

Contextualizing the Socio-Psychological Consequences of First Covid-19 Wave: A Gendered Perspective

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In February 2020, the unexpected first wave of Covid-19 reached Pakistan and posed multiple challenges for the country's overall population. Nevertheless, the most affected remained the female segment because of already entrenched patriarchy and orthodox forces, who even otherwise socio-culturally place women in a second fiddle role, confining them to limited space. This study is particularly designed to understand the immediate social, emotional, and psychological challenges Punjabi women of Pakistan faced after the first wave of coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown. For this, a survey of 62 literate females from different social classes residing in urban Punjab is conducted. The research concludes that the pandemic primarily created anxiety and depression among females across their social status and cultural backgrounds. The main causes remained the sudden announcement of the lockdown, unemployment of many males and/or females, and restricted social activities during Covid-19.

Keywords: Covid-19, women, socio-psychological consequences

The first wave of novel Covid-19 has been reported in Wuhan city of China in December 2019, which rapidly spread worldwide. The virus not only posed challenges for developed nations with relatively organized and equipped health departments like America and European countries but also affected the health sector of developing countries like Pakistan, which have limited resources and weak structures. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 is a health emergency, which has also shaken up the socio-economic structures, with worse psychological consequences for societies like Pakistan, which already has a fragile economy and gender bias social network. According to

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the WHO report, from 3 January 2020 to 28 January 2022, the confirmed cases of Covid-19 were 1,393,887 with 29,162 deaths in Pakistan ([World Health Organization, 2022](#)).

In this environment, the most vulnerable are the female gender, who, despite their 49% share in the population, already face an acute level of discrimination and under-representation in nearly all fields of life. Their vulnerability increased further during the unexpected first wave of Covid-19, as their already curtailed mobility and marginal economic opportunities further shrunk. Studies are available on the impact of Covid-19 on the financial and psychological status of Pakistani female entrepreneurs and health care practitioners. The findings conclude the negative influence of the sudden lockdown after the pandemic on women entrepreneurs running small businesses and their dealing strategies ([Afshan et al., 2021](#); [Mustafa et al., 2021](#)). The impact of this pandemic on women's physical and mental health is also the most debated aspect in literature. The particular focus of such studies remained the mental health of postgraduate trainees, senior trainees, and front-line workers dealing with Covid-19 patients ([Imran et al., 2021](#)). Although the pandemic posed severe health risks for women, the most vulnerable remained pregnant women ([Rauf et al., 2021](#)).

After analyzing the literature, this research particularly aims to debate women's socio-psychological challenges during the first wave of Covid-19 in the Punjab province of Pakistan. To investigate the pandemic's socio-psychological impact on women is a delicate attempt as the curtailment of their already limited mobility and total confinement to homes posed various challenges for them in the domestic environment. In this regard, most relevant are the two feminist approaches to psychology, the relational-cultural theory, and the moral development theory. [Miller's \(1976\)](#) relational-cultural theory from a gender perspective stresses that healthy relationships are highly significant for individuals, and any disruption in such associations becomes a reason for psychological challenges. [Gilligan's \(1993\)](#) moral development theory focuses on the difference between men's and women's approaches to life decisions and asserted that men are more legal in their approach. In contrast, women are more moral and ethical and thus are comparatively more inclined towards the element of care in their familial and otherwise associations. Keeping in view these two theories, before investigating the socio-psychological impact of the first wave of Covid-19, it is essential to understand the women's agency within their family relations in Pakistani culture, across rural-urban settings, and the social class divides. In this context, women's placement is studied

through their family structure and pattern, both within their own families and in-laws. The familial relationship in Pakistani society is largely influenced by two dominant variables: patriarchy and religious interpretations (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). These two components are widely used to stress female responsibilities, either married or unmarried, towards their families, within the rural /urban household environment by keeping aside their individual capacities and choices. Such role definition visualizes women in a specific character, where the household chores, including bearing and rearing children, taking care of elder relatives, and maintenance of a partner, are perceived as a sole responsibility of a female, irrespective of their academic and professional achievements and demands. In contrast, the participation of male family members in such tasks is commonly perceived as a favor, instead of equal participation by a partner (Awan, 2020).

