

## **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Widows of Rajouri District in Jammu and Kashmir: A Struggle for Survival**

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### **Abstract**

This paper has focused on studying the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the widows. COVID-19 pandemic has led to many problems which included fear of getting infected, financial crisis, emotional distress, less income sources, more expenditure, food insecurity and rise in the cases of violence. This article is purely a qualitative study. The case studies which were conducted included the widows from different sections of the society. This paper attempts to explain the impact of COVID-19 on the widows in the Rajouri District of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Widow, Financial Crisis, Emotional Distress and Family.

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 Virus (WHO). Till February 2022, three waves have hit the world. The world has faced many problems during this pandemic like financial crisis, the loss of lives, food insecurity, emotional distress, rise in the cases of violence and many more. The Government of India has made various efforts from time to time to stop the spread of deadly virus which included restricted movement of people outside their house, mandatory wearing of masks and providing vaccination. The people who were working in the unorganized sector were facing many problems as they were dependent on their daily income for running their houses. The work of Vegetable vendors, Tailors, Household helpers were badly affected during this phase. They were already working hard to meet their needs before COVID-19 pandemic but the situation worsened during this pandemic. They were not even able to work; as they cannot go out and hence faced difficulties in meeting their every basic needs. On 15th September 2020, India ranked 2nd in the list of countries having the most cumulative cases with 4,938,293 active cases and 3rd in cumulative deaths (82,066). The higher rate of disease transmission further increased the risk especially for the urban populations. Hence, India went into a lockdown state from 25th March to Mid May, 2020 and since then India has begun its unlocking phase. Few studies have shown that the testing rate increased dramatically after the lockdown in India. The last day of lockdown had 2,708 tests per million population, which had increased to 16,947 tests per million by the first week of August. Third wave of COVID-19 hit the nation by the start of January, 2022. There was a lockdown of 30-40 days and the peak was observed by the end of January.

## Literature Review

COVID-19 was spreading at a rapid speed. There were many stages of transmission of COVID-19 Virus. In the First stage, the Virus was spreading by importing from the virus-hit regions to other regions through travelling. In the Second stage, the virus was spreading through coming in contact with the persons who had travel history of virus hit areas. In the third stage, the virus was transmitting into the communities which created a very tense situation everywhere. In the last and the fourth stage, the virus was spreading in a completely uncontrollable manner. As a step of precautionary measures many initiatives were taken by the Indian government to control the transmission of virus which included Health screening at the International airports, Quarantine policies, Restriction on public gatherings, Border checking, Restriction on travelling which further included cancellation of Passenger trains, suspension of International and Domestic flights. Following these restrictions the Government of India imposed 21 days lockdown on 25th March, 2020 which was extended to 3 May 2020 and was again extended after analysing the situation of the country to 17th May 2020.

After that, the Government decided to relax the situation slowly and the process of un-lockdown was announced by assessing the current situation of the areas. Widows after the death of their husband move to towns or other areas for work when they feel themselves as a burden on their families or when they are disinherited by their families (Ghosh, 2000 & Ranjan, 2001). There, they work to meet their basic needs. This forced migration is usually done to meet basic needs of their life. Leaving their own family led to many problems like loneliness, social stigma, distress, emotional breakdown and financial loss. Widowhood is not just painful but also very hazardous for widows (because of the ritual practices performed after the death of their husband (Chen & Dreze, 1992).

## Objectives

This study was conducted with the objective to study the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the widows. The focus of this research is to study the major challenges faced by the widows and how they managed their life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodology

This research was purely a qualitative research. Case-study method was used as a tool of data collection. The samples were chosen as per the convenience of the researcher from the Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir. This research was phenomenological in nature. In this research, the lived experiences of widows during the COVID-19 pandemic were taken for consideration. In this research the experiences of widows during the three waves of COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to February 2022 were studied.

### ***COVID-19 Cases in India from March, 2020 to February 2022***

Under this heading, the cases are discussed from three different areas. In this, the total number of positive cases of COVID-19 virus and the total deaths are given which took place during COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to February 2022 in India, Jammu and Kashmir and Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir respectively.

**Table 1:** *COVID-19 Cases in India*

<b>Total No. of Positive Cases</b>	<b>Total Deaths</b>
4,29,24,130	5,13,843

**Source:** *Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, GOI, 2022.*

In Table 1, the total number of deaths were 1.19 percent of the total number of COVID-19 positive cases at the national level which includes 5, 13,843 deaths out of 4, 29, 24,130 total number of positive cases were registered during this period.

