



**A REPORT**  
**ON**  
**NATIONAL WEBINAR**  
**“WORKING ENVIRONMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH STATUS OF**  
**WORKING WOMEN: ISSUES & CHALLENGES”**

*Jointly Organised by*

*Social Work Department (PG) St. Edmund's College, Shillong and National  
Commission for Women, New Delhi*

*in Collaboration with*

*IQAC St. Edmund's College, Shillong*

*Date: 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2020*

## **Introduction**

In view of the current global scenario when the world is the victim of the menacing Corona virus or Covid19 pandemic, it is evident that human lives are being greatly and adversely affected in many ways. In every corner of the globe Covid19 pandemic has created fear in the minds of every individual without any discrimination. It has affected the various facets of human life; social disintegration, economic regression, political turmoil, scarcity in health services, increasing demands of basic needs and commodities and other complexities have sprouted from the current pandemic. These complexities have given rise to unfavorable reactions from the society to the abstract nature and subjectivity for justifications which resulted in discrimination and stigmatization towards those who even are not victims but are exposed to the potential of the current pandemic.

Among those who were and are still being greatly affected by the current pandemic are the working women working in different sectors in the country. The concept or the connotation of 'working women' is just being denoted to represent a particular status of women engaged in income generating or supporting economic functions for the home and the family. Perhaps there is scarcity in the words to really describe women in relation to their roles and function in both on or off the working space.

It is an art, a skill and commitment that women possess that helps her effectively perform her roles and responsibilities and maintain her work-life balances.

## **About the Webinar**

It was an opportunity for the Social Work Department (PG) St. Edmund's College, Shillong to have successfully organized the programme jointly with the National Commission for Women, Delhi and in Collaboration with Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) St. Edmund's College Shillong. The faculties of Social Work Department (PG) were the Organizing committee for the webinar. The Principal, Vice-Principal, IQAC and the Secretary St Edmund's College have enormously contributed to the webinar through their support and guidance. The technical arrangements were being supported by Dr. Samrat Adhikari, Assistant Professor & Head, Bioinformatics Department, and Mr. Gautam Deb, Assistant Professor & Head, Commerce Department, St. Edmund's College. The webinar was conducted on the 15<sup>th</sup> December from 12:30pm and was concluded at 03:45pm with Mr. Martius Rynjah, Assistant Professor, Social Work Department (PG), St. Edmund's College as the Organising Secretary and Dr. R Rajendra,

Assistant Professor & Head, Social Work Department (PG), St. Edmund's College, as the Convener of the webinar.

The webinar started with a speech from Br. Simon Coelho the IQAC coordinator where he welcomed the participants on behalf of the organizing institute and also highlighted the relevance of the webinar during the pandemic. He also mentioned about the present situation and the status of working women and a brief information on the impact of the pandemic on the working women on their socio-economic and psychological dimensions of their life.

The webinar was conducted through Zoom platform for which the link for registration and joining the webinar was created with the help from the department of Bioinformatics, St Edmund's College, Shillong. The registration link was shared through WhatsApp and email in a common WhatsApp group where members could use the link provided and register for the webinar. A WhatsApp group for all participants who have registered for the webinar was created and the link along with the meeting ID and Passcode was provided to the participant to join the webinar.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. Martius Rynjah the Organising secretary of the webinar. There were 120 participants in the webinar which included the likes of professors, lecturers, students, scholars from different universities and colleges both within the and outside the state of Meghalaya and other participants who are engaged in other professions. The speakers were given 20 minutes for their presentations and 5 minutes for question and answer session. There was an active response and participation from the respondents where they posted questions and queries after each of the session from the presenters. And it was also notable that the presenters were able to clarify the queries posted by the participants.

### **Speakers in the Webinar:**

1. **Mr. Allanson Wahlang**, Assistant Professor, Social Work Department (PG), St. Edmund's College

**Topic:** Working Women and the New Normal

#### **Key Points of the Presentation:**

- The speaker in his presentation focused on how the present pandemic has affected the working women and the challenges that the working women has to undergo through to adjust with the new normal.
- The speaker also highlighted the aspect that the current pandemic affect and implications is non-discriminatory but the State's responses to the current

pandemic has really affected the women population especially the working women.

