

## EDITORIAL

**The COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts on Women's Health**

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has spread rampantly worldwide, leading to the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March, 2020. It has disturbed the socio-economic composition globally, especially in low-income countries. It also has provoked public health concerns over women's wellness, including psycho-sexual and reproductive health as well as maternal health (1,2).

Most countries have promoted active and decisive actions averting the potential hazardous impact on public health, as well as maternal health. Pregnant women are a vulnerable population that can be easily infected by a majority of infectious diseases, particularly respiratory diseases. We assumed the effect on pregnancy is more harmful during this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (3). However, to date the literature reveals that pregnant women have favorable maternal and neonatal outcomes despite of higher prevalence of operative delivery and prematurity. There have been no documented cases of clinical evidence of vertical transmission (2,4). The reviews have a limited number of those infected in pregnancy in the cohort during the immediate crisis. Thus, a larger cohort study over a longer term in all parts of the world including Malaysia is required to determine a greater variety of effects on maternal and neonatal outcomes and to provide satisfactory conclusions for clinical implications.

However, apart from maternal health issues, the psycho-sexual and reproductive impacts on women health are also essential. They often go less recognized as an essential aspect to address during the pandemic. A majority of the effects are indirectly caused by social and economic burdens among the population during lockdown. The universal imposition of stay-at-home orders and numerous restrictions, particularly social distancing, have increased the rate of unemployment and caused a reduction in accessibility to health care. Limited access to the health care system contributed to a marked reduction access in-person to the health care, inability to pay, loss of health insurance and fear of contracting an infection (1). Reproductive health issues among women of reproductive age include sexual activity, contraception and family planning; psychological behaviours; and exposure to domestic violence. Some reviews have assumed that disparity of

the sexual demand and reproductive health services in the pandemic era in low-income countries will demonstrate the increasing occurrence of unintended pregnancies, illegal abortions and ultimately maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality (1,3). The universal lockdown and quarantine have exacerbated the inaccessibility of proper healthcare, leading some to unsafe abortions due to limitations in the accessibility of proper contraception and family planning methods. Women from low-income countries are also more likely than those from higher-income countries to access contraception during the pandemic (5). Additionally, women may also be reluctant to undergo cervical cancer screening through Pap smears or to be screened for sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) (6).

Furthermore, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have implications for the social welfare of households due to diverse socio-economic restrictions. The demanding economic crisis and other stresses undeniably may have exposed women to domestic violence, which has shown an increase since early this year. The increase in the unemployment rate among women will indirectly cause reduced avenues for obtaining health care for reproductive issues (7). Additionally, unintended pregnancies may also result in more burdens to the family. Such an event in life will clearly affect the psychology, perceptions and behaviours in the household. Women are at risk of experiencing psychological disturbances such as depression, anxiety and stress post-traumatic events (8). In addition, the paradigm of sexual function and activities also has changed, and this may affect the harmoniousness of the family institution both physically and psychologically. Negative influences on sexuality are possibly caused by fear of to infection as well as mental health instability (9).

Thus, action plans need to be strategized to prevent the hazardous outcomes of novel Covid 19 virus among women by increasing the accessibility and visibility of reproductive health care. This will involve the government, policy experts and Ministry of Health in upgrading the utility of telehealth or telemedicine for medical health related to women. It will also help to increase public awareness as well as contraception admittance. The usage of long-acting contraception is preferable during this pandemic as compared to

short acting (1,3). Moreover, alongside policymakers and experts, society should facilitate community-level services to promote sexual and reproductive health. This review highlights key areas of concern for women's reproductive health in the era of the COVID 19 pandemic. Hence, it is paramount to productively establish appropriate strategies to provide guidelines for strategic efforts to cultivate a higher quality of life among women of reproductive age.

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