

COVID-19: A GENDERED ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Entire world is struggling to get over the impacts of the pandemic Covid-19. People are finding it difficult to continue to live and work the way they were used to. New patterns of lifestyles are being invented. In the midst of the crisis are Indian women, who have lived a life of marginalization and have rarely been included in any strategic planning and development. No method of tackling the pandemic can be considered adequate unless one tries to analyse its impact on women who comprise almost 50% of our population. This paper is an attempt to make a gendered analysis of the affect of Covid -19 on women and also to assess the response of the State through a gender perspective. Pandemic like Covid -19 is new to the world but the society needs to prepare itself for any such sudden crisis which pushes the deprived sections to the margins. A gender lens would help in the success of all plans which aim at making society more inclusive and equal.

Keywords: Pandemic, Gender, Covid-19, Care Work, Migration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has crippled the human race all over the world since the last eight months. With millions being infected, the disaster has transcended the boundaries of race, class, colour, religion and above all, gender. Subjective issues of vulnerability, helplessness and surrender have again raised serious global concerns for the need of more equity, empathy, hope and above all, the need to shatter all symbols of power and greed. Fighting out pandemic like Covid requires great capacity, resources and above all resolve to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the same.

It becomes imperative in such difficult times to develop a holistic approach to deal with the disaster and help society to progress towards normalcy. One needs to stop and think whether there can be a holistic approach without attempting to understand the impact of Covid19 through a feminist lens? We are here reminded of the other pandemics like the plague of the fourteenth century and Spanish flu of 1918 which also had a devastating impact in terms of lives and economy. The famine conditions and shortage of food that existed in those times do not exist in India anymore. Women even in those disasters had a great care role to perform. Even recently during the 2014-16 West African outbreak of Ebola virus disease, gendered norms meant that women were more likely to be infected by the virus due to their roles as caregivers within families and as frontline health care workers(1). In order to create effective and equitable policies and interventions, the government needs to first recognize that health emergencies have different effects on individuals and communities. As government is responding with swift measures in their fight to control the spread, it is important to understand how these actions increase the risk for women. India is still struggling to contain the calamity to the best of its ability so far and we still have to improve our preparedness to face the ongoing medical, social and economic hardships which lie ahead in the upcoming months. It is in this direction that a gendered understanding of the women's role and the impact of Covid19 on their lives must be analysed so as to guide the governments to learn lessons from the past and to move ahead towards the creation of a fairer and more inclusive society.

2. HEALTH CARE AND WOMEN

Amongst the Covid warriors who are at the front of the war are no doubt our health workers, who risk their lives in order to fulfill their official and moral duty. Doctors and nurses both have been working day in and day out to combat the magnitude of the disaster. With more than 40% of doctors and almost 85% of nurses being women, women comprise the majority of our healthcare workers and face a higher risk of infection, morbidity, and death as a result of their profession.

They work under bad, negligent conditions, are often harassed by public and compelled to live in quarantine due to threats of infections. These women have chosen to leave their children, old parents and other domestic responsibilities for the cause of saving humanity.

Special mention needs to be made of more than 900000 ASHA workers who are our female community health workers. These Accredited Social Health Activist are important in India's primary health care programs. In an endeavor to help and control the infected population in their communities, these women are also risking their lives with no personal protective equipment and a meager salary of Rs.4000 per month(2).

Another noteworthy recognition must be made also of the role of women self help groups which were formed as a part of National Rural Livelihood Mission. These women across the country are contributing in different ways to help the rural areas to rise up to the challenges which are being faced by COVID-19(3). From making mass and personal protective equipment to setting up of community kitchens to feed the poor and elderly, providing them banking services and help in transferring of credit into their respective accounts, self help groups have performed laudably in their areas. These women groups have also helped spread information about hand hygiene, and social distancing and other government packages and schemes amongst the illiterates and poor. Though not directly qualified as healthcare workers, women self help care groups have responded positively and enthusiastically at this critical situation of the health crisis in India.

The impact of the pandemic on healthcare has been so tremendous that all health issues excluding Covid cases have taken a back seat with surgeries and other treatments being postponed. In such scenarios special focus needs to be given to health related issues of pregnant women, depressed women and women requiring help regarding reproductive health issues. As a category of population which has lived a marginalized and neglected life for long, these difficult times tend to affect them dually. The adverse effects of the pandemic in relation to women's reproductive health is not related to only pregnancy but also the entire supply chains of contraceptives and other related items seems to have been badly affected, Managing the mental health of women who are more tuned to depression is also a big challenge during the Pandemic crisis. With not much availability of resources and medical consultancy, mental health, anxiety and depression due to the prevailing situation of social distancing has increased.

