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Rethinking the residual policy response: Lessons from Hong Kong older women's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article examines older women's experiences of searching for face masks and handling mask-related issues during COVID-19. Set within the context of the Hong Kong government's policy reaction to the shortage of masks in early 2020, the article draws on interviews with 40 older women in Hong Kong to identify their various forms of vulnerability to welfare threats and their active and diverse responses in times of crisis. The findings reveal the implications of the government's residual policy response for people's vulnerability to welfare threats. They also carry practical implications for the support that social workers can provide.

Keywords

COVID-19, face masks, pandemic, social exclusion, social work, welfare residualism

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19, a Public Health Emergence of International Concern on 30 January 2020. Since then, the pandemic has affected nearly 200 countries. How to secure protection during COVID-19 in individual and collective ways has become a global concern. Hong Kong has detected some of the earliest COVID-19 cases among other countries (WHO, 2020). Given the experience of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) that adversely impacted Hong Kong in 2003, it is not unusual that people in Hong Kong take the initiative to seek self-protection after the emergence of COVID-19. One of the most common ways adopted by Hong Kong people to protect themselves is to wear face masks in

public areas. This is witnessed by people's scramble for masks in the market in early 2020 and public requests for government provision of face masks (Leung and Lum, 2020). In fact, the reaction of the government to these requests was slower than what the public had expected. It eventually committed itself to the provision of free masks to citizens over 3 months after the first confirmed case. How Hong Kong people in early 2020 searched for face masks and used face masks to protect themselves provides an important window into the ways in which the public seeks protection against threats to their welfare when government policies do not quite meet many people's expectations.

Against this background, this article aims to meet three objectives. The first is to study how older women in Hong Kong searched for face masks and the difficulties they faced during the search in early 2020. The second is to examine how the discussion of this issue enhances our understanding of the implications of the government's residual policy response for people's vulnerability to welfare threats. The third is to discuss how social workers can respond to these implications. To meet these three objectives, this article carries out two analytical tasks. First, we discuss the link between research on the government's residual policy response and research on the approaches to social exclusion. Social exclusion is widely seen as a key threat to welfare. As shown in the later part of this article, the discussion of this link provides important insights into the implications of the government's residual policy response for people's vulnerability to welfare threats, and the ways in which social workers can react to these implications. Second, we discuss the findings of a study of 40 Hong Kong older women's experiences of searching for masks and their ways of handling mask-related issues.

The residual policy response and approaches to social exclusion

The residual policy response is based on the residual welfare model. This model builds on two assumptions. The first assumption is that the family and the market are the 'natural' channels for meeting people's needs (Powell and Barrientos, 2011). Also, the model is premised on the assumption that the government should intervene only in temporary and emergency situations – for example, when the two sectors fail to function (Hill, 2006). Putting this model into practice is considered a common way for upholding the neo-liberal welfare principle (Yu et al., 2020). It is because this model conveys the messages that people should take part in the labour market and service market as individuals, and that the issues handled by the family should be seen as issues within the private domain. In order to respect the privacy of the family and people's freedom to participate in the market as individuals,¹ the government should intervene as little as possible.

The increasing popularity of the concept of social exclusion represents social scientists' attempt to identify different kinds of welfare threats experienced by people (Chau et al., 2017). Walker and Walker (1997) stress that the main cause of social exclusion is the unequal distribution of resources. Sacaceno (1997) sees social exclusion as an expression of social disintegration and individual detachment from the social order. Similarly, Abrahamson (1997) suggests that individuals may be excluded from society due to discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other social locations.

A number of analysts have suggested ways for tackling social exclusion (Levitas, 1996; Murray, 1984). Levitas (1998) has categorized them into three approaches – the moral underclass approach, the

socially integrationist approach, and the redistributive approach. It is important to note that government policies can be more than material transactions. For example, Lejano (2021) argues that policy outcomes can emerge from the working and reworking of relationships among policy actors. Rein (1983) draws our attention to some principles that guide the relationships between actors involved in the delivery of public policies. Different from these scholars' emphasis on social relationships embedded in social institutions, the three approaches proposed by Levitas (1998) attend to social exclusion by exploring the dynamics between the government, the family relationship, and the market relationship.

