

SHE-CESSION IN INDIA: MAPPING THE GENDERED DIMENSION OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the previous post-WW2 recessions the current global downturn is labelled as a "she-cession" by many commentators. It is also feared that the recovery or the "shecovery" is likely to be very sluggish and challenging especially in developing countries like India where women face multiple layers of discrimination and injustice. Analysts also contend that COVID-19 pandemic is neither gender neutral in its nature and consequences nor in the global response to it. The present paper tries to highlight the gendered dimension of this ongoing pandemic. It also shows the painful nature of India's "she-cession and shecovery". It concludes with certain policy recommendations to make our response mechanism more effective and gender-sensitive.

Keywords: COVID-19, She-cession, Response Mechanism, Gender Neutral, Gender-Sensitive.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting global lockdown and measures of social distancing completely shattered the global economy. Economic activities in both developed and developing worlds have been affected very adversely resulting in a worst kind of global recession ever faced by humanity after the Great Depression of 1930s. Reports of various government agencies and global financial institutions have registered unprecedented global economic downturns. No other event after the WW2 has caused a furore of this magnitude on global scale. It has brought down the entire human race on its knees. WHO chief has called this invisible enemy 'No. 1 Enemy of the Humanity'.

Truly, the world has become very globalized. It is evident from the fact that beginning as a localized health crisis in a small province of China called Wuhan COVID-19 very quickly emerged as a global pandemic calling upon a global response from all the countries. There is no point in approaching to this pandemic only as a health crisis. Though it began as a global health problem but soon it took the form of a global socio-economic crisis. A steep decline in the global trade of goods and services, domestic economies experiencing unprecedented contractions, employment and income loss of the masses, food shortage, painful migration of labour, deepening of mass poverty, propelling of inequalities and injustice, growth of crimes, exploitation and harassment of women in both private and public domains across the board are some of the ramifications this global pandemic outbreak has unfolded on a global level.

Experts of global economic and political affairs have taken COVID-19 to be the herald of "a new wave of de-globalization". Disagreeing with this point of view there is another group of analysts who contend that the phase during COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 time characterizes "a new normal" that can't be taken to mean another era of de-globalization. For them the current situation is better to be labelled as "slowbalization" characterizing a visible decline in global GDP, global financial contractions, shrinking of global trade in goods and services, global FDI declining to an unprecedented level, shattering of global stock etc. Much ongoing debates are focusing on the multidimensional impacts of COVID-19 on human condition and well-being. Academia, media, politicians and activists all are taking and writing about the various dimensions of it like health related, economic, political, social, cultural, ecological etc. They all seem to be divided in their assessments of the challenges, treats, risks and opportunities posited by this pandemic before the entire humanity.

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Many analysts suggest to seriously probe the gendered dimension of this pandemic. They emphasize that unlike the previous experiences of crises this COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented in both quantitative and qualitative terms. There is no doubt that this crisis has caused a huge damage to the global and domestic economies resulting in a multitude of problems in different spheres of life as a cascading effect. It is really very strange to note that this pandemic has a distinct gendered face. The repercussions of COVID-19 are not uniform for men and women across the board. Various reports and research findings are replete with statistics to show the gendered nature of this pandemic both in terms of its differential impacts on men and women and the response mechanisms adopted by different countries to mitigate its damage on humanity. The gendered nature of COVID-19 has forced many to adopt a critical and analytical approach to evaluate its impacts on both men and women. Most of them have arrived to the conclusion that the present COVID-19 pandemic has affected men and women very differently and it has been so far very brutal to the women population across the board. The world of women has got disturbed very ruthlessly by this pandemic. To capture the realities of this painful situation- half of the humanity is forced to face by this pandemic- a new word has been coined. This word is - "**She-cession**". The rationale behind the use of this word is that it clearly symbolizes the disproportionate bearing of the brunt of the economic recession caused by this COVID-19 pandemic by women in different countries. To say differently, this word is used to denote the gendered nature of the economic recession inflicted by COVID-19. Women are doomed the most to experience the adverse impacts of this pandemic.

