THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORKING DURING COVID: EVIDENCE-BASED LITERATURE REVIEW (ARAB GULF)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of Gulf employees.

Theoretical reference: The study utilizes a systematic literature review to analyze previous studies that have examined the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of the Gulf population.

Method: A systematic literature review was conducted to identify relevant articles that met the inclusion criteria. Six articles were selected for analysis, focusing on the Gulf region, published during the pandemic, and peer-reviewed.

Results and Conclusion: The analysis of the selected articles revealed that there is evidence linking lockdown measures to increased depression and anxiety among Gulf remote workers. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that remote working during lockdown contributes to an emerging epidemic of unhealthy living, which poses a risk factor for developing chronic diseases and exacerbating mental health challenges.

Implications of research: The findings of this study highlight the need for authorities and healthcare systems in the Gulf region to develop preventive measures to address the rising epidemic of poor mental health and unhealthy living among remote workers. This is crucial to avoid a future burden of mental health challenges among young employees.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the existing literature by specifically focusing on the impact of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of Gulf employees. It highlights the need for preventive measures to address the emerging epidemic of poor mental health and unhealthy living in this population.

Keywords: gulf employees, Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown, remote working, work from home, mental health challenges, mental health well-being.

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O IMPACTO DO TRABALHO REMOTO DURANTE A COVID: REVISÃO DE LITERATURA BASEADA EM EVIDÊNCIAS (GOLFO ÁRABE)

RESUMO

Objetivo: O objetivo deste estudo é explorar o impacto do trabalho remoto durante a pandemia da Covid-19 na saúde mental e no bem-estar dos funcionários do Golfo.

Referência teórica: O estudo utiliza uma revisão sistemática da literatura para analisar estudos anteriores que examinaram o impacto da pandemia na saúde mental e no bem-estar da população do Golfo.

Método: Foi realizada uma revisão sistemática da literatura para identificar artigos relevantes que atendessem aos critérios de inclusão. Seis artigos foram selecionados para análise, com foco na região do Golfo, publicados durante a pandemia e revisados por pares.

Resultados e Conclusão: A análise dos artigos selecionados revelou que existem provas que ligam as medidas de confinamento ao aumento da depressão e da ansiedade entre os trabalhadores remotos do Golfo. Além disso, há evidências sugerindo que o trabalho remoto durante o confinamento contribui para uma epidemia emergente de vida insalubre, o que representa um fator de risco para o desenvolvimento de doenças crônicas e agravar os desafios de saúde mental.

Implicações da pesquisa: Os resultados deste estudo destacam a necessidade de autoridades e sistemas de saúde na região do Golfo desenvolverem medidas preventivas para enfrentar a crescente epidemia de má saúde mental e vida insalubre entre trabalhadores remotos. Isto é crucial para evitar um encargo futuro de desafios de saúde mental entre os jovens trabalhadores.

Originalidade/valor: este estudo contribui para a literatura existente, concentrando-se especificamente no impacto do trabalho remoto durante a pandemia da Covid-19 na saúde mental e no bem-estar dos funcionários do Golfo. Destaca a necessidade de medidas preventivas para lidar com a epidemia emergente de má saúde mental e vida insalubre nessa população.

Palavras-chave: funcionários do golfo, pandemia da Covid-19, confinamento, trabalho remoto, trabalho em casa, desafios de saúde mental, bem-estar de saúde mental.

1 INTRODUCTION

The onset of Covid-19 brought a sudden change in the labor industry where work from home became necessary because of the lockdown, which aimed to control the virus's spread. The World Health Organization outlined lockdown measures to minimize contact and spread of the virus (Sagan et al., 2020). The lockdowns affected the labor industry, where remote working became the only opportunity to continue service delivery across all countries. The lockdown actions created a sudden and drastic change in the normal
The lifestyle of employees not used to staying or working from home. The lockdown is considered a disruption of one routine, which directly impacts the lifestyle of the affected persons (Radwan et al., 2021). Upon researching the impact of lockdown on the population lifestyle in the Gulf region, Radwan et al. (2021) established that this preventive measure increased stay-at-home time, excessive food storage, and disruption of the population's daily routines. Such disruptions increased anxiety about the new norm considering the lack of alternatives. Radwan and colleagues continued to establish that lockdowns led to dietary changes, reduced physical activities, and changed sleep patterns. These changes elevated psychological issues in the populations who did not have prior expectations of the sudden lifestyle changes.

