



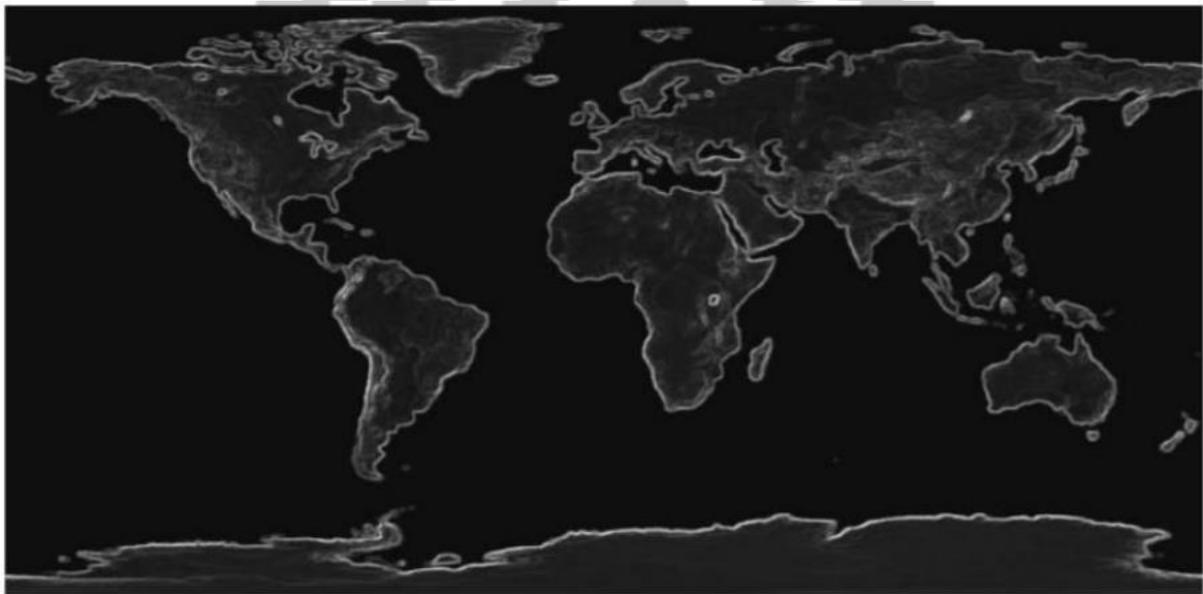
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# COVID-19 THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

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Women's rights in the wake of COVID-19 and the policy interventions  
designed in its wake

*Veritas et Aequitas*



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The outbreak of Covid-19 is impacting societies around the world in an unprecedented manner and is making pre-existing inequalities worse amongst various groups of the societal structure by exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic. As author and journalist Helen Lewis describes the COVID-19 pandemic as “a disaster for feminism”, the consequent lockdowns and prevailing atmosphere of economic instability are not only accelerating the rise in exploitation and discrimination of people with certain sexual orientation, but also marks the reversal of most of the gains that these communities have made in the last century. Adding to this, the global response to Covid-19 crisis lays bare the inefficient and inadequate stand of governments across the world in terms of acknowledging the special demands of people belonging to certain strata of the society. With respect to India which ranks 112 out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index 2020, this disproportionate policy action towards the crisis doesn’t come as a total surprise, all the while also forcing us to seriously consider a not so gender-blind response in a world so dramatically altered by the pandemic.

### Scope of the impact

#### 1. Impacts on Economic Security and Digital Divide

The profound impact of Covid-19 on global economy has led to the disruption of markets and supply chains, businesses are required to close or scale back operations, and finally affecting the jobs and livelihoods of millions. In the recent estimates by International Labour Organisation (ILO), full or partial lockdown measures affects almost 2.7 billion workers who constitute around 81% of the world’s workforce. On the similar lines, International Monetary fund also projects a significant contraction of global output in 2020. Having said that, the disproportionate affects of economic downfall on women and people belonging to LGBT community further adds strain to the situation especially in the scenario when their capacity to absorb such an enormous economic shock evidently bars less than men because of social stigma attached to their gender, pay gaps, larger involvement in informal sector, less secure jobs, less access to social protections, burden of single-parent households and many other reasons.