3. WOMEN AND WORK PRESSURE

With women being assigned the care work of the families, Covid crisis has definitely had a deeper and more penetrating impact on the nature and volume of care work they need to perform (4). It needs to be pointed out that it is estimated that women do 4 times more unpaid care work than men in Asia than men(5). A review of the impact of earlier epidemics on women in terms of increased work responsibilities can be seen during the H1n1, Ebola crisis in Africa. As the childcare burden of women increased, their labor force participation fell, either in the reduced hours or withdrawal from paid work (6).

With husbands being forced to stay at home, children off the school and ageing parents needing extra medical care, women are finding it tough to do all the domestic chores in the absence of domestic helps and in meeting the demands of all members at home- be it in terms of food, healthcare or help in studies. An important dimension that affects women's labor force participation is their involvement in housework and domestic cores and the Covid pandemic has definitely decreased the employability chances of women because of increase in hours of care work(7).

4. WOMEN AS A MIGRANT POPULATION

The whole nation was a witness to the total mismanagement of the government in addressing the issues of migrant workers all over the country who out of poverty, unemployment and fear only wanted to go back to their hometown and in the absence of any state services due to lockdown, were even compelled to walk down to their villages. As per the census of 2011, almost 70 percent of the internal migrant community comprises of women. Women migrant workers are lowest on the priority of being even visible to the planners and policy makers. As a part of unorganized sector, they work under unregulated labor laws like those working as domestic servants(8)

Issues of personal safety, lack of sanitation on the roads which became a bigger issue of personal hygiene, absolute poverty which pushed them and their children to hunger have been an experience for all these invisible migrant women who kept waiting for help from the state. Migrant women workers are mostly forgotten in popular discourse.

There is also a hidden patriarchy which embraces the return of men and often questions the return of women back home and that too when she has travelled for days to reach back. Covid 19 thus brought to the light the vulnerabilities of migrant specially women migrants to such emergencies and to the State centric measures which we all depend on.

5. RISING THREAT TO WOMEN SAFETY

The United Nations Chief on 6th April, 2020 has acknowledged a steep rise in cases of domestic violence at home due to the lockdown situations and has appealed for treating such cases as essential cases(9). It is important to take note of the fact that according to the Thomson Reuter Foundation's findings of 2018, India is the most dangerous nation in regard to sexual violence against women(10). With this background, the need to assess the impact of the pandemic on the issue of safety and security of women in India becomes even more inevitable. In India, a country with high rate of domestic violence Covid-19 provides an ideal situation with frustrated men facing issues like job insecurity, unemployment and craving for alcohol(which is not readily available due to lockdown). Compulsive staying indoors of incompatible couples due to the lockdown aggravates the chances of different kinds of violence. The lockdown has in fact reinforced the patriarchal notion of public private dichotomy wherein women who were already confined to the private domain were asked by our prime minister to observe the lakshman rekha with greater caution.(11)

The National Commission for Women has tried to respond to this problem and has launched a dedicated hotline for women experiencing violence at home during this period. A What's App number has been circulated to report such cases. It is estimated that in the second week of April, nearly 2500 women in Delhi called the emergency helpline number. Out of these, 1612 of these calls dealt with domestic violence. While helpline numbers are working in states as well, yet one needs to understand that due to the lockdown, women are not in a situation to go to the police stations. In 2020, between March 25 and may 31, 1477 complaints of domestic violence were made by women which is highest when compared to the data of last 10 years during this period(12). With lack of access to helpful neighbors and parental homes., children being at home and lower courts of judiciary not working, the courage to take action has diminished and women have been forced to become a silent sufferers of domestic violence. Although women needed to be put at the center of the efforts to recover from covid-19, there has been no advisory issued at the national level to declare domestic violence as an emergency. Rather one needs to understand that the government chose to earn revenue by reopening the liquor shops after 40 days of lockdown rather than eliminate and control violence against women. The link between domestic violence and consumption of liquor has often been highlighted by the women's movement (13) and in this light the Government's decision to open liquor shops seems to be a blunder from the perspective of women's safety. The government in fact should have come out with a comprehensive plan to address different aspects of violence which have been triggered by the present ongoing pandemic.

6. ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS

The rising State expenditure during the Covid 19 crisis and the impending economic slowdown of market and industry is not only inevitable but shall have long drawn consequences. The economic impact of the pandemic on a country like India with a population of 1.5 billion to take care of and with over 25 percent people below the poverty line, obviously has its own challenges. Indian economy has suffered even more than most as a result of lockdown (14).

Women's labor force participation rate in the last three decades has shown a downwards trend(15). The issue of making workforce more inclusive of women can not be overemphasized but pandemics like Covid pose greater challenge in reaching these goals. The problems of high inflation, layoffs and salary cuts would affect the society at large. In such a situation it makes lots of sense to see how it would impact on the women who are mostly non working in economic sense and live a life of marginalization. Women as the manager of their respective family budgets would find it difficult to take care of all economic needs be it food, clothing, education, health etc. In an effort to prioritize the family expenditure, her personal requirements will fall last on the list.