Lockdowns within the Gulf limited the population to daily routine activities. The lockdowns limited access to daily shopping routines. Such limits reduced access to food and elevated issues related to dietary intake. The issue of junk food became a common phenomenon among the population in lockdown because of reduced access to fresh food (Bennett, Young, Butler & Coe, 2021). Anxiety reported during lockdowns increases the risk of consuming sugary foods and causing energy imbalance because of reduced energy expenditure during the pandemic. The risk of losing a source of income for jobs that require physical presence may limit the affordability of various food. Even though Bennett, Young, Butler & Coe (2021) point out that there were positive lifestyle habits such as having more time to cook and spending with the family, the negative impact of lockdown regarding dietary seems to outweigh the benefit. For example, confinement to the house contrary to one's routine may lead to irregular food intake patterns where sugary foods and snacks are most likely consumed. Such sudden consumption of junk food results from elevated anxiety due to emotional eating.

The lockdown raised fears among the healthcare fraternity because of the risks of increased complications of lifestyle-related diseases. For example, Radwan et al. (2021) reported that 77% of all deaths in the UAE were associated with non-communicable diseases during the pandemic. Therefore, the probability of dying from non-communicable diseases was higher because of the sudden change of lifestyle, which limited physical activities and increased the risk of healthy eating. There is enough evidence linking sudden lifestyle changes to the increased psychological burden associated with unhealthy lifestyle habits, which affect overall living patterns.
The lockdown increased anxiety and elevated psychosocial well-being among the Gulf population. Cheikh Ismail et al. (2021), in exploring the impact of the mental health pandemic among the Gulf population, showed that the latest pandemic caused extraordinary challenges in various aspects of life among the Gulf population. The pandemic's inevitable health and economic impact spread to social circles. Cheikh Ismail et al. (2021) have established that the Covid-19 pandemic created multiple stressors that directly impact the mental health of the affected population. Examples of these stressors include movement restrictions, uncertain futures due to economic disruptions, virus infection fears, loneliness due to separation and quarantine, financial loss, and distress due to fear of the unknown among remote working employees (AL MANSOORI et al., 2021). These stressors play a role in exacerbating poor mental health among the population affected by the pandemic.

Emerging studies are trying to uncover the major social and psychological impact of lockdowns and quarantines on the world population. Such studies, including that of Sameer et al. (2020), show how the pandemic has caused changes in societal circles. Such changes include families and vulnerable populations experiencing domestic violence, socio-economic instability, and poor coping mechanisms for new norms. However, Cheikh Ismail et al. (2021) note that extended family, such as the norm in the Gulf culture, creates a buffer for lessening some of the societal-level impact created by the lockdown. Research is still insufficient to guarantee evidence-based causes and effects of the pandemic among the Gulf population, especially in an error where technological enhancement provides an alternative for remote working and not only a position that the pandemic forced the population to adapt.

The current study is a systematic literature review of recently published articles that seek to answer the research question regarding the impact of remote working during the Covid-19 lockdown in the Gulf region. The result of the study will be used to inform the government of the most appropriate primary healthcare measures and policies that can be used to avert an emerging epidemic relating to mental health and wellness. The Covid-19 lockdown also created a new behavior associated with unhealthy living. Unhealthy living suggests that there is a possibility of a new health condition associated with obesity and overweight. This healthy condition is stressful to the patient, their family, and the nation because of lost productivity alongside straining medical resources. Therefore,
authorities and the public must make informed decisions during possible quarantine incidents to win individual and public health.

2 METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review was conducted to evaluate the impact of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown among the Gulf population. The issues of concern with remote working include the changes in life routines that impact workers’ psychological well-being and how they manage to handle the changes in the working condition. Other issues of concern include health living, which directly impacts the psychosocial well-being of employees transitioning from physical to remote working.

