

**FINDING STRENGTHS
BEYOND CHALLENGES:
STRENGTH-BASED
PRACTICE WITH WOMEN
IN THE TIMES OF
COVID-19**

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has had a profound effect on each one of us in all aspects of life. In several countries, early evidence suggests that regardless of which sections of the population are more vulnerable to the disease, the impact of the lockdown and economic shutdown, which is the key pandemic control strategy everywhere, has been highly uneven, hitting already-vulnerable groups much harder. There have been many losses and challenges experienced by women since the onset of the pandemic. The researcher, being a resident of the proposed research area, observed the challenges faced by women there. Thereby, the researcher finds it necessary to understand the challenges experienced by women, and the coping skills developed by them throughout such a difficult period, through the use of a strength-based practice.

The strength-based practice has been developed in the field of social work. It views an individual as a person having potential and who has the capability to grow, rather than having a problem which needs to be solved. This perspective gives the individual the liberty to make their own choices and set goals on their own terms, and highlight the worth and dignity of an individual (Saleebey, 2000; Weick et al., 1989). This approach emphasises inner feelings (such as self-acceptance, meaning-making, love and courage, and strength and resilience) and outer feelings (such as compassion to self, dedication to serve, appreciation of others, reflection and humility, and learning and growing). By focusing on the strengths, it does not overlook the weaknesses of the individual. It acknowledges these weaknesses and focuses on their strengths and resilience in spite of possessing certain weaknesses or having been through certain challenging situations. Therefore, through this study, the researcher would like to draw attention towards the untapped resources, the coping skills, and the strengths that have been cultivated throughout the pandemic by the participants, by using strength-based practice.

Literature review

There have been limited studies that are related to the title of this paper. The researcher reviewed the available literatures of international and national sources. The strength-based practice has been found to be applied within small range of groups so far; additionally, there is a scarcity of literature or studies that have been conducted using this practice during the pandemic in in north-east India and nationwide. Considering this, studies using the strength-based approach need to be extended, particularly to women and various marginalised sections. The strength perspective, according to the researcher, is one of the lenses through which the discourse of loss and resilience could be best studied.

In Walsh's 2020 study, 'Loss and Resilience in the Time of COVID-19: Meaning Making, Hope, and Transcendence',

a resilience-oriented, systemic approach with complex losses contextualises the distress and mobilises relational resources to support positive adaptation. The study focuses on the importance of shared belief systems in certain strengths of the participants such as meaning-making processes; a positive, hopeful outlook and active agency; and transcendent values and spiritual moorings for inspiration, transformation, and positive growth.

Rashid and McGrath (2020) discuss how focusing on our strengths can motivate us to respond more effectively to the challenges we face during disasters. Strengths can be used to deal with those challenges adaptively, to come up with new solutions for the obstacles created by natural disaster. The authors describe frontline professionals dealing with COVID-19, including but not limited to doctors, nurses, paramedics, first responders, and nursing home staff. They are exposed to repetitive trauma as part of their work. Researchers have indicated that a substantial proportion of these providers may develop symptoms of anxiety, including posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, alcohol abuse, and medical concerns (Naushad et al., 2019). Yet, they are driven by their strengths—such as a sense of humanity, teamwork, kindness, and fairness—to continue. Based on the secondary data reviewed, certain strengths have been discovered at times of disasters, such as the ability to make meaning of the disaster events, which is also a strong predictor of resilience (Aiena et al., 2016); being aware of and affirming our most important strengths can help us to reinterpret and reframe our fear about the pandemic (Fredrickson et al., 2003); and using our strengths during a pandemic can provide us with a steady dose of well-being (Meyer et al., 2018).

In a study on Strength-Based Online Community Intervention (SOCI) and its impact on promoting resilience among adults in Hubei, China, Liu et al. (2021) reveal that SOCI had significantly improved participants' resilience, spirituality, and positive growth over time. The quantitative findings suggest that the strength-based intervention improved the overall psychological well-being of the participants living in Hubei Province during the COVID-19

quarantine period. It is hypothesised that this improvement was mainly due to the strengthening of resilience. Positive emotions, especially improved contentment and confidence, and the reduction of pivotal negative emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness, and hopelessness, had also contributed to the improved psychological well-being of the participants who received the SOCI intervention. The findings suggest that the SOCI programme has an impact on the spirituality of adult participants, affecting their perception of the meaning of life.

Research Methods

The researcher used a qualitative research methodology as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the personal experience of the participants over time. She also seeks to understand the meaning people have constructed, i.e., how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world (Merriam, 1998).

