*

Methods: The study was a descriptive qualitative one that was carried out from July to December 2019 on 16 participants who were selected from doctors, nurses, managers, social researchers, employees, and patients in Zhian health organization. Unstructured in-depth interviews were carried out to collect required data. The collected data were analyzed through van Manen's method, and the relevant themes and subthemes were extracted.

Results: Analyzing the collected data led to emergence of two main theme which were labeled as "raising health awareness" and "providing emergency health care". The first main theme had three subtheme, namely "raising public awareness of self-care", "raising the pregnant women's awareness of self-care", and "raising the women's awareness of gender-based violence". The second main theme had two subtheme, namely "providing refugees with emergency health care" and "providing internally displaced persons with emergency health care".

Conclusion: Primary healthcare NGOs can play a significant role in raising health awareness, promoting self-care activities, and providing emergency health care. As a result, such NGOs need to be developed and supported by the government and the Ministry of Health.

Keywords— *healthcare organizations, self-care, emergency situations, qualitative study.*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, self-care is "the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider". Self-care is highly significant for individuals particularly in low-resource settings such as natural disasters and wars where it is quite challenging to have access to professional medical care. Healthcare systems can also benefit from self-care, such as decreasing the level of burden on the healthcare providers and improving health coverage [1,2]. On the other hand, an

emergency is a situation that causes health, life, property, or the environment to undergo some levels of risk. Healthcare non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are primarily aimed at providing healthcare and rehabilitation services, and most of them work on health development and emergency response [3].

Self-care can include a set of activities and capacities. It can be taken into account from two complementary dimensions; one aims to improve the capacity of individuals to self-care and the other one is related to the relationship between self-care and the health system: people-centered and system-centered [4]. The individual's

capacity and ability to make wise health decisions and use the available health resources is a significant element of effective management and prevention of a health condition. The capacity to reach and utilize familial and societal resources plays a role in personal agency and autonomy and specifies health outcomes [5].

It is vitally important that healthcare organizations develop an emergency management program to support the development and maintenance of critical emergency operations components such as the emergency operations plan, training and exercises, and collaborative relationships. Healthcare organizations must monitor and update their emergency operation plans on an ongoing basis, maintaining a constant state of preparedness to ensure appropriate response and recovery within the shortest possible time frames [6]. Without proper planning, an incident involving the organization may result in either a temporary or permanent failure, thus disabling a crucial community resource. The emergency operations plan also should be fully integrated with that of other organizations and appropriate agencies at the local, state, regional and national levels. This is particularly important in situations such as a pandemic that may simultaneously impact large geographic areas for several months and disrupt national and international supply chains [7]. Moreover, emergency situations that can have negative effects of public health are increased by different factors such as behavior, beliefs, healthcare services, socio-economic environment, population profile, physical environment, and political context [8].

Since the overthrow of Saddam in 2003 and later the invasion of ISIS in 2014, there has been an increase in emergency situations in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The swarm of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees particularly to the Kurdistan Region due to its relative stability compared to other parts of Iraq has also added to emergency situations. There have also been some natural disasters like earthquake and floods in the region recently, which has worsened the emergency situation [9]. Therefore, healthcare NGOs need to adopt appropriate measures to handle emergency situations in the region. Self-care interventions for health have been introduced as the most promising new approaches contributing to universal health coverage (UHC) particularly in emergency situations (WHO, 2019). It is the responsibility of the healthcare system and the related organizations (both NGOs and public entities) to establish a self-care system and boost self-care practices among the public, so the people know how to survive in disasters and emergencies [9,10].

Since self-care can promote and improve wellbeing and health, it is a significant element of people-centered care [1]. A people-centered care system puts emphasis on self-fulfillment, empowerment, and psychological needs, placing less emphasis on technical activities and instead looking at self-care in terms of capacities, building on a person's "health assets," both as a condition for and a product of the practice of self-care [1,10, 11]. So far, there have been no established self-care practices in Iraqi Kurdistan, resulting in an increased rate of casualties and loss in case of healthcare emergencies. In this regard, the present study was carried out in order to investigate the role of Zhian health organization which is an active healthcare organization in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in activating self-care practices and responding to emergency situations based on the lived experiences of those who have worked in or received healthcare services from Zhian health organization.

