

Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) in Field Practice Area of a Tertiary Care Hospital

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Abstract: **Background:** Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community health workers under the National Rural Health Mission of Government of India. ASHAs play an essential role in strengthening the primary healthcare system in India. They are not recognised as “workers,” but as “volunteers/ activists” and excludes them from the protection offered under various labour laws. They do not receive social security benefits such as paid leave, insurance of any kind, or maternity leave. Coronavirus disease (COVID19) effected them socially, mentally and economically. **Objective:** To assess the challenges faced by ASHA workers during COVID19 pandemic. **Methodology:** Cross sectional study was done among all the ASHA workers in rural and urban field practice area of Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam . **Results:** It is found that in this study that on average of the respondents faced difficulties frequently during this pandemic and about per cent of ASHAs opine that COVID19 has a lot of impact on socio-economic status. **Conclusion:** This study discusses the economic impact of pandemic on ASHA workers and majority of the respondents felt financial difficulty during the pandemic period and it also impacted their savings, regular expenditure and jobs of their family members. From this study, it is suggested that Government should take appropriate steps to improving the financial status of ASHA workers by increasing their honorarium and improving incentive.

Keywords: ASHA, COVID19, Socio-economic problems, Frontline health workers

1. Introduction

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community health workers under the National Rural Health Mission of Government of India. Along with auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) and Anganwadi (childcare) workers (AWWs), they are among India’s frontline health workers.

ASHA programme began in 2005 and the programme covers all States in the country except Goa (GoI 2020a). According to the National Health Mission (NHM) guidelines, any “woman resident of the village – married/widow/divorced, and preferably in the age group of 25 to 45 years with formal education up to eighth class” can be selected as ASHA (GoI 2005). ASHAs undergo a brief period of training before commencing their work and their task involve creating health awareness, conducting immunisation drives, facilitating reproductive and child healthcare, and promoting other healthcare initiatives.

ASHAs are not recognised as “workers,” but as “volunteers/ activists” and excludes them from the protection offered under various labour laws. They do not receive social security benefits such as paid leave, insurance of any kind, or maternity leave.²

Along with the local bodies and other peripheral health workers (such as AWWs and ANMs), ASHAs play an essential role in strengthening the primary healthcare system in India. ASHAs are paid a small “honorarium” for their work monthly.² During the pandemic, the workers were

tasked with spreading awareness about COVID 19 and safety protocols ,identifying and tracking COVID19 positive cases as well as carrying out vaccination drive often without any personal safety gear. They also conferred honour for their “crucial role in linking the community with the health system as shown throughout the COVID19 pandemic,” by WHO.

2. Review of Literature

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community health workers under the National Rural Health Mission of the government of India. They have been contributing and devoting the majority of their time in COVID-19 work as warriors. It is affecting them a lot both socially and economically and they and their families have faced a lot of health issues. The study of **Bandyopadhyay S** et. al. infection and mortality of health workers worldwide from COVID-19 reveals that 1, 52,888 health workers are infected and 1413 deaths were reported. Infection was mainly in women but deaths mainly in men with 71.6% and 70.8% respectively.³ **Niyati and Mandela SN** have studied the impact of the pandemic on ASHAs in India. With regards to the available secondary data, which highlights the various problems faced by the ASHA worker during this pandemic.³ **Kingsley JP** et. al. in their study of the changing aspects of motherhood in face of the COVID-19 pandemic in low and middle-income countries have found that multi-sectorial investments providing high-quality care and available to all segments of the population are needed and pandemic preparedness programme must include action plan

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resilient material health service.⁴ **Azeez EP** et. al. examined the impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers in India. The study reveals that the dismal state of women migrant workers and their families and argues that urgent policy intervention is required to address the impoverishment. **Dutta & Fischer** studied local governance of COVID-19 and social security in rural areas of a developing country. They have examined the elected rural government in coordinating state response in Rajasthan, Kerala and Odisha.⁵ **Bawza V** et. al. experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Odisha and examined that the various challenges faced by the rural people in India. **Gumber and Nebhinani** examined the impact of COVID-19 pandemic child and adolescent mental health and identified that they have been struggling with fear, anxiety and uncertainty, depression and constant worries about their future and they have to face the psychological and emotional brunt of this pandemic. **Jelly P** et. al. in their study impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological status of pregnant women. The survey result reveals that around 73.6% of pregnant women have a minimal psychological impact and a minimal level of anxiety.^{6,7} **Vora KS** et. al. examined the impact of COVID-19 women and children and the need for a gendered approach in the vaccine. Taking into account gender-based biological differences; the inclusion of pregnant women is of vital importance for the development of the COVID-19 vaccine.⁸

3. Purpose of the study

During the pandemic, the work of ASHAs increased fourfold. Many of the ASHA workers infected during COVID19 and few of them lost their life due to COVID19. ASHA workers are receiving 10,000 /- currently without any additional incentives. During the pandemic period ASHA workers has faced many social, psychological and economical problems. Against this backdrop, there is a need to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic status of ASHA workers

Objective of the Study

To assess the challenges faced by ASHA workers during the COVID19 pandemic

Research Methodology:

It is a cross sectional study including all the ASHA workers working since 2years or more than 2 years in rural and urban field practice area of Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam. Total no. of ASHAs working during the study period were 89 and 88 participated as one of them didn't consented.

