

NEWSPAPER- REPORTING ON SUICIDES DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN PAKISTAN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Summary

Background: *suicide is a social relevant issue and a leading cause of deaths in the world; it has been reported that COVID-19 has significantly increased the rate of suicide worldwide. This study aimed to review media reporting on suicide cases occurred in Pakistan during the COVID-19 lockdown.*

Subjects and Methods: *a content analysis has been performed considering the electronic version of the daily Kawish newspaper reporting suicide cases from March to August 2020 in Pakistan.*

Results: *a total of 213 news regarding suicide in Pakistan during the lockdown period were identified. Suicide committers reported age ranging 19-30 years old, and the majority of them were males (74%). Suicide methods ranged as following: harmful practices (79%) > hanging (37%) > self-poisoning (28%). Factors associated to the risk of suicide were: familial discords (36%), poverty (21%) and joblessness (14%).*

Conclusion: *findings of this study have shown that pandemic lockdown in Pakistan have increased the number of factors, such as family issues, unemployment and poverty, leading to suicide especially in young males. The report of suicides may have an impact on the public general opinion and a responsible news-reporting is needed by press agencies and media.*

Keywords: *media, suicide, newspaper, developing countries, COVID-19, lockdown, Pakistan*

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INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a relevant social and public health issue all across the globe. In 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that one person dies of suicide every 40 seconds in the world (WHO 2014), and around 703,000 people commit suicide annually (WHO 2021). In Pakistan the rate of suicides is relevant with 15 to 35 people committing suicide every day, with one person dying of suicide/hour (Rehman & Haque 2020). Around two-thirds of the global cases of suicide in 2019 occurred in low and middle-income countries (WHO 2021). In particular, Pakistan is a Low- and Middle- Income Country (LAMIC) where the official mortality rate due to suicides is unavailable and not reported in the World Health Organization (WHO) statistics as well as in the national registration system. Nonetheless, over the last decades, a growing number of studies have been conducted to explore the relevance of suicide and suicidal behaviours in order to raise awareness on this social and public health issue (Khattak 2007).

Nowadays, Pakistan is coping with many challenges including food insecurity, poverty, and never-ending natural and man-made disasters: the country presents 24% of the total population living below the national poverty line, and 38.8% are considered to be poor on the base of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Khattak 2007).

The outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic in 2019 had a relevant impact on mental health in the entire world, and Pakistan was not an exception (Torales et al. 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has been also recognized as a highly distressing event leading to higher suicide risk in the general population (Krysinska et al. 2009, Devitt 2020). It has been largely recognized an increased number of COVID- related psychiatric problems such as nervousness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fear and uncertainty, panic attacks, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder as well as higher levels of xenophobia, racism and other social consequences (Anjum et al. 2020; Sinanović et al. 2020). In fact, policymakers and health providers warned the global population that the

COVID-19 pandemic might have led to unemployment, economic issues and health/ mental health consequences (Kawohl & Nordt 2020, Santini et al. 2020, Weems et al. 2020). Recent studies carried out during the last two years of COVID-19 pandemic have globally confirmed higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, (Salari et al. 2020, John et al. 2020) with a consequent increase of suicide risk (Lin et al. 2014).

Psychosocial distress, loneliness, isolation and socio-economic issues have greatly contributed to mental illness during the global lockdown (Gunnel et al. 2020). The possibility that suicide risk might increase throughout the COVID pandemic was warned in line with the evidences regarding suicides in the USA during the 1918 influenza epidemic (Gunnel et al. 2020, Khan & Hyder 2006, Mahesar et al. 2021, Holmes et al. 2021, Wasserman 1992). Nowadays, even if a significant progress has been made in the contrast of COVID-19, psychological and psychosocial consequences continue to affect people's lives: mental health should be prioritized as well as the fight to COVID-19 should be based on cohesion, coherence and systemic approaches (Lazzari et al. 2020, Jakovljevic et al. 2020).

