Exploring the Psychosocial Experiences of Women Undergraduates in Delhi, India, during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is of unprecedented and increasing concern for the world's population. The Indian education system, particularly the institutions and stakeholders of higher education, has felt its impact. With the announcement of the first official lockdown on 24 March 2020, the country decided to shut its schools and colleges, so classes have either been postponed or moved online, even though higher education institutions are ill-equipped to deal with virtual learning (Talidong and Toquero 2020) and are facing a host of challenges in the wake of other issues that the COVID-19 lockdown is bringing to the surface. Higher education institutions (HEIs) were prompted to establish management approaches regarding the pandemic to encourage positive health behavior among students (Akan et al. 2010). This entire situation has had a significant influ-

Notes for this section can be found on page 133.

ence on the psychosocial experiences of Indian undergraduate students who have had to limit themselves to the boundaries of their homes. This is because most students in India continue to live with their parents while attending college, especially if they are enrolled in an HEI in the same city. This is partly because parents sponsor their children's education for some years after schooling and because of cultural norms that give preference to cohabitation with one's family. Many students reported anxiety and stress not only because of COVID-19 itself, but also because of being trapped at home with their families. We aimed to capture the experiences of these college students, since girls and women in general and female undergraduates in particular are niche groups whose concerns are not usually voiced in the discourse on the current pandemic.[1]

It is not the first time that the world is experiencing the effects of widespread illness that has brought unforeseen challenges to its inhabitants, especially girls and women. E. Sara Davies and Belinda Bennett (2016) highlight the challenges faced by women and girls during the Ebola and Zika epidemics. They discuss the relationship between school closure and disturbed learning, on the one hand, and early pregnancy, on the other, during the Ebola outbreak, and the "conspicuous invisibility of women" (Harman 2016, cited in Davies and Bennett 2016: 1043) during the Zika outbreak. However, the impact of epidemics on girls and girlhood remains a relatively unexplored field of study, particularly, perhaps, in relation to the challenges faced by Indian women undergraduates and the adaptive patterns they have employed.

A World Bank Group policy report (de Paz et al. 2020) entitled *Gender Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic* shows that women and girls are affected in particular ways by infectious disease outbreaks like COVID-19, and that some face more negative impacts than men do. For example, girls in some middle- and low-income countries are expected to take on more household and family care duties, and this leaves them with less time for learning at home. The prevalent social and gendered norms in India and elsewhere, and the bargaining power of men vis-à-vis women in the household, determine how balanced the distribution of household and care duty is, but it is most likely to lead to a reduction in time devoted to study for girls and women.

Patriarchal social norms determining access to assets related to land use, inheritance, or finance also need to be considered in this context, along with the prevalent traditional social and gendered norms that affect

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the coping strategies and decision-making processes of young women. For example, given the closure of schools and the economic difficulties related to the pandemic, families may adopt coping strategies that lead to girls being at higher risk of early marriage and pregnancy.

Young Women and Education in India

Despite the extensive research and government investment in the so-called modernized education system in India—in which importance is given to universalization, access, and equity, according to Krishna Kumar (2010)—scant attention has been paid to the voices and experiences of young Indian women undergraduates. Studies of college-level undergraduate women in India have revolved around four primary areas: college as a site of temporary freedom for girls and women and as a critical time for them; the role of college-based friendship in the making of girlhood; college education as a bridge to girls' marriage for their parents; and the role of the patriarchy and sociocultural dominance in the internalization and rationalization of gendered thought, space, and time (Kirk 2005; Kumar 2010; Patel 2017). Girls' lives and education in contemporary India continue to be shaped by cultural forces deeply anchored in history (Kumar 2010). These forces, along with traditional practices, can be traced back to ancient India, as Uma Chakravarti (1999) reminds us. This structural framework includes the sociolegal devices that regulate perceptions and decisions on matters as significant as the appropriate age for marriage, the eligibility of women for economic independence, and their social status. We argue that the current pandemic has exacerbated the effects of these social and cultural forces in molding girls' lives and their experiences.

We are interested in the many forms of subordination faced by young women, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as they navigate formal education in India. Salient norms around gender shape parental decision-making, as do critical considerations around economic investment, marriage alliances, and the associated opportunity costs, such as the loss to parents of the unpaid domestic labor of girls who are not educated (Mukhopadhyay et al. 1994). Furthermore, education is often imagined as a basis for consolidating feminine accomplishments and "improving [girls'] capacity to be effective mothers, wives, and household workers" (Dyson 2014: 58). However, the perspectives of young women

themselves rarely form the center of analysis in studies of young people and higher education in India.