**Table 2:** *COVID-19 Cases in Jammu and Kashmir*

Total No. of Positive Cases	Total Deaths
4,52,997	4,748

**Source:** *JK UT Dashboard, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2022*

In Table 2, the total deaths that took place during the time of pandemic were 1.04 percent of the total number of COVID-19 positive cases at the Union territory level Jammu and Kashmir which includes 4,748 deaths out of 4,52,997 total number of positive cases were registered during this period.

**Table 3:** *COVID-19 Cases in Rajouri District*

Total No. of Positive Cases	Total Deaths
12,798	249

**Source:** *JK UT Dashboard, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, 2022*

In Table 3, the total deaths that took place during the time of pandemic were 1.94 percent of the total number of COVID-19 Positive cases in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir which includes 249 deaths out of 12,798 total positive cases were registered during this period.

### **Case study: 1**

#### ***Sunita Devi, 36 Years***

She got married at the age of 17 years in the year 2002 and she gave birth to her first child at the age of 18 years. She became widowed after 12 years of her marriage. They knew each other for 3 years before their marriage. They had a love marriage. After their marriage, they were living happily and her husband used to get gifts, take her out for outings. After the death of her husband, she moved to her mother's place because her mother in law used to quarrel a lot with her and many times, she was beaten up by her. Her husband committed suicide because of the property dispute within the family. She owns a shop in which she stitches the clothes and earns around 10000-12000 monthly. COVID-19 Pandemic was very difficult for her. The major problems she faced were social, emotional and financial problems. There was no other earning member in the family; the whole burden of managing finances was on her. She had some loan on her name from the bank which she needed to pay back. The markets were shut, she was not getting any suits to alter and stitch which was the only source of her income. It became terribly difficult for her to manage the expenses. She was emotionally so disturbed because she can't go out and have some time with herself which she needed at that time. She was feeling lonely from inside, there were family members with her but still emotionally full of extreme sadness, frustration and negativity. Every time she switches on the TV and watches the news about the rising cases on the television, she becomes terribly distressed and hopeless. She was feeling so helpless. She was worried that if the cases of COVID-19 rose this much rapidly, how she would feed her children and how she would run her house. COVID-19 has taught her about the importance of health and hygiene. She knew that only if she will stay healthy then only she can run her house. She can only then provide resources to her children for their education. Even in her family many times, her younger sister in law used to ill-treat her about her dependency on her brothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. She felt helpless when her children asked her for anything and she had to manage such a situation. Her children usually say to her, "You don't love us, only papa used to love

us". When her younger sister in law taunts her, she thinks if my husband would be alive. I could not have faced this situation. I could not have been to this place ever again.

***Case study: 2***

***Usha Rani, 50 years***

She got married at the age of 19 years. Her husband was an army soldier. She gave birth to her first child after six years of marriage. Her husband passed away because of a heart attack after 20 years of their marriage. He was hospitalized and was on a ventilator for 8 days. All their savings ran off on his treatment, she became bankrupt and also lost her husband too.

The situation of COVID-19 pandemic was terribly difficult for her; she was not able to step out of her house. She was the only one taking care of household affairs from groceries to medicines. She was scared that if she would step-out, she would get infected and then who would take care of her children. She faced problems in managing the ration as it also became very expensive during that phase. Her siblings helped her out by sending stuff like food items, groceries and vegetables. They were the only support who had taken her out of that crisis. During the first wave of COVID-19, She moved to her in-laws and stayed there for one month but things were not going that smooth. Then she moved to her natal family where she spent five months which were very comforting to her. There she got everything, her every basic need from food items to medicines got fulfilled there. Usha had a suffocating time when she was not with her natal family. She was emotionally exhausted but after coming to her house, she was feeling relaxed because of the emotional support she was getting from the family. She was concerned about the future of children as they all were in the career making phase. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a kind of barrier between the accessibility of resources like tuition, coaching and physical education sources. Usha was financially not well enough to get different mobile phones for her children. She had one phone and four children, All of them were having online classes. Almost the timings were the same too. The gap in their education would have an impact on their future too. She said, "many times, my relatives and close family members taunt me and say, If their father was alive today your children must have got jobs, you have spoiled your children". Majorly, she has faced emotional and financial problems.