- The speaker also shared that in the past pandemic women have taken longer to return to their pre-outbreak incomes levels compared to men. For which it can be repeated in the current pandemic if there is no proper and effective policy to look into the present challenges of the working women which will largely affect those categories of working women whose income depends upon the availability of daily work.
- With the new practice of 'Work From Home' as the new normal it seems that more than the normal working days the new normal has greatly affected the working women as in most cases there is no time limit of working hours. The new normal is also suitable and advantageous for the service sectors which constitutes of only a small percentage of working women than compared to other women who work as labourers. Whereas the other sectors of working women in deprivation and unavailability of labour during the pandemic are largely dependent on alms and charity for their survival of their families. This is categorically affecting those women who are single mothers, sole bread earner of the family and widows.
- Women have become more over burdened with responsibilities during the pandemic with lots in their hand to perform. Other than the regular chores she performs at home extra care and guidance for their children and old aged have added up due to the potential threats of the virus which could not only affect the health status but also social discrimination.
- Women who face domestic violence do find pre-pandemic working hours as a period to be free from domestic violence. But during the pandemic most of the men and women are at home and those women who live with abusive spouse are highly vulnerable to domestic violence during the pandemic.
- Some of the economic problems that women faced during the pandemic are dwindling work opportunities, lowered salary, overworking, unpaid work are some of the common features that impinge women.
- The current pandemic has also led and evidently seen to other problems and challenges of migration and human trafficking. Young women are very much vulnerable to imposters who pretend to help them getting back to their hometown by taking advantage of the situation.

- Some recommendations made towards the end of the presentation; recognizing the exacerbation of gender inequality due to COVID-19, Addressing gender-blind economic and policy responses, Mitigating increased violence in the context of crisis, Increase the number of person-days in MGNREGA.

2. **Dr. Bobby Mahanta**, Principal & Ex-Officio Secretary, Dhupguri College of Education, West Bengal.

**Topic:**Health and Family Stress of Working Women

**Key Points of the Presentation:**

- The speaker in this session started by enlightening the concept and definition of health and stress in their various dimensions.
- She focused on the nature of stress and its types. She explains that stresses are of two types; Stress that's beneficial and motivating - good stress, and Stress that causes anxiety and even health problems - bad stress.
- The speaker then went on to relate how the current pandemic led to stress to many most of the individuals especially those who are the ones taking care of the children and old aged. The stresses that most of us had experienced during the pandemic had various factors ranging from basic needs, economic needs, job security, adjustment with the new normal, work-life balance, additional working hours etc.
- The speaker then spoke on the area of working women and stress. She opined that the current pandemic the effect of stress from various factors have multiplied especially for the working women.

**Sources of stress for working women during Covid-19:**

- With technology, working women have office on their fingertips. So, they continue working from home - whether it is actual work or responding to emails. Technology sometimes makes it more difficult to break away from Office work. During Covid-19, in most homes with school going kids, homeschooling is mainly the mother's responsibility. Homeschooling children in addition to office work really is causing a lot of stress on working women. In many Families, taking care of elderly parents & other family members is falling on working women's shoulders.
- Women often compromise their comforts, health and needs for that of their husbands or kids.

- In the workplace, women know there is pay inequalities & discriminations in some workplace. This can cause resentment and anger – leading to stress in the long run.
- In the workplace, women also have to encounter dominating attitudes from their seniors and have to work harder and longer hours to prove themselves.
- All of the above causes a lot of stress in Working women leading to health problems.

