

CHP WEBINAR SERIES

PROMOTING MENTAL WELL-BEING OF VULNERABLE AND MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS AMID PANDEMIC STRESS

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great source of mental and emotional stress especially for key populations including the vulnerable and marginalized, as they have been facing a broad spectrum of challenges to their daily livelihood and basic well-being. Seeking to understand their concerns and explore practical solutions for the communities to overcome the many forms of distress they face and promote their mental well-being, the Center for Human Progress (CHP) organized a webinar on “Promoting mental well-being of vulnerable and marginalized populations amid pandemic stress”, in the second of the CHP Webinar Series.

Focusing on MSM, FSW, transgenders, truck drivers, rural, urban-poor and indigenous communities, the webinar aimed to address the wide-ranging needs and concerns of the communities, amplified in the COVID situation by bringing in speakers who included Ms. Sarita Jadav, National Program Officer at UNESCO, Ms. Abhina Aher, Associate Director, Sexuality, Gender and Rights, Dr. Kalpana Apte, Secretary General, FPA India, Mr. Oluoch Madiang, Technical Advisor, Author and Creative Writer, and Ms. Francis Porsingula, Founder Secretary, We Care.

The CHP Webinar Series serves as an opportunity to cross-learn, share insights, and contextualize a multitude of experiences while helping build individual and collective strategies for well-being during this pandemic.

METHODOLOGY: Before drafting the webinar agenda that was envisioned to promote the well-being of the vulnerable communities amid pandemic crisis, we listened to community voices to understand their needs and concerns. The webinar featured two pre-event internal discussions to assess the COVID-induced circumstances of the communities and collaborate with confirmed speakers to evolve an agenda that will best cater to the needs of the communities in promoting their mental well-being.

1. Interaction with the communities: Personal interactive conversations with select representatives from the targeted communities formed the first pre-event internal discussion. Videos/audio clips of these interactions were played during the webinar.

2. Interaction with the experts (speakers): 30-minute meeting with each of the key speakers, sharing the video and written documentation from interaction with the communities. The needs and challenges highlighted by the communities was shared in this meeting, and expert input and advice was sought from each speaker that aided in developing the agenda for the webinar.

Key Highlights from the Webinar

Impact of COVID on key populations, and mitigating actions that are needed (Ms. Sarita Jadav)

Some of the adverse effects of COVID-19 on key populations have been that industries have completely broken down, social isolation and physical distancing are difficult to maintain, and it is often difficult for people living together. Millions of migrant workers are undergoing trauma traveling home to their villages of which 30% do not want to return to Delhi and Mumbai because of the increased risk in these metropolitan cities. NGOs are not able to support the massive populations because of the economic difficulties and lack of availability of services. Along with the vulnerable, the lives of many girls and women have been affected, who being forced out of schools risk being trafficked. It is important to provide correct information and to find solutions that are doable, feasible, that sound optimistic and are practical.

It is important to talk about such alliances and partnerships where CBOs and NGOs have the capacity to reach out to the communities and can have greater collaboration. There is great power in partnerships; linking the communities to the organization and helping them to overcome issues. It is important to advocate with stakeholders, bureaucrats, policy makers to help the community gain an understanding of one another's needs, aspirations and concerns. It will help them to engage more with community members and respond to questions, and act on their concerns as appropriate. There is a need to talk about PLHIV, and community voices need to be heard. Their needs may be the same but are fragmented individually.

<https://youtu.be/fl-PEvj35cM>

Sexuality, Gender and Rights (Ms. Abhina Aher)

Ms. Abhina Aher highlighted the importance of communities to be part of the response and their role in forming any policies which impact them. For example, the Transgender Bill, which was passed by Parliament to protect Transgender rights was weighted towards the hijra community and does not necessarily include other trans people. It does not prohibit discrimination against them in employment, housing, education, healthcare and other services. There is huge diversity within the community and their needs need to be taken into account when formulating laws and policies. There are questions about understanding gender and judgement related to its definition and, therefore, reaching a consensus is not easy. Therefore, the bill mandates that each person has to recognize transgender as the third gender. There is still a need to normalize the existence of the third gender in society. More documentation is needed as there is not enough knowledge, and with this it is not easy to create a strong response.

Mental health is another a major concern among the transgender populations, they are stigmatized and are not addressed appropriately, which makes these already vulnerable

communities even more vulnerable. In India, mental health is stigmatized and there are no specific guidelines which talk about mental health. Stigmatization and lack of support for communities affect their mental health and often lead to suicide among transgender populations. There is a need to address stigma and discrimination which exists in various forms and affects communities in accessing needed services.

It is really important for communities to take charge and play an active role to balance their interventions between various stakeholders including the government whose role cannot be played by multilateral organizations.

<https://youtu.be/4MjsaV2ZB14>

Sexual and Reproductive Health Interventions (Dr. Kalpana Apte)

It is important to understand the sexual and reproductive health needs of communities while planning, as the need of each community is different. Communities often respond to the crisis they are dealing with a limited understanding of the facts, which sometimes misleads their concerns. For example using the term ‘third gender’ is not correct as it puts the other two genders in the first and second place respectively, and also shows the male gender to be more important than the female and the third gender. Therefore sometimes terminology sets us up for failure.

