

Special Article

COVID-19 Pandemic: Problems and Solution Suggestions for Disabled Women

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant threat to the whole society. In crisis situations such as a pandemic, disadvantaged and neglected groups are more affected. Disabled women are also among the risk groups for COVID-19.

Aim: This review aims to reveal the problems experienced by disabled women due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer the suggestion for their solutions.

Methodology: The literature reviewed examined and Popular data bases such as Pubmed, Medline, and Sciencedirect and corporate websites such as WHO, UN, and UNESCO were also used.

Results: Disabled women have faced a number of challenges that will constrain them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Problems such as lack of education, economic difficulties, social exclusion, discrimination, inequality, lack of access to resources, neglect, abuse and violence experienced by disabled women are more common during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions: The priority needs should be determined and cooperation between sectors should be established in order to solve these problems. The awareness studies should be carried out on the effects of the pandemic on disabled women and their rights, and more effective initiatives should be taken to address the problems experienced.

Keywords: COVID-19, disabled women, pandemic

Introduction

The New Type of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) emerged in China in December 2019 and spread rapidly all over the world. Thus, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020).

Although COVID-19 poses a significant threat to the entire society, disadvantaged and neglected groups are more affected in crisis situations such as a pandemic. Disabled women, who are ignored by many segments of the society and who experience many difficulties, are also negatively affected by this situation (WEI, 2020).

It was determined that disabled individuals experience more difficulties in all areas of social life due to the pandemic compared to non-disabled people in a study (ONS, 2020). In addition,

chronic diseases such as diabetes, lung problems, obesity and heart disease are common in disabled individuals, which will aggravate the consequences of COVID-19. This situation caused disabled people to be in the risk group in terms of COVID-19 and increased the severity of these difficulties (UN, 2020).

When the problems experienced are evaluated in terms of gender, the fact that women are affected more within the disabled group, as the pandemic is a global crisis that deepens pre-existing inequalities and increases the dimension of discrimination. Besides, even under normal conditions, disabled women have low opportunities to access health services, education and employment due to reasons such as physical limitations, social prejudice and lack of awareness.

For these reasons, they are more likely to face poverty, violence, neglect and abuse (Lisney et al, 2020; UN, 2020). COVID-19 further increased these risks and affected women with disabilities more directly and indirectly than non-disabled and disabled men (WEI, 2020). For these reasons, disabled women are a disadvantaged group and the problems they experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic should be emphasized (Turkish Federation of the Blind, 2020).

In this review; it is aimed to reveal the problems experienced by disabled women due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer suggestions for their solution.

Problems Experienced by Disabled Women Due to COVID-19: Disabled women and their caregivers faced a number of problems that would limit them and increase the risk during the COVID-19. These problems can be grouped under 4 headings.

Educational Problems: The decisions were taken to ensure that education should be remote and digital as a result of the COVID-19 and the accompanying situations. However, many factors such as gender, nationality, ethnic origin and poverty affect access to the internet, which is required for distance education, as well as disability. Disabled women and girls are exposed to forms of discrimination and exclusion that negatively affect the use of educational services even in ordinary periods. Compared to non-disabled and disabled men, they are three times more likely to be illiterate and twice as likely to use the internet.

During the pandemic process, these rates and their negative consequences increase, and the access of disabled women and girls to education services is restricted. During the pandemic process, these rates and their negative consequences increase, and the access of disabled women and girls to education services is restricted (WEI, 2020). The statistics of how many students with disabilities could not receive adequate educational support and gender-based ratios are uncertain in the COVID-19 due to the lack of data and information at the moment (UNESCO, 2020).

In addition there are various problems regarding the quality of the education of those who benefit from distance education support. These can be listed as follows: Many online trainings are not designed properly for the visually and hearing-impaired (such as lip-reading problems due to the

inadequate image quality, sign language interpreter not included in live or video lessons). The course contents are not presented in a way that disabled students can understand (such as not describing the visual contents on the slides, the presentations are not plain). The online education is not organized in accordance with the educational models of the people with learning difficulties (such as motivation, group therapy, literacy development programs).