This study aimed to examine the suicide-related news reports in Pakistan in the six-months period of COVID-19 lockdown from March to August 2020.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

We conducted a content analysis of suicide-news reports during the initial six months of COVID-19 lockdown in Pakistan from March 2020 to August, 2020. For this purpose, we daily examined the *Kawish* newspaper, a Sindhi language newspaper of national relevance: it is a mass-circulated newspaper in Sindhi language and the biggest success in the 136 years history of Sindhi journalism (Shaikh 2017). Although the newspaper is edited and released in three different cities with the same contents (*Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur*) we focused on the online edition released in Hyderabad. In fact, we could not attend libraries and press - clubs to study the hard copies of the newspaper because of the COVID lockdown restrictions; therefore, we examined the electronic version of the newspaper, available online, to identify all daily news about suicides. Afterwards, we started identifying and reading the news about suicides to collect specific data. A total of 213 news related to national suicide cases were identified. We set three inclusion criteria; a) suicide cases involving Pakistani citizens, b) suicidal acts occurred in Pakistan, and c) suicidal acts reported from any region of Pakistan. The exclusion criteria included those

suicide cases related to a) the terrorism-led suicide bombings, b) suicidal attempt cases, and c) all reports other than newspaper news (e.g. letters to the editors, opinions, announcements).

RESULTS

During the six months of the COVID-19 lockdown, 213 suicide-related news were reported by the daily *Kawish* newspaper. The majority of victims were males (74%), and almost half of them were single (40%), aged between 19 and 30 years old (48%). Approximately a quarter of the victims were students (26%) or government employees (22%). Self-hanging was reported as the most common method of suicide (37%), followed by self-poisoning (28%) and gun shooting (14%). Only 10% of the reports did not mention the methods of suicide. Furthermore, family discords were reported among the most common reasons for suicidal behaviour (36%), followed by poverty (21%), joblessness (14%), mental disorder (13%), love affairs (5%) and failure in the scholar exams (5%). The details of socio-demographic characteristics obtained from the suicide cases reported by the national newspaper are presented in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

An increase of suicidal behaviours has been warned globally during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nomura et al. 2021, Mamun 2021, Dubé et al. 2021). However, the incidence of suicide has been much higher in LAMIC countries, such as Bangladesh (Mamun 2021), than in high-income countries where rates remained stable or even decreased (Pirkis et al. 2021). Our study concluded that the rate of suicide in Pakistan was similar to the pre-pandemic rate as documented in previous studies: findings from a content analysis on newspaper-reporting of suicide in Pakistan, conducted in 2017, reported a monthly rate of 38 cases which was similar to the monthly mean of suicides in this study (213 suicides/6 months: 35.5 cases) (Mahesar 2018).

Our findings also show that the majority of suicide were committed by males with no significant differences with numbers of suicide per gender from our previous reports (Mahesar et al. 2021, Antebi et al. 2020, Whitley & Saucier 2020). This evidence may reflect that over 60% of the Pakistani population lives in rural areas where poverty is a relevant issue: most of rural inhabitants are males reporting unemployment with consequent depression and history of attempted suicides (Yousafzai et al.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic characteristics of Suicide cases (N=213) in Pakistan during the COVID-19 Lockdown

	Characteristics	n	Percentage
Age of the victims	Under 18 years	25	12 %
	Between 19 and 30 years	103	48 %
	Over 31	55	26 %
	Missing	30	14 %
	Total	213	100 %
Gender	Male	158	74 %
	Female	55	26 %
Occupation	Student	55	26 %
	Others	57	27 %
	Government employee	47	22 %
	Labourer	35	16 %
	Missing	19	9 %
	Total	213	100 %
Marital Status	Single	85	40 %
	Missing	68	32 %
	Married	53	25 %
	Divorced	4	2 %
	Widowed	3	1.5 %
	Total	213	100 %
Suicide method	Hanging	79	37 %
	Poisoning	59	28 %
	Gun Shooting	31	14 %
	Missing	20	10 %
	Burning	10	5 %
	Falling from height	8	4 %
	Drowning	6	2 %
	Total	213	100 %
Suicide reason	Familial discord	76	36 %
	Poverty	45	21 %
	Joblessness	30	14 %
	Mental disorder	27	13 %
	Love affair	11	5 %
	Missing	11	5 %
	Failure in exams	9	4 %
	Total	213	100 %

2020, Khan & Prince 2003). It is also of interest that suicide is more commonly described among males in many countries except for China where suicide rates are higher among women (Ebenstein 2014). We also found that suicide behaviour was higher in 19-30 years people as similarly registered in some previous studies (Sharmin Salam et al. 2017, Oyetunji et al. 2021, Khan & Reza 1998, Shah 2007).

