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Double pandemic: racial discrimination amid coronavirus disease 2019

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an escalation of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour in many places around the world. While this COVID-19-related racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour has drawn much attention in the media space, the issue has been less discussed in academia. Given that racial discrimination has a significant impact on human relations, mental health, and general well-being, it is important to address the rising racial discrimination problem amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper discusses some of the reported stories of racial discrimination associated with COVID-19 and presents viewpoints on why people are being abused and the socio-economic implications associated with the abuse. The paper concludes with few suggestions on how to address the COVID-19 related racial discriminations as the world continues to fight against the double pandemic.

1. Introduction

For more than a century, racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour has persisted as an intractable social problem in several parts of the world (United Nations, 2015). While the origin of racial discrimination seems to be contestable in the critical race literature (Lampert, 2004), it is widely recognised that race-related discrimination can be traced as far back as the ancient period of colonialism and slavery (Blackburn, 1997). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, for instance, racial discrimination was known to be prevalent in Europe's American colonies (e.g. Virginia) (Lampert, 2004; Blackburn, 1997; Takezawa et al., 2020; Vaughan, 1989). Amerindians were stereotypically regarded as inferior to Europeans and Africans were viewed as useful for slave labour (Takezawa et al., 2020; Vaughan, 1989).

Racial discrimination can be defined as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life” (International Convention, 1969).

The global impact of racial discrimination has driven the United Nations (UN) to raise several advocacies against the problem since 1945. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Bill of Human Rights which comprises the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been introduced by the

UN to commit its members to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination (Joseph & Castan, 2013; Nations, 1996; Nations et al., 2020). Following that, the 2001 ground-breaking World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance was held in Durban, South Africa to promote a global discussion on how to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination (Nations et al., 2002). The UN has also pegged March 21st of every year as the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination to promote greater global awareness of the racial discrimination problem (United Nations, 2015; Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, 2017). Additionally, an agenda spanning from 2015 to 2024 has been framed by the UN to address racial discrimination against persons of African descent who are considered as one of the greatly affected racial victims in the world (United Nations, 2015). Several human rights institutions operating with the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions have been formed in many countries to protect human rights, including the promotion of inter-racial acceptance (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, 2017). The forming of such institutions has also influenced the passing of several laws that criminalise racial discrimination in some countries (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, 2017). For instance, racial offenders in the United Kingdom (UK) under the Public Order Act 1986 face up to seven years imprisonment for “using, displaying, publishing, showing or distributing any words, images or behaviour which are threatening, abusive or insulting” and which are intended or likely to spark

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race-related hatred (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). In Canada, offenders of racial discrimination also face two years imprisonment (or five years for advocating a genocide) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). Through advocacies, civil societies and movements, such as the global Black Lives Matter movement have also protested against racial injustice in several communities globally (Della Porta, 2020).

As the UN, human rights institutions, governments, and civil society groups and movements continue to promote greater acceptance of people from different racial categories and encourage greater respect for human rights across the globe, the numerous reports of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour in the fight against the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) demonstrate that more work is needed to achieve the UN's goal of eliminating all forms of racial discrimination. In almost every continent, there have been widespread reports of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Clark et al., 2020; Devakumar et al., 2020). Several cases of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour have received much attention on numerous media platforms. For instance, in the UK and the US, media reports have shown that COVID-19 morbidities and mortalities were disproportionately high among people of colour by the end of May 2020 (Tsirtsakis, 2020). However, the issue has been less discussed within academia and race-aggregated data is virtually non-existent in many countries. This appears to be a major limitation to recognising the negative implications of racist behaviours and harsh government policies against non-citizens, people of colour, and visible minorities. Using news reports from credible media outlets as evidence, this paper discusses some of the unfolding racial discrimination stories associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and examines the implications of this disease-related racial discrimination for the future.

