

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

Dr. Alka Rani Agrawal

Associate Professor & Head,
Department of English
N K B M G PG College, Chandausi U.P.

Srijana Agrawal

B.A. LLB IIInd yr School of Law,
UPES, Dehradun U.K.

Abstract

In an effort to combat the Pandemic Covid-19, the whole world is struggling and practicing different measures. One most common is to keep all public dealing areas, factories, transport, markets, offices and School- Colleges closed or to say, under lockdown. India too remained in the throes of nationwide lockdown for a long duration; the impact of which is being felt by different communities and groups in many ways. It is hard time for every sector and individual. Now, even when the unlock has been started, the School-Colleges are still closed for uncertain periods, which has made providing education to all aspirants, the most difficult task. The same challenge is there for private jobs and individual working sectors. Apparently, the challenge is big for both boys and girls but undoubtedly, girls education and socio economic position of women along with their well-being is affected the most. In India, female sector already suffers from disproportionate care burdens causing negative impacts on their Educational and Economic empowerment which causes a serious threat to their social upliftment and gender equality. Here, in this paper, the focus will be on how, during the biggest public health crises of Pandemic COVID-19, girls' socio-economic and educational status is drastically affected. Besides, during these pandemic situations, their family conditions have in reality increased their problems and even worsen their already critical situation in conservative Indian social structure.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Girls' Education, Combat the Challenge*

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- Dr. Alka Rani Agrawal

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At present, the whole world grapples with this monstrous, insidious virus COVID-19 and the crisis deeply impacts women, men, students, workers, officials and all other differently. While men make up the majority of those who have died from the virus, women all over the world bear the brunt of disproportionate care burdens, disruptions in income and education, poor access to physical & mental health and other essential services along with a greater risk of being deprived of their legal, family and social rights and gender discrimination and Violence at home as well as work place. For most Indian women already living in poverty, these impacts can be a shock to their economic stability overall and impede their ability to purchase critical necessities, such as medicine and food. Governments the world over are struggling to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. While some voices have flagged the impacts on women, gender concerns are not yet shaping the decisions that mainly male leaders are making. At the same time, many of the impacts of COVID-19 are hitting women of all sectors throughout the world at the hardest.

The first focus is on some drastic impacts of this Pandemic COVID-19 on women across the world generally. After that some initiatives taken and should be taken at the initial stage at present for instant relief to suffering women so that our long-term existing and to be launched policies for women empowerment may bear some fruits in future. The foremost and very little discussed impact on women as Individual during this time is their excessive exploitation and overburden of work and that too at home. Almost all over the world, women and adolescent girls take on disproportionate care burdens with negative impacts on their economic empowerment. As per a survey, due to social norms, women already perform 76.2% of the total hours of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men. During public health crises of COVID-19, care burdens dramatically increase to include caring for the sick, vulnerable elderly family members, and children who are home due to school closures. This not only exposes women and girls to contracting the virus from infected family members, but also reduces time spent on generating an income, operating a business, or

other economic activity. Now, formal sector female employees with children are balancing one or more of the work (off course if they still have it), such as childcare, homeschooling, elder care, and general routine housework. Female-headed households are particularly vulnerable. No doubt, COVID-19 outbreak has increased young women's duties such as caring for elderly and ill family members, as well as for siblings who are out of school. Girls, especially those from marginalized communities and with disabilities, may be particularly affected by the secondary impacts of the outbreak. Economic stress on families due to the outbreak has put women at greater risk of exploitation, child labour and gender-based violence. Global lockdowns have also locked down women's autonomy; reinforcing the attitudes and practices that regard women as second class and hold them back. This is the most neglected problem related to day- to-day sufferings of women at present time of disease outbreak.