As strengths do not have a concrete definition, they could exist in any life experiences or specific events that the participants may not have acknowledged. The researcher saw the suitability of the narrative approach for the study as the narrative method would enable the participants in narrating their experiences in their own words, considering the influence of the social, historical and cultural factors. While the participants narrated their stories, it was not only the strengths that were identified but their ways of coping as well. The narrative approach allows for an in-depth, holistic understanding of the participants' experiences and gives a voice to those who have been silenced (Cresswell, 2007). The narrative inquiry helped the researcher to collect information exactly the way the participants narrated it. It also helped to articulate and understand how strengths are constructed by each participant, the meaning they have for them, and how these strengths have helped them in coping with challenges.

The study was conducted in Mata village, Saikot, and K Gamnom village, both in the Churachandpur district of Manipur, considering the feasibility of movement during the pandemic. Through the use of

purposive sampling, participants were selected from women playing different roles in the family—breadwinner of the family, women who had to drop out from college due to the pandemic, and woman with disabilities. The study also aimed to include women who had experienced traumatic deaths during the pandemic; however, such participants were not available.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using an unstructured interview guide, which allowed the participants to narrate their experiences freely. The broad domains of inquiry which have been included in the unstructured interview guide were personal details, family details, experiences of lockdown, ways of coping, daily living situations, social supports, spirituality, leisure or hobbies, health, and vocational or educational details.

Every narrative has been recorded in an audio format. After transcribing the audio-recorded narratives, a verbatim transcription was done in English to use in the process of analysis. As the interviews were conducted in the local language, they were first translated, and then transcribed.

Analysis and Discussion

The study attempted to understand the losses and challenges faced by participants and how they coped with these throughout the lockdown. In order to understand the challenges faced by the participants during the pandemic, it is significant to draw a brief discussion on what life was like prior to it. The study then aims to understand how the participants envision their future after going through such challenging periods.

The analysis and discussion are done in three different sections. The first provides a brief discussion on the livelihood situation, the challenges that were faced, and how the participants coped, and the next section focusses in detail on these challenges, ranging from a lack of financial security to emotional dependence. The discussion ends with a section that identifies the strengths in the participants and how these strengths are utilised in their coping.

TIMES BEFORE COVID-19

Before the pandemic hit, everything was normal. However, the definition of normal depends upon how the participants determined it: the undertaking of everyday routine without the disruption from any external factors. When faced with disruption in everyday life, the participants were familiar with the ways to deal and cope with such situations. They experienced challenges even prior to the pandemic; however, such challenges were accepted as a part of their existence and they eventually found a way to overcome them.

In Churachandpur district, the majority of the population depends on agriculture, and there exist very few other employment avenues. Enterprises and other private sectors, such as beauty parlours, bakeries, restaurants, or weaving or other manufacturing units are being gradually established, but such sectors are also still in the initial stages, with the ability to provide employment to only a handful of youth in the district. Some other income sources available are construction work, shop attending, mechanics, etc. Such sectors provide very low wages, which is the reason that agriculture becomes a better option for most people—either farming their own land or working as a daily wage labourer on another's farm. The type of farming prevailing in the district is subsistence farming, as no farmers own land large enough to cultivate for commercial purposes. They cultivate their own lands, and the agricultural produce is enough to sustain them throughout the year, under good climatic conditions.

Additionally, in the years prior to the pandemic, youth of the district have been migrating to big cities (mainly Bangalore, Delhi, and Chennai) in search of jobs, and therefore, the source of livelihood has been gradually changing. When the pandemic hit, it was a setback for this very population and they had to return home promptly. This led to a reversal of their source of livelihood, back to the agricultural fields.

'Life before COVID was slow. There was nothing to rush for, and everything was in place. I am a single mother, but just before COVID, my daughter eloped with a guy, and since then, I have been staying

with my mother in this house. I had three brothers—two passed away a few years ago, and the other one stays in a separate house with his family.

‘I used to weave handlooms by borrowing the tools from friends, and the wools and other materials were provided as a package by a manager in Lamka. Once we complete one unit of a wrap-around, we would give it to her, and then we would be given our payment—300 rupees per wrap-around. I used to weave only simple designs, and it used to take only two days to finish. Though the payment was a small amount, it was not physically taxing and I was quite satisfied. With 300 rupees per wrap-around, I could survive for more than a day, as I used to receive PDS (Public Distribution System) rice.

‘I have never had any permanent source of livelihood. I would weave if the manager requires me to; otherwise, if there was nothing to weave, I would search for work in another’s farmland. At the farm, they used to pay me about 400 rupees per day. For men, it is 500 rupees, as they are engaged in more physically intensive work, such as tilling the soil. In any case, if it was not the season to work on the land, I would ask around and work at a construction site. There, I get paid the same amount as they pay me in the farmland. So, there was hardly a day that I stayed idle at home. I would always get work, so that I had enough to buy myself rations and other essential items.’

