



Mental strain on women in urban India during COVID-19 imposed lockdown: An analysis

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated already-existing gender disparities, putting women in jeopardy. It has deepened the already prevalent gender inequalities exposing women to a position of vulnerability. With much of the globe under lockdown in 2020, middle-class and low-income women were forced to contend with restricted physical movement, a shortage of resources, substantial unpaid housework, and social isolation. The psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on women during the period of lockdown measures, remains unclear. The current study examines the influence of COVID-19-related putative risk variables on rates of mental health outcomes in women. In addition, the study aims to explore the various impacts of lockdown and the consequences of work-from-home arrangements on the mental health and well-being of working women. From its beginning till August 2021, 26 of the 1,309 publications were subjected to a systematic search of literature databases. These papers were discovered during the Boolean search with different keywords. The authors review the various studies about the

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triggers of psychosocial stress among working women during the lockdown in the year 2020-21. Other researchers investigated the stress experienced by working women, but unfortunately, there is a lack of data on helpful treatments for reducing anxiety and stress during a pandemic. Our early findings indicate that working women are at risk of stress due to the pressures to portray an ideal social image. Individual-level variables such as a lack of social support and family are responsible for these poor consequences. The study discusses the challenges of implementing gender-inclusive economic support for women during a crisis.

Key words: COVID-19, mental stress, pandemic, lockdown, work-life balance, gender.

Introduction

Gender role is defined as the expectations that societies have formulated for both men and women. It is within the family that learning and socialization about gender roles take place. Whereas boys learn to equate themselves with power and authority, girls associate themselves with femineity and submissiveness (Ram et al. 2014). The parents play major role models for such learning to happen. Consequently, boys acquire the tendency to exercise authority and control over women, whereas girls assimilate to submit to this authority. Though the advancement of society at large has nevertheless changed and so is the plight of women, however, even today the ground reality remains much or less similar. Women still report experiencing more stress as compared to males (Wichman et al., 2011, Ahmad & Mazlan, 2014, Richardsen et al., 2016). A significant part of this stress emerges out simply from the idea of being a male or a female or in other words belonging to a particular gender.

Gender inequalities impact women over their lifetimes. In fact, specific gender bias/role/expectation has a significant role to play in their health, educational attainment, and economic conditions. According to the inherent expectations of the societies, a woman is expected to play several roles that range from taking care of the household, children and of course be a part of the money-generating workforce. Women try to seek validation of their performance in the eyes of those

near and dear to them. However, managing so many things is not enough to suffice for the idea of being a perfect woman or *shakti* who can achieve or accomplish anything or everything that comes her way.

Though as already mentioned above it is worth acknowledging that the outlook towards women or gender-specific roles per se has indeed changed since we progressed as a society. The education, awareness and lifestyles all served as contributing factors to empower women (Trappe et al., 2015). Now we see women working at par in every sector, be it science, technology, defence or sports. Even societies have started accepting women to be working like men. Although society has accepted this gender equality in work, the ground reality is different. A working woman is expected to strike a balance between personal and professional lives. This often leads to a balance between the demands of work and family (Balaji, 2014). Working women often report feeling more stressed owing to the juggle between professional and personal life. Sirajunisa & Panchanatham (2010) also acknowledge this in their findings that stress at work interferes with personal life and personal life interferes with work.

Hence, the present paper is a review-based study that examines and analyses the various researches that point out the gender-specific COVID-19 related stress among women during the lockdown period. An effort has been made to highlight the gender gap that still exists even when we proudly boast of women empowerment in the 21st century.

Review of literature

On 30th January 2020, the World Health organization recognized and stated that the COVID-19 outbreak is a public health emergency of international concern. Accordingly, it was declared as a pandemic on 11th March 2020.

Those who were getting infected were becoming severely ill and required medical attention. The medical infrastructures of even the developed economies started failing to meet the demands of the increasing number of infected patients. There was turbulence and chaos all over the world. Very soon, everyone realized that the COVID-19 virus was capable of infecting anyone irrespective of age. The world witnessed people dying in the absence of any proper

medication or vaccine. The medical system seemed to collapse due to the situation. To stop the infection from spreading, many countries found it compelling to impose a lockdown.

