

2023

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Recommended Citation

M. AL-Tkhayneh, K.; Abuanzeh, A.; K. Ellala, Z.; and R. Alsalhi, N. (2023) "The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on Family Life in the UAE," *Information Sciences Letters*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 3 , PP -. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/isl/vol12/iss3/30>

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The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on Family Life in the UAE

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Received: 22 Sep. 2022, Revised: 12 Nov. 2022, Accepted: 12 Dec. 2022.

Published online: 1 Mar. 2023.

Abstract: The aim of the study was to identify the impact on families of the international measures designed to manage the spread of Covid-19, from the viewpoint of families in Al-Ain city, United Arab Emirates. Data were gathered online in semi-structured interviews from 100 families selected by purposive sampling, and results were assessed using the descriptive-analytical method and by referring to the literature. The findings suggest that the international measures on Covid-19, such as remote working, distance learning, and partial lockdown, have had more positive than negative effects on the family. One positive effect is that the international lockdown policies have helped to strengthen both the relationship between couples and the wider family unit. However, such procedures have also had certain negative effects on some families. Considerably more work is required to examine the existence of statistically significant differences between these effects on the family by employing variables such as monthly income and number of family members.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, family, lockdown, domestic violence, social pressures (GST Agnew).

1 Introduction

Throughout history, various pandemics such as the 1918 Spanish flu have inflicted grave damage around the world. To meet such challenges, a great deal of research has been conducted to detect the features of these viruses, and many restrictions have been imposed on public movement and gatherings. In recent times, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was effectively dealt with by intensive monitoring and restrictions on public movement, despite the subsequent negative impact on industrial production and livelihoods. While the current coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has characteristics similar to an infectious viral disease, it can often remain undetected due to its potential asymptomatic nature and ability to spread rapidly via the movement of people around the world. Accordingly, the Covid-19 crisis has been classified as extremely dangerous, and so most affected countries imposed a partial or total closure of their economies as a containment measure [1]. As well as economic lockdown, social distancing is another containment measure which was both rapidly adopted and strictly applied all over the world, leading to the greater adoption of distance learning and remote working. Following other countries, the United Arab Emirates government took measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19, such as by switching from face-to-face to distance learning. The government also banned travel to and from China, from which it evacuated its citizens, and established a ‘city of humanity’ to host peoples from other countries temporarily. A National Sterilization Campaign was begun and restrictions were imposed on movement between the hours of 20.00–06.00, and periodically updates were set regarding the epidemiological situation until the programme was accomplished on 24 June, 2020. Other measures were also imposed, such as preventing prayer in mosques, transferring certain jobs to remote working from home, delivering medicine to homes, closing malls at certain times, and establishing free Covid-19 screening centres. These centres placed the UAE among those countries providing free health checks. The measures taken by the UAE government to reduce the Covid-19 outbreak, just as in other countries, were intended to protect families and communities from the spread of this potentially fatal disease. However, questions have been raised about the impact of total and partial closures on society and individuals, including the family as a social unit, as such widespread public closures for extended periods came without warning. It is such measures as these which are defined in this paper as international procedures.

To determine the impact on the family unit of these measures, including lockdown, the opinions of a group of parents were gathered via the descriptive-analytical method and by referring to the available statistical reports. The audio and video recording of interviews was also facilitated through online sites. In so doing, this study contributes to the literature on the impact on families of the international procedures to combat a pandemic, within the context of the UAE, and may also provide researchers with beneficial information for future studies. Empirically speaking, political,

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social, and economic analysts are expected to benefit from this study.

2 Previous studies

[2] highlighted how a family's 'style' can be determined by noticing how family members treat each other, based on community customs, law, and morals. In this regard, norms are shared structured and consistent practices, taken from previous generations, which guide the actions of those sharing the norms. They are not symbolic of compulsory actions, but are instead duties to which we should adhere. [2] views the family as a structure consisting of parts occupying certain positions and roles. Each part has a special function determined by its duties and rights in terms of its interactions with other parts. The parts are integrated and connected, i.e., a change in one part leads to a change in the others. Individuals live in families and groups that depend on each other to survive. For example, if a problem affects one family member, it affects all members of the family and so the problem of the individual is considered a family one.

