

## **Corona confined 25m<sup>2</sup> world by Rupa Thapa**

2020 was my year. It was the year to finally achieve what I set out for. The start of the year brought with it, a new passion, motivation, and drive in me to successfully complete my master's degree. It was the year to make my family proud by being a recipient of an international degree from a world-renowned University. I was so excited with the outcome of this year that the hard work and writings that it entailed in between did not stress me at all. Rather, I was eager to grab the bulls by the horn and driven to successfully defend and submit my thesis. Little did I know, my plans were going to be punctuated by something no one saw coming. While the news of a novel coronavirus was being circulated online in the start of the year, life was still normal here in Norway. As time went on, the news of the virus became more rampant and slowly the infection and death rates started to creep up. The alarming rate with which the virus spread and impacted people throughout the world was enough to declare it as a pandemic in early March.

With the first case of the virus confirmed on February 26, 2020, the authorities here wasted no time in implementing rules and regulations to decrease the spread of the virus in the country. Developed countries are well-equipped with health and technology infrastructure to tackle most problems. With strong economy, the most difficult problems are easier to control and stop. As such, the authorities of Oslo implemented several safety measures to decrease the spread of the virus. As part of the measures, the authorities requested the general population to practice social distancing, home quarantine, and discouraged all leisure travels. While the implementations of these regulations are rationale and justified to stop the spread of the virus, the uncertainty regarding the duration and impact it would have on everyone's lifestyle was uncharted territory. As an international student living here with no family, the ramifications brought by the virus in my life was something I had never experienced before. It has been an eye-opening experience for me.

Not many people can say that they were fortunate to grow up in one of the low-income developing country of the world like Nepal. For, I believe that I have achieved more if not same as someone brought up in the developed world. Education has always been encouraged and strongly supported in our household. Although my parents are not well-

educated, they left no stones unturned to make sure their children received ample of opportunities to fulfill their dreams. My dream was to get an international degree from a world-renowned University, and I was on track to get it this semester from University of Oslo (UIO). As part of the preventative measures for coronavirus, all education institutes were closed. This meant I was supposed to complete my last semester remotely without the in-person guidance of my mentors and peers. The excitement, pressure, and motivation to write and submit my thesis was hindered by the psychological impact of the coronavirus pandemic. With everything going on around, it was very hard for me to focus on writing my thesis. Decreased motivation and inability to set goals taking center stage, it became very difficult to meet my target deadlines. Writing a thesis involves reading a lot of journal articles. However, I was not able to concentrate on it and my mind dwelled on coronavirus and what kind of impact it was having around me and specially in Nepal. It would hence end up being another unproductive day. My attempt to make a timetable to increase my focus was not that successful as well. I have worked diligently throughout my tenure to graduate with good grades. Being unable to move forward with the same passion during this pandemic was even more worrying and stressful. Further, as it was my last semester which requires extra hard work and attention, I would-be wide-awake thinking about it till late night.

I have been fortunate to have excellent mentors and support system in my University. This has significantly helped me to understand and navigate through my research topic and data acquisition so far. The final chapter to my graduate work involves organizing all my data, writing into a manuscript, and submitting it. Also, preparing my thesis and submitting it to my committee requires more guidance from my advisors. At times like thesis writing, having a constant support system is necessary. With everyone stressed by the pandemic and getting used to their new normal lifestyle, communication with my advisors was not as frequent and productive. This made it more difficult and time consuming to prepare and organize my thesis. With all these issues, I was still able to pull it through and write my thesis. The added toil of being isolated did not deter me from my goal. It might have slowed my progress, but I finally reached there and now have my thesis and manuscript ready for submission.

One of the worst feelings during this pandemic was being far away from my family, specially my father who is old, diabetic, and hence belongs to a vulnerable group. When the coronavirus pandemic was in its peak in Europe, there were not many cases in my home country Nepal. The thought of it wide spreading in Nepal kept me stressed and awake. As a developing country, I know Nepal does not have the health infrastructure, equipment, and adequate hospital support to treat its patients. The richest and economically sound and so-called developed countries were having a hard time treating the patients. Nepal had no chance and that very thought brought tears in my eyes. I would spend hours on video call with my parents advising them about social distancing, no leisure travels, and proper hand washing etiquette. Lack of cases in Nepal made people not serious about the virus and this gave me anxiety and disturbed me mentally. I could not do anything to help and support my family during the pandemic as I was confined to my small 25m<sup>2</sup> apartment, my world during the quarantine. The one thing that kept me going was my action to isolate and properly follow the quarantine was slowing the progression of the disease and decreasing the burden of the health system. Further, I was proud and hopeful that with my degree in Master of Philosophy in International Community Health, I will one day be able to help educate and better prepare my fellow Nepalese in future health issues.