Tingnu, 38, sole breadwinner of the family

‘Before lockdown, I was doing the first semester of my BA and I used to go to class regularly. On Saturday and Sunday, it would be a holiday, so I used to do domestic chores. Before lockdown, there wasn’t really any work to do at home, so it was just attending college. We were not wealthy but my father’s earnings were just enough to sustain our daily needs. Ever since we were kids, our paternal uncle looked after us. Until my mother passed away, we lived as a joint family with my uncle. But after my mother passed, my uncle separated their land from ours and we stayed as a single family—my three siblings, my father, and I. After a few months, three of us were sent to a children’s

home, as we were all girls and it was difficult for my father to attend to our needs. We stayed in the children home at Mata for more than five years, and left the home after we finished the twelfth standard.

‘My father used to burn charcoal and do paddy cultivation. Our living conditions were harsh and when the agricultural produce was not good, we were almost poverty-stricken. In my childhood, I could not spend leisure time as my peers did. My peers could go anywhere they wanted. But for me, I was just an eleven-year-old girl and my mother had just passed away. I had a two-day-old brother to look after. Whether I wanted to or not, the majority of the responsibilities of domestic work and looking after my siblings fell to me. I used to envy what my peers could eat and drink. But now, when I recall those days, they do not seem that challenging. It shaped me into a more responsible sister and daughter today.’

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

‘I live with my parents. My elder brother works in Chennai at a restaurant. Here in our village, there is nothing much to do. We either work in the agricultural fields or work as shop attendants in Lamka town for a meagre wage. So, my brother moved out of Manipur for a better livelihood for himself and for our family.

‘As for me, I used to weave and help out my mother in doing so. Otherwise, I would sit in the small pan shop that we own, which is located across the road. I do everything I can to help out my parents.

‘As I see from here, we did not experience too many hardships in the past. Everything was okay before COVID came. The only thing is that I faced some difficulties in transportation while going to college, due to my physical impairment. From my village to the college, I need to take two buses from two different stops. I used to go together with my friend. If it was too congested or if the bus was in a rush, then we would wait for another bus. I cannot run after the bus due to my impairment. Because of this, we would sometimes be late for classes. After we boarded in my village, Saikot, we had to get off at a stop near Lamka Police station. The same challenge happens there as well.

From Saikot to our college (Raybun College) is eight or nine kilometres, so two buses had to be taken.’

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

The above narratives discuss the living conditions of the participants, which were minimal but still satisfactory to the women. They had experienced challenges in relation to education or in their daily activities, but such challenges were regarded as a part of their everyday lives and treated as inevitable, and they were already familiar with how to deal with them.

The narratives also reflect the dominance of agriculture, as there are few other employment avenues in the area. If one does not want to work in the fields, they have to move out of town—either to Imphal or outside the state in search of employment in other sectors. Though other avenues of livelihood are also available, such as shop attendants, construction workers, these provide very low wages, barely enough to provide them with three square meals a day.

MULTIPLE LOSSES AND CHALLENGES IN TIMES OF COVID-19

The pandemic has been a testing period for every one of us. Though it has provided some with time for family bonding and self-reflection, and also had positive contributions towards the environment, such as a reduction in pollution, it has also been a period of loss and a testing of resilience for many. Some individuals have experienced loss in many ways and sometimes the multiple losses experienced by these individuals are interlinked. For instance, the loss of livelihood or loss of loved ones leads to imbalances in emotional well-being, which further leads to loss of self.

Loss is a powerful nodal experience that shakes the foundation of family life. It takes time to overcome multiple kinds of losses one

may have experienced and it takes multiple techniques to overcome and adapt to a new situation. It may also be dealt with differently from person to person. However, it is certain that loss has a great impact on an already vulnerable section of society—women.

Loss of livelihood and financial security

The dominant experience faced by women during the pandemic was the loss of their livelihoods. As the majority of the population of Churachandpur are dependent upon their day's earnings to sustain daily expenses, the pandemic impacted their livelihood the most. A single day's absence from their work or businesses could impact their livelihood tremendously, even prior to the lockdown. Chances of earning a livelihood have always been at risk when it comes to women, as there is still a wide gender gap in wages and accessing livelihood activities (as male still has access to multiple ways that they could earn their living, like an auto-rickshaw driver, construction worker, whereas women have the opportunity of being a mere street vendor). The closure of many economic activities indeed limited the livelihood options of women. Subsequently, it also led them to switch from one source of livelihood to another frequently.

'Before the lockdown, I used to weave handloom and earn for my day-to-day needs that way. Besides that, I am looking for another source of livelihood. Once the lockdown started, we could not weave any longer because the markets were closed. All of our products used to be supplied to Mizoram, but since the retailer stopped making the demands, the marketing discontinued, and we cannot weave any longer.

'As for rations, I collected 20 kilograms of rice from the PDS and managed somehow... At first, there were rumours that each household would get one bag (50kg) of rice; however, when it was actually distributed, it was 20 kilograms. In the lockdown, I used to collect bufaitham (a rice offering at church) from Saipum, as it is cheaper and easily available there.

