

COVID-19: MAPPING THE IMPACT ON WORKING WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In times of crises disadvantaged people tend to be the hardest-hit sections of population in any society. Also, the impacts of crises are never gender-neutral. Covid-19 is no exception. Research shows that the ongoing pandemic has affected women the most seriously and disproportionately. It has posed even existential challenge to poor women. The present article tries to gauge the impact of novel coronavirus on the lives of (working) women in India. It also makes a serious attempt to capture the economic, political and socio-cultural repercussions of Covid-19 specially for Indian working women. Again, the article talks about the way forward by suggesting some measures to set the things right for women by making the post-Covid 19 world women friendly.

Keywords: Crisis, Gender-Neutral, Covid-19, Working-Women, Women-Friendly World.

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 'the No. 1 Enemy of humanity'. In fact, the world is very global today. It is evident from the fact that starting as a local health crisis in a small province of China called Wuhan, Covid-19 instantaneously became a global pandemic that required a global response mechanism to fight against it.

There is no point in fighting against this pandemic like a simple health crisis. Because soon after its outbreak it touched almost every aspect of human experience. It quickly turned into a global socio-economic crisis having differential impact on the various economic, political and socio-cultural categories of people. A sharp decline has been registered in global flows in terms of global trade in goods and services, an unprecedented reduction in employment and income, food shortage and insecurity, painful labor migration, worsening mass poverty, escalating inequalities and injustice, propelling crimes, exploitation, harassment and victimization of women in both the public and private spheres. Experts in global studies have translated this 'Covid Blow' to the world economy into a 'new wave of deglobalization'. But there are also many commentators who avoid making such gross judgments about the present and future of the phenomenon called globalization. On the contrary they argue that the phases during Covid-19 and post-Covid 19 time characterize a 'new normal' that cannot be considered an another era of deglobalization. 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 of the current discourse centers around the multifaceted effects of Covid-19 on human condition and well-being. Academia, media, politicians and activists all are interested in knowing the nature and magnitude of its consequences for the various aspects of human life including health, economy, politics, society, culture and ecology. They all seem divided in their assessments of the challenges, threats, risks and opportunities posed by this pandemic before the entire humanity.

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Many analysts have suggested the need of conducting a serious investigation into the gender aspects of this pandemic- i.e. the gendered dimension of Covid-19. They also make a strong point that unlike previous crisis-experiences, this Covid-19 crisis is unprecedented in its nature and effect. There is no doubt that this crisis has caused tremendous damage to the global and national economies and caused many serious problems in different spheres of our life following a cascading pattern. Like other crises this pandemic also has a gendered face.

Again, the gendered nature of Covid-19 has compelled many to take a critical and analytical approach to assess its impact on men and women. Most of them have come to the conclusion that the this pandemic has so far been very cruel to the entire female population, specially the working women. The world of women is ruthlessly troubled by this pandemic. New words are used to capture the reality of this painful situation faced by half of humanity. The purpose for using such terms is to expose the disproportionate burden of this pandemic on women in general and working women in particular. Many scholars use terms like 'She-session', 'Shecovery', etc. to signify the gendered nature of Covid-19. There is a consensus that women constitute the most vulnerable group that bear the brunt of this pandemic.

Impact of Covid-19 on Working Women

The current pandemic has caused many changes and posed serious challenges before women in general and working women in particular. Almost every dimension of their daily lives has been touched by this pandemic. Nationwide lock downs and strict measures of social distancing have resulted in many serious economic consequences for working women. Apart from economic impact this pandemic has also given birth to many political, socio-cultural, productive and reproductive health and nutrition related challenges and problems for working women. These issues are so consequential that many commentators are very pessimistic about the condition of working women in the post-Covid 19 world. They contend that this pandemic has exposed the intrinsic flaws of the economic, political and socio-cultural infrastructures which are basic to our existence. Contrary to it, for the optimists the current pandemic is surely a challenge for the entire humanity in the short term, but in the long term it is a kind of opportunity because it gives us a chance to identify the problem areas and see where the problems actually lie that act as a barrier to the realization of the goal of making our world more democratic, inclusive, egalitarian and sustainable in the post-Covid world.

- **Economic Consequences**
 - **Towards a She-cession!**

Should the impacts of Covid-19 be analyzed through general lens? Should we adopt a gender sensitive response mechanism to mitigate the differential outcomes of Covid-19? Is it really important to emphasize the gender dimension of Covid-19 pandemic to deal with it effectively? 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 analysed using a gender lens.

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 menfolk 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 'Mencessions'. 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.

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. Indian 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 giving rise to the phenomenon of 'feminization of agriculture' in India.

▪ **Shecovery is a real challenge in India**

Many commentators and research findings highlight the point that unlike previous post-WW2 recessions (turned 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 lockdown 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.

▪ **Economic Fallout : Indian Scenario**

- 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.
- CRICIL 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 gone very high from 6.7% in March 2020 to 26% in April. Though it has come down to match the pre-locjdown 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 caused Indian economy to bear a loss over ₹3200 crore on a daily basis during the first few days of lockdown. Such an 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.