In the wake of the situation, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a 21-day lockdown in India on 24th March 2020 that extended up to almost three months. The unprecedented lockdown brought with it immense confusion and inevitable psychological stress. COVID-19 pandemic brought with it uncertainty and lack of knowledge (Wang et al., 2020). The horrors of getting infected adversely impacted the mental health and well-being of people around the globe.

It becomes essential to note here that when COVID-19 hit the world and lockdown was announced, everyone, irrespective of age and gender, was forced to lockdown in their own houses. People's homes were turned into offices and schools. Working parents landed in chaos managing with their work, departmental meetings, online classes of their children, taking care of the elderly while living in fear of getting infected. In this juggle between professional and personal responsibilities, the most affected lot were the women. Though women today are empowered enough in the foreground to be at par with men, the COVID-19 pandemic once again highlighted the deep-rooted patriarchal structures of society. In a country like India where the women workforce hires support systems like house help to ease the demands of personal and professional lives, they ended up struggling between personal and professional lives. It became challenging for women to manage office work, cooking, studies of their children and other household work during the lockdown. This sudden and unexpected demand of balancing work and family under lockdown created time pressure and stress among working parents, particularly working mothers of young children (Prickett et al., 2020). Therefore, in addition to the fear of getting infected, the never-ending work pressures and unending household work seemed inevitable aspects of the pandemic.

Everyone around the globe, irrespective of the world-class infrastructure that their countries have developed, found themselves caught in a chaotic

situation. In the previous studies, working professionals have been longing for flexible working hours and work from home arrangements. This demand for flexibility in the workplace has been extremely popular among youngsters (Chungg & Lippie, 2020; Finn & Donovan 2013.) Therefore, the work from home arrangement during lockdown seemed like a blessing in disguise during the initial days of the pandemic. However, it did not take much time for everyone to realize that any change has both pros and cons and so is the case with work from home. This arrangement did allow people for spending with family, have flexibility in working, avoiding everyday travel hassles and so on, but at the same time, it seemed like a never-ending vicious circle. Employees were quick to realize that there are no defined borders between work and non-work environments.

According to various studies conducted during the pandemic, one section was worst hit by the pandemic, and it was none other than the women task force. It becomes noteworthy to mention that even a country like Iceland that was at the top of the Gender Gap Index for some years was no exception to the aftereffects of lockdown. It was also among those countries that witnessed the uneven division of labour (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Anderson & Kelliher (2020) found that the women task force was not left with an option to choose between setting boundaries for household, children and office.

It has been observed in the previous studies that women increase their responsibilities in the family when it comes to flexible working hours (Hilbrecht, 2008). In addition, women have always reported shuffling between many roles while striking a balance between personal and professional lives (Emslle & Hunt, 2009). According to various studies conducted in the past, flexible working only facilitates singles and has not worked effectively for people with partners (Demerouti et al. 2014). Therefore, as previously noted, gender could be another variable to consider in the psychological response to the pandemic. The major problem arises when while working from home the lines are not drawn between work and non-work environments. As a result, employees, especially women, end up multitasking which may contribute to experiencing stress.

Lockdown did not only result in increased stress among women but also intensified domestic violence. Domestic violence which is inherently rooted in India emerged as a significant concern for women during lockdown (Kapoor, 2021). Domestic violence, mainly described as violence against women by their intimate partner, showed a 100% surge during the lockdown. The turn of events during lockdown did not only put everyone in chaos but also intensified the already existing violence against women. On the one hand, a lockdown was imposed to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, on the other, the victims of domestic violence found themselves trapped with their abusers. This pushed National Commission for Women to announce Mental Health Helplines for those witnessing any form of domestic violence (Chandra, 2020). In a country where women's subjugation is a norm in society, it came as no surprise to see that women suffered physical and mental abuse at the hands of their partners (Chakraborty, 2020). In addition to domestic violence, the cases of sexual violence also increased during COVID-19 lockdown. A lot of research done in the past also point to the rise in family violence and sexual violence during crises or disasters (Mittal & Singh, 2020).

Domestic violence emerged as a parallel shadow pandemic that went almost unaddressed as people were busy dealing with the COVID-19 virus while ignoring the predator of domestic violence. Therefore, it becomes worth acknowledging that this so-called shadow pandemic emerged as nothing less than a mental health crisis specifically for women. It was not only domestic violence that showed a surge during COVID-19, but all kinds of violence against women were at their peak during the lockdown.