As nothing has been done so far in this direction, policy makers must pay direct attention to what is happening in peoples' homes and support an equal sharing of the burden of care between women and men. There is a great opportunity to UNSTEREOTYPE gender role that is playing out in households in many parts of the world. One concrete action for governments, particularly for male leaders, is to join the campaigns like **HeForShe** and stay tuned for more information about **HeforShe@home**, whereby men and boys are enlisted to ensure that they are doing their fair share at home and alleviating some of the care burdens that fall disproportionately on women. Secondly, we should ensure that hotlines and services for all victims of domestic abuse are considered 'essential services' and are kept open and law enforcement is sensitized to the need to be responsive to calls from victims. This will ensure that the pandemic does not inadvertently lead to more trauma, injury and deaths of women during the quarantine period due to house abuse and exploitation. Another Important aspect to discuss is that this crisis is having a very adverse impact on women's **physical & mental health and safety**. Apart from the direct

impacts of the disease, women may find it hard to access much needed maternal health services given that all services are being directed to essential medical needs. Evidence from past epidemics also indicates that healthcare resources are often diverted from routine health services. This further reduces the already limited access of many young women to reproductive health services, as well as maternal, new-born and child health services. Availability of contraception, timely abortion and services for other needs have disrupted. Even deliveries at hospitals are affected, thus, bringing life- long health problems to women. Women's personal safety is also at risk. The very conditions that are needed to battle the disease; isolation, social distancing, restrictions on freedom of movement are, perversely, the very conditions that feed into the hands of abusers who now find state-sanctioned circumstances tailor-made for unleashing abuse. Further, as majority of frontline health workers especially nurses are women, their risk of infection is higher. By some estimates 67% global health force is women. So, while attention must be paid to ensuring safe conditions for ALL caregivers, special attention is needed for female nurses and caregivers in access to personal protective equipment like masks, hand gloves, sanitizers, PPE kits etc. It is part of Government and Health system duty to ensure that the needs of female nurses and doctors are integrated into every aspect of the response effort. They deserve all the support we can provide right now, particularly support in terms of much-needed critical medical equipment. At a minimum, this means ensuring that personal hygiene products such as sanitary pads and tampons are made available free of cost for female caregivers and frontline responders as part of personal protective equipment. This will ensure that they do not face unnecessary discomforts in already challenging situations. Besides, rigorous protection and safeguarding of women from gender-based violence must be emphasized in all policies, information, guidance at all stages & all over the world.

It is even more striking and cause of stress among women at present that most of the key decision-makers in the process of designing and executing the pandemic response are men. This is not surprising given that women still do not enjoy the same degree of participation in major decision-making bodies—governments, parliaments, cabinets or corporations- as men do. Only 25 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide are women, and less than 10 per cent of Heads of State or Government are women. So even educated and well settled women too always feel a kind of legging behind by their absence in decision-making power in this pandemic. So, it is hoped that leaders will soon find a way to include women in response and

recovery decision-making. Whether at the local, municipal or national level, bringing the voices of women into decision-making will lead to better outcomes; we know from many settings that diversity of views will enrich a final decision. Alongside this, policy makers should leverage the capacities of women's organizations. Reaching out to enlist women's groups will help ensure a more robust community response as their considerable networks can be leveraged to disseminate and amplify social distancing messaging. We have seen that during *The Ebola* outbreak, the involvement of women's groups had helped a lot, and the same can be this time of COVID 19 too. As the whole world is surrounded by the virus, it is inflicting more severe psychological scars on women. A recent review of research found that quarantine is linked with *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) symptoms, confusion, and anger - the effects of which can be long-lasting. Anxiety, excessive workload, nervousness, fears of contamination, constant reassurance seeking behaviors, panic attacks, sleep disturbance, lack of outing and feelings of helplessness are some of the other possible ramifications. In India, the government seems to have overlooked the need to formally integrate domestic violence and mental health repercussions into the public health preparedness and emergency response plans against the pandemic. But on individual level, there is plenty we can do to insulate ourselves from the ramifications of being restricted within the walls of our homes, such as:

- Taking breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media.
- Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- Taking care of physical hygiene.
- Taking deep breaths, stretching or meditating.
- Trying to eat healthy, well-balanced meals.
- Exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep.
- Avoiding alcohol and drugs.
- Making time to unwind.
- Trying to do some other activities you enjoy.
- Connecting with others through audio-video mediums.
- Talking with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.
- While working from home, it is important for the family members to build a productive routine by engaging in activities like music, meditation, playing indoor games, watching movies etc.

-Keep up good connectedness with friends and distant family members through digital platform.

-Practicing social distancing but not emotional distancing.

-Allowing yourself to access nature and sunlight wherever possible.

-Eating nutritious and balance food and staying hydrated are the key to boost immunity.

