

## **Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Gendered Analysis**

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### ***Abstract***

*The objective of this paper is to provide a gendered analysis of mental health considerations during the spread of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has caused acute health crisis accompanied by various psychological, social, educational and economical ramifications. During this crisis issues like poverty, unemployment, academic stress and social evils such as domestic violence, sexual abuse by intimate partner have constantly been on rise. Additionally, the Covid-19 induced lockdowns and self isolation measures have deteriorated the mental health of people. From the existing literature it may be said that disruptions caused by Covid-19 pandemic have affected the mental health of women more profoundly than men. The situation is quite similar in academic world too. There may be various social, economical and health related factors contributing to the deteriorating mental health of women. Therefore, based on the available literature the paper tries to put forward the probable causes of declining mental health of women and suggest plausible measures for developing good mental health. The paper also discusses the prevalent gender based mental health situation in academic world. Thus, the present study is an attempt to provide a view of mental health condition through gender lens during Covid-19 pandemic. For the present study a comprehensive literature survey was conducted through secondary sources such as, research papers, articles, e-books and different websites. From the analysis of previous studies, it can be said that there is a need for acknowledging the pivotal role played by women at workplace as well as at home further, more efforts are required in order to safeguard mental health and prioritize the safety of women against various social evils.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, mental health, economical issues, academic world, and gender-based violence.

### **Introduction**

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The acute health crisis stemming from coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is accompanied by various psychological, social and economical issues which has disrupted the normal functioning of almost every sphere of human life. In order to limit the spread of the disease and reduce the infection rate a series of lockdowns were imposed in various parts of the world (Anand et al. 2021), however prolonged home confinement and stringent quarantine measures have negatively affected the mental health of people (Brooks et al. 2020; Mosanya, 2020, Salari et al. 2020; Vloo et al. 2021). The World Health Organisation (2004) as cited in Galderesi et al. (2015) defines mental health as *“a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”*. From the above definition it may be said that the concept of mental health goes beyond than just having a body and mind free of diseases rather it also refers to psychological, sociological and economical well-being of an individual. A person with good mental health is able to manage a healthy life style, acknowledges both positive and negative emotions, maintains a rational outlook towards life and functions productively for the betterment of oneself and the society at large. However, the situation surrounding Covid-19 has taken a considerable toll on mental health of people (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020; Giuntella et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021) as many individuals all over the world are experiencing psychological issues like stress, anxiety fear, anger, insomnia and depression (Roy et al. 2020; Shah 2020, Fenollar-Cortés et al. 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic have affected the mental health of women more profoundly than men (Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers 2020) as women experience more stress and anxiety as compared to their counterparts (Shah, 2020) and are vulnerable to mental health issues (Al-rahimi, 2021). A study conducted by Afridi et al. (2021) revealed that during Covid-19 pandemic about 90% of the women worried more about the physical health of their families as compared to 85% of men. Further 82% women felt more anxious or nervous as compared to 64% of men. Similar findings were reported by other studies such as Ozdin & Ozdin (2020), Almeida et al. (2020), Sediri (2020), and Wang et al. (2020).

One of the reasons behind mental health concerns of women may be their anxious temperament (Sediri 2020). Additionally, during Covid-19 induced lockdowns there was temporary closure of schools in most of the countries to contain the spread of virus (Almeida, 2020). Consequently, some people experienced an increase in parental stress and workload particularly the mothers who are usually engaged in childcare, eldercare, domestic chores and other household services (Minello, 2020). Further, during lockdowns there has also been a significant increase in violence against women (Sediri, 2020). Home confinement along with the abusive relationship with partner has aggravated the situation of women who have

been victims of domestic violence (Das, 2020). Thus, the global health crisis accompanied by social evils and economical losses may be considered primarily responsible for deteriorating mental health of people particularly women.

Considering the mental health situation prevalent in academic world it may be said that students as well as teachers have also experienced a downturn in their mental health (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. 2021). On viewing the situation through gender lens, it may be said that female students (Kecojevic 2020, Prouse et al. 2021) and female teachers (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. 2021) have been struggling with mental health issues more than male students and male teachers. There may be various reasons leading to mental health issues among teachers and students such as difficulty in adopting technology driven virtual mode of learning, lacking necessary technical skills, experiencing technostress or fear with the use of technology, inaccessibility to resources etc. However, these issues can be resolved by addressing the training needs of the students as well as teachers and developing among them necessary 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that they will need to function effectively in this continuously evolving world.