The moral underclass approach can be seen as a 'supportive approach'. It assumes that people have the potential to rely on the family relationship and the market relationship to promote their welfare. If people rely too much on the government, they may not be willing to take part in the family and the market to reduce the threats to their welfare (Levitas, 1998). In other words, to promote people's well-being, the government may need to reduce its role in the provision of welfare or to provide welfare only when the market and the family fail to function (Chau et al., 2017).

The socially integrationist approach can be seen as a 'supplementary approach'. It suggests that people are inclined to rely on the family relationship and the market relationship to meet their welfare needs but they lack sufficient support to establish these kinds of relationships (Chau et al., 2017). Therefore, the government should take an active role in assisting people to take part in the market and/or family to meet their welfare needs. An example is assisted labour market policies which help unemployed people to seek jobs in the labour market (European Commission, 2017).

The redistributive approach can be seen as a 'substitute approach'. Given its assumption that social exclusion is caused by the unequal distribution of resources, this approach stresses that the government should take an active role in providing welfare (Levitas, 1998). This approach is also supported by the studies of defamilization, decommodification, and global issues (Kroger, 2011; Lister, 1994). The studies of defamilization and decommodification draw our attention to people's involuntary participation in unwanted relationships in the family and the market. By providing welfare directly to people, the government may be able to give people the opportunities to choose not to take part in the unwanted relationships in the market or the family without forgoing a reasonable standard of living. The study of global issues implies that the government may need to work with other governments to tackle some issues beyond the national boundary.

The discussion of these approaches to social exclusion provides insights into the investigation of several welfare issues. First, people can have different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats:

- (a) People's potential to take part in the family and/or market and to meet their own welfare needs is not sufficiently recognized (by themselves or other people).
- (b) People prefer to take part in the family and/or market to meet their welfare needs but lack government support to help them to do so.
- (c) The market and the family fail to meet people's welfare needs.
- (d) People's welfare is undermined by their participation in the market and/or family. However, they have no choice but to continue to take part in these two sectors.
- (e) People's welfare is undermined by some global issues beyond the national boundary.

Second, the residual policy response made by the government can help people to tackle some forms of vulnerability to welfare threats. This response may be able to encourage people to develop their potential to take part in the family or the market (by the carrot and stick) to meet their welfare needs, and to meet such needs when the market and family fail to function effectively as welfare providers. However, the residual policy response is not effective in assisting people to deal with their unwanted participation in the family and/or market relationship and the global issues.

The third issue is concerned with the multiple expectations of social workers. Social workers are expected to meet people's needs (Shaw and Ow, 2020). They are supposed to be sensitive to different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats experienced by people. This is evident in the basic values and beliefs, and practices and principles stressed by the Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers presented by the Social Workers Registration Board in Hong Kong (2020).

Social workers believe that individuals have the potential to develop and thus accept a responsibility to encourage and facilitate the self-realization of individuals with due regard to the interest of others.

Social workers recognize the need to advocate changes in the formulation of policies and legislation to improve social conditions, to promote social justice and general welfare of society.

In view of these ideas, social workers should support all approaches to alleviating people's vulnerability to welfare threats. From this perspective, we should not rule out the possibility that social workers may support the government's residual policy response and the residual welfare model. Neither should we rule out the possibility that social workers challenge the government's residual policy response and the residual welfare model. The decisions made by social workers should be made based on the people's actual experiences of different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats. Given that such vulnerability may also be subjected to a number of factors, such as the changing roles of the family and the market in meeting people's welfare needs and people's changing preferences for how their welfare needs are met, social workers need to be prepared to adjust their views on the desirability of the government's residual policy response from time to time.

