

## Title

# Female university students lived experiences of COVID-19 lockdown: the case of Jimma University, Southwest Ethiopia

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## Abstract

The study has explored the lived experiences of female university students during the covid-19 lockdown: the case of Jimma university graduate students, southwest Ethiopia. The study employed a qualitative phenomenology research design. Ten participants were selected based on their relevance to the topic and their size was determined based on the principle of data saturation point. In-depth interview data collection technique was applied via semi-structured interview guideline. Thematic data analysis was utilized to generate major and subthemes. The trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by collecting trustful information from the participants by having good rapport with them during the data collection time. The participants' willingness was secured via informed consent; the information from the participants were kept in conceal by using codes instead of their name. The findings of this study revealed that target university female students experienced hopelessness and suicidal ideation, lack of financial support, needed for domestic chores, unplanned marriage and pregnancy. They handle the challenges via alternative teaching-learning approach, job seeking, praying, and social media interactions. And they suggested that universities could carry on teaching-learning endeavors even during the lockdown by taking the necessary protective measures, awareness raising for families, and informing respective districts to help female university students on their needs and education.

## Key words

coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19); Ethiopia; female; Jimma; lockdown; students

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## Introduction

Although overall in the African Region, women account for around 40% of COVID-19 cases, these ranges from 35% in some countries to over 55% in South Africa. In addition, women face a higher risk of gender-based violence in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. A recent study by UN Women found that reports of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries as security, health, and financial worries create tensions and strains heightened by the overcrowded and confined living conditions of lockdown (WHO, Regional Office for Africa, 2020). As far as our knowledge concerns, no one is more responsible to identify the challenges and find solutions than African scholars for African problems always and particularly when life threatening pandemic occurred like coronavirus. The purpose of this study was to learn the female university students' lived experiences of COVID-19 lockdown of Jimma University, Southwest Ethiopia. Our personal experiences and observation after the lockdown and reopening of universities, gave us new perspectives regarding female university students to be investigated. Therefore, with the following context of literature, exploratory phenomenological research design, findings and discussions as well as recommendations are forwarded.

## Background

The world knows from its previous experiences that while calamities happen, violence against women and girls becomes worse. In this case, the combinations of the economic devastation and lockdowns, which have literally trapped women at home with their abusers, have created a perfect storm. Women are victims of domestic violence locked down with their abusers; as unpaid caregivers in families and communities, picking up the slack where schools, childcare and other services are shut down or scaled back: and as workers in jobs which lack social protection and which are being lost at an alarming rate. In other contexts, there is concern that the increased economic distress may trigger an increase in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, as families make very difficult choices, or that women may resort to transactional sex, where their livelihoods have been destroyed. Another driving force for increased violence is the fact that in some contexts, so much of our work and home lives have moved online. Cyber-violence, like sexualized trolling and online stalking, have intensified; with new forms of violence such as 'Zoom-bombing' emerging to intimidate and harass women and girls (Turquet, 2020).

Like other disciplines and professions, social work education is affected by the occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of that, students of social work as well as students from other disciplines were exposed to the interruption of learning because of the closure of higher education institutions during the lockdown. To lessen the impact of the pandemic on students' learning endeavors, online platform of teaching started. However, students experienced feelings of anguish, frustration and a worthless future. And reported that rural infrastructure causes terrifying moments at home, due to inadequate accessibility to internet connectivity. "*Social work educators expressed frustration with online teaching and doubted its success*" (Tanga, Ndhlovu and Tanga, 2020, p. 17). The other researcher asserted that inability of students to afford the online system of learning, shortage of technological skills, lack of resources and fieldwork supervision were hindered the teaching-learning activities though social work education, research and fieldwork were altered via the adoption of virtual platforms (Zvomuya, 2021).