As time went on with the quarantine, I started to slowly feel the financial burden brought by it. Norway is one of the most expensive countries in the world and it requires a lot of money to be able to afford simple meal and student housing rent. With education as my sole motive, I always refrained from working a lot. I did not want work to hamper my study and wanted to make enough money to support a simple life. This meant I did not have a financial cushion. I lost my part time weekend job because of the coronavirus shutdown. Moreover, I was afraid when I saw empty supermarket shelves as I could not afford to stock up. It would make me feel like the situation was getting worse. Losing my job, inability to stock up for future, dwindling funds in my account and notifications of rent payments led to high level of stress.

When you are staying away from your family, your friends become your family. However, during the shutdown, I was not even able to meet with my friends. This made me feel

lonely and void. Being away from your family and now friends in these trying times was very hard for my physical and mental well-being. I have now realized the importance of having simple conversations about your daily routine with your friend over tea. Inability to catch up with friends, share your feelings, and have an informal chat stresses your mind. While I was busy with my studies, work, and daily social life I did not realize how small my studio apartment was. But with the quarantine forced confinement, my mind and body felt caged inside my room. I felt like there was no space and was acting without any conscious thought and drive for studies. No fresh air, no direct interaction with other people and staring at the same stuffs was a horrible, monotonous, and tiring thing. As part of my coping strategy to get over this feeling, I began to go for evening walks. More than frequent video calls with my parents, brother and sisters became a daily routine. Playing video games online with my niece not only helped me with my mindfulness, it brought us a lot closer. I also started doing yoga which boosted my confidence and well-being.

I have never been prouder of my decision to pursue my degree in the field of community health. Having firsthand experience of the way Norway managed to contain the virus, I have now added familiarity to deal with health outbreaks. After I am done with my studies, I will draw upon my experiences here and educate health officials and citizens back in Nepal. I believe that it is never too late to start preparing for the next outbreak. Nothing prepares you more than being educated and understanding the importance of better health hygiene protocols. As education is not pervasive in the rural parts of Nepal, utilizing posters is the ideal way of spreading knowledge about the advantages of healthy habits. I further believe that there should be a program that allows graduate students here at UIO to visit developing countries and share their knowledge and expertise to fellow students there. This would help them use their knowledge to educate others while providing them firsthand experience to understand health and education problems developing countries throughout the world face.

One of the most rewarding things during this virus pandemic was to see how the whole world came together to collectively tackle it. News of health officials from several countries coming together to treat patients in highly infected areas gave me hope that collectively

we will be able to diminish the virus's impact. As a poor developing country, Nepal would have never been able to handle the deleterious effects of the virus may it be economically or with its insufficient healthcare system. But continuous supports from all over the world in providing test kits, personal protective equipment, money, and educational support has immensely helped Nepal face this pandemic.

I have been very impressed with the way UIO handled the pandemic. I am pleased with the decisions made by UIO that places student health first and does not hamper their studies. Students are notified immediately about any changes made by the universities. Latest news about the coronavirus is constantly published in the university website. Also, suggestions to cope with this situation and managing study hours were provided frequently through emails. All these efforts of the University to help students and not being left out made me feel fortunate. Placing student health first and then coming up with strategies to deal with the pandemic such that students do not feel isolated and still access several University resources makes me feel proud of our University community.

Life is never as planned. Unexpected situations occur in life and such situations do not come with warning. One might not have enough time to prepare for it. Hence, the best way to be ready for the next one is to learn our lesson from this. This pandemic is one of the worst situations we have faced. When it started no one anticipated it being this bad. We did not see confining ourselves at our home, keeping distance and not being able to hug our loved ones when they are in need. None of the health experts saw thousands of people to succumb to the virus every single day. The physical and mental stress that it has brought should not be taken lightly and effective support system should be in place to tackle any future implications that might evolve from this. The fight against the coronavirus continues and hopefully the scientific research community can come up with a vaccine against it soon. As I write this reflection note today, reminiscing the last couple of months, I can feel the changes it has brought to the different aspects of my life. I now know myself better and have emerged as stronger, confident and realist person, dare I say, a different Rupa Thapa. My 25m<sup>2</sup> apartment cocoon has molded me to a pragmatic person with a positive outlook towards life and fellow human beings. I am doing what I can from my 25m<sup>2</sup> world. Are you?