

# **Indian Journal of Psychological Science**

*Internationally  
Indexed, Refereed and Peer Reviewed*

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**UGC Approved: Emerging Sources Citation Index:**  
<https://mjl.clarivate.com/search-results?issn=0976-9218>

The official organ of:



**National Association of Psychological Science** (Regd.)

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## FAMILIES IN LOCKDOWN DURING THE PANDAMIC: YOUNG WOMEN TO WORK FROM HOME

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic brought in the most unexpected of restrictions. Closure of work places and restrictions on movements in public spaces brought the world to a standstill with families locked inside homes. The dividing line between work-related-tasks and home-related-chores got blurred in terms of the physical setting and time spent on each domain. The study explored the lived experiences of young women between the ages of 20-30 years who stayed within the confines of their homes with their families and attended educational programmes or engaged in official work in the online mode for a period of one year. Qualitative data obtained utilizing two methods – written responses to open-ended probes and semi-structured interviews – was subjected to thematic analysis. Themes reflected the benefits and challenges emerging out of the intersection between family-relationship dynamics and work-structured demands. The findings imply the importance of family as the primary component of the microsystem of society that contributes towards mental health of the individual as well as to the collective resilience of the society. Family welfare agencies can act as catalyst in preparing, assisting and counselling vulnerable families to face unforeseen situations like that of the recent pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Work-from-home, Family in lockdown, Youth and family,

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### INTRODUCTION:

The year 2020 witnessed the world shifting gear and moving into an unprecedented shut-down as a means to survive the pandemic. All nations were caught unprepared to comprehend and manage the medical situation with public health systems not able to cope under the unexpected large numbers of infected cases and no effective known line of treatment. The gravity of the medical situation compelled the nations all over the world to impose complete lockdown with closure of borders at the international level and with social distancing at the local level. Its impact filtered down to the basic unit of society – the family.

The pandemic, caused by the forces of the 'natural world', took on itself to create an environment of 'forced reuniting of family members' with each family closing their doors to people outside of their primary family unit. There was an exodus of people who were homebound. Those who were staying far away from home, either out of job compulsion or for educational purposes, returned back to their respective

homes. Fear of contracting the virus combined with offices, institutions, market places, religious centres, clubs and entertainment complexes being shut down, and with laws enforcing social distancing with curfews clamped on public spaces, people had no option other than to restrain oneself from going outside of one's residence. Whether one liked it or not, each family unit was thrown into staying together 24x7.

Familial structures were suddenly thrown into a hyperactive mode where locked-down family members had to work or study from home, be in contact with each other day-in and day-out, get exposed to each other's office work cultures which were either only partially known or completely hidden from other family members prior to the pandemic.

Family plays a crucial role with providing emotional and material support in bridging the transition from youth to adulthood (Oliveria, et. al., 2020). Family signifies the life of a collective with interconnections that last for a lifetime and each member having

reciprocal influence on the other. Families go through various phases of change over time, with each phase having its unique accomplishments and struggles for each member. The relationships between family members may undergo change from time to time in the course of life, but the family continues to remain a life-long support system. These long lasting social connections provide meaning and purpose that are essential for the individual's well-being (Hartwell & Benson, 2007).

Healthy familial relationships foster social support (Pearlin, 1999), provide psychological resources for enhancing self-worth (Fukukawa et. al., 2000), and encourage regulation of health care behaviours (Reczek et. al., 2014). The overall wellbeing, inclusive of physical health, psychological well-being and social integration, are the outcomes of interdependent relationships in an efficacious family environment (Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017). However, not all families responsibly cater to individual needs of its members. Dysfunctional family environments disrupt the emotional development of the individual and inhibit secure attachments with one another. Children are the most affected by familial dysfunctionality (Sayakin, Matveeva, & Zhukovskaya, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its forced self-isolation of each family and compulsory social distancing from other families, created opportunities to recognise the nuances and subtleties in communication patterns, love and commitments within the intra-family context.