II. METHODS

Study design and setting

The present descriptive qualitative study was carried out using a hermeneutic phenomenological design. It was conducted in Zhian health organization primary health care (PHC) Camp located in Erbil city of Kurdistan Region of Iraq over a period of 6 months from July to December 2019.

Participants: The study sample consisted of 16 participants who were doctors (n=8), nurses (n=1), manager of gender-based violence (GBV) manager (n=1), social researchers (n=1), and employees (n=1) who were working in Zhian health organization primary health care (PHC) Camp and provided the patients in the camp with health care. The study also included patients, refugees, and patients (n=4) in the study. They were chosen by a purposive sampling method.

Data collection: Unstructured in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants in order to collect required data. Data collection was continued until data redundancy occurred. The interviews were conducted in the participants' desired place and time. Following the participants' consent, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The scripts of the interviews were translated into English line by line and word by word by a highly experienced native-like translator and were analyzed according to Van Manen's method (1990), so that the researcher's interpretation will be possible. For data collection, the following interview questions were asked.

“Please tell me about your feelings and lived experience of the role of active healthcare NGOs in Iraqi Kurdistan in activation self-care systems and responding to emergency situations?” Other questions were directly given to the participants to encourage them to continue reflecting on their past experiences. They included, “Please tell me more”, “Can you give an example?”, “How did you feel/think about that”, “What was it like?”, and “You said that?” The researcher remained “silent” as a tactful way to encourage the participants to recall and tell their experiences.

Data analysis: Data analysis was carried out through the six methodological steps proposed by van Manen’s method (1990). The hermeneutic approach proposed by van Manen is used to reach a high level of abstraction [13]. As a result, van Manen’s method (1990) was used to analyze the collected data. This method consists of 6 methodological steps, including turning to the nature of lived experience, investigating experience as we live it, reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon, describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting, maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon, and balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole [14].

Trustworthiness: To make sure about and maintain the rigor of the study, four operational techniques, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used [15]. In addition to this, there was a prolonged engagement with the data over a period of 2 months during which the researcher referred to Zhian health organization primary health care Camp located in Erbil, had effective communication with the participants, and employed the member- and peer-checking techniques in order to make sure about the credibility of the findings [16]. Furthermore, given the fact that the researcher is a master’s candidate in nursing and has experience in terms of providing health care to patients, his credibility was also achieved.

Ethical considerations: The ethical considerations were taken into consideration through the approval obtained from the Ethics Committee of Near East University. Also, before the final participants were selected and the interviews were conducted, the participants were provided with sufficient explanation about the aim of the study and the data collection method. Moreover, a written informed consent form was filled by each participant. The participants’ information was kept confidential and anonymous by labelling them as Participant No. 1, Participant No. 2, etc.

III. RESULTS

Analyzing the data obtained from the participants led to interpreting the role of Zhian health organization healthcare organization in activating self-care practices and responding to emergency situations as two main themes, namely “raising health awareness” and “providing emergency health care”. The first main theme had two subthemes, namely “raising public awareness of self-care”, “raising the pregnant women’s awareness of self-care”, and “raising the women’s awareness of gender-based violence”. The second main theme also had two subthemes, namely “providing refugees with emergency health care” and “providing internally displaced persons with emergency health care”.

First main theme: Raising health awareness

Analyzing the scripts of the interviews revealed that Zhian health organization primary healthcare organization has been successful in raising health awareness among its clients, resulting in activation of self-care activities and practices among them. In this regard Participant No. 10 stated, “*One of the main goals of Zhian health organization is to enhance people’s awareness of health by training them and providing them with required knowledge on medical issues.*” The same fact was referred to by Participant No. 5 who was an Arab IDP as she stated, “*After receiving medical services from Zhian health organization, I’m now more aware of my and my child’s medical issues.*” Data analysis indicated that rising health awareness in Zhian Health Organization had a particular focus on the public self-care, pregnant women’s self-care, and gender-based violence, which were labelled as three subthemes of the first main theme.