My neighbours cultivated pumpkins and gifted those to us as well. Also, my mother used to collect changkuangche (spade leaf) from the fields, and she would sell and purchase other items like beans, dal, etc.

I could not weave as the handloom business had stopped, but after a while, there was some very small work to be done on someone else's farm. I used to earn there for a while, and sometimes go to the forests for burning charcoal (firewood is collected and burned in a hole in the ground. It is then covered with sand for hours until it turns into charcoal). We used to stay the night in the forest, as it was very far from my village... I earned in every way I could.'

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

'Just before the start of the lockdown, we collected all the money we had and purchased an auto-rickshaw with the thought that using it, we would at least be able to cover our household's basic needs and essential items. Then, when the lockdown started, we could not generate any income from it. We invested everything we had into the auto-rickshaw and had nothing at all left to fall back upon. The auto-rickshaw was our only hope to meet our daily needs... As for food, we grew rice, pumpkin, maize, etc., in our small farm just before the pandemic. After a few months, we harvested the pumpkin, yams, and maize. My step-mother and I used to sell in the market early morning, around 3:00 a.m., and return home at daybreak (before the police resumed duty).

'Now, I work as a part-time teacher in a private school as I cannot continue my college... I look after the needs of my brother. Through my salary, I am able to pay for my brother's fees and purchase all my day-to-day requirements.'

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

In the unprecedented lockdown, the sudden crisis caught many households unprepared. It was unimaginable for Churachandpur's daily workers to have their essential needs for the unprecedented crisis, which may last for more than a year, already prepared. There were supplies distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS)

from the government and other agencies a few times. Such supplies lasted for less than a month and did not cover even rudimentary needs.

The narratives also show how the participants change from one source of livelihood to another in order to make ends meet. The lockdown disrupted the source of livelihood of the participants drastically, which has put their financial security in jeopardy. One of the participants also discussed how she had to drop out of college, and had to start earning in order to sustain her family throughout the pandemic. This indicates that when the livelihood and the financial situation of the family are at risk, it also puts the education of the younger generation at risk, especially that of women.

Reminders of the past and the loss of self

In the study, it was found that lockdown had been monotonous at times, and that such mundane, desolate, and challenging times reminded the participants about their past, and losing loved ones, which ultimately affected their psychological well-being.

‘After my mother passed away, we were in the worst living conditions. I was just eleven years old and my youngest sibling was just two days old... The majority of the responsibilities of domestic chores and looking after my siblings fell to me. The struggles I had to face then are similar to the kind of struggles I had in the lockdown. My father was infected with the virus. I felt all alone at that time, with no one to depend on. We took a loan of twenty thousand rupees from our distant relative and took care of him, managing his treatment at home. The thought of losing him often came to mind, and I could not bear it as my siblings are still very young. I had already lost my mother, and I did not want to lose another parent. I could not eat, I could not find peace those days.’

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

‘It was my younger brother, who passed away a few years ago, who used to help me in my spiritual and material needs. I used to share all

my feelings with him and relied on him whenever needed. There has been nobody like him since. I have three brothers, but I do not have a close relationship with the other two (one of the two passed away just before the pandemic). No matter how much I tried, I could not bring myself closer to them. It was around mid-year, and I used to overthink a lot. I thought about my two brothers who passed away. I contemplated how things could have been if they were still alive. I thought about how I, their wives, and children would have been if they were with us in this situation. (Had they been alive now, her nieces and nephews would not be orphaned and her sister-in law would have someone to lean on.) I used to have insomnia and sometimes stayed awake till 1:00 a.m. Due to the lockdown, I struggled with these thoughts... I was really mentally disturbed at that time. I only thought about death... I was losing myself. I was not able to recognise myself anymore, even though I did not realise it at the time. I did not know what was happening to me. I sometimes felt frustrated, sometimes anxious, sometimes angry.'

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

The participants described how loss, either of the self or of loved ones, could be a jarring experience. With many restrictions due to the lockdown, there were limitations in seeking help, and most of the participants did not even realise that they needed therapeutic assistance. The changing situations were too difficult for the participants to adapt to, and life became monotonous for a certain period of time, which led them to relive the pain they experienced previously.

It also reflected on the cultural dynamics among the participants. The community in the villages of Churachandpur has a special bond, and each one in the community is closely linked to the others. Usually, after an exhausting day of working throughout the day, the participants would visit their neighbours or vice-versa in the evening at either of their houses and they would chat about anything and everything until bedtime. In the morning, the elders would sit in the tea shops and discuss the rumours in the village, politics and thereon. Such social

bondage had been broken by the lockdown and the community is not so technically equipped that their normal conversations are carried through telephonic or video calls. With the lockdown, their medium of communication was restricted and they spent time in desolation, which gradually contributed to an individual's loss of self.