The study of older women's responses to mask-related issues

This section offers a contextualized discussion of the current study on older women's responses to mask-related issues by providing some background information – the importance of the residual welfare model in Hong Kong, the reasons for focusing on older women, and the link between the current study approach and the discussion of welfare issues.

Background issues

The Hong Kong government has long been seen as a defender of welfare residualism (Karim et al., 2010). A number of welfare measures provided in Hong Kong are, however, well beyond the confines of the residual welfare model. For example, Hong Kong has one of the largest public housing programmes in the world (Kennett and Chan, 2011). The public hospital services are provided based on an almost universalist principle (Hospital Authority, 2020). Despite that, the Hong Kong government continuously stresses the important roles of the family and the market in meeting people's

needs (Lam, 2017). Moreover, the Hong Kong government has been developing important welfare measures with reference to welfare residualism. An example of these measures is the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance scheme (CSSA), which is a non-contributory means-tested social security measure (Social Welfare Department, 2020). In fact, the basic allowance provided by this scheme for a single able-bodied adult aged 60 and above is lower than the poverty line for a one-person household (The Commission on Poverty, 2015). Analysts have discussed the reasons why the Hong Kong government attaches importance to the residual welfare model. Chiu and Wong (2005: 89) suggest that traditional Chinese family values, such as love for one's family and the importance of collective responsibility, have been used by the Hong Kong government as 'a means to contain social welfare costs' to justify the residual welfare model. Other scholars also argue that by stressing the family and the market as important channels for meeting people's needs, the government can lower people's expectations on public policy and avoid political challenges (Yu et al., 2021). The analysis of the social policy in Hong Kong is influenced significantly by the Productive Welfare Capitalism Thesis (Holliday, 2000). According to this thesis, the Hong Kong government believes that encouraging people to take part in the market through the provision of welfare and other means serves as an important way for promoting economic growth.

Focusing on older women aged 65 and above provides a useful lens through which to explore the welfare threats faced by this vulnerable group of people and their ways of reacting to the government's residual policy response. Older people are adversely affected by the government's insufficient commitment to the provision of welfare. An annual government report in 2015 shows that one in three older people aged 65 and above live in poverty (Wen et al., 2021). Older people, particularly those over the retirement age of 65, constitute a large proportion of CSSA recipients due to their relatively low employability (Yip et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the CSSA does not provide sufficient material support to its recipients. Many older adults have limited access to care services due to their inferior financial status and feel frustrated at the lack of quality care and the long waiting time for public care services and facilities (Bai et al., 2020). In particular, older women deserve additional attention. Due to traditional gendered expectations, women are often expected to meet the care needs in the family, which hamper their career development (Kroger, 2011; Yu et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that compared with men, women tend to encounter greater difficulties in saving sufficient pension incomes for retirement through the local work-based pension scheme (the Mandatory Provident Fund) in Hong Kong (Yu et al., 2021). In other words, women tend to suffer from fewer opportunities for staying in the work economy and resultant increased risks of poverty in their old age compared with their male counterparts. Taking the age, gendered, and financial factors into account, it is important not to overlook the experiences of older women in times of crisis to better understand the implications of the government's residual policy response for their vulnerability to welfare threats.

The difficulties faced by older people in receiving sufficient care from the government are also reflected in their difficulties in receiving sufficient protection against COVID-19, especially in the first wave of the outbreak. The mortality rate for people aged 60 and above caused by COVID-19 is 105 times of those aged below 60 in Hong Kong (The Chinese University of Hong Kong [Faculty of Medicine], 2020). The existing literature also suggests that the pandemic has placed an additional tremendous burden on women as most of the additional housework and care work associated with the pandemic fall on them (Shek, 2021; Zhou et al., 2020). It is thus reasonable to believe that the need to

secure face masks for themselves and their families constitutes one of the major concerns among older women. Despite that, there is a lack of systematic schemes for helping people to protect themselves through wearing masks. Because of the shortage of masks in early 2020, there was a scramble for face masks both online and offline in Hong Kong. A number of news reports about people queuing outside shops to buy face masks at the break of dawn hit the headlines between February and March 2020 (Leung and Lum, 2020). Older people who lack sufficient knowledge to do online shopping and were not able to queue outside shops for several hours to buy masks were in a disadvantaged position. While the focus of this study is on Chinese older women, the experiences of other marginalized groups during COVID-19, such as those of ethnic minority older people who found it difficult to seek masks due to a lack of access to technology and language barriers (Yam, 2020), merits academic and societal attention so that more systematic ways of helping older people to enhance their welfare can be identified.

