

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN DHANGADHI  
SUB-METROPOLITAN CITY, KAILALI DISTRICT**

**A Thesis**

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**Submitted By**

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**LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION**

This is to certify that Usmita Acharya has prepared the thesis titled “Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Kailali District” under my supervision. This thesis has been completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology. It is hereby recommended to the evaluation committee for assessment.

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**LETTER OF APPROVAL**

A thesis entitled “Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Kailali District” has been submitted by Usmita Acharya in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology. We hereby certify that the Evaluation Committee of the faculty has found this dissertation satisfactory and has therefore accepted it for this degree.

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the M.A. thesis titled “Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Kailali District” submitted to the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, is entirely my own original work. The findings and conclusions drawn in this thesis are based on my independent research and have not been submitted elsewhere for any academic degree or purpose. I take full responsibility for the authenticity and integrity of this work.

.....

Usmita Acharya

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

|            |   |  |
|------------|---|--|
| COVID-19   | : | Coronavirus Disease 2019   |
| ILO        | : | International Labour Organization                                      |
| IOM        | : | International Organization for Migration                               |
| MoHP       | : | Ministry of Health and Population                                      |
| SARS CoV 2 | : | Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2                        |
| UN Women   | : | United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women |
| UN         | : | United Nation  |
| UNICEF     | : | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund                 |
| WHO        | : | World Health Organization  |

# CHAPTER – I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus, later named SARS CoV-2, was identified in Wuhan, China, causing a respiratory illness now known as COVID-19. The virus rapidly spread across the globe, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Governments worldwide implemented stringent measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, and travel restrictions to slow its spread, disrupting social, economic, and health systems.

Nepal reported its first case of COVID-19 on January 23, 2020, involving a student who had returned from Wuhan, China (Shrestha et al., 2020). Since then, the virus spread across the country, and by the end of 2020, Nepal had recorded over 250,000 confirmed cases and 1,800 deaths (Ministry of Health and Population [MoHP], 2020). The pandemic's impact on Nepal was significant, as the country faced economic slowdowns, healthcare challenges, and disruptions to everyday life.

COVID-19 not only affected health but also altered family dynamics, as lockdown measures confined individuals to their homes for extended periods. Families experienced both positive and negative changes in their relationships. While some found more time for bonding, others faced increased tensions due to the sudden confinement, financial stress, and changing roles within the household. A study by Prime et al. (2020) indicated that the pandemic heightened stress, which exacerbated family conflicts and led to challenges such as increased domestic violence, emotional distress, and strained parent child relationships.

Family relationships are fundamental social structures that influence individual well being, emotional support, and social development. A family, typically seen as a group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption, plays a vital role in providing economic, emotional, and social security (Gottman & Silver, 2015). These relationships are often the first and most enduring bonds people form, shaping their identity, behavior, and interactions within society.

In most cultures, family relationships are characterized by specific roles, such as parent child, sibling, and spousal relationships, each having its own set of expectations and responsibilities. These relationships involve emotional connections that provide love, care, and support during difficult times. However, family relationships are not static; they evolve over time and can be influenced by various factors, including cultural norms, economic circumstances, and external pressures.

In traditional Nepali society, family structures are often extended, meaning that multiple generations may live together under one roof. This setup fosters strong intergenerational bonds and allows for collective decision making and support, particularly in times of crisis (Sharma, 2018). However, modern societal changes and urbanization have led to more nuclear family structures, especially in urban areas like Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, where family dynamics differ from rural settings. As family roles change with modernization, the nature of relationships within the household also transforms.

Different factors can shape family relationships. Economic stability is one of the most significant influences. When families experience financial hardship, stress levels tend to increase, which can lead to conflicts and strain within the household (Conger et al., 2010). Cultural expectations also play a role, as traditional gender roles often assign different responsibilities to men and women, which may create imbalances in household labor or decision making power.

External events, such as natural disasters, wars, and pandemics, can further impact family relationships. These crises often increase the emotional and psychological stress on families, affecting how family members interact with each other. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, lockdown measures confined individuals to their homes, disrupting routine activities and straining relationships as families spent more time together under stressful conditions (Prime et al., 2020). The pandemic forced families to adapt to new ways of communicating, sharing responsibilities, and supporting each other while dealing with external challenges such as job losses and health risks.

In addition to economic stress, social isolation can have a significant effect on family relationships. Being confined to a limited social circle for extended periods can lead

to increased frustration, conflict, or feelings of alienation among family members. On the other hand, some families may experience stronger emotional bonds and increased cooperation during crises, depending on their resilience and coping mechanisms (Güven et al., 2020).

Overall, family relationships are influenced by a multitude of factors, ranging from individual characteristics and cultural contexts to broader socioeconomic conditions. Situations such as economic instability, social isolation, and external crises can either strengthen family bonds through cooperation and mutual support or, conversely, strain relationships, leading to conflict and emotional distress.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the fabric of societies around the globe, presenting not only a public health crisis but also a social and economic one. Governments worldwide imposed lockdowns, movement restrictions, and social distancing measures to limit the spread of the virus, with profound impacts on everyday life (Prime et al., 2020). While these policies were essential for controlling the pandemic, they also created new challenges within family systems, fundamentally affecting family relationships. The sudden shift in lifestyle—forced isolation, economic instability, and increased household responsibilities placed enormous pressure on families, altering family dynamics in ways that are still being understood (Günther-Bel et al., 2020).

In Nepal, the situation was no different, though the country faced unique challenges due to its socioeconomic conditions. The first case of COVID-19 in Nepal was confirmed on January 23, 2020, and by late March, the government enforced a nationwide lockdown, which lasted several months (Panthee et al., 2020). Although the lockdown was effective in containing the spread of the virus during the early stages of the pandemic, it had a severe impact on the economy, with many Nepali families, particularly in urban areas like Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, experiencing job losses, income reductions, and heightened financial insecurity (Nepal et al., 2020). According to a study conducted by the Nepal Labour Force, unemployment surged from 11.4% to over 18% during the pandemic, which placed additional stress on family units (Nepal & Aryal, 2020).

The pandemic also exposed and magnified existing socioeconomic inequalities within Nepali society. Many urban families, especially in developing urban centers like Dhangadhi, are already vulnerable due to limited access to healthcare, unstable employment, and crowded living conditions. During the pandemic, families found themselves confined to small spaces, leading to increased tensions, domestic conflicts, and mental health issues (Paudel et al., 2020). Such crises can significantly alter family dynamics, leading to shifts in traditional family roles and expectations. For instance, gender roles within Nepali households have been especially impacted by the pandemic, with women bearing a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities and caregiving, even while many men experienced loss of income (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2021).

Furthermore, the enforced lockdowns and social distancing measures disrupted the support systems that families traditionally rely on. Extended family networks, community interactions, and social institutions, which often provide emotional and social support, were suddenly inaccessible. As a result, families had to rely on internal coping mechanisms to deal with the heightened stress and uncertainty (Prime et al., 2020). For many families, this led to an increase in intra family conflict, including domestic violence, as frustration and anxiety grew in response to external pressures (Sharma, 2020).

Despite the magnitude of these challenges, there has been little research conducted on how COVID-19 has specifically affected family relationships in Nepal, especially in urban areas like Dhangadhi. Much of the global research on family dynamics during the pandemic has focused on developed nations, where the socioeconomic context is markedly different. In contrast, the unique socio cultural and economic conditions in Nepal require specific attention to understand how family relationships have been influenced by the pandemic. This gap in the literature highlights the need for localized studies that investigate the pandemic's social impact on Nepali families.

This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on how COVID-19 has affected family relationships in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City. Specifically, the study explores how urban families have coped with the social and economic challenges posed by the pandemic, how the pandemic has shifted gender roles and responsibilities within

households, and how these changes have influenced emotional bonds and communication among family members.