The increased care demands at home when coupled with cuts and lay-offs at jobs is limiting women’s role in family support, especially for female-headed households. In case of couples, partners are forced to make the difficult choice of who should stay at home and who should take up the role of breadwinner and the pre-existing traditional norms but obviously influence many of such cases. The service sectors like retail, hospitality and tourism, where women are generally represented at a considerable higher rate, presents a worse picture in this context of lay-offs. A new study by CARE International “COVID could condemn women to decades of poverty: Implications of COVID-19 on Women’s Economic Justice and Rights” reveals how the global pandemic is having a real and immediate economic impact on women in the developing world where as large as 70% of women’s employment is in the informal economy with few protections against dismissal or for paid sick leave and limited access to social protection. This largely leaves them out of coverage of social protection mechanisms, including for instance assistance targeted at workers during crises. The study further emphasises on the untimely setback experienced by women entrepreneurs stemming mainly from the loss of open access to labour force and lack of access to loans and savings mechanisms. Jobs such as food



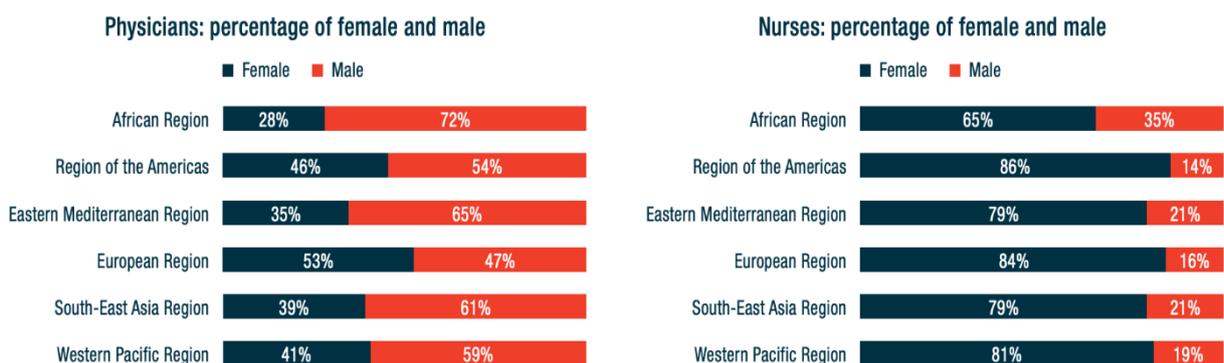
vendors may adjust to greater mobility demands (as individuals travel house-to-house during a lockdown), and shift towards being male-dominated.

In India, several states are further considering or implementing an increase of daily working hours from eight to twelve hours and some have also proposed dilution of several clauses labour laws which might influence key provisions around maternity and welfare. The previous experiences from past, such as in case of Ebola virus outbreak, goes on to reflect that “while men’s economic activity returned to pre-crisis levels shortly after preventative measures subsided, the impacts on women’s economic security and livelihoods lasted much longer.” (UN Policy Brief: Impact of Covid-19 on women, 2020)

Another important aspect of increasing gender disparities reflects in the emergence of ‘digital economy’, not only now, but also during the post-pandemic recovery phase. While this offers the silver-lining for e-commerce in times of social distancing, the actual picture is that this phenomenon still lacks the inclusivity. On average, women use and access digital technology less often than men: for example, the proportion of women using the internet was 48% in 2019 against 58% of men globally, according to data from the International Telecommunication Union, a UN agency. They also lag behind men when it comes to their technological aptitude and today only a tiny percentage of women in both developed and developing countries access and complete tertiary education programmes in Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Certainly, the future is most likely to generate demands for more learned and well-equipped work force in this field and thus ‘digital divide’ has the potential to become an even greater source of gender gap.

**2. Impacts on Healthcare and Hygiene**

One of the distinguished features of pandemics like Covid-19 is that they lay bare the vulnerabilities of the social structures concerning the most basic and important segment of human survival i.e. healthcare sector and the response to these situations needs to be solely based on inclusive, unbiased, holistic and genderless policy. Unfortunately, this has not been the case at present.



Source- World Health Organisation

Globally, women constitute 70 percent of the health workforce and are more likely to be front-line health workers, especially nurses, midwives and community health workers. They are also a major participant in health facility service staff- such as catering, cleaners, laundry etc.-and thus their chances to be in direct exposure to the virus increases manifold. The disproportionate



and neglected representation of women as “corona warrior” can be reflected in number of reported cases where there is the lack of correct size of personal protection kits.

Adding to this, women and girls also have regular and unique needs in terms of menstrual hygiene, maternal and reproductive healthcare. However, these needs are less likely to be sufficiently addressed, especially in case of refugee women and rural and marginalised areas where restrictive social norms and stereotypes are always in play. The economic constraint in the form of disruptions in supply chains and closure of nearby access points are worsening the case of period poverty in almost all the countries across the world. A research report from development and humanitarian organization Plan International has found that the Covid-19 pandemic is leaving people struggling to manage their periods. They surveyed health professionals in 30 countries and 73% said restricted access to products through shortages or disrupted supply chains is a major issue.

68% pointed to restricted access to facilities to change, clean and dispose of period products during the crisis has being a fundamental problem and over half (58%) said an increase in the price of products is exacerbating period poverty during the lockdown. Additionally, the lack of personal space, rise in stigma and shameful or harmful cultural practices, inadequate clean water and less hygienic environment to dispose products are making period poverty worse under lockdown. While charities, food and hygiene banks are trying to bridge this gap through their distribution drive, the economic fallout and restricted physical interactions seem to push the situation into abyss.

