

DAUGHTERS OF THE PANDEMIC

ASSESSING THE LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF
COVID-19 ON SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN & GIRLS

PRELIMINARY REPORT

A PARTNERSHIP PROJECT BETWEEN LAADLIYAN & PCHS

AUTHORS

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Daughters of the Pandemic

Introduction

The Peel Region's population consists of mostly racialized communities, with South Asians making up 51% of the total population as per the 2016 census (Peel Region, 2016). With a focus on gender equity, Laadliyan works closely with South Asian women and girls in the Peel Region to raise awareness for this community's concerns. Through our programming, we attempt to address the barriers they face through education, awareness and empowerment. During this pandemic, it is evident that this population has been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, whether it be with the number of cases, unemployment rates, precarious work, unsafe working conditions, financial insecurity, the spread of misinformation, mental health impacts, and the increase in gender-based violence. South Asian women and girls, especially those who are newcomers or international students, are at an increased risk of facing all of these challenges. Through our virtual events and programs, many participants have revealed that unpaid work responsibilities, employment precarity, social isolation, and immigration status have resulted in added strain on their mental and physical well being. For many international students in particular, we learned about the difficulties they faced as a result of not being eligible for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and other government financial relief supports. Many were and continue to deal with unemployment as a result of the pandemic.

We recognize fundamental changes need to occur at the research and programming stages. In order to direct a post-pandemic recovery which takes into account this population's lived experiences, it is integral that data specific to this community be collected. Through this community based research project in partnership with Punjabi Community Health Services, Laadliyan aims to conduct a needs assessment of the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on South Asian women living in the Peel Region. The aim of this community based research study is twofold. First, we will determine which gaps exist in current services and resources for this population, to gain a deeper understanding on how South Asian women can be supported. Second, we strive to utilize an intersectional lens to create more culturally responsive services that will help these individuals post-pandemic and to continue our advocacy work within the South Asian community.

COVID-19 in Ethnically Diverse Neighbourhoods

Within Ontario, racialized communities have disproportionately been impacted by COVID-19 (Public Health Ontario, 2020). However, Canadian race-based data on COVID-19 continues to be limited even though racialized communities are reported with having the highest number of infections (CAMH, 2020). The Peel Region (2021) specifically has reported statistics

on COVID-19 cases indicating that between April 13, 2020 and January 31, 2021 the South Asian community has had from 58%-32% of cases, respectively. However, when looking specifically at South Asian women, much of this overrepresentation can be explained by the role they have played in precarious frontline positions and due to unequal access to health services (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). Racialized women are especially overrepresented within the precarious sector, so it is important to assess how they have been disadvantaged during a pandemic where work from home options may not have been available to many of them. Workplace safety is also a concern for the South Asian community, especially those who are in Canada on a temporary basis or those who do not have permanent residency (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). There is a large fear of facing negative repercussions if they raise a concern around workplace safety with their employer (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020).

Since this community is at high-risk of contracting COVID-19, it is imperative that ethnic media channels provide factual and up to date information so individuals are aware of how to stay safe (Debebe, 2020). This is especially important due to the increased risk of infection and spread while living in multi-generational homes (Marwaha et al., 2020). As women are having to manage most of the household labour due to ethno-cultural norms in many households, they are at higher risk of contracting and transmitting the virus. This is why the work of the South Asian COVID Task Force is so important, as they have been promoting community testing, developing content in multiple languages and have been doing awareness related work to debunk COVID-19 myths (Marwaha et al., 2020). In order to reduce fear, uncertainty and hesitancy especially with the vaccine, ethnic media channels need to amplify accessible public health directives (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). This is especially important as it is evident that inequities exist in Canada with "access to health care, housing, income and social supports" for vulnerable groups (CAMH, 2020, p.3). Considering the aforementioned factors, it is imperative that an investigation be done around the barriers South Asian women and girls are facing in accessing reliable resources. By conducting a needs-based analysis we will be able to understand what services are truly required.

Due to COVID-19, there has also been a negative impact on mental health with vulnerable groups such as women and racialized communities being at higher risk of experiencing anxiety and depression (CAMH, 2020). Fear and uncertainty about health, social isolation and concerns over employment are a few of the reasons why. Childcare loss and job loss due to COVID-19 which has impacted precarious workers most, also presents additional barriers for these women and girls. Since there is currently no data that looks at mental health impacts on South Asian women and girls in Peel where the cases are particularly high, it is integral that we conduct this research.