Disabled women are more ignored in the measurement and evaluation processes of online courses (such as not being able to give additional time through the system for exams, not having a reader option). Many educators are inadequate in terms of digital skills and the use of special education techniques structured for the disabled (Kalaç, Telli and Erönal, 2020; WEI, 2020).

Economic Problems: Many disabled women have different health problems necessitates a strict quarantine process throughout the pandemic. This situation causes disabled women to be isolated from working life, either voluntarily or compulsorily. The disabled women who experienced difficulties in employment before the COVID-19 pandemic faced more frequent layoffs during the epidemic and began to experience discrimination about returning to work.

Other problems encountered are those working in the private sector being given unpaid leave because they are in the risky group, and those operating in the informal economy are much less protected by social insurance (including unemployment and sickness) and health insurance (Rensburg and Smith, 2020).

In addition, with the disruptions in the training programs, the participation of disabled women in the labor force has become difficult. In a study examining how women with disabilities were affected by the COVID-19, it was stated that the majority of participants lost their jobs or had to take sick leave due to the pandemic, the labor market did not offer them the opportunity to find another job and /or experienced financial difficulties. It was stated that entrepreneurs, freelancers or those working in the informal sector, are worried about their financial security as well as loss of income. In addition, it has been determined that many of them cannot receive sufficient social security support from their governments (WEI, 2020).

This situation has caused disabled women, whose economic level is already inadequate, to be disadvantaged due to losing their jobs and not finding alternative sources of income during the pandemic (Davis, 2020).

Family Relationships and Daily Life Problems:

The various problems arise with the restrictions on staying at home without taking into account their needs during the pandemic of disabled women who went out of the house less frequently before the pandemic. In a study conducted in England; it has been determined that daily life changes experienced due to the pandemic strain the whole society and disabled individuals are affected more than non-disabled people. Since more than half of the disabled group is women, disabled women are more affected by the changes in daily life caused by the effect of the pandemic (ONS, 2020).

Many disabled women who depend on others for their daily lives (official support from service providers or informal support from relatives / friends), receive insufficient support due to movement restrictions and physical distance measures. This puts them at high risk of not being able to access food, essential products and medicine. Also disabled women, who continue their lives without a caregiver, are dependent on someone else to meet their outside needs in this process. This situation damages the self-care power and sense of autonomy necessary for disabled women to meet their daily life needs (Turkish Federation of the Blind, 2020; UN, 2020).

There are many problems in both personal and family relationships due to the quarantine process, which is a necessity for pandemic conditions. Disabled women who are in quarantine in their homes experience intense anxiety and stress due to not knowing when this process will end.

Because of the excessive experience of anxiety, problems such as anxiety disorders and depression are seen. In addition, the risks of disabled women to be exposed to neglect, abuse and violence increase due to reasons such as social isolation, anxiety and increased dependence on their caregivers. This is important that there is a significant increase in domestic violence rates during the home quarantine process, and that disabled women and girls are more exposed to violence. In the policy summary of the United Nations named "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women", it was mentioned that there is a significant increase in domestic violence rates

during the home quarantine process, and that disabled women and girls are more exposed to violence (UN Policy Brief, 2020). Similarly, considering the fact that disabled women are more likely to be subjected to violence than non-disabled women even in normal times, the pandemic process makes this situation more serious (UN, 2020).

Although data on disability and gender-based violence are currently insufficient specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, experience shows that disabled women are particularly at risk in similar circumstances (UN, 2020; UNFPA-Turkey, 2020). In addition, it is particularly difficult for disabled women who are subjected to violence to apply for and access domestic violence services and assistance.

Because such services are generally accessible and not inclusive for disabled people. Emergency help and reporting lines are generally not equipped with interpreting services for hearing-impaired women. Again, shelters and services created for emergencies are not sufficient to meet the needs of disabled women (UN, 2020).