A study conducted by [3] found that pressures such as the inability to achieve positive goals, the loss of valuable stimuli, and the repetitive display of negative stimuli can increase the likelihood of an individual committing a crime, and delinquency. Since the imposition of the procedures for combatting the pandemic, individuals have experienced increased social pressure arising from negative emotions including anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression. In turn, this has led to a decline in levels of social stability, and a rise in deviant behaviours and domestic violence. Statistics from the Himaya Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children showed that about 53 cases of domestic violence were seen at the institution due to the psychological pressure that the families faced during the lockdown [4].

In a study employing the functional constructivist theory, [5] showed that the family is an integrated and interconnected social structure in which a defect in one part leads to a defect in the others. For instance, if a parent is stressed and under pressure, this can affect the rest of the family. In this regard, there is no doubt that the containment measures imposed due to Covid-19 had a positive effect in some countries and a negative in others. According to the theory of functional constructivism, if one parent suffers from psychological stress due to lockdown and social distancing, this can negatively affect all family members.

Many changes have occurred to family life since the outbreak of Covid-19, with some families suffering from conflict, instability, and even divorce due to the sudden pressures and indirect negative effects of lockdowns and social distancing [4]. However, positive effects have also been reported as other families have taken advantage of the same situation to establish stronger bonds, indicating the important role of the extended family in maintaining social habits during the pandemic. In these circumstances, there was no increase in domestic violence in Bahrain, as there was in some countries [6]. [7] captured the beliefs and attitudes of Chinese parents towards the effectiveness of teaching young children online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results suggested that the implementation of distance learning during the pandemic was problematic and challenging for families, since the parents were neither trained nor ready to deal with such a method of teaching. Furthermore, it was found that they rejected distance education because of shortcomings such as young children being insufficiently organised, and the lack of time and professional knowledge available to support children's distance learning.

Also focusing on Covid-19 measures, [8] designed two studies on the impact of the lockdown measures on domestic violence in Argentina. The first study investigated 137 calls to the domestic violence hotline in Buenos Aires, where a 32% increase in calls was observed once the lockdown was imposed. The study also revealed that cases reported to the hotline instead of the police increased by 127% from before the lockdown. The same authors' second study compared women whose husbands had to adhere to lockdown measures with those whose husbands were exempt from doing so, revealing a causation between the lockdown and domestic violence. In another study, the [9], a UAE government-run organisation, looked at the impact of remote working on family relations and found that it provided the family with more time to sit and interact closely during daily activities, thus stabilising the relationship between the spouses and other family members. A study by [10] suggests that Covid-19 would increase global domestic violence during lockdown, including in Bangladesh. One result of such closures is that a person suffering from domestic violence cannot access help. In most cases, the perpetrator is a male who abuses and attacks his wife and children because he is frustrated about losing his job and being forced to stay at home. [10] study showed that there are many unreported cases in Bangladesh, including of physical, financial, and psychological abuse. A 27-district Bangladeshi survey conducted by a local human rights organisation, the Manusher Jonno Foundation, found that 4,249 women and 456 children had been subjected to domestic violence. Of these, 1,672 women and 424 children had been exposed to violence for the first time and, in this case, lockdown could have been the reason why. The research suggests that there is a definite need for other means of increasing awareness of domestic violence and for holding free sessions to support individuals' mental health online. [11] found that many families have experienced stress that threatens their health, security, and wellbeing due to the heavy burden on parents, and which may influence their behaviours and accordingly affect all family members, especially children, by exposing them to the risk of abuse and neglect. Focusing on the impacts of the Covid-