Loss of Deep Connection

Social connection or connection within families were not of one's priority before the lockdown. With the advancement of technology, it has both positive and negative factors. Some have more connections, whereas some are disconnected, as too much time is invested in the world of social media, impacting their connection with the real world. Once the lockdown started and distancing became the key preventive measure, the importance of a real connection was realised, which was otherwise easily ignored. The restrictions on physical contact due to lockdown may vary from each geographical location, depending on the severity of the disease at the time. However, in areas where COVID-19 cases were mild or few, participants still longed for their previous normalcy, and for life before the lockdown.

'We used to attend church every Wednesday and Saturday, other than Sunday. For me, attending church nurtures my spiritual life. Now that churches are closed in order to prevent COVID, we have no option but to stay at home during church timings. I could no longer sing in the church or participate in the church activities with my friends. It is not just the activities themselves, but there is no time to loiter with my friends, as we are not allowed to go out. Now that we do not see each other often, some of my friends have become distant, and I also feel that there is a setback in my spiritual life. I have become idle and sometimes feel reluctant to even have a worship service at home. I used to video call my friends through WhatsApp, but the network is often weak. In any case, video conferences are nothing compared to

physical church service. I cannot talk or share whatever I want in a video call and my friends also cannot do the same.'

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

'People stayed inside their houses and it seemed very awkward even to visit one another. Even if we roam around the locality, we were seen very differently. Gone were the days when we could just go to our friends and neighbours and spend time together, and go back home before bedtime. We would share laughter and rumours. We would often exchange curries and share recipes. Such times do not exist anymore, or are rare. The elders here would often sit together at the tea shop in the early morning and discuss politics, issues prevailing in the village, and whatnot. Now such things do not happen anymore. Each person is stuck within their own four walls.

'I used to talk with my friends on the phone. We shared how we were doing, our daily activities, our adversities, and so on. But there is nothing like chatting face-to-face. It's a good thing that, in today's world, we can still have conversations and say whatever we want through phone calls. But our sadness, our loneliness, and our emotional needs could not often be shared over the phone. It's difficult to have a deep connection and conversation that way.'

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

The participants described the disturbances in their spiritual life due to the loss of physical contact. Even the bonding between neighbours is distant, and social relationships gradually developed a gap, when they were what the participants needed the most. Telephonic conversations were often conducted, but such conversations could not be in-depth due to weak network connections and an individual's longing for physical contact. The loss of physical contact and distant social relationships further weakened their spiritual health.

Loss of hopes and dreams

The waves of the pandemic held an uncertain future for the individual, family, and community. Not many people were aware of what the new normal would look like; people were occupied with thinking about whether they would survive the pandemic and how they would adapt to the new normal if they did. There were unclear hopes and dreams of the future. This is even more evident in the lives of the participants who were students.

‘As the lockdown started, the auto fares increased. Where we used to spend forty rupees, we now spend eighty rupees. Some of the parents wanted their children to stop going, as they thought college had been a waste of money. So, some children dropped out of school and college.

‘Also, due to lockdown, there was a limited opportunity for activity for the youth, as schools and colleges were shut down. Most students have extensive leisure time now as there are no classes extensively unoccupied and in the process, they lost their sense of discipline. Now, most of the youth in my village are of the opinion that one should search for a livelihood and earn, instead of attending classes. Students’ lives became mundane, and they lost their interest in education.’

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

Schools and colleges were closed during the lockdown. This left students unoccupied throughout the day, which could have a great impact on their careers. They became unsure of what the future held for them, and whether continuing school/college would serve any purpose. Some already were of the opinion that continuing their education was no longer needed, and that one should seek a source of livelihood so that they could survive. The future seemed to be so unclear that they no longer wanted to look forward to it, and instead, sought an opportunity to allow them to survive the current situation. Parents, already in strained financial conditions, stopped having hopes and dreams for their children. ‘Young adults, facing the loss of educational and job plans, fear the loss of life dreams: in pursuing

careers, gaining financial independence, finding life partners, and starting a family' (Walsh, F., 2020).

IDENTIFICATION OF STRENGTHS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

According to the strengths model by Rapp and Goscha (2006), strengths can be drawn both from the individual and the environment (family and community). In order to accomplish one's goal, both the individual and environmental strengths need to be interconnected. At the individual level, strengths may be viewed as aspirations (goals, dreams, ambitions and hope), competencies (skills, abilities, talents, knowledge, and aptitudes), and confidence (power, influence, belief in oneself). There needs to be an interaction between these three elements. When an individual discovers their skills/abilities, they become more confident, and this contributes to building hope and achieving their goals by drawing on environmental strengths. The environmental strengths include resources (basic needs and services), social relations, and opportunities.

