

Effect of COVID-19 on Working Women's Physical and Mental Health: A Descriptive Study of Pre and Post Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Background and Aim: In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic and a public health emergency of global significance. Recent studies have revealed that these restrictions and women's anxiety of the virus itself may have had an adverse effect on their mental health. Children and family members are spending more time at home; thus, society needs to be conscious of how this is affecting working women's emotional and physical health especially in the absence of any assisting maid. Thus, the purpose of this study was to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected working women's physical and mental health.

Materials and Method: To examine the effects of COVID-19 on the physical and emotional health of working women, a cross-sectional survey was conducted. Data is collected using an online survey platform. To investigate the impact of lockdown on the women's mental and physical health, a semi-structured questionnaire comprising a number of open- and closed-ended questions was prepared. Additionally, any mental health disorders and emotional difficulties that developed during lockdown or became worse were enlisted. Another goal was to gauge how much family members understood and were sympathetic to the physical and mental strain the working women were under.

Results: The study involved 200 women from different states of India. The hours spent in the kitchen and other associated activities increased from 1.5 hours to 5.5 hours when the time between before and during the lockdown was compared. The amount of time spent engaging in physical activity, such as yoga and morning and evening walks, significantly decreased during the lockdown and are coming to normal after the lockdown. 68 per cent of those surveyed said that women's behaviour had changed. About 58 per cent of the women suffered physical changes such as fatigue, headaches, lower back discomfort, and other issues with women's weight gain.

Conclusion: Additional research is required to better understand the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's mental health, particularly in regard to the identification of additional variables that may be connected to the pandemic's potentially multiplicative effects on women.

Key Words: Women, Pandemic, Women, Mental Health, COVID-19, World Health Organization.

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Introduction

The novel coronavirus, which was eventually given the COVID-19 designation, is an infectious disease that can pass between people. It first became known in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late December 2019, when cases of pneumonia with an undetermined origin were reported. The World Health Organization (WHO) deemed the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of global significance and recognized it as a pandemic. The majority of the globe's regions are badly impacted, including the US, Brazil, India, Russia, and Europe, which have experienced more cases and fatalities than the rest of the world.^{1,2}

Many nations then implemented nationwide lockdowns, shut down businesses and schools, forced citizens to learn online, enforced social isolation policies, and put in place restrictive measures that barred people from going to public places or interacting with people from other families.³ Recent studies have revealed that these restrictions and individual's anxiety of the virus itself may have had an adverse impact on their physical and mental health.⁴ According to prevalence studies, between 11 per cent and 28 per cent of women in non-pandemic settings experience psychological distress as a result of gender-related violence and discrimination.^{3,4} During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous national public health mandates and recommendations put the mental health of millions of women at risk.^{5,6,7}

Because of the stress and uncertainty in their own lives, it has become challenging for family members to soothe their fears. Women's occupational or emotional issues interfere with their normal capacity to care for their family members and children, which has increased their stress levels. Negative feelings like anxiety, disappointment, grief, worry, anger, and loss are not uncommon for people to feel, but the extended, constrictive, and broad nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse. In addition to contributing to the strained family relationships, the increased household responsibility placed on women as a result of the lack of a housekeeper has presented other difficulties.^{8, 9,10}

The family members must be aware of the changes in the women's mental and physical health as a result

of the increased time spent by women on domestic duties. Family members' influence on the women's mental and physical health will be considerable because they are the women's primary caregivers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected working women's physical and mental health.

Materials and Methods

To examine the effects of COVID-19 on the physical and emotional health of working women, a cross-sectional survey was created. With the use of an online and offline survey platform, the data is collected. Potential respondents were contacted via social media, and after providing informed electronic consent, they were instructed to complete a Google form. It was optional and anonymous to participate in the study. The study included women who worked full-time and were between the ages of 25 and 50 and had a minimum of four family members. Exclusion criteria included (a) refusal to participate, (b) any family members who had a physical health condition or mental disease that was either inherited or acquired, or (c) any working women who, according to their own self-reports, had any psychiatric or cognitive impairments.

The target population in across India was enlisted using a non-random convenient sampling technique. Although the sample size was not determined prior to the study's execution, maximum involvement was desired and anticipated given the topic's present social importance. To determine how the lockdown affected the working women's physical and emotional health, a semi-structured questionnaire containing a number of open-ended and closed-ended questions was created. Variables such as the women's current level of (Physical Activity) PA, time spent in the kitchen, time spent on other home tasks including cleaning, washing, and, the quality and pattern of sleep, time spent working, and usage of digital devices were used to evaluate PA characteristics.

Along with the rate of any family disputes, any mental health concerns and emotional difficulties that developed or worsened during lockdown were also recorded. Finding out how much family members understood the value of PA and mental tranquillity

for the women was another goal. It was reported that there had been noticeable changes in physical and emotional behaviour prior to COVID-19 and during lock down periods, which were then examined.