### **Suggestions for Working Women**

- The speaker having done on sharing the concept and definition of health and stress, types of stress and how the Covid-19 has created various kinds of stress for the working women working in different sectors, she concluded with some suggestions that working women can follow to reduce stresses especially during the present pandemic period:
  - Prioritize work – First Things First
  - Time Management - Don't overload yourself.
  - Stop worrying about things you can't control. For example, you can't control how someone else behaves or talks. So, worrying about such a person and why s/he does this or that is unnecessary and only cause you problem.
  - Stop trying to be the best in everything – For example, it is ok for the home not to be looking perfect or kids no to have perfect score.
  - If something is disturbing you, discuss with a close friend or relative.
  - Learn to enjoy as much as you can.
  - Have positive companions. Share positivity.
  - Turn off the cell phone, once in a while.
  - Limit office work at home.
  - Engage in something of your choice (singing, playing an instrument, gardening etc.) or Listen to nice music
  - Don't stop yourself. Take out time to relax & pamper yourself.
  - Laugh - Watch good movies / shows that make you laugh.
  - Most important - Take care of your health
  - Exercise,
  - Meditation,
  - Yoga, asana,

- Nutritious diet
- GOOD SLEEP (at least 7-8 hours)

3. **Ms. Ainamlin Dkhar**, Assistant Professor, Social Work Department (PG), St. Edmund's College.

**Topic:** Working Environment: A Challenge for Working Women During Covid-19

**Key Points of the Presentation:**

- The speaker in this session has shared her knowledge on another dimension of the problem pertaining to working women during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her key area of focus for the presentation was the challenges faced by working women in relation to the working environment during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- She opines that the impacts of the Pandemic and the lockdown have been disruptive and changed the way in which humans perform their daily activities and go about their routine lives.
- Such impact has however not been the same across all social groups, with the most vulnerable and marginalized groups being affected differently due to the already existing social inequalities.
- The Pandemic affected women differently. Women face specific additional risk due to the deeply rooted inequalities, social norms and unequal power relations.
- The speaker introduced her session by sharing with the participants to understand the concept and meaning of working environment where she describes working environment as: the social interactions at the workplace, including interactions with colleagues, subordinates, managers, authorities etc. Working environment also includes the psychological aspects of how the work is organised and the wellbeing of employees at work. A positive working environment is a work place that promotes employee safety, growth and goal attainment. There could be a hostile working environment as well.
- The speaker then shared about the meaning of supportive working environment and the various components and that are core and are very much valued in a supportive working environment such as:
  - Employees as human being
  - Acknowledge achievement
  - Employee autonomy
  - Treat employees like family

- Removing fear
- The speaker then spoke about the role and status of women back then and now. Traditionally the role of women used to be of cooking, cleaning, raising children etc. They were looked upon as caregiver or as home keeper and were denied access outside home. Today's women have made their mark in every field. Be it literature, arts, politics, sports, Corporate or any other sphere women are ready to take up challenges.
- The speaker also touched on the aspect of women and work life balance that even though society have evolved and most of us we live in the modern world the traditional concept of a women as a home maker has not gone away from the minds of the people.
- She opines that times are changing from traditional to the modern way. But the wife still cooks, washes and runs the house. Today's women are striving continuously for "Work Life Balance".
- Today's women are mostly into full time services and are working 8 hours per day and 5 days in a week minimum. Most of them carry work and responsibilities to home as well. Many of the women are struggling to achieve work life balance.
- Women have to cope up with high work targets, office commitments, tight meeting schedules and the duties and responsibilities of life and home.
- She also discussed that some of the challenges that women face at workplace are; Poor and Biased Based Infrastructure, Sexual exploitation and Discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the office spaces to the homes of the people.
- The pressure of Covid-19 and the new work environment have completely changed the life of women. The change in the working environment of the women has led to various challenges for women such as;
  - Many women across the world have quit their jobs to be at home with their children.
  - For a daily wage earner - Pandemic means no work, no wages.
  - Those who hold jobs that cannot be performed remotely are routinely losing their jobs.
  - Working from home has resulted in an increased workload for most women.