2. COVID-19 and associated racial discrimination

The COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with a series of racial discrimination, especially, against people of East Asian and Southeast Asian appearance (Wikipedia, 2020). The surfacing of racial discrimination amid the COVID-19 pandemic warrants serious attention bearing in mind that the reported cases in the various media outlets and this paper are likely just a fraction of actual encounters. It is also important to keep in mind that racial discrimination can be subtle and/or systemic resulting in underreporting of cases (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Reports of racial discrimination against people of Asian (especially Chinese) appearance have, however, been noted in several news channels as it was being conveyed that COVID-19 originated from Wuhan in China (Wikipedia, 2020). In Australia, for instance, a dispute was caught on camera showing a woman verbally abusing Asian Telstra workers at Miranda in Sydney (Mourad, 2020). The furious woman threatened one of the men of Chinese appearance that his entire family "would be deported" and shouted at the man to "go back to China". There have been similar reports of anti-Asian racism in several other places, including India, the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, Jordan, the Philippines, and some African countries (Wikipedia, 2020). In the United States, for example, the 'Stop AAPI Hate' forum has recorded more than 1100 instances of anti-Asian abuse since late March 2020 (Mourad, 2020). In the north-eastern states of India, people of Chinese appearance have been facing racially motivated discrimination and have been blamed for bringing COVID-19 to India (Krishnan, 2020). In an interview organised by Deutsche Welle (DW) news, one victim and his daughter were allegedly denied entry into their apartment on March 16 as the administrator of the building claimed they may be incubating COVID-19 (Krishnan, 2020). On March 10, 2020, an Egyptian driver was also arrested in Egypt after a video showed the driver compelling a Chinese passenger to get out of his car at a highway in Cairo on an unfounded reason that the passenger had COVID-19 (Al Sherbini, 2020; Khaled & Fayyad, 2020).

As COVID-19 has triggered anti-Asian racism in various places around

the world, interestingly, it was being reported that the reverse is happening in China as the country experienced new waves of COVID-19 cases (Wikipedia, 2020). The Chinese government after declaring control of the pandemic has increasingly emphasised the threat of imported cases. China's National Health Commission reported that there had been few domestically transmitted cases of COVID-19 and that the new cases were largely from overseas (Huaxia, 2020). Following these announcements in China, there have been several reports of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour (Wikipedia, 2020). As businesses reopened in the country, racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour took an economic dimension as some Chinese shops and restaurants allegedly banned non-Chinese people from using their services. An Australian woman was reportedly attacked in China after attempting to breach this anti-foreigner abuse (Walden & Yang, 2020). In Guangzhou, China, there have been reports of abuse against people of African appearance (Wikipedia, 2020). Chinese residents of African appearance were being evicted from their homes by landlords and prevented from entering public accommodations based on an accusation that they were incubating COVID-19, despite many claiming that they have had no recent travel overseas or come into contact with any COVID-19 patient (Marsh, Deng, & Gan, 2020). In an interview between Cable News Network (CNN) and a number of the African immigrants in China, many shared their experiences on how they have been evacuated from their homes, been subjected to selective testing for COVID-19, and been selectively quarantined for 14 days, despite having no symptoms or contact with known COVID-19 patients (Marsh et al., 2020).

Another incident believed by many as racially motivated appeared on several international social media platforms when videos of two French doctors openly agreed on live television that the first vaccine trials for COVID-19 should be tested in Africa. In the video, one of the doctors said: "If I can be provocative, shouldn't we be doing this study (testing of vaccine) in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation?" "A bit like as it is done elsewhere for some studies on AIDS. In prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed and that they do not protect themselves." This idea came after the other doctor had earlier questioned whether the study would work as planned on healthcare workers in Europe and Australia because they had access to personal protective equipment to prevent them from contracting the virus (Rosman, 2020). The remarks from the two doctors received backlashes from some social media users in the following days who condemned the comments as racist. The remarks from the two doctors also drew criticism from a high-ranking figure in the World Health Organization (WHO) who described the comments as a "hangover from a colonial mentality" (Folley, 2020).

3. Why are people being racially abused amid COVID-19?

While emphasizing that racial discrimination should not be encouraged for any reason, it is important to recognise why it occurs to elicit a better understanding of how to address the problem. Factors associated with the racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour during this pandemic may be complex and may include post-colonial perception of racial superiority, fear of COVID-19 infection, 'inflammatory' comments by significant public figures, vengeance for fellow citizens who have experienced abuse elsewhere, and perception of differences in COVID-19 susceptibility due to differences in phenotypic physical features.