- **Political Consequences**

- **A Backlash Against Feminism**

Covid-19 pandemic has victimized women across the world. It has magnified the existing inequalities and vulnerabilities of women. This pandemic has aggravated the existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. Moreover, feminist activities have also come to a standstill causing a serious backlash to their goals aimed at protecting and promoting women's interests.

- **A Leap Backward for Women's Rights**

Covid-19 has caused a rolling back of achievements of decades in the sphere of women's social, economic and political rights. Months of home-schooling and the required technological infrastructure have caused many girls to drop out of education never to come back. The menace of domestic and sexual violence has become even worse. Mother mortality rate has also gone high in want of proper support system.

- **Socio-Cultural Consequences**

- **A Hidden or Shadow Pandemic Indeed!**

During this pandemic unlike men, women have experienced a greater economic loss. Loss of paid work and a disproportionate increase in unpaid care and domestic work has further deteriorated the poor plight of working women. Some commentators have seen this crisis as a resurgence of patriarchy. For them pre-existing gender inequalities and injustice have been worsened by this pandemic. Scholars don't see this pandemic as a 'battle of the sexes' but rather a condition in which women has to bear the brunt. Once again men are the breadwinners and women are the homemakers. This gendered division of labour within families is reminiscent of the families of 1950s.

Again, complete lockdown, measures of social distancing, school closures and work from home imperatives have compelled women to be in abusive relationships and trapped inside with violent men for months. This has resulted in a global rise in the cases of domestic violence. Globally, nearly 243 million women and girls between 15 to 49 years were subjected to sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence in the last year (UN Women, 2020). A survey of 122 community organization shows that 85% of them reported a rapid increase in violence against women and girls (VAW/G) between March – September 2020 (UN Trust Fund to End VAW, 2020). This alarming increase in domestic violence has made to call this health pandemic 'a hidden or shadow pandemic'. Covid-19 pandemic has created an atmosphere of fear and apathy among people. This has adversely affected our gregariousness causing further a huge loss of social capital of people.

- **Consequences for Health and Nutrition**

The current pandemic is a life-threatening situation for around women health workers who constitute around 70% of total health workers. Due to many inherent paradoxes marginalized and poverty ridden women face even higher risks of virus transmission and fatalities. She-cession causes food insecurity that further leads to many health and nutrition related issues for women and girls. Women's need for hygiene, sanitation and reproductive health has also been affected very adversely by this pandemic.

Women's mental health has also been threatened disproportionately by this pandemic. Many research findings show that the number of women reporting their experiences of stress and depression during the pandemic has doubled than their number registered before the outbreak of this virus. The case of younger women is specially discouraging.

Way Forward: Policy Responses

Undoubtedly this is a very tough time for all, but for working women the challenges posed by novel coronavirus are very serious and fundamental. These issues do need an immediate address and policy response from government and civil society organizations.

Our experiences of previous outbreaks should back our response mechanism to fight against the current pandemic. We have learnt from our past experiences that until and unless our response to critical situations like the present pandemic is gender responsive and remains gender neutral our efficiency to tackle such adverse situations remains limited and counterproductive too in some cases. We are so globalized today that the occurrence of such pandemics in future seems inevitable. The government (local level) should make proper arrangements to ensure recognition, reduction and redistribution of women's unpaid work by developing provisions of community based services mechanism.

Awarenesses raising campaigns and programmes should be launched with missionary spirit to denounce those social values and norms that reinforce patriarchal patterns of acting, feeling and thinking. Only realizing this mental revolution directed towards attitudinal change can we expect the success of all other measures to promote gender parity and gender justice. This will encourage a fairer redistribution of responsibilities of domestic chores and unpaid care-giving between male and female. The current pandemic recession (also she-cession) needs distinct policy interventions. One such is reopening of schools and daycare centres. This can ensure resumed labour supply leading to a smooth recovery (more precisely shecovery). This move will certainly benefit working women and help fighting against the problems of widening gender wage/income gap, gender skill gap, gender poverty gap, education gender gap, a push towards traditional gender could be avoided with some certainty.

Unless, policy response mechanism intentionally enables economic relief measures and deliberately targets women, supports women-led businesses and their income security, their situation will only worsen. UN Women makes a strong case for designing the socio-economic policies in such a way that can ensure the realization of women's rights. Feminist strategies should be incorporated in the larger response mechanism to tackle the current pandemic and ensuring a women-friendly post-Covid world.

Concluding Remarks

The present pandemic has disproportionately affected (working women) and girls. Not only in terms of adverse economic fallouts but also the resulting socio-cultural, political and health related repercussions have increased the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of women and specially the working women. But there is always a silver line even in times of adversity. The Covid-19 crisis has surely shattered the very organization of economies of countries and lives of their people. But at the same time, while exposing the intrinsic flaws of the designing and dynamics of the existing scheme of things, it has given us an opportunity to pause and plan a response mechanism driven by a steep learning curve it has provided with us to be better prepared and resilient for the future. It is a wake-up call for the entire humanity to work in collaboration to make the world more democratic, inclusive, just and sustainable. It is a high time to reboot the world system in such a way that women's agency find a top priority for ensuring a better and stronger future for all the humans. Again, feminist strategy should be prioritized to support movements for the emancipation of women and bring their voices and their leadership roles to the forefront. The only formulae we have is to rethink, re-imagine, and reboot—together.

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