Data Collection Method:

This exercise was undertaken during their monthly meetings at Rural Health Centre, Simhachalam and Urban Health Center, Allipuram. The purpose of the study, the procedure to be followed, and its implications were explained to all participants and informed consent was obtained before commencement of the study. A pre-tested semi-structured questionnaire including socio-demographic details and Likert scale was used to know the opinions of the participants.

Data analysis:

The Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft excel represented in terms of percentage and proportions.

4. Results

The demographic profile of the respondents and perception of ASHA workers towards COVID-19 works and the impact of COVID-19 on the social and economic status of the ASHA workers were studied here

Table 1: Demographic Details

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage	
	(n)	(%)	
Religion	Hindus	77	88
	Muslims	7	8
	Christians	0	0
	Others	4	4
Family Pattern	Joint	7	8
	Nuclear	81	92
Age	< 20 years	0	0
	20-30 years	10	12
	30-40 years	70	80
	40-55 years	8	8
	50 years and more	0	0
Education	Professional degree	0	0
	Graduate	18	20
	Intermediate	0	0
	High school	70	80
	Middle school	0	0
	Primary school	0	0
Marital status	Unmarried	0	0
	Married	88	100
	Widow	0	0

This study found out that 88% of the participants are Hindu and 8% constitute Muslims. Most of the participants to Nuclear family than Joint family. With regards to education 18% are graduate, 70% finished their high school. Among the participants most of them belong to the age group of 30-40 years and taking the consideration of the marital status 88% of them are married.

Perception of ASHA workers towards COVID-19 work:

ASHA workers are facing a lot of problems while doing COVID-19 work. Their perception was collected and presented in Table-2; represents the data about the respondents' working conditions during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study found that 37 (42%) of the respondents frequently felt it was tough to work during the COVID-19 lockdown situation. 37 (42%) respondents opine that it was frequently drained a great amount of their energy to work during the COVID-19 lockdown situation. The majority of 34 (39%) of the respondents rarely felt hesitant to work during the COVID-19 lockdown pandemic period. 45 (51%) of the respondents occasionally thought the COVID-19 pandemic situation had created an extra burden in their usual work. 45 (51%) of the respondents occasionally felt depressed working during lockdown situations. 44 (51%) of the ASHA workers frequently felt while treating COVID-19 positive patients might be impacted on their health, while 22(26%) occasionally and 2(2%) of the respondents rarely felt for same. From this discussion, it is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown caused abnormal working situations

for many ASHA workers. Therefore ASHA workers do have a negative perception towards COVID-19 work.

Table 2: Perception of ASHAs

Particulars (%)	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very rarely	Never
Do you felt it was tough to work during the COVID-19 lockdown situation	36 (32)	42 (37)	22 (19)	0	0	0
Does it drain a great amount of your energy to work during the COVID-19 lockdown situation	38 (33)	42 (37)	19 (17)	1 (1)	0	0
Did you feel hesitate to work during the COVID-19 lockdown period	30 (26)	39 (34)	28 (25)	3 (3)	0	0
Did you thought the COVID-19 pandemic situation had created an extra burden on your usually work	18 (16)	51 (45)	25 (22)	2 (2)	3 (2)	1 (1)
Did you ever felt depressed working during the COVID-19 lockdown situation	16 (14)	51 (45)	32 (28)	1 (1)	0	0
Had you ever felt, while treating COVID-19 positive patients might impact your health	18 (16)	51 (45)	26 (22)	2 (2)	2 (2)	1 (1)

Impact of COVID-19 on Social Status of ASHA workers:

Table No 3 discusses the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ASHA workers. The study found that the majority 160 (64%) of the respondents occasionally felt the corona outbreak harmed their relationships, while 40 (16%) and 20 (8%) very rarely and never felt the same respectively. The study also focuses on the issue of domestic violence experienced by ASHA workers, in this regard 190 (76%) of the respondents frequently experienced an issue of domestic

violence during the pandemic period, 40 (16%) of them rarely experienced such problems. The question had been asked regarding the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the upbringing of children of their family, the study found that 180 (72%) frequently, 40 (16%) very frequently and 30 (12%) occasionally felt COVID-19 pandemic harmed the upbringing of their children. 150 (60%) of the respondents opine that their work nature frequently caused frustrations among the family members

