

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NEPAL DURING COVID-19: A CASE REVIEW

Project title: Addressing Mental Health and Gender-Based Violence in Nepal During COVID-19: A Case Review

Implementing partner: Community Research and Development Organization (CORD)

Central focus: Impact of COVID-19 crisis on women and girls with primary focus on mental health and gender-based violence (GBV)

Country/region: Nepal, Ganeshman Charnath Municipality

Grant amount: 10,000 EUR

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Main activities: Psychological first aid training to the teachers; Orientation to parents on precautions to be safe from COVID-19 affect; Education support to children; Installation of facilities for hand hygiene in school and public places; Psychosocial support for safe hygiene and behavior change.

Three lessons:

1. An integrated approach across mental health, education, hygiene, and GBV sectors helps to address crosscutting issues.
2. Utilizing schools as community hubs help to get access to different stakeholders of the society in one place.
3. A whole of community approach is highly impactful.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

Social and economic shocks from the COVID-19 crisis have taken a heavy toll on the mental health and the wellbeing of women and girls in Nepal. Like many countries, Nepal imposed lockdowns, including school closures, to curb the spread of infections during the pandemic. Isolation, financial stressors, and the lack of in-person schooling aggravated gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices, such as forced marriage. In a country where more than 1 in 5 women report having been the victims of physical violence,¹ the pandemic hampered women and girls' access to the already limited legal and health systems. Stigma and unhygienic practices around menstruation also exposed them to health risks.

The Community Research and Development Organization (CORD) received an AHA! Project small grant. CORD works at the intersection of health education and advocacy for women and girls in Nepal's Ganeshman Charnath Municipality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CORD addressed priority issues raised by the health crisis—notably the suspension of in-person schooling and the related spike in mental health episodes and gender-based violence (GBV). Teachers, school administrators, and more than 50 female students in the locality benefited from psychological self-care trainings, women's health and GBV awareness workshops, and hygiene interventions.

The Awareness with Human Action (AHA!) Project works to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia, focusing on misinformation, threats to social cohesion during the pandemic, with a focus on youth, women and girls, and religious actors. CORD's efforts to offset societal and psychological effects of COVID-19 in a vulnerable Nepali community—while tackling the related issue of stigma around women's health and hygiene—strongly aligned with AHA goals. This case review situates the project in its setting and highlights lessons for community development actors in similar contexts.

¹ <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr336/fr336.pdf>, 339.

CONTEXT OF THE CASE REVIEW

The COVID-19 emergencies have had wide-ranging negative impacts in Nepal. In Nepal, where some 63% of workers make their living in the informal sector² the pandemic has significantly increased under- and unemployment. School closures and heavy-handed lockdown enforcement have worsened people’s mental health, and increased both social and political instability. The health system, already fragile and overstretched, has faced great hurdles in efforts to provide routine care, in addition to treating COVID-19 cases. One effect of these shocks and stressors has been an increase in various forms of violence across the society.³

Nepali women and girls have been especially vulnerable to violence and other types of harm during this period, aggravating abuse and discrimination they already faced prior to the pandemic. As of 2016, 22% of Nepali women were reported as experiencing violence, including sexual violence, after they turned 15. In Province 2, where CORD’s recent project was located, this statistic soared to 34%.⁴ High rates of spousal violence and child marriage are also reported across Nepal, despite laws to curb such practices.⁵ The tradition of chhaupadi—isolating women and girls during menstruation and after childbirth—was banned in 2017, but is still widely practiced in the country’s western provinces.⁶

Globally, the COVID-19 crisis has led to a surge in GBV so intense that women’s rights advocates have characterized it as a “shadow pandemic.”⁷ In Nepal, lockdowns and economic hardship have worsened the plight of vulnerable girls and women. Confined to the home, victims are at heightened risk of physical and sexual violence by male relatives or intimate partners. The Nepal Monitor violence-tracking platform recorded a 2.7% rise in GBV following COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Other sources cite a more dramatic spike: a 24-hour helpline operated by the National Women Commission received 885 calls from domestic violence victims between April and June 2020,⁸ after the start of lockdowns—more than twice the number in the previous quarter.⁹ With public resources diverted and stretched to meet the COVID-19 crisis, victims face additional obstacles when they seek protection, justice, and care.

School closures have placed Nepali girls at increased risk of harm. Economic hardship in families, coupled with the suspension of education, have both driven higher rates of child marriage during the pandemic.¹⁰ Girls may also suffer in subtler ways from the loss of mobility, financial security, social life, and schooling; these conditions create the perfect storm for heightened anxiety and depression.

These problems are rampant in the area of CORD’s intervention. Ganeshman Charnath Municipality is part of Dhanusha District, situated in the low-lying terai zone near the Indian border. Between Nepal’s first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 and the end of 2021, the Nepal Monitor recorded 76 cases of GBV in Dhanusha, making it one of the districts in the country where women and girls fare worst since the start of the pandemic.¹¹ Prior to the pandemic, rates of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against women in the surrounding province (Province 2) were already significantly higher than the national average.¹² The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated these trends.