The strengths perspective is based on the belief that people possess a wide range of skills, talents, abilities, capacities, resources and aspirations. No matter how little or how much may be expressed at one time, a belief in human potential is tied to the notion that people have untapped mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual abilities that can be expressed. As a researcher, attention to those strengths people have, rather than their failings, reveals that people are more likely to develop along the lines of those strengths. An assumption is made in the strengths perspective that the quality of growth is enhanced by attending to the positive abilities already expressed, rather than an absence of ability. A singular focus on the strength already expressed is the vehicle through which additional talents and abilities can be developed. This position asserts that people do not grow by concentrating on their problems. The fact that people have lacks is

acknowledged, but the best strategy for supporting further gains is a conscious emphasis on the gains already made (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989).

In times of disaster or natural catastrophe, it is significant to focus on the positivity of an individual rather than reminding them of the kind of adversities they have experienced. Eventually, the individual would have a new positive outlook rather than being drowned by the disasters they had experienced. The use of a strengths perspective does not overlook the weaknesses or incapacity of an individual or their environment. It acknowledges the weaknesses while giving emphasis to the potential and resources of the individual and their environment.

The study attempted to focus on the strengths of the participants and their environment during the pandemic. It tried to understand the way the participants cope with losses and challenges with the use of their strengths, sourced either within themselves or their environment. The strengths identified by the participants are contentment, perseverance, self-reliance, social skills, negotiating skills, spirituality, and aspiration. The strengths drawn from environmental resources are mainly from family and community.

Within oneself

It is the strengths that are inherently present in the individual that can be further developed by interacting with the social environment. Among the strengths found in the individuals, intrapersonal strength is seen as a function of circumstances and not necessarily as a function of human interactions. Carter et al (2015) describe the intrapersonal strengths as 'characteristics that represent winsome dispositions or attitudes'. It is likely that intrapersonal strength is inherently present in the individual.

The participants narrated being content with what their lives offer. Throughout the pandemic, despite experiencing certain challenges, they were able to acknowledge the blessings they had experienced, which helped them survive the pandemic.

‘I have not experienced that much discrimination because of my impairment. My friends treat me like anyone else. My disability has not come between us so far. But there were times when I wanted to sing in church. I wanted my friends to accompany me. But with some of my friends, I did not know what exactly they thought. Some of my friends did not accompany me when I needed them during the pandemic, be it in church or to do some errands. They did not want to accompany me. I know... everyone cannot always be a friend. But with the few friends I have made, I am happy.

‘As far as rations are concerned, I thank God that we did not go hungry for even a day. The youth organisation (a civil organization set up by a particular community) used to distribute PDS rice once a month. Even when my brother, who lives in Chennai, could not send us money any longer as he stopped working due to COVID , we always had food to eat. We have rice provided from the PDS and the vegetables which we have been growing since way before COVID started. Until now God has led us, and we survive each day during the lockdown without experiencing any hunger.’

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

Contentment is closely associated with mental well-being. Despite all the challenges that the pandemic had brought along, the participants were content with the little they had in whatever aspect, be it food or social relationships.

Perseverance has also been observed as a common strength amongst the participants. The narratives indicated that there have been constant changes in livelihood for each participant or their parents. There has been a loss of a permanent source of livelihood. Despite this, the participants manifested perseverance in their search for a livelihood and survival, even when their lives were at risk due to unexpected circumstances.

Negotiating skills have also been found to be a strength that enabled them to save themselves from the police on lockdown duty. One of

the participants narrated how she and her friend negotiated with the police at a check post in order to get home from their workplace.

‘He (employer) dropped me off from Zomual to my village on his two-wheeler... I negotiated and spoke more than my travelling partner did, as I thought the police might have less suspicion on women. I thought it was better for me to speak than the man, as we might avoid any argument or fight that could arise. I politely conversed with the police and told him that I had not been home since the pandemic, and that my aged mother was waiting for me all alone. I even told him that since we began our journey, I had not even known that lockdown was in place. I told him of the difficulties of getting transportation from my workplace, which is in a mostly deserted area, and how my employer was sympathetic and had offered to drop me home without a second thought. The policeman responded with a nod. Then we asked them if there would be police at Lanva bridge, to which they responded ‘yes’. Then I requested the OC (Officer in charge of Police) to kindly talk to the police on duty at Lanva bridge, and he politely agreed to my request.’

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

In a community that is closely interlinked with strong social bonding, it is quite common to have social connections among the participants. The isolation felt during the pandemic acted as a barrier in their social bonding, rather than the preventive measures, such as distancing, lockdown, being the barrier. Likewise, the participants said they were willing to form social relationships with others. They had always been members of a leisure group, or of organisations run by the church. The social distancing guidelines, in some way, created distance between friends and neighbours. However, the participants connected with their friends and shared their grief, disappointment and other experiences through phone calls. During the pandemic, phone calls acted as a means of therapeutic intervention for the participants.