Study approach

Against the backdrop of the face mask shortage in early 2020, the authors were invited by a research institute to study the difficulties faced by Chinese older women in Hong Kong in searching for masks and dealing with other related problems. An advisory group was set up to develop the study approach. The advisory group was composed of community workers and older women (aged 65 and above). Research questions were set with reference to people's different kinds of vulnerability to welfare threats and the experiences of some of the members of the advisory group in searching for face masks. They include the following: (1) In what ways did older women search for face masks in the face of mask shortage? (2) What were the difficulties faced by older women in searching for face masks? (3) What are older women's suggestions on government policies regarding the shortage of masks and other related problems? These questions allow us to investigate the ways in which older women attempted to resolve threats to their welfare and the extent to which they favoured the government's residual policy response to the shortage of face masks and other related issues.

Forty women aged 65 and above were invited to attend an in-depth interview. Roadside stalls were set up in busy locations in Tsuen Wan and Yuen Long (residential and industrial districts in Hong Kong) to recruit respondents. Potential respondents were identified on the spot and provided with information about the purposes of the study. Those who were interested in the study were invited to attend an interview at the community organization or a place convenient to them on a scheduled date. Respondents were also asked to invite their friends who met the age and gender requirements of the study to participate as interviewees. The study received ethical approval from the research institute. Each respondent received an information sheet about the interview and signed a consent form at the beginning of each interview. Reviewed by the advisory group, the discussion topics broadly include (1) older women's everyday lives during the pandemic, (2) their experiences of searching for masks and challenges involved, and (3) their expectations towards the government during the pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of respondents. Table 1 provides brief information about the respondents' characteristics. There was a considerable diversity in the sample in terms of age, living arrangement, marital status, working experience, and educational attainment.

Table 1. Personal characteristics of the respondents.

		No. of respondents
Age	65–81 (median age 74)	40
Occupation	Retirees	34
	Cleaners	3
	Office clerks	2
	Chinese medicine practitioner	1
Marital status	Married	4
	Married with children	22
	Single	6
	Widowed	8
Education attainment	Primary	19
	Secondary	17
	Post-secondary	4
Living arrangement	Living alone	9
	Living with spouse	7
	Living with children	7
	Living with children and spouse	17

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, the researchers coded the transcripts line-by-line and sorted different codes into themes. The key themes that represented shared meanings and experiences among respondents and related to the research questions were identified. Given the small sample size and convenience sampling method, the findings drawn from the study were intended to be illustrative of people's experiences rather than extensive. The next section discusses the key findings.

Diverse ways of searching for face masks

Most respondents (35 out of 40) reported that how they responded to COVID-19 was influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by their negative experiences of SARS. Unsurprisingly almost all respondents (38 out of 40) saw wearing face masks in public spaces as a kind of self-defence against the virus. They attempted to search for face masks from various sources, namely the market, the family, and community organizations. Because of their previous experiences of responding to SARS and the flu, Ah-lan, Ah-fong, and Bonnie had developed the habit of storing some boxes of face masks at home. They were not affected by the shortage of face masks in the market even when the number of COVID-19 cases hit a peak in late March 2020. Nevertheless, they still attempted to purchase more face masks through the Internet. Ah-fong said, 'I always keep an eye on the Internet. Whenever there is news about the sale of masks, I register as a customer.'

