

Title: Fear, Stigma and Othering: The Impact of COVID-19 rumours on marginalised populations of Nepal

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Background: Fake news, misinformation and rumours about COVID-19 in Nepal have proliferated widely on social media and online news portals. The rumours have been particularly targeted at returnee migrant workers from India and members of the Muslim community (who had attended religious gatherings in Nepal and India). These rumours identified them as COVID-19 carriers responsible for spreading the infections into communities. Drawing on Cohen's (1972) notion of moral panic, the study aims to: (a) understand how migrants workers and Muslims perceive such rumours and responses, and their coping strategies and resilience; (b) explore the wider impact of such mis/disinformation and rumours; and (c) institutional responses.

Methods: This qualitative study included in-depth interviews (N=30) with migrants (n=15) and Muslims (n=15) from Kapilbastu and Banke. Our participants were fairly young (mean age 32 years, range 18-65 years) and mostly males (25/30). Of the total participants, only seven (of 30) participants completed a higher secondary grade. In addition, eight interviews were carried out with key stakeholders working in the health and media sectors. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated and thematic analysis was performed for data analysis. The study protocol was approved by Bournemouth University, UK and the Nepal Health Research Council.

Findings: Seven overlapping themes have emerged in our data analysis: a) rumours and mis/disinformation; b) fear and moral panic; c) othering practices-stigma, discrimination, abuse, humiliation, blame, social exclusion; d) health and social impact; e) resistance and resilience; f) institutional response; and, g) preventive measures against rumour and mis/disinformation. Our findings suggest that rumours and misinformation were fuelled by social media and online news portals during the initial months of the lockdown. The media propagated moral panic which led to, returnee migrants and Muslim populations experiencing both self-perceived and enacted fear. Although most of the participants did not have any issues accessing healthcare, they experienced othering practices such as stigma, discrimination, blame and social exclusion at the border and within their communities. However, their experiences varied as the poorest, Dalit, and females were disproportionately affected and Muslims with people facing jobs (e.g. shopkeepers) experienced more othering practices. Resistance and resilient activities and effective institutional response to dispel rumour were limited.

Conclusion: There is a wider impact of COVID-19 mis/disinformation and rumours on marginalised groups. At the same time, coping strategies and institutional response are non-existent. This urgently calls for the government, social media and news portals to help develop strategies, which could dispel rumours and mis/disinformation and protect the socio-economically disadvantaged and/or minority populations in the country. Interventions are needed to help build resilience and mitigate the consequences (hatred, tensions) at the community level. COVID-19 offers a striking example of a media destruction in Nepal.

Reference:

Cohen, S. 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panic: The creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London. MacGibbon & Kee.

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