If feeling stress or depression, we can also apply **A.P.P.L.E** Technique, i.e., **Acknowledge:** Notice and acknowledge the uncertainty as it comes to mind. **Pause:** Don't react as you normally do. Don't react at all. Pause and breathe. **Pull back:** Tell yourself this is just the worry talking, and this apparent need for certainty is not helpful and not necessary. It is only a thought or feeling. Don't believe everything you think. Thoughts are not statements or facts. **Let go:** Let go of the thought or feeling. It will pass. You don't have to respond to them. You might imagine them floating away in a bubble or cloud. **Explore:** Explore the present moment, because right now, in this moment, all is well. This will help a lot in relieving the pressure and tension.

Next comes **Girls' Education** that is severely disrupted with school closures by crises more than boys', with lasting impacts on the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the economy. In areas where social norms lead to greater disparities between girls and boys in enrollment and retention in school, temporary disruption as a result of a crisis such as COVID-19 can lead to permanent removal from school. Families being unable to pay school fees resulting from loss of income during the crisis will cause long-term negative impacts on girls' access to opportunities and resources to improve their lives and ultimately, on their educational, economic, and health outcomes. The government's STEP scheme or Support to Training and Employment Programme for women is trustworthy from educational purpose during the COVID-19 times. STEP aims at providing skills and competencies to women which will lead to employability. Under the scheme, a particular project is provided for a duration of 5 years, depending upon the nature of it, kinds of activities involved and the number of beneficiaries to be undertaken. For girl students who are compelled to leave their studies on account of COVID-19 consequences, this Scheme will provide help in sectors including agriculture, horticulture, handicraft, computer handlooms, tailoring, etc. With this, it'll also provide help and support in skills like spoken English, IT and computer, travel and tourism, hospitality, etc. to empower women of all sectors. Amid COVID-19 factor, The Modi-led government has announced to continue to promote the campaign **Beti Bachao, Beti Parao**

as it works to make the 2020 decade the “decade of Indian Women”. The scheme 'Beti Bachao Beti Padho' revolves around the notion of female feticides. this campaign aims at eradication of female feticides and to make girls socially and financially self-reliant through education. The movement also revolves around the actions to bridge the growing gap between the girl and boy infants so that to empower women in long run.

Economic challenges during the outbreak pose a serious threat to young women’s work and business activity and expose them to increased risk of exploitation or abuse. Many of the industries in the formal economy directly affected by quarantines and lockdowns; travel, tourism, restaurants, food production have very high female labour force participation. Women also constitute a large percentage of the informal economy in informal markets and agriculture around the world. In both developed and developing economies, many informal sector jobs- domestic workers, caregivers are mostly done by women who typically lack health insurance and have no social safety net to fall back on. Another most neglected problem is of migrant domestic women workers who are in a more vulnerable situation, with unclear immigration status and lack of legal protection. In situations where those migrant domestic workers come from less-developed countries, their families back home are dependent of their remittance to survive in the country of origin of the worker. In Philippines, those remittances account for 9% of their GDP, therefore impacting their country of origin's economy. Young women facing severe economic shocks are more likely to take on high-risk work for their economic survival. Responses to the outbreak must protect and support young women’s economic empowerment. Indian Government

has taken initiative of some Financial Help to women During Lockdown. To empower Poor widows during this Pandemic, Government has announced financial help of 1,000 rupees (\$13) for the next three months from April 1 through direct cash transfers, which would help around 10 million women below poverty line. About 200 million women who have bank accounts opened under an existing government financial inclusion initiative will get 500 rupees each over the same period of time. Some help is provided through free RASHION and GAS to poor women. But till date, no scheme or help is provided for Middle class community women.