Health Care Access Problems: The disabled women face more health problems during the pandemic and also face more inequality in access to health services (UN, 2020; WEI, 2020). Emergency response programs have been established in healthcare institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This situation causes the budget and resources allocated for disabled individuals to benefit from health services to be directed towards the fight against the epidemic. Thus, disabled women cannot receive routine treatments and other diseases emerge (UNFPA- Turkey, 2020). In the study examining the effect of COVID-19 on disabled women, it is stated that 61% of the participants can not receive their routine treatment and can not access their medicines and equipment.

In the same study, it was determined that the barriers of women with disabilities to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services increased during the pandemic. During the pandemic process, it was determined that disabled women could not have regular SRH checkups, could not participate in breast cancer screenings, and could not benefit from prenatal care, menopause, and curettage services.

In addition, it has been stated that this situation negatively affects disabled women

psychologically (WEI, 2020). Thus, the pandemic process negatively affects SRH services, and the fact that it is felt most strongly by disabled women. The SRH problems of women and girls with disabilities are an important issue that needs close attention during the pandemic (ESCAP, 2020).

It is vital to pay attention to physical distance, to comply fully with hygiene rules and to use protective equipment during the pandemic (UN, 2020). In the study examining the effect of COVID-19 on women with disabilities, it was found that most of the participants could not provide protective materials such as mask / hand sanitizer. In addition, the participants stated that it is very difficult to pay attention to social distance rules due to disability (WEI, 2020).

Disabled women face different problems that need to be addressed specifically according to the type of disability they have. For example, visually impaired people who can move with their sense of touch increase the risk of getting the virus in public places, amputees worry about the hygiene of their prostheses and remaining limbs, those with movement disorders cannot apply general personal care measures independently, and the use of masks makes lip reading difficult, which is an important communication tool for the hearing impaired. Thus, it becomes difficult for disabled women to access health services during the pandemic process (Jalali et al, 2020; WEI, 2020).

The Solution Suggestions for the Problems of Disabled Women Due to The COVID-19: The problems arising from the pandemic process should also be included in the practices made to solve the problems of disabled women. Disabled women, their caregivers and their representative organizations should be included in every stage in planning the measures taken within the scope of the pandemic process (WEI, 2020).

Distance education programs for women and girls with disabilities need to be paid more attention during the pandemic process. Necessary information should be provided to students with disabilities regarding the use of materials, technical support and technology to meet their distance education needs. It is important to enrich the distance education platforms for disabled students. In addition, it is very important to support families' participation in the process in order for students with special education needs to benefit more from distance education activities (UNESCO, 2020).

Special protection policies for disabled women should be arranged in order to maintain economic security during the pandemic process. Disabled women should be among the groups that should be protected with priority in active employment policy, vocational training programs and cash aid programs. Alternative working conditions should be made accessible to disabled women (UN, 2020).

During the pandemic crisis, routine screening and treatment practices of disabled women who are disproportionately exposed to risk should not be disrupted. In addition, telehealth practices should be used to carry out routine follow-up and treatment process evaluation programs for disabled women. Video telehealth applications, which are structured by considering special groups such as mental, hearing and speech impaired, are an important issue especially in terms of reaching disabled women during the pandemic process that requires social distance and isolation. Support, counseling and rehabilitation services should be provided in order to protect the mental health of disabled women, especially those who are exposed to violence and abuse (Boldrini et al, 2020; Andrews et al, 2021).

Conclusion: The problems faced by disabled women specific to the COVID-19 pandemic is an issue that needs to be addressed with importance. Because problems such as deprivation of education, economic difficulties, social exclusion, discrimination, inequality, inability to access resources/services, neglect and abuse experienced by disabled women are more common during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important that social policies, public and private life proposals for disabled women, who are among the vulnerable groups of the society, to protect them from all kinds of risks in terms of psychological, social, economic and health during the pandemic, and that these regulations are carried out with inter-sectoral cooperation.

Abbreviations: COVID-19 = The New Type of Coronavirus Disease, SRH = Sexual and Reproductive Health, WHO = World Health Organization

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