Moreover, the sexual exploitation, gender-based violence and cases of unwanted and teenage pregnancies have recorded a major surge in the graph. Even in the past, such cases increased during the 2013-16 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, in some communities by as much as 65 percent. This scenario can be explained by taking maximum factors into account such as economic stress, quarantines and social isolation, the potential breakdown of societal infrastructures or family separation in conflict or fragile contexts, reduced access to services, or the inability to escape abusive partners, among others. (World Bank Report: Gender dimensions of Covid-19 Pandemic, 2020)

The closure of schools and other educational institutions are putting many adolescent girls at the risk of early marriages, especially when the adults in the home are hospitalized or deceased, and children stay alone or under the care of strangers or in case of economic fallout. Moreover, reports from the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone and Democratic Republic of Congo indicate that sexual exploitation was common by state officials and community members in charge of enforcing the quarantine.



## The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women and Girls and COVID-19

Globally,

**243** million



women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.

**The number is likely to INCREASE as security, health, and money worries heighten tensions and strains are accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions.**

Emerging data shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and particularly domestic violence, has **INTENSIFIED**.

In **France**, reports of domestic violence have increased by **30%** since the lockdown on March 17.



In **Cyprus and Singapore** helplines have registered an increase in calls of **30%** and **33%**, respectively.

In **Argentina** emergency calls for domestic violence cases have increased by **25%** since the lockdown on March 20.

Increased cases of domestic violence and demand for emergency shelter have also been reported in **Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States**.

As stay-at-home orders expand to contain the spread of the virus, women with violent partners increasingly find themselves isolated from the people and resources that can help them.

**87,000** women were intentionally killed in 2017. The majority of these killings were committed by an intimate partner or family member of the victim.

Violence against women and girls is pervasive but at the same time widely under-reported. Less than **40%** of women who experience violence report these crimes or seek help of any sort.

The global cost of violence against women had previously been estimated at approximately

**US\$1.5** trillion  
That figure can only be rising as violence increases now, and continues in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The surge in COVID-19 cases is straining even the most advanced and best-resourced health systems to the breaking point, including those at the front line in violence response.



Domestic violence shelters are reaching capacity, or unable to take new victims due to lockdown and social distancing measures. In other cases, they are being re-purposed to serve as health centers.

National responses to COVID-19 must include:



**Services to address violence against women and girls**, including increased resources to support shelters, hotlines and online counselling. These essential services should be expanded and adapted to the crisis context to ensure survivors' access to support.



**A strong message from law enforcement that impunity will not be tolerated.** Police and Justice actors must ensure that incidents of VAWG are given high priority and care must be taken to address the manifestations of violence emerging in the context of COVID 19.



**Psychosocial support** for women and girls affected by the outbreak, gender-based violence survivors, frontline health workers and other frontline social support staff must be prioritized.



Source- United Nations Women

### 3. Impacts on Psychological Well Being

In 2000, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Gender to be a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness. They said that “gender determines the differential power and control men and women have over the socioeconomic determinants of their mental health and lives”.

However, in pandemics like the current one, the duo of unpaid family care giving to recovered patients and additional domestic responsibilities, right from childcare to managing without domestic help, affects the psychological well being of women across the globe. The invisible contribution via unpaid work has real impacts on formal economy as well. In Latin America the value of unpaid work is estimated to represent between 15.2 percent (Ecuador) and 25.3 percent (Costa Rica) of GDP. According to “Time To Care”, a report by Oxfam, women and girls spend 3.26 billion hours of unpaid care work each and every day, making a contribution to the Indian economy of Rupees 19 lakh crore per year, which is equivalent to 20 times the entire education budget of India. However, beyond of such fancy statistics, there lies much deeper implications of such increased burdens on lives of women, especially for those who are working remotely in quarantine and dealing with constant demand of proving their efficiency at work. However, this doesn't imply that women' engagement in caregiving should be totally rebelled against. But the fact is that asking for support in maintaining these chores, in many households, is met with physical, verbal and sexual abuses and during crisis, certain phases of women's lives such as perimenopause / menopause, pregnancy or soon after childbirth, uncomfortable menstruation etc. add another layer of burden.



## Conclusion

This is undoubtedly the universally acknowledged fact that pandemics expose and amplify the existing inequalities and it further leads to the varied severity of impacts of crisis on various segments of society. Such was the case of Ebola virus outbreak, Zika virus outbreak and other countless moments in history. Covid-19 too holds no exception and it needs a whole-of-society response to match its sheer scale and complexity. This can only be insured when policies taken up by governments, non-governmental organisations and civil society are unbiased and thus acknowledge and address needs of people irrespective of their sexual orientation by formulate policies that take pre-existing conditions into account to provide a tailored approach.

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