Not all respondents had sufficient digital knowledge to do online shopping. The majority of respondents (27 out of 40) tried to purchase face masks on site. Several respondents queued up overnight to buy masks. Catherine said,

Since I don't need to go to work, I don't mind queuing for face masks overnight. However, even though people like me are willing to queue for a long time, there is no guarantee that they can eventually get the face masks.

It was not uncommon for respondents to rely on their family members to buy face masks and protect

themselves and their families. Dai-lin said, 'My two daughters bought back a number of face masks from their trips in East Asia. I then gave some to my son's family.' Four respondents sought help from their overseas families. One of them was Elly. She said, 'My son and my daughter-in-law live in the UK. I ask them to mail some face masks to me.' Several respondents were members of community organizations (such as elderly welfare centres, local councillors' offices, and neighbourhood organizations). They made use of their personal connections in these organizations to obtain face masks. Fiona said, 'the neighbourhood organisations that I have joined gave each member two boxes of face masks. I shared some with my friends and families.' Bing-fong joined the group purchase activities organized by a community organization in order to buy face masks from other countries. Two respondents took part in producing cloth masks with other members in their neighbourhood organizations.

The diverse experiences of searching for masks through different channels demonstrated that respondents might prefer to tackle problems and enhance their own welfare in different ways. It is noteworthy that different respondents had different kinds and different amounts of resources (such as financial resources and social networks) for responding to COVID-19. It is thus not surprising that they did not search for face masks in the same way.

Difficulties in searching for face masks

A number of news reports have exposed the defects of the market in meeting the demands for face masks (Leung and Lum, 2020) – the price of face masks went up sharply regardless of customers' affordability and the existence of information asymmetries between sellers and buyers (concerning the quality of the masks and the time for sale).

Respondents expressed that they encountered these problems. Mary and June found the face masks too expensive and thus avoided going out to save money, although they found their lives much more boring than before. Hilary had tried to purchase face masks through the Internet but eventually gave up doing so. She said, 'The quality of the face masks that I bought (from the Internet) was below standard. I am not sure whether wearing that kind of masks could give me any protection.'

Family conflicts over issues about the purchase and use of masks were common among respondents. For instance, Katie complained that her daughter-in-law always wanted to wear new and expensive face masks but refused to use her own money to buy the masks. In order to avoid using too many face masks and quarrelling with family members, several respondents seldom went out. Wendy complained that her daughter-in-law gave a lot of masks to her mother but refused to leave sufficient masks for her. Some respondents who lived with their family members (such as Lan-yee) pointed out that spending more time at home made it easier to have conflicts with their family members. Respondents (such as Son-nie, Elly, and Yan-yee) who had asked their overseas family members to send them face masks had feelings of guilt about doing so after noticing that their overseas family members were also vulnerable to the threat of the virus. Yan-yee eventually sent back the face masks to her overseas family. Some respondents had difficulties in getting face masks from community organizations. May-yee and Nancy chose not to seek help from community organizations. They explained that the organizations they contacted required them to provide too much personal information and that they did not support the political stances of the community organizations. Nancy said, 'I am not sure whether the

community organisations [which distribute masks] will ask me to vote for the candidates they support in the next election. I don't like politics. To play safe, I choose not to accept their masks.' May-yee also said, 'I am a neutral person. I don't want to be seen as a support[er] of a particular group. So, on second thoughts, I chose not to accept their masks.'

Respondents' experiences highlight that the support they sought from various sectors (the market, the family, and community organizations) could be a double-edged sword for them. On one hand, these sectors had the potential to assist them to reduce the risks of COVID-19. On the other hand, they could be the sources of threats to their welfare. As shown in the findings, some face masks bought from the market were of low quality; some respondents faced family conflicts over the issues of using face masks; and some were concerned that community organizations provided free face masks on condition that people disclosed personal information and/or for political purposes. In order to help them to avoid these problems, it is important to assist them to obtain face masks through different means.

