

Social Construction of Distance and Discrimination during COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19, the biggest crisis of our generation is affecting our life adversely, has its root from China. Now we are facing a global crisis. Till date we know that lakhs of people worldwide have already lost their precious life due to this deadly virus and crores of people are already infected. As the spread of corona virus is at its peak in our country, the number of corona patients is above 11 lakhs. It can be said that corona virus has a very high chance of faster spread in India as the country's population is very high which leads to high population density and due to the high foreign and internal travel of the people has created a favorable condition for this virus to spread. This article tries to address the discrimination which the patient, their family members and COVID warriors has to face in their day to day life. The article tries to point out the relationship between social distance and discrimination in this crucial time of corona virus. It can be seen that the COVID-19 patients as well as the health workers, sanitary workers and the police men those who can be seen to be in the frontline for management of this outbreak are facing a lot of discrimination because of the fear, misconception and misinformation about the infection. Even the people who have already recovered from COVID-19 have to face discrimination and negligence from the other people living in the society. People are having a fear that they might get themselves infected with the virus if they come in contact with the patients who are already discharged, having a doubt that the recovered patients are not completely well or healthy. There are many cases where the recovered patients are ill-treated; avoided, boycotted by their neighbors, relatives and even in the society they are living in. It is seen that some people starts blaming the COVID patients for infecting and creating a risk for the life of other. This types of behavior and attitude of the people creates a lot of mental disturbances, distress and guilt among them leading to serious mental illness or depression. With a fear of getting discriminated and boycotted from others some COVID-19 positive patients has taken extreme steps to end their life by committing suicide. We know that Corona virus can be avoided if we maintain physical distance with each other. It is very much needed to maintain a gap or distance among each other. But now, the situation is so adverse that the people following social distancing have started making emotional distancing from COVID-19 positive patients and their family members which is creating a mental stress among them. It should be lessened so that they can fight against corona virus effectively. Although till now there is no proper vaccines and medicine available for the treatment of corona virus. Social distancing is the only weapon to keep ourselves, our family, friends, and relatives healthy. It should be maintained and followed seriously. The negligence of people in maintaining proper steps to control COVID-19 can cause worsening the situation, resulting in loss of many lives. Due to this epidemic, the world is not the same, as it was before. It has changed a lot forcing us to change our life as well. In this time of global crisis we should come forward to provide a positive, healthy, friendly attitude towards the COVID patients and even the COVID warriors. At this time when patients are fighting all the odds to get their life safe from the corona virus, we should at least try to have sympathetic and supportive feeling and attitude towards them. This paper is an attempt to address the discrimination which the patients, their family members and COVID-19 warriors have to face in their everyday life. Further, the task is to understand the relationship between social distance and discrimination.

Keywords: Social Construction, Disease, Discrimination, COVID-19.

Introduction

The entire world is struggling with the global outbreak of novel Corona Virus (COVID- 19) characterized by social distance and fear of death declared as pandemic by World Health Organisation which has made everything made

upside down. However, it has serious consequences not only towards life but also to the overall wellbeing of the human existence. Novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) which is said to be originated from China has now rapidly crossed borders, infecting the people throughout the world. World Health Organization (WHO) announced corona virus to be a disease on 11th February 2020. WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). It is a respiratory disease which impacts the health of the individual as a whole and in some extreme cases it results in the death of the person infected with it.

The first case of COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan city of central province of China. It is said that a cluster of 40 cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology was reported in some of the patients being the vendors and dealers in the Human Seafood market there in the month of December 2019. As of 25th July 2020, more than 15.7 million cases have been reported across 188 countries and territories, resulting in more than 639,000 deaths. More than 9.05 million people have recovered. The very common symptoms of corona virus are fever, cough, fatigue, shortness of breath and loss of smell and taste. In majority of cases it results in mild symptoms but in some cases it progresses to acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) which further results in cytokine storm, multi-organ failure, septic shock and blood clots. The time from exposure to onset of symptoms ranges from 5 to 14 days. The virus is usually spread between people during the close contact by small droplets produced by coughing, sneezing and talking. Transmission may also happen through small droplets usually falling on the ground or on to the surfaces and the people may become infected by touching a contaminated surface and then touching their face. The very recommended measures to prevent infection includes frequent hand washing, maintaining physical distance from others (especially for those with symptoms), quarantine (especially from those with symptoms), covering coughs, and keeping unwashed hands away from the face. The use of cloth face coverings such as a scarf has been recommended by health officials in public settings to minimize the risk of transmission.