This study has attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City perceive the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their relationships?
2. In what ways have gender roles and household responsibilities shifted within families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

- To explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitancity.
- To investigate the changes in gender roles and household responsibilities within families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships in a Nepali context, particularly in urban settings like Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City. While numerous studies have examined the effects of the pandemic on families globally, there is limited research on how these dynamics play out in developing countries, where socioeconomic and cultural contexts differ markedly from those in developed nations. Given the limited social safety nets and the unequal burden of the pandemic on vulnerable populations in Nepal, this study is crucial in providing insights into how families in Dhangadhi have adapted to these challenges. Additionally, it contributes to a broader sociological understanding of how public health crises impact family dynamics, particularly in developing countries. The findings of this study also offer recommendations for policy and community interventions that can help support families during future crises.

Understanding how families perceive and cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that can help support family well being during such crises. The findings of this study provides

insights into the shifting dynamics of family relationships, particularly in terms of communication and emotional support. Moreover, examining changes in gender roles and responsibilities contribute to the discourse on gender equality in Nepal, highlighting the need for policies that address the specific challenges faced by women in times of crisis.

Additionally, the study's outcomes may inform local government, NGOs, and community organizations in designing programs aimed at enhancing family resilience. By shedding light on the lived experiences of families during the pandemic, this research not only contribute to academic knowledge but also serve as a practical resource for stakeholders seeking to promote healthier family dynamics and improve community support systems in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **CHAPTER – II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Theoretical Literature Review**

Understanding family relationships requires a multi dimensional approach that considers various sociological and psychological theories. These frameworks help explain the roles, interactions, and structures within families and how they adapt to societal shifts. This section delves into five key theories: Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, Family Systems Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Feminist Theory. These theories helped to guide understanding of how family relationships evolved, particularly during significant global events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

##### **2.1.1 Structural Functionalism and Family Roles**

Structural functionalism, introduced by Talcott Parsons, views society as a complex system with various institutions, including the family, that work together to maintain stability and order (Parsons, 1951). In this framework, the family is seen as a key social institution responsible for the socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities. Each member of the family fulfills specific roles—such as the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the caregiver—that contribute to the overall function of the family and, by extension, society.

However, this traditional understanding of family roles has been challenged, particularly in the context of modern day events like the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis disrupted the balance of these roles, as many families experienced sudden economic instability, with breadwinners losing jobs or working remotely. Additionally, caregiving roles became more complex as households had to manage children's schooling at home. This disruption forced families to renegotiate their roles and responsibilities in ways that structural functionalism does not fully account for. While this theory is useful for understanding the stability of traditional family roles, it lacks flexibility in explaining how families adapt to crisis situations.

Structural functionalism also faces criticism for its narrow view of family dynamics, particularly regarding gender roles. It assumes a heterosexual, nuclear family model

that does not reflect the diversity of family structures present in modern societies. Despite its limitations, structural functionalism remains an essential theory for understanding the initial role allocation in family systems. In crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, where these roles are disrupted, the theory highlights the importance of stability but must be supplemented by other perspectives to explain family adaptations more fully (Giddens, 2013).

### **2.1.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Family Communication**

Symbolic interactionism, developed by Herbert Blumer (1969), emphasizes the importance of symbols and shared meanings in everyday social interactions, including family life. Unlike structural functionalism, which views roles as rigid and pre-determined, symbolic interactionism suggests that family members actively negotiate and redefine their roles and relationships through communication. Family relationships are built on the shared understanding of roles, behaviors, and expectations, which can change over time as family members interact and adapt to new circumstances.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the symbolic meaning of certain roles within the family changed dramatically. For example, the role of a parent may have expanded to include being a teacher, as children transitioned to remote learning. The ways in which families communicated and understood these new roles became crucial to how they adapted to the challenges of the pandemic. Symbolic interactionism provides a valuable framework for understanding this adaptability, as it highlights the importance of flexible role definitions and open communication in maintaining family cohesion during periods of stress (Goffman, 1974).

Moreover, this theory emphasizes the subjective experiences of family members, allowing for a more detailed understanding of how individuals within the same family may perceive their roles differently. For instance, a parent might view their increased caregiving responsibilities as fulfilling, while another might find them overwhelming and stressful. Symbolic interactionism offers a way to explore these varied experiences, providing insight into the diverse ways families responded to the pandemic and how these responses impacted their relationships.

### **2.1.3 Family Systems Theory**

Family Systems Theory, first proposed by Murray Bowen (1978), views the family as an interconnected unit where each member's behavior and well being affect the others. Rather than analyzing individual family members in isolation, this theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the family as a dynamic system. Changes in one part of the family, such as a child's behavior or a parent's stress level, can create ripple effects throughout the entire system. This theory is particularly useful in examining how external stressors, like the COVID-19 pandemic, affect family functioning.

The pandemic created numerous stressors financial difficulties, health concerns, and social isolation that tested the resilience of family systems. According to Bowen, families that could effectively communicate and support each other were more likely to adapt successfully to these stressors. However, families with pre existing tensions or poor communication skills may have found it more challenging to cope. Family Systems Theory helps explain why some families fared better than others during the pandemic, as it emphasizes the importance of internal family dynamics in coping with external crises.

Family Systems Theory also highlights the role of boundaries in family relationships. Some families may have experienced "enmeshment," where boundaries between family members become overly blurred, leading to increased stress and conflict. In contrast, families with clear but flexible boundaries were better able to manage the emotional toll of the pandemic. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex, interdependent relationships within families and how they respond to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

### **2.1.4 Social Exchange Theory**

Social Exchange Theory, developed by George Homans (1958), posits that social relationships are based on a system of costs and rewards. Individuals seek to maximize rewards such as emotional support, financial stability, and companionship while minimizing the costs, such as conflict or stress, in their relationships. This theory applies to family relationships by suggesting that individuals continuously evaluate their roles and contributions within the family based on perceived fairness and reciprocity.

The COVID-19 pandemic added complexity to these cost benefit evaluations. Families had to renegotiate household responsibilities, with some members taking on more caregiving or financial burdens than others. Social Exchange Theory can help explain why tensions might arise in situations where one family member feels overburdened or perceives an imbalance in contributions. For example, if one partner is expected to manage both childcare and remote work while the other focuses solely on their job, feelings of inequity can lead to conflict and dissatisfaction within the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In addition, the theory sheds light on how families negotiate caregiving roles. Social Exchange Theory suggests that family members will continue to perform tasks if they feel adequately rewarded, either through emotional support, appreciation, or reciprocal efforts from others. During the pandemic, many families had to recalibrate these expectations, with some family members stepping up to new responsibilities while others might have felt overburdened. This theoretical lens is valuable for understanding how family members balanced new demands and how these shifts impacted their relationships.

### **2.1.5 Feminist Theory and Gender Inequality in Families**

Feminist theory offers a critical lens through which to examine the unequal distribution of power, responsibilities, and resources within families, particularly along gender lines. Historically, feminist theorists like Ann Oakley (1974) has highlighted how traditional family structures often place women in subordinate roles, assigning them the majority of unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities. This unequal division of labor within the family has been exacerbated during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where women disproportionately shouldered the burden of additional household tasks and caregiving.

The pandemic intensified these existing gender inequalities within families. Research indicates that women, even when working from home, were more likely to take on the bulk of childcare and household duties compared to their male partners (Alon et al., 2020). Feminist theory explains this through the lens of patriarchal social structures, which continue to shape expectations around gender roles. While some families

renegotiated these roles to be more equitable during the pandemic, many others fell back on traditional patterns, reinforcing the gendered division of labor.

Feminist theory also emphasizes the importance of understanding how intersecting identities—such as class, race, and economic status—further shape family dynamics. For instance, women in lower income households may have faced even greater challenges during the pandemic, as they were more likely to work in essential jobs that could not be done remotely, leaving them to juggle both paid and unpaid labor. This theoretical perspective is crucial for understanding how the pandemic affected different family members unequally, particularly in terms of gendered expectations and responsibilities.

## **2.2 Empirical Literature Review**

This section examines empirical studies and reports on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected family relationships globally, in Nepal, and specifically in Dhangadhi and Western Nepal. The pandemic triggered significant changes in family dynamics, and this review highlights the different ways it has reshaped relationships, gender roles, and coping mechanisms.