Table 3: Impact on Social Status

Particulars	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very rarely	Never
Did you felt the corona outbreak harmed your relationship	23 (21)	52 (46)	18 (16)	3 (2)	3 (2)	1 (1)
Did you experience any kind of domestic violence during the pandemic period	18 (16)	36 (32)	32 (28)	7 (6)	7 (6)	0
Did your work nature ever caused frustrations among your family members	13 (12)	48 (42)	33 (29)	5 (4)	1 (1)	0

Impact of COVID-19 on Economic Status of ASHA workers:

Table No 4 represents economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ASHA workers, the majority 200 (80%) of the respondents frequently felt problem of the fulfillment of basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident from the above study that all respondents 250 (100%) frequently felt some sort of financial difficulty during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information was also collected regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the savings of the respondents, as per this, results showed that

200 (80%) of the respondents opine that the COVID-19 pandemic has frequently affected their savings. With regards to the pandemic effect on regular expenditure, the study found that 160 (64%) of the respondents are frequently affected during the pandemic lockdown. Finally, questions had been asked regarding the pandemic effect on the jobs of their family members. The study found that 200 (80%) of the respondents' family members were lost their jobs or mode of income that they were dependent on like business and they have unquestionable relies on the salary of ASHA workers.

Table 4: Impact on Economic Status

Particulars	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
Did you felt the problem of the fulfillment of basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic	28 (25)	44 (39)	23 (20)	1 (1)	3 (2)	1 (1)
Did you felt any financial difficulty during the COVID-19 pandemic	30 (26)	45 (40)	19 (17)	5 (4)	1 (1)	0
Did this pandemic affect your on savings	17 (15)	58 (51)	18 (16)	6 (5)	1 (1)	0
Did this pandemic effect on regular expenditure	15 (13)	60 (53)	14 (12)	2 (2)	6 (5)	3 (3)
Did this pandemic effect on job of your family members	3 (3)	2 (2)	5 (4)	9 (8)	81 (71)	0

5. Conclusion

ASHA Workers playing an important role in realizing the objectives of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). Their role is remarkable during the situations like COVID-19 pandemic. As found in the present study, out of 88 ASHA Workers selected, 42 of them frequently felt it was tough to work during COVID-19 lockdown situation still they performed their duties properly, which is proved through the present study that 3 respondents rarely felt hesitate to work during this situation and 22 of them occasionally thought that pandemic situation had created an extra burden on their usual work. But concerning the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the respondents felt negative impacts on their relationships, experienced domestic violence and felt negativity about the upbringing of the children of their families. The present study also discusses the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, 39 respondents frequently felt the problem of the fulfillment of basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, all most all respondents felt financial difficulty during the pandemic situation and said that this situation had also impacted their savings, regular expenditure and jobs of their family members. From this study, it is suggested the Government take some steps to improve the conditions of the ASHA Workers by the means of enhancing their socio-economic status other initiatives.

6. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and disrupted health services delivery at all levels of the health system. Testing and tracing of the COVID-19 patients and their contacts is an emergency health service during the pandemic. Effective management of immunization during the disaster time shows the resilience and strength of the health system and frontline health workers. The study aims to explore challenges faced by the ASHA workers during the delivery of the health services during COVID-19.

According to the study conducted by **Niyati Singaraju**⁹ et al, the challenges faced by ASHAs during the COVID19 period done using telephone interviews found out that the work of ASHAs intensified during pandemic. Besides having low payments, their incentives were also lost during COVID19. Their health was at risk because of inadequate safety equipment and inadequate training and also they are not having social security.

The study done by **Monika Gogoi**¹⁰ et al, saw that ASHA workers have to do a lot of work but they didn't receive a proper salary and other facilities, besides their position in society is not so good. The delay in their honorarium hurt their self-esteem and has a bearing on their service delivery.

Study done by **Devarajappa S**¹¹ et al found that an average of 80% of the ASHAs faced difficulties frequently during the pandemic and 80-90% of ASHAs opine that COVID19 has a lot of impact on socio-economic status

Limitations: Sample size is limited and can't be generalizable.

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Conflict of Interest:

No conflict of interest between authors

Authors Contribution:

The study examined the challenges faced by ASHA Workers during this COVID-19 period and its impact on their socioeconomic status, the results of this research is suggested to the Government to take appropriate action.

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