

Are Persons with disability taken into account for preparedness of COVID-19 pandemic in India?

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has a severe impact on the health and well-being of individuals. However, there is limited data on the impact on persons with disabilities (PWDs) in India. The objective of the present study was to explore the impact and preparedness of the pandemic on PWDs. A rapid review was conducted during May- June 2021 through free online database using published articles, news reports, and Government press release. The study identified that PWDs faced difficulties in following the preventive measures and guidelines. They also had challenges in access to health care and rehabilitative services, daily activities of living due to lockdown and restrictions in travel. PWD faced mental health issues like stress, fear, loneliness, anxiety, aggression and depression. Domestic violence also increased especially among women with disability during the lockdown. Services provided by the government for PWDs were scarce. Many of PWD were unable to access the services. The study highlights the need of implementation of comprehensive disability inclusive guidelines and services.

Key words: COVID-19, Person with disability, India, pandemic

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has led the entire World in distress. The impact of this disease has not been limited to the physical and mental health, education, and employment of the people. The Low- and Middle-income countries like India are still facing the problems, even after one-and-a half year of the disease outbreak. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on 30th January, 2020 in India⁽¹⁾. Thereafter, the Government of India declared a countrywide lockdown as a preventive measure for the outbreak. Various infection preventive measures like frequent hand washing, social distancing, use of mask, and avoid touching face were also informed by the government through various media and websites⁽²⁻⁴⁾. Vaccination for COVID-19 was also initiated⁽⁵⁾. The same preventive measures, lock-down were taken, yet, the country faced the second wave of the disease in April- May 2021⁽⁶⁾. However, the implication of these activities on the life and well-being of Persons with disability (PWD) were not much considered, even during the second wave of the disease.

The last available Census reported about 26.8 million i.e. 2.2% of Indian population being disabled in 2011⁽⁷⁾. The recent National Sample Survey 2018 also estimated similar proportion of PWDs (2.2%)⁽⁸⁾. The Census 2011 reported that proportion of disability is highest among people with locomotor disability (20%), followed by visual (19%), hearing (19%), multiple (8%), speech (7%), cognitive impairment (named as mental retardation) (6%) and mental illness (3%). Any other type of disability also contributes to about 18% which include people with autism etc.⁽⁷⁾. PWD generally are more vulnerable and have more health-care needs⁽⁹⁾. There is limited information about the impact and preparedness for COVID pandemic for PWD. The present study aimed to explore the impact and preparedness of covid-19 on health of PWD in India.

Methods

A rapid review was conducted based on published articles, news reports, Government press release using free online database google and google scholar for impact of COVID-19 of PWD in India. The review is

based on 14 published articles, 4 news articles, 3 letters to editor or correspondence and 6 government press releases. The study was conducted in the month of May and June 2021.

Results and Discussions

Following preventive measures

Studies reported that PWD faced difficulties in following preventive measures to reduce the spread of disease including regular hand washing, social distancing, social isolation. Many of these PWD are dependent on caregiver for their activities of daily living⁽¹⁰⁻¹⁵⁾. People with hearing impairment had difficulty in use of mask as the language of communication involved movement of lips and mouth⁽¹⁶⁾. It was also difficult for people with visual impairment as these individuals depended on handling thing and touch for their day-to-day activities^(17,18). People with spinal cord injury⁽¹⁹⁾ or mental illness like dementia⁽²⁰⁾ also faced difficulties in maintaining preventive measures of personal hygiene. Communication difficulty in understanding instructions, and guidelines through media was observed among PWD⁽¹⁰⁻²¹⁾.

Effect of lockdown

It was reported that almost 67% of PWD has difficulty in accessing essential services including food supply⁽¹²⁾. Challenges were also faced by people who had a caregiver as an outside person. Challenges were also faced by PWD in repairing or acquiring assistive aids, transport, acquiring disability certificate, financial challenges, and psychosocial issues^(11-15,22). Domestic violence was increased especially among women with disability during the lockdown period^(19,23-24). It was difficult for children with disability who were physically dependent for their daily activities. Children with disability also found it difficult to cope with the online education^(12,25). Besides, challenges were also faced for accessing health services especially for COVID-19 disease diagnosis, treatment, quarantine facilities and vaccination^(10-14,26).

Studies conducted in different parts of the country reported that PWD had difficulty in accessing routine medical services during the pandemic⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾. PWD were also unable to access their regular counselling or therapy services, their daily routine was disrupted. Besides, many experienced mental health concerns like moderate to high stress levels, anxiety, aggression, depression, fear, and loneliness. Only one-third of PWD were able to sought information on mental health issues or had access to those services⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾. The study also reported economic impact stating that about 86% had to borrow or request for support for food and 46% were forced to borrow money for livelihood⁽¹²⁾. While, another study reported that more than half of the respondents relied on family for financial support for their personal expenses and health care⁽¹³⁾.

Services for disabled

The government announced three months' pension to be given in advance to PWD under its National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). Further, it also announced ex-gratia of ₹ 1,000/- over three months to these people. However, the amount was very meagre. Also, many PWD were unable to access the scheme due to unavailability of disability certificate⁽¹⁰⁾.

The Department of empowerment of disabilities (Divyangjan) took many initiatives for PWD and also recommended disability inclusive guidelines during the pandemic⁽²⁷⁾. One of its initiative is Mental health rehabilitation helpline during the pandemic. However, very few people are aware of the service. Also, people with visual and hearing impairment faced challenges in accessing these services^(12,16-18). Another initiative is regarding employment for PWD. The notified posts for persons with benchmark disabilities are increased to 3566 suitable posts^(11,27). However, these posts have remained yet on paper only. The newly introduced Application, Sugamya Bharat App is another initiative taken by the government and may help the disabled in accessibility of services^(11,27). Yet challenges remain in availability and affordability of a smart phone and internet services where most of the PWD are from poor families.

Conclusion

The study identifies the need of implementation of comprehensive disability inclusive guidelines and services, that can be used for preparedness during similar outbreak situation.

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