### **2.2.1 Global Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships**

The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on family dynamics worldwide has been profound. Families everywhere were suddenly confined to their homes, faced with unprecedented challenges ranging from financial insecurity to mental health issues. According to the United Nations (2021), the immediate impact of lockdowns and restricted movement disrupted daily routines and exacerbated pre existing stress within family structures, leading to heightened conflicts. A global survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (2020) found that over 55% of families worldwide reported increased household stress during lockdowns.

A study in Europe found that couples reported more frequent arguments and tensions, driven by financial strain and the demands of balancing remote work with household responsibilities (Günther-Bel et al., 2020). Similarly, in North America, the pandemic deepened family conflicts, with significant increases in reports of domestic violence.

The American Psychological Association (2021) noted that domestic violence helplines in the U.S. saw a 30% rise in calls during the height of the pandemic.

From a gender perspective, studies show that women bore a disproportionate share of domestic work during the pandemic. Research by Alon et al. (2020) highlighted that women's workload both paid and unpaid rose dramatically, often leading to emotional exhaustion and strained relationships. A study in the UK revealed that 72% of mothers reported they were primarily responsible for homeschooling, while only 31% of fathers reported the same (ONS, 2020).

Financial hardships added to family tensions globally. In South America, for instance, 62% of families reported reduced income due to job losses during the pandemic (ECLAC, 2020). With these economic challenges, many families struggled to meet their daily needs, exacerbating conflicts over finances and increasing family stress. A study in Brazil found that financial insecurity during the pandemic was one of the leading causes of relationship breakdowns (Lopes et al., 2020).

Lockdowns also had a profound psychological impact on family dynamics. A research in Spain (Günther-Bel et al., 2020) found that confinement led to "closeness fatigue" in many families, where prolonged proximity without space or privacy led to heightened tensions. This was especially true in smaller households where individuals lacked personal space.

Moreover, divorce rates increased in several countries as the pandemic worsened family conflicts. In China, for example, a study by Zhang & Ma (2021) reported a significant spike in divorce filings once lockdown measures were lifted, with many couples citing prolonged confinement as a major factor in their decisions.

### **2.2.2 Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Nepal**

Nepal, like the rest of the world, witnessed a significant shift in family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in January 2020, and the government enforced strict lockdowns, which severely affected the livelihoods of families, particularly those in informal sectors. The economic impact was substantial, with over 5 million people estimated to have lost their jobs by mid 2021 (ILO, 2021).

The family structure in Nepal is traditionally extended, with multiple generations often living under one roof. The pandemic disrupted this structure in many ways. As families became confined to their homes, intergenerational tensions emerged, especially in urban areas where living spaces are smaller. Bhattarai and Subedi (2021) conducted a study in Kathmandu and found that the close confinement of family members led to conflicts between younger and older generations, particularly regarding health and safety protocols.

One of the most significant impacts of the pandemic was on women. According to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (2020), women in Nepal were disproportionately affected by increased domestic workloads. Due to traditional gender roles, Nepali women, particularly in rural areas, already carried the burden of household chores, child rearing, and caregiving for elderly family members. The pandemic exacerbated this inequality. A survey conducted by Shrestha and KC (2021) found that 80% of women reported a significant increase in domestic responsibilities during the lockdown, leading to increased stress and fatigue.

Another aspect of the pandemic's impact on family dynamics in Nepal was the rise in domestic violence. According to the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC, 2020), reports of domestic violence increased by 25% during the lockdown. Financial strain, job losses, and close confinement were identified as the primary triggers of these incidents. Many NGOs working in the field of women's rights and family welfare reported an uptick in cases of emotional and physical abuse, particularly in households where economic hardship was more pronounced.

Additionally, economic uncertainty due to the loss of remittances further strained family relationships. Nepal relies heavily on remittances from migrant workers, many of whom were forced to return home due to job losses abroad, particularly in the Middle East and India. This sudden return of thousands of migrant workers to rural villages placed immense pressure on families, as they struggled to accommodate more members with reduced financial resources (Paudel & Subedi, 2021). In a study by Joshi et al. (2021), families in urban and semi urban areas like Dhangadhi and Butwal reported increased stress due to a lack of income sources during the pandemic.

### **2.2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Western Nepal and Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City**

Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, situated in the far western region of Nepal, experienced unique challenges during the pandemic, largely due to its geographical location near the Indian border. This region saw a high influx of Nepali migrant workers returning from India after losing jobs, which added to the local unemployment and stress within families. By mid 2021, Kailali District, where Dhangadhi is located, had one of the highest COVID-19 case counts in Nepal, with over 20,000 confirmed cases (Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal, 2021).

A study conducted by Poudel and Subedi (2021) focused on the experiences of families in rural Western Nepal during the pandemic. They found that while families in these areas faced significant economic hardship, they also displayed strong resilience. Many families in Dhangadhi reported that they had to rely heavily on community support systems to cope with the crisis. Families engaged in collective farming and shared caregiving responsibilities for children and the elderly, which helped to alleviate some of the economic and social stressors created by the pandemic.

However, the return of male migrant workers from India posed both challenges and opportunities for family dynamics. In a study by Dhungana et al. (2022), families in rural areas near Dhangadhi reported that the return of male family members disrupted traditional gender roles. Men, who were traditionally seen as breadwinners, were now forced to participate in domestic duties, leading to both conflicts and renegotiation of household responsibilities. While some families adapted well to these changes, others experienced tension, especially where traditional norms were more rigid.

Despite these challenges, local reports indicated that families in Western Nepal exhibited strong community bonds. A study by Joshi et al. (2021) found that families in Dhangadhi and surrounding areas were able to maintain close ties with extended family members through digital communication. Social media platforms and messaging apps such as Facebook and Viber were heavily used to stay connected, particularly for those who were separated due to travel restrictions.

Moreover, despite economic difficulties, some families reported positive changes in their relationships. With fewer options for socializing outside the home, many

families found more time to spend together, which, in some cases, led to stronger family bonds. However, these positive outcomes were mostly observed in families with stable incomes or those engaged in agriculture, where the impact of the lockdown was less severe (Sharma & KC, 2021).

In terms of public health response, NGOs and local government bodies in Dhangadhi played a crucial role in supporting families during the pandemic. Organizations like SAATHI and the Red Cross provided food relief and support services to families affected by the pandemic. Their efforts were particularly focused on addressing the needs of women and children, who were disproportionately impacted by the lockdown measures (SAATHI, 2021).

## **CHAPTER – III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the research methodology used to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships and gender roles within families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City. The study employs a qualitative approach, with a focus on understanding the subjective experiences of individuals affected by the pandemic. The chapter outlines the research design, rationale for selecting the study area, sampling method, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, the profile of respondents, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.1 Nature of Research**

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of families during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative design was chosen because it allowed for a detailed understanding of how the pandemic influenced family dynamics, communication patterns, and the division of household responsibilities. Qualitative research is appropriate for capturing the complexities of social behavior, especially when investigating how individuals perceive and respond to changes in their personal and social environments.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach was employed, focusing on Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City to gain an in-depth understanding of how the pandemic influenced family dynamics, communication patterns, and gender roles. This design allows for an exploration of the cultural, economic, and social factors shaping family relationships in a specific urban setting. This approach is particularly suitable for examining the complexities of social behavior and individual perceptions during unprecedented crises such as the pandemic.

#### **3.3 Rationale for Selection of the Field**

The field site selected for this study is Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, located in the far western region of Nepal. Dhangadhi was chosen due to several factors: its

status as a growing urban area, its economic diversity, and its rich socio cultural environment, characterized by the coexistence of traditional Nepali values and modern urban influences. This socio cultural environment reflects a blend of rural and urban characteristics, making it an ideal location to explore family dynamics across diverse socioeconomic settings.

Additionally, the researcher's familiarity with Dhangadhi, being from the area, provides a unique advantage. This connection facilitates better rapport and trust with respondents, making data collection smoother and more authentic.

