



# The stigma and socio-economic impact of COVID-19 affected factory workers in Kashmir and their lived experiences.

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## *Abstract*

The occurrence of health-related stigma can manifest in specific places such as the workplace and beyond especially during the pandemic. The COVID-19-affected workers are not only discriminated against in their place of work but also in the community and at the place where the factory is situated. Thus the stigmatization of the worker affected by COVID-19 has both social and economic consequences for workers. Thus present study attempts to understand the process of stigmatization of COVID-19-affected factory workers. This paper addresses the stigma associated with COVID-19 affecting factory workers and their lived experiences.

Keywords: Stigma, Discrimination, Covid19, Workplace

## **1. Introduction**

Covid19 pandemic has affected every aspect of human life in the world. It has affected almost all age groups in 180 countries. The number of COVID-19 cases has reached 7,458,646 with 419,020 deaths reported around the globe (WHO, 2020). The number of cases is growing exponentially daily. It is often said that the covid19 affects everyone irrespective of race, class, or country but it is also a fact the most vulnerable sections of society have a high chance of contracting the virus. The same is the case with the factory workers as they are more exposed and fragile to contracting the virus. Staying at home and maintaining social distance is a privilege. The factory workers have to make terrible choices, stay at home, and risk starvation or go to work and risk the contagion. The factory workers have to reach the workplace which is often crowded making them more exposed to the virus. Public health emergencies such as COVID-19 can lead to the stigma of the people affected by viruses. Similarly, people who have been released from the COVID-19 quarantine may be stigmatized as well. Stigma is defined as a social process that marginalizes and labels those who are different, and discrimination is defined as the negative practices that stem from stigma, or “enacted” stigma. Stigma can result in negative health and social consequences for the affected. Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or a group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. The stigma associated with the

disease has serious consequences on the people who are labeled as such but more for those who are marginalized sections of the society. In some cases, the stigmatized because of the covid19 have committed suicide as well. In the workplace, employees may suffer from COVID-19-related stigma from their co-workers and supervisors, such as social isolation and ridicule, or experience discriminatory practices, such as being fired from their jobs. The stigma and discrimination related to health by industrial workers can be experienced in the community and the area in which they are employed. Thus the stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19 are not confined to the workplace but may be experienced beyond that by the workers.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative study was carried out to explore the stigma and discrimination of factory workers in the workplace, community, and the area where the factory is situated. The 24 in-depth interviews of the workers of the COVID-19 factory were conducted keeping in view the social distancing norms. The 20 of the respondents were negative and 4 of the respondents were tested positive for the covid19.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

According to Goffman stigma is an attribute that is deeply discrediting and the person carrying that stigma is different from the rest or of a less durable kind (Goffman, 1963). He says that the stigmatized self arises when there is an undesirable discrepancy between one's virtual social identity (social expectations) and actual identity (what a person is). Thus the stigma makes the person less durable and different from the ones who are normal (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatized person carries the feeling of inferiority which arises from failings related to social expectations. Mixed social contacts produce anxiety among both the normal and stigmatized person. For normal people, anxiety is produced on how to avoid contact with the stigmatized person and the stigmatized person how to avoid rejection. In such cases, both normal and stigmatized adjust their lives to avoid each other, though the adjustment is more on the part of the stigmatized person. These adjustments can be in many ways avoided due to fear and anxiety of being rejected by normal people. According to Goffman, the stigma can be like a public mark noticed by the public that produces the spoiled identity of the stigmatized person. Spoiled identity here refers to the imperfect person about the norms society has set forth. The spoiled identity reflects the whole self spoiled by the particular condition or behaviour (Lewis, 1998). Stigma thus reflects the spoiled identity which is shame-inducing, and this shame and stigma are likely to reflect the spoiled identity, whether the stigma is visible or not. The main idea of Goffman's theory of stigma is comprised of feelings of inferiority that arise from the feelings about the expectations of society. The stigma according to Goffman is the social construct wherein he focuses on the social interactions within which it operates. According to him, stigma operates about what others view about the person, it is more concerned with feelings based on the social interactions with others or anticipation of such social interaction (Lewis, 1998).

## 3. Background

On 24 March 2020, the first COVID-19 case was detected in Srinagar city and the lockdown was imposed in and around the district of Srinagar. After nearly two months the restricted economic activities were allowed by the

district administration, especially the factories. Eventually, the workers joined the work and were hoping to get the desired wages needed for living. On 25 April only after two days of reopening of factories, the factory situated in the industrial estate in Kashmir was hit by COVID-19 infection. A large number of officials arrived at the affected factory and workers were directed to stop the work immediately. Till that time workers were not able to understand the reason for the immediate stoppage of work and later they found that the driver associated with the factory was found COVID-19 positive. As per standard operating procedures, all workers of the factory were moved to the quarantine facility not far from the place of work. Most of the workers suffer from anxiety for obvious reasons because they belong to the marginalized section of society and have no income available for them. Eventually, all of the workers were kept in the quarantine facility until the results of the test were declared. It was only after five days that the test results were available and 4 of the workers working in the cold storage of the factory were found positive for the infection. The rest of the workers were allowed to go to their respective homes.