Gender-Based Violence

Global reports have indicated that cases of domestic violence have been rising during the pandemic. This is evident in Canada as well where even before the pandemic, research showed that on average, every six days a woman is killed by their intimate partner (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.). Reports in the Peel Region prior to COVID-19 also showed that domestic violence and family and intimate partner violence (FIPV) incidents have been rising (Region of Peel, 2020). In the South Asian community in particular, the Council of Agencies Serving South

Asians (CASSA), found that in 2019 there was a significant number of domestic violence homicides in Ontario (CASSA, 2020). Now due to the COVID-19 isolation measures, there is an increased risk of gender-based violence since individuals are in confined spaces with abusers (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.). Pandemic-related stressors such as unemployment, reduced income, food insecurity, and fear regarding the virus are potential triggers for gender-based violence (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.; CASSA, 2020). Newcomer and immigrant women in particular are at an increased risk of violence if they do not have employment or status as citizens in Canada (Amin and Bond, 2021). It can be more challenging for them to leave due to their vulnerable status, so they are often compelled to stay with their abuser (Amin and Bond, 2021).

Due to closer surveillance and confinement, it has become much more difficult for victims to seek help from shelters, sexual assault centres and other service providers as their safety may increasingly be at risk (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.; CASSA, 2020; The Pointer, 2020). Gurpreet Malhotra, CEO of Indus communicated this concern, emphasizing that the pandemic has created additional barriers to help victims of domestic violence as there are limited ways through which they can safely reach out (The Pointer, 2020). Service providers are also facing strains due to a lack of shelter space and affordable housing. In terms of reporting, prior to the pandemic schools were quite receptive to warning signs of children who may be experiencing violence at home (Amin and Bond, 2021). However, the current challenge now is exacerbated through virtual learning environments in which warning signs are not easily recognizable by educators, and students feel less of a personal connection that would allow them to confide in their teachers (Amin and Bond, 2021). Thus, opportunities to report abuse that may have existed prior to the pandemic, have now been taken away from the victims.

Further, many gaps exist within the shelter system as well. The current ‘one size fits all’ approach means that a culturally responsive lens is missing (Amin and Bond, 2021). Shiba Anjum, Operations Manager at Nisa Homes in Mississauga which is a transitional home for newcomers to Canada commented that, “these women are escaping an abusive situation and

landing in another abusive situation” (Amin and Bond, 2021). Not only is it a difficult decision to leave due to the stigma and ostracization they could face from their community, but when individuals factor in their children, wait lists for affordable housing and the fact that they will most likely have to work low-paid precarious jobs, it becomes very difficult to leave abusive situations (Amin and Bond, 2021).

Economic Impacts

When analyzing which labour sectors have been impacted by COVID-19, it is primarily those in which minority groups, especially Peel Region’s South Asian community are overrepresented. These include manufacturing, transportation, and factory work (South Asian Daily, 2020). As a result, it is extremely important to capture an understanding of South Asian women’s experiences with employment and subsequently, income during COVID-19.

From an economic perspective, there has been little improvement for racialized women since the beginning of the pandemic. In July, the unemployment rate for South Asian women between 15-69 years of age was 20.4%, compared to 9.2% for non-racialized women (Statistics Canada, 2020b, Gordon, 2020; Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.). These numbers can be explained by the fact that racialized women are overrepresented in precarious work and have less access to child or elder care (Gordon, 2020). Many South Asian women have also been working in essential deemed services during COVID-19 such as, health care workers, cleaning staff, home care providers/educational support occupations, cashiers, etc. (Milan and Gagnon, 2016). The conditions were and remain even worse for immigrant women who represented 45% of employment losses in mid-July (Canadian Women’s Foundation, n.d.). Thus, it is imperative to investigate how different types of employment have varying needs of necessity during COVID-19 and how this has in turn, impacted South Asian women’s access and conditions of employment.

According to a recent report released by RBC Economics around the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian women, it was discovered that women who identify as youth, visible minority, newcomers and as mothers have been impacted the most (Desjardins and Freestone, 2021). Due to the pandemic, unpaid household duties for many mothers increased and as identified by the report, 12 times as many mothers compared to fathers had to leave their jobs to support their children. When looking at visible minority women, their jobless rates are much higher than that of women overall, with South Asian women facing an employment gap of 5.9% (Desjardins and Freestone, 2021). In addition, female immigrants that arrived within the last 10 years face a higher risk of job loss, and currently 8.6% are unemployed in comparison to 5.4% of non-immigrant women (Desjardins and Freestone, 2021). This data shows that while the economic experiences of racialized women were never optimal even pre-pandemic, they have

been on a decline in the past year. As a result, it is important when discussing a post-pandemic recovery for South Asian women, that the aim be to improve and address the underlying barriers and challenges they have faced even prior to COVID-19.

Conclusion

Overall through the research and trends that have been discussed, it is evident that South Asian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to negative impacts of COVID-19. It can be assumed that many of these concerns, such as with mental and physical well-being, their overrepresentation within precarious employment, and gender-based violence will create long term impacts. Furthermore, Laadliyan wishes to explore how intersecting factors of gender, race, ethnicity, culture and citizenship status have made these women and girls more vulnerable to these challenges. By doing so, we aim to shed awareness around these issues and to increase accessibility to culturally responsive resources for a post-pandemic recovery for South Asian women and girls, as many service providers are currently operating near or over capacity (The Pointer, 2020).

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