“Biology is enabling; culture actually restricts” - Yuval Noah Harari

Medical education and protocols need to address the health needs of communities; and the medical curriculum should take them into account. The protocols should ensure that doctors are well equipped and that people feel safe without being discriminated against.

“Equity is critical and all human beings need to be treated with fairness and respect.”

There is a limited understanding of sexual and reproductive health, which often comes from a disease perspective. This approach does disservice to the sexual and reproductive health needs of individuals. More opportunities need to be created for doctors and counselors to enhance their understanding of sexual and reproductive health needs of different community groups and for them to be part of a progressive movement.

<https://youtu.be/WHQGR0r5HOo>

Innovations in the times of COVID-19: Perspectives of a POP Member from Africa (Mr. Oluoch Madiang)

The marginalized and vulnerable populations have experienced loss of jobs, opportunities and social networks. NGOs are being asked to offer packages of services to communities. Two things have happened during the pandemic. COVID-19 in Africa has brought out the danger/risks of immigration, the danger of being infected, vulnerability, inability to pay rent and ensure basic livelihood.

To what extent do we balance the danger and potential opportunities of COVID-19?

If we concentrate on the danger of COVID-19, we risk focusing on just self-pity that exacerbates mental health issues. The pandemic also provides opportunities which we need to concentrate on to develop self-efficacy. Dangers at the individual-level include increased anxiety and depression, socio-economic problems, disruptions in healthcare services, and lack of access to food. People also experience increased anger, frustration and violence. There is increased stigma and discrimination amongst the marginalized and vulnerable communities.

There is a need for home delivery of services/commodities such as self-care kits that reach out to the communities and build capacities of communities like self-screening for STIs. Many transgenders that are cut off from their social links are pushed towards connecting virtually, but this is not possible for everyone. There is a requirement to get essential documents from the government and mainstream normal citizenship documentation for the marginal and vulnerable communities.

<https://youtu.be/vPIBDXUHRiI>

Mental well-being of rural, urban-poor and indigenous communities (Ms. Francis Porsingula)

It is important to handle the situation in a positive manner. The mental well-being of rural, urban-poor and indigenous communities is being affected in many forms. There are social factors like loss of freedom of mobility for employment, not being able to organize weddings, economic loss, spiritual well-being and so on are affected which in turn influences mental health. There has been an increasing number of suicides.

To help combat these issues, one ought to offer help, support and create a positive environment. We should see situations of people with vulnerability and support their upward mobility. *“We can move mountains, if we work together and are able to organize help through social media and develop a bond of friendship and togetherness.”* It is important to reach out to government officials and counseling services to make services accessible to communities during the pandemic. With better coordination and support, we will be better positioned to enable access to facilities for ART and other medical care.

“This is the time to share resources, help each other and see the change. Love each other and comfort each other, and you will feel happy and content that you have done something fruitful for society.”

<https://youtu.be/loFnUGYgKtw>

Discussion and Conclusion

Dr. Sundar Sundararaman, an HIV expert, Mr. Ashok Row Kavi, founder of Humsafar Trust, along with the speakers engaged in a discussion following the main sessions. Mr. Ashok Row Kavi brought out the concerns of “Seenagers”, unmarried gay senior citizens above the age of 55 who face greater isolation and difficulties during COVID. His community of Seenagers have set up a buddy system for assistance on essential items and to check up on each other.

“This civilization is supposed to treasure old people but modern India seems to have forgotten us (Seenagers). Showing values for human being is a great thing now.” - Mr. Ashok Row Kavi on old people in the face of the pandemic crisis

Dr. Sundar Sundararaman emphasized the fact that “We are in it [pandemic] for the long haul” and called for moving forward with our roles and responsibilities with conserved energy that will help in the hard fight against COVID, as we grow in the long-term with greater understanding.

“Disenfranchised people during this time, will continue to face the biggest brunt and the largest of challenges.” - Sundar Sundararaman.

Through the webinar, “Promoting mental well-being of vulnerable and marginalized populations amid pandemic stress”, the speakers provided a pathway for individuals, organizations and communities to act towards reducing the adverse impacts of the pandemic on the communities. The webinar reiterated the importance of coming together in these hard times to discuss approaches and to act on the interactions that have taken place by weaving in communities’ perspectives. The follow-up activities will include widely disseminating the contents of the webinar with communities through the NGOs and civil society networks. Activities will be undertaken to create a database of support systems and resources available, which will be employed to connect different NGOs and community networks to promote greater collaboration in addressing the needs and concerns of communities.

Mr. Ashok Row Kavi : <https://youtu.be/wJdhCOB94nQ>

Dr. Sundar Sundaramanan : <https://youtu.be/FPG8bfD4LEM>

Full session : <https://youtu.be/MF2umByJF3o>