- With the pandemic - maids, house help is not allowing to enter the premises in cities, the household work falls on the women to take over the household responsibilities.
- There are no boundaries when it comes to work timing. 9-5 pm jobs are a thing before the pandemic. Now, one is expected to be on call even late into the night even on weekends. Fear of losing jobs that makes one works harder and not complaint about the long hours work.
- Many working women complain of 'online sexual' harassment. Many women have approach the experts for guidance as they were unsure of how to raise complaints of sexual harassment while working from home.
- Risk in Health including Reproductive health; Women are also at the frontline of the Covid-19 response – nurses, doctors, health workers, food services, garment industry, retails etc...
- No safe space at home; many women experience intimate partner violence, physical, verbal and emotional abuse behind closed doors. There has been an increase in domestic violence cases with the pandemic.
- Mental Health; physical distancing, self-isolation, fear, uncertainty, prolong period of working from home has led to a large number of people suffering from mental health issues. It has led to loneliness and isolation, anxiety, stress and depression.

4. **Dr. Ritwika Rajendra**, Assistant Professor, Social Work Department, Assam University, Silchar

**Topic:** Status of Women Mental Health During Covid-19

**Key Points of the Presentation:**

- The speaker here while focusing on the impacts of Covid-19 on mental health, she has also attached with it on how social work intervention is necessary and the scope of social work practice can intervene during such situations.
- While discussing on the impacts of mental health of the pandemic on the society she has pointed out the vulnerable sections of the society whose mental health are being adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic due to factors being; losing of job or joblessness, increased responsibility, inaccessibility to basic needs, education, lack of sales of products and health concerns. Some of these sections of the society most affected by the pandemic are:
  - Migrants people

- Marginalized people
  - Labourer
  - Women
  - Student fraternity
  - School Children
  - Farm labourers
  - Older people
- She also shared that work from home jobs can be a real challenge for some women and their mental health. One of the major after-effects of the pandemic is the shutting down of physical workplaces, forcing people to work from home and Women have been hit hard by the pandemic as they try to strike a balance at home – juggling office duties with household care. Their personal and professional lives have gone for a toss in the absence of support, an orderly structure or even networkingsystems.
  - Working from home has resulted in an increased workload for most women, especially those who do not have help with household chores or child-rearing. With a number of gated communities in cities like Mumbai not allowing house help to enter the premises, the onus falls on the woman to take over household responsibilities as well.
  - The speaker highlighted the impacts faced by women as a result of the challenges above in maintain their professional responsibilities and performing their home roles leads to problems such as:
    - Outbursts, irritability, or frustration over small matters.
    - Loss of interest over activities enjoyed - such as sex or hobbies.
    - Insomnia or irregular sleep schedules.
    - Tiredness and lack of energy, so even small tasks take extra effort.
    - Food cravings leading to obesity, or no hunger at all.
    - Anxiety, agitation, and restlessness.
    - Trouble in concentrating, making decisions, and remembering things.
    - Physical problems such as back pain or headaches Avoiding socializing altogether.
    - Psychological stress growing panic due to reinforced messaging in all forms of media.

- In terms of private job holders, a lot many are fearing loss of job, some have already seen pay cuts and appraisals are getting delayed almost for everyone make them anxious and worried about their future.
- Coming to the other aspect of the presentation on the role or scope of social work intervention to address or provide professional support to women suffering from mental health, the speaker highlighted the various roles that professional social workers could provide such as;
  - Social workers are in a unique position to disseminate accurate information from trusted sources and to help address anxiety, depression arising as a result of this public health crisis.
  - Social workers can also help by facilitating effective communication between health care professionals and clients to reduce mutual frustrations or anxieties.
  - This pandemic is generating lots of negativity around the people, at this time, a social worker can help them uplift their mental strength, cope up with it and come out of it by giving them counselling and motivating them.
  - Social workers in hospital-based settings or community organizations directly dealing with COVID-19 patients may hold the responsibility of calming distressed patients, supporting caregivers through teletherapy.
  - Recognize specific and varied needs for each person/family. There is no generalization. Help them to acknowledge that this is an unusual situation of uncertainty and reassure them that the situation is transient and not going to last long. Normal life is going to resume soon.
  - Instead of reflecting mercy, Social worker should seek their support in the spirit of winning over the situation together.
  - Clear guidance is critical on both an individual and community level. Social workers are essential in offering support to those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but every member of a community has an important role in helping others and following the guideline of government recommended safety precautions.

