

## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Persons with Visual Impairments

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### Abstract

The new pandemic (COVID-19) is caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. It has threatened the world and become the global public health crises. The focus of this review is to estimate the COVID-19 outbreak on population, especially the visually impaired people. It is a big challenge for persons with visual impairments (Pw VI) to maintain self-care and other preventive measures against COVID -19 outbreaks. Furthermore, the same is duly complicated by other issues and existing health conditions leaving them at risk to serious infections and illnesses. The research write-up of review investigation is a summary of 14 major articles published in different journals found in MEDLINE or published online pertaining to impact of current pandemic on visually impaired people. It has been observed that the Pw VI are more affected due to lockdown. Indeed, blind people relatively have more been affected in practicing social distancing and preventive measures. Therefore, it has eventually been attempted to link Pw VI to their basic needs in this paper and use this time to plan to be more adaptive to serve them better with special reference to India and equivalent countries.

**Keywords:** COVID -19; Disability; Visual Impairment; Support; Intervention; Counseling

### Introduction

India has nearly one-third of the world's blind population. This sub continental region has about 12 million PwVI out of the world total of 39 million as reported by the National Programme for control of Blindness [1]. Only 29.16 percent of the blind in India are part of mainstream of education and training as reported by the National Council of Education Research and Training [2]. The prevalence of blindness is higher among population having lower socio-economic status and it is quite high in rural India.

In fact, The World Health Organization (WHO) firstly confirmed on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2020 that a novel corona virus causing respiratory illness emerged in Wuhan city, China. declared it as a pandemic which appear invincible causing a huge mortality globally even today. It is a syndrome causing illness with involving symptoms from common cold to more severe and deadly respiratory diseases. Corona virus diseases (COVID-19) are a new lethal fear for humans, chiefly causing respiratory and digestive tract symptoms ranging from mild to severe pneumonia, septic shocks and multiple organ failure syndromes etc. Even asymptomatic infected person may become the source of infection via respiratory tract. Infants, children, elderly people, pregnant women and person with disabilities are at high risk. At present, there is no specific drug available for this disease and therefore causing high mortality [3].

India is the second populous country with 1.35 billion people in the world. So, it was observed that India would be overwhelmed with COVID -19 patients and the then current status of its health systems would be unable to control the surge [4]. Therefore, the international experts viewed India with sincere concerns to enhance health strategies for controlling COVID-19. Firstly, being reported on the 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 2020, currently India is the second highest in the world after the United States with reaching the mark of more than 8 million on 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2020. The Government of India duly recognized the threat of COVID-19 on time and introduced a series of steps since then to curb and control the transmission, e. g., screening body temperature, travel history, and screening at airport etc. The Government also started effective and praiseworthy public awareness campaigns through all possible means and resources. Furthermore, social distancing, personal hygiene and use of standard quality of face masks were emphasized to be used widely [5]. For the purpose of this study number of published works available online have been explored especially after the outbreak available on MEDLINE and WHO related website. The details of these studies are given below in a tabular form:

S.No.	Author	Article	Publisher	Year
1.	National Programme for Control of Blindness	National Programme for Control of Blindness report	<a href="http://dghs.gov.in">http://dghs.gov.in</a>	22/08/2018
2.	National Council of Research and training	Final Report NCERT	<a href="http://ncert.nic.in">http://ncert.nic.in</a>	25/10/2019
3.	Dundar.T.et.al	Menstrual Hygiene Management among Visually impaired women	Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care	24/08/2020
4.	World Health Organization	Corona Virus Tracker	<a href="http://www.mygov.in">http://www.mygov.in</a>	05/06/2020
5.	Royal National Institute of Blind	Stress and Fear Report(RN9B)	<a href="https://www.gov.in">https://www.gov.in</a>	25/06/2020
6.	Fares,et al	The Morbidity and Mortality of the visual impaired are likely to be higher during Covid- 19	Journal of Clinical Ophthalmology	23/07/2020
7.	Zaharieva,et al	Health in Inequities. Lessening the impact of covid-19 on vulnerable groups	Journal of Travel	23/04/2020
8.	World Health Organization	Global Action Plan- 2014-21	<a href="http://www.who.int">www.who.int</a>	2017
9.	Research Gate	How do blind people feel under Covid-19	<a href="http://www.researchgate.net">www.researchgate.net</a>	11/07/2020
10.	Wood,J.M	Risk of falls, Injuries falls and Injuries resulting from visual impairment in older adult	Journal of Aging and Health	02/06/2009
11.	Fare, et al	Evaluation of personal hygiene among student with visual impairment	Journal of Aging and Health	20/10/2018
12.	Suray,et al	Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on people with visual disability current Ophthalmology	Journal of Ophthalmology	07-05-2020
13.	World Health Organization	World report on Vision	<a href="https://www.int">https://www.int</a>	26/03/2020