First subtheme: Raising public awareness of self-care

Raising awareness of health care was referred to as one of the fields in which Zhian health organization has been successful in. In the long run, this goal gives way to elevated public awareness of self-care. In this regard, Participant No. 8 who was a nurse working in the organization said, “*I’ve noticed that most of our regular clients and those we pay visits tent to tent are much more careful about their health than before. They pay more attention to what they eat and are sensitive about their regular check-ups.*” Moreover, Participant No. 9 who was a Syrian refugee revealed, “*Doctors and nurses of Zhian health organization give us regular educational classes and teach us how to take care of our and our family’s health. I feel that we’ve got a far healthier lifestyle than before.*”

Second subtheme: Raising the pregnant women's awareness of self-care

One of the main objectives of Zhian health organization Care Organization which was highlighted by the participants is its focus on the health and health awareness of pregnant women. In this regard, Participant No. 11 who was a pediatrician stated, "Zhian health organization has a significant focus on pregnant women's health because we believe that healthy and health-aware pregnant mothers give birth to healthy children. And I think we have been quite successful in this regard." Focus on self-care among pregnant women was also mentioned by Participant No. 3 who was a doctor by saying, "We pay pregnant women regular visits tent to tent in the camp. During our visits we teach them about healthy diets, good exercises, suitable lifestyle, and negative effects of some bad habits. The pregnant women in the camp are well aware of their health." Also, Participant No. 6 who was a pregnant woman said, "They give us regular check-ups and provide us with useful health information which is useful for me and my baby."

Third subtheme: Raising the women's awareness of gender-based violence

Zhian Healthcare Organization has a center which provides specific services regarding gender-based violence (GBV) which is called GBV Center. The goal of this center is raise women's awareness of GBV and prevent this phenomenon. In this regard, Participant No. 2 who was the manager of GBV center stated, "Due to the specific culture structure of our community, there is a high rate of GBV. In this regard, our center aims to raise women's awareness of this phenomenon and how to prevent it by giving them regular educational classes." Also, Participant No. 1 who was a social researcher mentioned, "We have been able to protect females against GBV by consulting them and training them on a regular basis. Now, the women know about the bad effects of childhood marriage as the main risk factor for GBV." Moreover, Participant No. 12 stated, "As a tradition, girls are forced to marry early, even at the age of 9 years. However, they have taught us about the bad effects of childhood marriage, so we avoid it."

Second main theme: Providing emergency health care

The second main theme that emerged out of data analysis was a justification for one of the main goals of Zhian health organization which is providing health care in emergency situations. In this regard, Participant No. 16 revealed, "In Zhian health organization, we are always ready to provide quality health service to the camp residents in emergency situations. These services are

provided 7/24. Our clinics are always open and ready to admit patients with emergency needs." Moreover, Participant No.14 stated, "They have helped us in most emergency situations, particularly when there is a pregnant woman, they take good care of her and her baby. And I can say that we have access to healthcare services that are available in Erbil, which is thanks to Zhian health organization." This theme had two subthemes which are presented below.

First subtheme: Providing refugees with emergency health care

As indicated by data analysis, Zhian health organization has been successful in providing emergency healthcare services to refugees, particularly those who have been displaced from Syrian. In this regard, Participant No. 7 who was a doctor stated, "This camp includes a large number of Syrian refugees. When the refugees arrive in the camp for the first time, most of them are not at a good health status. However, after staying here for a few months and receiving necessary healthcare services, they will be in a better health status." Also, Participant No. 15 who was a Syrian Refugee said, "As a result of emergency health services provided by Zhian health organization, we can receive require health care almost all the time during the day and night."

Second subtheme: Providing internally displaced persons with emergency health care

Data analysis also showed that Zhian health organization has successfully delivered healthcare services to internally displaced persons (IDPs). In this regard, Participant No. 4 mentioned, "Most of the residents in the camp are Arabs who are displaced from other cities and town of Iraq. They are provided with healthcare services in emergency situations, and they can refer to the clinic at any time during the day or night. In addition, we visit the patients in their tents whenever there is an emergency situation or when the patient cannot be taken to the clinic." Also, Participant No. 13 stated, "Due to 7/24 provision of healthcare services by Zhian health organization in the camp, our health status has improved compared to before coming to and living in the camp."