The study from Bangladesh revealed that general the situation of COVID-19 creates a profound psychological effect among the university students. The result confirmed that due to the present pandemic, 97 % of university students are in profound anxiety. Residing in urban zones, not having a stable economic situation, not living with parents, and contamination of relatives or friends with coronavirus become the major factors for developing severe anxiety among university students in the course of the eruption of novel coronavirus. Moreover, "*The stressors of the COVID-19, including economic stressors, academic delays, impact on daily life, and social supports, are entirely linked with the symptoms of anxiety levels among the university students of Bangladesh during the epidemic* (Dhar, Ayithey and Sarkar, 2020, pp. 4-5)".

Study shows that school closures connected to sexual and reproductive health aspects, where teenage girls might excessively drop out of school because of increased risk of sexual exploitation, pregnancy, and forced marriage. As a result of school closureS, humiliation of teenage pregnancies prevails all through the developing countries. And we will perhaps realize an escalation in drop-out rates as teenage girls get pregnant or married. In addition to that, with the existing COVID-19 virus, we might understand more girls than boys serving at home, lagging behind with studying, and dropping out of school (Muller and Nathan, 2020).

Physical exhaustion or tiredness, headaches and body pain, decreased motivation and increased worry were the most pronounced manifestations of fatigue reported. Gender and college year were identified as important predictors of fatigue.

Increased personal resilience and coping skills were associated with lower levels of lockdown fatigue (Leodoro & Cherry, 2020).

A study in Zimbabwe explained that the effects of coronavirus are causing psychological and physical flaws to women making them susceptible to the short and the long run. And the lockdown actions have made women be further exposed to unwanted pregnancy, school dropout, sexual abuse, intimate partner abuse, child marriages and child prostitution. These manipulations were advanced by the lack of basic goods and services during the COVID-19 lockdown. The promising positive result of the lockdown strengthened the intimate partner relationship (Dzingirayi, Mutete & Maunganidze, 2020).

Being female, staying at home, history of medical illness, and poor and moderate social support increased the risk of depression. Not living with their parents, relatives got coronavirus and low family income were risk factors for anxiety. The study revealed at its conclusion that COVID-19 resulted a higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students (Shifera, Ayenew & Matiyas, 2020).

A study at Jimma University confirmed that fears, stress, isolation, loneliness, poor social interaction are the psychosocial impacts and coped-up by support systems. Engaging in resource mobilization and spending their time with family and self-update were the coping strategies that the participants' utilized. The finding implies the need for social workers' contribution in handling the psychosocial challenges of the community and intervention with culturally relevant theories (Gebru, 2020).

Though several studies have been conducted from global to the local level as aforesaid, we didn't come across study undertaken on the impacts of COVID-19 lockdown on female university students. The personal experiences of the researchers upon the reopening of universities and female students' situation as well as the knowledge gap regarding the topic were the major reasons to undertaking this study. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of ten female university students during COVID-19 lockdown at Jimma University, Southwest Ethiopia. To achieve the purposes of the study, the following research questions were raised and addressed.

- What were the challenges that female students experienced during COVID-19 lockdown?
- What were female students' resilient strategies for curbing the challenges of COVID-19 lockdown?

- What do female university students suggest for future similar cases that might happen from their lived experiences?

## Research method

The problem was identified through preliminary information we obtained from female university students at our school, and personal experiences of our observation led us to conduct this study. The study has employed qualitative research approach and phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of female university students during coronavirus lockdown. Qualitative research approach is characterized by understanding events adequately in the context, and direct concern with experiences as its participants feel it or live it (Goundar, 2012). Qualitative research approach is useful to have deep understanding of the social phenomenon and phenomenological research design also lends an opportunity to explore the lived experiences of the participants from their own perspectives. For participants' selection, we applied purposive participant selection technique with their relevance to the study from school of social work, Jimma University. Accordingly, ten female university students with the age range of 22-24 years old, three Protestants, three Muslims and four Orthodox Christians, and with graduate class academic status were engaged in this study. In-depth interview guideline with semi-structured interview questions was developed to collect detailed information about issue at hand. Data collection was done by the researchers via interviewing the participants at the office school of social work, Jimma University and it took a minimum of 45 minutes to the maximum of 55 minutes.

