



# THE IMPACT OF COVID -19 PANDEMIC ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF WOMEN

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**Abstract:** The whole world is going through turmoil due to Corona virus pandemic for almost 9 months now. Everyone is affected by the pandemic in their own way. Being a working women and a mother even I have been facing lot of issues relating to work-life balance, stress, anxiety, tiredness and emotional imbalances. This motivated me to conduct a study among women to investigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of women across different sections of the society. An online survey was conducted among women with the help of various social media platforms. This survey was conducted in the month of September, 2020. The respondents submitted their responses by filling a questionnaire which was drafted to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of women, increase in stress, behavioural and changes in their lifestyle. The study was conducted among working women, homemakers, students and retired women, across different age groups, economic backgrounds, educational qualifications and professional status. The study reveals that the work-life balance has got disturbed for majority of women who are working and are married. However, most of the women responded that they had family support during this time. Women who have kids responded that they are unable to pay adequate attention to their kids. Majority of the respondents also acknowledged the impact of this pandemic on their mental health.

**Key Words:** Covid-19, women, stress, mental health, work-life balance.

**Introduction:** The pandemic caused by Corona virus is a disaster of huge proportions. A disaster is a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources. Though often caused by nature, disasters can have human origins. The impact of disasters depend on various factors i.e. the economic status of the societies, vulnerability of the population, the physical and the mental state of the people affected by it. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is one of the worst disasters that humans have faced in recent times. It is acting as great source of stress to the patients, their families, health care workers, aged people, students, working men and women, homemakers and even people who are not yet infected by the virus.

This disease spread from the city of Wuhan in China in December 2019 and today every country in the world is affected by it. COVID-19 is considered a relative of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which has the possibility of transmission from animals to humans. Currently, it is still unclear when the pandemic will reach its peak. To date, the source of the SARS-CoV-2 remains unknown. However, the SARS-CoV-2 infection has been associated with contact with a local seafood vendor in Wuhan that illegally sold some wildlife animals including bats.

As the pandemic started growing, efforts to deal with it also started gathering pace with local governments, international organisations and many spirited individuals playing their part. Various countries including India have been working tirelessly to develop the vaccine for the respiratory syndrome caused by this unknown coronavirus and many vaccines are in different stages of development. In the absence of the vaccine, the focus mainly is to prevent the spread of the disease, social distancing, rapid testing, isolating the infected persons and to provide medical help to the patients suffering from severe conditions. The outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic is considered to be of greater magnitude and intensity than 2003 SARS. The fear and anxiety among people was so excessive that it prompted the Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi to impose a nation-wide lockdown, which was strictly enforced in the beginning and later relaxations were announced in a phased manner.

The declaration of lockdown in the last week of March 2020 in India resulted in complete closure of the schools, colleges and all the workplaces. All the members of the family were forced to work from home. Lockdown affected every member of the society in one way or the other and some more severely than others. Working women were faced with a difficult situation where they had to manage their household work, take care of the kids and elders in the family and at the same time also attend to their official duties. This obviously involved a huge physical effort from them but it also has the potential to affect their mental well-being.

The corona pandemic has challenged emotional health and there have been several reasons for this. Following are some of the causes of emotional distress during this period:

- (i) Economic strain and uncertainty. This is widely accepted that this pandemic has resulted in significant job losses and pay cuts. This has obviously strained the emotional wellbeing of the people directly affected by these job losses and pay cuts.
- (ii) Social isolation – not being able to meet one’s own family and loved ones over a prolonged period has also contributed to emotional distress. In Indian society, we draw lot of comfort from the social and family connections that we have. The lockdown and social distancing has eroded this support system.
- (iii) Decreased access to traditional support systems including spiritual mentors.
- (iv) Decreased access to avenues for unwinding like gyms, clubs, social gatherings etc.
- (v) Concerns around availability of adequate health care facilities in case of illness of self or family members.
- (vi) Continuous lack of domestic help taking the toll on working couples.
- (vii) Anxiety about catching the infection and the general media frenzy around the pandemic.

While mental distress has been an obvious outcome of this pandemic but this is not a topic that has been explored and discussed widely in our society. The pandemic has different effects on people, but I believe the mental agony and stress that it is causing, is largely unnoticed and is not really spoken about. Let us first see what Mental Health is. World Health Organisation defines Mental Health as:

*Mental Health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.*

### **Survey method and characteristics of respondents:**

To assess the impact of this pandemic on working women, a study was conducted on a well-represented sample of 100 women. The objective of the study was to study the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the women and how they are dealing with it, the behavioural and lifestyle changes and how they are coping with it. The participants were requested to fill up an online questionnaire. Besides the questionnaire, the participants were requested to provide their background information like their names, marital status, educational background etc. The questionnaire was sent to 100 women out of which 65 participants responded to the survey. Following are the key characteristics of the sample of the 65 women who responded to the questionnaire:

1. AGE: The respondents represented varied age groups. 20% of the respondents are between the age group 18-25 years, 25% are between the age group 26-40 years, 55% are between age group 41-55 years and none of the respondents are above 56 years of age.
2. EDUCATIONAL STATUS: 25% of the respondents are under-graduate, 25% are graduate, 35% respondent are post-graduate and 10% respondents are with doctorate degree and the remaining 5% are with other educational backgrounds.
3. MARITAL STATUS: 67% of the respondent women are married whereas the remaining 33% are unmarried.
4. EMPLOYMENT STATUS: 47% of the respondents are salaried women, 18.5% each are homemakers and students, 10% are self-employed and the remaining 6% are the ones who has lost their jobs recently due to COVID.
5. NUMBER OF FAMILY MEMBERS: 77% respondents have between 3 to 5 family members, 18% have over 5 family members, 2% are two member families and the remaining 3% are single women.
6. FAMILY INCOME: 42% respondents reported monthly income of up to INR 30,000, 29% reported monthly income of between INR 30,000 to INR50,000, 7% between INR50,000 and INR80,000 and 22% above INR100.000.

