

The impact of COVID -19 on Indian women

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Abstract:

The impact of the virus was not gender neutral, the women were more hurt by social and economic crisis in India .As COVID-19 was continuing its rampage, it did not affected men and women alike. While men reportedly have a higher fatality rate, women and girls were especially hurt by the resulting economic and social fallout. As per a UN Women report, the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls is far more than their counterparts. *As per the report, in comparison to white women, Indian women were at 2.7 times likely to die of COVID-19* which started on March 2020. It had a significant effect on all sections of society, including pregnant and peripartum women and also gravely affected women's financial health, There was also an alarming rise in domestic violence against women in during the lockdown period.

Keywords:- COVID-19, Physical state, Mental conditions, financial effect, Domestic violence, Women

The COVID-19 pandemic has had prejudices consequences on every part of society, but mental health risks being overlooked. The lockdown imposed by the government in different countries had taken a toll on people's mental health and mainly in women's. Undoubtedly, during these unprecedented times, the likelihood of rising mental health issues was high. Some studies show that the pre-existing gender gap in mental health, with women worse affected than men, has broadened. There was rarely a crisis or calamity that doesn't impact women differentially - COVID-19 was no exception. The diversion of resources towards the emergency response to the outbreak had impacted essential non-COVID-19 health services, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH), family planning and abortion services globally, thereby threatening to reverse the limited gains made in ensuring due priority to women's health. Similar consequences to Ebola and Zika pandemics were witnessed in the past. What makes COVID-19's implications worse was the unprecedented magnitude of its reach and damage.



In March 2020, as the pandemic spread, India witnessed a nationwide lockdown limiting the movement of its 1.3 billion population. What was meant to be a COVID-19 prevention and management strategy had unparalleled impact on women's ability to access SRH and abortion services. Several factors had contributed to restricted access, including suspension of transport facilities, shutdown of private facilities, conversion of public health facilities into COVID-19 treatment centres, diversion of medical professionals towards COVID-19 emergency response and stock outs of contraceptives and medical abortion drugs due to interruptions in supply chains. The pandemic also saw the emergence of fear psychosis, with women refraining from visiting health facilities for the fear of being infected.

COVID-19 has had a significant effect on all sections of society, including pregnant and peripartum women. Studies had suggest a significant burden of COVID-19 among pregnant women attending the hospital for any reason. Hormonal changes and several other factors predispose these women to behavioural changes and alteration in psychological functioning and social well-being. A recent survey of pregnant women conducted in found severe psychological impact of COVID-19 on more than half of participants.

In addition to physical health, the novel coronavirus pandemic had also gravely affected women's financial health. While men were more likely to see their working hours reduced (54% of men vs. 50% of women), more women have had lost their jobs or businesses as a result of COVID-19 (25% of women vs. 21% of men).

Apart from comparatively less pay and greater rate of job loss, there had been an alarming rise in domestic violence against women in during the lockdown period. The National Commission for Women (NCW) received a large number of distress calls every day from women seeking help. The pandemic resulted in job loss and caused stress for men and women alike but domestic violence had affected women adversely, resulting in further subjugation of women. Economic stress on families due to the outbreak put children, and in particular girls, at greater risk of exploitation, child labour and gender-based violence. As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, participation of female labour force in India is



one of the lowest in the world. Women constitute 49% of the Indian population but their contribution to economic output is only 18%. The pay gap in India is 35% compared to the global average of 16%. Mostly involved in irregular or unpaid work, women in the informal sector have been considered as the most vulnerable by the International Labour Organisation. Many women had lost their livelihoods and had to make a permanent exit from the labour market because of the pandemic. Stalled participation of women in the labour market in recent months has further enhanced income disparity. As per the CMIE Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) data, four out of 10 women lost jobs in India and 17 million women lost their jobs during the nation-wide lockdown in March and April 2020. A World Bank Report suggested that 49 million people will be pushed to abject poverty because of the pandemic; out of this, more than 12 million people will be pushed to poverty in India. Women will be overrepresented in that category creating a new cycle of poverty.

