



Youth Action Research

On **The Impact Of Covid-19 Pandemic** On **The Mental Health Of Youth** From Marginalized Communities.

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Abhivyakti Media for Development

Country Context

India is the world's second-most populous country. It has 62.5% of its population in the age group of 15-59 years, attaining the world's largest demographic dividend. The share of the maximum population lies in the age group 13 - 35 years. Therefore, India is also known as a Young Nation. The youth are cornerstones for the progress of the country. The development of a country depends on them. Still, the country unemployment rate is rising. While unemployment is a problem affecting the lives of billions of young people, many issues such as expensive education, poverty, and now the pandemic, are limiting opportunities for young people.

Generally, we consider youths as fit and healthy. But according to WHO, about 2.6 million deaths annually among youth occur in the age group of 10 - 24, suicide being cited as the fourth reason of death in the age group of 15 - 19. This highlights the issue of psychological well-being among youth. In India, mental health is a neglected component of public health. The World Health Organization estimates that 14 percent of all illnesses are related to neurological disorders. And yet the question of mental disorders seems to have been ignored. There is a huge disparity in the availability of health facilities and amenities. Therefore, the issue of mental health, which is already neglected, is a distant dream for socially and economically deprived sections.

Due to Covid-19 pandemic & lockdown, mental health issues became more prevalent from March 2020. The continuous spending time at home, pandemic crisis led to depression, irritability, stress among people. Many global surveys have shown that lockdown and Covid-19 shall have a greater impact on young people and children. The pandemic has impacted multiple segments with varying intensities. However, the impact on education, employment, health, and so on needs to be considered in terms of socio-economic and gender differences.

The pandemic has largely impacted school children. The gap in children's education is widening since traditional teaching methods have now shifted online. Students from rural, tribal & marginalized areas have been deprived of education due to the unavailability of digital systems, mobile handsets & networks. As a result, many students are dropping out of school, especially from rural areas.

The lockdown has had a far-reaching effect on education as well as the economy. Many have lost livelihood opportunities, suffered economically, and also starved.

Employment, education, & such situation have raised concerns about the future, and as a result, mental health has deteriorated. Abhivyakti Media for Development is a nonprofit organization located in Nashik working for the last 35 years in the fields of education, information, rights, and media. It is working to bring the voices of the disadvantaged sections closer to the center and build connections between the government and the

people with the help of the media. Through youth action research the impact of Covid-19 on marginalized communities on mental health came to the limelight.

During the first lockdown, a survey on the impact of Covid 19 on the lives of girls in rural areas of Trimbakeshwar taluka in Nashik district revealed the increased levels of stress in the lives of girls. The girls spent more time at home, dropped out of school, lacked spaces to express themselves freely, and the continuous uncertainty of lockdown led to fear of being forcefully married. Increased household chores, continuous living at home, lack of livelihood, online education, and related issues impacted not only the lives of women but importantly of young men. The second wave of the pandemic in March 2021 was the worst hit and created unprecedented damages. Nashik district was one of the most affected districts in Maharashtra. Both these factors led Abhivyakti to study & understand the impact of the pandemic in its work area and i.e. Communities in the Trimbakeshwar block. Necessary mitigative & preventive steps can be taken to avert relapses. At the same time, it was noticed that the wave had caused a great deal of mental damage, and therefore, keeping mental health a neglected issue, it was felt that it would be possible to know how much is known about it in rural areas. The two consecutive pandemic waves also highlighted the pauperized state of mentally ill being among masses & thus led to study and conduct YAR on the impact of Covid-19 on mental health.



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Research Method

The research program aimed to study the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of youth from marginalized communities. One of the main objectives of the research was to understand the strategies to cope with mental health problems, the availability of public health resources, the governmental support system & understand the recommendations of NPO working on mental health. Hence, four villages from Trimbakeshwar block, Hirdi, Boripada, Malegaon, and Velunje researched the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of youth. The research was conducted by 25 young participants from September to December 2021 in the above-mentioned four communities. The main objective of this research was to find out the impact of Covid-19 & pandemic on the mental health of the youth & the availability of facilities to cope or plan necessary facilities for future needs.

