

The Poor and the Pandemic: COVID-19

ARATI RAUT¹, RUCHIRA ANKAR², SHEETAL SAKHARKAR³

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 was proven to be a pandemic in early 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). At present, 213 countries have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the history of global pandemics, COVID-19 has had a major impact on society as it has killed humans, spread human suffering and uprooted the lives of the people. Across the globe, there are 18,705,096 confirmed cases, 11,922,692 recovered cases, 704,385 deaths, and 6,078,019 active cases as of, 5 August 2020. It has affected the world's economic, social and political status. Poor people belonging to the lower strata of society face more difficulties during pandemics. They are unable to secure their daily bread as well as other basic needs. The impact of COVID-19 on the poor and the role of society have been addressed.

Keywords: Corona virus disease 2019, Global pandemic, Poverty

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected near about all segments of the population. At present, 213 countries have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. In the history of global pandemics, COVID-19 has had a major impact on society as it has killed humans, spread human suffering and uprooted the lives of the people [2]. Across the globe, there are 18,705,096 confirmed cases, 11,922,692 recovered cases, 704,385 deaths, and 6,078,019 active cases as of 5 August 2020 [3]. Specifically, the social groups living in susceptible conditions are the most affected during pandemics. These include geriatric groups, youngsters, people with co-morbidities, and the most sensitive group being those living in poverty [4].

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced complete lockdown divided into three phases for breaking the chain of coronavirus transmission, as well as protecting the lives of millions of Indians [4]. The major effects of the lockdown include unemployment, hunger, migrant worker crisis, and widespread loss of access to healthcare [5]. The global economic destruction resulting from the lockdown policies is pushing millions into poverty increasing their vulnerability to possible COVID-19 infection, as well as the deadly danger that comes from simply being poor [6]. During lockdown, a lot of people lost their jobs and they migrated to their home towns. Many people are striving to get adequate food and shelter and those who are already poor, are becoming even poorer [Table/Fig-1] [7].

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Poor

When widespread pandemics like the current one erupts, it usually hits the poor first and hardest. Poverty is often associated with large families, which gives rise to many issues, such as illiteracy, broken families, alcoholism, drug addiction, children becoming orphans, divorce, increased number of slums, sexual violence, and exploitation. Moreover, each of these problems has its peculiar characteristics and is aggravated by the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic [8].

Problems Faced by the Poor During COVID-19 Pandemic

A lot of problems have affected the poor during the COVID-19 pandemic, including unemployment, hunger, inaccessible healthcare facilities, insecurity of women and girls, limited access to education, and the spread of rumours [Table/Fig-2].

Unemployment: Unemployment is a very big problem faced by the poor during the current pandemic. When the government authorities



[Table/Fig-1]: Global health and economic crisis and emergence of pandemics.



[Table/Fig-2]: Problems faced by the poor during pandemics.

announce restrictions and lockdowns to fight COVID-19, the people are unable to perform their daily activities. Many people are unable to win their daily bread for their families, with their kids having to go to sleep on an empty stomach [9]. The Centre for Monitoring Indian

Economy (CMIE) estimates that around 140 million people have lost their jobs, pushing the unemployment rate from 8% before the crisis to 26% [5].

Inaccessible healthcare facilities: The bridging of healthcare services to the poor and rural areas is unlikely during the pandemic. If swift and urgent medical care is needed, there are other obstacles, such as distance, cost, and connectivity. As a result, medical services are not accessible to them in a timely manner. Moreover, as in developed nations, poor people are unable to bear the expenses associated with medical care, resulting in their condition being significantly compounded and exacerbated and eventually, their lives torn to pieces due to poverty [10].

Insecurity of women and girls: It is the unwritten law of society that the man is the bread winner of the family and the woman is the primary caretaker of the family. But the real warriors are none other than the women. Women take care of ailing family members and nurture their children during school closures and illness. Women and girls are integral parts of each nation, state, group, community as well as every single family. The attack of COVID-19 is expected to unreasonably devastate women and young girls in society [11]. According to the WHO, every third woman all over the globe experienced physical and sexual violence in their lifetime by their partners [12]. It is observed that during pandemics women and girls belonging to poor societies often face dangers like sexual assault, domestic violence, neglecting reproductive and sexual health, as well as delays in getting the services they need.

Domestic violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic: When the pandemic emerged, domestic violence increased within the family. Following the announcement of lockdown and physical spacing measures by the Government of India, women and children became the most vulnerable to domestic violence. Right now, Indian women and children are experiencing exploitation and despite trying to push it away, not all communities are succeeding. Therefore, the pandemic has instigated and increased domestic violence, especially in poor communities [13].