The young adult often perceives the self as capable of independent living and independent decision making. Staying together under one roof for a long period of time with family would mean conformity with a group. Conformity is contrary to the notion of uniqueness emphasized in an individualistic culture (Cukur, De-Gusman & Carlo, 2004). Unconditional

acceptability of uniqueness when living in close quarters with another individual on a day to day basis is possible only when one desires cohesiveness. Persons with individualistic values show higher gender equality and less power distance (Hofstede, 1980). Whereas in the collectivistic cultures, the hierarchical differentiation as well as the clear-cut gender role differentiations are delineated with high degree of precision, and there is high value attributed to conformity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Siddiqi & Shafiq, 2017).

Arnett (2007) and his colleagues have argued that there exists a stage sandwiched between Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages of adolescence and adulthood, which they have termed as emerging adulthood.

In the earlier times, like in the 1950s, the primary goal of young adults was to attain stability in job, get married and settle down in a location and home of their choice. These were considered the hallmarks of achievement. Today, though they are not averse to settling down in a long-term committed relationship of marriage and a consistent job, such stability is not seen as parameters of achievements but as impediments to exploring and experiencing life. Many of them opt for jobs that can act as stepping stones to higher level jobs and the trend is to move from one job designation to another in quick transition. Many take up assignments for a temporary period of time and frequently drop out of the job to travel around and explore the world. The readiness to viewing life as a field of adventure does not gel well with the parental generation (Buhl, 2007),

The change and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic was unsettling in multiple ways. Youth is a phase when identities and relationships are formed within the settings of a work-place or educational institutions, and with face-

to-face interactions with colleagues and peers. These interactions, however, got redefined and swung into a virtual mode due to the constraints imposed by the unique rule of social distancing. Many youngsters were compelled to move back into parental homes because paying guest accommodations, hostels, etc. were closed down. Some youngsters lost their jobs due to the closing down or downsizing of their offices (Raut, 2020). This led to reliance on parents for partial or full financial support.

The range of choices available to the present generation are many and in normal situations they would have found themselves at several cross-roads of decision making (Reifman, Colwell, & Arnett, 2007). The situation of confinement within a limited physical space and curtailing of choices could be frustrating for any young adult, and created a great deal of psychosocial strain during the pandemic (Sharma, et. al., 2020). As institutions and work places were compelled to figure out a new mode of functioning and were forced into adopting the work-from-home mode, there emerged a new-normal to which all had to adjust instantly. The new normal forced the world to shift its focus to family as the basic microsystem of societal functioning and caregiving unit, into which the individual had to incorporate the new work-from-home routine. Thus, the family as a single unit with its innate collective essence had to take on a major role in maintaining the mental health and wellbeing of its members.

### **Objectives:**

The healthy functionality of a family is of paramount importance for any society to attain a satisfactory index of happiness and success. The present study aims at exploring the lived experiences of young women who stayed with their families during the lockdown and the challenges faced by this exclusive group that was at

cross-roads of identity formation, aspirations, longing for independence and freedom.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To study the impact of lockdown on family interactions as experienced by young women who had to spend a confined within their place of residence with their families.
2. To explore how work and home responsibilities were managed by young women within the confines of the home environment.

### **Methodology**

#### **Sample:**

Purposive sampling technique was adopted to select eight unmarried women between the ages of 20-30 years who, in the lockdown situation, had to attend online classes or engage in official work for a period of minimum one year from within their homes staying with their family members. None of the participants had lost any immediate family member during the period of lockdown.

#### **Data collection and analysis:**

Two methods of data collection were adopted with the purpose of collecting qualitative data. The participants were required to write their free-flow of thoughts to open-ended probes pertaining to the pandemic generated situation and their lived experiences within this context. In addition, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant for 15-45 minutes to supplement the responses obtained through the written report. The responses obtained utilising the two techniques was subjected to thematic analysis to explore the challenges and outcomes of lived experiences during this universal yet unique phase spent within closed residential setting with their families.

## Results and Discussion:

The present research has explicitly delineated the family dynamics as it played out in the lives of the young women within the year of getting confined in closed quarters of their homes with only their family members to interact with. The findings revealed the perceptions and insights gained by the young women and the growth they experienced in familial relationships during the lockdown period. Having to juggle between the two domains of life i.e., office/institution and home, and the two merging into one physical space gave rise to opportunities of togetherness as well as various dilemmas and complexities. This period in history brought to light the best of bonding and resilience (Walsh, 2016), as well as the worst of conflicts and distress (Lebow, 2020) that can exist within the family system.