Corona virus pandemic is affecting adversely in many aspects of our lives in this global village. COVID-19 is infecting indiscriminately, which is reminding us about the principle of equality. It is infecting people from all classes whether that of rich or poor, black or white, privileged or unprivileged regardless to status, health, wealth and caste. It can be said that every state of the nation is dealing with corona virus cases, different states across the country are experiencing disparate impact of the outbreak. The number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Maharashtra followed by Delhi and Tamil Nadu is increasing in an alarming rate with every passing day. It is creating a pressure to the government to handle the situation effectively. Government has started a lot of awareness programmes relating to COVID-19 transmission and treatment so that the fear, misconception, anxiety and confusion among the

general public can be reduced. As COVID-19 is a new disease and is having the most devastating effects globally, it is creating a feeling of fear and hatred towards the patients of corona virus leading to stigmatization. Today COVID-19 has resulted in to be a public health emergency. History has shown that public health emergencies often lead to stigma and discrimination to certain communities and groups or affected person. India is facing the biggest health emergency since the country has gained independence. The corona virus has brought chaos to lives and economics not only to our country but to the whole world. This phenomenon has led to provide a massive public reaction, the media has been reporting continuously across borders to keep all informed about the pandemic situation. All these things are creating a lot of concern for people leading to heightened levels of anxiety. Pandemic can lead to high level of stress. The outbreak of COVID-19 has greatly affected the free movement of people all over the world; a lot of restrictions are imposed on them. Now people are required to stay at home and maintain social distance so as to keep themselves and other, safe and healthy. In order to control the spread of this infection, a lockdown initiative was taken so that the chain of the transmission can be broken. But during this lockdown, we saw how the pandemic was leading to new forms of social solidarity. Due to the lockdown, the free movement of people within and outside the country was completely restricted. In order to keep ourselves safe from this infection, people are needed to remain in their house. It can be said that half of the planet is isolated under lockdown; the world's economy is going downwards alarmingly with each passing day. It created a feeling of isolation and depression.

Social distance

In sociology, social distance describes the distance between different groups in society, such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender or sexuality. Members of different groups mix less than members of the group. It is the measure of nearness or intimacy that an individual or group feels towards another individual or group in a social network or the level of trust one group has for another and the extent of perceived likeness of beliefs. Robert E. Park defined social distance as "an attempt to reduce to something like measurable terms the grade and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterizes personal and social relations generally". Social distancing is a non-pharmaceutical infection, prevention and control intervention implemented to avoid or decrease contact between those who are infected with a disease causing pathogens and those who are not, so as to stop or slow down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community. This eventually leads to decrease in spread, morbidity and mortality due to this disease. The practice of social distancing means staying at home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent spread of COVID-19.

Government with the help of various local bodies and NGOs is trying to create awareness among the general public about maintaining social

distance in order to save others and even one's own precious life. Since corona virus is a new disease, no proper vaccines is available the only way to slowing down the spread of this infection is social distancing. Social distancing is very much needed for controlling the speed of the infection among the people. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to increase in a faster rate across the globe, social distancing interventions like that of school closures, event cancellations, telework, home isolation and physical separation are becoming common thing. Now a day the practice of social distancing encourages the use of things such as online video and phone communication instead of in- person contact.

Due to this pandemic the government has provided restrictions on the social gathering of people with limited number of people for any social events like that of marriage, festivals, rally and conferences. If any violation is found, strict legal action is been taken by law. However it is not easy to make it follow or compulsory for all the people living in the society. As the people are sometimes bound to come out of their house in order to fulfill their day to day needs like that of going to the market for purchasing vegetables, fruits, grocery or some other things. It is very difficult to maintain a safe distance among each other. Social distancing is a vital public health intervention because it is a measure available to slow the rate of infection and reduce the rate of mortality in the early phases of a pandemic when treatment is unavailable or in low supply. Social distancing can also have deep social impacts, particularly for people who are already marginalized and stigmatized. It is seen that with the fear of getting one self infected with this disease they starts distancing not only physically but also emotionally. This results in creating a mental distress, loneliness, and emotional tensions among them. Social Distance in form of lockdown is deeply having negative psychological impact on people. This global pandemic and the ensuring crisis are causing stress and anxiety beyond imagination. It is creating a fertile breeding ground for mental health concerns like anxiety disorders, depression, sleep and eating disorders, addiction and obsessive Compulsive Disorders (ODCs). Distancing is clashing with the deep seated human instinct to connect with others. Crowded living environments may also affect the implementation of preventive measures such as social distancing. Social connection helps people to regulate emotions, cope with stress, isolation worsen the burden of stress and often produce deleterious effects on mental, cardiovascular and immune health. Distancing threatens to aggravate feelings of loneliness and could produce negative long-term health consequences. The word "Social distancing" is providing wrong message and contribution to social isolation. Instead of using the word "social distancing", "physical distancing" should be used, as in this time of global crisis we need to be emotionally connected with each other so as to fight against this infection together.

