

Policy Review

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women

Health, livelihoods & domestic violence

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Introduction

Coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in late 2019 in the Wuhan city of China has directly and indirectly affected each and every sphere of life across the world. Till date it has affected more than 3.9 million people with a death toll of 270,740 the world over. Coping with a pandemic medically is hard, but more difficult is to come out of the fear and panic it has causes and can cause to the victims. However, the fear caused by potentially falling victims to the disease can itself be an overwhelming experience as it stirs up people's emotions and sensitivities. Women are mostly the victims of such sensitivities. According to the Lancet report (2020), there has not been any gender analysis of the pandemic by any government of health organization or any estimates of potential victims in preparedness phases.

Plan International (2020) highlights that the COVID-19 has interrupted our way of life and has further disrupted individuals, families and communities putting them under stress of health and economic burdens. However, there are other reasons of stress caused by the COVID-19. In times when social isolation and distancing practices are being applied, there are increased risks of violence against women, their abuse, exploitation and neglect. Past evidences inform us that diseases outbreak affected men and women differently in their day-to-day activities.

Whilst there are primary effects of the pandemic, there are secondary impacts as well, which are often missed out in policy discussions, but which have deeper social and political implications. These implications are even more difficult to understand and resolve when sex-disaggregated data is missing or incomplete. Unfortunately, affected countries have still not released their national sex disaggregated data, which is seriously hampering the creative planning or preparatory efforts in a gender-sensitive manner (Sandoiu 2020). Thus, it is of sheer importance that governments must recognize the extent of damage caused by the COVID-19 to appreciate how does the pandemic affect women and men as a fundamental step towards tackling the primary and secondary effects through equitable policies and interventions.

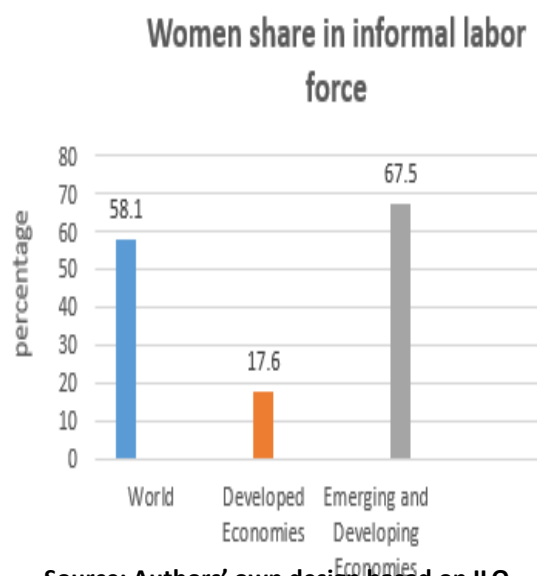
It is, as a result, absolutely vital that when we talk of a crisis, we understand how it affects communities and more so the ones already with increased vulnerabilities or marginalized characteristics. Globally, as well as more so in the context of Pakistan, one such major

marginalized section seems to be that of 'women' and the lack of differential understanding of how the COVID-19 has impacted their lives remains neglected and a huge omission considering that women provide us with most of the informal care within families. More so, during crisis, women are more prone to risks due to gendered nature of the health workforce, which include women fighting the disease at the forefront, are subjected to limiting work and economic opportunities. Quarantine measures as a response to the disease have also put women at heightened risk of violence at home and cutting them off from essential protection services and networks, which they had prior to the imposition. This will further exacerbate gender inequality and become a source of stress on women's physical and mental health.

The objectives of this policy brief are to:

1. Understand the gendered impacts of Covid19 in the context of Pakistan
2. Understand how women are affected differently as individuals and communities
3. Understand in particular how women's livelihoods are impacted due to financial challenges caused by the pandemic
4. To recommend effective policies and interventions as a means to be prepared and prevent the outbreak by in cooperating women in the various processes

Globally, COVID-19 has given a harsh blow to the informal economy of two billion workers. Particularly, female workers are set to be hit hardest due to their high employment share. For instance, the UN women reported that globally 65 per cent of women are engaged in the informal sector and are at more risk of economic uncertainty_ (Haldevang 2020). The figure shows that a major share of females come from emerging and developing economies, which is 4.6 percentage points greater than that of male workers (International Labour Organization 2018). According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2018), 70.7 female workers were engaged in informal sector in the fiscal year 2017-18. Most of the women working in informal economies are deprived of social protection and are at the high risk of falling prey to poverty. They are supposed to face severe challenges of sustenance and livelihoods in post-pandemic period.



