

FRONTLINE CHALLENGES • MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY MEMBERS IN INDIA

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“We never imagined in our wildest days that we would experience days like this.” - M, aged 22, Rajasthan

In India, young leaders associated with civil society organisations acted as frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing critical relief work and essential services. As front line workers, these young leaders experienced unprecedented emotional and physical stress. In September 2021, months after a devastating second wave of the pandemic; Restless Development India conducted independent research to understand how these young leaders are managing their mental health and well-being. The research focused on young peoples’ experiences both as individuals, and also as key members of civil society spaces.

The research investigated two critical questions:

1. How are young leaders in civil society movements experiencing mental health and well-being during the pandemic?
2. How can civil society organisations support the mental health needs of young leaders?

20 focus group discussions were conducted with 114 young leaders (40 per cent female, 60 per cent male), between the ages of 18-29, from five states across the country: Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu. The leaders represented 50 civil society organisations working on a diverse range of issues, from girls’ education to agriculture and sustainable development.



Individual Challenges

While all young leaders said that they have been affected by the pandemic, their experiences are not homogenous. Factors such as gender identity, urban-rural positionalities, among others play a key role in determining how they experience and engage with their mental health. Mental health services (if they exist) were challenging to access, especially for young women and those living in more rural areas, due to many factors including the stigma associated with accessing these services.

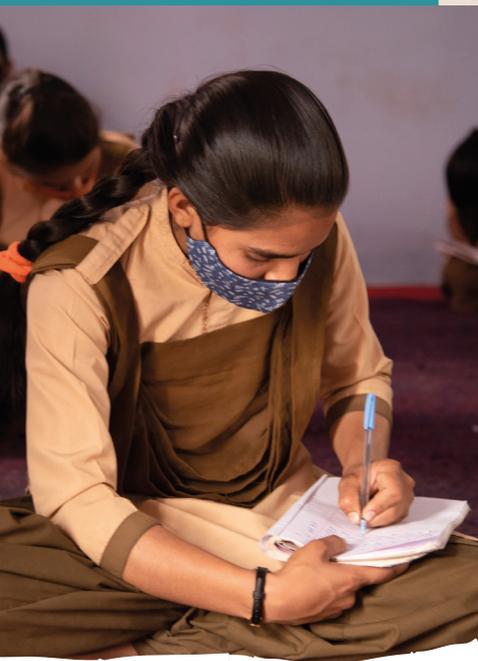
“Mental health services are a far dream.” - P, aged 27, Tamil Nadu

Challenges with education: Young leaders in the 18-24 age group across all states experienced difficulties with continuing their education. This was either due to not being able to access digital educational spaces or, in many cases, being unable to afford the cost of education as a result of unemployment and financial instability at home. Those who were able to continue their education, highlighted how futile the endeavour had become: *“What is the point of studying, if there are no jobs after we are done? I don’t know what I am working towards.” - R, aged 22, Rajasthan*

Professional concerns: Leaders in the age group of 25-29-years-old were grappling with challenges related to their professional growth and aspirations. Leaders across states noted how challenging it had become to have professional aspirations given social uncertainties, and how *“Covid has robbed people of their aspirations,”* said S, aged 27 from Odisha. In many cases, young leaders took on the role of sole breadwinners for their family, which added to their mental stress.

Female leaders faced familial pressure to give up their jobs to get married and support their households. Those who maintained their jobs, struggled to find the balance between professional commitments and family obligations. T, a 21-year-old female leader from Tamil Nadu, said that she had married in the pandemic. After moving into her husband’s home, her household responsibilities had increased. *“If the pandemic hadn’t happened, my parents wouldn’t have been in such a rush to get me married,”* she said. *“I had to quit my job also because my husband’s home is far away from my workplace.”*

Financial instability: Across all states, young leaders noted that financial insecurity was the primary shock to their lives as a result of the pandemic. They went on to identify how this had impacted their mental health and well-being as well as their ability to think about the future.



The disruption to girls' education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is known. The statistics are particularly alarming for girls in India, and especially in Rajasthan.



Disruptions to education form a key concern that young people are grappling with as a result of the pandemic.