In real terms, Physical distancing is the practice of staying at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching a disease such as COVID-19. Physical

distancing gives more importance of maintaining of physical space when in public areas. The distance required for minimizing the spread of virus is "physical distance" or "safe distance". Physical distance must be maintained among them but the people should remain socially and emotionally connected to their loved ones and family. Public health expert advice that, in the interest of mental health and well-being, we all can make efforts to feel connected, emotionally and socially to others during this unprecedented time and ways to stay in touch with others. Ways to stay in touch with others include video chats, phone calls and via social media.

Discrimination

With Discrimination comes stigmatization, they are like two sides of the same coin. Discrimination means a person who receives a less favourable treatment and it contributes to placing the groups of people at systematic disadvantage with respect to their health status. Discrimination towards patients is the behavioral response of prejudice, and can be understood in terms of social processes of power and domination with groups, which serve to devalue the stigmatized. Stigma is discrimination against an identifiable group of people, a place, or a nation. Stigma can be defined as a mark of disgrace that sets a person apart from others. Social stigma (e.g discrimination and devaluation by others) has a variety of negative consequences that inhibit recovery, such as shame, embarrassment and the "why try" phenomenon. Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association related to people or group who has a specific disease in common. In an epidemic, this may mean that people are labeled, stereotyped, and discriminated against because of a perceived link to the epidemic. This is even more true when dealing with a highly contagious disease. Stigma is associated with lack of knowledge about how COVID-19 spreads, needs to blame someone, fears about disease and deaths, and gossips that spreads rumors and myths. It can be said that fear is the breeding ground for hatred and stigma. The fear of getting stigmatized makes the people to hide their illness and not seek health care. In the time of widespread use of social media, false myths along with fake news around corona are also spreading rapidly. Firstly, stigmatization and discrimination can substantially increase the suffering of people with disease. Secondly, people with the disease or those at the risk of catching it may avoid seeking health care, making it much harder for public health authorities to control the disease. Thirdly, professionals and volunteers working in the field may also become stigmatized, leading to higher rates of stress and burnout. It can be said that stigma harms the mental and physical health of people with disease. This stigma can take the form of social rejection, gossip, physical violence, and denial of services. Experiencing stigma from others can lead to elevated depressive symptoms stress and substance use. Discrimination of COVID-19 patients and family members

The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours

against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus. Family members of people with disease and healthcare providers caring for people with disease are at a higher risk of experiencing discrimination from others during this epidemic. As the disease is new, a very less information about this virus is known, creating a feeling of fear and confusion among the people leading to provide discrimination towards the people related to this disease directly or indirectly. It is seen that a person who is infected with this disease has to face a lot of discrimination in form of getting blamed for spreading the disease. A feeling of hatred and avoidance is developed against them. They are even made to feel guilty and are boycotted from the society by other. It creates a lot of mental distress, humiliation and depression among the patients. Not only the patient individually but also his entire family has to face all kinds of ill-treatment and discrimination, making their life very difficult. In some of the cases the patients are suffering from negligence in their treatment due to the lack in numbers of health personnel's and adequate medical infrastructure. There is a severe shortage of medical equipments, PPE Kits leading to worsening the condition of the corona patients. Still now there is no vaccine or treatment for COVID-19. It is even seen that the dead body of the corona patients has to face discrimination even after the death as there is no one to receive the body from the hospital or do the last rites because of the fear of getting infected with the disease.

Discrimination against the Corona warriors

The Corona warriors like that of doctors, nurses, health staffs, policemen, sanitary workers are said to be in the frontline in the management to control and fight against corona virus. They are doing their duty tirelessly to have control on this epidemic. They are sacrificing a lot to save and protect us from the hands of the corona virus. The COVID-19 emergency has significantly transformed the working environment and job demands. Providing care to the patients becomes difficult emotionally for health care workers. Some of the healthcare workers have to face a lot of discrimination by the other members of the society. They are avoided and boycotted in the society making their journey to fight against COVID-19 really very difficult. They are taking risk of potentially exposing their family to infection in order to do their duties daily in this time of global crisis. The COVID warriors have to go through a lot of stress, uncertainty and stigmatization. Working of health personnel's with potentially high infectious patients led to considerable stigmatization.