Economic Blowback of COVID-19 is Palpable now

The Indian Scene

- According to the **World Bank**, India has been undergoing an economic downturn for some quarters before the outbreak of COVID-19. The current pandemic is bumping existing risks to economic landscape of India.
- The World Bank and other rating agencies have revised India's growth rate several times and have anticipated a lowest growth for it in FY21. This estimated growth rate is lowest India has ever experienced since it opened its economy under the forces of LPG in 1990s.
- **CRISIL** has noticed that this pandemic will lead to the worst recession in India since independence. According to a research conducted by the State Bank of India, GDP is expected to shrink by more than 40% in the first quarter of FY21. Indian Ministry of Statistics has also released the GDP data for the first Q1 of FY 21, which has showed a decline by about 24% over the same period last year.
- The unemployment rate has also shot high from 6.7% in March 2020 to 26% in April. Though it has come down to match the pre-lockdown levels in mid-June as the economy is opening step by step. According to one estimate the current pandemic has caused a job loss for around 140 Million people in India. It also resulted in huge salary cut for many other. More than 45% of households across the country have experienced a dip in family income compared to last year.
- Full lockdown in India was 15% more stringent lockdown than other G20 countries. It costed Indian economy a loss over \$ 3200 Crore on a daily basis during the first few days of lockdown. Such a stringent lockdown with the practice of social distancing let less than a quarter of India's \$ 2.8tn economic activities to be operational claiming an estimated 53% of domestic companies affected very negatively. The supply chains were also put under excessive pressure due to full lockdown. It was a time when we were lacking a clear definition of essential services indeed.
- Daily wagers and people in the informal sector (which accounts for 90% of total economic activity) are at greater risk. Many farmers across the country are also facing uncertainty. Working women in both formal and informal sectors have come out to bear the brunt most adversely.
- Large Indian companies and industrial setups have been temporarily closed or shut down significantly. The young workforce initially had their worst moments when money ran out. FMCG companies have significantly reduced their operations and are focusing only on the essentials. The Indian stock market has also witnessed the biggest loss in history.

Approaching COVID-19 through a Gender Lens : A She-Cession Ahead

Is COVID-19 not gender neutral in its consequences? Should the impacts of COVID-19 be analyzed through gender lens? Should we adopt a gender sensitive response mechanism to mitigate the differential outcomes of COVID-19? Is it really important to emphasize the gendered dimension of COVID-19 pandemic to effectively deal with it?

Is the current global recession peculiar in character than the previous many recessions witnessed by humanity? These are few questions which require immediate address to assess effectively the impacts of this pandemic on global economies and human affairs. To rationalize the measures taken on a global level to mitigate the adverse effects of this pandemic and to achieve a new normal which is less threatening to us and which can ensure an effective gender sensitive response mechanism adopted by global community this pandemic must be analyzed using a gender lens.

- **Yes, we are facing a She-cession**

Many commentators have come to the conclusion that the global recession inflicted by COVID-19 pandemic is going to affect women more adversely than men. Women are going to face disproportionate job losses in the current recession. This unprecedented outcome of COVID-19 has made many analysts to label it a "She-cession" or "Women-cession". Our past experiences and researches show that during almost all the recessions or downturns after WW2 men folk has been the most vulnerable in terms of both job and income losses. To say it differently after WW2 most of the recessions including the Great Recession of 2008-09 were in fact "He-cessions" or "Men-cessions". The reason behind was that during those recessions the 'hard-sectors of economy' (goods-producing sectors) dominated mainly by men were hit the hardest pushing millions of men out of the world of paid work. But the current recession is qualitatively peculiar in the sense that due to a worldwide lockdown and the practice of social distancing as measures to control the transmission of virus 'the soft-sectors of economy' (non-goods service producing sectors) have emerged as the worst affected spheres of human agency. Undoubtedly, the soft-sectors of economy are overrepresented by women. It is a global pattern that women are mostly concentrated in few sectors of economy like agriculture, health and paid-care, education, paid-domestic work and manufacturing. During the current crisis the service sector jobs such as paid- childcare, retail, restaurants, tourism etc., which tend to have more female workers, have been hit very disproportionately by this pandemic all over the world. Hence, the label "She-cession" is used to capture the reality of this gendered nature of the current recession inflicted by COVID-19.

