



## INCREASING GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA AMIDST THE COVID -19 PANDEMIC

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### **Abstract**

*Gender inequality is the idea that men and women are not equal and gender affects an individual living experience. These differences arise from biology, psychology and cultural norms .In a developing country like India, gender inequality is a persistent challenge. Women even in normal times in households face all kinds of discrimination. In this lockdown period women are overburdened as there has been increase in workload in homes and scarcity of resources for families: Women do not get health services on time as in the case of migrant labourers where they have to walk along with men and children hundreds of miles without food.*

*This paper seeks to study the impact of COVID- 19 on Indian women and the kinds of discrimination they are facing during this lockdown period and also seeks to study and compare increasing Gender inequality in India from human development index parameters like health, education, employment of women before and after COVID19.*

**Key words:** Gender Equality, Gender Discrimination, Health, Education, Covid-19, Employment

### **Introduction**

Gender Inequality (GI) is the idea that men and women are not equal and gender affects an individual's living experience. It also refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender and stems from distinctions whether empirically grounded or socially constructed. Although gender inequality is a global issue which varies in size and intensity across various geographies in India it is a crucial and harsh reality. This paper specifically focuses on GI issues in India, particularly the ones that have surfaced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and makes for a compelling case for the government and associated agencies to address this issue as a matter of national priority. This paper will cover GI issue across five major areas – cultural, socio-economic, education, health, infrastructure (rural versus poor), and lack of coordination among governmental agencies. Based on the recent incidents and data collected a set of recommendations have been made to address this critical issue on a sustainable basis.

In modern times, women, in general, have made significant progress in all spheres of life and are performing well across all industries and professions, still majority of Indian women face the problem of GI and discrimination. In many parts of India, still birth of a son is celebrated, while birth of daughter is considered painful. Boys are considered to be tough while girls are meant to be shy and skilled in home bound duties. Right from birth to marriage and thereafter, girls face inequality at every stage of life. The inequality can be of different kinds: economic, social, cultural, psychological etc.

As Covid-19 continues to affect lives and livelihoods around the world, we can already see that pandemic has already altered everyday life. Our present circumstances while unprecedented have been shaped by persistent social realities such as entrenched racial and economic inequality, the proliferation of misinformation and anxieties about ability of world's democracies to confront major crisis. The impact of virus is also exacerbating India's deep rooted social inequalities. There is a need to understand the extent to which corona virus affects



women and men differently. Women in India already suffer from wider gender gap in employment, health, education and various other human development index parameters like health, education, employment etc.

### **Literature Review**

Niaz Asadullah's article "Fighting Gender Inequality in India during Covid-19 Pandemic" focused on how the impact of Pandemic will worsen the situation for India if corrective measures are not taken. He laid stress on restoring health services for women and adolescent girls and also creating provisions for empowerment of women.

Kadambari Shah in her article "How Covid-19 is Amplifying Gender Inequality in India" pointed out that women are facing not only physical violence but are also facing other kinds of discrimination. She came up with interesting point on enhancing digital skills of low income women and direct employment programmes should be initiated specially for women.

### **Methodology**

Content analysis method was adopted to carry out the study. Since the focus of this paper is on highlighting GI issues coming to light due to the pandemic crisis in India the data, stories, and other facts are based on the governmental and non-governmental agencies, newspaper articles, published papers, webinars, and magazine related articles published between June – July 2020. Historical figures, however, are sourced from UN, GOI, and other agencies.

### **Covid-19 and its impact on increasing Domestic Violence in India**

Lockdown measures in India have led to increase in domestic violence cases in India. As the lockdown started in India on March 25, news about the increase in domestic violence also started trickling in. National Commission for Women (NCW) have reported a rise of 94 percent in complaint cases where women have been abused in their homes in lockdown. From 30 in the first week of March, the number of complaints rose to 69 between March 23-April 1, 2020. As the complaints increased, the NCW announced a Whatsapp number to ensure they are easily accessible to women who live in abusive homes. With almost 57 percent of the women not having access to smart phones, their option of registering the complaints are challenging. Sometimes the women rely on other family members to report on their behalf. There are many dimensions of domestic violence which arise from the exercise of patriarchal power. The protection from Domestic Violence Act was enacted in 2005, which states that "any act, conduct, omission that harms or injures or has the potential to harm or injure will be considered domestic violence by the law", but even in 2020 the assurances made in this act have not been in force when we take a look at the cases of domestic violence. If we compare the cases before the Covid-19 and during the Covid-19, we find that the cases of domestic violence have doubled during the pandemic. From February 27-March 22, NCW received 123 complaints whereas between March 23- April16, NCW received 239 complaints. Many times the cases of domestic violence go unreported and police officials are unable to reach the victims because of lack of access to landline or phone and secondly due to fear of not being able to move away from perpetrator. Domestic violence against women is an old age phenomenon, Women were always considered weak, vulnerable and in a position to be exploited. Violence has long been accepted as something that happens to women. The complaints the commission have got are from certain sections of society, who are literate and upper class and who have access to technology. Women from underprivileged community have no means to reach out. Due to social distancing it has become tough for women to report their experiences and seek help. One of the reason for increase in domestic violence is the silence from victims because of the mindset that it can cause embarrassment