### Family in lockdown: Themes of benefits

**Understanding family dynamics.** With the COVID lockdown and 24x7 time spent inside home, tremendous amount of learning took place from within home in the span of a year. The youngster got an opportunity to understand family dynamics by listening to *parental conversations*, perceiving the gap between the ideal and possible *expectations from family members*, getting clarity on *unfounded misunderstandings*, *valuing togetherness*, coping with *anxieties for stranded members*, accepting duties and *risks of working parents*, sharing caregiving *responsibilities towards the elderly*, and coping with *illness or death of a loved one*. Family that were cohesive prior to the pandemic found it easier to cohabit during the uncertain and stressful situation caused by the pandemic.

**Quality time spent together.** The necessity to move back home came with

the closure of common residential facilities like hostels and paying guest accommodations. Returning home got converted into an occasion for *family reunion* and was viewed as a much *needed break in life*. Indulging in collective activities like a participant elaborated “Because of this pandemic one thing that was beneficial was that people started sitting together as a family talking to each other, spending some time, playing, watching movies together, so that is the good thing that happened” contributed to *quality time spent* in each other’s company. A participant stated, “Obviously everybody had their mental problems, mental ease was disturbed for a very long time. But still talking out with each other was very helpful.”

**New family routines.** Since religious places of worship were closed and social gatherings prohibited, each *family created their own routine of getting together* to converse, play or pray together as stated by a participant, “In my family we used to sit at night and interact with each other and our everyday ritual was to pray before going to bed”. Families found themselves *discussing existential issues* of life and felt the need to revive *religious practices* which they had forsaken in the pre-covid times. Parents played a major role in *helping cope with the negativity* by encouraging young adults in the practice of yoga, meditation, and scriptural readings as expressed by a participant “Since my family has always encouraged spiritually, the initial response was fear which however, later on changed into positive emotions like that of acceptance, faith and gratefulness for whatever we could have!”

**Emotional bonding.** The revival of connections with seniors members of the family, like grandparents and other extended family members, *increased feelings of belongingness* to a family tree. Spending ample amount of time with each

other helped in *processing grief at the death of a loved one* as expressed by a participant, “Bonding with grandparent helped in the grieving process at their time of death due to old age (not due to COVID)”. Inability to return home and staying away from family due to the imposed lockdown and curfew *restrictions led to cognitive distortion* in perceiving the physical distance between the two locations as more magnified than in normal times as stated by a participant, “Physical distance from close ones in another state seemed magnified in the mind”.

**Sharing of household chores.** With restrictions placed on movement on roads and public transport, the domestic helpers were unavailable. Every household chore had to be done without outside assistance. Sanitizing everything purchased and brought into the house increased workload. Family members learned to *divide responsibilities and share the chores*. A participant states “In those testing times, we had to remove the domestic help, thus every single household task was to be shared amongst us”. Many *a new tasks were learned* in the process. This acted as an eye-opener for the young adult to realize the extent of responsibilities their parents had taken on themselves while taking care of the family, of which they were oblivious prior to the pandemic.

**Heightened sense of responsibility towards each other.** With concerns of COVID spreading from anyone and anything contaminated with virus, there was a sudden shift of taking on not only protection of the self but also of being overly concerned for the others in the family as in the statement “I felt a sense of responsibility that I had never ever felt before”. Each member felt a *heightened sense of responsibility to protect the other* as expressed by a participant “I traveled in relief of being able to get home and in fear of infecting my parents”.

**Lessons of generosity.** A sense of collective responsibility for *rationing on essential commodities* made each value what one had for daily consumption. Family members had to make *collective effort to save on resources and in some cases take on additional jobs to generate income*. Pandemic brought about an *increase in sensitivity and compassion* towards the deprived sections of the society and parents acted as models of generosity as expressed by a participant “Despite the challenging times and cancelled orders and no work happening for months, my parents made it a point to pay all the workers...I am proud and happy that they thought of not only their own family but their factory workers too”. Families with sufficient financial backing went out of their way to help those in need even when their personal income generation had come to a standstill.

