

Stigma and Discrimination of Covid19 Affected Factory Workers of Kashmir and their lived experiences.

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Abstract

The occurrence of health-related stigma can manifest in specific places such as the workplace and beyond especially during the pandemic. The covid19 affected workers are not only discriminated in the place of work but also in the community and at the place where the factory is situated. Thus the stigmatization of the worker affected by covid19 has both social and economic consequences for the workers. Thus present study attempts to understand the process of stigmatization of covid19 affected factory workers. This paper addresses stigma associated with covid19 affected factory workers and their lived experiences thereof.

Keywords: Stigma, Discrimination, Covid19, Workplace

1. Introduction

Covid19 pandemic has affected every aspect of human life in the world. It has affected almost all age groups of 180 countries. The number of covid19 cases has reached to 7,458,646 with 419,020 deaths reported around the globe (WHO, 2020). The number of cases is growing exponentially on the daily basis. It is often said that the covid19 affects everyone irrespective of race, class, or country but it is also a fact the most vulnerable sections of the society have high chances of contracting the virus. The same is the case with the factory workers as they are more exposed and fragile to contract the virus. Staying at home and maintaining social distance is a privilege. The factory workers have to make terrible choices, stay at home, and risk starvation or go to work and risk the contagion. The factory workers have to reach the workplace which is often crowded making them more exposed to the virus. Public health emergencies such as covid19 can lead to the stigma of the people affected by viruses. Similarly, people who have been released from the covid19 quarantine may be stigmatized as well. Stigma is defined as a social process that marginalizes and labels those who are different, and discrimination is defined as the negative practices that stem from stigma, or “enacted” stigma. Stigma can result in negative health and social consequences for the affected. Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or a group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. The stigma associated with the disease has serious consequences on the people who are labeled as such but more for those who are marginalized sections of the society. In some cases the stigmatized because of the covid19 have committed suicide as well.

In the workplace, employees may suffer from covid19 related stigma from their co-workers and supervisors, such as social isolation and ridicule, or experience discriminatory practices, such as being fired from their jobs. The stigma and discrimination related to health by the industrial workers can be experienced in the community

and the area in which they are employed. Thus the stigma and discrimination associated with covid19 are not confined at the workplace but may be experienced beyond that by the workers.

2. Methodology

A qualitative study was carried out to explore the stigma and discrimination of the factory workers at the workplace, community, and the area where the factory is situated. The 24 in-depth interviews of the workers of the covid19 factory were conducted keeping in view the social distancing norms. The 20 of the respondents were negative and 4 of the respondents were tested positive for the covid19.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

According to Goffman stigma is an attribute that is deeply discrediting and the person carrying that stigma is different from the rest or of less durable kind (Goffman, 1963). He says that the stigmatized self arises when there is an undesirable discrepancy between one's virtual social identity (social expectations) and actual identity (what a person is). Thus the stigma makes the person less durable and different from the ones who are normal (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatized person carries the feeling of inferiority which arises from failings related to social expectations. Mixed social contacts produce anxiety among both the normal and stigmatized person. For normal people anxiety is produced on how to avoid contact with the stigmatized person and the stigmatized person how to avoid rejection. In such cases, both normal and stigmatized adjust their lives to avoid each other, though the adjustment is more on the part of the stigmatized person. These adjustments can be in many ways avoiding due to fear and anxiety of being rejected by normal people. According to Goffman, the stigma can be like a public mark noticed by the public that produces the spoiled identity of the stigmatized person. Spoiled identity here refers to the imperfect person in relation to the norms society has set forth. The spoiled identity reflects the whole self spoiled by the particular condition or behavior (Lewis, 1998). Stigma thus reflects the spoiled identity which is shame-inducing, and this shame and stigma are likely to reflect the spoiled identity, whether the stigma is visible or not. The main idea of Goffman's theory of stigma is comprised of feelings of inferiority that arise from the feelings about the expectation of society. The stigma according to Goffman is the social construct wherein he focuses on the social interactions within which it operates. According to him, stigma operates in relation to what others view about the person, it is more concerned with feelings based on the social interactions with others or anticipation of such social interaction (Lewis, 1998).

3. Background

On 24 March 2020, the first covid19 case was detected in the Srinagar city and the lockdown was imposed in and around the district Srinagar. After nearly two months the restricted economic activities were allowed by the district administration especially the factories. Eventually, the workers joined the work and were hoping to get the desired wages needed for living. On 25 April only after two days of reopening of factories the factory situated in the industrial estate in Kashmir was hit by covid19 infection. A large number of officials arrived at the affected factory and workers were directed to stop the work immediately. Till that time workers were not able to understand the reason for the immediate stoppage of work and later they found that the driver associated with the factory was found covid19 positive. As standard operating procedures, all workers of the factory were

moved to the quarantine facility not far from the place of work. Most of the workers suffered from anxiety due to obvious reasons because they belong to the marginalized section of society and no income available for them. Eventually, all of the workers were kept in the quarantine facility until the results of the test were declared. It was only after five days that the test results were available in which 4 of the workers working in the cold storage of the factory were found positive for the infection. The rest of the workers were allowed to go to their respective homes.