in the society and can tarnish image. Lower class women are used to domestic violence because they feel reluctant to report the matter to police and even to their parents. Sometimes police also do not take their complaints seriously. On many instances, poor women are taken advantage of when they go for filing complaints. Safety of women is a big concern as they are exploited by the powerful people in the name of providing jobs and help. Even if somehow they file FIR, they do not get justice easily and due to the fear that once the criminal gets bailed out due to lack of evidence, the victim will again get exploited or maybe get killed. So due to these problems, women remain silent at most of the times. Covid 19 has left many people unemployed which has reduced their income to raise families. As a result there is lot of tension, frustration among the earning member of the family which is mostly men of the household in India. Women face brunt of anger as they get abused by their partners and often get beaten at home as a result of not being able to support the family. They are not allowed to work from home for offices because of increase in responsibilities of family care and increase in workload at home.

### **Covid-19 and Impact on Health and Education of Women**

Women make up nearly 70 per cent of the global health care workforce. As nurses, doctors, therapists they are in harm's way with grueling schedules, compromised safety and lack of safety equipment. The thought of how pandemic will affect their own lives and families is the main cause of tension and anxiety. Evidence from past epidemics, as well as existing evidence around impact of COVID -19 suggests that disruption of essential health services put women and girls at risk of decreased access to services as resources are diverted from routine health services including pre and post-natal health care and family planning, contraceptive supply and other reproductive health services. The Covid-19 crisis has placed unprecedented demand on our social services and health care system. Women are at greater risk of domestic violence, disruptions to health care services, stocks out of supplies to contraceptives menstrual hygiene products and mental stress and anxiety.

Data on National Health Profile 2019 -annual account of demographics, health sector, health finance shows that while the cost of hospitalization of male patients in urban areas is, Rs 30450 while for women it is over 25 percent less for women. In rural areas the cost is Rs.19027 while it is 28 percent lesser for female patients. During Covid-19, this number reduces specially for poor women who have least access to healthcare. Women belonging to stigmatized groups and disabilities have drastically been impacted in terms of basic amenities and health care. At the frontline, ASHA workers face physical violence while trying to prevent Covid 19 infections in their villages. Kerala based 3.8 lakh United Nurses Association have moved to Supreme Court, highlighting the extreme risks faced by the health workers across the country. In India women are at greater risk of contracting the work because of overrepresentation in health sector. Women self-help groups are trying to provide personal protective equipment gear although need is more. For some women the choice is between unemployment and jobs that put them at risk of disease and infection. According to government data 55 per cent of women do not use public health services because of high health expenditures. Only 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of households have at least one member covered under health insurance which also exhibits clear gender bias. Under the Child Development Scheme the country's 1.3 million Anganwadi centres provide critical nutrition counselling and supply food to pregnant women and lactating mothers. These centres have been closed since March 24. Though several states have started doorstep delivery of supplementary nutrition other services like immunizations remain suspended. One aspect of discrimination against women that matters for health of women is whether women eat less or worst food quality than men. In households with limited food budget, where there is no refrigerator to store leftover food, the person who eats last gets very less or low quality food. In pandemic, where there is already



shortage of resources and food, women do not get adequate supply of food and nutrition which they require. As a result they suffer from malnutrition and other health problems more at the time of Covid-19.