In India, girlhood is a highly structured and controlled phase of socialization during which a girl's rights and freedom are regulated according to the patriarchal social fabric. Karuna Chanana (2001: 37) argues that

> [t]he growth and development of women's education in India are caught in two simultaneous processes. On the one hand, the state policy and public discourse on education put a premium on the need to promote education among girls and women to generate positive forces at the macro-level. On the other, the micro-level forces rooted in the family, the kin group and culture determine the educational policies, programs and ability of girls and women to access them. Therefore, it is not possible to view women's education without reference to their social context, which is rooted in culture, religion and the "patrifocal family structure and ideology."

This gives young women a disadvantage as far as accessing and completing a college education is concerned. Our study looked at the experiences of women undergraduates in relation to their struggles and concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic in the new enforced online teaching and learning environment. The University of Delhi (a public university) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting classes online using various media like WhatsApp and video calls through Zoom and Google Meet, and by making course content and notes available to students through college apps and the uploading of lectures onto Moodle and YouTube. Concerning assessment, first- and second-year students are graded based on their performance in an internal assessment, and final-year students have been asked to appear for an examination. After months of speculation, the University Grants Commission and the University of Delhi decided to conduct the third-year bachelor's exam in September. The indecisiveness about the dates, the lack of technical support, vagueness about the format, and much more has left the students anxious. This anxiety is the focus of our study, as we tried to understand and explore the nature of the women undergraduates' psychosocial experiences during the pandemic. We focused on how already-present socioeconomic inequalities intersect with the gendered space and time in which this pandemic has confined these women undergraduates to their family homes. The research aimed to unveil the nature of the academic anxieties, psychological distress, and social struggles the young women undergraduates faced, along with the coping strategies they adopted during the pandemic.

Method

We used the snowball sampling technique to select four participants referred to here by the pseudonyms Savi, Pahal, Yasti, and Adya, all of whom were between eighteen and twenty-one years of age and were studying humanities and social sciences in four affiliated colleges for women at the University of Delhi, and with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. Savi and Pahal belong to the lower-middle class and Yasti and Adya to the middle class. Savi belongs to a scheduled caste,[2] and Pahal and Adya to a general category.[3] Also, these three women are Hindus while Yasti is Muslim. These young women are in different years of their three-year undergraduate courses.

In-depth interviews, crucial for capturing people's voices and stories (Hennink et al. 2020), were based on detailed interview guidelines and enabled us to build one-on-one rapport with the participants. Depending on the participants' linguistic comfort and availability, we conducted interviews in English or Hindi at specified times. We conducted two to three interviews to enable us to obtain in-depth information from each participant. All interviews were conducted by the authors online over Zoom (audio and video calls), with the unique context of India and its prevalent gender norms being kept in mind, and were recorded. At the beginning of the first interview, we introduced participants to the research topic, told them that the calls would be recorded, and assured them of the confidentiality of any information they imparted to us. We asked those who agreed to participate for their written consent. To maintain confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms throughout.

For Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006: 79), thematic analysis, to which we subjected our data, is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) from within [it]." It is a flexible method suitable for theory-driven (deductive) as well as data-driven (inductive) research approaches. We used a primarily inductive form of thematic analysis, and we followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting such thematic analysis. During the first phase we transcribed the interviews and translated the Hindi ones into English, which helped to familiarize us all with the data. The second phase was devoted to generating initial codes following several close readings of the interview transcripts inductively while keeping the aims of our research in mind. We applied the codes to shorter sentences as well as to longer paragraphs. These codes were further refined through constant engage-

ment with the data. During the third phase we collated initial codes under broader themes that captured their content to facilitate our search for themes. During the fourth phase, we undertook a process of refinement by checking whether themes worked with coded extracts. We involved the entire data set in a review of the themes. This refinement of themes also helped us to ensure coherence and discreteness within and between the themes. Phase five was devoted to identifying the individual story of each theme, as well as the overall story held together by all the themes. This helped us define and name themes. During the sixth phase we selected the specific examples of themes necessary to produce this chapter.

Findings

We analyzed young women's experiences during this pandemic by drawing on the literature on past pandemics and how they affected women's access to, and continuation of, education. Girls and women have been recognized as a vulnerable group in many domains during this coronavirus outbreak (Hall et al. 2020). Katarzyna Burzynska and Gabriela Contreras (2020) assert that during it, some parents who assign a lower value to girls' education might not provide their daughters with a second chance to become educated when it ends. Further, because of the closure of educational institutions, the current situation may dampen the already-achieved progress of young women students, especially in developing countries. The anxiety and uncertainty faced by the young women in our study was palpable, as we go on to show.