### **Objectives**

1. To provide a gendered analysis of mental health during Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To study the state of mental health in academic world.
3. To study the probable causes of declining mental health of women during Covid-19 pandemic.
4. To suggest plausible measures for developing good mental health.

### **Methodology**

For the present study a comprehensive literature analysis was conducted through secondary sources such as, research papers, articles, e-books and different websites by primarily focusing on keywords such as, 'Covid-19', 'mental health', 'stress', 'anxiety', 'depression', 'gender differences', 'economical issues', 'social issues', 'academic world', and 'gender-based violence'.

### **State of mental health in academic world**

The state of mental health of different populations has been a growing concern during Covid-19 pandemic (Son et al. 2020). In a study done by Rehman et al. (2021) it was revealed that among various professions students and healthcare professionals experience stress and anxiety more than others. According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021) globally, schools for more than 168 million children have remained closed for an entire year due to Covid-19 induced lockdowns. As mentioned by Agoramoorthy (2021) about 1.5 million schools in India were closed during the pandemic. Therefore, in order to continue teaching-learning services

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almost every educational institution witnessed a massive shift from traditional to online mode of learning (Hidalgo-Andrade et al. 2021). However, this shift was not as smooth as it was expected as many teachers as well as students experienced difficulty in adopting online mode of teaching and learning which resulted in mental health issues like stress, anxiety, confusion etc (Cuervo et al., 2018; Chitra 2020). Further uncertainty about the academic year, inability to access online classes, unavailability of resources and academic difficulties may also be associated with aggravating mental health of teachers and students (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Moreover in a country like India where approximately 364 million people are poor (Human Development Report 2019) and due to Covid-19 they are facing even more severe economic backlash. Consequently, a large number of students are forced to dropout from the school as they cannot afford online learning. According to UNESCO (2020) about 0.32 billion students in India have been affected due to pandemic. The dropout rates for girl child is even more severe which in turn may lead to social evils like child marriages, domestic violence, child labour etc (Alvi and Gupta 2020). Further it is also observed that in India some families prioritize the education of male child over the female child. The financial difficulties and the indifferent attitude towards education often become hurdles in the education of girl child. It may be said that the upsurge of Covid-19 has disrupted the path towards gender equality and has aggravated the long existing gender disparities (Fisher and Ryan, 2021).

It may be said that Covid-19 pandemic has posed mental health challenges for the academic community. Chinna et al. (2021) examined the psychological impact of pandemic and lockdown on university students of Asia. Results of the study revealed that overall 21.9% students experienced mild to moderate and 13.7% students experienced severe to extreme level of anxiety. Additionally, female students from Bangladesh, China, Malaysia, China and Pakistan were found to experience higher levels of anxiety as compared to their male counterparts. Islam et al. (2020) in their study reported 82.4% students belonging to Bangladeshi universities had mild to severe depressive symptoms where male students (67.35%) were found to have higher depressive symptoms than female students (32.65%). A study by Kecojevic (2020) reported that female students perceived higher level of stress than male students. Similar findings were reported by Prouse et al. (2021) where female students experienced more pronounced negative affects of pandemic on their mental health and academics as compared to male students. Some other studies such as AlAteeq et al (2020); Verma (2020); Sharma & Shakir (2020) also reported that female students experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety than male students.

Klapproth et al. (2020) in their study revealed higher stress level among female teachers as compared to males. Similar findings were reported by Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) where stress and anxiety scores of female

teachers were higher as compared to male teachers. Study done by Santamaria et al. (2021) also revealed that female teachers had significantly more symptoms of stress and anxiety as compared to male teachers.

Covid-19 has undoubtedly intensified the mental health concerns in academic world. From a gendered review of the studies, it may be said that female students and teachers experienced more mental health issues as compared to their male counterparts.