- **India's She-cession is Likely to be more Disturbing**

Women are likely to share the maximum brunt of COVID-19 pandemic around the world, but the situation of Indian women is far more precarious. For women in India already suffer multiple layers of discrimination, exploitation and harassment in both the private and public domains of life. There are vast gender gaps in terms of employment opportunities, wage-income and education. The female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) is experiencing a continuous decline since 2006. This was the pre-virus labour market situation in India. Today less than 25% of Indian women are in labour market and claim nearly 35% less earnings on average than men compared to the global average. India women contribute only 18% to total economic output which is almost half of the global average. There are many structural flaws in Indian economy. About 90% of the workforce is concentrated in the unorganized/informal sector. Among women labour force nearly 80% are engaged in five major sectors including agriculture, health & care, education, paid-domestic work and manufacturing. Again, nearly 63% of the female workforce is active in the agriculture making it look like "the feminization of agriculture" in India. The following points can summarize the situation of a painful she-cession in India -

- A very stringent nationwide lockdown and social distancing measures have brought Indian economy to a standstill. The wheel of Indian economy and day-to-day life stopped abruptly causing millions of Indians to face job and income losses, to migrate back to their native places in want of food security and social security networks, to shut down their Startups in want of finances, to confine themselves into the homes, to adopt new technologies to fulfill the needs of Work-from-Home.
- The **ILO** has concluded that those who find themselves in casual work and are self-employed are going to face the maximum damage. In India about 75% employment falls under the category of non-regular-either self-employed or casual work. What is more worrisome is that women in India are more likely than men in non-regular kind of employment. Therefore, women are seemingly on the verge of employment loss in India.

- India seems to experience a worse time ahead hit with a double whammy. The health crisis resulting in economic recession has also manifested many social, political, psychological implications especially for India women. The combined effects of record low female labour participation rates, increased child-care, elderly-care and sick-care demands at home and a recessionary economic downturn have caused the fear that women could be pushed out of productive economy.
- Though in terms of absolute numbers more men lost their jobs by April, 2020 (over 100 million men against 17 million women) but in percentage terms the impact of COVID-19 on women's employment is proportionately greater and worse (women's employment dropped by 39% against 29% decline in men's employment). To put it in simple terms this is the situation where 04 out of 10 women who were in paid employment in last year lost their jobs during the virus outbreak. **Oxfam India** has estimated a loss of about \$216 billion (equal to almost 8% of India's GDP) because of the loss of women's employment.
- According to **ILO Indian** women are in "vulnerable employments" with a high risk of permanent exit from the labour market. This situation results in the phenomenon called "the feminization of income poverty". **World Bank** estimates that COVID-19 in India will drive more than 12 million Indians into abject poverty and women will likely form the largest part of "the new poor".
- Home confinement of family members, closed schools for children, ban on geographical mobility all things resulted in an additional burden of household chores and care work on women without any tangible redistribution. The **Global Gender Gap Report 2020** ranks India 112th of 153 countries in providing equal opportunities to men and women in terms their access to employment, health care and educational resources.
- The socio-cultural and gender norms have aggravated the situation. Women are supposed to bear the burden of domestic work, childcare and care of the elderly members in family. In different surveys very few women reported that their spouses shared their domestic responsibilities. The pandemic has also exposed the deep-rooted social inequalities and patriarchal structures in Indian society. During the lockdown the cases of domestic violence surged very high. Girls' education is likely to be disadvantaged also. As only 29% Indian females are comfortable with the use of Internet technology (indicating a huge digital divide among men and women). In patriarchal families there is a mentality of using limited resources for the advantage of boys than girls.
- Longer hours of domestic work decreased the leisure time for women causing psychological stress as a challenge for their mental well-being. Moreover, domestic income loss, food insecurity and a sense of uncertainty have cascading effect in the form of undernourishment and psychological stress of women.
- Research says that public confidence in physical interactions will take time to build again. So the "new normal" is going to be fundamentally different from the pre-virus situation. Women will take more time to come back into the world of work making the "she-covery" a real challenge for Indian economy. This will certainly affect India's vision and mission of becoming a \$ 5tn Economy before 2025.
- Due to restrictions on mobility and practice of social distancing activities of feminist groups and civil society institutions (SHGs, NGOs etc.) are suspended. Many analysts express their fear that if this situation prevails for a long time the achievements in the direction of protecting and promoting the interests of women will be meaningless.
- With limited resources **GOI** has diverted all the efforts in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic without being gender sensitive. It has caused the suspension of funding of various policy interventions to safeguard the interests of women.
- Women constitute 70% frontline health care workforce in India during this pandemic. Ironically, they are the most vulnerable to virus infection but they are doing their work without being supplied with PPEs and other facilities.