19 pandemic on parental stress and child abuse, the study involved 183 parents and one child under 18 in the western United States. Group differences tests and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test the relationships between the respective risk factors of Covid-19, mental health, and parental-perceived stress, as well as protective factors. The study identified that, although the families experienced hard times and heavy stressors due to the Covid-19 pandemic, parental support and intervention are key in overcoming such difficulties. Another finding to emerge from this study is that racial differences were related to stressors of Covid-19 and not to mental health risks or protective factors, stress, and child abuse. Domestic violence is considered one form of violent behaviour existing within the family, and includes physical and psychological abuse [12]. Following the instigation of lockdown measures, the individuals in the study by [12] were found to have lowered confidence and self-esteem due to the limited choices they had, i.e., isolation, neglect, and abuse. Additionally, social isolation has increased unemployment rates and the consumption of drugs, which are all considered to be risk factors for those suffering from domestic violence. The study also found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, crime rates have decreased by 40% in many countries, but domestic violence has increased by 5%. To support victims, the study further noted that some countries have opened hotels to victims to enable them to escape from their houses. At the same time, there were also reports of victims not attending hospital for fear of being infected with Covid-19 [12]. Another study by [13] found that Covid-19 is a serious threat to the wellbeing of families due to the challenges they face during the pandemic, such as financial insecurity and the burden of caregiving. This study’s framework was based on systematic models of human development and family functioning, and it linked the social disruption caused by Covid-19 with child adjustment through certain factors such as wellbeing, communication, and caregiving. The study also discussed ways of developing a flexible relationship between family members based on shared backgrounds. [14] study revealed the challenges met by Saudi families suddenly faced with teaching their children. The study used the descriptive survey approach on a sample of 412 participants selected randomly using a questionnaire. The results suggest that the students found no benefit in studying online due to several challenges: the families were ill-prepared to deal with the change; there was a lack of electronic devices available to the students; internet connection was poor in some areas; and there was a lack of teachers able to utilise modern technologies for learning. [15] implemented certain precautionary measures during the Covid-19 pandemic to address potential social problems arising from it. To reduce the burden of lockdown, various social policies were developed and one of these was the implementation of family support programmes to reduce the psychological and moral burden faced by families, regardless of their size or type. Other implemented policies include distance learning and remote working, not only to promote welfare and support the role of the family in society, but to develop the functions of the family. The [16] conducted a study in collaboration with King Abdulaziz University to determine the effects on the Saudi family of total and partial closure during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results revealed that 67% of the sample reported how lockdown had contributed to raising health awareness and promoting social responsibility, and 91% of the families said that lockdown had contributed to strengthening relationships and improving communication and effective negotiation skills. The study also found that 84% of respondents thought that the rate of domestic violence had declined during the pandemic.

Accordingly, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Have international measures to reduce the Covid-19 pandemic, such as lockdown, distance learning, and remote working, positively or negatively affected your relationship with your life partner? Explain.
2. Have international measures to reduce the Covid-19 pandemic, such as lockdown, distance learning, and remote working, positively or negatively affected your relationship with your children? Explain.
3. What are the main social policies established by the UAE to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on the family?

3 Methodology

3.1 Study sample

The sample consisted of 100 families selected by purposive sampling, to ensure that each family consisted of a husband, wife, and at least one son/daughter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and online during the lockdown with one of the spouses (husband or wife) in Al-Ain city in the UAE. Table 1 illustrates the sample distribution according to demographic variables.

Table 1: Sample distribution according to demographic variables

| Variables | Categories | No. Participants | Percentage |
|---------------|------------|------------------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 42 | 42% |
| | Female | 58 | 58% |
| Work | Working | 60 | 60% |

| | | | |
|--|-------------------|------------|-------------|
| | Not working | 40 | 40% |
| National Status | Citizen | 50 | 50% |
| | Resident | 50 | 50% |
| Monthly Income | >10,000 AED | 22 | 22% |
| | 10,000–15,000 AED | 26 | 26% |
| | >15,000 AED | 52 | 52% |
| No. Family Members, including Parents | 3–4 | 36 | 36% |
| | 5–6 | 40 | 40% |
| | ≥7 | 24 | 24% |
| Total | | 100 | 100% |

Table 1 shows that 58% of the sample was female and 42% male. This was expected as females are normally more present at home and available for such interviews than men, whose work and duties require spending long hours outside the home. Within the total sample, the working/ not working split was 60% to 40%, respectively, and that for national status (i.e., resident or citizen) was equal. Concerning the distribution of monthly income, 52% were earning more than AED 15,000 per month, while 22% were earning less than AED 10,000. This proportion is logical since 50% of the sample was comprised of UAE citizens, who receive relatively high monthly incomes due to the UAE government's promotion of social and economic welfare. Regarding the number of members in the family, the proportion of families with more than seven individuals was 24%, while the number of families with 5–6 members was 40%, followed by families of 3–4 persons (36%).