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study was aimed at investigating the role of Zhian health organization which is an active primary healthcare organization in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan in activating self-care practices and responding to emergency situations in the region of its activity. For this purpose,

several unstructured in-depth interviews were carried out with some doctors, nurses, and employees working in the organization and some patients who had received healthcare services from the organization. The results revealed that the organization has been successful in promoting healthcare awareness among the residents of the camps, leading to promotion of self-care practices. It has also been successful in responding to emergency situations, especially in the case of pregnant women.

The first theme that emerged in this study was raising health awareness among the clients who are refugees and IDPs. This finding is in good agreement with the results of the study carried out by Ejaz et al. (2011) who concluded that NGOs have a relatively better performance in terms of both delivery of healthcare services and awareness raising, which is distributed by them to the fact that NGOs have more flexible planning and are able to design population based projects aimed at education and promotion of health [17]. As revealed by the results of the present study, Zhian health organization has successfully raised public awareness of health issues. Similar to this finding, Smith et al. (2001) also pointed out that private sector in the form of healthcare NGOs provide better healthcare services compared to the public sectors because strategy planning and flexibility are two key attributes of the private sector; therefore, they can perform better with regard to raising public awareness of health care [18]. Anbazhagan and Surekha (2016) even extended the activity and effect scope of NGOs and stated that such organizations can even raise international awareness of healthcare issues provided that they are cooperated by related governmental institutions and entities [19].

As stated by the participants in the present study, Zhian health organization has been successful in raising the pregnant women's awareness of healthcare issues, whereby their self-care practices have been enhanced. In line with this finding, Mercer et al. (2004) reported that in areas where healthcare NGOs are active, the rate of deaths as a result of the stillbirths and neonatal mortality is relatively lower than other areas. They further related this fact to the active role of such NGOs in delivering maternal healthcare services and raising pregnant women's awareness of maternal health [20]. In their study, George et al. (2018) highlighted this point that if the community is supported by health NGOs, there will be remarkable improvement in maternal health, healthcare awareness, and self-care practices [21].

Due to existence of a gender-based violence center in Zhian health organization, one of its major aims is to

reduce the rate of gender-based violence (GBV) among its clients. In this regard, as revealed by the participants, the women are taught about risk factors for GBV, among which they specifically referred to childhood marriage. Therefore, another subtheme of the present study was the success of Zhian health organization in raising the women's awareness of GBV. This finding is in line with the reports of the World Health Organization (2010) that stated that violence against women needs to be monitored and can be reduced as a result of cooperation of administrative and healthcare workers in the form of healthcare NGOs [22]. This finding is also in line with those of the study carried out by Glass et al. (2018) who referred to the significant role of healthcare NGOs in raising the community's awareness of GBV and decreasing its prevalence rate [23].

The results also revealed the successful role of Zhian health organization in providing healthcare services in emergency situations. This finding is in agreement with those of the study carried out by Yagub and Mtshali (2015) who stated that healthcare non-governmental organizations had a successful performance with regard to providing healthcare services in emergency situations [24]. Similar findings were reported by Mercer et al. (2004) who highlighted the role of such NGOs in delivering quick and quality health care in emergency situations [20]. The participants revealed the successful performance of Zhian health organization in providing emergency health care to refugees and IDPs. The remarkable role of NGOs in providing emergency health care to refugees has been emphasized by Spiegel et al. (2018) [25] and to IDPs by Hakamies et al. (2008) [26].

V. CONCLUSION

As an active healthcare NGO in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Zhian health organization Primary Healthcare Organization has performed successfully in raising awareness of health care among the public and particularly among pregnant women, which has led to a remarkable increase in their self-care practices. It has also been successful in providing healthcare services to refugees and IDPs in emergency situations. Therefore, the Ministry of Health and the government are recommended to encourage development of such organizations in order to develop and implement an efficient self-care system in the region and come up with a healthier community.

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