One of the other ways in which the pandemic had affected women differently than men was through increased burden of unpaid work. Owing to the sexual division of labour, and gendered roles and social norms of performing domestic and care work in a household, the burden of unpaid work had fallen disproportionately on women. Such tasks were time-consuming and physically tiring, and subject women to time poverty leaving little or no time for them to undertake productive activities like education or employment, or leisure. The pandemic had worked to exacerbate the already existing gendered nature of unpaid work at home. With the closure of offices and educational institutions, and the simultaneously emerging norm of work from home and online education, along with the lack of services of domestic workers, the needed to perform unpaid chores like cooking, cleaning, washing, child care among others by household members had increased. For working women, the lockdown has meant the collapse of the demarcation of their professional spaces and domestic life which had led to the simultaneous performance of their office work and household responsibilities.



Increase in Burden of Unpaid Work for All but More for Women during lockdown

During the lockdown, 81% of the total survey population reported to avail no services of the domestic workers as compared to 13% before the lockdown. Therefore, the domestic work including cleaning, cooking, laundry, child care, elderly care among others which were earlier performed by the domestic workers for income, are now performed by the household members without any remuneration. Therefore, the burden of unpaid work during the lockdown increased for all. Highest decrease has been observed for the percentage of population spending up to 7 h/week on unpaid work during the lockdown for both men (27.9 percentage points) and women (26.3 percentage points). However, the disparity across genders has increased. Approximately, only 19.3% of women now spend a maximum of 7 h/week on unpaid household chores as compared to 39.5% men during the lockdown. Furthermore, for men the highest increase in population of 16.2 percentage points is observed in the time interval of (15–21) h/week whereas highest increase for women of 14 percentage points has been observed for more than 70 h/week being spent on unpaid work. Interestingly, no man in the survey population spent more than 70 h on household tasks during the lockdown. It should be further highlighted that during the lockdown, 93% men dedicated up to 28 h/week on unpaid household responsibilities as compared to only 64.9% women. Simultaneously, 35% and 25% women spend more than 28 h/week and 50 h/week respectively on unpaid work during the lockdown as compared to 21% and 8.8% women before the lockdown. Therefore, the conditions of lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 has increased the burden of household work for all, but the responsibility has increased relatively more and disproportionately for women who were already spending more time in unpaid work than men before the lockdown.

The most common experiences of women during the global Pandemic in India:

Online Work and Education

Along with the restrictions on mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the office spaces and classrooms to the homes of the people, meaning that individuals who would go out of their homes into the professional spaces for the purpose of income earning or educational



opportunities now spend more time at home doing the same activities. Young people who were living away from their hometowns in pursuit of education and jobs have also returned to their homes due to the flexibility of performing these activities from within the house. This implies that the services including buying cooked meals and snacks, the entire process of cooking, and finally cleaning the dishes that were earlier purchased to facilitate working and studying are now to be procured within the house. Furthermore, the activities like laundry and cleaning the house which were earlier performed by domestic workers for a wage while the members of the household were allocating the same time for other activities, for example, preparing for office, are now to be performed by the members of the household at a time that does not conflict with the office hours. Thus, the norms of work from home and online education increased the demand for services that were earlier purchased both within and outside the household, and are to be now performed without pay during the lockdown, therefore increasing the burden of unpaid work which is gendered in nature.

Sanitization and Hygiene: The Load of New Activities

Another manifestation of the lockdown is visible in the recurring need to maintain social distancing and hygiene through sanitising everything that has physically been in the public space, which has created a new set of activities that need to be performed daily

Perceptions and Gender Roles

An examination of the perception regarding gender roles and the responsibility of unpaid work highlighted that while none of the interviewees believed that women are more responsible for household chores than men just because of their gender, two observations are significant in this context. First, is the fixation on unemployed women who are housewives/homemakers to share a greater burden of household chores for every member in the family. The reason most cited for this is that since these women are not engaged in any type of income generating activities, they have more time available to perform the domestic work. In addition, the interviewees also stated that since other members of the household are working full time, they do not have any spare time to contribute to domestic chores, which are therefore inadvertently taken up by the



