

## A study on Gender Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has affected different spheres of life from individual, family, society, country to international level. The entire humanity is facing this crisis from different perspective of life. It is of immense importance to discuss the possible gender implications of this pandemic so as to raise the effectiveness of containment efforts and minimize the potential negative impact. Data in most of the countries shows that men have been 50-80% more likely to die following diagnosis than women. Although the reasons for this trend yet remain unclear, initial research points to the pre-existing health condition or chronic diseases (heart disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory illness, hypertension, high blood pressure), risky health-seeking behaviours (i.e. smoking and alcohol consumption) among men, lack of consciousness about hygiene, as well as genetic and immunological differences are found responsible for such fatalities. Moreover, women and girls can be affected in a particular way and in some cases, face more negative impacts than men. This study attempts to find out the economic and health impacts of this pandemic on women and girls. Moreover, it also makes a study on the gender based domestic violence and exploitation, gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work, gender implication for education, devastating risks for women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The study is based on secondary data from different reports of World Bank, UN and UNFPA and other published sources.

**Keywords:** Women and Girls, economic impact, health impact, domestic violence, unpaid care work.

### Introduction

Pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China named as COVID-19 on 11 February 2020 and declared as pandemic on 12 March, 2020 by WHO becomes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. This virus has spread to every continent except Antarctica (UNDP, 2020). Though it is a health pandemic, it has devastating effect on every sphere of life at individual, family, social, economic, political and international level. This pandemic has become the greatest challenge as the entire humanity has faced since the Second World War. It is of immense importance to discuss the possible gender implications of this pandemic so as to raise the effectiveness of containment efforts and minimize the potential negative impact. IASC (2020) in its interim guidance states gender norms and pre-existing inequalities disproportionately impact women and girls in this emergency. Studies and Policy notes of World Bank, UNICEF, United Nations and UNFPA clearly depict the picture of possible gender implications of this Pandemic all over the world and recommend different measures so as to reduce the negative implications on women and girls. Recognizing the extent to which the COVID-19 outbreaks affects women and men differently (IASC, 2020), male fatalities are found more both in countries experience more male COVID-19 cases as compared to female cases and in those which experience more female COVID-19 cases. Data in most of the countries shows that men have been 50-80% more likely to die following diagnosis than women. In India, according to Ministry of Health data, male made up about 75% of both cases and deaths respectively (Mohanty Kenneth, 2020). Although the reasons for this trend yet remain unclear, initial research points to the pre-existing health condition or chronic diseases (heart disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory illness, hypertension, high blood pressure), risky health-seeking behaviours (i.e. smoking and alcohol consumption) among men, lack of consciousness about hygiene, as well as genetic and immunological

differences are found responsible for such fatalities. Likewise, gender differences in physical activity, eating habits, occupational exposure to smoke and dust, etc. are associated risk factors could play a role. Considering the evidences of infectious disease outbreaks similar to COVID, World Bank Group's policy note on Gender Dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) points out that women and girls can be affected in a particular way and in some cases, face more negative impacts than men. Evidences from prior outbreaks show that this crisis could exact a massive toll on women and girls (UN, 2000; UNFA, 2020) on different spheres of life.

**Objective:**

Under the above background this study attempts to find out the possible impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in different ways

**Method:**

The study is analytical in nature. Different reports such as policy brief of United Nation, World Bank, Inter Agency Standing Committee Interim Guidance and different websites are explored to find out the relevant information.

**Result and Discussion**

**Economic Impact:**

Considering the emerging evidence, the UN policy brief (2020) 'The impact of COVID-19 on Women' suggests that **women's economic and productive lives** (economic impacts) will be affected disproportionately and differently from men. Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single-parent households. Their capacity to absorb economic shocks is therefore less than that of men. As women take on greater care demands at home, their jobs will also be disproportionately affected by cuts and lay-offs. Such impacts risk rolling back the already fragile gains made in female labor force participation, limiting women's ability to support themselves and their families, especially for female-headed households. In many countries, the first round of layoffs has been particularly acute in the services sector, including retail, hospitality and tourism, where women are overrepresented. World Bank policy note (2020) states that due to food insecurity, girls and women would decrease their caloric intake in favor of men and boys. The situation is worse in developing economies where the vast majority of women's employment – 70 per cent is in the informal economy with few protections against dismissal or for paid sick leave and limited access to social protection (ILO,2018)

**Health Impacts:**

Women are more likely to expose to different types of health hazards directly and indirectly as a result of this Pandemic and Lockdown. Women may be at risk or exposure due to occupational sex-segregation which can be considered as **occupational health hazard**. Globally Women make up 70% of health work force more likely to front-line health workers especially nurses, midwives and community health workers, health facility service staff are at risk to be exposed to the virus (IASC, 2020; UN Policy Brief, 2000). As an example, women are more present in client-facing roles while men concentrate in logistics or security. Providing protective equipment and materials and COVID-19 testing to higher-risk populations will be of utmost need to prevent their contagion. Medical practitioners and health care workers must be provided special status and facilities to cope up with pandemics.

There arises threat to **Sexual and Reproductive Health** of women, which becomes the central challenge to provide health, rights and wellbeing of women and girls. The shift in resources towards addressing the public health emergency can entail disruptions to key health services for women and girls, such as reproductive such as antenatal care, delivery care and sexual health

services or family planning and other critical services (World Bank, 2000; UNFA,2000; IASC, 2020). The diversion of attention and critical resources away from these provisions may result in exacerbated maternal mortality and morbidity, increased rates of adolescent (teenage) pregnancies, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (UN,2020).