While confirming this perspective about gender roles, a report on working women of Pakistan explains that the women in this society receive respect first by accepting all decisions made by their husband and in-laws. Secondly, their skills in household chores (housekeeping, cooking, caring for children) make them respectable wives or daughters; good cooking skills and raising children well are seen as particularly important. Thirdly, women earn respect by showing good faith and practicing religion seriously (Oxfam, 2019). This pre-determined standard to judge women's value in society hardly approve their academic or professional achievements. With this sociocultural expectation from women, the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 posed various challenges for the female gender in the domestic sphere.

The first challenge Pakistani women faced in this pandemic concerning education are to see the impact of Covid-19 on female education in Pakistan. Malala Fund Education (2020), with the help of the Education Champion Network, surveyed 1,598 households in July and August 2020. According to its report, 22.8 million children are out-of-school in Pakistan. Of these, 53% (13.4 million) are girls, which show that the pandemic widened the literacy gap between male and female education. The most affected are girls from underprivileged and rural backgrounds, as when it comes to preference, male education is preferred over a female child. Women's second issue during the first wave of the pandemic was unemployment. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics report (2020), the working population who faced job loss or income decrease during Covid-19- was 49% (58% urban, 43% rural). In Punjab, the financially affected were 48%, and those who either lost their jobs or could not work were 37%, resulting in the province's income decreasing to 10%. Important to mention is that the pandemic wave

further affected the female labor force in a country that was already 24.2% compared to 79.7 % of males (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The real victim of this situation was the women associated with an informal economy (home-based, domestic, sanitary, care workers, etc.). The absence of job security arrangements made them more vulnerable because of the sudden lock-down.

The third issue was the compulsive homestay of the employed population. After lockdown, the employed men and women start working from home. The working wives, who previously received help in the shape of a maid to meet family expectations regarding household tasks, now had to work from home besides fulfilling the house-related daily chores. This situation became worse for those women who were already dealing with estranged husbands and difficult in-laws as the compulsive homestay, in many cases, caused friction in relations. For such women, to go out for work was a relief. While narrating the story of many such women, Ahmed and Bugti (2020) deliberated that single working women suffered the height of economical and emotional plight during the first wave of Covid 19.

The compulsory stay-at-home with estranged family members caused violence in some cases. According to the Sustainable Social Development Organization (2020) reported increased incidences in cases of domestic violence; while writing about women's conditions during the lockdown, the findings of a lawyer, who has been dealing with domestic violence cases explained that the lockdowns and enforced social distancing have trapped women and children in the home with their abusers, drastically limiting their options for support (Malkani, 2020). The situation worsened because of the stay-at-home state policy, as the women victims could not involve their families and community members for immediate solutions because of mobility restrictions. Thus, the pandemic particularly increased the challenges for women already dealing with abusive partners.

Rationale

Covid-19 posed serious challenges for both the male and female gender, but the most affected remained the female section of society because of already entrenched patriarchy and biased socio-cultural structures. This study was to understand the economic and less-debated socio-psychological challenges of urban women during the first Covid-19 wave through the survey responses of employed/unemployed educated females residing in urban Punjab, which in terms of population is the largest province of Pakistan.

Method

For this study, a mixed-method approach was adopted, which helped to investigate the socio-psychological and economic impact of Covid-19 on urban women of Punjab qualitatively as well as through basic statistical analysis of survey responses (Creswell, 1999). Thus, quantitative, and qualitative methods were adopted to answer the research questions. To develop background information on this subject matter, the qualitative content analysis technique was used (Schreier, 2012). The qualitative content analysis of already published work helped raise questions, which were investigated through the cross-sectional survey and administered at a single point in time (Kesmodel, 2018).

Sample

For this research, the purposive sampling technique is used. The online survey through this technique was emailed to respondents. In this phase, the sample ($N = 62$) included literate women aged 18 to 60 years, who had access to the internet and resided in urban Punjab. The sample was accessed with the help of students enrolled in different courses of Political Science at Forman Christian College University, Lahore. There were 43 single and 19 married women out of those 27 were employed, while 35 were unemployed. Most participants were living in nuclear family setting ($n = 46$); while others were residing in extended family setup ($n = 16$). Educational qualification of respondents included matric ($n = 3$), intermediate ($n = 19$); graduate ($n = 17$), and post-graduation ($n = 23$).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The survey questionnaire was emailed in the English language. Those who could not understand the questions were provided help to translate the questionnaire into Urdu for clarity. Those who did not answer the emails or refused the response through their replies were excluded from the sample. The incomplete submissions were also excluded from the sample.