Unlike Hecovery, Shecovery is Likely to be a Real Challenge in India

Many commentators and research findings have come to the conclusion that unlike previous post-WW2 recessions (proved to be he-cessions) this COVID-19 recession (reasonably labelled as a she-cession) is very deep and structural in its nature and consequences. It has hit the soft-sectors of

economic activities which are predominantly concentrated by women. These sectors (service-based) require close physical proximity among service providers and the clients to be in operation. But very stringent and full nationwide back-to-back lockdowns and required protocol of social distancing halted all economic activities in these sectors resulting in a disproportionate damage to working women.

Again, the negative GDP growth rate has caused a huge revenue loss to governments impelling them to practice austerity measures. A trend towards shrinking of public sector is visible on the global level. It is accompanied with redirecting all the efforts and resources by governments towards ensuring the better management of economic activities concerned with "the essential services". Unfortunately, economic activities performed by majority of women in informal sector are not included in the category of "essential services".

The fear of the spread of COVID-19 virus is so deep seated into our mind that it will take longer for public confidence to rebuild in physical interactions minimizing the prospects of rehiring or reentering of women into workforce unlike their male counterpart. Again, it is feared that if things set right 'the new normal' is not going to be women-friendly. In times of economic upturns women are likely to face pay and promotion loss very disproportionately during the coming sluggish "shecovery". Unfortunately, Indian women are first to be laid off and last to be rehired during upturns. Past trends show this clearly.

Then What is to be Done to Propel Shecovery in India

To realize the aim of turning Indian economy into a \$ 5tn Economy by 2025 the issues of ongoing painful "she-cession" and a feared slack "shecovery" are to be dealt with very strategically. Our response to these issues should be in line with the following recommendations -

- Given the gendered nature of the pandemic, any policy response must also be gender sensitive in nature. Effective response mechanism can't be gender neutral.
- Response to COVID-19 must speak to the needs of all the sections of population. At the same time the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and young girls must be at the centre.
- Effective response is one that doesn't propel existing patriarchal gender norms, discriminatory practices and inequalities.
- Women's participation in decision making for outbreak preparedness and response must be ensured.
- Governments are required to put women dominated economic activities into the category of "essential services" so that their income losses can be minimized.
- Policies aimed at ensuring greater workforce participation of women should be streamlined addressing the fundamental infrastructural problems of Indian economy.
- Government efforts and civil society interventions to ensure multidimensional empowerment of women should be pushed further with double energy.
- Adequate financial and administrative resources should be channelized in developing a women friendly socio-economic infrastructure in India.

Conclusion

We have to adopt a Janus-faced approach to better analyze the economical, political, socio-cultural and psychological repercussions of COVID-19 pandemic for Indian people in general and Indian women in particular. Doing so we can assess the threats, risks and challenges of this pandemic on one hand and the chances and opportunities on the other hand this pandemic has unfolded for us. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 is both a crisis and a chance. A crisis in the sense that it has brought the lives and livelihoods of about 1.4 billion people to multiple layers of risks like health risks (both physical and mental well-being), sustenance risks (job and income losses, food insecurity etc.), socio-cultural risks (including widening poverty, inequalities, gender injustice etc.). It has made Indian economy to experience an all-time low GDP growth rate (nearly -24%) resulting in a "she-cession" of an unprecedented scale and character. On the positive side of the story we can think of COVID-19 to be an 'eye-opener'. It has helped us to identify 'the blind spots' in our economic, political and socio-cultural infrastructures. Adequate understanding of these lacuna and efficient implementation of corrective measures can help us significantly to move towards the realization of our national goal of becoming once again "**the JAGADGURU**" ensuring the participation of women to their full potentiality.

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