Academic Anxieties and Student Struggle

Although the literature establishes that there are gender-based differences in education, especially higher education, for young women in India, there is negligible research on young women's struggles to access education through online media. Our interviews uncovered anxieties related to online classes, internal assessments, exams, and other academic matters among the research participants. Concerns ranged from small technical issues to teachers being unresponsive to students' queries online. Savi, who is pursuing an undergraduate degree in a language course, told us about many of the issues that she has faced while attending online classes. She explained,

> Ma'am, if we have like a batch of forty, then first there are a lot of technical issues, and if we want to say anything about the disturbance then we have to go and check the chat box whether someone's audio is muted or not. Also, many students are not available at the same time, some are not able to join, and some don't know how to join.

Even during the interview session, Savi was experiencing network issues. She has to go to a particular spot on her terrace where there is better video quality, and this makes her invisible in classroom discussions. Maria E. Salinas (2020) and Andrew Perrin and Erica Turner (2019) report similar kinds of technology-related challenges experienced by Black, Latino, and Hispanic students, who, in the absence of Wi-Fi and traditional broadband facilities at home, have to rely on smartphone internet or travel to McDonalds, the library, or a public hotspot to complete their academic assignments. Adya, who is in her second year of a bachelor's degree in geography, spoke about how the teachers had been exerting pressure on her and her fellow students in practical classes to complete their assignments, and said that the teachers had not given them timely feedback, which is a reasonable expectation in a practical class.

Pahal, who is in her third year, mentioned that they had still not received any explicit instructions from the university regarding their exams. She was seriously concerned because the exams had been postponed, and this led to a lot of confusion and anxiety. When asked about her final-year exams, she replied, "Ma'am, today also like . . . they are saying that they are not sure when they should organize those exams."

This state of confusion regarding examinations and the attainment of a degree affects future goals and actions. This is especially true for young women from developing countries like India, where a substantial number of patriarchal values and social norms (de Paz et al. 2020) already confine their time in higher education to rigidly specific stipulated years, and where many parents understand higher education to be merely a CV for marriage, as Viresh Patel (2017) reminds us. Under the so-called protection principle that works under the control of patrilineal kin (Chanana 2001), young women are socialized to internalize, confirm, and enact the patriarchal values that promise to protect them economically, emotionally, and physically. Therefore, for many of them, the idea of even having a choice to study in the future is frightening, never mind the possibility of rebelling.

It is clear that our findings support Stidham Kelli Hall et al.'s (2020) assertion that girls and women constitute a vulnerable group in many

domains and that their vulnerability is exacerbated by COVID-19. Undeniably, anxieties related to their academic lives have emerged as the most common form of mental illness in women undergraduates. Han Qi and his colleagues' (2020) investigation into the pervasiveness of anxiety among Chinese adolescents during COVID-19 also substantiates our results. Their findings suggest that strict measures, including lockdown, the shutdown of academic institutions, and the cancellation of various events, put adolescents at risk of anxiety. In such an uncertain time, girl students report greater worry and a higher risk of anxiety.

Negotiating Freedom and Choices

For each undergraduate whom we interviewed, attending college or being physically present there had different meanings. For these young women, uncertainty about the reopening of college and the resumption of traditional classes, which involve meeting with college peers and friends, fills them with anxiety. Adya said,

> We are students. We don't have a habit of staying at home for a long duration and now it's been three and a half months at home. There was a time that I used to think that nobody understands me, at least from home. You can have calls, even the video calls, but you really need a person in a physical sense to tell them about your things and so going out really makes a difference for a moment.

In Adya's narrative, her reference to "we" explicitly reflects her heightened need for peer-group belonging. Engagement with a peer group is highly significant during this phase of life, since it serves as an opportunity to acquire unique skills and experiences in collective spaces (Brown 1990; Rubin et al. 1998, cited in Kiuru et al. 2007). For girls, the meaning of friends and peer groups is different from their meaning to boys. For example, girls' peer groups are more intimate, are tightly knitted (Benenson 1990), and lean toward trusting relationships (Brendgen et al. 2001). Moreover, with their friends, girls indulge in greater self-disclosure (Buhrmester 1990). Since Indian culture places great significance on parental consent for making friends and for meeting and interacting with peers, parents are becoming stringent with these rules during the lockdown and, as Patel (2017) observes, parents' permission has greater significance for young women than for young men. Additionally, for women undergraduates, this restriction on their freedom is threatening (Drennan 2018).