14.	Durrani, et al	Covid-19 Lockdown has made life harsher for the Blind	WIRE <a href="https://m.thewire.in">https://m.thewire.in</a>	20/06/2020
15.	Ram, et al	Covid-19 pandemic in India	European heart Journal	10/06/2020
16.	Harjeet, et al	Estimating the impact of Covid-19 outbreak on high risk age group	Journal of Argumental human research	07/07/2020
17.	Jarvis, et al	Quantifying the impact of physical Distance on the measure of Covid- 19 in UK	Perspective in Psychological research	07/05/2020
18.	Khanna, et al	Covid-19 Pandemic and lessons learn and future directions	Indian Journal of Psychology	24/04/2020
19.	Meredith,W	Social distancing has left the visually impaired particularly isolated	Journal of World economic forum	21/07/2020
20.	Brooks and Fortuna	Psychomet validation of the job satisfaction of person with disabilities	Psychiatric rehabilitation Journal	12/01/2020

**Table 1**

**Impact on visually impaired**

People with visual impairment are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and other related communicable diseases. It means that more than 253 million people worldwide will be at risk to the pandemic endangering their lives in future [6]. Similarly, in India, around 13 million people with low vision-related problems are at stake to the COVID-19 [7]. Most of these visually challenged population resides in rural areas of the country belonging to lower socio-economic background. The morbidity and mortality of the Pw VI are likely to be higher during the COVID-19 in India [8].

Several researches on COVID -19 have observed that the current pandemic has increased psychological stress both in the general population and high- risk groups especially Pw VI as we need eye vision to perform more than 90 percent daily life activities. For example, frequent use and practices of preventive measures, completing daily life chores, social distancing, isolation measures, medication etc [9]. An individual with visual disability is often a victim of negligence in the society. The literacy rate among visual impaired is poor compared to a person without visual impairments. Research on the Psychological impact of mass trauma suggests that the pandemic might particularly harm the mental health of marginalized populations who have less access to socio- economic resources and supportive social networks. Persons with disabilities like low vision and blindness generally have more healthcare needs than others and, therefore, they are more prone to be affected by this deadly virus [10]. Compared to persons without disability, persons with disabilities are more likely to have poor health: among 43 countries, 42 percent of persons with disabilities (mostly sensory impairments) versus 6 percent of persons without disabilities perceive their health as poor [11]. General individual can maintain self-care and other preventive measures against COVID-19 outbreaks, but for a person with disabilities may have difficulties in implementing measures to keep the virus at bay, including personal hygiene and frequent cleaning much other primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Visually impaired persons may not be able to practice social distancing and cannot isolate themselves as thoroughly as other people, because they require regular help and support from other people for every day self-care tasks which are unattainable due to mandatory social distancing for primary prevention and isolation for secondary and tertiary preventions.

Grimly, there are some unique stress and challenges worsening mental health for Pw VI. Researches showed that disabled people like Pw VI find it harder to access various critical medical supports [6]. Transportation is another challenge for the visually impaired people. Unfortunately, there is no data on rate of rate of infections, number of hospitalizations, outcome/ death ratio aggregated by disability, age and socio-economic effects attributed to the impact of COVID -19 pertaining to visual impairments and other vulnerable groups. Besides, as the virus continues to spread, data are necessarily required to estimate actual health impacts and responses towards it [12]. Though, there is adequate number of researches is on specific impact of COVID-19 as well as community of Pw VI, however, several studies are underway. At one hand, The Pw VI are at 'high risk' in the current pandemic, and on another hand, they are openly facing medical discrimination and clinical malpractices causing additional stress and fears. A report of the Royal National Institute of Blind People [13] informed that two/ third of visually impaired individuals have lost independence since the beginning of lockdown, giving rise to a negative impact on their well-being and mental health. For example, emphases on social distancing and isolation may promote loneliness in such people. It has also been observed that the Pw VI are stressed about their inability to access to healthcare services, meet their financial needs and their ability to maintain their present standard of living. They are further stressed by their fragile economic status [14].