History has shown that the human population has long been divisive with perceptions that people of different appearances have different abilities and natural dispositions (Cantle and Cantle, 2005). This form of reasoning in the pre-civil rights era has motivated unequal treatments of people across different racial categories with evidence showing that rights and privileges have, for a long period, been distributed unequally as in the 'Nazi crisis' as well as the apartheid systems that existed in South Africa, Australia, Israel, and the United States (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2010; Lodge, 2012; Massey, 1990; Sonn, 2012, pp. 240–251).

Colonisation and slavery in the early 1800s, particularly, in Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Southern Pacific are other classic examples of activities in the past associated with racial discrimination (Rogers & Bowman,). Notably, there was a massacre of Tasmanians (in Australia) and the Maori population (in New Zealand) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Rogers & Bowman,). By 1850, Robert Knox (a famous English anatomist) falsely declared that race and intelligence are linked and concluded that people of colour were intellectually inferior (Rogers & Bowman,). The studies of Knox and others influenced the Eugenics movement in the 20th Century but it was later revealed that his conclusion was based on the autopsy of only one man of colour (Rogers & Bowman,). Between the 19th and 20th centuries, more than 600 distinctive legislations against the rights and privileges of Asians were passed in Europe which prevented Asians from obtaining citizenship and somewhat allowed for the murder of Asians with impunity (Rogers & Bowman,). These ancient colonial ideas of racial superiority for particular groups of people may have been imparted to the descendants of past perpetrators of racism and these ideas may still be internalised by many people today.

In correspondence with the report of Devakumar, Shannon (Devakumar et al., 2020), fear of COVID-19 may also be contributing to the racial discrimination problem. Instances of regional discrimination against Wuhan natives in other provinces of China, such as people being refused entry into hotels, have been noted in some media reports (Wikipedia, 2020). Given this example, it is tempting to simplistically assume that perpetrators of racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour do so to prudently protect themselves from COVID-19 infection. It is however important to note that the vast majority of victims of racial discrimination in China were reportedly non-citizens and people of colour rather than citizenry (Wikipedia, 2020).

As COVID-19 spreads across borders, some social media users, media personalities, celebrities, and political leaders have passed comments that may have encouraged racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour. For example, a former deputy prime minister of Italy attributed the early spread of COVID-19 in Italy to asylum seekers of African descent (Devakumar et al., 2020; Tondo, 2020). In another instance, a president of a nation referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the 'Chinese virus', linking the health threat to foreign policy and trade negotiations (Scott, 2020). At one point in time, two UN human rights experts had to appeal to the Bulgarian government to stop hate speech and racial discrimination against the Roma minority in its response to COVID-19 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). Such inflammatory comments by some leaders and famous personalities defy the WHO's advice that the names of new diseases should not be tagged with people or places where it was first detected as that can propagate hatred (Wikipedia, 2020).

Some cases of racial discrimination may have been motivated by a desire for vengeance for fellow citizens or people of the same racial category who have reported racial abuse elsewhere. For instance, there have been reports of growing tensions between Chinese people in Nairobi and Kenyan citizens due to the abuse of Kenyans and some other African nationals in China (Solomon, 2020).

Another factor that may be associated with the racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour during this pandemic is the differences in phenotypic physical features across racial categories (Cantle and Cantle, 2005). As humans have distinct phenotypic physical features of the face and body, such as skin colour, hair colour, and eye colour, these differences in physical appearance may have triggered some thoughts of differences in COVID-19 susceptibility, transmissions, and incubation periods across different racial categories (Cantle and Cantle, 2005).

4. Socio-economic implications of COVID-19-related racial discrimination

The COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications of racial discrimination continue to have a serious socio-economic impact on victims and

societies. Globally, millions of people have been infected with the virus, hundreds of thousands have died, countries have closed their borders, cities have been put on lockdown, businesses have stalled, jobs have been lost, schools have been closed, and social life has been disrupted (Devakumar et al., 2020). The racial discrimination associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing health vulnerabilities of non-citizens and people of colour (Devakumar et al., 2020; McAuliffe & Bauloz, 2020). Highly infectious diseases, such as COVID-19 often increase pressure on limited health care resources (Devakumar et al., 2020). In the presence of a biased society that often favours citizens of a country, non-citizens and people of colour face a higher risk of infection and mortality from COVID-19. A typical example is the case in America where communities inhabited mostly by people of colour emerged as the 'hotspots' and zones for COVID-19 transmission and deaths (Noppert, 2020). The risk of infection and death from COVID-19 may even be higher for undocumented immigrants who are likely to avoid medical attention as they face an additional risk of detention and deportation (McAuliffe & Bauloz, 2020).