During the systematic review, the following phrases were used in conducting relevant studies to include in the study: Lockdown remote working, working during the pandemic, Covid-19 work disruptions, mental health challenges during lockdown among the Gulf population, UAE employees during the lockdown, psychosocial well-being among employees during the lockdown and changes in work-life balance during the lockdown. The inclusion criteria for studies selected to offer information for literature writing in this study must be published in English and during the Covid-19 pandemic era, which is the period between late 2019 to mid-2023. Studies focusing on UAE or the Gulf population will be given priority because of the cultural considerations, which might impact behaviors related to coping with lifestyle changes. Studies selected for this literature review must be peer-reviewed and published articles in open-source scholarly journal databases.

A total of twelve research articles were obtained and reviewed to ascertain their minimum inclusion criteria for the current study. Six articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected to be analyzed for this study and became part of the literature studies for this research. The following table 1 highlights the articles that were selected for this study.

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### 3 RESULT

#### 3.1 THE IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING OF GULF EMPLOYEES

The lockdowns that various governments imposed led to a sudden change in the labor industry. The prominence of these changes included a shift from physical working location to remote working or working from home. Such changes led to a sudden rise in anxiety and depression among affected employees. As Thomas et al. (2020) demonstrate in a population-wide study of the burden of the global pandemic among the UAE population, the rate of depression rose during the pandemic compared to global average levels. According to Thomas et al. (2020), the Gulf population during community surveys confirmed an increase in relatively high rates of depression and anxiety associated with lockdown.

In the study of Al-Mutawa & Al-Mutairi (2021), the population of the Gulf Cooperation Council with pre-existing mental health conditions are highly vulnerable to increased mental health challenges because of Covid-19 associated stressors. Al-Mutawa & Al-Mutairi (2021) defined the population with pre-existing mental challenges as the youth, divorcees, singles, and women as the vulnerable population receiving the pandemic lockdown measures. Al-Mutawa & Al-Mutairi also outline the prevalence of mental health conditions associated with insomnia, depression, post-traumatic stress, and anxiety.

Kooli (2022) conducted a study exploring the challenges of working from home in the UAE among women in the wake of Covid-19 challenges. Kooli conducted a semistructured interview using an interpretative philosophical approach among randomly selected women engaged in employment. Upon completing the study, the author established that women face challenges of attention at home. Women find it difficult to concentrate on work because of the increased risk of invasion into personal space.
Therefore, Kooli (2022) established that among working women in UAE who were confined to lockdown, the issues of divided attention created glitches with work tasks and overall malfunctioning of the work-from-home opportunities. Even though working from home has notable flexibility and control, there is a conflict of distractions, which raises the issues of the quality of work these women complete and the overall risk of employment due to poor quality work.

3.2 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON THE LIFESTYLE LIVING OF WORK-FROM-HOME EMPLOYEES IN THE GULF REGION

Movement restrictions during the lockdown period affected normal food-related practices among individuals who shifted from physical to remote working. Alah, Abdeen, Kehyayan, & Bougmiza (2021) investigated the effects of the pandemic on perceived diet, body weight, and physical activities among the Qatar population to determine despite the benefits of the lockdown, staying at home created new health hazards associated with dietary behaviors and lost opportunities for physical activities. The survey respondents in Alah, Abdeen, Kehyayan, & Bougmiza's (2021) study admitted that their normal diet changed, and they became less healthy during their stay-at-home period.

Radwan et al. (2021) conducted a study in UAE to determine the indirect health effects of lockdowns and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. In this study, the authors conducted a cross-sectional study during the lockdown of UAE participants to ascertain the prevalence and determinants of unhealthy behaviors during the lockdown. Upon completing the study, the authors determined that most respondents reported violating the dietary intakes through increasing food consumption alongside frequent eating. Further, the authors found that lockdown and working from home reduced the physical activities the target participants participated in daily. The changes in dietary intake and reduced activities resulted in the risk of increased obesity, decreased sleep, and increased consumption of recreational substances. Radwan et al. (2021) determined that increased food intake was the most popular violation of dietary intake, followed by reduced physical activities.