Result

The study involved 200 working women in total. Table 1 shows the included participants' average age

Table 1: Mean Age of the Study Participants

S No.	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Age Group (Years)	40	6.6

Table 2 shows the average amount of time spent on household tasks increased from 1 to 1.5 hours to 5.5 to 6 hours, and the average amount of time spent sleeping declined from 6.5 hours to around 4.8 hours.

was 40, with a standard deviation of 6.6. According to the study's findings, more time is now being spent using digital appliances, cooking, and doing housework. When the time periods before and after lockdown were compared, it was discovered that the number of hours spent on mobile had grown from an average of 1.28 hours to 4.28 hours.

The amount of time spent engaging in physical activity significantly decreased. It shrank daily from 1.13 hours to 0.23 hours.

Table 2: Comparison of Various Parameters before, during and after Lockdown

S No.	Variable (Daily average in Hrs)	Before Lockdown	During Lockdown	After Lockdown	Change before and after lockdown (%)
1	Time spent on household work	1.23	5.96	1.79	45.52
2	Time spent on digital devices	1.28	4.28	2.77	116.40
3	Time spent on PA	1.13	0.23	1.23	8.84
4	Sleep Time	6.43	4.82	6	-6.68

Table 2 also shows that after the lockdown, time spent on digital devices recorded highest growth in terms of per day usage (116.4 per cent), however the sleep time is negatively impacted (-6.68 per cent). For household work and time spent on PA, positive growth of 45.52 per cent and 8.84 per cent is reported.

It was found that 85 per cent of the working women who were participating spent an excessive amount of time in the kitchen, ranging from 4 to 9 hours. Sixty-eight per cent of those surveyed said that women's behaviour had changed. Irritation, impatience, excessive rage, anxiety, frustration, melancholy, and agitation were the main behavioural shifts among the women.

The working women had visible bodily changes. Approximately 58 per cent of working women suffered bodily changes such weariness, neck pain, headaches, lower back pain, and a significant issue with a woman's weight gain. Affected by high stress

were detected in about 61per cent of the women. By taking part in this study, the family members have been more aware of and sensitive to the increased amount of time that women spend in the kitchen, whether it be cooking with limited ingredients or juggling work online while taking care of the needs of the family and kids. The necessity for physical activity and mental wellness for women was universally acknowledged, although several family members also emphasized the need for greater understanding in this area.

Discussion

73 per cent of working women during the lockdown said it was difficult to work from home because of demands from family members. 39 per cent said their pay had been cut, 17 per cent said they had been fired, and 8 per cent said they had quit because they couldn't combine their personal

and professional life. 5 per cent of respondents also mentioned domestic abuse in some form.

Although the lockdown was progressively lifted and certain businesses and organizations were permitted to reopen, some routines were disturbed by the addition of additional regulations, such as the requirement to wear a mask at work, switch to online or hybrid employment, and occasionally work on odd or even days. Recent studies have revealed that these restrictions and women's dread of the virus itself may have had an adverse effect on their mental health. The social fabric and norms' unexpected disturbance has had an impact on women's behaviour and mental health.

Indian women's mental health has been impacted in a variety of ways as a result of marriage, having children, juggling job and family obligations, and learning to control their emotions.^{8,9}

Few research have been done in the field to investigate this association in working women. Several studies in adults throughout the pandemic have identified consistent associations between reduced physical activity and poorer mental health and between increased screen usage and poorer mental health.^{11,12}

In order to highlight the pandemic's possible effects on mental health, researchers have drawn on pre-pandemic studies. They have also urged for further study and improved mental health facilities. Few research, however, have particularly looked at the relationship between physical activity and kitchen time and mental health in nationally representative samples, or the mental health of working women before, during and after the pandemic.¹³

Lockdown was highlighted by all family members as the main element that had an impact on adult physical activity. Prior to lockdown, research showed that working women spent more time being active and had higher PA levels on the weekends than they did during the week. Especially those who have desk jobs, working women often get fitter over the holidays.¹⁴ It is possible that the lengthy lock down due to offline work closure lasting a year or more will have significant effects on working women's overall physical and mental health. There

have been disruptions in behaviour throughout the whole 24-hour day due to an increase in the amount of time spent on housework, managing personal and professional obligations, and disrupted sleep patterns/quality during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Finally, the majority of the poll participants had advanced degrees and higher-than-average household incomes. Working women who live in lower-income homes may not be covered by the findings. Future studies on the effect of COVID-19 on women's behaviour will benefit from data gathered from a more varied sample and from lower-income families.

Conclusion

We still have a lot to learn about the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of working women, particularly when it comes to identifying the protective variables present in females who may have been less impacted by the pandemic. There are still many unsolved problems, such as whether aspects of living conditions influence women's ability to adapt to serious public health emergencies like the COVID-19 epidemic.

Declaration of Ethical clearance- Taken from ethical committee of institute. All participants' written informed consent were obtained.

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