Specifically, in the Indian context, where male dominance is a norm, such a crisis needs immediate action and attention to address the rights and needs of the sufferers. However, nothing can be changed overnight where patriarchy is so inherent in society that it is nothing but a norm. Hence Wani et al. (2021) propose a stepwise approach in this regard. According to Dedhia (2020), there was an increase in porn usage during the lockdown in India.

Also, there were media reports of fear of scarcity of resources in the future which led people to stockpile. Many cases were reported globally where people

procured essential items like groceries, stationaries, toilet paper etc. However, in an unusual trend of this stockpiling, the medical store owners reported a surge in the demand and supply of condoms in India. This might be attributed to a lack of social contact, limited sources of amusement, social isolation, and a variety of other factors. However, regardless of the reason for such behaviour, COVID-19 has influenced women's physical, social, and emotional well-being worldwide.

Many research studies were explicitly conducted to understand the post-traumatic stress disorders among women. Gao et al., (2020) and Huang and Zhao (2020) found that post-traumatic stress symptom in Wuhan residents following the outbreak of COVID-19 were exceptionally high among women under 35 years of age. This was particularly true for those who reported watching the news three times a day. While earlier women juggled between housework and office work, during the lockdown, women found themselves in a position where they had to multitask as wives, mothers, daughter-in-laws managing children, office all at the same time (Andrew et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Craig and Churchill, 2021.)

Much of the research has shown that women appear to present more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and distress in comparison with men (Lai et al., 2020; Liu N. et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020). Moreover, the idea of motherhood and societal pressure added to stress among women and work from home became a double-edged sword (Bisht et al., 2021). It was the societal pressures that were becoming taxing for women. Also, the eternal aspirations of the organizations towards profit and growth that ultimately resulted in the employee's mental and physical health and well-being contributed to working women stress.

Survey data from hundreds of households found that women reported being more anxious, more depressed, and suffered from more significant levels of sleeplessness than men during the early stages of lockdown in India (Afridi, Dhillon & Roy, 2021). Such stress among women can be attributed to multiple factors, including the fear of getting infected, concerns about self and loved ones or the perception about financial insecurity in future.

Previous research has also found that pandemics only worsens the increased risk of specific adverse health outcomes and reduced healthcare experienced by many women. Hence, gender differences in health risks and implications only expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the initiatives to promote impartiality in health, social, and economic systems during and after the COVID-19 may lessen the discriminatory risks posed by pandemics and other times of healthcare stress (Connor et al., 2020).

While women were already doing most of the world's unpaid care work before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging research suggests that the COVID-19 crisis and its subsequent shutdown response have resulted in a dramatic increase in this burden (Power, 2020). In addition, COVID-19 pandemic-related measures, such as prolonged periods of social isolation, unexpected employment disruptions, school closures, financial distress, and changes to routine, are having an unprecedented negative impact on women's mental well-being (UN) (Srihara et al., 2020). COVID-19 pandemic and the stress followed by lockdown has once again highlighted the ever-existing inherent aspect of society where men hold control over women.

Discussion

This article has sought to identify the major causes behind mental stress on women post the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research has emphasized the socio-cultural factors that exerted pressure on women. The authors in the study have made an analysis of women's gender/equality/gap scenario in the present time. There is a scope of deeper analysis for future studies based on a mixed-method approach where the situation's qualitative and quantitative analysis could be done. The study points out the conception of an ideal woman and its practical relevance in the present times. It is an excellent time to realize that society must stop putting women under undue social, psychological, and physical pressures. The authors do not deny the fact that men are untouched by the stresses of COVID 19, but at the same time recognizes that it is high time to rise above the male-dominated society and treat women at par with men at a more realistic level.

Conclusion

It's safe to say that 2020 will go down in history as the year that a pandemic changed everything. All of these factors were taken into account when determining the influence the study would have on the globe as a whole. Most individuals in our society agree that gender prejudice is the accepted standard in our society, but the present study has sought to look at the problem from a gender bias lens. Another effect of COVID 19 was to create an outbreak of interest among academics from across the world, who were requested to look into patriarchal Indian social concerns and make sure that sufferers' complaints reached the right decision-makers for appropriate action. Because nothing can be changed in a hurry, it's best to take a systematic approach instead.

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