Survey Results:

### Survey Results:

#### *Impact of COVID on general mental wellbeing of women:*

A significant majority (93%) of the respondents reported that they are feeling anxious all the time during COVID period and are worried about either themselves or their family members catching infection. It was good to note that majority of those who are feeling stressed and anxious about the Corona situation, have the support of their family and friends. In fact, 89% of the respondents acknowledged the support of their family and friends. The remaining 11% reported lack of support from their family and friends.

Table 1

Questions	Agree or strongly agree percentage (No. of respondents)	Disagree percentage (No. of respondents)
Are you feeling anxious and worried about the growing COVID infections?	93% (60)	7% (5)
If you are feeling stressed, do you have enough support of your family and friends to seek help and share your emotions?	89% (58)	11% (7)

#### *Impact of COVID on women with kids:*

Respondents were asked if they have young kids (under 5 years) at home, weather they are able to pay attention to them and help them in studies and if they have support at home to take care of the kids.

65% of the total respondents have kids whereas 45% of the total respondents have kids younger than 5 years. 59% of those with kids below 5 years acknowledged that they have support at home to take care of the kids whereas the remaining 41% acknowledged lack of such support.

A significant majority of 60% of those with kids responded that they are not able to pay attention to their kids and help them in studies as they used to do during pre-COVID times. The remaining 40% responded that they are still able to pay attention to their kids and help them in their studies.

Table 2

Questions	Eligible participant percentage (No. of respondents)	Agree or strongly agree percentage (No. of respondents)	Disagree percentage (No. of respondents)
If you have kids (< 5 years), do you have support at home to take care of the kids?	45% (29)	59% (17 out of 29)	41% (12 out of 29)
If you have kids, are you able to pay attention to them and help them with their studies as you used to do prior to COVID?	65% (42)	60% (25 of 42)	40% (17 of 42)

#### *Impact of COVID on daily routine of women:*

Respondents were also asked if they feel motivated to do their routine household work and if they have others in their family who are helping them in their daily household work.

60% of the women responded that they feel less motivated than before to do their routine household work. 74% of the women responded that they lack the support of other family members in their daily household work.

Table 3

Questions	Agree or strongly agree percentage (No. of respondents)	Disagree percentage (No. of respondents)
Do you feel equally motivated to do routine household work as you used to feel during pre-COVID period?	40% (26)	60% (39)
During COVID period, are you getting help from other family members in routine household work?	26% (17)	74% (48)

#### *Impact of COVID on work-life balance of women:*

Three questions were asked to assess the impact of COVID pandemic on the work-life balance of women.

76% of the respondents acknowledged that the pandemic has adversely affected their work-life balance. 55% of the women responded that during the pandemic period they are unable to find time to relax and indulge in unwinding activities. Further, 77% of the respondents acknowledged that they are unable to spend quality time with their families during this pandemic.

Table 4

Questions	Agree or strongly agree percentage (No. of respondents)	Disagree percentage (No. of respondents)
Are you able to manage work life balance during COVID period?	24% (15)	76% (50)
During COVID period are you able to find time to relax and indulge in unwinding activities?	45% (29)	55% (36)
Are you able to spend quality time with your family during COVID period?	23% (15)	77% (50)

## Conclusion:

The study helped to assess the impact of the COVID pandemic on the mental well-being of women. It came to light that women got affected by this virus at multiple levels. While none of the respondents that I contacted fortunately got infected by the virus, but majority of them got adversely affected by the overall situation that directly or indirectly resulted from this pandemic. The daily routine got disturbed and with no household help available, the daily responsibilities increased. Due to school closures and school's transitioning to online mode of education, respondents had to spend extra time with their kids to help them navigate the new mode of distance learning. While this resulted in increase in physical work, but the associated mental stress also increased. Many women acknowledged that the general stress level and anxiety increased as they were generally worried about either themselves catching the infection or one of their loved ones catching the infection. The lockdown and social distancing norms also took away the option of socially connecting with friends and family which would have otherwise helped in relaxing and unwinding.

One positive development that came to light was that this crisis and the lockdown pushed people to talk and discuss about mental health issues, albeit not very openly. It is also acknowledged that this small awakening is probably limited to more educated and urban populations and people in smaller towns are still not able to recognise this as a challenge that needs to be addressed.

The first step in dealing with any issue is to realise its existence in the first place. The respondents that were approached did acknowledge that mental health is a relevant issue. The next step is to work towards dealing with it. Besides clinical and medical interventions, a small step in initiating a conversation with affected people can go a long way. It is imperative to probe a little deeper inside the seemingly "I am fine" exterior. We all want to be there for people we care about but often feel daunted and envisage a therapy like set-up to start a conversation. In reality, natural and meaning conversations involving mutual empathy can go a long way in helping someone deal with issues that otherwise they are fighting alone in their minds.

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