

THE ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIFE OF MOST EXCLUDED SECTION OF THE SOCIETY, THE HIJRAS/TRANSGENDER

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ABSTRACT

The present day world is facing a catastrophe of Covid-19 pandemic that has created a human, economic and social crisis. The pandemic and associated precautionary measures especially lockdown had serious implications on the society. Individual life, family life, education, economy is remarkably affected. Therefore, social scientists studied about the Covid Breakdown and its impact on society, economy, health, changing life style and work culture; but too little is understood about its impact on transgender community and their life. Thus, the present study highlights the negative changes in transgender life particularly hijra community's life brought about as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. The Study is primarily based on telephonic interviews with hijra people. The study trying to draw attention of policy makes towards hijra community.

Keywords: Covid-19, Corona, Lockdown, Transgender, Hijras Life.

Introduction

The Covid-19, otherwise known as Corona virus disease, which was recently discovered in December 2019, has now taken millions of lives globally. According to the WHO report, by May 9, 2020, 3, 759, 967 positive cases were verified, and 259,474 deaths were recorded global resulting from the corona virus epidemic. Following the data provided by the Indian Government, 56,342 confirmed cases were traced, and approximately 1,886 people have lost their lives due to the complications related to Covid-19 (WHO, 2020). The social distancing helps to bound contact; thereby preventing the spread of infection; India ramps up efforts to control emerging corona virus pandemic by an absolute lockdown. In order to control the spread of corona virus epidemic, all educational institutes, working spaces, commercial establishments, and transportation services are shut down, and social, political and religious gathering is prohibited from March 24, 2020, in India (Komireddi, 2020).

The impact on the economy due to Covid-19 in India has been very disruptive. The World Bank and credit rating agencies have reduced India's development for the financial year (2021), and India has already faced the lowest statistics over three decades, since trade liberalization in 1990 (The Times of India, 2020). In the 21-day lockdown announced after the coronavirus pandemic, the Indian economy is projected to lose more than 32,000 crores every day (The Hindu Business Line, 2020). Owing to lockdown, around 53% of enterprises across the country will be affected (The Indian Express, 2020). The lockdown constraints placed the supply chain into stress and lack of transparency in streamlining about essential commodities. The most groups and communities are affected the informal sectors like farmers, daily wage labour, street food seller, small market (non-essential items), transgender etc. The most affected people are transgender particularly hijra community due to sudden lockdown and Covid pandemic. The enforced restrictions of staying home resulted in unprecedented levels of widespread radical change in hijra's lifestyles and livelihoods. In this regard, the present study is going to examine the negative impact of Covid-19 and its precautionary measures on transgender/hijras life.

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Methodology

The telephonic interviews method was used by the researcher. The data was collected from transgender/hijra respondents residing in Chandigarh and Mohali region between 1st March 2021 to 22nd May 2021. The researcher was contacted with 14 respondents but five of them denied to communicate therefore the researcher final were able to get information from the 9 respondents. A brief interview was conducted with their consent. The present research is a descriptive by using case study method and narratives.

The analysis is divided in following two sections. Section-I deals with the economic impact of Covid-19 breakdown on hijras/transgender life and associated indicators and Section-II will discuss the Covid-19 impact on psychological health of hijras.

Section-I

Covid-19 Impact on Transgender/Hijra's Economic Life

The epidemic is affecting the Indian economy adversely, thereby putting economic risk over the health of countrymen by checking the physical movement of masses during the pandemic. However, the war against the deadly invisible virus has opened a battlefield for the existence of millions of daily paid workers, especially the community of transgender/hijra people. The transgender are known as hijras in India. India's Covid-19 lockdown has left hijra people at heightened risk of hunger and poverty. The transgender community is one section of India's huge informal sector whose livelihood is entirely dependent on daily wages and performance jobs, including street entertainment, begging and paid sex. The lost livelihood opportunities due to lockdown leave them vulnerable to unemployment and tragedy. The Finance Minister of India on March 26, 2020, extended a stimulus package of approximately 22 billion USD for specific vulnerable groups, including people below the poverty line, older and widowed persons, disabled, farmers and daily wage earners (Covid-19, 2020). There is no mention of transgender/hijra people as beneficiaries in any of these schemes (Choudhary, 2020). On April 29, 2020, one transgender person expired from Covid-19 in Indore (Trivedi, 2020). On May 3, 2020, Tamil Nadu reported a transgender person, the first in the state, affected by novel corona virus infection (Corona virus Outbreak Updates, 2020). Ideology is endangering transgender people from corona virus. Transgender people are considered as a stigma on the respect of the Indian patriarchal family and society.