5. **Dr. Jasmine Lyngdoh**, Clinical Psychologist, Shillong.

**Topic:**Importance of Women's Wellbeing and Mindfulness in Society)

**Key Points of the Presentation:**

- The last presentation of the webinar started with a small exercise guided by the speaker who is an expert and practitioner in the field of clinical psychology. The exercise was relaxing after almost 3 hours of attending and listening to other speakers present their topics. The speaker through her therapy help the participants to relief the stress from their minds by focusing on her guidance during the therapy.
- After the small exercise/therapy the speaker started the presentation focusing on the Importance of Women's Wellbeing and Mindfulness in Society by highlighting the statistical profile of female labour force participation (per 1000 female) in India. The highest was Mizoram with 642 in Rural and 439 in urban female labour force per 1000 female.
- The speaker also made some observations in her presentation in the areas such as; the need for better policies for women to experience the joy of working and in tribal areas the women are more readily engaged in business and enterprise that are less bounded by rigid working hours, unsupportive environments and gender inequities or discriminations existing in offices.
- The speaker also shared that according to the WHO (2017):
  - 57 million people affected by depression.
  - 18 percent of people worldwide.
  - 1 in 5 Indians suffer depression in a lifetime.
- ASSOCHAM study (2015):
  - 42.5 percent of employees in the private sector suffer from depression or general anxiety disorder.
  - workplace fatigue.
  - sleeping disorders.
  - Perceived 'poor health'.
- Mumbai-based counselor Divya Srivastava (2017)
  - Stigma is still strong in India
- The speaker also mentioned few contributing factors to stress as given by the (WHO)
  - **Task – specific**
    - Workload (both excessive and insufficient work).
    - Monotonous or unpleasant tasks.
    - Lack of participation.

- Role ambiguity or conflict.
  - Lack of recognition.
  - Inequity (especially women).
- **Interpersonal related**
  - Poor interpersonal relationships, working conditions, leadership and communication.
  - Conflicting home and work demands
  - Control in the workplace.
- The Speaker highlighted the factors that leads to workplace stress for women;
  - Multitasking more due to social roles of being a mother, bread earner, achiever.
  - Increasing cognitive load impairing memory due to switching back and forth can impact productivity, creativity and accuracy.
  - More than 75% of expectant mothers report that they're excited to return to work after giving birth, but 43% of them leave their career.
- She also shared the various dimensions of the impacts of stress on women according to Harvard Business Study of Comerica Bank:
  - Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS): 10%
  - Lowered on-the-job productivity: 20%.
  - Gestational Hormonal imbalance: 15% -21%
  - moods and anxiety
  - insomnia
  - paranoia
  - post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
  - depression (especially postpartum depression)
  - Over 6 weeks to recover from pregnancy and delivery and longer in later age groups.
- While focusing on the other aspect of wellbeing in the presentation, the speaker has help clarify the two both related but misunderstood concepts of mental health and well-being.
- She clarified that the concept of;
  - mental health is both
    - The absence of mental illness.
    - The presence of psychological well-being.

- Well – being consists of:
  - Hedonic Happiness (enjoyment, pleasure) .
  - Eudaimonic Happiness (meaning, fulfillment).
  - Resilience (coping, emotion regulation, healthy problem solving).
- Focusing on well-being, the speaker further clarified the concept and the various dimensions of well-being. She describes well-being as;
  - A sense of balance in emotion, thoughts, social relationships, and pursuits.
  - Emotion regulation is defined as the processes by which we influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how we experience and express them (Gross, 1998).
  - The Stress Hypothesis Theory of Multiple Roles (Goode, 1960) suggests an individual’s well-being reduces when an additional role is added to the societal role that already includes many demands and hassles.
- The speaker also elaborated and explained the different parts of the brain; the Central Nervous System (CNS) and the Autonomous Nervous System (ANS) functions in while the body interacts with the mind.
- Furthermore, the speaker shared on the other concepts associated with well-being such as subjective well-being, psychological and capital well-being, perceived gender equity and well-being, psychological capital intervention.
- The speaker towards the end of the presentation shared the concept of mindfulness in its relation to well-being and also how mindfulness can promote well-being of an individual.
  - Mindfulness training promotes the synergistic engagement of mind and body to enhance psychological well-being.
- **Mindfulness:**
  - The act of being intensely aware of the importance of sensing and feeling at every moment — without interpretation or judgment.
  - The awareness emerges from the intentional attention in a kind, open, and discerning way.
  - 
  - Spending too much time planning, problem solving, daydreaming, or thinking negative or random thoughts can be draining.
  - Directing attention away from this kind of thinking and engaging with the world in the moment.