‘I used to talk with my co-worker over phone calls. She also used to call me up and ask how I was doing. In times like that, that was the

most we could do. We could not go out, we could not meet, we could not find anyone at all in the streets. It was complete desolation. I talked with my friends about how things used to be before the pandemic, and what we could have done if we were not in such a situation. But the fact they I had friends to talk to, even in such isolation, was a blessing.'

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

'We could not talk every day on the phone. But once in a while, when we did talk, it did not feel like there had been any distance. It always felt the same... We did not usually meet during those times. However, if there was an urgent meeting or funeral, or another such occasion, then we would seek permission from the Village Task Force.'

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

The participants were able to find means of connecting with their friends, either through phone calls or attending meetings. The Village Task Force was flexible when there was an unavoidable gathering, such as a funeral. So, the meetings at the funeral also happen to be a place of bonding with friends.

Another strength found among the participants was their skill sets. The participants spoke of their vocational and other skills, such as weaving, singing, or giving solace to a friend in need. These skills are mostly acquired by the participants on their own, either by observing people in the household or by learning from others outside the family. The participants used their vocational skills to earn an income, which contributed to sustaining the livelihood of the family.

'I feel that I am good at consoling others in their grief and disappointment. Whenever someone comes to me to share their grief, I can be a reliable person with whom they can share their sorrow. I can be of great solace to them. In times like the COVID lockdown, we needed one another. We needed someone to be there for us. I think I could handle overwhelming emotions better than most of my friends. My friends talk things out with me whenever they feel low. As for me, I talk it out with God, through my prayers.'

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

‘I am like an all-rounder. There is no one thing I am skilled in. I can weave, do construction work, and cultivate on a farm. I don’t think I am talented or someone who is gifted. These skills were acquired since my childhood. I have always loved working, and there has hardly been a day that I have gone without working. I do not differentiate any task by any gender specific. I work in the forest, cultivate farms, do my own kitchen garden, build my own house, and work at a construction site; I do all the possible things. I may not be an expert, but I can say that I can do almost anything, though I may be illiterate.’

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

Spirituality is often expressed and experienced in religious communities, which involves shared beliefs, practices, and moral standards that can support spiritual development, encourage healthy lifestyles, and provide support systems and ways of coping with challenges (Canda and Furman, 2010). It is seen as a strength to make meaning of the circumstances the participants had experienced. ‘A spiritual component in a person’s life acts as a calming force and creates a context for prayer, meditation and affirmation’ (Jaganathan and Sekar, 2011). Thus, the practice of one’s religion and prayer is seen as a way of life and as a way of coping for the participants.

All the participants described how their spiritual beliefs helped them in coping with and overcoming challenges in the pandemic. They specifically mentioned how their spiritual moorings have enabled them to make sense of their lives, and that they were able to overcome anxiety and fear by strengthening their relationship with God.

‘I am a person with locomotor disability. I don’t think of my impairment any differently. Some people may see me as a disabled person. But in my mind, God has created me just the way he likes. Had he created me with the usual appearances, it might have been worse for me. I feel God has created me this way for a reason.’

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

‘Around mid-year, I was overthinking. I used to have insomnia and sometimes stayed awake till 1:00 a.m. Due to the lockdown, I

struggled with certain thoughts... I only thought about death... I was losing myself. I was not able to recognise myself anymore...

‘I prayed to God to be able to cope with it. I prayed so that I stopped overthinking. On Sundays, whenever I was free, I used to read the Bible all the time and pray. That was the kind of meditation I did. By doing this, I was able to stop overthinking and develop better mental health.

‘I forgot the exact Bible verse, but it starts “The Lord is my shepherd...” Whenever I would read this verse, it refreshed my mind and gave me peace of mind. All those verses strengthened me and my faith. I feel that God gave me these verses to strengthen myself at my weakest.’

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

The use of spiritual strength is predominant amongst the participants, which can be seen in the context of the study area being a Christian-dominated area, and the participants are closely linked with religious activities. Though there was a lockdown, it was also mentioned by some of the participants that churches remained open. This indicated that the concerned village authorities were flexible enough to allow spiritual moorings, such as attending church, worship services, to the participants. We see then that spiritual strength has been one of the key factors that have facilitated the participants in coping with the challenges they faced in the lockdown.

After the identification of the strengths present in the participants, identifying the goals that they have for themselves is important, as it points to their self-esteem and vision. It explains how the participants see themselves today and how they see themselves in the near future. The aspirations of the participants may vary depending on the skills and education they have acquired. They were realistic about their goals and uncertain of the future. With the weak financial conditions and their careers precarious, they were sceptical about achieving their aspirations. However, with their existing strengths such as spirituality

and perseverance, they still strive for their goals, which gives them a sense of hope and something to look forward to.