Instrument

The survey questionnaire was comprised of 18 questions, including 16 closed and 2 open-ended questions of explanatory nature. The questionnaire had three sections. The first two sections were designed using a nominal scale and analyzed using quantitative

analytical techniques, while the two open-ended questions at the end were analyzed qualitatively. The first section of the survey questionnaire comprised the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including age, marital and social status, occupation, family structure, qualification, and household income. The second section of the quantitative survey questionnaire intended to collect data regarding confronted socio-psychological and financial challenges for literate women residing in urban areas of Punjab after the first wave of Covid-19. There were 9 questions in this section. The first question was to understand the gravity of confronted problems about the type of problems they believe were increased for them after the pandemic. The answers provided were *social, financial, emotional, don't know*. The second question was indirect as mostly the respondents would be reluctant to share their personal life experiences. Therefore, they were asked, have they witnessed any domestic violence incidents in their locality. The answers provided were *yes, no, don't know*. The third question was about the nature of the challenges they faced while dealing with family members at home during the pandemic. The answers provided were *psychological, financial, emotional, don't know*. The structure of questions in this section also helped in distinguishing the challenges women faced from those of men. For this, first, the respondents were asked whether they think women were more affected by this pandemic than men. The answers provided were *agree, disagree and don't know*. Second, they were asked about receiving help from their male family members with household chores. The answers provided were *regularly, often, no, don't know*. Third such question was, in dealing with whom they felt more challenged? The answers provided were *male members of family, children, female members of family, don't know*.

The third section of the same survey questionnaire was based on open-ended questions that were analyzed using the narrative analysis technique (Lawler, 2008). The purpose was to allow respondents to explain their additional thoughts specific to their context in response to open-ended questions. They were asked which challenges they faced after the spread of Covid-19. This question helped them share their sentiments and feelings in more detail. These three sections helped to understand the challenges faced by women in domestic and public domains during the first pandemic wave.

Procedure

The respondents were informed about the nature of the research beforehand, and the questionnaire was emailed to them after their consent. The anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the

process. The survey was circulated and collected between February and March 2020.

Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed in Excel and the results are depicted through pie charts in the discussion section. The analysis and discussion are based on the trends represented in these figures. In Pakistan, although the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 affected both males and females, however, compared to men, the confronted challenges for women were more severe. The reasons for more effect of a pandemic on females have already been debated above. This contention is also supported by the survey below.

Figure 1

As compared to men, do you think women are more affected by this pandemic?

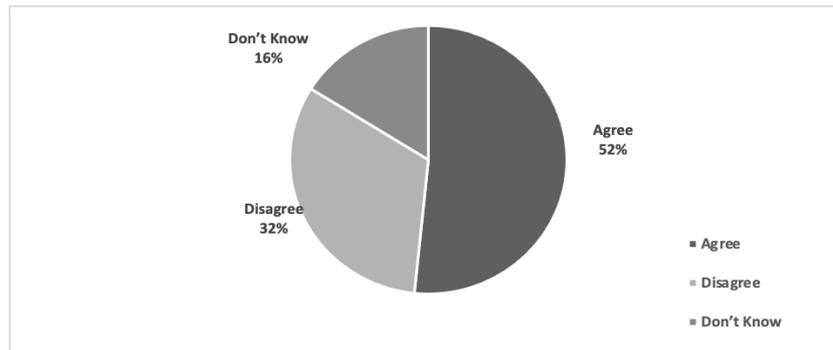


Figure 1 shows that 52% of respondents believe the pandemic affects women of all ages more than men. As hinted in previous segments, in an emergency, many reasons ranging from the patriarchal socio-cultural environment to religious explanations exert pressure on women more than men. One of the glaring examples of increased challenges for women in the domestic environment is abuse. As discussed above, the lockdown conditioned male and female members to stay at home, which caused friction between already estranged couples. According to the statistics of the [Punjab Safe City Authority \(2021\)](#), from January to May 2020, they received 13,478 calls for domestic violence on their emergency helpline 15 from the province, which is higher than the cases registered cases last year. In 2019, 12,312 domestic abuse cases were reported ([Khatri, 2020](#)). This comparison shows that the domestic abuse and violence incidents

increased significantly after pandemic. In response to an open-ended survey question, “Which challenges personally you faced after the spread of Covid-19?”, one of the respondents mentioned:

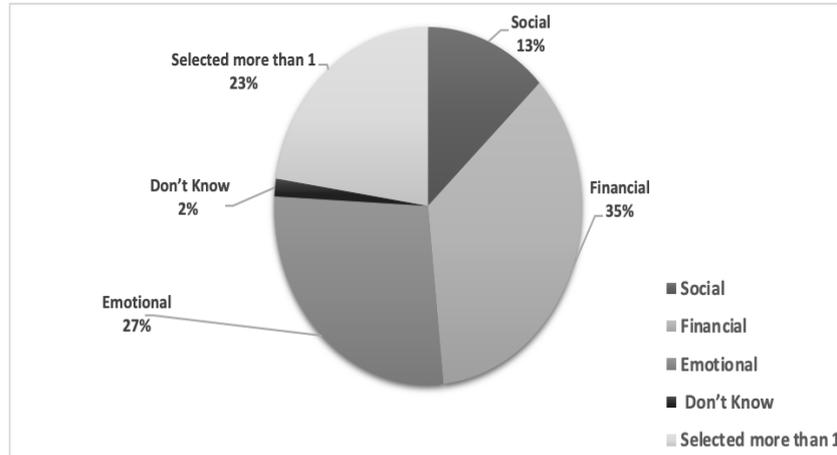
My husband has been abusive in the past, but he became violent again during this pandemic. He was not earning much from his business, so he borrowed money, contributing to his bad temperament. He was always in a bad mood. He severely beat me, which pushed me to leave his home.

An in-depth interview base study on increased violence against rural women of Islamabad and Rawalpindi during the pandemic concludes, “... men's violent behavior and controlling attitude against women is on the rise due COVID-19 lockdown. The households with the menace of unemployment and low income are affected most” (Munir et al., 2021, p. 243). While writing about the pandemic's effect on the world, particularly on Pakistani women, Bukhari and Manzoor write those women faced domestic violence despite society considering home to be the safest place for females. The aftereffect of the “stay at home” policy was most dangerous for women and young girls as they had no choice but to deal with abuse. Being isolated from the community, they had no way to ask for help (Bukhari & Manzoor, 2020). It has been noticed that the economic base disparity between males and females along with cultural constraints together make women vulnerable whenever it comes to natural calamities like Covid-19. The effect of natural disasters on females is different from men. Neumayer and Plümper (2007) asserted that gender differences along biological, social, and normative indicators would differently restrict the behaviors of men and women, emergent resource shortages and the temporary breakdown of social order may influence the mortality rate of people.

However, the analysis of male and female hardships during Covid-19 determined that men physically while women psychologically were more affected. This psychological bearing was comparatively severe for women in South Asian societies like Pakistan, where women's mobility is already a restricted phenomenon. Although the compulsory homestay posed a challenge for those women, who were already living in a hostile home environment, at the same time, by default, it saved them from being affected. When women were questioned about their most confronted problems during the unexpected first wave, 35% mentioned financial crunch as the most severe issue they encountered during the first wave.

Figure 2

What type of problems do you believe have increased for you after the pandemic?



In Figure 2, 27% shared emotional challenges, while 23% selected more than one option, financial and emotional difficulties during a pandemic. It is relevant to mention that the financial and emotional abuse of employed and unemployed women during the pandemic has different dynamics. While sharing about the financial difficulties, a respondent who lost her job during Covid-19 shared:

COVID-19 has brought financial and psychological challenges for me. I had to quit my job soon after the few cases were reported. The lockdown was announced, and I could neither visit my office for clearance nor apply anywhere else until today. The companies are not hiring new employees. I couldn't even get freelance work. It has affected me badly that I am going through spells of anxiety. It is tough to do nothing and run out of all your savings as a working woman.