### **Probable causes of declining mental health of women during Covid-19 pandemic**

Mental health of individuals is an essential aspect of human life that needs to be addressed carefully during the Covid-19 scenario. The chaos surrounding Covid-19 has deeply affected the mental health of almost every individual. Men and women both are struggling with mental health issues during pandemic however; the situation of mental health is quite severe for women. Some of the probable causes of declining mental health of women that became more serious during pandemic are as follows:

- 1. Concerns regarding physical health:** Covid-19 pandemic has put physical and reproductive health of women at risk as many countries like Nepal, Brazil and India have reallocated their resources for the service of Covid-19 patients (Fisher and Ryan, 2021). Consequently, the inaccessibility to quality health services, essential medication, vaccines, sexual and reproductive health care services etc have put the physical health of women at risk. The diversion from these essential services may results in aggravated mortality rate, early pregnancies, morbidity, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (United Nations, 2020).
- 2. Psychological concerns:** The uncertainties surrounding pandemic such as fear of catching infection, prolonged home confinement, sense of isolation, quarantine measures, depressive news content from all around the world, death of loved ones etc have affected the psychological health of people. Many individuals are experiencing psychological issues like stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, hypertension etc (Grover et al., 2020; Roy et al. 2020; Shah 2020, Fenollar-Cortés et al. 2021), which has further deteriorated their mental health (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020; Giuntella et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021). The mental health of women is more profoundly affected than men as they have been experiencing higher level of psychological distresses (Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020; Shah, 2020; Al-rahimi, 2021).
- 3. Family Violence:** It may refer to violent and threatening behaviours of family members occurring in form of physical violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, intimate partner violence, psychological violence or emotional abuse such as verbal humiliation or harassment and economical pressures (Smyth et al., 2021). A study done by Usher et al. (2020) revealed that during pandemic induced lockdowns the reports regarding domestic violence and family violence have increased

worldwide. In India according to statistics released by National Commission of Women (2020) as cited in Das (2020), there has been an increase in the complaints filed against domestic violence during 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. Approximately 214 complaints were received out of which 58 complaints were against domestic violence. It may be said that pandemic has aggravated the situation for the victims of domestic violence; further women with the history of mental illness who also became the victims of violence during lockdowns are at greater risk of severe depression, stress and anxiety (Sediri, 2020).

- 4. Increased workload:** It is observed that globally there has been an increase in work burden upon women during lockdowns. According to United Nations (2020) the gross imbalances in the gendered distribution of household care services have deepened during Covid-19 pandemic. Women were doing three times as much unpaid domestic service than men which has exponentially increased during pandemic. Women are considered solely responsible for elder care, child care, educating the children, performing domestic chores etc. Also with the closures of school the workload is increased particularly for mothers. Increased work burden and lack of support may affect the physical and mental health of women. Furthermore, adolescent girls spend more hours on domestic chores than their male counterparts. School closures have not only added to increased responsibility of domestic chores for girls but many girls especially the ones living in poverty ridden, remote areas and girls with disabilities are at risk of dropping out from school without completing their education and may not return even when the crisis is over.
- 5. Economical losses:** Economical crises such as unemployment and poverty brought about financial instability in many households. The situation have been critical for migrant labors who were not able to afford even basic necessities of daily life and at the same were unable to go back to their native places due to travel restrictions. Further economical crises have affected women more severely than men. According to United Nations (2020) economic lives of women will be affected differently and disproportionately than men. Globally women aged 25 to 34 are 25% more likely to get hit by poverty than men. Women are vulnerable to economic impact of Covid-19 as they earn less, have less secured jobs lesser savings. The cuts and lay-offs also affect the economic lives of women especially in the female headed households and the single mothers as it limits their ability to support themselves and their families.