4. Stigma and discrimination experienced by the factory workers

There was a general perception among the respondents that the stigma and discrimination were present at various levels. Most of the respondents experienced the stigma at the three different levels community, factory area, and the place of work. The respondents who were negative of the covid19 experienced stigma and discrimination mostly in the community and the area of the factory. Those who were found positive faced at all three levels.

4.1. Stigma and discrimination faced in the community

Numerous experiences and types of discrimination were experienced either by the respondents themselves or by other members of society. Participants shared multiple experiences of discrimination resulted from the stigma attached to them due to covid19. Many shared that the discrimination at shops, at religious places, and in the neighborhood as well. Though the workers were found negative for the covid19 infection still they faced the stigma in the community. The name of the affected factory was widely circulated by the print as well as the electronic media. Thus most of the community members knew about the event and eventually the workers faced a lot of stigma and discrimination in the respective communities. . Most of the workers were worried about this stigma associated with the community.

According to one respondent *“when I went to the nearby shop to buy the essentials the shopkeeper which was very accommodative before was apprehensive towards me”*

“The milkman is scared to come to our house to deliver milk,” said another respondent.

Our interaction within our community has substantially restricted, as it’s difficult to move on freely in the locality (mohalla) said by the respondent.

My children in the neighborhood complain me of the negative attitude of their friends, said by the worker

4.2. Stigma and discrimination experienced in the area where the factory is situated

The stigma attached to the workers was also witnessed within a particular area where the factory was situated. After the opening of the factory once the workers went back for the work in the factory, the workers from the other factories started to stigmatize and discriminate the workers of the affected factory.

We used to interact with the workers of other factories when our shift changed but now the workers don’t come close o us anymore a respondent narrated.

The workers within an industrial area used to move freely from one place to another and also socialize with the workers in the nearby tea stall. Now everything has changed for them, most of the workers now avoid visiting

the tea stall during which the respondents go there. Most of the workers from the adjacent have stopped coming to that tea stall altogether.

Most of us would generally go to the tea stall situated outside the factory but when we go there no one from the workers from other factories comes there, said most of the respondents.

Most of the workers don't have the personal transportation thus it becomes difficult for the workers to get any vehicle like no one want them to ferry in their vehicle

According to one of the respondents "No vehicle would ferry us to the bus stop because of the negative attitude associated with the covid19 affected factory workers".

4.3. Stigma and discrimination in the place of work

The covid19 infection though affected the whole factory but within the place of work, the positive covid19 workers were stigmatized and discriminated. The four positive recovered workers faced discrimination within the factory from the co-workers who were tested negative. All four respondents had experienced discrimination in the workplace from co-workers, employers and managers. According to respondents discrimination is revealed in different contexts and forms in the world of work. In the context of the workplace, discrimination often manifests itself in the form of discriminatory practices by employers, co-workers, clients, and customers. The respondents experienced discrimination from an employer in the sense that he initially refused to join the work after they recovered from the covid19 virus.

"All four of positive covid19 workers were not allowed to work initially by the employer/owner because he blamed us for the closure of his factory and also had feared to impact his factory further. It was only after much the intervention of the labor department that we were again reinstated" respondents said

The respondents also experienced discrimination from co-workers who avoid them most of the time due to fear of contracting the disease.

Yes, a lot of discrimination in the workplace. Most people, do not want to interact with us. Maybe they fear that may get covid19 infection. Respondents narrated

Even if we go for lunch together with the people, workers will sit aside. They will leave us alone eating they do not want to eat together with us, all the four respondents said.

The managers and supervisors have been stricter towards the positive recovered covid19 workers. It may be because the working environment had become hostile towards the positive covid19 workers. The reason for such strictness was not known to the workers themselves.

Since we joined back to work from our recovery of covid19 we have been treated badly by the supervisors. We can see clear discrimination against the four of us as others are not being treated like this by the supervisors. The rude behavior of the supervisors has mentally exhausted us.

5. Conclusion

Covid19 related stigma and discrimination can generally affect the workers not in the place of work but also at the community and local levels of the factory area as well. Such stigma and discrimination have many serious

consequences for the marginal sections of society like factory workers. Another recurrent theme that emerged from the study is that the workers who were not tested positive were also discriminated at different levels.

6. Recommendations

The development of strategies is very important in the workplace regarding the awareness and protection of workers from the covid19 related stigma. The government through the medium of media shall try to clear the misconception regarding the covid19 pandemic. The employer shall be directed to desist from the actions which tend to discriminate and stigmatize the covid19 affected workers. It is also important that the identity of the covid19 affected patients must be kept secret as much as possible which ultimately will help them to live a normal life.

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