The impact of outbreak on women due to COVID-19 also threatens the **legal rights** of women on land along with stability of food security in the developing world. Women comprise on average 43% of the agricultural workforce in developing countries and are estimated to account for two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers. Limits to global food supply could require countries to focus on domestic production, which puts women at a greater economic disadvantage as their land rights are already less secure globally. Additionally, this will likely increase the risk of violence and exploitation by male sharecroppers and credit services in countries where social norms restrict women from harvesting the land they own. In addition, many women sell agricultural products in local and informal markets; as markets close due to the COVID-19 crisis, women will experience further losses in income. Women's **employment** in the health sector disproportionately exposes them to COVID-19. Women comprise about 70% of global health care workers and are front and center to exposure to COVID-19 and stigma within their communities for working near COVID patients. Additionally, the gender pay gap in the global health workforce is 11%; lower pay means decreased ability to purchase necessary supplies or access care. The undervaluing of women's work hurts women and healthcare systems, and underinvestment holds systems back from preparedness in times of crisis. Unemployment and women's overrepresentation in the informal sector heightens their vulnerabilities during crises. The International Labor Organization estimates that 195 million jobs could be eliminated globally due to the pandemic, with a majority in sectors predominated by women. Furthermore, over 740 million women around the world work in the informal sector and as low-wage or domestic workers, i.e. housekeeping, childcare etc. are particularly vulnerable to being exploited for their labor during COVID-19. Furthermore, the 26% gender gap in labor force participation now seems to be widening further and the U.S. Department of Labor

reported in April 2020 that women held 60% of the 700k jobs that have been eliminated in the U.S. so far due to COVID-19. In India, 6.3 million women's self-help groups - microfinance initiatives that borrow small amounts of money at subsidized interest rates from state-owned banks - will get 2 million rupee collateral-free loans. This is double the amount they get currently and would benefit 70 million households. But this is not enough. Much is needed to be done for making women independent. The U.S. Congress included \$3.5 billion in grants for childcare providers in the CARES Act in March 2020. However, this is insufficient to sustain most childcare providers who have lost work.

Indian Government has taken some initiative through some schemes which are very useful at this time of global crisis, such as **Mahila-E-Haat** is a bilingual online marketing platform which helps aspiring women entrepreneurs, self-help group, and NGOs to showcase their products to the world. The platform is open to all Indian women above the age of 18 and is very user-friendly and provides an easy sign-in process with convenient payment modes. **Mahila Shakti Kendra** that is another important initiative by the government is the Mahila Shakti Kendra. Though, this scheme came into force in 2017 with the aim to empower rural women with opportunities for skill development, employment, digital literacy, health, and nutrition. This scheme is very useful in the mid of growing unemployment among migrants and other low wages women workers because it provides an interface to the rural women so that they can approach the government so as to avail their entitlements through training and capacity building. It works at four levels, national, state, district and block levels. But this again is not sufficient. Attending school may not be the only means to enabling and empowering women. The experts suggest that bailout and stimulus packages provided by governments must also include social protection measures that reflect an understanding of women's special circumstances and recognition of the care economy. This means ensuring health insurance benefits for those most in need and paid and/or sick leave for those unable to come to work because they are taking care of children or elders at home. For informal sector employees, who constitute the vast majority of the female labour force in developing economies, special efforts should be made to deliver compensatory payments. Identifying those informal sector workers will be a challenge and will need to take account of a country's particular circumstances, but it is worth the effort to ensure more equity in outcomes. Apart from COVID-19 impact on women's Individual health, Educational & Socio-Economic well-being, the most important and instantly and directly hitting impact of COVID-19 on

women is **gender-based violence**. Sources in China, France, India and almost everywhere in world have already reported that cases of gender-based violence have increased dramatically during the COVID19 crisis. Apart from this world-wide gender -based violence, the worst scenario is a high rise in matters of domestic violence which is a term used in many countries to refer to intimate partner violence, but it also encompasses child and elder abuse, and abuse by any member of a household. While women alone don't face domestic violence, the rates of violence and abuse directed at women are high, particularly from perpetrators known to them. According to the World Health Organization, one in every three women across the globe experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime; and at least 30 percent of all women in relationships have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partners. The health impacts of violence, particularly intimate partner, on women can result in injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies. Thus, around the globe, governments have Implored residents to stay home to protect themselves and others from the new coronavirus disease, COVID-19. But for domestic violence victims-the vast majority of whom are women, home is a dangerous place. Therefore, Experts have characterized an 'invisible pandemic' of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis as a 'ticking time bomb.'