The Mental Health Action Research Project was supported by ASPBAE. The research uses a participatory action research approach & is conducted by youth in their villages. Youth action research (YAR) is conducted using interview techniques. Due to the sensitivity & difficulty of the topic the interview was conducted through audio recordings to collect in-depth responses. The interviews were conducted through verbal or written consent.



Demographic profile



The participants selected for the research were in the age group of 16 to 30 years. The participants were from rural tribal areas belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups. It has both married and unmarried youth. The sample occupations were farmers & daily wage/farm laborers. Most of the interviewees were high school graduates. Due to fear of a recorded interview, many refused to give the interview. Some were afraid that the interviews would be shared. Peak harvesting season and unavailability of time for interviewees made the YAR process difficult. Overcoming many such difficulties, we conducted 35 sample interviews and through that, we understood the impact of Covid-19 of Corona on the mental health of the youth in four villages namely Boripada, Hirdi, Velunje, Malegaon in Trimbakeshwar block.



What is mental health?

Mental health is the health of the mind. The World Health Organization(WHO) conceptualizes mental health as a “state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community” - (WHO,2014).

Anxiety and stress are all part of everyone's life. Good mental well-being helps us deal with mental health issues easily & effectively. Improper mental well-being or imbalance makes it difficult to deal with mental health issues. The absence of a mental disorder is not an indicator of mental well-being. Mental health or ill health cannot be viewed as binaries. Balanced mental health means understanding one's abilities, strengths, ability to contribute to your community, and ability to achieve bettering life.

Mental disorders are related to thought processes, emotions, perceptions, orientation, comprehension, and memory. Mental disorders can impair a person's behavior, ability to perceive right and wrong and make it difficult for a person to meet his basic

Addiction also has a major impact on mental health. It does not slow down a person or impair his intellectual capacity, it affects his mental state. Mental health ranges from mental balance to mental disorders.



Psychosocial Perspectives

The psychosocial approach is a spectrum of psychological, social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and physical experiences. It is a whole spectrum. We found this approach very important in the analysis of the research because YAR seeks to understand the mental health of young people from disadvantaged social groups in rural and tribal areas. Through understanding, the whole of society, the family background of these youngsters, and their mental, and emotional well-being can be taken into consideration.

The young researchers were from disadvantaged-marginalized communities. The opportunities available, capabilities developed are based on psychosocial aspects. The majority of youth participants live hand to mouth, thus neglecting education and health. Hence mental health is a very insignificant subject for them. According to YAR researchers, resolving fundamental livelihood issues of participants can make mental health issues visible. However, there is a lack of realization between the correlation of mental health & fulfillment of necessities. Thus from a psychosocial lens issues faced by participants is lack of information about mental health.



Research Findings

► Lack of information and awareness about Mental Health

The young participants hail from areas deprived of essential facilities & lack of information. They lacked understanding of mental health & were unable to answer questions. Many were unaware/unheard of the word 'mental health'. Many youth participants had heard the word mental health for the first time in their lives. Most of the youth were unaware of the symptoms of mental illness. The proportion of participants who lacked information about the facilities related to mental health is very high. Some youths did not know what lockdown was & also did not understand it. As YAR researchers learned about mental health during the process but most youths from communities lack this knowledge.

Perhaps many also refused to give interviews since they lacked an understanding of the subject. And even in the interviews conducted, many did not understand the questions and failed to answer any questions. Apart from lack of awareness about mental health and medical facilities available there were other important government schemes & aids about which people from rural & tribal areas lacked. In such circumstances, fake news & rumors too were rampant in the communities which misled people.