² <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00616-w>

³ See, for instance, <https://asiafoundation.org/2021/07/21/covid-19-violence-dashboard-shows-nepals-shadow-pandemic/>

⁴ <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr336/fr336.pdf>

⁵ *Ibid.*, 343; see also <https://nepal.unfpa.org/en/publications/lumbini-province-strategy-ending-child-marriage>

⁶ <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/new-code-criminalises-chhaupadi>; <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/3-years-since-criminalisation-3-provinces-of-nepal-still-practise-chhaupadi-survey.html>

⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

⁸ <https://asiafoundation.org/2021/07/21/covid-19-violence-dashboard-shows-nepals-shadow-pandemic/>

⁹ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/nepal-helpline-serves-lifeline-survivors-during-covid-19-lockdown>

¹⁰ <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00616-w>

¹¹ See <https://nepalmonitor.org/dashboard/gender-based-violence>

¹² <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr336/fr336.pdf>, pp. 339, 343.

CORD'S COVID-19 INITIATIVE: A FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND GBV

CORD set out to address several interconnected, high-priority issues during the COVID-19 crisis, including a lack of community awareness about appropriate health and hygiene measures; the disruption to education, the mental health impact of the pandemic on teachers, students, and parents in the school system; and the potential for higher levels of GBV during lockdowns. Partnering with local women's groups, the School Management Committee (SMC), and traditional peacemakers, CORD's activities supported key members of the community—women, adolescent girls, children, and families from marginalized backgrounds—in efforts to weather COVID-19 related stressors. An estimated 150 participants benefited from CORD seminars and events, while project components such as the installation of hygiene stations benefited the entire Municipality. Overall CORD estimates that it reached nearly 40,000 people.¹³

Psychosocial First Aid and Self-Care. During the period July 13–16, 2021, CORD staff held a series of Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) and self-care sessions for local participants, including orientations and trainings. During orientation workshops, 50 adolescent girls and women from the community learned how to maintain mental wellness during the pandemic through practices such as deep breathing, exercise, meditation and reflection, and creative activities. They were also informed about hygiene protocols to avoid infection and how to resist and report GBV through available channels. In trainings, 20 teachers and administrative staff—12 men and 8 women—from Ratriya Primary School were taught to identify signs of mental distress or abuse among students and equipped with basic counseling techniques. Since all learning at this time was remote and many students were isolated, teachers' personal involvement was critical to students' wellbeing.

Support for Low-Income Students. On October 6, CORD held an “Education Support Program for Deprived Children” to coincide with the reopening of schools and the national Hindu festival of Dashain. Twenty-four children from the most economically needy families in Ganeshman Charnath received new school bags and learning materials. This initiative was designed to encourage parents who, due to financial stressors, might not otherwise have allowed their children to return to school. Bags and supplies were distributed at a ceremony with parents, students, teachers, and the SMC President in attendance.

Hand Hygiene Station Installation. CORD also installed three hand hygiene stations—each with a water tank, tap, and hand soap—near busy temple sites in the Municipality for the benefit of congregants and visitors. CORD staff held informational sessions on COVID-19 precautions, health, and sanitation, and handed over management of the hygiene stations to temple administrators in October. Since installation, there have been requests for more stations in Ganeshman Charnath.

Menstrual Hygiene and Sanitary Pad Distribution. On October 6, more than 50 adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds attended an educational session at Ratriya Primary School on the importance of personal hygiene, especially during menstruation. CORD staff distributed two packets of sanitary pads to each girl and gave instructions on proper use. This was a significant step in normalizing an often stigmatized issue and in promoting women's and girls' health, since local women typically use unhygienic cloths instead of pads.

¹³ https://muannepal.org.np/municipality_profile/ganeshman-chnath-municipality/

BEYOND COVID-19: LESSONS FROM GANESHMAN CHARNATH MUNICIPALITY

CORD's pandemic outreach and interventions have benefited dozens of girls, women, and students from marginalized backgrounds directly, as well as thousands of residents of Ganeshman Charnath Municipality who benefited from hand hygiene stations. Apart from direct benefits, the initiative models sound principles for community development and peacebuilding actors across South Asia. **Some specific lessons include the following:**

- CORD approached the work in an integrated manner that linked mental health, education, hygiene, and GBV, as intrinsically linked rather than compartmentalized.
- Using the local school as the hub was effective in the intervention during the pandemic. Teachers and administrators were trained to recognize signs of crisis, and students—notably adolescent girls, an especially vulnerable population—were informed about self-care, mental wellness practices, and GBV resources.
- The whole-community approach brought key stakeholders together for maximal impact. Educators, temple leaders, and traditional peacebuilders were engaged as important sources of authority and crucial nodes in the community network. They followed “adult learning approaches” such as plenary discussion, group discussion, and group works. By enlisting these actors and their respective institutions, CORD was able to reach and serve the target beneficiaries more effectively.



Image source: Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/-Kslh9vsWQk>

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