Thematic analysis has been employed to generate major and sub-themes of the study finding. To produce the final themes, first the audio-records were transcribed; then open, selective and axial coding has followed to bring similar concepts together (Neuman, 2014). Afterward, reorganized similar ideas to extract the patterns of themes and presented the final findings. Member checking and peer debriefing were the main strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the data in this study. We have made the data accessible to the participants using clarification, furthering and confirmation questions during data collection time and it enhanced the credibility of the study's findings. Moreover, we invited our colleagues to read and criticize our study from the inception to the end of the study which in return upheld the dependability of the study findings. Two colleagues from school of social work at Jimma University, Ethiopia have read the instruments of data collection, the findings of the study and they gave us their critical comments and concerns.

Participants were willing to take part in this study after they are informed about the purpose of the study in detail orally. The confidentiality of the information they shared are kept in secret by using codes or pseudonym instead of their name. The privacy of the participants was respected through comforting to their desire of participation, the place for an interview they chose and securing them from any harm related to the study. Similarly, the audio-recorded data have been deleted after having the transcribed notes. College of social sciences and humanities' postgraduate and research coordinating office gave us permission to conduct this study after understanding our intention concerning this study. And we planned to reach the study participants and scientific community by publicizing the findings of the study on open access journals.

## Findings

### Hopelessness and suicidal ideation

The findings of the study showed that female university students felt hopelessness during the COVID-19 lockdown when universities were closed. *FI-1* said:

*I was hopeless in many things, such as my family, employment opportunities, neighbors, peers and on the reopening of the university. Because my family was not thinking that I can complete my educational endeavors and they thought that they just extravagated their money on me for the last fourteen years. Unless completed my education, I can find any white-collar job; therefore, I got hopeless on current and future job opportunities; our neighbors were not helpful in giving hope rather they were talking to me with lip-services which is discouraging. And I was not thinking that the university is reopened after those fearful calamities of corona virus pandemic.*

And the other participant confirmed the same experiences as the above participant described. Accordingly, *FI-4* stated:

*The reopening of the university was like a daydreaming or nightmare for me because the information from Ethiopian Health Institute, Mass-Media, social media and the informal information about corona virus, the protocols for protecting ourselves and the lockdown in general were not promising. Hence, I lost hope on the reopening of the university and rejoining for teaching learning activities. Then, I started to look for my future husband to fight for life together instead of standing alone.*

As the finding revealed, female university students were hopeless during the lockdown and university

closure because of several reasons behind as mentioned above.

In similar ways, participants developed suicidal ideation frequently. And the hopelessness was leading them to this suicidal idea recurrently. *FI-2* said:

*During university closure because of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, we were calling each other and making sure of our safety. And our phone discussions were about suicidal attempt of female students in different areas of the country. Similarly, in my community, shopkeepers were ordered not to sell mouse poisons because many suicidal attempts have been undertaken in the area. And all suicidal attempts were done by female university students as a result of unbearable domestic chores, hopelessness about universities' reopening and believing that they have no promising future.*

Thus, the finding specified that female university students at the time universities closure and COVID-19 pandemic lockdown were suffering with hopelessness and suicidal ideation; however, they recovered and developed hope after the reopening of universities.

### Lack of financial support

Families of female university students misunderstood the situations of their daughters during the time of university closure and corona virus lockdown. For instance, *FI-6* explained:

*My family was sending me monthly pocket-money to support my learning processes. And I was fine with that in having mobile cards, personal hygiene materials, copy and printing, for tea or coffee expenses. However, after the university's closure and corona virus lockdown, they failed to know the importance of money for me. I needed it for many things, such as mobile-card, soaps, lotion/cream/ointment, hairdressing, and recreation. Despite the needs, my family ignored it and I got frustrated.*

As the finding disclosed, female university students were suffering with the lack of financial support from their families. *FI-5* affirmed that by saying that families considered them an adult and take responsible for their issues and failed to support them. And female university students also assume that they are old enough and ashamed to ask for money from their parents. These causes are the main reasons to suffer with the lack of financial support. And they preferred to search other alternatives instead of depending on their parents. They were seeing alternative in seeking job and looking for boyfriends or husbands to cover their expenses.

