

What have we learned about gender equality during the pandemic?

BY VANITA NAYAK MUKHERJEE AND SHREE BAPHNA, DAWN

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of hard-won gains for gender equality. Notwithstanding women's biological advantage of being less susceptible to contracting the SARS-COV2 infection and lower death rates from it as compared to men, the social and economic fallout of the pandemic has played out adversely and exacerbated gender inequalities. Multi-layered intersectional identities of race, class, caste, sexual orientation and gender identities, ethnicity, age, ability religion and migrant/citizenship status in the South (and the North) have negatively impacted women's access to healthcare, as well as their economic and educational opportunities.

The pandemic and resulting economic lockdown are a potent cocktail with deleterious economic fallouts that create a domino effect in many spheres of women's lives. Women account for less than 40 percent of the global

workforce,¹ but have incurred an estimated 54 percent of job losses. There are several reasons for this. One, unemployment has disproportionately hit feminized sectors such as services and hospitality, where up to nine of every ten workers are women.² Two, in some developing countries, women workers in the informal sector (92%) outnumber men (87%). And across the globe, 56 percent of all countries report a higher percentage of women workers than men in the informal sector.³ During the first month of the pandemic, informal workers experienced income drops of 60 percent globally, and 82 percent in Asia and Latin America.⁴ Three, women entrepreneurs face specific challenges with lack

of financial support, increase in unpaid domestic work and constraints in mobility during the pandemic like in Bangladesh. And in China, women farm owners experienced more challenges with resource allocations, and were left more vulnerable to the long-term pandemic impacts than male farm owners.⁵

As a result, income gains made by women over the last ten years have declined drastically,⁶ and women are more likely than men to report a drop in income and/or in financial support⁷ from family.⁸ Of the 96 million people that the pandemic could potentially push into poverty, a report from UN Women states that nearly half

1 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FPV_Issue-Paper-1_Access-to-Medicines_-Why-Should-Feminists-Care-2.pdf
2 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-32_The-Pandemic-as-a-Portal.pdf
3 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf
4 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-32_The-Pandemic-as-a-Portal.pdf

5 <https://emerge.ucsd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/covid-19-and-gender-quarterly-report-oct-dec-2020.pdf>

6 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-32_The-Pandemic-as-a-Portal.pdf

7 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-32_The-Pandemic-as-a-Portal.pdf

8 H. Lewis, The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism, Atlantic Magazine, April 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>

(47 million) are women and girls.⁹ Job losses for women, combined with an increase in domestic labour at home and care work for their families have further reinforced barriers to economic equality.¹⁰ Unpaid care work has increased by up to 49 percent among women.¹¹

Economic stress caused by the pandemic has impacted young girls negatively, leading to gender-based exclusions. In Asia, girls have been quitting school education during COVID-19 to supplement household income in menial jobs¹² With the closure of schools, and education moving online, the exclusion of the poor, especially girls, has intensified with limited access to digital gadgets like laptops and smartphones.¹³ Even as schools open, the combination of education

budget cuts¹⁴ and families under financial strain make it likely that more girls will continue to remain out of school in order to help with domestic and care work. Under extreme economic duress, there are reports of trafficking in girls,¹⁵ and an increase in child marriages during the pandemic.¹⁶

The lockdown and restrictions on movement during the pandemic has also led to an increase in domestic violence, as women were shut at home with their perpetrators for long periods of time, with limited access to support services.¹⁷ As resources are reallocated to fight the pandemic and health-care services diverted to combat COVID-19, other services considered 'non-essential' are being affected. Among them, according to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, are a range of sexual and reproductive

health services.¹⁸ They include maternal healthcare, contraception, abortion and gynaecological services that largely affect women and girls. The risk of unwanted pregnancies is especially high for girls with serious consequences for their life-opportunities.¹⁹ Within the health system, women frontline healthcare and services workers constitute around 70 percent globally,²⁰ and are at the lower ends of health worker hierarchies. They experience poorer work conditions, low wages and job insecurity.

Due to vaccine shortages and delays in receiving supplies around the world, there is a likelihood of rationing in households, with preference given to males. In India, nearly 24 percent more men than women were vaccinated during the height of the pandemic's second wave in

9 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>

10 S. Kenward, Covid-19 vaccination strategies must ensure equity for all women, 2 February, 2021, <https://swhr.org/covid-19-vaccination-strategies-must-ensure-equity-for-all-women/>

11 https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-32_The-Pandemic-as-a-Portal.pdf

12 <https://theprint.in/world/girls-are-quitting-school-to-work-in-covid-hit-rural-india-nepal-other-asian-countries/506619/>

13 Country level data on the gender gap in mobile ownership and mobile internet use indicate women consistently lag behind men, <https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2021.pdf>;

14 A. Mendez Acosta and D. Evans, COVID-19 and Girls' Education: What We Know So Far and What We Expect, 2 October 2020, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen>

15 <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-19-poor-marginalised-vulnerability-child-trafficking-ngos-1812519-2021-06-08;>

16 <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/child-marriages-during-pandemic>; <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-19-poor-marginalised-vulnerability-child-trafficking-ngos-1812519-2021-06-08;>

17 https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/20201119_SDD_Policy_Paper_Covid-19.pdf;

18 Gavi, Why a gender lens is needed for the COVID-19 response, 16 April 2020, <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/why-gender-lens-needed-covid19-response>

19 E. Janoch, M. Rodriguez and B. Turner, Our best Shot: Women Frontline health workers around the world are keeping you safe FROM COVID-19, 25 March 2021, <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/health/our-best-shot-women-frontline-health-workers-around-the-world-are-keeping-you-safe-from-covid-19/>

20 A. Linde and A. Gonzalez Laya, What the COVID-19 pandemic tells us about gender equality, 9 May 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/what-the-covid-19-pandemic-tells-us-about-gender-equality/>

spring 2021.²¹ There are fears of domestic violence if a woman gets vaccinated before the male ‘head of household’ does.²² Women with disabilities face specific challenges of ‘access’ – related to a lack of sensitivity in designing physical spaces and apps for vaccination services. Similarly, women who are sex workers face discrimination, abuse and lack of access to adequate information, or documentation required to receive COVID-19 vaccinations.

The pattern of gendered pandemic effects in COVID 19 is broadly similar to those witnessed during the HIV/AIDS outbreak, Ebola, and Zika outbreaks. This emphasizes the need to address what the British *Lancet* journal calls the “structural determinants of gender inequality – e.g., political participation and economic systems” – and the “intersections with other inequities” to combat COVID-19 and its detrimental gender impacts.²³ Many countries have not reported sex-disaggregated data, critical for tracking gender impacts. According to this *Lancet* report, only 48 percent and 36 percent of 199 countries reported sex-disaggregated data

on, respectively, COVID-19 cases and deaths.²⁴ And few countries have data that account for gender identity and typically exclude transgender and non-binary people.²⁵ Disaggregated data is key for gauging the nature and extent of gender and other manifestations of inequalities during the pandemic, and to design appropriate policies and programmes for interventions.

21 <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/fewer-women-than-men-taking-covid-shots-in-india-s-vaccination-drive-1810158-2021-06-02>

22 Choosing to challenge gender inequity in the COVID-19 Vaccine rollout, Options, 5 March 2021, <https://options.co.uk/news/choosing-to-challenge-gender-inequity-in-the-covid-19-vaccine-rollout>

23 <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2821%2901651-2>

24 Ibid.

25 <https://globalhealth5050.org/the-sex-gender-and-covid-19-project/>