Moreover, an experience of racial discrimination in this pandemic period can exacerbate mental health distress associated with the fear of contracting COVID-19 (Burt, Simons, & Gibbons, 2012). Victims of racial discrimination in this pandemic era are likely to express feelings of sadness, anger, depression, and constant fear (Burt et al., 2012; White et al., 2007). These negative energies which are often associated with an experience of racial discrimination can lead to lifelong hatred and intolerance towards people of different racial categories (White et al., 2007).

Racial discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour in this COVID-19 period has the potential to also disrupt global trade and economic ties. Before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries had arranged trade agreements (United Nations, 2019). As citizens of such countries are being maltreated, future trade arrangements can be affected. For instance, in 2009, China became the largest trading partner of Africa and bilateral trade agreements have been signed between China and 40 African countries (United Nations, 2019). As people of African descent are being abused in China, some African countries may rethink their trade negotiations with China, and this can result in a post-pandemic breakdown of trade ties and relations.

Non-citizens and people of colour often provide essential hard labour and income to host countries. Studies have shown that this category of people often earn a low income, face labour exploitations, and do not have access to citizenry benefits, such as paid leave, and access to income support (Anderson, 2010; Minkler et al., 2014; Orloff, 1993). In this pandemic era, several policies have been imposed by many governments that have put non-citizens and some people of colour in devastating conditions. In Australia, for instance, an extensive survey conducted in March and April 2020 has shown that 65% of overseas visa holders lost their jobs during this pandemic, 43% were skipping meals regularly, 34% have become homeless, and 39% did not have enough money for daily upkeep, and yet, were somewhat excluded from the government's policies on stimulus packages and were advised to go back to their countries of origin in the middle of this pandemic (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020). These problems were accompanied by escalated racial discrimination against them, and the risk of unemployment and economic hardships may only increase among this vulnerable group of people. To some extent, governments that have neglected non-citizens in their support policies may also lose some financial benefits accrued from the payment of taxes by those who have lost their jobs due to the lack of policy support (Clark et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions

Racial discrimination has no place in society, and certainly, not in this time of COVID-19 pandemic. As the epicentre of the disease outbreak continues to shift from place to place, urgent measures need to be developed to reduce the increasing cases of racial discrimination. The

UN, human rights institutions, governments, and citizens of countries have a responsibility to increase advocacies and fight against racial discrimination. It needs to be understood that this pandemic is a global problem and that discriminating against non-citizens and people of colour will only worsen existing vulnerabilities for people and will increase prejudiced hostility and hatred among the human race.

As some citizens are likely to continue propagating anti-migrant sentiments during this disease outbreak, people (particularly, other citizens) need to stand against such sentiments, especially, when they occur in their presence. A good example has been noted in Egypt where an Egyptian was admonished for abusing a man of Chinese appearance. Some Egyptians visited the Chinese man in his hotel and expressed an apology to him for the incident, and condemned the act as bullying and racist (Al Sherbini, 2020; Khaled & Fayyad, 2020).

Criminalisation of racial discrimination and associated penalties should be promoted and intensified in countries by political leaders and existing powers. This can assist with reducing both overt and subtle display of racial superiority and discrimination against non-citizens and people of colour (Avery & Cooper, 2020).

Considering the possibility that racial discriminatory behaviour can be learned and unlearned (Chick, 2005), promotion of racial tolerance and acceptance among children in schools can be a useful long-term approach for eliminating racial discrimination against non-citizens, people of colour, and ethnic minorities. Authorities at places of social gatherings, such as work, hospitals, sports avenues, can intensify advocacies against racial discrimination.

It is important to always understand that our differences should complement rather than reprove one another. Expression of love, understanding, patience, and tolerance towards one another will make the world a better place to live in.

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Conception and design of study: I.Y.A.

Acquisition of data: I.Y.A.

Analysis and/or interpretation of data: IYA.

Drafting the manuscript: I.Y.A.

Reviewing the manuscript critically for important intellectual content: I.Y.A.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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