The inefficiency argument is just an extension of the gender roles and norms which have to be fulfilled with the performance of certain activities like domestic work. Since, women have been fulfilling these roles and responsibilities even in normal situations before the pandemic set in, they are more efficient at these activities as compared to individuals, generally men, who are new at these activities during the lockdown. Measures to combat COVID-19 did not take into account gender disparities. A vast majority of women in India are self-employed in the agricultural and manufacturing sector. Lockdown affected their livelihoods and cut down their income. Many women may permanently exit the labour market if appropriate policies are not adopted to address the issue. The pandemic virus, SARS CoV-2, may not discriminate by gender but the impact of the pandemic and the response of the state have been gendered. It has been observed that the autonomy of women is compromised during any health emergency. This pandemic was no different. Policy decisions to combat the disease should have been gender balanced by incorporating gender concerns. A recent Lancet article also pointed out that the gendered implications of the pandemic have In the short run, redressal and prevention mechanisms should be in place to curb the rising cases of domestic violence in the country. Employment of women badly suffered during the pandemic should be made a priority. Any unemployment support must include women who form a large proportion of the workforce in the informal sector. Going forward, policies need to be adopted to prevent the marginalisation of women from economic activities. Fair wages and better terms of employment need to be ensured. In the absence of clear policies, COVID-19 will only result in an increased gender gap due to the widening of already existing social and economic inequalities in India. A social safety scheme should be provided to women. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can help women at the community level. Some of the SHGs are making masks, running community kitchens and, thereby, generating livelihood for women. Improving digital literacy of women and promoting women entrepreneurship can be very effective to bring women back to labour workforce and generating income for them.



This highlights the impact of COVID on the burden of unpaid work for women. The paper shows that women were already sharing a higher burden of unpaid work, and COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown had worked to exacerbate the existing gender inequalities and increased their burden of unpaid work even more. Among women, marital status and employment status were the key determinants of women's burden of unpaid work where time spent on unpaid work had increased the highest for married women and unemployed women, who were already spending the highest time on such work even before the lockdown. Specifically, during the lockdown, approximately 22.5% of married women, as compared to zero men and unmarried women, worked for more than 70 h/week. Similarly, unemployed women had witnessed the highest increase of 30.5 percentage points for those who spent more than 70 h/week on unpaid work as compared to employed women who show the highest increase of 14.7 percentage points for those spending 22–28 h/week and 29–49 h/week each. The emerging norms of work from home and online education, and the new needs of sanitization were responsible for the increased burden. For unemployed women, particularly the housewives/homemakers, the excessive burden was due to the perception that their share of responsibility for unpaid work should be more due to not being engaged in full-time employment and is more efficient in performing these tasks. As such, unemployed women have to perform the unpaid domestic work for all members of the household. For employed women, the collapse of the distinction of the professional and personal lives, both of which are now confined to the household, means that office commitments and domestic responsibilities are to be fulfilled simultaneously. This has created time poverty for most women which impacts their opportunities for engaging in employment, professional performance, career advancement, and leisure, thereby affecting their overall well-being and empowerment. In the context of perceptions regarding gender roles for unpaid work, while it was found that individuals did not overtly believe in putting the burden on women by the virtue of their gender, but rationalized it with the time spent on full-time paid work (for unemployed women) and their own inefficiencies in performing such tasks. In addition, the results on employment related decision-making shows that gender roles and responsibilities, though overtly rejected, remain entrenched in the social norms of the society. However, there is a ray of hope in reversing gender roles in the household work during the pandemic as both men and women are



looking for gender equality in performing unpaid work, particularly when all members of the household are engaged in full-time employment. For this, it is suggested that the work from home norms and online education becomes more flexible and suits requirements of the employees. Furthermore, such flexibility needs to be extended not only to women, but also to men to facilitate their contribution in the unpaid domestic work. However, caution should be exercised in terms of policy making as flexibility in working will not automatically translate into gender equality in unpaid work and will have to be catalysed through awareness, knowledge and opportunities. Finally, the new norms of work and related policy, by both the government and the private players should focus on gender mainstreaming where gender perspectives are integrated into the designing, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of policies, rather than addressing these concerns in isolation.

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