

Learning From the International Diversity of Health Worker Protests During COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, health workers have faced unprecedented risks during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This evolving situation has given rise to a new wave of hundreds of innovative protests and proposals from health workers on the frontlines. The Health Worker Protest Project is a pilot learning initiative from the Accountability Research Center (ARC) that seeks to learn from the international diversity of health worker protests and proposals, coronavirus related and beyond. Using crowdsourcing the project compiled 841 media reports of health worker protests and proposals from 96 countries during the first year of the pandemic, and shared them on social media via the twitter account @HealthWorkerPro to increase awareness of the challenges faced by health workers. As part of my MDP practicum I worked to analyze these media reports to learn more about health worker needs and demands throughout the pandemic, in order to learn how to better support health workers both during this pandemic in the future.

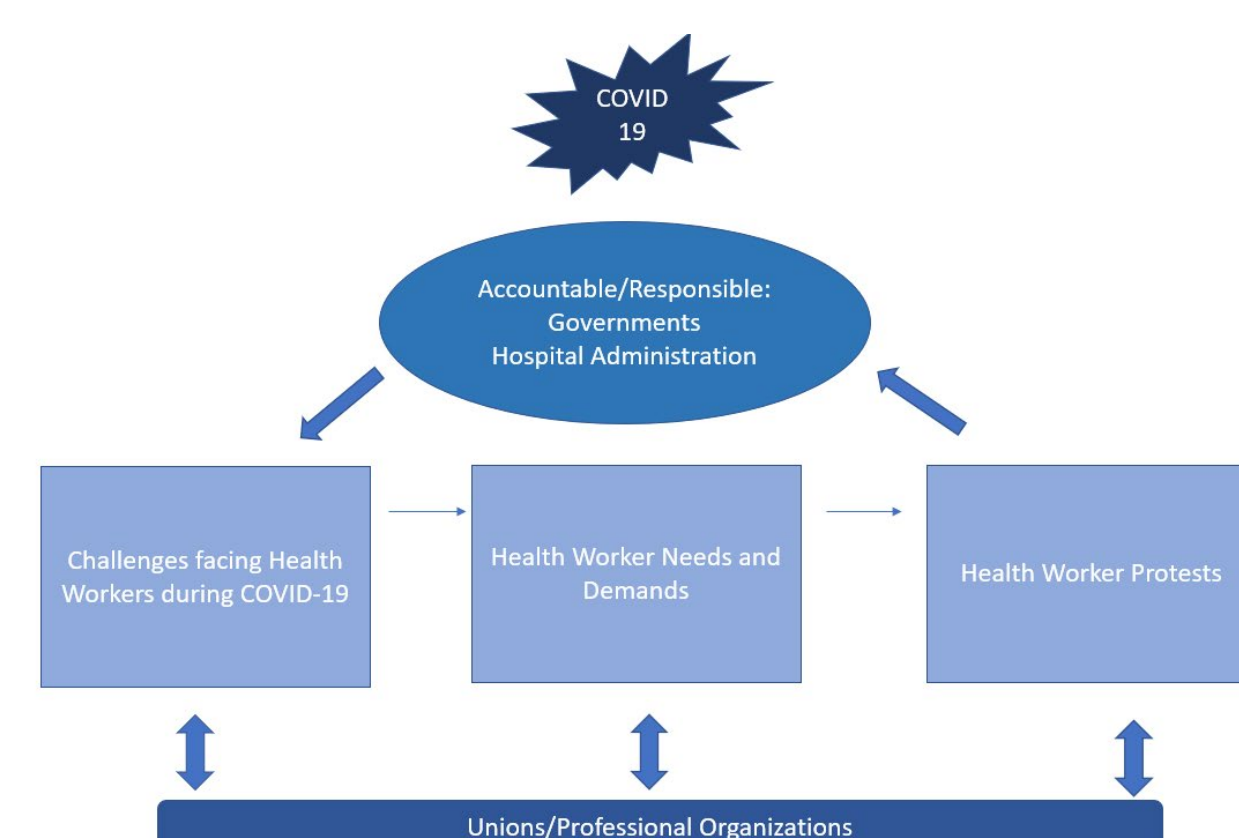


METHODS

I used the qualitative methods of document analysis and content analysis in my field practicum to analyze the media reports on health worker protests and proposals. I began with documents analysis, manually going through each media report to determine if it fit the inclusion criteria and recorded the variables that would be analyzed. For the content analysis I identified the parts of the media report that specifically referred to protest demands, and coded them based on the category they described. The codes used were:

- Resources
- Work conditions
- Delivery organization
- Government restrictions
- Health system critiques
- Social issues
- Other, which referred to categories such as respect or recognition for health workers.

CONCEPTUAL/CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK



GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

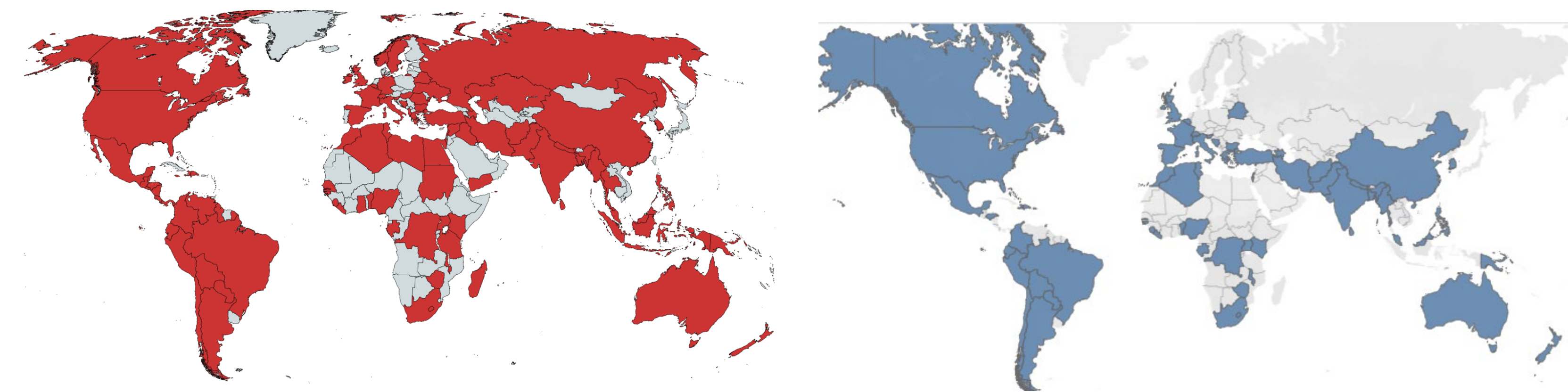


Figure 1: The geographic distribution of the original 841 health worker protest and proposal reports from 96 countries compiled via crowdsourcing.

Figure 2: All countries that reported protests that fit the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using content analysis.

Source: Jennifer Johnson

RESULTS

Of the original 841 health worker protest and proposal reports, 397 fit the inclusion criteria to be analyzed as part of this study. The most frequent demands mentioned in media reports on health worker protests were:

- 1.) Compensation and job security: 180 protests (45%). This includes demands for the payment of unpaid salaries or bonuses, or salary increases due to increased risks, or requesting greater job security to protesting for greater job security or against layoffs
- 2.) Resources: 164 protests (41%). This includes demands for anything health workers need to do their jobs safely, from PPE to training and vaccinations. 100 (25%) of these protest demands specifically mention PPE.
- 3.) Work conditions: 121 protests (30%). This includes demands such as safe staffing, working hours and the number of hours on shifts
- 4.) Health system critiques: 47 protests (11%). This includes demands around health system funding, management and privatization.
- 5.) Social issues: 31 protests (8%). Many of these protests were part of the Black Lives Matter protests, and the anti-military coup protests in Myanmar
- 6.) Government restrictions: 15 protests (4%). This includes demands such as closing borders, repealing laws and quarantine mandates
- 7.) Other: 12 protests (3%). This includes demands that call for health worker respect or recognition, or recognition of health workers who have died during the pandemic.
- 8.) Delivery organizations: 9 protests (2%). This includes demands to be included in planning process, or around hospital changes such as the creation of covid facilities or isolation centers