As Dhangadhi is a developing city, its characteristics mirror those of other urban centers across Nepal, making the study's findings potentially generalizable to the entire country. Furthermore, the city experienced significant disruptions during the pandemic, including public health challenges and economic consequences, providing a valuable context for examining the pandemic's impact on family life. The research aims to understand how local cultural norms and values influenced families' responses, offering insights relevant to other regions of Nepal as well.

### **3.4 Universe, Population, Sampling Method, and Sample Size**

The universe of the study consisted of families residing in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Wards No. 2 and 3, according to recent census, which recorded a population of approximately 17,000 and 21,000, respectively. Ward 2 has approximately 3,800 households, while Ward 3 has 4,500 households. Among them, almost all of them suffered directly and indirectly during the pandemic because of lockdown and economic restriction. The target population included families who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and could provide insights into how their relationships, communication patterns, and gender roles were affected during the crisis.

A purposive sampling method was employed to select respondents for the study. The purpose of sampling is to select individuals who were best able to provide relevant and detailed information about the family relationship. Families were chosen based on specific criteria, such as their socioeconomic background, family structure, and their experiences during the pandemic. By using purposive sampling, the study was able to

gather in depth data from respondents who had directly or indirectly experienced the impact of the pandemic on their family lives.

A total of 55 respondents from 20 families participated in the study, where 15 families contributed three members each, while the remaining 5 families contributed two members each. From each of the 20 families, the household head was chosen as the primary respondent. Additionally, other family members were included to provide multiple perspectives, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences related to the research topic. The final sample size of 55 individuals comprised 20 household heads (both male and female), 18 children (young adults and teenagers), 12 life partners of household heads, and 5 other family members, such as siblings, extended family members, or close relatives. This selection strategy ensured that a wide range of perspectives was captured, making the findings more comprehensive.

The sample size of 55 individuals from 20 diverse families was carefully chosen to ensure it was sufficient for achieving data saturation, which is a critical benchmark in qualitative research. Data saturation occurs when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection, indicating that the sample size is adequate to fully explore the research questions.

This sample size was sufficient to ensure data saturation, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the various ways in which the pandemic affected family relationships in Dhangadhi.

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods**

The primary method of data collection was in depth interviews. These interviews were conducted with family members from the selected sample to gather detailed information about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of semi structured interviews allowed respondents to express their views freely while ensuring that the research questions were adequately addressed.

- **Questionnaire:** A sort questionnaire was developed with closed ended questions that covered the basics socioeconomic status of research respondents (Annex 1)
- **Interview Schedule:** Interview schedule was used to structure and guide the main areas of inquiry, including changes in family

relationships, communication patterns, and gender roles. Respondents were asked to reflect on how their family dynamics shifted during the pandemic, what challenges they faced, and how they coped with the crisis (Annex 1).

Interviews were conducted either face to face or via online platforms, depending on the preferences and availability of the respondents. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour. The conversations were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed for analysis.

In addition to interviews, participant observation was used in some cases to gain further insights into family interactions and behaviors. Observations provided valuable context to the verbal responses gathered during the interviews, particularly in understanding non verbal communication and family dynamics.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the safety, privacy, and well being of the respondent. All respondents were provided with information about the purpose of the study, their rights as respondents, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Written or verbal consent was obtained before the interviews. In order to protect the privacy of respondents, all personal identifiers were removed from the data. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names in the transcriptions and final report. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Given the personal nature of family relationships and the potential emotional toll of discussing pandemic related stress, the researcher took care to approach sensitive topics with empathy and respect. Interview questions were designed to minimize discomfort, and respondents were free to skip any questions they found uncomfortable.

### **3.7 Process of Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed a systematic process using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research. First, all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The researcher then carefully reviewed the transcripts

multiple times to become familiar with the data and identify recurring patterns. A coding framework was developed based on emerging themes related to family relationships, gender roles, and communication changes during the pandemic. Once the data were coded, they were categorized into major themes and sub-themes. The findings were then interpreted in relation to existing literature and research objectives to draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of the pandemic on families in Dhangadhi. To ensure credibility, the results were cross-checked with respondents where possible and validated against theoretical frameworks.

### **3.8 Limitations of the Study**

This study is subject to several limitations that may influence its findings. First, it is geographically restricted to two wards of Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City; ward no. 2 & 3, which may limit the applicability of the results to other areas of Nepal or different socio cultural contexts. Family dynamics can significantly differ across regions, making it challenging to generalize findings beyond the study's location.

Second, the qualitative nature of the research, relying on interviews and focus groups, introduces the potential for participant bias. Respondents might provide answers they perceive as socially acceptable rather than their true feelings, which could skew the data. Additionally, the relatively small sample size, constrained by time and resources, may not capture the full diversity of family experiences in the community.

The retrospective aspect of the study also presents a limitation, as respondents will need to recall their experiences during the pandemic. This reliance on memory may lead to inaccuracies or selective recollections, impacting the reliability of the data. People's perspectives on their past experiences can change over time, further complicating their recollections.

Furthermore, the study may not address all facets of family dynamics affected by the pandemic. For example, families with unique circumstances, such as single parent households or those with members who have disabilities, may face specific challenges that are not explored in this research.

## **CHAPTER – IV**

### **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected during the study, focusing on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted family relationships and communication. The data is interpreted in relation to the research questions, with key themes emerging from the interviews and observations. This section provides an in depth understanding of the lived experiences of families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, drawing connections between their experiences and the broader socioeconomic and cultural context of Nepal.

The primary aim of this chapter is to illustrate how families adapted to the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. The data is presented in the form of thematic analysis, where key patterns and insights from the respondents' narratives are explored in detail. These findings are compared with the theoretical literature reviewed earlier, highlighting the extent to which global trends apply to the local context of Dhangadhi.

#### **4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents**

The demographic profile of the respondents provides a comprehensive understanding of the diverse family dynamics in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 55 respondents from 20 families participated in the study. These respondents came from varied age groups, occupations, educational levels, and family structures. This section breaks down the key demographic characteristics to highlight the diversity of experiences and insights.

##### **4.1.1 Age Distribution of Respondents**

Age plays a significant role in how individuals and families perceive and handle crises. The study classified respondents into three main age groups: young adults (18-35 years), middle aged adults (36-50 years), and older adults (51+ years). This classification aimed to capture a broad range of experiences, with each age group representing different stages of life and social responsibilities during the pandemic.

**Table 1:**

## Age Composition of Respondents

| Age Group                        | Number of Respondents | Percentage  |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 18-35 years (Young Adults)       | 20                    | 36.36%      |
| 36-50 years (Middle Aged Adults) | 22                    | 40.00%      |
| 51+ years (Older Adults)         | 13                    | 23.64%      |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>55</b>             | <b>100%</b> |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

In this study, 36.36% of respondents were young adults, a group likely to be active in the workforce or pursuing education during the pandemic. This group reported facing significant challenges in managing their work life balance and dealing with family dynamics, particularly with the shift to remote work or education.

Middle aged adults, who comprised 40% of the respondents, were often the primary breadwinners or caregivers in their families. They reported a significant burden of balancing professional responsibilities, childcare, and managing the household during the lockdown period. Some expressed difficulties in maintaining communication with extended family members due to social distancing measures.

The older adult group, representing 23.64% of the respondents, faced unique challenges during the pandemic, particularly health related concerns. Many of these respondents had to rely on their family members for care and support, which influenced the family's dynamics, particularly in joint households.

#### **4.1.2 Gender Distribution of Respondents**

The gender distribution in the study is important to understand how men and women perceived the impact of the pandemic differently. In total, 55 individuals were interviewed, with a fairly even gender split.

**Table 2**

## Gender of Respondents

| <b>Gender</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Male          | 26                           | 47.27%            |
| Female        | 29                           | 52.73%            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>55</b>                    | <b>100%</b>       |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The study consisted of 47.27% male and 52.73% female respondents. Females slightly outnumbered males, which reflects the fact that women often play a central role in maintaining household dynamics and caregiving responsibilities in Nepal. Women reported increased responsibilities at home, as they often had to manage childcare, education, and household chores, especially with the closure of schools and daycares.