### **Suggestions for developing good mental health among women**

In the light of above-mentioned causes of declining mental health of women here are some suggestions that may help in developing good mental health and limit the impact of Covid-19 on women. These suggestions are:

- 1. Provisions for basic health facilities:** Provisions must be made for standardized health care services without any interruption. In addition to this, attention must be paid on the health care services for older women, gender-violence survivors (such as women who are ostracized for not following stereotypical social norms, who are forced to marry their perpetrators, women who get traded off for fulfilling basic household necessities and sexually assaulted women), pregnant women including emergency obstetric and new born care. Necessary infection control measures should not be neglected. Further public messages promoting Covid-19 appropriate behaviour such as social distancing, regular sanitization, being empathetic to those who are affected etc must be accessible to all (United Nations, 2020). Proper physical health care will help in promoting and developing good mental health.
- 2. Developing and fostering resilience:** There is need to develop stress resilience among individuals. People need to understand that stress is a normally occurring response especially during a pandemic scenario and it must be dealt with resilience building techniques and situational appropriate behaviour. People can engage into different stress resilience activities such as expressive writings in which people put their thoughts and feelings into words, cultivate social support, avoid too much exposure to negative news, seek information through reliable sources, practice self care such as healthy eating habits, meditations, appropriate amount of sleep and definitely reach out for (virtual) professional help when experiencing disproportionate levels of stress (Almeida et al., 2020).
- 3. Prioritizing safety needs of women:** A sense of safety and security may help in providing some mental relief to the victims of family violence and other forms of violence. The United Nations (2020) suggested integrating domestic violence prevention strategies into Covid-19 response plans. Setting up shelters for domestic violence victims by re-purposing other spaces such as empty hotels or educational institutions. Safe spaces (such as pharmacies or grocery stores) where women can report abuse without alerting the perpetrators must be designated. Further national response to covid-19 must include communication to public that laws are not suspended during the lockdown period.
- 4. Challenging stereotypical gender specific roles:** The long existing stereotypical gender specific roles need to be challenged through redistribution of child and elder care services usually performed by women. Additionally, involvement of males in household services must be encouraged. Equal sharing of responsibilities would help in reducing workload and promote better physical and mental health of women. Further in the pandemic context efforts must be made to provide e-learning resources especially to the girls residing in rural areas, so that no child is deprived of education.

**5. Economical support:** Government and large-scale business enterprises may provide economic support packages to women who are struggling to afford day to day necessities. Providing tax relaxation wherever possible can be of great help. Enactment and effective implementation of laws that could bridge gender pay gap are urgently needed. Provisions for free medical facilities, free sanitary napkins and medicines must be made. All these measures may help in relaxing the economical and financial burdens, which will further enable women to support themselves and their families. Easing financial burdens may help in attaining a composed state of mind to some extent and sustain a healthy lifestyle.

### **Conclusion**

The upsurge of Covid-19 pandemic has left no aspects of human life unaffected. Along with claiming so many lives across the globe Covid-19 has caused various physical, psychological, social, educational and economical ramifications. During this period the stringent quarantine measures and home confinement deteriorated the mental health of many people and especially women. Women were more vulnerable to mental health issues as compared to men due to various reasons such as inaccessibility to physical and reproductive health care services in some areas, increased work burden, rise in family violence, lack of support, economical and financial insecurities. During Covid-19 social evils such as domestic violence and sexual abuse have constantly been on rise which further made women more exposed to mental health issues.

In educational context many teachers and students have been experiencing stress due to changed method of teaching and learning. The little or no technical knowledge, adaptability issues, inaccessibility to e-learning resources, and informal teaching learning environment has made teaching-learning quite disturbing and stressful for teachers and students. Further due to temporary closure of school and inability to afford e-learning resources many students especially girls are at risk of dropping out from schools without completing their education. This will not only affect the education of many girls but also hamper their all-round development.

In order to overcome the impacts of Covid-19 crisis and safeguard the physical and mental health of women necessary and uninterrupted health care services must be made available in every area. There is a need for redistribution of domestic duties and normalizing involvement of men in household work. Shelters and safe spaces for the victims of abuse must be made available in order to ensure their safety. Further early action against the abuser must be taken. Efforts must be made to make e-learning resources available for economically weaker students irrespective of their residential status. Further economic stability of women must also receive due importance through effective implementation of various employment schemes and the role of women must be acknowledged at all levels.

It may be said that Covid-19 has disrupted the progress made towards gender equality and has deepened the long existing gender disparities. Nevertheless, through genuine efforts pandemic can be turned into an opportunity for building more resilient, stronger and better society that promotes welfare of every individual on earth.

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