Suggestions on government policies

Respondents believed that the government should take a more active role in tackling the shortage of face masks. Ling-wan and Shuk-ling believed that the government should forbid shops from selling substandard masks. Ling-wan also suggested that the government should give every Hong Kong citizen free face masks regularly.

Several respondents were concerned about not only their welfare but also the needs of others. Wing-Sheung and Lai-mei suggested that the government should set up an unemployment insurance scheme to help people who suffered from unemployment due to the virus outbreak. Some respondents were concerned about the safety of those providing front-line services, such as medical staff and cleaners. Wendy said,

Like other governments, our government should ensure that all key workers are given sufficient equipment to protect themselves. Medical staff members are our soldiers defending our life. Like how we responded to the SARS crisis in 2003, we should respect and support them.

Po-ling expressed her concern for the safety of cleaners:

I think that many cleaners are more likely to be infected by the virus. However, there is no guarantee that their safety receives sufficient attention. Some friends of mine who are cleaners are not given sufficient face masks and they find it necessary to quit their jobs.

Some respondents suggested tightening health screening measures at border checkpoints. Ah-Yan said that as most of the COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong had been imported, it was necessary to give all visitors medical tests before allowing them to enter Hong Kong.

Three respondents suggested that the Hong Kong government should provide aid to poor countries affected by COVID-19 on behalf of Hong Kong people. Mrs. Wong said,

Hong Kong is not the only city troubled by the virus. There are many places with even more people infected with the virus than those in Hong Kong. As a global city, we should help people outside Hong Kong.

With similar concern about other countries, Wendy added, ‘If we don’t help people in other countries, COVID-19 will never vanish. Sooner or later the second wave of the virus will appear in Hong Kong.’ Several respondents felt that the Hong Kong government had already done a good job during COVID-19. For example, Zoe believed that ‘the Hong Kong government so far handled the virus much better than many western countries did’. She added, ‘I think that we should not only rely on the government, we should also make our own efforts to support ourselves and our family.’

Almost all respondents expected the government to play an important role in tackling the pandemic. However, their views on what the government should offer were far from the same. Some respondents expected the government to intervene in certain areas that other sectors might fail to handle – such as giving foreign visitors medical tests and aiding other countries during the pandemic. Some expected the government to help people to take part in the market, such as ensuring that the cleaners could work in a safe condition and that shops would not sell substandard face masks. Some saw the government as a good substitute of the market, expecting it to provide unemployed people with unemployment insurance and offering all citizens free masks regularly.

Implications of the findings

This section discusses the lessons we learn from the interview findings. These include the different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats faced by older women, the roles respondents played in handling different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats, whether Hong Kong government should make a residual policy response to the welfare threats caused by the pandemic, and the role of social workers in helping older women to deal with the welfare threats.

Different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats

Respondents were subject to different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats. The differences are attributable to two factors. The first is concerned with different resources they had when seeking face masks for themselves and their families. As shown above, different respondents searched the face masks in different ways, depending on the resources that were available to them. The second is concerned with the kind of welfare they thought was threatened by the pandemic. Some respondents, such as Wendy and Mrs. Wong, were worried about not only their own welfare but also the welfare of other vulnerable groups, namely that of medical staff and cleaners. Several respondents had even wider horizons. They wanted the government to provide help to other countries. This suggests that respondents found their welfare being threatened by COVID-19 and that these threats should be treated as part of a bigger social problem rather than mere individual misfortune.

The active and diverse responses made by respondents

As mentioned in the previous parts, whether it is appropriate for the government to make the residual policy response to the welfare threats faced by people largely depends on whether people are willing and able to tackle the welfare threats by themselves. On one hand, respondents shared their experiences of different kinds of difficulties caused by COVID-19, including family conflicts, difficulties in searching for sufficient face masks and the resultant financial burden, and decrease in social activities. This implies that many of them were vulnerable to the threats of the virus outbreak. Nevertheless, instead of passively accepting the negative impact of the virus outbreak on their lives, a number of

respondents actively explored ways to respond to the crisis. Subject to the amount of resources they could use, respondents tried different ways to search for face masks, such as seeking help from their overseas families, taking part in group purchase, and producing cloth masks in collaboration with community organizations. These actions suggest that while many respondents wanted the government to take more action to tackle the welfare threats they were facing, they wanted to play an active role in dealing with these threats.