**Changed perception of capabilities.** With the homes getting converted into makeshift office space, one family member could step into the official space of the other. The positive outcome of this was that one got to *understand the work and study environments of the other*, and family members *became aware of the capabilities of each other* which were previously only exhibited within the official milieu. Now from within the confines of the home, family members could witness official behaviour. This brought about a *change in perceptions* and increased *appreciation for the accomplishments of the other* as expressed by a participant, “So that’s when I got to know that my sister has this talent also, that she speaks great English. And then while working so we, we actually got to know that everybody’s work in their field is different”.

**Valuing family members.** Previously where family was taken for granted, living through the pandemic brought in a feeling of being blessed, a *sense of gratitude* for loved ones, and *valuing the presence of family members*. This added a flavour of unity and closeness to the dynamics within

family life, and transformed it for the better.

Parenting styles play a significant role in influencing the nature of parent and young adult relationship (Shenaar-Golan & Goldberg, 2019). Autonomy supporting parents facilitate the sustaining of positive attributes of a family (Jung et. al., 2020). In addition, the young adult's agency to accommodate the needs of elders results in positive transformation of family dynamics (Shah et. al., 2021). Mutual warmth and responsiveness provide emotional stability which are essential in meeting challenges.

### Family in lockdown: Themes of challenges

**Boredom.** Initial three to four months went on as a holiday. As the lockdown extended, functioning within the limited multifunctional residential space and constant contact with the same individuals for prolonged periods of time led to the condition of being "*Bored of the boredom*" as was expressed by a participant.

**Disputes.** Social interaction through social media platforms served only a limited purpose as distractors. Limited *physical space for movement* had a psychological impact on the *tolerance level* towards each other. Constant physical proximity with the same set of persons led to frequent *interference in affairs of one another*. This coupled with no external social interaction led to *irritability and disputes*. The distractions that are present when one moves out of the house and meets persons of the neighbourhood or of the work place were missing for too long.

**Thoughts of running out of resources.** With many persons hoarding food and essentials, fear and uncertainty about the future gripped the mind. The realisation that one needs to *monitor the use of essential resources* like food and money, which had previously been taken for

granted, was now of paramount concern. A participant explicitly expresses that "The resources in terms of ration at my house were all used very judiciously. We stocked the essentials once a month and used it with no wastage".

**Lack of freedom and privacy.** Though communication channels opened within many families, young women reported *issues of privacy and freedom* due to space constraints of the house as a participant stated, "In the village culture you cannot wear short dresses or anything like shorts. In the urban setting you can wear anything and enjoy in your hostel room." During the pandemic, the house seemed over populated 24x7 and being in the constant presence of male members, some young women found themselves self-imposing dress codes and other behavioural adjustments. Another interesting phenomenon that got highlighted was communication through the virtual mode replacing face-to-face interactions and "privacy" being redefined with family members sometimes choosing to sort out their differences on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, leading to traditional family norms experiencing the greatest test of all times.

Being isolated from the social world physically, remaining confined to limited space for prolonged periods of time, total dependence on social media for expression of ideas and conversations is in contradiction to the desire for freedom and mobility that underlies the youthful phase of life. This is the age of moving out with friends, seeking leisure time activities, engaging in outdoor sports, exploring new avenues of learning, and exploring the world through travelling. The inaccessibility to public spaces and varied entertainments that are possible only on stepping out of one's residential unit served as triggers for frustration, mood swings, helplessness, internet addictions and family disputes. Being locked in for a year had its pitfalls (Salarvand et. al., 2022).

**Work From Home: Themes of Benefits**  
**Reduced travel related expenses and time.** Working from home was attractive as it *reduced the daily hassles of time spent and expenses incurred in travelling* to work place. It provided the convenience of doing things from within the home, *more time for leisure activities and more time to spend with family.*

**Support from organizations:** Many organizations provided the basic infrastructure required to work from home as stated by a participant, "My school people had given me a laptop. For my sister also, the company had given laptop for her to start work from home". Employers were understanding of the difficulties as they themselves were thrown into a similar context as clarified by a participant, "We were very blessed that we got a principal who used to take care of both, that academics should also be covered up, that my teachers should also not feel stressed".