Other participants also expressed similar concerns. For them, going to college signifies freedom to study, to hang out, to meet people, to participate in protests, to travel solo, and to engage in many more behaviors. College gave Savi an opportunity to travel solo, unguarded by any male member of her family; for her, this was an exciting experience. With the closing of college during COVID-19 she has lost her chance at freedom, and with it her agency to exercise this freedom. She said, "In the back of the mind there is a lingering tension that when there was college there was some joy in our life. Going to college daily, traveling daily. And for me they were mainly solo trips."

Since she has been confined to her home, the discourse surrounding women's safety and security has socialized Savi into believing that her locality is unsafe for going out alone after dark. Social media and family members constantly reiterate this, and she consensually agrees, and even tried to convince us that the city becomes unsafe once darkness falls. Only when she goes to college does she feel that she has the choice to be on her own, and this is what she most misses now. Her current understanding of time and safety indicates a tendency toward believing that she will come to harm in the dark, and this may well turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although venturing out to college and for other related activities with friends gives a sense of freedom to young women, freedom is still a negotiated category. Most research on girls and young women, especially that which focuses on education and work opportunities, refers to narratives that highlight the success stories of girls' newfound freedom and opportunities. But we need to understand the complexity of this freedom in the Indian context, especially since the experience varies depending on one's situatedness in the sociocultural milieu. "Freedoms are not straightforward, nor equally available" (Charlton 2007: 122). We noted that students were not given the freedom, even, to choose their own college subjects. For example, our research participants found that their parents did not readily trust their choice of subject for undergraduate study. Pahal's choice to pursue a BSc in Home Science was not accepted initially by her parents. They brought in her elder brother and discussed with him in great detail the pros and cons of her opting for this subject, and then they finally agreed to her choice. She recounted how neither she nor any elder sibling were consulted when her brother chose his undergraduate subject. She felt that her parents did not believe that she was capable of making such a big decision by herself.

Sociocultural, Economic, and Psychological Struggles

Pahal felt that the current COVID-19 situation has resulted in parents marrying off their daughters, since there are fewer expenses and a much smaller dowry involved. Citing a case from her neighborhood, she explained,

> There is a girl I guess of my age only, and she has got married in this COVID. I have seen her working, but I was really shocked, like what happened suddenly that she has to get married this time only . . . So, well there might be more [girls], and their parents might be thinking that there is no point in educating them further . . . so it's better to get them married. Marriage can be organized by calling fifty people, and there'll be a less[er] financial burden over parents.

Since these gendered experiences of women undergraduates are embedded in sociocultural factors such as caste, tribe, and class (Chanana 2000), the COVID-19 pandemic, in affecting families' economic situation, can have devastating consequences for young women. Families of women students coming from the lower end of the hierarchy have come to expect them to marry early, primarily through arranged matches.

These undergraduate women expressed concerns regarding their greater contribution to the household and to care work since they have been confined to their homes. Before the pandemic struck, most of these young women would have gone home after finishing their classes and meeting their academic work responsibilities, and would not have been expected to contribute much to household work. The situation changed and, for our participants, the pandemic-induced lockdown appeared to have reversed the progress made by women in general through their decades of unrelenting struggle for economic empowerment and being allowed out of the house.

Young women are also witnessing the effects of the economic slowdown caused by this pandemic. Pahal mentioned that along with her studies, she used to give paid extra classes before the lockdown started, but this came to a halt, affecting her financial independence, which will have consequences for her self-sponsoring her college education. She explained,

> After 12th standard only, I have been an independent girl financially also . . . but this situation has created a scenario in which I am sitting at home twenty-four hours, and there is no source of income. All my savings are gone like that. So, I am not financially stable right now.

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For Pahal, the importance of work lies in making sure she can contribute to her family's income and be self-reliant in realizing her higher education aspirations. But since her father's income has been reduced by the lockdown, she feels anxious about both the financial condition of her family and her ability to pay for her higher education.

Psychological Issues

Yasti's daily routine is "just a lot of monotony right now." She added,

> I am a little bit disappointed in myself because I thought that I'll be productive starting June, but I have not been able to do that . . . I feel like there is no deadline in this lockdown, so there is nothing to look forward to.

In addition, because there is no certainty regarding when the situation will be over, the students lack motivation and there is nothing to look forward to on a daily basis, so even though Yasti is engaged in two internships, she still feels unproductive. Her daily routine during the lockdown seems futile to her.