Inadequate personal hygiene and environmental sanitation may further increase the risk of infection among the Pw VI. For example, a study conducted in Egypt revealed poor knowledge knowledge of personal hygiene among students with visual impairments as compared to normal children [8]. The status of females with visual impairment is more pathetic. It was reported in a study of Turkey investigating practices of menstrual health among women with visual impairment [15]. Moreover a visually disabled or blind couple living independently may have poor environmental sanitation due to poor housing and supportive means. People with visual impairment are often live in poverty and poor health conditions. The nationwide lockdown effects, e. g., sudden disruption of supporting sources, potential economic hardship etc., are likely to have serious impacts on health and wellbeing Poor availability and accessibility to visual healthcare services are likely to cause detrimental visual impairments which further may lead to severity of a suffering and injuries due to falls and fractures of bones [16].

### Key factors of disease

There are three key factors to mitigate the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic in the Pw VI.

### Social restrictions

Researches on impact of COVID-19 with a social distancing measure have reported a substantial decrease in its transmission in populace. The Pw VI, like others, are also motivated and advised to ensure social distancing, avoid crowded places, restrict social interactions and stay at home during the pandemic. But, the Pw VI are highly likely to experience high level of loneliness, depression as well as medical health issues [16-20].

### Personal factors

The Government of India duly advises certain measures to be implemented at the individual levels like wearing standard face masks, frequent hand wash, limits unnecessary physical contacts to others, maintaining social distance of 6 feet and avoid touching to nose, eyes etc. These measures are to highly likely to minimize the risk of exposure to the COVID-19. Therefore, it is important for the Pw VI to adopt these behavioral measures in the best possible way during the pandemic. These people must be guided for pertinent issues and measures to be followed strictly. However, getting a close contact with people is very difficult for the Pw VI during pandemic period, and, non-compliance to social distancing possibly leave at stake and criticisms.

### Environment factors

Truly, the Pw VI shouldn't be ignored for their needs' fulfilment of livelihood during lockdown pandemic. Rather, the adequate amount and optimal level of environmental supports should be on priority for such people, as they mostly rely on caretakers for performing needful and instrumental activities of daily life. Accomplishment of such tasks could be possible to manage only through the governmental involvement in steering proper mutual co-operation and understanding of pertinent supportive groups and agencies. But so far, poor coordination, improper information dissemination, inadequate manpower, lacking support from local agencies and social groups have been major hurdles in implementing programmes.

### Recommendation for visually impaired

The following recommendations for the Pw VI in the context of environmental factors can be helpful to them during the pandemic:

- Well-planned and coordinated supportive programmes to meet the requirements of daily living through involving agencies of public and private sectors.
- Creating an environment for care givers in providing essentials services during lockdown.
- Training and education about measures of safety, purpose of social distancing and self-protection to caregivers, family members during the pandemic for the Pw VI.
- Utmost and regular assistance in accessing healthcare services and support as required during the pandemic for the Pw VI.
- Awareness of the core groups about psychosocial support, equal opportunities, personal dignity, respect while serving Pw VI.
- Financial support to the Pw VI during the lockdown period from the governmental and non-governmental sources.
- Arranging special training programmes and services for students with visual impairments who are left in respective special schools, elderly with visual impairments and supportive family members through various agencies.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Undoubtedly, since the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, the Pw VI have tremendously been experiencing distress with pains and perturbations. According to the Indian Government there are 5.4 million people with vision impairment in the country. A large section of this population is either unemployed or dependent on government provisions or working as daily wagers in the unorganized sectors. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, serious mobility challenges resulting in loss of livelihood have pushed them towards marginalization and dented their chances of survival. Really, the impact of COVID-19 has badly affected the Pw VI of various social segments. But no studies have reported such impacts differentially on violence on females with visual impairment, male and female elderly population with similar conditions, as well as destitute and orphans. Similar investigations are required to be promoted on impact of this pandemic on Pw VI differentially in urban, remote and rural areas, job markets of Pw VI, newborns and infants with visual impairments, persons with multiple impairments including visual impairments also etc. The authors have observations that the currently running pandemic is a high time for conducting such researches on their needs' assessment as well as design appropriate and effective intervention programmers to meet their physical and psychosocial needs for desirable level of survival and welfare. Relevant specialized autonomous institutes, composite regional centers and non-governmental agencies must be given financial and logistic supports and appreciations to come ahead for such useful investigations.

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