HEALTH WORKER QUOTES

WORK CONDITIONS		
Country	Profession	Quote
France	Health workers	"We don't have time. There are too many patients, too much work, we are facing additional work without being given more staff, without being given equipment. We are fed up; we can't take it anymore."
India	Nurses	"I have worked here for two years now, and the past three months have been a nightmare. I do not eat for 12 hours at a stretch as we continuously have patients to cater to."
Israel	Resident Doctors	"(There is no other sector in the job market that works such long hours on a regular basis.) It hurts us, damages our health and negatively impacts our patients."
United States	Nurses	"When I say I work 13 hours and I don't get a drink of water, I'm not exaggerating. And, you know, I'm almost 52 years old and I'm a strong lady but I'm not that strong anymore. It breaks my heart. The things sometimes that I see I can leave in tears. I have left in tears."
United States	Nurses	"If you can safely care for one or two patients, but you're given four or five, you have to make some decisions about who you're going to rescue. That is just a horrible thing for health professionals to confront."
United States	Nurses	"You see the signs on the lawns calling everybody heroes and on the inside we aren't being treated like heroes."

RESOURCES		
Media report	Health Profession	Quote
India	ASHA Workers	"We are working at the ground level and helping people, but getting humiliated instead. We are not getting masks, hand gloves or sanitizers. There are no facilities for us."
Paraguay	Health workers	"We don't have thermometers or biosafety suits, and we have to use the same masks for over 12 hours. We can't stop taking care of the people, but we are very exposed."
Peru	Health workers	"We have only 3 masks to use in a month, so we have to re-use them and re-use them, so, what has happened? My colleagues have become infected."
South Africa	Nurses	"We don't have proper PPE and we are being exposed to the virus. We are fearing for our lives because we can be like our colleagues that have passed away."
United States	Nursing home workers	"I don't feel protected. I don't feel safe. It's terrifying. We have to beg for masks. I work five days a week, and they issue me one mask."

SOCIAL ISSUES – Black Lives Matter Protests		
Country	Health Profession	Quote
United States	Health Workers	"What's happening right now as far as the racial injustice and equality and police brutality, that is also a pandemic. And we need to treat it as such. It starts with us doing this. We have to do better."
United States	Health Workers	"We want to come out to show support for the same community that showed support for us not too long ago as we were on the front lines of the COVID crisis."
United States	Health Workers	"George Floyd could have been me. Being a doctor, being a hospital worker, that might not have protected me from the same fate that happened to George Floyd. I'm here as black man, I'm here as a frontline provider. I'm here with pain. I'm here with hurt, I'm here with anger. But when I look out at this crowd, I know I'm not here alone."
United States	Health Workers	"Over the course of our history, racism has shown that it is truly the root cause of mortality and morbidity in the United States. It is truly the public health emergency that has taken more lives than any epidemic."
United States	Health Workers	"We save everyone at their worst time, why are you killing us? When we take off these scrubs, I am a black woman. And you can't ignore, just because of what you do, what's going on in the world. I would like to have that same message be delivered to the police officers: Who are you when you take off that uniform?"

DISCUSSION

Conclusions – how to better support health workers

- Increase production of and access to PPE
- Improve compensation and working conditions for health workers
- Recognize and respect intersectional identities of health workers
- Give health workers a greater voice in policy and governance

Health workers voices matter – they are speaking, are we listening? Listening to health worker needs and demands and transforming their demands into policy will be crucial to support health workers and health systems through this current pandemic and future pandemics.



Figure 3: A statue in Yucatan, Mexico recognizes health workers for their work around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: Jennifer Johnson