**Possibility of taking up additional jobs:** With no time wasted on travel from work place to home, those who needed to take up additional jobs to support the family financially as a participant shared, "Because of this pandemic I started working became responsible towards my duties. And now I realize how important it is for young women to start earning and become independent". Those who desired to add to their qualifications were able *take up new ventures* during extra time at their disposal. With everything moving into the virtual mode, *the range of possibilities and available choices widened.*

**Work From Home: Themes of challenges**

**Fuzziness of boundaries.** Work-space getting enmeshed with home-space created a set of competing forces. The boundaries between the two became fuzzy in multiple respects. The work environment required one kind of decorum and behaviour while the home environment had an informality to it. *Merging of two different domains of life,* ways of behaving, interacting with

two different sets of people belonging to different setting, family and official at the same time, handling personal and professional life simultaneously required a great deal of *balancing of emotions and cognitive manipulation.*

**Disturbances and distractions.** To add to the perplexity of the situation, the familial relationships and the psycho-social atmosphere at home impacted the work performance and vice-versa. In normal circumstances, one leaves behind one milieu and enters another almost totally, and the interactive effect of one on the other gets automatically minimized. But in the work-from-home situation this could not happen as both existed simultaneously in the same physical space. Family members would walk in and out of rooms when an official engagement was going on. *Physical intrusions and noise* had to be avoided within the limited space of a home as pointed by a participant, "For my sister it was not manageable because all her calls used to get recorded and no interference was allowed in the background also, so we used to completely leave her in the second room", when one was on an official call or a google classroom in order to maintain a formal environment without background distractions.

**Limited resources.** Availability of gadgets and the strength of internet connectivity determined the amount of *adjustments and compromises* one had to make if more than one family member had to be on a work call or in a classroom at the same point in time. This had a bearing on the work output and sometimes led to *criticism from the employers and reprimands from the teachers.* *Expenses of households increased* as multiple laptops, mobile phones, etc. were required in a household and internet facilities had to be upgraded.

**Loss of job.** There were instances where the travel plans related to work came to a standstill. Since many kinds of employment cannot be done remotely from home, when *family members lost their*

jobs as shared by a participant “My mom is a chef so work from home can’t be for her. And dad was taking care of the business and because of the covid, business was also stopped”, and were unable to find a new employment during the pandemic period, the consequent effect of frustration was experienced by all. It had an impact on the working members, as psychological distress in one was getting transferred onto the others.

In the pre-pandemic normal times, a phone call from family was a distraction at the work place, which often served as a stress buster and a welcome distraction. In contrast, working from home meant having constant physical presence of family around which instead of having a positive effect often became an irritant.

### Conclusion

The pandemic brought out very vividly the difference between effective family outcomes and dysfunctional family consequences. Many researches highlight the psycho-traumatic effects that the pandemic brought in families (Chen, Byrne, & Velez, 2021). It is essential to emphasize that the pre-pandemic status of family dynamics had a crucial role to play during COVID time familial interactions and resilience.

The themes that emerged in the present study reiterated that, though negative after effects of the pandemic on family dynamics have been reported in many studies (Kofman & Garfin, 2020), there is also a positive side to the closeness, bonding and understanding that got generated amongst family members as they moved towards resilience (Pfefferbaum & North 2020). With increased time available to be together, creating family routines, redefining personal identities within the family setting and participating in collective decision making, the young women reassessed their priorities and experienced a deep sense of appreciation and gratefulness for being blessed with a family. Family as the microsystem plays a

significant and consistent role as the provider of life long support to its members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Having gone through the process of maintaining work-life and family-life balance from within the confines of a common physical space, made the young women aware of their potential to juggle between the two roles, multitask and successfully preserve their unique identities in the two arenas of life successfully.

Looking ahead to a future where the possibility of pandemics cannot be ruled out, and now knowing fully well the impact a family can have on the resilience that youngsters experience with the support of an effective family support, early detection of dysfunctional families and providing them with adequate guidance and counselling can be very beneficial at all times, during a pandemic or otherwise. Interventions are possible at different levels. Within the school setting where both parent and child form an integral part, within the healthcare sector and within organisational setups. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes the relevance of the interconnections between the different systems within a cultural context, the primary source of well-being and high productivity of society relies on the health and effective functioning of the micro-unit of the society, the family.

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