### **Impact on Education of women in Covid-19**

In India 300 million children have been affected by school closures caused by Covid-19. Online classes do not factor in country's digital divide where only 16 percent females have internet access compared to 36 per cent males according to National Sample Survey 2019. This gap can sometimes have tragic consequences as a girl in Kerala committed suicide due to inability of access to online classes. The lockdown is burdening girls with household chores and additional care of family and siblings'. Covid 19 is ruining the progress made in the 70 years in the field of girl's education. Female literacy rate and enrolment rate had gone up quite remarkably but now the pandemic has halted its growth. It is especially difficult for women to continue the education. According to the report published in Forbes, four factors are hindering the progress in the girls' education in the country- disruptions in funding, school nutrition, access to schools and unemployment rate. It is estimated that nearly 10 million girls can drop out of school due to pandemic. During pandemic, as schools are shutdown therefore families can opt out to send their daughters to school resulting in higher dropout rates and less enrolment rate and which leads to early marriage, increase in domestic violence, etc. Girls in remote areas also face the problem of less access to technology. Girls in rural areas have 28 percent of access while girls in urban areas have 33 percent of access. During the last few years, lot of schemes were announced by the government to encourage girl's education and huge sum of money was invested in girls' education but during the pandemic the investment was directed to Covid-19 response. At the time of pandemic, families with more than one child can afford the education of only one among the rest of the children; therefore more preference is given to boys' education.

### **Impact on Employment of women of Covid-19**

As Covid 19 continues to affect lives and livelihood around the world, we can already see that pandemic and its economic fallout are having regressive effect on gender equality. Research from World Bank suggests that pandemic will drive more than 12 million Indians into poverty. Less than a quarter of women in India are in labour force-among the poorest standings in the world and they earn 35 per cent less than men, compared to global average of 16 per cent gap. Women represent 49 per cent of Indian population yet contribute to 18 per cent to its economic output. When lockdown was imposed many women were setback further. Lockdown and social distancing norms are likely to have outsized impact on women. Indian men spend around 52 minutes on unpaid work every day including routine household work, shopping and care giving. In comparison Indian women spend additional 5 hours on unpaid work every day. Women with full time paid employment will now end up executing more household work like cooking, cleaning and childcare. This will reduce their efficiency of additional share of workload. Since now they are spending 24 hours at home, this also increases the chances of sexual abuse and increase in domestic violence. Oxfam India estimates economic loss from women losing their jobs during pandemic at about \$216 million knocking of 8 per cent from GDP. Lockdown has cut off all means of sourcing and income earned. This will cascade further in the form of undernourishment and psychological stress of members of household especially women with increased demands on their time. A higher percentage of women employed in health and education sectors have regular and public sector jobs which safeguards their employment and economic benefits to an extent. Lack of personal protective equipment heightens their vulnerability to sickness. According to International Labour Organization, every 25 women workers is a domestic worker. There are no legal regulations in recruitment of domestic workers in India. While Central Government announced relief package for migrant workers, domestic migrant were left out. Women form a massive part of informal economy. Large percentage of women, work in informal economy and are concentrated



in low paying sectors. Not only they face higher risks due to poor working conditions, they also have few resources to address these risks. Informal workers do not have any social security, including health insurance. Women in both house and outside, carry the additional responsibility of care giving for unpaid salary or a very meager amount which is never sufficient for them or their families.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Empowering the female section of society and promoting gender equality is of immense importance for advancing and fulfilling Sustainable Development Goals. Discrimination that women face is not only a violation to written and granted human rights but also hindrance to many developmental processes and progress along with it. The level of stigma associated with Covid-19 is based on factors which are as follows:

- It is a disease that is new and for some it is still unknown(those countries who are unaffected)
- It is easy to associate with fear with others

Current Covid-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against people of certain backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with virus. It has also exacerbated certain inequalities. Women in India have always been discriminated in one or the other way from long time. During pandemic like Covid 19, this discrimination and inequality increases as women becomes victim of domestic violence or they do not get adequate food and nutrition due to scarcity of resources at home. During lockdown, schools get shutdown as a result the literacy rate of girls also decreases. In terms of employment, women lose more jobs than men during the time of pandemic. The question arises what are the possible solutions of these problems?

The first step is to restore pre-existing health services and social security net schemes for women and adolescent girls. Anganwadi and Asha workers should be rewarded and encouraged not just by applause but monetarily also and they should be covered under health insurance and measures should be taken to ensure their safety at the time of pandemic. Second step is home delivery of nutrition services especially to domestic women workers who lose their job during pandemic and who are expecting child and have no other source of income to raise the family. Third step is to repurpose self help groups and other women groups to create more economic opportunities for women that serve the need at the time of pandemic. Fourth step is more and more girls should be encouraged to continue their education through counselling and digital access should be provided to the girls even in remote areas to pursue online classes.

There is a need for national coordination among agencies not just for addressing the problem of gender inequality but also for seeking permanent solution through enactment of stringent laws and police reform. There is also need for improving infrastructure for women in rural sector and building more clinics and providing more first aid facilities encouraging the women working in these sectors to act as mediator between vulnerable women and government agencies. A number of schemes and policies have been made by the government to reduce gender inequality but they are hardly implemented. The rich and powerful people get maximum benefit while the poor and downtrodden are left behind.



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