### Needed for domestic chores

It's obvious that female students are forced to involve in domestic chores than their counter parts namely male students in our culture. Accordingly, female university students were challenged with domestic chores during the period of universities' closure and corona virus pandemic lockdown. For example, FI-3 mentioned:

*In our community around Northern-Shewa of Ethiopia, female students are more responsible for domestic chores than male students during the ordinary time. Currently, during COVID-19 lockdown and universities' closure, female university students are exposed to home-based jobs as my understanding. House sweeping, washing clothes, cooking, making beds, and looking after infants are the main responsibilities that I was suffering with during the lockdown and universities' closure time. As one of educated member of our community, I strictly condemn this culture of female segregation and victimization. And I was fighting for my right at home with my parents, neighbors and relatives during corona-virus pandemic lockdown and universities' closure time.*

The finding exposed that universities closure during corona-virus pandemic lockdown has been contributing for female university students' mistreatment at their homeland and with deep-rooted culturally right; however, as human being unethical thoughts and actions. FI-8 participant confirmed:

*My parents and relatives were respecting me when I came to visit them during university vacation at summertime. But, after the universities' closure as a result of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, my parents became hopeless on my educational outcome. And they began mistreating me with expectation of immense chores to be done by me. Then, I got exhausted and worn-out.*

The finding also indicated that even the outcome of female university students' education determines the degree of engagement of female students in domestic chores. Parents and relatives expected continuous involvement of female students in home-based activities, if they do not achieve the academic career.

### Unplanned marriage and pregnancy

The participants described that the challenges of universities closure and corona-virus pandemic caused lockdown, exposed them to marriage and sexual abuse. For example, FI-7 said:

*I was over thought about my future fate, if the universities continued closed for at least to two years. What am I going to do as my age is increasing? What will be the sources of my income?*

*How could I manage for my needs? How could I support my parents? These and the like questions were holding my mind and worried me a lot. And the final resolution to these challenges according to our culture was looking to someone who can be responsible for me, i.e., either husband or boyfriend. Thus, I engaged last month and currently, I am pregnant of three months for my husband, thanks to God; I will give birth after my graduation. However, if it was in between my learning period; it will be terrible and it is the consequence of universities closure because of corona-virus pandemic lockdown.*

On the other hand, the participants believed that universities' closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown have contributed for gender-based violence, especially sexual violence. FI-6 mentioned:

*Universities' closure and corona-virus lockdown have been contributing for the get-together of parents and relatives at home. In get together, extended family members and neighbors will get the chance to spend their time together and it will expose girls for sexual abuse. I heard such experiences from my neighbors and community that many female university students got pregnant from neighboring boys and was sexually harassed.*

FI-4 also stated:

*I am one of the students of social work at Jimma University and I know that around thirteen, female students got pregnant during the universities' closure time, particularly from our school. Two of them gave birth during the reopening of the university and learning-teaching endeavors. And imagine how much it will be at university level and nationally too. This happens without their planned decision and even there will be more cases if we strictly diagnose their situations except those who are engaged legally.*

### Cope-up strategies

#### Alternative teaching approach

The participants stated that they were trying to cope up the challenges of corona-virus pandemic lockdown and university closures by focusing on the alternative teaching-learning approach, i.e. online teaching via telegram channel. FI-9 said:

*We have been sharing teaching materials from the telegram group channel created by school of social work at Jimma University. Though many students didn't have smart phones to access teaching materials and the internet, some of us were trying to manage the boredom conditions through accessing teaching learning materials.*

Hence, the participants confirmed that those who could access the material with good internet and smart phones have been coping up the situations of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and university closures in promising ways.