In due course, they get rejected by the families once they are identified. Ultimately, they end up in hijra-hood. The community of hijra is socially excluded as it transgresses the general categories of the gender of 'male' and 'female,' thereby pushing them into begging or sex work. These are round the clock occupations and only source of income for them. Further, they are subjected to social exclusion, lack of education facilities, discrimination, job opportunities and medical facilities. However, those who do not get into the culture of hijra-hood and gain entry in mainstream jobs face another battle in itself in contemporary circumstances (Sonu, 2020). While the whole world combats one on one against Covid-19, once again they are excluded and ignored. According to census 2011, the total population of transgender is 4.88 Lakhs in India, and the majority of them are living in hijra community.

Social isolation, lack of healthcare support system, discrimination, and absence of daily income has left the transgender community in India distressed amid the national lockdown. The idea of social distancing and work from home has proved to be privileged. However, it has also leaved many people in hijra communities hungry and unable to sustain them. While social distancing protocols, travel restrictions, and curfews were practised to curtail the spread of coronavirus and to save lives (Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020). It is observed that several issues faced by the community of transgender people due to their lost livelihood opportunities. Approximately 2 million transgender people are estimated to be most horrible affected in India by the move taken by the government in the form of lockdown because most of them earn their livelihood on the streets (Banerji, 2020). They are not socially privileged to work within the online world as they are predominantly dependent on social interactions and functions such as weddings or baby showers. Hence, the restrictions on movement during the Covid-19 lockdown have multiplied the struggles and challenges faced by the transgender community.

The strong restrictive measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 epidemic have a substantial effect on the global economy, including an increase in the unemployment rate worldwide. Poverty hits the transgender community hard as many are already unemployed in India. Since most of them are daily-wage earners forced to earn from sex work and begging, the restrictive measures like social distancing, travel restrictions and self-isolation because of lockdown have affected them.

Food Insecurity among Transgender/Hijras

The Indian government is very less concerned about food insecurity among transgender people. Many states of India have yet not taken any step inclusive of transgender people in their schemes related to financial aid, food distribution, and welfare schemes. Transgender people face food insecurity in the wake of Covid-19. The transgender is particularly affected in covid-19 crisis because transgender is under poverty is a constant reality playing out in everyday life. Before epidemic, transgender people faced heightened barriers to food security due to longstanding issues ranging from social exclusion to lack of employment opportunities to wage gap. However, after the outbreak of Covid-19 in countrywide lockdown, transgender people are at heightened risk of hunger and poverty since most of them earn their living by begging, street performance, and sex work. One of the respondents (Santosh) that during this pandemic period nobody give as money and no one come for physical pleasure; from where I can fill my stomach and from where I get money. Another respondent Ganga a Chandigarh based transgender revealed that hijras were thrown out from their families during early childhood days and thereby do not have opportunity to go back home like other people are moving back to their home for food security at least.

In Roby's words *maiakeliraihti hu, maine 2 din tak chai bhinhi pi thi lockdown me, mere paas paise hi nhi the. Maine kai jagah try kiyaapnehijredoston se ke wo mujhekuch paise de deudhar; par paise to unkepaasbhikam hi the; agr koi denabhichahtatha to lockdown ki wajah se dene nhi aa pa rahatha; mujhe phone me paise kaiselethaimujhenhi ate or mere pass to koi bank account bhinhai; jaisetaise mere guru ne mere liye 400 rupee bhijwae or thordasarasanbhi* (I live alone and did not drink a cup of tea for 2 days during lockdown due to lack of money. I tried to beg money from my hijra friends but they have little amount for them. If any friend was ready to give money but was unable to send due to lockdown. Even I did not know how to receive money through phone or online mode; also I don't have any bank account. However my guru was manage to send me 400 rupees and some raw food). It is observed that many hijras do not have bank account and maximum of them are not educated that is the reason they are not technologically updated. They don't know how to make online payment or receive payment. In this advance and modern world the hijras are digitally backward also.