It appears that in the run-up to the announcement of the nationwide lockdown on March 24th, 2020, the government failed to craft strategies to address possible fallout in several areas. One such area that went unaddressed was domestic violence. Reaching out to people facing domestic violence and in distress needs to be classified as an 'essential service' by the government. But it is still beyond reach, Therefore, we need an aggressive nationwide campaign to promote awareness about domestic violence and highlight the various modes through which complaints can be filed. National news channels, radio channels, and social media platforms must be strategically used, similar to the way, in which the government has deployed campaigns advocating for physical distancing and hand washing to combat COVID-19. Besides, Social Awareness measures are needed to be adopted. Community members should be made aware of the increased risk of violence against women during this pandemic and the need to keep in touch and support women subjected to violence. Women who are experiencing violence may find it helpful to reach out to supportive family and friends or seek support from a hotline. Citizens must be sensitized towards the increased risks of domestic

violence, and bystanders and neighbours should be urged to intervene if they suspect abuse, using tactics such as the banging on the door or ringing the bell. They should also be provided the benefit of anonymity if they choose to report a case. Besides, Hundreds of nonprofits are working to enable access to medical assistance, legal aid, counselling, 24×7 shelter needs, and so on. Therefore, in its efforts to combat COVID-19, the government must allow civil society organizations, counsellors, mental health organizations, and other service providers to come to the aid of people facing domestic violence. We are also in dire need of some Initiatives to be taken by health care sector. Health care providers should identify information about services like hotlines, shelters, rape crisis centers, counselling for survivors, including opening hours, contact details and whether these can be offered remotely, and establish referral linkages should be made available. Health managers or facility administrators need to have plans to address the safety of their health workers. Front-line providers dealing with COVID-19 might experience isolation and being socially ostracized. Providing psychosocial support, non-performance-based incentives, additional transport allowance, child-care support should also be planned for health workers. Health workers, the majority of whom are women in many settings, may be at risk for violence in their homes or in the workplace. So, Health systems have an important role to play in ensuring security for women health workers against any kind of violence during the COVID-19 outbreak this time. All stakeholders involved in COVID-19 response need to be aware of and raise awareness that physical distancing, stay at home and other measures to address this pandemic are likely to have on women who are subjected to violence. Awareness for individual efforts too is required to cope with stress at home and specially women who themselves are the victim of violence should reach out to supportive family and friends who can help practically with cooking food, child-care etc. as well as in coping with stress. There is also a need to develop a safety plan for women and their children's safety in case the violence gets worse. This includes keeping numbers of neighbors, friends and family whom you can call for or go to for help. Besides, women should be made aware to have accessible important documents, money, a few personal things to take with you if you need to leave immediately; and plan how they can exit the house and access help like transport, location , shelter etc.

Along with this, Government of India's One-Stop Centre Scheme which came into being in 2015 with the 'Nirbhaya' fund is already working for the empowerment of women in India.

This is very much helpful in the era of this global pandemic COVID-19 as the main aim of this scheme is to provide shelter, police desk, legal, medical and counseling services to the victims of violence. It has been established at locations throughout the country. It has a dedicated 24-hour helpline. The toll free number to remember is 181 besides **New India for Nari Shakti** app for instant help. But still there are so many things that are required to be done to strengthen women in India. The need of the hour is to find out priority measures to accompany both the immediate response and long-term recovery efforts for Women Empowerment specially during this time of Coronavirus pandemic, these actions and more are urgent. Now even though the unlock 5 has started and the School-Colleges may hopefully open soon; to provide education to all aspirants still appears to be the most difficult task. The same challenge is there for private jobs and individual working sectors. Apparently, the challenge is big for both boys and girls but undoubtedly, girls' education and socio-economic position of women along with their well-being is affected the most and to revive it is further a greater challenge. Thus, as a whole, Economic Empowerment, Strict Measures to End Violence Against Women, Gender Equality and Women's Physical & Mental Well Being, Peace and Safety, Protection of Women Rights, Women Oriented Government Policies, Social Initiatives and Individual Awareness, as well as Free and Compulsory Education to Women specially of deprived sector even while at home, in fields or any other workplace are some points on which focus is needed. Education, as it is clear, is the foremost way of empowering an individual and groups. In the words of American historian and President of Harvard University *Drew Faust*, "**We educate women because it changes the world.**" Building in the needs of women offers an opportunity for us to 'build back better' and there can be no better gift to our shared humanity than to implement policy actions that build a more equal world.

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