#### *Job seeking*

As the finding pointed out, female university students were searching for job during universities' closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown to fight back the challenges. *FI-10* discussed:

*My parents were not supportive financially and the reopening of the universities was not promising. Therefore, I was seeking for job throughout the lockdown and universities' closure. Jobs were open to those who have relatives via nepotism and other determinants. Thus, I failed to get job although I tried all my best. However, I used it as the strategy to fight against various stressful situations.*

So, the participants admitted that they were spending most of their time in job seeking without discrimination of the types of work. For instance, *FI-8* acknowledged that she was looking for jobs even security guard, runner/messenger, facilitator and etc. even though she failed to have it. All in all, they have been using seeking job as time management tool rather than spending the whole day at home.

#### *Praying*

The participants supposed that spirituality is one of the coping strategies for drastic moments. Notwithstanding the closure of religious institutions because of corona-virus pandemic lockdown and the protocols, female university students were praying at home. *FI-5* recognized:

*The burdens of universities' closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown, such as hopelessness, bad feelings, domestic chores, and financial problems could not be bearable without divine attachment. For that reason, I was praying at very morning and evening times to my God. After praying, I always feel comfortable and found myself at ease. And it is like sharing my complications to someone caring for me and it's a relief from bad moods.*

The notions of the participants exhibited that spiritual activities are a great healing mechanism all through demanding situations. And participants were applying regular praying to their higher divine power to resist those enormous challenging factors at the time of universities' closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown.

#### *Social media interaction*

Though female university students were challenged with lack of financial support, they were

compromised what they have to buy mobile-cards and visit social media. *FI-1* described:

*I have a smart-phone and use data to access the internet. At the time of university closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown, I depended heavily on my smart-phone to engage in social media, such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber, Email, Imo, YouTube, Google go and text messages. As we know, the COVID-19 protocols are not for social-media distance; it's for keeping physical distance to protect ourselves from corona-virus infections.*

The participants declared that they used social media interaction as a mechanism of managing their problematic situations resulted from universities' closure and corona-virus pandemic lockdown. Besides, using telegram group channel for accessing teaching and learning materials, the participants utilized diverse social media for recreation and various purposes.

#### *Carry on teaching-learning endeavors*

The participants suggested that universities continued the teaching and learning activities at the moment of corona-virus pandemic with some cautious measures as they have been doing during the reopening time. As long as the reopening of universities was factual, universities should have continued their teaching and learning activities which are very vital. And this measure of continuing the teaching and learning endeavors in those demanding conditions saved the economic, social, psychological, political, spiritual and environmental liabilities. And universities have to follow-up their students' situation at home environment through different government offices from top to down to local administration and hard copies could be accessible if they were looking after their students. Moreover, during the lockdown and university closure, universities should communicate the students' respective districts about the students' academic status and recommend them to find them part time work to minimize their stressful conditions and they could tell them how to use them in COVID-19 pandemic protection activities. The participants also said that the government and universities should have to have the mechanisms to raise the awareness of the families regarding the situations to understand their children's perspectives. Similarly, the participants asserted that female university students ought to be clear with their responsibilities specific to their age and context instead of mingling their roles.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study revealed that universities' closure and COVID-19 pandemic

lockdown exposed female university students for several problems, such as psychological, economic, labor exploitation, unplanned marriage and pregnancy. And they handle the situations through actively involving in praying, seeking jobs, social media interactions and following the alternative teaching and learning endeavors on telegram group's channel. Similarly, African scholars asserted that students of social work as well as students from other disciplines were exposed to the interruption of learning because of the closure of higher education institutions during the lockdown. To lessen the impact of the pandemic on students' learning endeavors, online platform of teaching started. However, students experienced feelings of anguish, frustration and a worthless future. And reported that rural infrastructure causes terrifying moments at home, due to inadequate accessibility to internet connectivity. And social work instructors showed frustration about online teaching and suspected its success (Tanga, Ndhlovu and Tanga, 2020). The other researcher asserted that inability of students to afford the online system of learning, shortage of technological skills, lack of resources and fieldwork supervision were hindered the teaching-learning activities though social work education, research and fieldwork were altered via the adoption of virtual platforms (Zvomuya, 2021).

