

# COVID-19 Pandemic: A Major Challenge for Gender Equality

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## **Abstract**

There is the pandemic everyone knows about, and all too well. It is legitimately clogging press headlines and consuming the attention of government leaders. Then there's the shadow epidemic, which is swiftly unravelling the world's meagre, but invaluable accomplishments toward gender equality over the last few decades. The global COVID-19 pandemic is still wreaking havoc on people's lives and it is apparently observant that its repercussions are having a regressive influence on gender equality. The incidence and intensity of gender-based violence, particularly sexual and domestic violence, are amplified during times of crisis, reflects the anecdotal evidence and data sets from past pandemics and natural catastrophes. Also, access to official support services becomes more difficult for victims of abuse in such predicaments. The combination of growing demand on the one hand and more limited access to resources on the other broadens the existing rift, potentially leaving more woman victimized and their children in need of assistance. This is equally applicable to COVID-19. The effects of COVID-19 are magnified for women and girls merely because of their gender in every single domain, from health to the economy, security to social protection. The coronavirus pandemic has the potential to undo "substantial progress" attained in past decades toward gender equality. This paper documents some of the most blatant gender biases that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and articulates how social theories and research, comprising work on traditional gender roles and stereotypes, responses to potential danger, patriarchy, perception of risk, and backlash, can aid to explain the fundamental causes of these inequalities. Lastly, this paper proposes key considerations for future research, specifically (a) challenging the lack of a gender equality perspective in short-term emergency and long-term reconstructing measures, (b) identifying similarities and differences in approaches to service access, and (c) adopting a concurrency approach to address systemic inequalities in the aftermath of COVID-19.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pandemic, Gender, Gender Inequality, Vulnerability, Abuse

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender disparity is a prevalent phenomenon for ages. It has existed in society in some or the other form, overt or covert, minute or giant, accepted or denied, talked or left. It took a lifetime for the policymakers, international agencies, committees, non-government organizations, states, constitutions, and other stakeholders to achieve a little in terms of bridging the rift between men and women. Yet the arrival of a global pandemic seems to wipe out the hard-won achievements so far. This pandemic has been proved to be a double-edged sword to women, for they were equally vulnerable to the health hazards, adding to the same- its regressive effects on gender equality making it even more abominable for them. The onset of the global pandemic elevated the existing gender inequalities across domains-

health to the economy, security to social protection for women and girls simply by virtue of their gender. The toll of the pandemic was higher on women by dint of the patriarchal construct of gender and pre-existing horizontal inequalities. According to Sigmund Freud, Biology determines gender identity through affiliation with either the mother or the father. While some may agree with Freud, others say that the development of the gender self is influenced more by interactions with the primary care giver than by biology. Gender roles are constructed throughout childhood via- internalization and identification, according to non-Freudian theory. Gender, as stated by Judith Butler (1990), by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction.

Various documents like the UNDP's and the European Commission Report, illustrates how the pandemic has exacerbated gender disparities; nevertheless, another side of the story shows how pre-existing gender prejudice made the pandemic much worse, surpassing its impact capacities especially for women. Also, the consequences of the pandemic can constrain women's decision-making power in the economic and political spheres, leading to widening gender gaps in accessing basic services, controlling assets, and managing resources (Rivera, et al., 2020).

The pivotal idea behind this paper is to document some of the most blatant gender biases that have arisen out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another theme in this series is the long-held academic discourse that gender is a social construct rather than something that individuals are born with. The social theories embracing gender roles and stereotypes abet in explaining the fundamental causes of gender inequalities. This crisis puts capabilities as well as women's ability to face the effects of the pandemic and economic crisis at risk.

### **COVID-19: A Pandemic Under Gendered Lens**

The year 2020 was designated as a time for reflection on progress toward gender equality and women empowerment (United Nations, 2020). In an ironic twist, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both prospective and current gender disparities (Fisher & Ryan, 2020). The COVID-19 conundrum is a human development crisis that is putting progress toward gender parity at jeopardy. The acute implications of this on gender disparity may have already been seen in health and education, as well as the burden of unpaid care work and gender-based violence. While the pandemic impacts everyone, women and girls suffer distinct and potentially disproportionate economic, health, and social perils of profoundly rooted inequities, societal norms, and disproportionate power dynamics (Rivera, Hsu, Esbry & Dugarova, 2020). The Commission issued its 2021 report on gender equality in the EU preceding International Women's Day, which highlights the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women (European Union Press Release, 2021).