Men, on the other hand, shared experiences about adapting to working from home and taking on more domestic duties. Some male respondents, especially those in middle aged groups, mentioned job insecurities and financial pressures, which strained relationships within the household. The gender breakdown allowed for an analysis of how traditional gender roles were reshaped during the pandemic, often with men assuming roles that were conventionally seen as "female" duties in Nepalese culture.

### **4.1.3 Family Structure**

Family structure greatly influences how families cope with external stressors like a pandemic. The respondents were classified into two categories: nuclear families and joint families, based on their living arrangements.

**Table 3**

Family Structure, Number of Families and Number of respondents

| <b>Family Structure</b> | <b>Number of Families</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Nuclear Families        | 12                        | 32                           | 58.18%            |
| Joint Families          | 8                         | 23                           | 41.82%            |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>20</b>                 | <b>55</b>                    | <b>100%</b>       |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

In this study, 58.18% of respondents were from nuclear families, while 41.82% belonged to joint families. Respondents from nuclear families often reported feelings of isolation during lockdowns, as they had fewer individuals to share the burden of household work. Many mentioned difficulties in managing online schooling for children while also maintaining their jobs.

On the other hand, respondents from joint families highlighted both positive and negative aspects of living with extended family members during the pandemic. On the one hand, joint families provided a built in support system, which was helpful in managing household tasks and caregiving. However, some respondents reported increased conflicts due to close proximity and differences in opinions or expectations during a period of high stress.

#### **4.1.5 Occupational Distribution of Respondents**

The occupation of the respondents significantly impacted their experiences during the pandemic. Economic stability and work flexibility were important factors that influenced how individuals handled the crisis. The occupational categories in this study included professionals, daily wage workers, homemakers, farmers, and self employed or small business owners.

**Table 4**

## Occupations of Research Respondents

| <b>Occupation</b>              | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Professionals (Public/Private) | 15                           | 27.27%            |
| Daily Wage Workers             | 8                            | 14.55%            |
| Homemakers                     | 13                           | 23.64%            |
| Agriculture/Farming            | 9                            | 16.36%            |
| Self Employed/Small Business   | 10                           | 18.18%            |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>55</b>                    | <b>100%</b>       |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The largest group of respondents (27.27%) were professionals, many of whom were able to continue working remotely during the pandemic. This group experienced challenges related to work life balance and, in some cases, reduced salaries.

Homemakers accounted for 23.64% of respondents, most of whom were female. They reported a significant increase in their workload, as schools closed and children were at home full time. Many homemakers also took on additional caregiving responsibilities for elderly family members during the pandemic.

Farmers (16.36%) and daily wage workers (14.55%) faced severe financial hardships due to lockdowns and restrictions on movement. The inability to sell their produce or find daily work strained their families, leading to increased stress and tensions at home.

Self employed individuals and small business owners (18.18%) reported difficulties in keeping their businesses afloat during the pandemic. Many had to shut down their businesses temporarily, leading to financial instability and uncertainty about the future.

#### 4.1.6 Educational Attainment

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' responses to crises. The educational levels of respondents were categorized into five levels, from primary education to master's degree and higher. The distribution of respondents by their educational background is shown below.

**Table 5**

Education Level of Research Respondents

| Education Level           | Number of Respondents | Percentage  |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Primary School            | 7                     | 12.73%      |
| Secondary School          | 14                    | 25.45%      |
| Bachelor's Degree         | 22                    | 40.00%      |
| Master's Degree or Higher | 12                    | 21.82%      |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>55</b>             | <b>100%</b> |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The largest group of respondents (40%) held a bachelor's degree, while 21.82% had attained a master's degree or higher. Educated respondents generally had more access to information and resources, which helped them cope better with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

A significant portion of respondents had secondary education (25.45%), while a smaller number (12.73%) had only completed primary school. Respondents with lower educational attainment, particularly those working as daily wage workers, reported greater financial insecurity and reliance on external aid, which impacted family dynamics and communication.

#### 4.2 Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships

The COVID-19 pandemic created complex challenges for family relationships worldwide, and the experiences of families in Dhangadhi reflect many of these broader trends. In particular, the lockdown and social distancing measures imposed during the pandemic had a significant impact on family communication, emotional bonding, financial stress, and gender roles. This section explores the themes emerging

from interviews with 55 respondents in Dhangadhi and connects these findings with similar studies conducted in other contexts.

#### **4.2.1 Increased Communication and Bonding**

A notable theme that emerged from the interviews was the increase in communication and emotional bonding within families. The lockdowns forced families to spend more time together, which for many led to stronger relationships. A 42 year old mother from Dhangadhi remarked: "Before the pandemic, we rarely had time to sit and talk. Everyone was busy, but during the lockdown, we spent more time together, and it helped us understand each other better."

The pandemic also affected how family members communicated with one another. Several respondents noted that while they spent more time together, their communication patterns changed. Some families reported more open and honest conversations as they navigated the shared challenges of the pandemic, while others found it difficult to maintain healthy communication due to the stress and uncertainty.

Lila, a 47 year old woman, shared: "We talked more during the pandemic, but not always about positive things. There was a lot of fear and anxiety, and sometimes that made it hard to have a calm conversation."

However, families that faced fewer economic hardships often experienced a notable increase in emotional bonding. The absence of financial stress allowed them to focus on supporting one another emotionally. A 50-year-old businessman from Dhangadhi described his experience:

"We were fortunate not to have financial problems, so we could focus on caring for each other. When my wife got COVID-19, we all worked together to ensure she was comfortable and isolated from others. My children and I took turns cooking and cleaning. It brought us closer as a family."

Another respondent, a 38-year-old father, reflected on how the family adapted to isolation:

"When my son tested positive for COVID-19, we had to isolate as a family. It was challenging, but it also gave us a chance to step up for each other. My

wife took care of his meals while I managed his medications and entertained him with stories. We became a stronger unit through this experience."

These examples illustrate how the pandemic's unique challenges, such as isolation and caregiving for sick family members, fostered a sense of collective responsibility and empathy within families.

The pandemic also brought unique challenges and opportunities for couples separated by distance, with one partner in Nepal and the other abroad. For many, the uncertainty and extended periods of isolation led to an increase in communication as they sought to bridge the physical gap. A 29-year-old woman from Dhangadhi shared her experience:

"My husband works in the Gulf, and before the pandemic, we mostly talked once or twice a week. But during the lockdowns, we started talking every day, sharing how we were coping and supporting each other emotionally. It felt like we became closer despite being so far apart."

This finding aligns with global studies that observed similar trends. For instance, research conducted in China by Wang et al. (2020) indicated that family cohesion increased as people adjusted to life at home together. Similarly, studies from the U.S. and Europe reported that families developed improved communication and emotional closeness due to the increased time spent together (Prime et al., 2020; Masten & Motti Stefanidi, 2020).

Studies by Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020) noted that the pandemic prompted families to engage in more emotional and supportive conversations, but also highlighted that increased stress often led to communication breakdowns. In Dhangadhi, many families experienced this duality—engaging in more frequent interactions, but not always with positive outcomes.

This finding aligns with global studies that observed a similar trend. For instance, studies conducted in the U.S. and Europe found that families reported improved communication and emotional closeness as a result of spending more time together

during the pandemic (Prime et al., 2020; Masten & Motti Stefanidi, 2020). These studies suggest that while the pandemic was stressful, it also provided opportunities for family bonding in ways that were often overlooked in pre pandemic times.

#### **4.2.2 Financial Stress and Its Effect on Family Dynamics**

One of the most challenging aspects for families in Dhangadhi was the financial strain brought on by the pandemic. Many respondents described the pandemic as a time of uncertainty and financial instability, particularly those working in the informal sector or agriculture. A 37 year old laborer from Dhangadhi shared:

I lost my job immediately after the lockdown, and we had no savings. The stress was unbearable, and there were a lot of arguments in the family because we didn't know how to manage. (A respondent, 2024)

Even more, the loss of a breadwinner typically forces surviving family members to adapt to new roles and responsibilities. In some cases, some may be required to leave school to contribute to the family's income, disrupting their education and future prospects. Spouses, often unprepared for the workforce, face the dual burden of earning an income and managing household duties. This sudden redistribution of roles can lead to feelings of resentment, frustration, or guilt, straining relationships within the family.