► Increased stress due to difficult economic situation

The outbreak of Covid-19 affected both rural and urban areas, but in rural areas, citizens faced many challenges. The existing lack of facilities created more problems during the lockdown. According to the report, most of the youths lost their jobs, wages and were not getting their salaries. Post monsoon season, youth migrate to districts seeking contractual, daily wage work. During off-seasons, people are dependent on earnings from wages. Moreover, high inflation rates caused additional economic hardships & caused more mental distress.

Stress is caused due to inconvenience and difficulty in education. The inconvenience of the mobile network in the village makes it more difficult to avail of online education. The proportion of young people who failed to understand through online learning was high. Because of the network issues, they could not understand what was being taught online and could not learn. It also deprived many children of education. The digital divide, caused by lockdown, is a major cause of stress. This educational gap is further depriving youths who are already from deprived and neglected areas.

► Behavior in the community and family environment

During the pandemic, it was essential to follow physical distancing protocols but the people in the community needed mental support. Through our research, many people needed emotional support but were instead alienated and socially distanced from the Covid affected. The families of Covid-19 patients were socially excluded and bullied.

Some families were not provided with essential goods and were socially boycotted. The social fabric within the families changed. The lockdown led to fights, quarrels in homes, hesitancy to communicate within the family. Along with this, ineffective public distribution of essential commodities and rising inflation affected the people.

People are stressed about many things such as livelihood, education and future but...

80% of People

are unaware the word
'Mental Health'

Many of the participants don't know that stress, anxiety and loneliness etc. can be the symptoms of mental illness
Most of them don't feel any need of visiting doctor for such issues and feel that only extreme illness needs treatment.



People who are affected with mental illness, disorder are looked down upon, are called psychopaths and are suggested superstitious remedies.



Mental health issues caused by Covid-19

► Youth on grief, suffering, irritability, anger, and self-harm

The village communities are close-knit spaces, without social exchanges & interactions it cannot work well. Thus the covid protocols set by the government was a hindrance. The youth found the outside world more appealing & preferred the company of friends & colleagues. But during the lockdown restrictions were strengthened.

In the case of girls, the situation was even more difficult. They couldn't communicate freely within households with existing restrictions. There was a gap in daily conversation and dealings with friends and relatives. Also, young girls were not allowed to go out and talk to others. People lost their jobs and wages, which led to financial problems at home and increased grief, anger, and resentment among the youth. The youth responded by being irritated due to financial difficulties and quarrels at home, which led to grief, anger & irritability. The number of youth irritated by domestic & financial difficulties was very high. The major problem faced by youth was their inability to resolve financial problems.

Amid the responses we received, a young man's statement was as follows, "How do we survive in this lockdown?" Also, some girls said that it was sad to not be able to talk to their friends because there is no one around to express feelings. It was a time of emotional hardships, sorrow, pain, and stress.

A few participants responded as they were saddened by the deaths of their relatives. At the same time, some young people said "There is no point in killing oneself, no matter how one lives." Although the number of young people who said they wanted to hurt themselves is very small, it still was a matter of concern.



► **Young people on anxiety, fear, anger, and loneliness**

In March 2020 when the lockdown was just announced, through the news people kept themselves updated about Covid-19 but had a carefree attitude since not many were affected. But in rural areas, other problems were more prevalent. Although the virus had not yet spread, many utilities were in short supply. Despite the lack of contagion, there was a shortfall of essential goods. But during the second Covid-19 wave, as the number of patients in the villages rose, people felt the intensity of the pandemic and since then have started to fear Covid-19. The youth also feared that the economic downturn will eventually make it difficult to earn a living, to spend on education. Often the youth in rural areas have to earn & have many responsibilities from an early age & thus have to earn via various modes. And thus have to compromise upon dreams. The news related to Covid & the high death toll created fear in the minds of the people. The failure of public health systems during the second wave and the lack of proper facilities in the village led to fear. People had to come to Nashik for treatment, and due to a large number of patients, there was a shortage of beds & oxygen. In all these circumstances, many people were worried about what would happen if they would be affected. The hustle to buy food, earn money & financial instability worried most of the youth. A few were worried about the closure of educational institutions due to lockdown and wanted regular offline classes.