### **Why Do Gender Inequalities Worsen and Emerge During Crises?**

The upcoming section(s) will have a detailed explanation as well as examination of the factors responsible for emergence and worsening of the pre-existing gender inequalities. There exists a continuum of factors ranging from social to economic. Their underpinnings provide an understanding of how the pandemic has worked to raise gender inequality among the masses.

### **Gender Role Beliefs & Expectations**

Long-held gender role ideas may underlie why gender disparities arise and increase during crises. Women's responsibilities from outside house have significantly grown, with more women working outside the home than ever before (United Nations, 2020). Notwithstanding this, gendered expectations

continue to thrive. Women are still anticipated to handle the majority of household and care chores. As a result of the shutdown of many professional childcare facilities during COVID-19, working women are compelled to not only be primary caretakers for their families but also to be efficient at work. Harmonizing these two expectations is exceedingly difficult, and nearly impossible during a worldwide crisis (Power, 2020). Nevertheless, women, particularly those in relationships with men, may be supposed to cut their work hours in order to take on caregiver responsibilities, however men, especially those in relationships with women, really aren't. As a result, it is not surprising that women experience higher levels of stress and anxiety, as the pandemic has escalated the role stress and obligations placed on women while also lowering external assistance (Fisher & Ryan, 2020).

### **Surge in Domestic Violence & Abuse**

During large-scale calamities, relational abuse tends to surge, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). Pre-existing caustic social norms, coupled with soaring socio-economic stress caused by confinement initiatives and financial difficulties in the household, have contributed to an increase in gender-based violence, since many women are in lockdown with their abusers, whereas the services to assist victims are obstructed or inaccessible due to the pandemic (Rivera, et al., 2020).

Due to rampant lockdowns throughout the globe, many women are being impelled to remain at home and isolate in a supposedly secure place, but many houses are not poised to offer this protection to women and girls. Gender biases at home can perpetuate through a viscous circle of powerlessness, which is typically entrenched in gender societal norms leading women to make severely constrained or even devastating choices. (Rivera, et al., 2020). 243 million women and girls worldwide have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner. For countries in medium and low human development groups, the percentage of women who ever-experienced intimate partner violence is, on average greater than thirty percent. Still, thirty percent of people believe it is justifiable for a man to beat his partner (Rivera, et al., 2020). Other nations have witnessed a decrease in reporting as a result of escalated impediments for victims (Azcona et al., 2020).

The pandemic has also resulted in unprecedented forms of manipulation and control. Perpetrators may falsify or exploit quarantine "rules" in order to manifest dominance over their partners and curtails access to support. Women with disabilities, who are already at a higher risk of domestic and sexual abuse, have become even more vulnerable as a result of the COVID-19 isolation measures (Azcona et al., 2020).

### **Re-emergence of Odious Practice: Child Marriage**

Child marriage is yet another embodiment of gender-based abuse. Many of the variables that contribute to child marriage are augmented in crisis and emergency situations. The pandemic's repercussions, including as loss of household income, increased risk of domestic violence, and a lack of access to education, can all lead to a rise in child marriage. odious practises. Odious practice viz. child marriage continues to be more than 25% among the high, medium, and low human development nations (Rivera, et al., 2020).

### **Escalating Health Issues**

Spite of the fact that the morbidity and fatality rate of COVID-19 is twice as high in males as in females

(Jin et al., 2020), the virus has taken a substantial toll on women's routine psychological and physical wellbeing. Women reported higher levels of emotional distress in the beginning of the lockdown than men (Fisher & Ryan, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has jeopardised women's physical and reproductive health, since several nations, including Brazil, India, and Nepal, have redirected resources to the care of COVID-19 patients (United Nations, 2020). This redistribution of resources and attention away from critical areas like sexual and reproductive health facilities potentially resulted in an increase in maternal mortality and morbidity, adolescent pregnancies, and HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (Rivera, et al., 2020).