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are the most common method of interviewing in the fields of humanities and social sciences, and differ from structured interviews in that the interviewer can extract more information from the interviewees by providing them with more flexibility to speak. In addition, the interviewer can interact more with the participants rather than being restricted by prepared questions [17]. In contrast to unstructured interviews, the interviewer can focus on issues they consider crucial to the research questions. In this vein, [19] stated that a qualitative interview is a powerful tool for identifying the opinions, experiences, and ways of thinking of the participants and, in turn, helps researchers obtain valuable data.

4 Results

Table 2 presents the responses to the first question regarding whether the Covid-19 pandemic had affected the marital relationship.

Table 2: The positive impact on marital relations of international measures to stop Covid-19

| Variables | Categories | No. Participants | Positive Effect | Negative Effect | Percentage of positive effect |
|---|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Gender | Male | 42 | 30 | 12 | 71% |
| | Female | 58 | 40 | 18 | 69% |
| Work | Working | 60 | 50 | 10 | 83% |
| | Not working | 40 | 20 | 20 | 50% |
| Nationa Status | Citizen | 50 | 42 | 8 | 84% |
| | Resident | 50 | 32 | 18 | 64% |
| Monthly Income | >10,000 AED | 22 | 10 | 12 | 54% |
| | 10,000–15,000 AED | 26 | 20 | 6 | 77% |
| | >15,000 AED | 52 | 40 | 12 | 77% |
| No. Family Members including Parents | 3–4 | 36 | 32 | 4 | 88% |
| | 5–6 | 40 | 26 | 14 | 65% |
| | ≥7 | 24 | 12 | 12 | 50% |
| Total | | 100 | 70 | 30 | 70% |

Table 2 shows that the percentage of participants who felt that the pandemic had a positive impact on marital relations was 70%, which is evidence that the pandemic positively impacted marital relations during the respective measures of lockdown, distance learning, and remote working. This is supported by a study conducted by the [9], whose study revealed that the country's measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 had enhanced family stability, and allowed family members time to together. Moreover, the study by [9] suggested that the pandemic helped families overcome those conflicts and problems they faced before the pandemic, such as working outside their home for long hours. Staying at home increased the time that family members could spend gathering to talk. This result is in line with that of

the [16], which found that lockdown reflected positively on health awareness and enhanced communication between family members. The data in Table 2 also indicate that non-workers, those on a low income, were greatly affected by the lockdown measures as 50% and 54% respectively felt their impact, possibly due to the social pressures that these families were exposed to during the pandemic. This result aligns with that of [3]. There are many reasons for the current study’s finding, such as the families’ inability to provide a suitable distance learning environment for several children since they have inadequate space and a low income, and indeed this was noted by a number of the participants who were not working or on low salaries. The result is consistent with [14] and [7], whose studies revealed that those families exposed to negative social pressures experienced them as a whole, in line with the notion that the family is a cohesive social structure. This supports Durkheim’s theory of social solidarity and social rules (1888), and may explain why 84% of citizens were mostly positively affected by the international measures to decrease the spread of Covid-19. Most of these families received a high salary, had servants to help them, and lived in a suitable social and spatial environment conducive to distance learning and remote working.

The data in Table 3 concern the second question regarding whether the Covid-19 pandemic affected the relationship between parents and children.