With only 25 percent women in the workforce out of which more than 70 percent being absorbed in the informal sectors (16)(Mathew,2017). Women's power to bargain and continue to work in the labor force is itself a challenge. One also realizes that it is the service sector which provides higher chances of employability for women. A study in 2013 revealed that almost 55-60 percent of the employees in hotels in South India and West Bengal were women while they comprised around 50 percent in Maharashtra, Delhi and Punjab(17). Apart from the hospitality industry, the tourism industry has also been very forthcoming in terms of employing women. Over the period 2005-2015, 46 percent of the workforce in tourism was that of women (18). The pandemic has most badly hit these kinds of service sectors which without work

would find it difficult to retain these employees for long. Apart from them, there have been other informal sectors too where loss of work has been tremendous. The huge exodus of the migrant laborers from Delhi, Mumbai, Surat etc. to their respective hometowns in search of security has been well covered by the media. With no economic security these women who work as domestic helps, as daily wagers at construction sites, as helpers in small shops, malls etc have all been left at the mercy of the State. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package of 1.70 Lakh crore was the relief package announced by Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman on the 25th march 2020 in an effort to ensure the poor and migrants food and livelihood security. It included free food grain, three free cooking gas cylinders to beneficiaries of Ujwala scheme for three months, April- June, and cash doles to women in Jan Dhan account through direct benefit transfers in an effort to ease out the nation wide lockdown(19). This was later expanded to a mega Rs 20 lakh crore stimulus package announced by the prime minister to help restore a dying economy, almost 10 percent of India's GDP(20).

It would not be right to say that the State did not respond to the economic crisis but the important question that arises is did it reach to the actual beneficiaries? Economic hardships have come to stay for some time for the poor all over India but the problem lies when we start analyzing the process of access to food security which takes place through the Public Distribution System. The existence of heterogeneity of class, caste and gender positions women at a very disadvantageous position in terms of varying ability to access the different schemes of State and Central governments. The power trapping that exists in rural India even today makes it difficult for women to avail these benefits even with a ration card. Thus the economic impact of Covid-19 would be borne by all Indians in their own ways but looking at it from a gender perspective obviously makes it much more taxing and enormous for women.

7. WORK FROM HOME

Since Covid- 19 has been declared as a pandemic, there has been tremendous pressure on large firms and start ups even in India to give a choice to their employees to work from home. Although work from home has been a part of the work culture in western countries, India has been almost forced to accept it as an alternative due to the pressure of social distancing and the consequent lockdown. Although challenges of lower efficiency, poor server connectivity and issues of security threats need to be tackled, yet looking at the possibilities of emergence of work from home kind of culture would be a welcome scenario for lots of women who can comfortably perform and work from home while supervising and taking care of pressing family needs. Covid-19 in fact has opened the window for such women employees who wish to work post their maternity leaves without any guilt. Technologies like tele-presence and video conferencing are no longer unknown for Indian employees but they need to be enhanced and made more effective.

In fact work from home has helped in channelizing the young minds of children and youths in these difficult times of lockdown in a positive direction by providing them opportunities of attending online classes while not going to schools and colleges. Here again the role of women as educators needs to be not only recognized but also appreciated. With women numerically outnumbering males as teachers, the role they have played in getting used to the digital online mode of teaching, adapting, counseling and mentoring the students even when they are themselves facing tough conditions at home needs to be acknowledged by the state in particular and society in general.

We also need to realize that the pandemic has proved to be an opportunity to re-establish the importance of family as the most trustworthy institution that continues to support its members cohesively and emotionally. The role of family in helping to cope up with such adverse situations has again been reinforced. Women as pillars of the family have got a chance to fight out issues of feeling of alienation and loneliness. The so-called family time has motivated few men to share some burden of domestic work during the lockdown thereby diluting the existing binaries of sexual division of labor.

Covid-19 will teach new lessons to the present generations and help them in adapting to the changing patterns of lifestyle. The huge loss to lives and our economy once again has shown us the vulnerability of humanity during such disasters and calamities. A gendered analysis of the pandemic will hence go a long way in helping and guiding the societies to face such situations more effectively, adequately and justly. The lyrics of the iconic song "We shall overcome" keeps resonating in our ears today and definitely we shall together overcome this crisis but only with one caveat-The overcoming this time has to be jointly done with equal participation, care and efforts of both men and women. This long period of lockdown has revealed some of the stark realities about inequality and privilege in India and how vulnerable groups in society are treated during times of crisis and emergency. Social distancing then appears to be a privilege specially for women who remain to be poor and helpless.

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