Illiteracy: Access to education is a major issue faced by the poor during the pandemic. This stems from the fact that they are the most vulnerable to contracting the infection and are least able to fight off the virus effectively. Children from wealthy families can get their education at home, as they have access to the internet and are well-equipped with all the necessary electronic gadgets, such as computers, laptops and mobiles. On the other hand, poor children are unable to get their education remotely, due to inaccessibility to electronic devices, arising from their abject poverty. Moreover, their parents are unable to educate their children, as most of them are illiterate. The problem is aggravated by unemployment and deprivation [14].

Rumours during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic has currently spread to 213 countries across the globe. Many nations are struggling not just with the pandemic, but also with the spread of rumours and misinformation. Rumours are a fatal weapon for slow-poisoning and deteriorating the morale of the poor and rich alike [15]. A fact-checking website analysed the boom in the spread of fake news from different countries. They discovered false predictions about the origin and spread of COVID-19 in China during January-February. They also found that fake news about Italy's lockdown was spread digitally in March, and misinformation targeting the Muslim community became more common in April [16]. It was observed in Aizawl in Mizoram that in March, a group of about 15 people spread fake circulars, allegedly issued by the Union Home Ministry that Mizos who lived outside the state should return immediately as otherwise, they would be declared as non-Mizos. Between 10 and 13 March, 15 people were arrested against this crime under section 505(1)(b) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) [17]. According to a Maharashtra Times

report, on 15 April, 2020, Rahul Kulkarni, a reporter with ABP News, was arrested by Mumbai police for reporting false news. He circulated fake videos that trains would commence services from 14 April, 2020. As a result, all staff gathered in Bandra on 14 April, despite the nationwide lockdown. So, the ABP Majha TV channel was given notice and legal action was taken under IPC 1860 for transmitting false news and causing public disorder [17]. The lack of trust in the State Ministry and the rapid spread of infodemic are making the poor communities more panicky.

Strategies of the Government of India Against COVID-19

Initial Ban on International Travel: Initially the Government of India took steps for restriction of international flights, so that the situation could be managed smoothly. Announcement of lockdown in a phased manner: The honorable Prime Minister, Narendra Modi announced a phase-wise lockdown along with more focus on physical distancing and handwashing practices in order to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 [18]. Prime Minister's appeal to migrants at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: The honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi had requested migrant populations to stay where they were and not to migrate. He requested the migrant workers, especially the poor, not to take any hasty decisions as this could create many difficulties and hardships. He furthermore stressed on the fact that lockdown was the only weapon to fight COVID-19 [19].

Steps Taken by the Government of India for Poor Communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Government of India has announced a Rs 1.7 lac-crore relief package for deprived communities, such as daily wage-earners and those who need urgent assistance during the lockdown. The *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Scheme* has provision for serving nearly 80 poor communities in crore.

For the next three months, each family member will get 5 kg of rice or wheat and one kg of pulses. In addition, cash payments for those farmers and workers covered under the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme* has been credited to their bank accounts. Moreover, the government has many schemes for widows, women with disabilities and others [20].

Steps that Citizens Can Take to Serve the Poor during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Support the training of community health leaders to fight COVID-19 and identification of team members.
- Make arrangements for food, shelter, safe drinking water, soap and water for handwashing and other sanitary products.
- Provide small loans to help families sustain their livelihoods and rebuild their lives following the crisis.

Measures to Overcome Poverty Arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Responses from governments around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic show how social and political power causes poverty. In fact, the pandemic points to the guilt of power exerted by the state. Countries should take immediate action against COVID-19 to restore economic stability [21].

CONCLUSION(S)

Pandemics have occurred many times in human history. Over the centuries, viral pandemics have increased in frequency, especially as a result of zoonotic transmission of viral diseases. Pandemics can cause high morbidity and mortality, as well as increase in the incidence of crime, drug abuse, domestic violence, illiteracy, among others. This often results in an economic downturn, which leads to global economic recession, thereby exacerbating poverty. Therefore, tackling pandemics such as the current one, is of vital importance in order to restore economic stability and alleviate poverty.

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PARTICULARS OF CONTRIBUTORS:

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, SRMMCON, Wardha, Maharashtra, India.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, SRMMCON, Wardha, Maharashtra, India.
3. Clinical Instructor, SRMMCON, Sawangi Meghe, Wardha, Maharashtra, India.

NAME, ADDRESS, E-MAIL ID OF THE CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dr. Arati Raut,
Adarsh Colony, Sudampuri, Wardha, Maharashtra, India.
E-mail: aratiraut15714@gmail.com

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