Ways to deal with mental health issues Through YAR research, we found that the concept of mental health was new to many marginalized & rural young people, but there were many other pressing issues around them. But most have successfully coped with the pandemic crisis. We understood the ways to overcome all the problems like loneliness, sadness, anxiety, and fear. Due to the closure of schools and colleges during this period, the participants could not meet each other. At that time, they did not have many options to spend time or have fun. Mobile and games, as well as social media, helped navigate the lockdown. But excessive & increased consumption of online content led to temperament and anger issues.

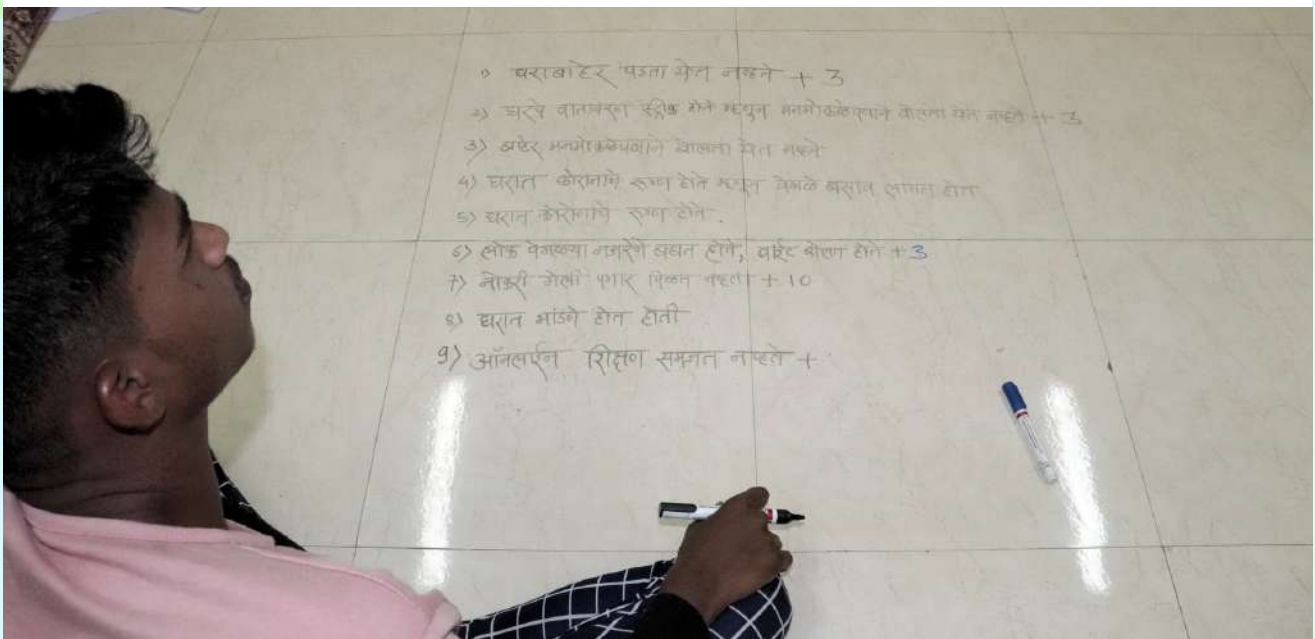


However, boys could easily access mobile phones. But the girls lacked such accessibility. Many girls are not allowed to use mobile phones at home. And therefore most girls don't have their mobile phones. They spent most of the time doing household chores, which added to the stress. Despite all the problems young people faced, many said that they had no intention of harming themselves. Because they wanted to see so much of the world but were struggling to survive. Some young people even said that they did not want to hurt themselves by thinking about their family or that they did not have suicidal thoughts. The youth said that to be stress-free, they talked to relatives and family, played games, and kept in touch with friends on the phone.

Aid & assistance received & expectations It is challenging to meet the basic needs of a disadvantaged group of young people when a particular disaster strikes, & difficult to focus on other issues. For instance, how to sustainably is a much bigger question for these communities.