“In many parts of the country, young leaders, as part of civil society spaces, acted as frontline workers during the deadliest waves of the pandemic.”

Particularly in the eastern states surveyed (Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha), young leaders noted how seasonal employment led to many individuals and families, particularly in rural areas, experiencing financial shocks. Because many families had seen their family members experience Covid and had been unable to afford treatment, M, a 22-year-old male respondent from Rajasthan shared: *“Arth bina sab vyarth hai”*, meaning *“without wealth there is no meaning.”*

Organisational Challenges

Frontline concerns: In many parts of the country, young leaders, as part of civil society spaces, acted as frontline workers during the deadliest waves of the pandemic. Young leaders from Jharkhand particularly, highlighted how their community engagement and activism increased even during the lockdown restrictions. With that, the fear of being infected by Covid and the fear of infecting their family members led to increased anxiety. As these young leaders worked towards dispelling myths (through door-to-door campaigns, supporting vaccination campaigns) and rumours around Covid-19 and vaccinations, they also faced physical and verbal abuse from their communities, particularly in rural areas where knowledge and awareness about the pandemic was low.

“There were myths that if someone takes the vaccine, they will die in three months, and unmarried women who take the vaccine won’t be able to conceive children later. They [the community] made fun of and threatened us. They threatened to place my cluster coordinator under arrest and burn her house down. It was a very stressful time.” - M, aged 28, Jharkhand

Lack of organisational funding: Further, leaders noted that there was a lack of funding that was available to civil society organisations, which had put constraints on the kind of work that they were able to do and the kind of impact that they could make. Leaders across all states noted the importance of community-led Covid-relief initiatives in supporting people whose livelihoods had been impacted by the pandemic. However, they noted that smaller community based organisations were unable to access funding to do this work, and lacked the capacity to access funding from larger, international organisations. Several leaders noted that they had come together across organisations, and put together concentrated efforts to raise funds from within the community, however they noted that this was not a sustainable or long-lasting solution.

“As most activities, including those related to education or professional opportunities, shift online, young leaders’ reminded us that we cannot ignore the very real digital divide in the country.”

Solutions

When the pandemic hit, youth organisations and their members across India supported crucial COVID relief efforts to the most marginalised, and in the hardest-to-reach places. They provided ration kits, co-ordinated supplying oxygen cylinders, and helped find beds in hospitals for critical patients. They also supported community re-building and sustaining efforts, providing online wellness classes and community spaces, running COVID awareness programmes, and helping young people find slots for vaccine appointments. Most of these initiatives were need-based, volunteer-led, and driven by young leaders.

Youth forums and platforms: The mental health of young civil society members can be supported by providing a safe space to engage and acting as a platform for young people to express themselves and connect with each other.

“Make platforms to really hear the voices of young people. ‘What do young people really want?’ Young people already have solutions, or can work together to create solutions. We need to listen to them.”
- R, aged 21, Rajasthan

Amplifying community-led initiatives: Young leaders across all states noted the role and importance of community organisations in working with diverse young people from different marginalised groups across the country. In many instances, they highlighted that the work to build collaborations and networks at the grassroots level was already underway. However, there was a need to amplify these initiatives to maximise impact, provide support by increasing visibility. They also highlighted the need for larger development organisations to come together in targeted ways to support and fund smaller organisations.

Gender inclusive planning and bridging the digital divide: Young leaders in Jharkhand specifically noted the importance of states to engage in gender inclusive planning when managing and mitigating the effects of disasters, including the pandemic. As most activities, including those related to education or professional opportunities, shift online, young leaders’ reminded us that we cannot ignore the very real digital divide in the country. Online solutions are challenging for those in rural areas, and particularly for women. The gender digital divide needs to be acknowledged when conceiving developmental solutions.

Conclusion

Overall, findings from this research highlight the manner in which the pandemic has disproportionately affected young people. Young leaders' experience of mental health and well-being has been diverse and across India, different groups have experienced different and unique challenges. It is important that as we come together, these differences are acknowledged, and the solutions that are generated take into account the needs, priorities, and experiences of young leaders – who in many spaces are already at the forefront of leading sustainable solutions in their communities.

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