***Case study: 3***

***Seema Devi, 27***

She got married to her boyfriend after 2 years of their relationship in 2004. Her husband worked in the unorganised sector. She was widowed in the year 2006 and was left with a 6 months old baby girl with her. Her husband died in an accident. She was not left with any source of income in her hand. She was not educated enough to apply for some job. She moved to a rental apartment because of disputes in her in-law's family and joined a job in a school, where she was working as a peon. COVID-19 Pandemic had impacted her in many ways like financially and emotionally. She has a girl, who is differently abled. Seema needs to get medicine for her daughter daily. During COVID-19, she faced a lot of problems in getting medicine for her daughter as she was not able to go out to the bank to withdraw money from there.

She was emotionally so exhausted about the disability of her daughter because she cannot go to Amritsar for her treatment which she was getting from a hospital in Amritsar. She is so alone that she is not able to get help from anyone to take her daughter to the doctor for the treatment. She borrowed money from her landlady during the COVID-19 pandemic to run her house. She was also not getting a regular salary from school. Seema and her daughter, Mansi were the only support to each other. So, the biggest fear Seema had during COVID-19 Pandemic was if something happened to her who will take care of her daughter. She hardly

went to either of her family during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her only happiness is her daughter and sometimes because of the emotional burden all her frustrations burst out on her daughter. She does not get any support from either of her families. Everyone turned off their faces with an hour of need. She has left everything for Mansi, many times she got marriage proposals but because of less acceptance of her daughter she refused everything. Seema said, "I tried hard to never make her feel that she lacks something, I tried every possible effort to provide her everything and love her so that she does not miss her father but still when she sees other children with their father. She misses her own father that breaks me inside".

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

COVID -19 was difficult for everyone but widows managed well during this time from managing the basic resources like food items, clothes and medicines & all the financial emotional and physical support from their families. The major findings of this study were that all the widows faced financial crisis and emotional frustration. The families of the widows were comparatively more comforting to them than that of their in-laws families. All the relatives blamed them for everything wrong happening with their children. Widows felt lonely in handling and managing all the things. They were socially excluded and targeted for everything wrong happening to them and their children but never given the credit of handling everything single handedly. Widows are amongst the vulnerable sections of the society. In society like ours, Widows are usually made questionable and responsible for every good and bad in their life and their children's life. This was found true in case of the widows of Rajouri District who faced these common problems during the pandemic. They said, "Their relatives, close family members taunted them many times for the lapse on their part in the life of their children". It was also found that the children of the widows were found complaining to their mothers. Sometimes their children also complain to them, like "Mama, you don't love us, only papa used to love us". When the widows were unable to fulfil the desire of the children during the pandemic they felt emotionally and financially exhausted. They were not able to go out and do some work which could be the only source of their income and all their savings were not enough to manage during the time of the pandemic. Emotionally, they were also frustrated as they weren't able to share their problems with anyone. They wanted to share their pain with their friends and closed ones but were unable to do so. They hid their emotions and frustration from their family members also as they did not want to make them feel tense and worried.

Widows acted as a protective cushion to their children and tried to protect them from all negative comments and judgements of the close relatives and the society. During that time widows had reprehensible experiences but they tried to hide their harsh experiences and emotions within themselves. They faced fear of running out of money to manage their kitchen, medicine and some other basic needs. They were the only care-takers of their families as there was no one else to manage their life. These problems led to chaos, stress, loneliness and sleeplessness. In spite of so many hardships, Widows being a single mother faced this COVID-19 situation with all their strength as they had no one on which they can rely for the basic support to their families. They tried their hardest to be strong enough in front of their children but deep inside they were the ones who were badly broken. They were missing their partners and they were having the feeling that if their partners were alive today these tough situations would have not been this much tough to handle. After the death of their husband most of the widows lacked the emotional and financial support which they were getting from their partner.

Widowhood brought these women to a point in which they were in a loss situation. Emotionally, they lacked the support which they were getting from their husbands and were

now only left to the support system of their families. They hardly get enough time to meet their close friends and families. They were of the view that after a period of time, both the families got involved in their own lives and the widows were left alone in every aspect. Their children also turned off their faces against them when they were not able to fulfil their needs. During pandemic they could not rely on either of their families for emotional support. Their decisions were many times forced upon by others for the second marriage. In their life, their decisions have very less say as others were deciding many things on their part. It was being controlled by others in the name of their Good will and settling them down again to secure their better future. Most of the decisions were controlled and taken by others in the name of their better future. Thus we can conclude that although the time during the Pandemic was very hard for everyone, the widows who are already seen with frowned eyes faced many hardships due to their status. Lack of education, economic dependence and unemployment were also seen as few of the important causes of problems they faced during the Pandemic. But despite of so many hardships and bad consequences they sailed through tough situations boldly.

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