Apart from facing financial challenges, unemployed women, both married and unmarried, faced uncertainty. After the pandemic, apart from fulfilling household responsibilities, the housewives dealt with either employed men working from home or jobless partners with financial constraints. Both situations had their bearing. In the first case, women constantly felt pressure to fulfill the demands of their men at home, who consider the household chores the sole responsibility of women. This condition worsened when domestic workers, in most cases, stopped coming for house help because of the

lockdown. While writing the ordeal of this situation, one of the respondents mentioned:

The help for domestic work is unavailable during the pandemic, and it is challenging to handle house chores without maids. Kids have their online classes. It is challenging to administer kids and household responsibilities of cleaning, cooking, and washing.

Although women of all strata were affected by the pandemic in one way or another, but the ordeal of illiterate and unemployed women was more serious, especially when their partners also became jobless. These issues together created a tense environment at home for the whole family. While writing about the confronted challenges, one of the married uneducated house-wife shared:

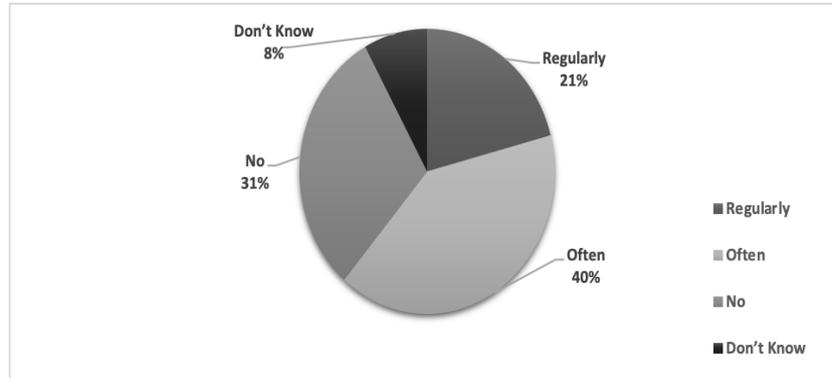
My husband works at a workshop. Due to lockdown, his work has been affected. His income is not sufficient to fulfill the household needs. Moreover, being illiterate, I am unable to teach children at home. Schools are closed, and my children's studies are seriously affected. They keep fighting each other, which puts an extra burden on me.

During the pandemic, although the above-mentioned confronted problems and challenges of housewives, either educated or illiterate, were manifold but the life of employed women working from home was even not less demanding. Along with working from home, they had to perform household chores like taking care of children. In a society where other family members, including husbands, do not acknowledge women's job-related responsibilities, this "new normal" posed a severe challenge for working daughters, wives, and mothers. While [Zakaria \(2021\)](#) narrated about the condition of employed women during the pandemic and concluded that work from home is more difficult for women and performing work duties during work hours. These women find themselves forced to watch children and also be available for Zoom calls or other work interactions

Confronting these challenges, when women were asked whether they received help in their household chores, they gave exciting responses, as depicted in Figure 3. Only 21% of women receive regular support from their male family members; however, 40% receive help occasionally. Interesting to note is the percentage of 31%, which shows that these women do not receive support from male family members in household chores.

Figure 3

Are you receiving help from the male family members in household chores?



It is essential to mention here that in a rural setup, the practice of sharing the burden of household responsibilities with the female family members hardly exists, considering it an exclusive domain of women. While writing about this gender-based role division, [Abrar et al. \(2019\)](#) stated that under patriarchal ideology about division of work, women are responsible for work at homes, while men are eligible for public sphere means more power, more money, better status, freedom and more opportunities for growth and self-worth. Although, overall, the weak participation of men in household chores is because of the socio-cultural environment; however, it cannot be overlooked that comparatively, the patriarchy is more robust in rural set-up. Thus, the participation of male family members in household chores is not commonly observed as it portrays a weak position of a man in the house environment.