The Health care workers often had complex and conflicting thoughts and feelings about balancing their roles as healthcare providers and parents, feeling professional responsibility but also fear of this new disease, associated with corona virus patients, and guilt about potentially exposing their families to infection by working during the COVID-19 emergency. The pandemic crisis has significantly transformed the working environment and job demands (e.g high-pressure work, an unfavorable physical environment

and emotionally demanding interactions). COVID-19 is an emerging, rapidly changing global health challenge affecting all sectors. The health workers like that of doctors, nurses and other health staff are at high risk of getting infected as they come in direct contact with the corona patients. This also leads to acquiring this disease much higher among them, the general public. It is seen that the corona warriors has to bear or face a lot of opposition, physical abuse and attacks from the people. In all over the country, many cases has come where the doctors, nurses and the other medical staffs are harassed by the landlords to leave their rooms due to the fear that they are directly getting in contact with the patients, they would bring the virus to their home and locality. It is due to the fear of getting contagion. The corona warriors are in the frontline of management of this epidemic, but sometimes it is very much unfortunate that the guided missiles are being aimed at some of these corona warriors by some "masked", misguided and ill-informed elements of society. A few of these corona warriors have risked their lives in service of those very persons who had attacked them. Again in some cities it is seen that the newspaper delivery warriors are not being allowed to engage in the battle.

In this time of pandemic the older people are facing a lot of difficulties in leading their life smoothly. They are having social isolation leading them to mental distress and loneliness. In various old age home or shelter house they are left abandoned. The older people are at the greatest risk of severe symptoms from COVID-19 virus. Distancing threatens to aggravate feelings of loneliness and could provide negative long-term health consequences. There is no one to take care of, forcing them to lead a life of misery and pain. It is said that the elderly and immune compromised patients are vulnerable to the mortal repercussion of the virus. There is a very harass impact on the economic growth and condition of our country. Loss of jobs and livelihood has forced the labourer, employees of various small scale industries to return back to their native place that is the village. The migrant labourers has to face a lot difficulties and discrimination in order to reach their destination. Refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants are unable to access healthcare, or even maintain social distance, in overcrowded conditions. Person with the disabilities who access to essential personal support is compromised by social distancing and self-isolation. Children from economically disadvantaged groups are unable to access online classes. In the beginning stage of this pandemic people wearing a mask created a feeling of fear towards that person. He was considered to be a COVID-19 positive patient. They were discriminated by the people. Some of the cases of racial discrimination were also seen for the north east people of our country. The north-east people are having some similarity of facial appearance and features with that of Chinese people. As corona virus has originated from china, the north east people are blamed and bullied for it.

Discrimination towards women

Reports have high lightened that the stay at home measures are placing women at risk, as the

abusive relationship has increased. They are facing a lot of problems in balancing their personal life, doing domestic work and handling their professional carriers. Women are said to be at the high risk of domestic violence and marriage conflict. Due to this pandemic the burden of girls and women has increased a lot. It is creating a lot of pressure on their physical and mental health. The cultural construction of gender has imposed certain roles to women and girls within the family such as caring for children and other dependent family members as well as providing for basic needs of family life such as domestic work, food, hygiene and education for children. The burden is now heavier on them to fulfill this role due to a significant increase in the care needs of the children, elderly and the sick, as well as the threat of food insecurity. This is even more burdensome for women working in essential services and single heads of households. Despite the increased burden, their unpaid care work continues to be undervalued and unrecognized, without any means to ensure its fair distribution or alleviation through the expansion of social protection. The presence of women is very much important in frontline role as they are playing critical role in keeping the communities running.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to address the issue of disease and discrimination in general and the areas of discriminations that the COVID-19 patients are facing in particular.

Conclusion

Disease and discrimination occupies a crucial significance in recent times particularly in Indian context as our society is stratified with caste, class, gender and ethnicity. Recently, disease and discrimination add to the processes of social stratification more complex. Today Corona virus has resulted to be a global crisis. Due to this epidemic, the world is not the same, as it was before. It has changed a lot forcing us to change our life as well. Our country economy like that of trade and market is going through a low phase. In order to save our lives and humanity in this globe, we need to come together so as to fight against this COVID-19 virus. In this time of global crisis, we should come forward to provide a positive, healthy, friendly attitude towards the COVID patients and even the COVID warriors. The government is trying its best to take adequate steps to control have over the situation. Government is playing a vital role to strengthen the health systems measures and a cooperation with public health policy makers. The government and public health authorities are also increasing awareness among the population, which may help to control the pandemic. Educational campaign targeting the correct population groups is essential to reduce the public anxiety towards this pandemic.

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