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Sharing and Collecting Covid Stories: For Those Who Were Burned

BY  THI THUY VAN DINH JUNE 21, 2023 PUBLIC HEALTH, SOCIETY 7 MINUTE READ

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Traumatic times in human experience are often best understood, across cultures, through the sharing of stories. I have a few personal stories from the Covid restrictions. As a mother, daughter, and human, they illustrate to me that something is deeply wrong.

First, I was furious that the daycare centers, playgrounds, and local libraries were ordered to close. I stood in the park, looking at the roped-off swing that my one-year-old daughter loved, and felt outrage in my veins. In the name of what was this taken away from my children? I have dutifully paid taxes for years to maintain these public services. I was exasperated that the lockdowns were so easily accepted in the West, which did not help the Global South at all. In the South, people tend to look to the West to do the right thing, as it is often not as easy for them to protest against governmental orders.

This anger was amplified a few months later. My father fell ill two days before the lockdowns in my home country. Bound to bed, he survived for eight months without formal medical care, then passed away. He was old and frail, so several of us preferred that he spend his last days at home and be buried next to his ancestors, rather than ending his life with strangers wearing astronaut suits and then being cremated like contaminated waste (“because of Covid”).

How much I wished his last days would have been less painful for him! How much I wished I and my children could have been there! I did not know another way of mourning besides family and community gatherings, crying, and talking about the deceased’s life. I

was shattered as a child and a lawyer. The right to family of a migrant worker like me suddenly vanished, was buried and flushed away in the endless spirals of lockdowns, border closures, and vaccine requirements, for the so-called “greater good.” I was treated worse than a criminal. It was impossible to challenge these mandates. This has rendered me hurt, upset, and worried for the future of my children.

We all must have a few stories like mine that motivated our decisions. Some made under extremely coercive circumstances. Others made for the hope of a better future. My husband and I became lockdown refugees, moving to another part of the country where we restarted from zero.

Sadly and revoltingly, my stories are nothing next to the ones I know. Those reveal the unimaginable inhumanity of the governors, hospitals, nursing homes and workplaces, from friends, and friends of friends.

Somewhere in Southeast Asia, an elderly couple reliant on the village market died of hunger after the market was closed.

A Grab biker in a mega-city was sent to the quarantine center for weeks for being in close contact with a Covid-positive customer. When he returned home, no one could let him know the whereabouts of his grandmother and mother who had lived with him for almost 40 years. They must have died and their bodies either discarded in some unmarked mass grave, or cremated and ashes thrown.

A whole class of more than thirty 3-year-old toddlers were taken to the quarantine center because of one positive test. The parents arrived at the daycare center to pick them up as usual, to find their children gone. The kids had to endure quarantine alone.

A father of four children had a serious seizure immediately after being ordered to take a Covid vaccine, footed his medical bills, felt lucky enough not to die and never dared to question anything.

Here in North America, one of my friends took a Covid vaccine against her will when the hospital told her she could not visit and hold her dying mother’s hands. My friend surrendered because she was a human being and a mother herself.

Another friend’s husband lost his job for refusing the vaccine, forcing them to sell their house and move away to another area.

A son “kidnapped” his mother from a nursing home and hid with her in a trailer in the forest, just to take care of and spend time with her.

These stories are unbearable at different levels and dimensions. They should be contextualized for their real impact to be felt, such as where the individuals and the communities have no cushions, hunger means famine and death, many millions more girls are too young to be married and children too young to work... They haunt me; they make me wonder whether we will be able to rebuild the world in the aftermath of such personal and collective tragedies.

There are billions of such stories of voiceless, little people, whose life and rights did not matter in the last three years. They suddenly discovered that international institutions didn't care about them. They came to understand that the claims that the United Nations Secretary-General being “the spokesperson for the interests of the world's peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable people among them” were untrue. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced his two-step plan on 26 March 2020: “first, to suppress the transmission of Covid-19 as quickly as possible” and “keep it suppressed until a vaccine becomes available;” second, “work together to minimize the social and economic impact.”

Guterres clearly knew there would be social and economic impact; nevertheless he judged them minimizable. His plan was executed by almost all governments, throwing one after another lockdown blankets the world over. He did not invite States to reconsider these unprecedented emergency measures. He did not question their proportionality and excessive duration as suggested by OHCHR (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) guidelines, or the reasons why the WHO (World Health Organization) abandoned applying its own 2019 pandemic guidelines which had recommended against unethical and anti-human rights pandemic measures. Then he chose to carefully raise some most obvious impact (1.6 billion students out of schools) and left out others (health matters other than Covid, social, economic, human rights).

No, he did not stand up for the poor and vulnerable! The same choice was made across the United Nations entities whose abbreviations, namely, FAO, ILO, OHCHR, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNWOMEN, WHO, among others, were once synonyms of goodwill and human rights.

I was condemned to stay where I was when the leaders, the self-proclaimed philanthropists and my former colleagues were gathering in Glasgow for their COP26 on climate change. Two years later, the United Nations system is doubling down on the new narratives of “complex global shocks,” “climate crises,” and “pandemic preparedness,”

envisaging how to spend more tax-paid money and create more debt rather than repair the damage done.

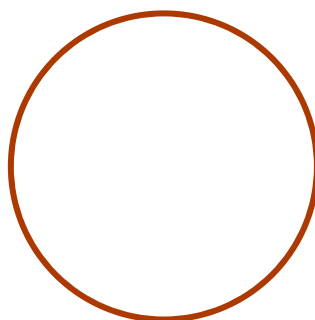
How about rebuilding informal economies, communities, small businesses in low- and middle-income countries? How about children's rights, women's rights and human rights? Primary health care? Fair and transparent assessments of Covid responses? A decent apology for letting us down? The WHO, obviously incompetent and shameless of its poor record in managing the Covid crisis, is asking Member States to give it extraordinary powers so that during the next "potential" event, it can order more lockdowns, quarantines, and vaccine requirements. Pure theater.

In many cultures, it is uncomfortable sharing pain and showing emotion. We often leave it to the specialists who have the duty to keep it confidential. I had adopted this advice while making a professional career in the West, but have decided to talk about my late father and volunteered to be someone else's voice, like for the elderly couple and the Grab biker.

I invite you to consider sharing and collecting Covid stories around you, within your networks and communities, or on a new Covid Stories web app depository designed to better understand collateral damage of restriction measures globally. Many of us may never know justice or reparations after these three agonizing years. But by archiving these stories, we should be able to, somehow, quantify some visible parts of the immense sufferings imposed on the world.

Hopefully, those who made the shameful, unjustified, inhuman decisions will regret them some day. Those who are tomorrow's decision-makers might think twice before suppressing individual rights. Those who prepare for future political debates might foresee the impact of the agenda they choose to promote. Those who regret their decisions and actions might behave differently during a future crisis. Those who were burned, like me, could go on. Together, it will be our way to say "I am sorry" and "Never again."

Author



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Dr. Thi Thuy Van Dinh (LLM, PhD) worked on international law in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Subsequently, she managed multilateral organization partnerships for Intellectual Ventures Global Good Fund and led environmental health technology development efforts for low-resource settings.

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