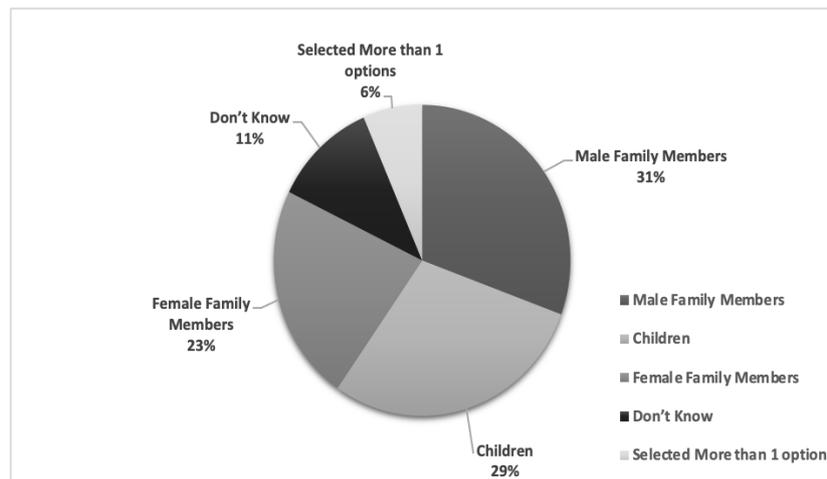
A survey-base study further confirms the non-participatory role of a male partner in household chores mentioning:

... to contribute in most household chores, especially washing clothes or cleaning the house; it was quite rare for a man to clean the toilet. Although a clear majority of respondents reported their fathers did take care of them and their siblings, this care took the form of playing with the children or taking them out; it did not involve tasks like changing diapers or clothes. We may infer that most respondents grew up in an environment where gender norms dictated a skewed division of household work between male and female members ([Ashfaq et al., 2018](#)).

Another reason for the less participation of male members in household chores is their masculinity, which they believe would be questioned if they participate in household work, which is usually a feminine domain. Thus, for them, being involved in home chores is feminine (Andrade, 2021; Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). When a question was asked that during the pandemic, who posed them more challenges at home, women gave intriguing responses, as 31% faced problems in dealing with male family members. In comparison, 29 % faced difficulty with children. As shown in Figure 4, most male family members were non-participatory, but their approach was also non-cooperative towards their female family members during the pandemic.

Figure 4

In dealing with whom do you feel more challenged?

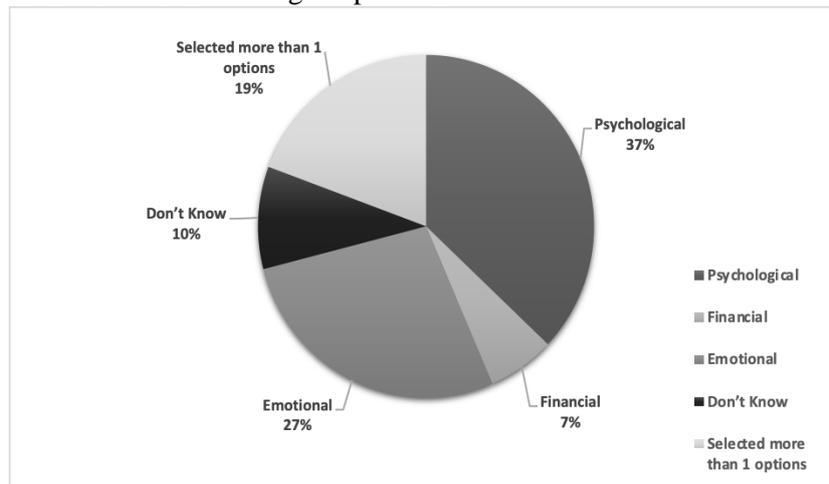


Another critical factor that multiplied women's challenges during Covid-19 was an absence of an outlet for women because of the lockdown. It further psychologically drained them. Although social media connects people but, it is hardly a replacement for physical human interaction. Important to note is that in Pakistan, men use more smartphones and the internet than women, which means women are less connected with friends and family than men. According to GMSA field base report, 50% of women and 81% of men own mobile phones, whereas women use 49% less mobile internet than men. Smartphone ownership in men is 37%, whereas, in women, it is 20 % (Shanahan, 2021). These percentages show a considerable gap in technology usage between males and females. Despite owning smartphones, the

weak socialization of women further isolated them during the pandemic. When women were questioned about their challenges while dealing with family members, they gave interesting responses, as depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

What type of challenges do you face while dealing with family members at home during the pandemic?