Another respondent who lost her husband during COVID-19 shared:

"After my husband's death, my eldest son had to take up a job in a factory. He was only 20, and I could see the anger and sadness in him. He felt like his childhood was stolen. Our relationship changed I became more of a taskmaster than a mother because I had no choice but to push him to support the family."

Financial hardship leading to family conflict is a recurring theme in global research on COVID-19. Studies conducted in the Global South, including Kenya and India, reported that financial insecurity due to the pandemic increased family tensions, especially in households where breadwinners lost their income (Mutambasere et al.,

2021; Jha & Sarangi, 2021). In Nepal, a survey by UNICEF (2021) indicated that 52% of households experienced a reduction in income during the pandemic, and over 40% of families reported increased stress due to financial strain. These findings mirror the struggles faced by families in Dhangadhi, where limited access to resources exacerbated tensions.

#### **4.1.3 Changes in Gender Roles and Caregiving Responsibilities**

Another key theme that emerged from the study was the change in caregiving roles and responsibilities within families during the pandemic. With schools closed and children at home, women in particular found themselves taking on additional caregiving duties. One respondent, a 34 year old woman from Dhangadhi, explained:

Before the pandemic, I worked part time and my children went to school. But during the lockdown, I had to stay home full time, manage their online classes, and look after my elderly in laws. It was overwhelming. (A research respondent, 2024)

This experience is consistent with findings from other studies that reported a disproportionate burden on women during the pandemic. Research from India and Bangladesh found that women carried the majority of the caregiving load, which often led to heightened stress and fatigue (Chauhan, 2021; Kabeer, 2020). Similarly, in Europe and North America, studies highlighted the “double shift” many women experienced, balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, which often resulted in increased conflict within households (Farré et al., 2020).

In Nepal, the pandemic deepened existing gender disparities in household responsibilities. A study by CARE Nepal (2021) found that women were more likely to take on additional caregiving tasks, including caring for children and elderly relatives. This was reflected in the experiences of families in Dhangadhi, where traditional gender roles were reinforced during the pandemic, placing greater strain on women.

However, caregiving challenges were not exclusive to women. Men who suddenly became sole caregivers faced significant hurdles as well. A 38-year-old man from

Dhangadhi shared his experience of losing his wife to COVID-19 and having to care for his two young sons, aged 7 and 3.

When my wife passed away, I didn't know how to manage. I had to look after my boys, cook, clean, and also find ways to earn enough to keep us afloat. The younger one cried for his mother constantly, and the older one became very withdrawn. I felt like I was failing them both. If I had been in a combined family, it would have been easier. There would've been others to share the responsibilities. (A respondent, 2024)

His story highlights how caregiving responsibilities can overwhelm single parents, particularly in nuclear family setups. The lack of support systems exacerbated the emotional and practical challenges he faced, leading to feelings of isolation and inadequacy.

This narrative underscores the role of family structure in mitigating the impact of crises. Joint families, with their shared responsibilities and emotional support, often provide a buffer against such challenges. In contrast, nuclear families, which are increasingly common in urban areas like Dhangadhi, struggle to absorb the shocks of events like the pandemic, leaving individuals more vulnerable.

#### **4.2.4 Mental Health Challenges and Increased Conflicts**

Mental health issues emerged as another significant factor that impacted family relationships during the pandemic. Respondents in Dhangadhi reported feeling anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed, leading to increased conflict within families. A 28 year old woman described her experience:

The constant fear of getting sick and the financial worries made everyone in the family more irritable. We argued more often, even about small things. It felt like the pandemic was testing the limits of our relationships. (A research participant, 2024)

This finding is supported by global research on the mental health effects of the pandemic. Studies from the U.S., the U.K., and Australia reported a rise in anxiety, depression, and stress related disorders during COVID-19 lockdowns, which in turn led to increased tension and conflict within families (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Brooks et al., 2020). A study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) found that the pandemic exacerbated pre existing mental health conditions and contributed to a rise in interpersonal conflicts globally.

In Nepal, a study by Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) revealed that the pandemic had a profound impact on the mental well being of the population, with over 40% of respondents reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression. These mental health challenges were particularly severe in households facing financial insecurity, which, as reported by respondents in Dhangadhi, often resulted in conflict and strained relationships.

While some families experienced strengthened relationships, others reported increased conflict and tension due to the stress and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. Financial strain, job loss, and the constant proximity of family members led to more arguments and disagreements. This was particularly true in families where one or more members lost their jobs or faced reduced income, as the pressure to meet daily needs heightened the sense of frustration.

Geeta, a 29 year old mother of three children, explained:

With both my husband and I losing our jobs, the stress at home was overwhelming. We fought more often, sometimes over small things like what to eat or how to pay bills. It felt like we were trapped, with no escape from the tension. (Gita, 2024)

This is consistent with findings from other studies that highlight how economic instability during crises often leads to heightened conflict within families (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The lockdowns forced families into confined spaces for prolonged periods, which exacerbated the effects of pre existing issues and brought new stressors to the surface.

#### **4.2.7 Role of Social Support Systems**

Interestingly, several respondents in Dhangadhi also highlighted the importance of extended family and community support during the pandemic. For families who faced severe financial strain or caregiving challenges, relying on relatives or neighbors became a crucial coping mechanism. A 50 year old farmer noted:

When we ran out of money, we had to rely on our extended family. My brother and his family helped us with food and other essentials. It wasn't easy, but we survived because of that support.(A Respondent, 2024)

Research conducted in rural parts of developing countries during the pandemic found that social support networks played a vital role in mitigating the effects of economic hardship. A study from rural Pakistan found that families who had strong social ties were better able to cope with the financial and emotional stresses of the pandemic (Naveed et al., 2021). Similarly, in Nepal, a study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2021) reported that community based support systems were essential in helping families manage the crisis.

This reflects the experiences of families in Dhangadhi, where informal social networks provided much needed assistance. However, it is worth noting that not all families had access to such support, which often left the most vulnerable households at greater risk of emotional and financial strain.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships in Dhangadhi mirrors many global trends, including increased communication, emotional bonding, financial stress, changes in caregiving roles, and conflict. While the pandemic brought some families closer together, it also exacerbated existing challenges, particularly around gender roles and financial insecurity. The findings from Dhangadhi align with similar research from around the world, highlighting both the resilience of families and the unique pressures they faced during this unprecedented time.

## **CHAPTER – V**

### **SHIFTS IN GENDER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought sweeping changes to families around the world, including shifts in traditional gender roles and responsibilities. The lockdowns, job losses, and closures of schools and daycares pushed families into new routines, where men and women had to renegotiate their roles within households. This section examines the impact of these changes on gender roles in the families interviewed in Dhangadhi, Nepal. Through a thematic analysis of interview data, this chapter explores the increasing responsibilities for women, shifts in economic burdens, the redistribution of domestic labor, and the emotional and psychological impacts on family members.

#### **5.1 Increased Responsibilities for Women: Intensification of Domestic Roles**

One of the central themes that emerged from the data is the increased burden placed on women during the pandemic. Traditionally in Nepal, women have played the role of primary caregivers, taking care of household chores, cooking, cleaning, and managing childcare. The pandemic did not just maintain these roles—it amplified them.

Sarita, a 35 year old housewife, expressed her frustration about how much her workload increased during the lockdown:

I used to have some help from my eldest daughter and mother in law, but once the pandemic started, schools closed and everyone was at home all the time. It was like my work doubled overnight—cooking three meals a day, cleaning constantly, and teaching the children. I felt like there was no rest. (A respondent, 2024)

Sarita's experience is not unique. The closure of schools and the necessity to support children's education at home compounded the existing household responsibilities, particularly for women. This mirrors findings from global studies. A research report by UN Women (2020) found that the pandemic exacerbated existing gender

inequalities, with women around the world taking on more unpaid domestic labor. The report revealed that women globally were spending more time on household work, averaging an additional 5.10 hours a week compared to their male counterparts.