During the lockdown, hanging was the most frequently reported method (37%), followed by the self-poisoning method in 28% of suicide cases. Similarly, previous studies in India (Pathare et al. 2020) and Indonesia (Nisa et al. 2020) also reported that self-hanging was the most

common suicide method. It is of interest that this method has become frequent in LAMIC countries, probably affected by cultural factors to be further explored. Self-poisoning method was less frequent probably because of lower availability of substances due to the lockdown. For instance, access to pesticides was almost difficult. Also, railways service was stopped during the severe lockdown: this may have resulted in reduced suicides committed with jumping in front of a train (Pathare et al. 2020). Therefore, it seems that the lockdown has limited some suicide methods, even if it apparently triggered the self-hanging method. Nevertheless, this hypothesis required further investigation.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, familial discords (36%), poverty (21%), and joblessness (14%) were mentioned in the news as the putative leading causes of suicide. This finding may confirm the evidence that familial discords and intimate partner violence increased during the COVID-19 lockdown with higher levels of subjective distress among family members (De Berardis et al. 2021). Also, the economic burden of pandemic has increased poverty and unemployment with following subjective distress among males, above all in low-middle income countries (Kawohl & Nordt 2020, Santini et al. 2020, Weems et al. 2020).

Only 5% of news did not mention any suicide reason with an overall focus on the harmful details: this may suggest that victims' reasons for killing themselves were poorly considered (Victor et al. 2019). It is of note that there was no suicide case caused by sexual harassment. This may reflect the evidence that people in Pakistan were forced home during the lockdown with closure of any academic as well as administrative activity. This finding is in line with a similar report from India (Pathare et al. 2020).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study aimed to examine the suicide newspaper- reporting during the COVID-19 lockdown in Pakistan. Nonetheless, limitations include: this is a single newspaper-oriented study analyzing the suicide news reported during the first COVID-19 lockdown for six months only; only news about suicide deaths, not attempts, were analyzed in the current study; we did not assess the impact of media reporting on suicide on the general population; the research was limited to Pakistani newspapers and Sindhi language.

Nonetheless, this study may help health-practitioners, media academics and reporters to improve the quality of reporting on public health issues such suicide and news related to COVID-19 pandemic. Also, a following survey on the impact of newspapers on the general population opinion would be greatly informative for media experts.

According to a recent review of literature by Doty et al. (2022) regarding suicide prevention among adults living in low- and middle-income countries (including Pakistan), strategies should be based on psychological behavioral interventions conducted among vulnerable groups of population (e.g. young adults, school attendees, people living in poverty, etc.), community- based interventions

(e.g. restriction of means for suicide such as bridges in the cities, heights, access to rivers, reduction of pesticides toxicity, etc.), improvement of clinical/medical policies and promotion of public awareness campaigns on suicide.

Also, according to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations

Agenda 2030, a particular attention to social and economic inequalities, especially in vulnerable countries, the promotion of policies aimed to contrast poverty, to promote a balanced social gradient among levels of population, may lead to lower levels of psychosocial distress with a consequent reduction in suicide rates. As discussed, Covid-19 Pandemic has increased social inequalities, marginalization as well as reduced the access to mental health especially for economically and socially disadvantaged populations.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Pakistan has increased family issues, unemployment and poverty, leading to suicide, especially in young males. All these factors were leading causes of suicide. The self-hanging has been a frequently used method by suicide committers.

The newspaper-reporting on suicides may potentially have an impact on public general opinion and a responsible reporting is needed by press agencies and media in order to prevent further risk of suicidality in Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations: Does this study include human subjects? NO

Conflict of interest: none

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Authors contribution: Dr. Rameez Ali Mahesar: study design, data collection, first draft, approval of the final version. Dr. Muhammad Latif: data collection, approval of the final version, statistical analysis. Dr. Salbia Abbas: data collection, approval of the final version. Dr. Mujeeb Rehman Abro: data collection, approval of the final version. Momina Ali: data collection, first draft, approval of the final version. Mahnoor Aslam Rao: data collection, approval of the final version. Antonio Ventriglio: study design, first draft, approval of the final version, statistical analysis.

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