

Lockdowns have economic and social costs for world's poorest families

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Low socioeconomic families—and particularly women—experienced increased financial hardship, food insecurity, domestic violence and mental health challenges during COVID-19 lockdown measures in Bangladesh, a new research study shows.

In the first study of its kind, Australian and Bangladeshi researchers documented the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated [lockdown](#) measures on the wellbeing of women and their families in rural Bangladesh. The study found that low socioeconomic families experienced a range of economic and [mental health challenges](#) during the two-month stay-at-home order, and women reported an increase in [intimate partner violence](#).

The study, published today in *The Lancet Global Health*, suggests in the event of future public health lockdowns, the wellbeing of families—and particularly women—needs be actively addressed.

Devastating impacts of lockdown

Like many countries around the world, Bangladesh

used stay-at-home (or lockdown) orders to limit the spread of COVID-19 in April and May 2020. Using an existing research network in Bangladesh, a collaborative team led by the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research in Bangladesh was able to measure the impact of the lockdown on financial stability, [food security](#), mental health and [domestic violence](#) in 2424 families in a rural Bangladesh community.

The impact of the lockdown on households was worrying, said Associate Professor Sant-Rayn Pasricha from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute.

"While the lockdown was an essential public health measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we were concerned about the problems it could pose for the families in our study," Associate Professor Pasricha said.

"Comparing how families were faring before and during lockdown, we observed substantial financial and mental health pressures experienced during lockdown."

The study revealed 96 percent of families experienced a reduction in employment and 91 per cent considered themselves to be financially unstable.

"During the lockdown, almost half (47 percent) of families saw their earnings drop below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day," Associate Professor Pasricha said.

"Seventy percent experienced food insecurity, with one in six families running out of food, going hungry or missing meals."

The lockdown also had mental health impacts, with women showing an increase in depression symptoms, and 68 percent of participants reporting their anxiety level had increased. Concerningly, among the women who reported emotional,

physical or sexual violence from their intimate partner, more than half reported violence had increased since lockdown.

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Families need more support

Provided by Walter and Eliza Hall Institute

Associate Professor Pasricha said the study indicated the lockdown had unintended yet devastating outcomes for the families.

"Stay-at-home orders lasting more than two months, in a rural South Asian setting, have inflicted an enormous economic and psychosocial burden on women and their families," he said.

Associate Professor Pasricha said the results reflected similar studies that indicated the flow-on effect of stay-at-home orders to food security and nutrition would be experienced globally.

"The marked increase in severe [food insecurity](#) in our study population shows the impact of economic pressure on food access and supports modelling to suggest the pandemic could have a catastrophic effect on [food](#) security and consequently on nutrition worldwide.

"Our study, which is the first of its kind, highlights the need for wide-reaching welfare and other forms of financial support for families impacted by lockdown measures, not only for those on low incomes. Crucially, social support is needed to protect women's safety and it is essential that domestic violence intervention services remain accessible during lockdown.

Bangladeshi Principal investigator, Dr. Jena Hamadani, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh, said she hoped the research would help inform governments about the need for welfare support for people in rural communities in low and middle income countries during lockdowns.

"We hope our findings will be valuable for public health officials, and will inform and improve future public health measures, should lockdowns continue," Dr. Hamadani said.

More information: *The Lancet Global Health*

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