4 DISCUSSION

Available studies have confirmed that the current COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacts mental health among the UAE population. However, the claim that
the Gulf population has much higher depression and anxiety rates than the global averages remains questionable because the globe received the same dose of pandemic and imposed the same measures. Covid-19 has impacted the mental health of the Gulf population equally as other populations across the globe. However, the differences in the rates of anxiety and depression seemed to depend on differing responses to the pandemic and available local health resources (Thomas et al., 2020). The differences in healthcare systems and sociocultural norms impacted the pandemic response. Different response mechanisms guarantee variations in psychosocial well-being observed in different regions worldwide.

The mental well-being of Gulf residents in response to the Covid-19 lockdown may have a higher variation than the global averages. Such variations occur because of the anxiety and fear of the pandemic (Badahdah et al., 2021). If the pandemic strikes a family member, there is a likelihood of infecting many family members because of the increased social contact observed among the Arabs. For example, as Thomas et al. (2020) highlight, most Gulf regions have multigenerational families living together. Therefore, there is fear of infection within the family because a single infection may threaten the lives of all the extended family members. Such a threat suggests that the lockdown is not only a viable solution to controlling the spread of the virus but also presents serious anxiety among the UAE population as compared to the rest of the population across the globe who lives in small families.

The current study has established issues related to dietary intake changes when transitioning from a physical work location to staying at home. As reviewed in Alah, Abdeen, Kehyayan, & Bougmiza (2021) article, the sudden changes in the working norm came along with healthy benefits of preventing the virus infection. However, this healthy benefit was traded with reports of worsening dietary behaviors. The current result is consistent with the review published elsewhere, suggesting that transitioning from a physical work location to remote working brings overall defective dietary behaviors (Khubchandani et al., 2020). As (Khubchandani et al., 2020) revealed in their study, more participants reported switching from unhealthy diet changes to fatty and sugary foods.

The existing explanation for riskier dietary intake among participants who transitioned from physical working locations to working from home included a feeling of boredom, loneliness, and anxiety about not knowing when the confinement would end. Such feelings and social changes are attributed to emerging emotional eating behaviors.
Alah, Abdeen, Kehyayan, & Bougmiza (2021) have noted that unhealthy eating contradicts the health system's efforts to encourage Gulf citizens to adopt a healthier diet alongside adequate physical exercise. Therefore, Covid-19 not only created a threat to the health systems but also caused an emergent epidemic threat associated with mental wellness and an unhealthy lifestyle.

5 CONCLUSION

The recent study explored the psychosocial well-being of the Gulf populations during lockdowns necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. National governments across the globe, including those in the Gulf, imposed Covid-19 measures to curb the spread of the virus. During these measures, the labour industry was hardly hit because of the requirement to work from home. The work from home was a sudden change in people's lifestyles. Both employees and those who do not work had to cope with the new norm of staying together or away from the workplace. The stay-at-home created a sudden rise in anxiety and depression of the fear of the virus infection and sudden lifestyle changes. There is a sudden unexplained increase in depression and anxiety among the population living in the Gulf. The increase in unexplained depression and anxiety is more than the global average. Such an increase in depression and anxiety among the Gulf population during the pandemic suggests evidence of negative mental health impact associated with the sudden transition from physical work location to working from home. Covid-19 created a global virus threat and caused a long-term mental health problem among the Gulf population.

RECOMMENDATION

The long-term mental health challenges among the Gulf population caused by Covid-19 lockdown measures have been established. Authorities who sponsor healthcare systems can devise preventive measures, including strategies for assessing the levels of depression and anxiety among the Gulf population caused by Covid-19's new norm of working from home. The purpose of lockdowns and quarantines was to solve devastating health problems and not create a more complex problem. Identifying the stressors that increased the mental challenges among the Gulf population could help create healthcare problems aimed at averting a long-term mental health pandemic. Available evidence regarding the
impact of the psychosocial well-being of the Gulf’s work-from-home population is scarce. There is a need to conduct various studies, including case-by-case analysis, to collect evidence that will guarantee policy changes to the healthcare systems and programs to improve the mental well-being of the affected population. Much of the health care burden may be in long-term mental health problems, which is worse when affecting a large productive population.

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