‘I would love to do whatever I can by going abroad. I would love to learn new things, work on myself and communication skills ... I would love to pursue hotel management.’

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

‘I don’t know what I aspire to be ...but I wish that I had more money to build this house just the way I want—to build a proper foundation and proper steps at the entrance. I also wish there were an alternative livelihood other than working in the farmland ...’

Tingnu, 38, breadwinner

Aspirations depend upon the participants’ educational background and previous experiences in terms of work and skills. Some participants aspire to build a proper foundation for their house, whereas others aspire to work abroad. These aspirations have been what keep them looking forward in life, with a belief that they will accomplish them one day.

Environment: Family and community

The family plays a major role in the strengths of the participants. It is an important social agency that meets various needs. The family enables the participants to be independent, and empowers and enables them to develop feelings of being worthy and competent, of having power and control. Anuradha (2004) describes the importance of empowering family members and mentions that families certainly face many challenges. Yet, they also have resources, knowledge, and skills that can be called upon in times of crisis. The family also acts as a strong emotional support to the participants, and their role in meeting medical needs has been significant, as narrated by the participants.

‘My two other sisters were still at the children’s home, and my brother was still too young to help us. Though my father was not well, my mother and I did everything we could to survive the pandemic.

We have our differences at times and argue over small things, but the pandemic has bonded us and it really taught me about what it was like to have a family and someone to call my own.'

Boinu, 21, college student (early leaver)

'My mother used to collect vegetables from the farm and sell them at Saikot Bazar... [she] used to go to Saikot Bazar before dawn to sell the vegetables, and with the money she would purchase rice and other essential needs.'

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

Among the family members, the women—either the participants or their mothers—proved to be the reason the family had been able to sustain its livelihood through the pandemic. Additionally, the participants showed resilience during the lockdown. In spite of being exposed to the virus and the risk of being caught by the police if they did not return home in time, the participants strive to sustain their livelihood.

The participants narrated how the community had been open and accessible during the pandemic. The community may be a church, a leisure group, or neighbourhood, or youth clubs.

'We are all the same... we are all united. We face every problem together, as one. The lockdown affected all families and all neighbourhoods, so there is no such thing as our issues being bigger than others'. The [people of the] neighbourhood are supportive towards one another, as all of us are in the same situation.

Paknu, 20, college student and person with locomotor disability

In spite of all the challenges that the participants had faced in procuring food and daily essential items during the lockdown, environmental resources proved to be one of the main features by which the participants were able to cope. There were a few times that the participants received rations and essential items from the government agencies, politicians, etc. However, the community proved to be the major support. Through the narratives, it was found

that the community believes in gifting and sharing what they have. There has been a sense of union, sharing, and support within the community. The community did not treat the lockdown as a crisis that had to be faced by households on their own, and had a strong motivation to survive the lockdown together.

The family and community are resourceful domains. When the family and the community are closely connected, the participants are able to access resources and avail support from both. Rapp and Goscha (2006) explain how strengths can be drawn and utilised by connecting the three domains: individual, family, and environment. In order for the participants to make use of their strengths efficiently and achieve their goals, the linkage between the family and community needs to be formed. Both these systems must be opened to each other so that the participants have free access to both, and are able to reinforce their strengths. The individual, family, and environmental strengths need to be interlinked in order to accomplish one's goal.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic and its experiences have had a ubiquitous impact on the population, especially on the participants and their mothers, in the household. For these women, their role in sustaining the livelihood of the family and meeting its needs proved to be a reason that they could strive for more and develop their ability to cope with anything life throws at them. This study attempted to understand the losses and challenges experienced during the lockdown, and how the participants coped with them through the use of strengths that exist in themselves, in their families, and in the community.

It has been observed that most of the participants are daily wage labourers, and are engaged in agricultural work depending upon the season. The unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic shook the participants in all aspects of life, from education

to livelihood. There have been certain periods of time during which the participants experienced anxiety, fear of loss, fear of survival, and many other traumatic experiences. With the help of their spiritual strength, the participants were able to cope with these challenges in the pandemic.

A commonly experienced loss was the loss of livelihood, which led to a lack of rations. However, as a majority of the district's population engaged in agriculture, the participants still had a stock of rice grains to survive for several months, along with rations from government welfare schemes. Also, it reflected. The community shared whatever they had in stock so that all members could survive until lockdown was relaxed, reflecting the compassion and support of the community. The pandemic was not faced as an individual issue, but as a group issue.

The pandemic reflected the strengths that had always existed in these individuals, and in their environments, which had often been left unnoticed. The discovery of their strengths with the help of the environmental resources gave the participants a new meaning to life. With this discovery of strengths, the participants may now be able to cope better with the challenges that may arise in the future and gradually be able to adapt to the new normal post-pandemic.

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