Role of media in science communication for building awareness about the negative consequences of COVID-19

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Globally, COVID-19 has negatively impacted the mental health of people, which is attached to stigma in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) in South Asia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many reports on the consequences of COVID-19 stigma on mental health were published in print and on social media reporting on impacts on financial, social, family, and personal issues. Because of the global research funding crisis and the absence of a mechanism to divert funding to LMICs, there have been limited efforts in generating evidence from rapid research to innovate solutions for the LMICs, particularly for the most vulnerable populations. Real-time data capture mechanisms are absent or limited in LMICs, limiting public health officials from taking prompt actions for preventing severe mental health consequences in people’s life.

In Bangladesh media has played an important role in communicating public health messages to the community during the pandemic. In 2021, our group conducted a document review of the local newspapers from March 2020- March 2021 to track mental health issues during COVID-19 in Bangladesh and initiatives undertaken by different organizations. Our review revealed that most of the reports focused on domestic violence (38.3%), stress (22.4%), and suicide (24.9%) linked to family issues, financial constraints, and stigma. Around 14.4% of reports highlighted the actions taken to respond to COVID-19 in Bangladesh. The overall review suggested news coverage had the scope to highlight important issues emerging as consequences of the pandemic, such as mental health.

A systematic reporting on the consequences of COVID-19 stigma is imperative for early notification of harmful consequences in the community, including unnatural deaths by the local administration, and help them to prepare various social groups for taking preventive measures to engage the vulnerable communities. Careful contextualization of published mental health information and training of the media to reinforce public health messages along with reporting of severe mental health situations, such as suicide could be a helpful strategy for the policymakers for early preparedness to avert undesirable consequences of COVID-19 on mental health in Bangladesh.