The strengths and limitations of the residual policy response

Some respondents made individual efforts to search for face masks and find ways to give their family members protection. They did not rely on the government to take extra responsibility for searching masks for them. This point, to a certain extent, offers support for the residual policy response to the pandemic. However, it is important to note that quite a number of respondents expected the government to take action beyond the confines of the residual welfare model – such as allocating face masks to every citizen, forbidding shops from selling substandard masks, providing economic aid to unemployed people, strengthening border control measures for containing the spread of COVID-19, and helping other poorer countries. This implies that in order to reduce people's different forms of vulnerability to welfare threats, the government cannot only make residual policy responses to COVID-19.

Expectations on social workers

It is reasonable to believe that social work training can sensitize social workers to people's diverse preferences for ways of handling the welfare threats. As helping professionals, social workers can help people to review not only the government policies regarding the provision of face masks during COVID-19 but also the government's residual policy responses to welfare threats. Such review can be done in a narrow way and a broader way. A narrow way is to draw attention to our findings that all the three approaches (supportive, supplementary, and substitute approaches) to social exclusion and other welfare threats are relevant to people's expectations on how the pandemic should be dealt with. Social workers can initiate public discussions of the relative desirability of these approaches.

Furthermore, social workers should consider carrying out the review in a broader way by encouraging discussions on whether people can enhance the capacity of society for handling welfare threats beyond the three approaches. To do so, social workers need to draw attention to several issues, including (1) whether people would still be able to develop their potential to make use of the market and family relationships to enhance their welfare if the government intervenes beyond the confines of the residual welfare model; (2) whether the government can develop long-term policies to ensure prompt responses to people's needs when the market and family fail to function as expected. For example, as suggested by our respondents, setting up an unemployment insurance scheme can provide financial aid to people who lose their jobs. And (3) whether the government is willing to adopt the 'substitute approach' and take an active role in providing welfare to not only Hong Kong citizens but also people in need outside Hong Kong.

Although there is no guarantee that people and the Hong Kong government are willing and able to handle the above-mentioned issues, the discussion of these issues at least provides insights into how far the government and people are prepared to go beyond the three approaches when dealing with

welfare threats such as those arising from the pandemic.

Despite the implications of the findings for policy interventions and social work practices, a few limitations of the study warrant attention. Given the relatively small sample, the findings cannot be generalized to the older people population in Hong Kong. They do not cover the experiences of older people who belong to other minority groups, such as ethnic minority older people and older people with disabilities. Also, the study only focuses on the Hong Kong government's policy responses to the early wave of the pandemic in Hong Kong. Further research is needed to investigate government policies implemented in the later waves of the pandemic, such as lockdown measures and vaccination policies, and the role of other stakeholders, including that of family carers, government health officials, and the market, in times of crisis.

Conclusion

This article has revealed how older women searched for face masks and the difficulties they faced during COVID-19 in early 2020. Identifying these experiences and challenges has allowed us to examine the implications of the government's residual policy response for individuals' vulnerability to welfare threats and to explore how social workers can respond to these implications. We argue that whether the government should make residual policy responses depends on the kinds of vulnerability to welfare threats faced by people. In case people have diverse kinds of vulnerability to welfare threats, it is necessary for the government to act beyond the confines of the residual welfare model. Social workers should also pay more attention to the demand side of the policy measures rather than focusing on the supply side only. Instead of taking a fixed stance on the government's residual policy response, it would be prudent for social workers to evaluate the desirability of the policy response by attending to people's different kinds of vulnerability to welfare threats over time.

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Note

1. Freedom here refers to negative freedom (free from constraints), but not positive freedom (availability of resources for supporting people to do what they want).

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