- **How to be mindful?**

- Pay attention: give meaning, understand with patience, delay judgements or criticisms.
- Make the familiar new again: Look at something afresh, identify new details that give purpose.
- Focus on breathing: Become aware of what's happening around, breath by breath.
- Awaken the senses: The sight, taste, feel, smell and sound of things will be meaningful if we pay attention.

- **5 Commonsense mindfulness**

- Talk to yourself as a friend: Be kind and loving.
- Switch off and enjoy some me-time: Well deserved.
- Congratulate yourself: Focus on the Inner Cheerleader. Get rid of the Inner Critic.
- Find activities that sustain you - not drain you: Prioritize meaningful and enjoyable activities to energize.
- Stop trying to please everyone: Take ownership and acknowledge the importance of the decision. Get away from feeling a helpless victim of circumstances.

### **Conclusion:**

The National Webinar has provided insight and enlightened the participants on the challenges faced by the different categories of working women during the Covid-19 pandemic. The invitees/speakers did a commendable job to guide the seminar through the discourse and were also successful in providing an in-depth understanding of the various issues and challenges of working environment and mental health pertaining to working women during the pandemic. From the five presentations by the guest speakers it was evident that working environment and working conditions have been largely affecting the mental health status of working women during the pandemic. Through their lectures one could easily comprehend what the pandemic had brought about the multi sectoral and multi layered challenges for the working women in seeking work-life balance in their daily lives recently.

The new normal has led to numerable changes in working space, adjustment issues, work time constraints and ever-increasing demand on the working women which over burdens them from the already existing and expected natural responsibilities of the working women. The work from home approach has also made women vulnerable to domestic violence as pointed out during the webinar as there is an increasing rate of domestic violence during the pandemic which has been reflected in the recent gathered surveys. Work from home has become an environment that makes women vulnerable instead of being secure.

With most of the official and academic functions being conducted and performed online through the digital media and other social platforms during the pandemic, online sexual abuse and harassment has also one of the forms of abuse women are facing during the pandemic. It seems that the new normal has given space for abusers to abuse women.

The webinar has also highlighted the various activities and that not only women but also others who are in stressful situations could practice to relief stress or by consulting and interacting with professionals for solutions and remedies. Prioritization of activities has also been highlighted as one of the main factors that would help women in avoiding stressful situations and overdoing above their capacity and help in decision making.

Migration of working women has also been seen as one of the major issues faced by the working women particularly those sections working in household level as maids, helper or caretakers. They are subjected to losing employment which affects their family's access to basic needs and also discrimination and exploitation from the society. Migration of working women during the pandemic have also made them vulnerable to imposters for human trafficking who takes advantage of the situation by assuring them safe return to their hometowns.

Women working in frontline emergency services like health care and other basic services are facing mental health issues coupled with work load and role expectations as the social isolation for a prolonged period of time during the peak periods of the pandemic has made them to stay far away from their children and families. This has really affected particularly to those working women who are caretakers and bread earners in the family.

The webinar was concluded by the Convener of the webinar, Dr. R Rajendra where she summarized how the seminar proceeded and highlighted the important points covered by the esteemed speakers related to their respective topics. Towards the end of her speech she also extended the vote of thanks to all members of the college and the participants for their support and their participation that have contributed to the success of the webinar.