When asked about the help received on mental health issues, the youth responded about their lack of unawareness about the subject & also failed to understand the questions.

A few youths had some knowledge about public mental health facilities and wanted it to be available along with training support, and awareness. But in aid, the majority of young people wanted financial aid, employment opportunities & necessities like food grains, and essential commodities. The research highlights that upon attainment of necessities, only issues about psychological illness gain their value. And therefore the majority of people talk about achieving basic needs.



Recommendations

► Expected from the government

1. There should be a psychiatrist in the primary health center. He/she must be present full-time. He/she must follow work hours.
 - Psychiatrists should visit the sub- center twice a week.
 - There should be complete medical facilities.
 - Information regarding further treatment should be available at the primary health center.
 - There should be a helpline for mental health.
2. The government should conduct awareness programs on mental health from time to time
 - Make banners, compose songs, plays/street plays

► School/college

1. Mental health should be taught to school and college teachers.
2. Teachers should conduct sessions with students.
3. Schools and colleges should have mental health as separate subjects.
4. There should be safe spaces.

► Social organization

1. Workshops should be conducted (detailed information)
2. Conducting programs with the help of radio and TV.
3. Making videos in the regional language for public awareness.
4. Get helpline or information in regional language.
5. Training provided to people in the village who will further act as a bridge between the patient & service provider.



Conclusions

In this research, we tried to study the effect of Covid-19 on the mental health of young people. The impact of the pandemic was different on various fabrics of the society. Marginalized youths from rural ecosystems have to shoulder financial responsibilities from a very young age. Similarly, the study found that the pandemic has changed the future course of action of many young people. Considering the impact on the mental health of the youth, the majority were unaccustomed to the term as they are deprived of many amenities. While it is difficult for people to meet the basic needs of daily expenses, they seriously overlook important concerns like mental health.

But it was equally important to ponder over this psychosocial aspect of mental health & well-being. In many responses, youths said that despite the appointment of a psychiatrist in the primary health center in or near their village, he is not present. Many people are not aware of the availability of facilities related to mental health. During this period, even if a family member had a Covid-19 patient or a mere suspect, they were treated differently by society. People did not even have access to public amenities. For instance, they were boycotted from public spaces like public drinking water or grocery stores.

Many young people lost their jobs during the lockdown. It is during this period that people migrate after the end of the farming season but due to lockdown, it was difficult to meet ends. The prices of essential commodities had inflated. This profoundly affected the psychological state of mind while dealing with these situations. Most of the youths said that they were irritated due to financial problems at home. The youths were not able to understand online education due to the inaccessibility of mobile phones & networks thus affecting education. As a result, many feared dropping out of school. The deteriorating finances will affect the affordability of education.

Regarding the effects on education, it is noticed that online education was not understood at all and many people could not get education due to mobile or network problems. As a result, many feared dropping out of school. Soon it will be impossible to afford education due to deteriorating economic conditions. This will result in a large number of school dropouts. During this period if any family member was suspected to have been affected, they were treated differently by society. People were declining access to public amenities like public drinking water & grocery stores.

The communities practiced social boycotts. With school and college closed, there weren't many choices to spend time with close friends & to express oneself. The young boys relied on mobile, playing games & social media to spend time. But the girls simply did not have mobile access. As a result, they had to stay home and do multiple household chores, which added to the stress. While disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic make it difficult for the rural disadvantaged to meet basic needs, & thus mental health is a distant subject to think over. The youth were unable to ask for help due to a lack of awareness. But in the future, they may demand food, groceries, and financial help from the government, but seldom expect to raise awareness about mental health.

The research underlines the mutual inclusivity of overall mental health and social well-being. Understanding the psycho-social perspective is more important & essential to be able to effectively work on mental health & well-being. Mental health is a taboo subject, though. People avoid taking treatment & avoid expressing it. The research also highlights a lack of mental health terms and language needed to express in the community.







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