In the families interviewed in Dhangadhi, many women echoed Sarita's sentiments. Out of the 55 respondents, more than 75% of the women mentioned that they felt overburdened by the increased workload at home. They often juggled multiple responsibilities simultaneously, which took a toll on their mental and physical well-being. Several respondents spoke about how their husbands were either working from home or were temporarily unemployed, yet the division of household labor remained skewed in favor of women.

## **5.2 Economic Burdens and Role Reversal: Financial Impact on Families**

The pandemic also led to significant economic hardships for many families. The closure of businesses, loss of income, and economic slowdown left many families in Dhangadhi struggling to make ends meet. The data revealed a common trend where women who were employed outside the home before the pandemic often had to quit their jobs or take extended leaves due to the increased demands of domestic work.

Rita, a 28 year old teacher, shared how she had to leave her job:

I loved my job, but when the pandemic started, the school closed, and suddenly I was at home with the kids full time. I couldn't balance both. It became clear that I had to make a choice, and I chose to focus on my family. Now, I don't know if I'll ever return to teaching. (A respondent, 2024)

Similar experiences were reported in a study by ILO (2021), which highlighted that in low and middle income countries, women were disproportionately affected by job losses due to the pandemic. In Nepal, the situation was even more dire, as many women worked in informal sectors without access to job security or financial protections. The ILO report noted that 1 in 5 women who lost their jobs during the pandemic have not returned to work.

The economic burden also shifted within families, with men facing the psychological strain of job loss or reduction in income. Several respondents shared that their male partners struggled with the role reversal, where women sometimes became the sole breadwinners, or in the case of Sarita, the family was forced to rely on the husband's dwindling savings.

Sushil, a 45 year old taxi driver, shared his own struggles:

Before the pandemic, I worked every day. But then, the roads were closed, and I had no work for months. We had to survive on my wife's savings from her small business, and I felt like a failure. It was hard for me to accept that I couldn't provide for my family. (A respondent, 2024)

This sense of failure or emasculation was reported by men across many developing countries. A study by Prime et al. (2020) found that men in low income settings were more likely to experience depression or anxiety due to the loss of their traditional role as breadwinners. This emotional toll created tension in relationships, as men struggled with their changed roles in the family.

### **5.3 Redistribution of Domestic Labor: Gender Role Reconfigurations**

While the pandemic intensified women's domestic responsibilities, there were also instances where traditional gender roles began to shift. With men spending more time at home, either due to work from home arrangements or job losses, some families reported a more equal distribution of household tasks. Several men took on roles traditionally reserved for women, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

Sagar, a 40 year old government worker, described how his family adjusted to the new situation:

Before the pandemic, I never thought much about household chores. It was something my wife did. But when we were both at home all day, I started helping more. At first, I didn't know how to cook, but I learned. Now, we share responsibilities much more evenly. (A participant 2024)

This shift in domestic roles has been a subject of global interest. Del Boca et al. (2020) reported that in some families, men stepped up to share household chores during the pandemic, leading to a slight narrowing of the gender gap in domestic labor. However, they also pointed out that this was not universal, and in many families, traditional roles persisted.

In Dhangadhi, around 30% of the families interviewed mentioned a more equitable sharing of household tasks. However, this change was often temporary, with men participating only when their own work commitments were reduced. Once they returned to work, the responsibility for domestic labor again shifted primarily to women.

#### **5.4 Emotional and Psychological Impacts: Mental Health Struggles**

The reconfiguration of gender roles, compounded by the economic and social pressures of the pandemic, had a profound emotional and psychological impact on families. Both men and women reported feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and emotionally drained. Women, in particular, were affected by the dual burden of increased domestic work and the emotional labor of maintaining the family's well being.

Mira, a 32 year old mother of two, reflected on how emotionally taxing the lockdown was:

There were days when I just couldn't take it anymore. My husband would be at home, but the kids still needed my attention constantly. I had to be the teacher, the mother, the cook, everything. I would cry at night after they all went to bed. (A respondent, 2024)

The mental health toll of the pandemic on women has been well documented in global research. A study by Vindegaard and Benros (2020) found that women experienced higher rates of anxiety and depression during the pandemic due to the increased burden of domestic work and childcare. In Nepal, access to mental health services is limited, particularly in rural areas like Dhangadhi, making it difficult for women like Mira to access the support they need.

Men also experienced emotional strain, particularly those who lost their jobs. Sushil, the taxi driver, shared how his inability to work affected his mental health:

It was tough. I didn't just lose my job, I felt like I lost my purpose. My wife tried to support me, but I could see she was exhausted too. We were both struggling. (A respondent, 2024)

The emotional toll of unemployment and the pressure to maintain family stability has been a recurring theme in pandemic related research. A study by Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) highlighted how the loss of employment among men led to a rise in relationship conflicts and emotional distress, further straining family dynamics.

### **5.5 Lasting Changes or Temporary Adjustments?**

A key question that arose during the interviews was whether these changes in gender roles were temporary or if they might lead to lasting changes in family dynamics. Some respondents believed that the pandemic had permanently altered how their families functioned, particularly in terms of sharing household responsibilities.

Rita, the schoolteacher, shared her thoughts on how the pandemic changed her perspective:

I think we will never go back to how things were. My husband helps more now, and I don't feel like it's all on me anymore. Even when things go back to normal, I expect that we will continue sharing the work. (Rita, 2024)

In contrast, other respondents felt that the shifts were temporary and that once the pandemic was over, traditional roles would be reinstated. Sarita expressed skepticism about the permanence of these changes: "It's only because of the lockdown that my husband is helping. Once he goes back to his job full time, I know things will go back to how they were."

Globally, researchers are divided on whether the pandemic induced changes in gender roles will have long term effects. Some scholars argue that the pandemic has accelerated progress towards gender equality by forcing families to rethink domestic

labor (UN Women, 2020). Others believe that the structural inequalities that existed before the pandemic will ultimately prevail, particularly in patriarchal societies like Nepal (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

In summary, the overall findings shows that, for many families, the pandemic brought both challenges and unexpected positive changes, shaping the dynamics of family life in ways that may have lasting implications. Through an analysis of various themes, including emotional bonding, conflict, changes in communication, and role shifts, this chapter highlights the complex ways in which families have navigated the uncertainties and pressures of the pandemic.

One prominent theme that emerged is the strengthening of emotional bonds within families due to the enforced proximity during lockdowns. While family members spent more time together, they engaged in more shared activities, leading to stronger connections and increased understanding among family members. Many respondents reported feeling closer to their immediate family, citing opportunities for quality time and open conversations that were previously unavailable due to work and school commitments. This finding aligns with similar global studies, indicating that crises often bring families closer as they work through challenges together.

In contrast, increased conflict and tension were also notable outcomes for many families during the pandemic. Financial stress, job losses, and the pressure of constant proximity led to more disagreements and heightened frustration among family members. For households already under strain from economic or relational challenges, these stressors amplified existing issues, sometimes creating lasting impacts on family relationships. This aligns with findings from other research studies, where the economic instability of the pandemic led to increased interpersonal conflict in family settings.

Additionally, the pandemic catalyzed significant shifts in household roles and gender dynamics, particularly with a higher burden of caregiving and domestic work falling on women. With traditional gender roles persisting strongly in Nepal, many women found themselves balancing increased household responsibilities alongside remote work or, in some cases, added economic pressure due to a partner's job loss. These shifts in roles have implications for the long term perception and distribution of

household responsibilities, with some respondents expressing hopes that these changes will lead to more balanced roles post pandemic.

Communication patterns within families were also notably impacted by the pandemic. While some respondents found that the crisis fostered more open communication and emotional support, others experienced communication breakdowns due to the strain of constant proximity and the overwhelming nature of pandemic related anxieties. This duality in communication—of both improved bonding and increased friction—reflects the unpredictable effects of prolonged confinement and collective trauma on interpersonal dynamics.