There were no incomes unless their families invest on them as they do during their education processes in the universities. Culturally deep-rooted norms of the community which believes that females are accountable for domestic chores was not swallowed to educated female students as their community expected from them. Hence, their financial dependency, unbearable domestic chores and the need for freedom as their age urges them, exposed them to be stuck in between. These in response, forced them to engage in unplanned marriage and pregnancy in which the psychological and economic demands push them to decide without sound reasoning to foresee its outcome. Congruently, there is concern that the increased economic distress may trigger an increase in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, as families make very difficult choices, or that women may resort to transactional sex, where their livelihoods have been destroyed (Turquet, 2020). In consistent with this study findings, economic stressors, academic delays, impact on daily life, and social supports are entirely linked with the symptoms of anxiety levels among the university students of Bangladesh during the epidemic (Dhar, Ayitney and Sarkar, 2020). In line with the findings of this study, girls may experience sexual exploitation, forced marriage, pregnancy and faced escalation in drop-out rates and more girls than boys might serve at home with the existing COVID-19 virus (Muller and Nathan, 2020).

Communicating their divine power through prayer day and night and hoping to get answer for it, have kept them strong and resilient to the situations. Sharing their internal and external turmoil with their peers through social media also helped them to regulate the challenges and get relief. They look for jobs to alleviate their economic needs and dependency on their significant others. In addition, they focused on the alternative teaching-learning approach via telegram channel and doing their individual assignments in which they got relief from their tense conditions.

The participants suggested that the universities could be doing great if there were continued teaching-learning activities rather than closing. And the current measures that have been taken for protection of corona-virus contamination during and after the reopening of the universities could be applied then. And universities could follow-up their students during the lockdown time and inform their respective districts on how to support them in their education endeavors, corona-virus protection activities and provide them part time jobs.

## Limitations of the study

The study focused exclusively on female university students and with small sample size which is limited to the context of the study area. And the study only looked through the lenses of qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the impacts of universities closure due to corona-virus pandemic lockdown on female university students. Therefore, further comprehensive studies will be required to be undertaken by scholars who are interested in this area.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommended the following points to be taken into account:

- Before taking serious actions, universities should have to scrutinize the case and take evidence-based decisions to close the teaching-learning activities.
- Universities should have to have the structure and job description of psychosocial support providers, such as counselors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists to support students during demanding times.
- Students have to have the culture of transferring the knowledge, skills and values they got from universities to the community where they live and raise their awareness about their importance.

- Gender equality should be seen beyond the participation of women through empowering them at different levels by concerned bodies.
- Universities should have to be proactive by developing protective strategies rather than being reactive after problems already happened.

## Conclusion

The study addressed the challenges that female university students experienced during universities' closure, the resilient strategies that female university students utilized and their suggestions for future possible happening of pandemics. Accordingly, hopelessness, suicidal ideations, lack of financial support, and needed for demanding domestic chores were the major challenges that female university students experienced at their homeland. They have been handling these challenges by engaging in alternative teaching-learning approach (online telegram group channel), actively involving in seeking jobs, praying and using Social Media interaction and they suggested that the universities' teaching and learning activity could be better if it was enduring with some precautions measure of COVID-19 protocols instead of closure because of corona-virus pandemic.

And universities have to follow-up their students' situation at home environment through different government offices from top to down to local administration and hard copies could be accessible if they were looking after their students. Moreover, during the lockdown and university closure, universities should communicate the students' respective districts about the students' academic status and recommend them to find the students part time work to minimize their stressful conditions.

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# Journal of Development Administration (JDA)

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