The percentage of Psychological and emotional challenges is higher than financial. However, 19% selected two options, psychological and financial. The severity of these two challenges is mentioned by a respondent in one as follows:

I am already an anxiety patient. The pandemic increased my illness and resulted in panic attacks. In addition to this, I lost my job. I was bearing my study expenses on my own. I belong to a middle-class family. Apart from confronting financial issues, I find it challenging to deal with my family. These were the main challenges I faced doing the lockdown.

Apart from dealing with the burden of online classes, the female university students felt themselves under extreme pressure, especially those who were already dealing with an economic crunch and working part-time or had a history of psychological problems. While sharing such challenges, another respondent, who was a student, shared:

I live in Model Town Extension, Lahore. The major challenge is financial, as my university fee with tax is high, leaving me with less cash in hand to spend on other necessities. Online classes make it hard for me to focus because, in on-campus studies, the academic environment encourages students to study, but in

virtual classes, focusing on studies is a real challenge. Without a proper academic environment, I feel demotivated.

The uncertainty of the situation demotivated people, especially women who already face challenges because of conservative patriarchal structures. While sharing the impact of physical isolation on mental well-being, another respondent shared:

I have faced psychological problems because of uncertainty and the absence of emotional support. I cannot go out and meet my friends. The whole situation stresses me out.

In this environment of fear and uncertainty, older women with some history of illness altogether faced different challenges. Therefore, the level of stress and anxiety among old age people during the pandemic was most severe. Apart from taking care of their health, they had to keep themselves away from social family gatherings, which affected their mental health as one of the senior female citizens shared:

I feel isolated as my kids cannot visit me. My old age has also restricted my mobility. I can't meet my married daughter and her children because we must stay home during a pandemic for safety.

Another respondent shared the effect of the pandemic on the financial and psychological situation as follows:

I, myself, had to face financial and psychological issues. I am an old woman. I have to visit my doctor for regular medical checkups. After Covid, I was unable to visit my doctor for a follow-up. One more thing that has bothered me is my youngest daughter's health. She had open-heart surgery, and the situation after the pandemic has made her recovery slow.

The responses mentioned above in close and open-ended questions indicate challenges for the female population, no matter to which social class they belong, where they live, and in which age bracket they are grouped.

Limitations and Recommendations

The data collection process for this research faced various limitations. First was the weak response of participants. The data was emailed during the complete lockdown. The sudden change in the living style because of the lockdown and restricted mobility created an

environment of uncertainty, reflected in slow responses. The psychological and physical pressure from the sudden pandemic outbreak also contributed to the weak responses. The online classes for students and work-from-home for professional women created pressure for those who also had home responsibilities. Another reason for the slow response was the increased reliance on the internet, causing weak internet signals and slow speed in some areas. Thus the process of receiving and returning the questionnaire faced interruption. A more diverse sample incorporating the women living in rural Punjab will reflect the comprehensive understanding of the confronted challenges under study. Moreover, future researchers are also recommended to ask in-depth questions from the men, which would help to establish the relation between the pandemic and gender so that the comprehensive analysis is drawn from more than one lens.

Implications

The study highlights the immediate impact of the pandemic on urban women of Punjab from various dimensions, including social, psychological, and economical. This research could be a guideline for future researchers interested in investigating the gender dimension of pandemics in general and Covid-19 in particular. The responses gathered through this research have highlighted firsthand information about women's feelings/sentiments and shared real stories during the first wave. The unique aspect of this research is that it was designed at a time when there was no study available on this topic, and people were dealing with unimagined and invisible threats to their lives.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the socio-psychological consequences of the first Covid-19 wave on women in Pakistan concludes that during such pandemic, the already prevalent cultural gender discrimination plays a significant role in posing multiple challenges for women of all strata. However, the most affected were those women who were academically and financially weak and, therefore, could not properly cope with the centuries-old discriminatory behavior and norms. This pandemic proved to be an eye-opener. It unveiled the profoundly entrenched gender discrimination even within the four walls of homes. This gender-specific discrimination is a social phenomenon; thus, mere women-friendly laws could hardly bring much change. What is needed is a solid social policy that can challenge the stereotype mentality. After the training at home, the gender-neutral curriculum in

schools and colleges is the only way to eliminate gender bias attitudes, practices, and expectations. Unless societal biases against the female gender are not addressed at all levels, women will remain in a disadvantageous position during unexpected situations, whether pandemic or civil strife.

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