Table 3: The impact of international measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 on the relationship between parents and their children

| Variables | Categories | No. Participants | Positive Effect | Negative Effect | Percentage of positive effect |
|---|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Gender | Male | 42 | 26 | 16 | 62% |
| | Female | 58 | 36 | 22 | 62% |
| Work | Working | 60 | 42 | 18 | 70% |
| | Not Working | 40 | 20 | 20 | 50% |
| National Status | Citizen | 50 | 34 | 16 | 68% |
| | Resident | 50 | 28 | 22 | 56% |
| Monthly Income | >10,000 AED | 22 | 12 | 10 | 54% |
| | 10,000–15,000 AED | 26 | 16 | 10 | 61% |
| | >15,000 AED | 52 | 34 | 18 | 65% |
| No. Family Members including Parents | 3–4 | 36 | 24 | 12 | 66% |
| | 5–6 | 40 | 24 | 16 | 60% |
| | ≥7 | 24 | 14 | 10 | 58% |
| Total | | 100 | 62 | 38 | 61% |

From Table 3, it can be seen that 61% of the parents felt that the pandemic impacted positively on the parent-child relationship, and this is consistent with the study by the [9] which found that the lockdown enhanced family stability and reduced domestic violence. The finding of 61% is lower than that for the positive impact of the pandemic on marital relations (68% said positive); this could be explained by the fact that the imposition of distance learning was accompanied by social pressures that initially affected the family, in particular the parents. In turn, this increased parents’ stress, anxiety, and nervousness in their behaviour towards their children, in line with [3]. This finding also supports that of [13], which found that the pandemic poses a risk to family wellbeing. [10], moreover, also noted that lockdown was viewed as the reason for the increase in domestic violence, usually perpetrated by husbands on women and children, due to being frustrated about losing their job. In the same vein, [12] found that enforced lockdown reduced individuals’ self-confidence and led to isolation, while also subjecting children to neglect and abuse. The link between lockdown and increased domestic violence was also reported in [8], while [11] noted how social pressures caused by the pandemic can threaten the security, health, and wellbeing of the family.

Regarding the current study’s third question on the social policies implemented by the UAE government to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on the family, it is worth noting that the UAE implemented several procedures to reduce domestic violence during lockdown. One such procedure was initiated by the Community Development Authority in Dubai, which held a workshop to promote emotional understanding between family members and thereby reduce the psychological and moral burden of the pandemic on the family. Importantly, the Community Development Authority did not spot any cases of domestic violence during the lockdown and its investigations, and indeed a specialist team kept in touch with those families who had adopted children of unknown descent to follow up on their situation during the pandemic through unarranged visits or by telephone. Another initiative was the Istbshru campaign, established by the Family Development Foundation, Department of Community Development, and Abu Dhabi Social Support Authority. The campaign aims to promote stability and bonding between family members by providing them with psychological and social support as needed. This campaign disseminates positive messages to all members of the community and engages senior citizens who share their experience and advise families. The Istbshru campaign is a social campaign based on the use of digital and social media to provide psychosocial support to all family members,

promote emotional intimacy, and achieve social adaptation. One of its objectives is to provide opportunities for family time, enhance the social role of individuals in society, promote stability, establish family connectedness, and provide psychological and social support to family members.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

This study has found that, generally, the total and partial lockdowns, other measures, such as remote working and distance learning, and the various policies implemented by the UAE government in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic had more positive effects than negative. This helped some families to strengthen their relationships by staying at home for long periods, and parents became closer to their children by being more involved in their education. The second major finding was that the couples became closer and overcame conflicts arising from long and late working hours, as these hours ended with the imposition of the remote working policy during the pandemic. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the measures had negative effects for families on low income and families in which both parents work. The research has also shown that the implementation of the Family Support Programme helped to reduce domestic violence during lockdown.

There is a definite need for more in-depth similar studies that examine the existence of statistically significant differences between the impact of these measures on the family and a number of variables such as monthly income and number of family members, to identify the factors that have a positive effect on some families and a negative on others. Such information will help with the formulation of efficient and effective social policies due to their significant role in improving the wellbeing and happiness of families while also reducing social problems. Another important practical implication is that it is essential to raise community members' awareness of the pandemic-inspired policies and programmes offered by the UAE government through different media

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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