#### **Gender-based Violence and Exploitation:**

The COVID-19 pandemic combines with economic and social stresses and measures to restrict contact and movement also increase women's and girls' vulnerability to **gender-based violence and exploitation** (United Nations, 2000; UNFPA, 2020; IASC, 2020). Crowded homes, substance abuse, limited access to services and reduced peer support are exacerbating these conditions. Alongside the increase in numbers, violence against women is taking on a new complexity: Abusers are exploiting the inability of women to call for help or escape; women risk being thrown out on the street with nowhere to go. At the same time, support services are struggling. Judicial, police and health services that are the first responders for women are overwhelmed, have shifted priorities, or are otherwise unable to help. Civil society groups are affected by lockdown or reallocation of resources. Some domestic violence shelters are full; others have had to close or have been repurposed as health centres.

#### **Unpaid Care Works:**

The COVID-19 global crisis is **deepening the gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work**. The UN Policy Brief (2020) states that before COVID-19 became a universal pandemic, women were doing three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men and they are at the forefront of the COVID-19 response as the default unpaid family caregivers and the majority of unpaid or poorly paid community health workers. The world's formal economies and the maintenance of our daily lives are built on the invisible and unpaid labor of women and girls. With children out of school, intensified care needs of older persons and ill family members, and overwhelmed health services, demands for care work in a COVID19 world have intensified exponentially. Recent data shows that adolescent girls spend significantly more hours on chores compared to their male counterparts (UNICEF, 2020). School closures do not just mean that girls are taking on more chores at home, it could also lead to millions more girls dropping out of school before they complete their education, especially girls living in poverty, girls with disabilities or living in rural, isolated locations. Due to closers of school, reduction of formal and informal supply of childcare, the demand for unpaid childcare provision is falling more heavily on women, not only because of the existing structure of the workforce, but also because of social norms. The lack of childcare support is particularly problematic for essential workers who have care responsibilities. Across countries, as women are over-represented among older persons, care for and by older persons is also a critical need in the face of COVID-19.

#### **Gender implications for education:**

Social and gender norms will play a role in educational investment decisions. Intra-household allocation of resources for home schooling and/or at the community-level might be redirected to boys over girls (World Bank Group Policy Note, 2020). Among boys, pressure to contribute to the family income may also increase with the tightening economic conditions, leading to permanent school dropout.

#### **Impacts in Humanitarian, Fragile Settings and on Human Rights:**

The COVID-19 pandemic poses **devastating risks for women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**. Disruptions to critical health, humanitarian and development programmes can have life and death consequences where health systems may already been overwhelmed or largely non-existent. More than 50 per cent of all maternal deaths occur from complications in pregnancy and childbirth in countries affected by fragility, further impacts on the health sector are likely to drive this number up even further. In settings across the conflict landscape, women – be they displaced, refugee, rural, poor or otherwise marginalised – face isolation, the concerted spread of misinformation and a lack of access to critical technologies. In such areas, even violence such as sexual exploitation perpetrated by public officials, community members in charge of enforcing

quarantine measures or by outsiders transporting goods are of particular concern (World Bank Policy Notes, 2020)

Besides the above, migrants workers, predominantly women are also facing tremendous hurdles because of travel restrictions and self-isolation. IASC Interim Guidance (2020) states that non availability of passports/identity documents, and/or financially dependent on jobs may put them at particular risks. Moreover, there is also a clear preponderance of cases and fatalities amongst the older sections of affected populations, and as with women and girls, the needs, rights and contributions of older people in emergencies are often neglected. Older women are more likely to have lower or no pensions and live in poverty, a manifestation of life-long inequality and discrimination. This may in turn exacerbate the impact of the virus, their meaningful participation and access to protective items, food, water, information and health services, as well as measures taken in response to the virus such as self-isolation (IASC Interim Guidance, 2020).

### **Conclusion:**

Above discussion shows that COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the both gender (male and female) in a different ways. There is every possibility to have adverse impacts on transgender which needs special attention on humanitarian ground. The World Bank Group in its policy notes (2020), Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Interim Guidance ((2020), United Nations' Policy Brief (2020) have discussed elaborately the different gender implications of COVID-19 pandemic and considering that this pandemic will amplify and heighten all existing inequalities recommend different measures. The Policy Brief of UN (2020) puts emphasis that in order to build a more just and resilient world, there must be inclusion and representation of women in the all national responses plans and priorities their right, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection. For more impactful policy response the Policy Brief emphasises three cross-cutting priorities: 1) Ensure Women' equal representation in all COVID-19 response Planning and Decision-making 2) Drive Transformative Change for Equality by addressing the care economy, paid and unpaid and 3) Target Women and Girls in all efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Considering all the possible gender implications of COVID-19 Pandemic, the IASC Interim Guidance (2020) also advocates the participation of Women and Girls- and their respective women's networks and youth rights organizations as decision makers in responding to this crisis to achieve most effective humanitarian response. Based on the existing evidence and emerging trends the Policy Note of World Bank Group (2020) summarises key gender differentiated transmission channels and impacts on outcomes across the three areas of endowments, economic conditions, and agency and emphasises the need for a broad research agenda for a better gender informed response, recovery, and resilience-building for this crisis, as well as for future ones on direct health outcome e.g., contagion and fatalities by age, sex, income and living conditions and specific group of women (e.g. pregnant women) and indirect health outcome such as reproductive and maternal health, mental health and other aspects such as education, poverty and living conditions, response effects and active participation of men and women in prevention, containment, surveillance and recovery efforts in order to better understand their differential contributions to the response, and with the objective of improving its effectiveness in this and future similar crises. The Policy also recommends a number of emergency, medium and long term measures on health, education and economic conditions considering the gender implications of this pandemic for action. Putting women and girls at the centre of economies will fundamentally drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all, support a more rapid recovery, and place us back on a footing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals( UN policy notes, 2020).

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