Coping Strategies

A recent psychological wellness guide on COVID-19, produced especially by Emory University for families with college students at home, asserts that "[c]ollege students are accustomed to a level of autonomy and independence that is difficult to lose when returning home" (Department of Psychiatry COVID-19 Response 2020: 1). Simultaneously, they may experience isolation, grieve for the loss of their college experiences, and face conflicts with parents. The American Psychological Association (2020) has also considered the issue of students' coping with stress related to COVID-19.

We found that young women are using diverse coping strategies depending on their needs, socioeconomic class, and time frames. They know that they must employ coping mechanisms if they are to survive the COVID-19 lockdown. The uncertainty and ambiguity attached to COVID-19 has impacted the daily schedules and life patterns of these young women. Additionally, it has presented new challenges to, and changes in, their lived social reality.

Something that all the participants mentioned was their communication with their friends through calls, video chats, texts, and so on, and the fact that this has helped them get through these difficult times. Like Adya, all our respondents are maintaining peer relationships through social media and telephone conversations, and they are scheduling virtual meetings with their friends. Some of these young women have engaged themselves in doing things around the house and have also indulged in various hobbies and interests to offset the stress and deal with the loneliness. Savi told us about how she had started helping her mother by cutting up vegetables and dusting the house. In Pahal's case, the loss of earning power led to a state of struggle, confusion, and tension in the early months of the pandemic. But after some time she showed resilience and found a new job and has been keeping herself busy. However, Yasti's work in two internships gives her little relief and she experiences boredom. Savi said,

> In college, we have a lot of societies and many foundations which advertise various competitions on their online platform[s], so I have joined those. Also, I write something on my own. Also, I am working as a content writer for a foundation as well.

She added, "I try to help my mother in household work." Her engaging in stereotypically feminine work like chopping vegetables and dusting the house might offer a glimpse of her conformity to patriarchal structures, or it may simply be the only way she can help her mother. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of patriarchal bargaining is worth considering here. She suggests that women can decide to conform to patriarchal demands for emotional, psychological, or financial gain. For Savi, the coping strategy of helping her mother may give her emotional or psychological satisfaction.

Conclusion

Our research study focused on exploring the nature of the psychosocial issues faced by young women undergraduates during COVID-19 and on highlighting the coping strategies they use. Drawing on information about the socialization of young women and the patriarchal fabric of Indian society, we have shown how already-existing socioeconomic inequalities intersect with the imposed confinement of these women undergraduates. They all face academic anxieties related to the delaying of exams and to problems accessing and continuing with online classes as they struggle to

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complete their education. Although divided by socioeconomic and other cultural markers, all the women undergraduates are somewhat similarly placed in relation to what might be called a new digital divide that has been created by the pandemic-induced lockdown. They all miss being physically present in college, and they all face sociocultural and economic struggles, including the loss of income and the fear of being unable to return to college after the pandemic has come to an end. Most feel that the pressure to get them married off will build up, as parents view this pandemic as an opportunity to have a low-cost wedding. On a more personal level, these young women also reported feeling unproductive, demotivated, hopeless, and lonely during this period. This pandemic has left these young women longing for real time with their friends, venturing out, attending college, and going to lectures. It has left them feeling shut off behind closed doors, and they aspire to freedom.

This chapter has revealed that the mental health of these women undergraduates is of concern during this pandemic. Anxiety related to their academic lives, to the loss of income, and to the increased fear of losing out on educational opportunities in a country that prioritizes boys' education is obvious. They are suffering from the lack of contact with their peer groups, and they fear getting trapped into early marriages given the dominant patriarchal values of their society. Those from a lower socioeconomic and more conservative background are at even greater risk. The negative impact of the pandemic on the economy and the resultant unemployment and slowdown not only puts limitations on their mobility, it also threatens their further education.

Finally, this study helped us to recognize the experiences of young women in the context of the current political and economic environment of a developing nation like India. Here, young women are expected to adhere to traditional cultural values, but at the same time, they want to be educated and financially independent. We have attempted to highlight the lived experience of young women students during this pandemic and show how it affects their already-gendered lives in the Indian social context.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this research has exposed how young women undergraduates are battling differently with psycho-socio-economic entrapments related to COVID-19; it will be interesting to see how this pandemic-induced gender disparity in access to, and continuation of, education will be addressed in future.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. We have used the terms "girls" and "young women" interchangeably since, in Indian culture, females in the age group between eighteen and twenty-one years are generally considered to be young women, but we understand that this is not the case in other countries.
2. The scheduled castes are officially designated groups of people in India. In modern literature, these are sometimes referred to as Dalits, a word that means "broken" or "scattered."
3. The general category, defined by default, refers to those who do not require the benefit of an affirmative action policy on the grounds of their social background, or are not considered to require such a benefit.

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