The states do not have appropriate record of transgender people in their official database. Since most of the transgender/hijra persons have left their parental homes at an early age (as mentioned earlier), they do not have their education degrees or date-of-birth proofs which are the essential documents to get an Aadhaar card. Further, many of the may not receive their transgender cards or residential proofs, which make it hard for them to get Ration cards (Choudhary, 2020). Without having the Aadhaar Card or Ration Card, as such, transgender people are disadvantaged of getting the benefits meant for the downtrodden. While interviewing a Kamali (A dera head), she narrated that maximum of the people in hijra community do not have id proofs like DL, Passport, PAN, Aadhaar, Voter ID cards, Ration card, and are eventually excluded from food security schemes of Central or State government. However, in this quarantine, the primary source of agony for the hijra community is the lack of food. Hence, if the government considers transgender individuals as poor people and classify the murder below poverty line and other welfare schemes, then they can fare better.

Section II

Psychological Impact on Hijras life of Covid-19

The good psychological health and Stress-free life is very important for the growth of any human being in each stage from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. If one lives with happiness and have good quality to manage his mental stress; so he can live happy without any problem. If one is living with high stress; it may lead to many other problems. Hijras are suffering from many psychological health problems like stress and depression. The lack of social support, familial support and ambiguous identity creates strain and mental health problems. They face several issues like fear, shame, fear of relationship lose etc. they are remaining permanently in anxiety; the fight within the family and teasing outside leads their life into stress, depression and fear (Sonu, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic is seen as the biggest health crisis. The transgender are also suffering from this pandemic and its protective measures; the sudden lockdown impacted on the hijras psychological health. Transgender are already suffering from many mental issues such as isolation, depression, stress, lowliness etc due to exclusion. The Covid-19 and its protective measure such as home isolation and quarantine make their condition more vulnerable. They are more stressed, more depressed and much psychologically disturbed. Kajal (hijra respondent) reveal that we hijras are alone nobody looking at us and nobody is bothering how we are managing food. It has been observed that food insecurity create fear of die hungry among hijras.

This brings into light the existing social stigma against transgender people. The fear of stigmatization in the hands of healthcare professionals discourages transgender people from accessing healthcare amenities, which push them away from reporting the symptoms for Covid-19. There is an absolute stigma in the healthcare system. If they face the symptoms of Covid-19, they prefer remaining silent. In Deepka's words "*hum hijron me corona keluxandikhai de to hame testkarne k liye doctors muskil se hi ate hai phone karne k baad bhi or agr corona report positive aa jae to hameghar me raihne k liye hi kaha jatahaichahekithibhi emergency kyonna ho. Ye bol k beds ki kami hai.* (If Covid symptoms identified, hardly doctors come to us for Covid test after a phone call. If identified Covid report positive then they suggest us remain in the home in spite of medical emergency. They say that beds are not available)".

The suspected cases and confirmed hijra patients perhaps suffer the most in feeling stigmatized by the community and society. In Ganga's words *agar kishijre ko corona ho jae to log use ek stigma samjhtehai or uski recovery ho jane k baad bhiusse koi baatnhikarta or dartehai, yahantak ki apnehijre log bhiussedartehaikahindusrehijron ko corona naho jae* (If a hijra suffering from corona virus it is considered as stigma. After his recovery still nobody talks and felt afraid of him. Even their own hijra people do not talk and felt afraid of him. The hijras assumed that the recovered hijra may spread the corona virus). It has been observed that they loss freedom and feel helplessness. They are suffering from acute psychological stress and exhaustion which may lead to suicidal tendencies.

From time immemorial people belonging to *hijra* community face a wide variety of discriminatory barriers in enjoying full equality. Even sometimes these people face difficulties in meeting their one of the most important basic needs that is health care. They do not access the medical facility in the country. *Hijras* are alienated and ruining their health due to lack of medical facilities and negligence of health staff; still, they are not accessible to medical facilities (Sonu, 2020).

Conclusion

The entire world is passing through great uncertainty. There is major challenge that to save the country from the spread of Corona virus, which is a health emergency. The saving lives are the principal concern of the Indian government. However, it is observed transgender people are excluded as always. They are dying of hunger and suffering from psychological stress still society does not bother about them. The health system of India does not consider the transgender life is more important than any male or female. Even government do not consider them while making policies or scheme even in this pandemic situation. The moot question is where the transgender/hijra people go for their food security at least in this epidemic situation.

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