Lastly, the isolation from extended family and broader social networks affected family members' emotional well being and sense of social support. The inability to interact with extended family disrupted traditional support structures, leading to increased feelings of loneliness and disconnection, especially among older family members. This sense of isolation highlights the role of extended family as a vital component of emotional and social support in collectivist societies like Nepal, where such connections are essential to overall family well being.

In sum, the findings shows the complexity of the pandemic's impact on family relationships in Dhangadhi. The experiences of respondents reveal both resilience and vulnerability, with families adapting to new roles and forging stronger bonds in some cases, while facing heightened conflict and isolation in others. These insights contribute to a detailed understanding of family dynamics during crises, suggesting that while families can be sources of support and resilience, they are also susceptible to significant stressors that demand careful consideration in any response to future crises.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter briefly summarize findings of the study and offers a reflective analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected family dynamics within Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, with a focus on changes in relationships, communication patterns, and gender roles. The results offer insights not only into immediate shifts but also potential lasting impacts on family structure and social norms.

#### **6.1 Summary**

This research has examined the ways families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City perceived and adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on family relationships, communication, and household roles. Using qualitative interviews with 55 respondents from 20 family of a variety of backgrounds, this study has shows how families navigated the multifaceted challenges of health anxieties, economic instability, and prolonged proximity.

The nature of the study, based on qualitative data collection and thematic analysis, has allowed for an in depth exploration of these personal experiences, highlighting the diversity and complexity of family dynamics. The research framework, which combined a purposive sampling strategy with non structured interviews to capture a wide array of perspectives. The selection of Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City as the study location also underscored the need to understand how urban Nepali families responded to lockdowns, economic impacts, and role shifts. The focus on family relationships was particularly relevant in Dhangadhi, where traditional values intersect with urban lifestyles, providing a meaningful context for analyzing changing dynamics.

The data analysis revealed a range of responses that reflected both resilience and strain within families. A key theme was the intensification of family bonds. Many families reported a closeness and increased emotional support, as spending more time together encouraged shared activities and open communication. While this was especially true for families where pre existing relationships were strong and have less economic difficulties, others faced an increase in family conflicts. Financial and

health related stressors, compounded by enforced proximity, often heightened tensions. The intensified home environment exposed underlying issues and, in some cases, exacerbated relational strain.

Changes in gender roles emerged as another significant finding. Traditionally, household responsibilities in Dhangadhi, as in many parts of Nepal, are heavily gendered, with women primarily responsible for domestic tasks. During the pandemic, however, the study found that some families adapted to the crisis by redistributing household duties. The lockdowns and job losses meant that some male family members, who were previously disengaged from domestic work, took on caregiving and household roles. For many families, these shifts were temporary adjustments, but they also suggested the potential for long term changes in gender norms. The alteration in roles, although not uniform, was a notable trend that could have lasting implications for gender equality within family structures.

Communication patterns also evolved as families adapted to living in close quarters for extended periods. For many, this meant increased discussions on practical and emotional matters, fostering an atmosphere of openness and mutual understanding. In contrast, some families found that constant proximity led to communication fatigue, which sometimes resulted in conflicts or misunderstandings. This shift in communication styles reflects the dual nature of the pandemic's impact: while fostering intimacy in some cases, it also revealed stress points in family interactions.

Additionally, the pandemic's effect on extended family interactions was evident. In a society where extended family and social networks are essential for emotional and material support, the restrictions brought about by COVID-19 disrupted these connections. For families in Dhangadhi, this led to a sense of isolation, particularly among older family members and children who missed out on interactions with relatives. This reduction in social support highlighted the emotional cost of the pandemic and underscored the importance of extended networks in maintaining family stability.

Overall, the study found that while families in Dhangadhi demonstrated resilience and adaptability, the pandemic also underscored the vulnerabilities present within family structures. These experiences reflect broader social dynamics, including shifting

attitudes towards gender roles, the importance of economic security, and the role of family communication in fostering resilience.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped family life in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, shedding light on both the strengths and challenges families face in times of crisis. Families have shown a significant capacity for adaptation, whether through strengthened bonds, revised household roles, or altered communication patterns. The pandemic acted as a catalyst that forced families to confront and navigate change, often in ways that could lead to lasting shifts in family dynamics.

One of the primary conclusions is that the pandemic had a complex impact on family relationships. For many families, the shared crisis fostered emotional resilience, strengthening bonds and encouraging open communication. This shift indicates that during crises, family relationships can act as a crucial support system, helping members to cope with external stressors. On the other hand, the study also highlights that the stress and proximity caused by the pandemic magnified pre-existing tensions, leading to conflicts within some households. This finding underscores the reality that family resilience varies widely and can depend on prior relational dynamics, economic stability, and individual coping mechanisms.

Another major conclusion of the study is the observed shift in gender roles within families. The redistribution of household responsibilities during the pandemic, although not universal, represents a potential pivot point for traditional gender norms. Men, who traditionally may not have engaged in caregiving or household tasks, were required to share these responsibilities due to circumstances beyond their control. Although the permanence of these changes is uncertain, the pandemic created an environment where traditional gender roles could be questioned and, potentially, redefined. This shift has broader implications for gender equality in Nepal, suggesting that crises can catalyze reevaluation of entrenched social norms and create room for more equitable role distribution within families.

The pandemic's influence on family communication also stands out as a significant finding. Constant proximity led to more frequent interactions, and for some, this

meant more open and empathetic communication. The study underscores the value of effective communication in fostering family resilience, as it allows members to share their concerns, provide emotional support, and resolve conflicts constructively. Yet, the study also noted instances of communication fatigue and misunderstandings, indicating that while proximity can foster intimacy, it can also strain relationships if not managed with empathy and understanding.

Lastly, the disruption of extended family and social networks had a substantial emotional impact. The inability to connect with extended family members, who often play crucial roles in social and emotional support, heightened feelings of isolation for many families in Dhangadhi. This finding highlights the importance of extended support systems in maintaining family well being, especially in societies where family structures extend beyond the nuclear unit.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting mark on families in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, revealing the resilience, adaptability, and vulnerabilities within family units. While some families may revert to pre pandemic roles and dynamics as normalcy returns, others may retain the changes induced by this period. The study's findings emphasize the significance of family relationships as a foundation for coping with crises, suggesting that fostering communication, equitable role distribution, and robust support networks could enhance family resilience in future challenges. The experiences of these families reflect a broader need for social and policy frameworks that support family stability and well being, recognizing the essential role of family units in navigating societal challenges.

## CHAPTER – VII

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## ANNEX I

Name..... Age.....

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other/Prefer not to say

What is your marital status?

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

What is your highest completed level of education?

- No formal education
- Primary education
- Secondary education
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree or above
- Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your yearly household income? \_\_\_\_\_

How many members are there in your household? \_\_\_\_\_

Type of family:

- Nuclear
- Joint

How long have you been residing at your current address? \_\_\_\_\_ Years

Anyone in your family suffered from COVID-19?  Yes  No

If yes, how many members suffered? \_\_\_\_\_

## **ANNEX 2**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships**

- General changes in family relationships due to COVID-19.
- Shifts in communication patterns within the family.
- Changes in time spent together versus separately.
- Effects on emotional bonds and closeness.
- Frequency and intensity of conflicts during the pandemic.
- Approaches to conflict resolution within the family.

#### **Changes in Gender Roles and Responsibilities**

- Adjustments in household roles and responsibilities.
- Shifts in tasks traditionally assigned to specific members.
- Balancing work from home/study from home dynamics.
- Changes in family decision making roles.

#### **Coping Mechanisms and Strategies**

- Strategies adopted for managing stress as a family.
- Forms of support among family members.
- New family activities or routines established.
- Impact of these routines on family cohesion.

#### **Socioeconomic Factors and Financial Impacts**

- Economic impact on family stability.
- Influence of financial changes on family relationships.
- Sources of external support (community, government).
- Effect of external support on family dynamics.