### **Distorted Finance & Economy**

As COVID-19 continues to impact people's lives and livelihoods throughout the world, it is clear that the pandemic and its economic ramifications are having a detrimental effect on gender equality (Madgavkar, White, Krishnan, Mahajan & Azcue, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic's economic implications have left no country or people untouched, and women are again being inordinately affected (Rivera, et al., 2020). Women and members of minority gender groups earn less, save less, have less secure jobs, and are more likely to work in informal sectors than cis-men (United Nations, 2020). For these circumstances, they are sensitive to the economic impact of COVID-19. Many women in high-risk industries operate micro or small businesses or work for themselves. They are now facing greater risks of bankruptcy as a by-product of funding discrepancies, which implies that women have less access to cash and loans (Rivera, et al., 2020).

“What is good for gender equality is good for the economy and society as well”. Women's jobs are 1.8 times more prone to the crisis than men's jobs, according to calculations. Women account for 39% of worldwide employment but account for 54% of total job losses. One explanation for the virus's higher impact on women is that it greatly increases the cost of unpaid care, which is borne predominantly by women (Madgavkar, et al., 2020).

Historically, most economic recessions are characterised as "he-cessions," succeeded by "she-recoveries," in which woman industries serve as the economic recovery's backbone (Alini, 2020). The reverse is true with COVID-19, which has been labelled a “she-cession” since woman service sector employment were the first to disappear (Gupta, 2020). As a result, the worldwide poverty rate for women is anticipated to rise by about 10% (Azcona et al., 2020).

### **Impediment to Education**

Education is fundamental for women to strengthen their capacity to make and act on choices, but the pandemic is having a worldwide impact on education. Before the pandemic, access to school was already a concern for many girls in low-income nations. Due to school closures and lockdowns, 10 million females in secondary school may be out as a result of the situation. Less than 60% of women use the internet in high, medium, and low human development nations. In nations with medium or poor human development, the average percentage of female internet users is less than 30%. Caused by uneven access to the internet and technology, school closures may exacerbate the gender digital rift (Rivera, et al., 2020).

### **Interventions and Way Forward**

Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, added: “Despite the disproportionate impact on women's lives

due the COVID-19 crisis, we need to use this situation as an opportunity. We are determined to strengthen our efforts, continue progressing and not allow a backlash on all the gender equality gains made” (European Union Press Release, 2021).

Policy frameworks and interventions cannot be designed in the absence of awareness and adequate empirical representation of disadvantaged populations (Fisher & Ryan, 2020). Forthcoming researches should attempt to dispel negative prejudices about men undertaking domestic chores, increase men's self-efficacy in domestic jobs, develop conditions that indicate men's belonging in home realms, and reward men who undertake domestic labour.

Frontline female health professionals, including midwives, nurses, community health workers, and facility support personnel, require special attention to their health, psychological requirements, and work environment. It has been discovered that masks and coverings scaled using the ‘default male’ size, which is frequently utilised in design and manufacturing, expose women more. Women's voices on the front lines must be recognized in response planning (United Nations, 2020). Making preparations for the continuation of routine health services, including sexual and reproductive health care is also of supreme importance (United Nations, 2020).

Rather, every COVID-19 response strategy, rehabilitation package, and resource allocation must consider the pandemic’s gender implications, meaning:

1. including women and women’s organizations at the heart of the COVID-19 response;
2. transforming the inequities of unpaid care work into a new, inclusive care economy that works for everyone; and
3. designing socio-economic plans with a deliberate focus on the lives and futures of women and girls (United Nations, 2020).

Addressing the gender-differentiated effects of the COVID-19 crisis through sex-disaggregated data is vital to creating policy proposals that minimise vulnerable situations and strengthen women’s agency while putting gender equality at the forefront. This is about more than simply eradicating long-standing inequities; it is also about creating a fairer and more resilient world (Rivera, et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a worldwide impact and it shook practically every aspect of human life with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. However, human civilization has withstood countless jolts in the past and thrived, hence this pandemic too will loosen its grip allowing life to bloom once again. The only troubling aspect is the loss of women and the harm they have suffered. They being the most vulnerable and fragile sections of the society would take greater time to heal. In such a scenario, it becomes more important for intellectual domains to talk more and establish new discourses to address their issues, researchers to investigate and inquire more deeply into those issues, academia and other humanitarian bodies to publish more, and families and society as a whole to understand and bear with the daily plight of women. This is only how the essence of writing this paper could meet its tiny most contribution to the cause hopefully.

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