#### **4. Stigma and socio-economic discrimination experienced by the factory workers**

There was a general perception among the respondents that the stigma and discrimination were present at various levels. Most of the respondents experienced the stigma at three different levels community, factory area, and the place of work. The respondents who were negative of the covid19 experienced stigma and discrimination mostly in the community and the area of the factory. Those who were found positive faced at all three levels.

##### **4.1. Stigma and socio-economic discrimination faced by COVID-19 affected workers in the community**

Numerous experiences and types of discrimination were experienced either by the respondents themselves or by other members of society. Participants shared multiple experiences of discrimination resulting from the stigma attached to them due to COVID-19. Many shared the discrimination at shops, at religious places, and in the neighborhood as well. Though the workers were found negative for the COVID-19 infection still they faced the stigma in the community. The name of the affected factory was widely circulated by the print as well as the electronic media. Thus most of the community members knew about the event and eventually, the workers faced a lot of stigma and discrimination in their respective communities. . Most of the workers were worried about this stigma associated with the community.

According to one respondent *“When I went to the nearby shop to buy the essentials the shopkeeper who was very accommodative before was apprehensive towards me”*

*“The milkman is scared to come to our house to deliver milk,”* said another respondent.

*Our interaction within our community has been substantially restricted; as it’s difficult to move on freely in the locality (mohalla)* said the respondent.

*My children in the neighbourhood complain to me about the negative attitude of their friends,* said the worker

#### **4.2. Stigma and socio-economic discrimination experienced by COVID-19 affected workers in the area where the factory is situated**

The stigma attached to the workers was also witnessed within a particular area where the factory was situated. After the opening of the factory once the workers went back to work in the factory, the workers from the other factories started to stigmatize and discriminate against the workers of the affected factory.

*We used to interact with the workers of other factories when our shift changed but now the workers don't come close to us anymore* a respondent narrated.

The workers within an industrial area used to move freely from one place to another and also socialize with the workers in the nearby tea stall. Now everything has changed for them, most of the workers avoid visiting the tea stall to which the respondents go there. Most of the workers from the adjacent have stopped coming to that tea stall altogether.

*Most of us would generally go to the tea stall situated outside the factory but when we go there no one from the workers from other factories comes there,* said most of the respondents.

Most of the workers don't have personal transportation thus it becomes difficult for the workers to get any vehicle like no one wants them to ferry in their vehicle

According to one of the respondents, *“No vehicle would ferry us to the bus stop because of the negative attitude associated with the COVID-19 affected factory workers”*.

#### **4.3. Stigma and socio-economic discrimination experienced by COVID-19 affected workers in the place of work**

The COVID-19 infection though affected the whole factory but within the place of work, the positive COVID-19 workers were stigmatized and discriminated against. The four positive recovered workers faced discrimination within the factory from the co-workers who tested negative. All four respondents had experienced discrimination in the workplace from co-workers, employers and managers. According to respondents discrimination is revealed in different contexts and forms in the world of work. In the context of the workplace, discrimination often manifests itself in the form of discriminatory practices by employers, co-workers, clients, and customers. The respondents experienced discrimination from an employer in the sense that he initially refused to join the work after they recovered from the COVID-19 virus.

*“All four positive COVID-19 workers were not allowed to work initially by the employer/owner because he blamed us for the closure of his factory and also feared it to impact his factory further. It was only after much the intervention of the labour department that we were again reinstated”* respondents said

The respondents also experienced discrimination from co-workers who avoid them most of the time due to fear of contracting the disease.

*Yes, a lot of discrimination in the workplace. Most people, do not want to interact with us. Maybe they fear that may get covid19 infection.* Respondents narrated

*Even if we go for lunch together with the people, workers will sit aside. They will leave us alone eating they do not want to eat together with us, all four respondents said.*

The managers and supervisors have been stricter towards the positively recovered COVID-19 workers. It may be because the working environment had become hostile towards the positive COVID-19 workers. The reason for such strictness was not known to the workers themselves.

*Since we joined back to work after our recovery from covid19 we have been treated badly by the supervisors. We can see clear discrimination against the four of us as others are not being treated like this by the supervisors. The rude behaviour of the supervisors has mentally exhausted us.*

## 5. Conclusion

COVID-19-related stigma and discrimination can generally affect the workers not only in the place of work but also at the community and local levels of the factory area as well. Such stigma and discrimination have many serious consequences for the marginal sections of society like factory workers. Another recurrent theme that emerged from the study is that the workers who did not test positive were also discriminated against at different levels.

## 6. Recommendations

The development of strategies is very important in the workplace regarding the awareness and protection of workers from the COVID-19-related stigma. The government through the medium of media shall try to clear the misconception regarding the covid19 pandemic. The employer shall be directed to desist from the actions which tend to discriminate and stigmatize the COVID-19-affected workers. It is also important that the identity of the COVID-19-affected patients must be kept secret as much as people which ultimately will help them to live a normal life.

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