Source: Authors' own design based on ILO 2018

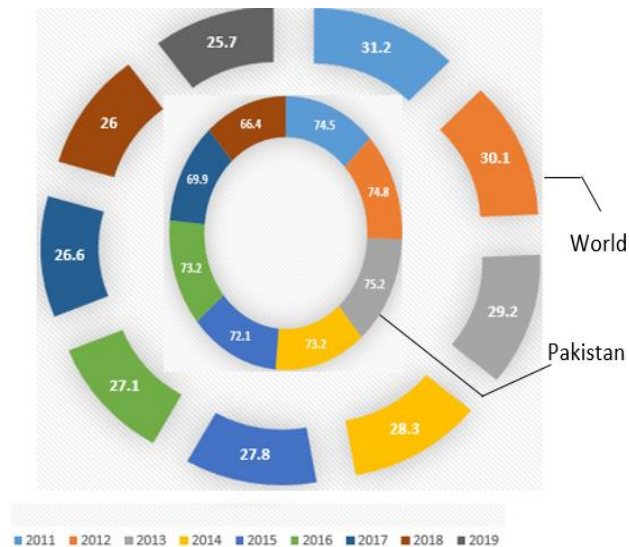
Discussion and Findings

In the Pakistan's context, female workers are mostly engaged in the informal sector where they are paid minimal wages (Zohu 2017). This is the sector, which is severely affected by public emergencies. Domestic workers, particularly women, involved in home-based small and medium businesses, are laid off due to employers' inability of paying wages during lockdown. Likewise, Home-based Workers' (HBWs) analysis depicts that presently 12 million HBWs whose average income is between PKR 3,000 to 4,000 each will experience multidimensional uncertainties due to absence of social protection schemes for them, financial insecurity and unprecedented economic vulnerability during the lockdown (Ministry of Human Rights 2020).

The ongoing global lockdown has also impacted the daily wagers in the formal sector (i.e. apparel, construction, textile, and other manufacturing industries). For instance, millions of workers (majorly women) have become unemployed in Bangladesh, the second largest textile exporter in the world (Alam and Kurtenabch 2020). Similar situation has been observed in other prime textile and apparel exporter countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Though both female and male daily wagers have lost their jobs, women are impacted more severely, as they also have to combat psychological warfare in addition to financial crisis in response to cruel domestic atmosphere around. The Government of Pakistan is actively trying to ensure the security of wages and financial needs. Recently, the government has earmarked PKR 200 billion for daily wagers of formal industries, but no specific quota has been allocated for female daily wagers.

According to the World Bank database (2019), international women participation share in agriculture was 25.69 per cent. While in Pakistan, the agriculture sector usually engages 65.52 per cent of the female labour force showing their prominence in the sector (WDI 2019). Though the ILO stated that economic impact has not been observed in agriculture or rural economy, the risk of food insecurity emerges (United Nations 2020).

Female employment share in Agriculture (%)



Source: Authors' own design based on WDI

The crisis, limiting global food supply, demands of economies to enhance their domestic production putting less pressure on women, who are already insecure. Moreover, it will enhance the cases of exploitation by male-farm co-workers in sharing fields and obtaining credit services particularly in developing economies like Pakistan where women are culturally restrained to harvest their own lands. In the case of field labourers' movement restrictions, more participation from women and girls will be demanded, who are already burdened with household chores.

Furthermore, the lockdown will restrain women in accessing the local markets to sell agricultural products, which will further worsen their economic conditions.

The female paramedic staff is very active at the forefront of battle against COVID-19. Women make up about 70 per cent of workforce in the health sector in the world (Boniol et al. 2019). Evidence shows that majority of them are playing nursing roles in the frontlines against the virus. In China, 90 per cent of paramedic staff is women (Wenham et al, 2020). Despite their active roles and responsibilities, still no gender analysis of this pandemic has been done by global health institutions in virus impacted countries. Similarly, in Pakistan, female paramedic staff is at the frontline to provide essentials to victims. Nurses and other paramedics are in direct physical contact with corona patients in quarantine and isolation wards. But, regardless of their integral role and having direct exposure to Corona patients, the health care staff is not given much preference with regard to providing protective gear, thereby enhancing their vulnerability and high-risk exposure to the virus.

Hence, women constitute a major segment in Pakistan, who are affected by the COVID-19 in terms of their physical ailment, emotional response and impact vis a vis recovery. Under the present scenario of lockdown, sluggish economic activities, financial insecurities and health issues have increased the risk of trauma and mental illnesses. This is, however, least discussed in Pakistan's response to the pandemic. In reality, the disease is affecting women's lives, health (both mental and physical); and livelihoods. Despite representing half of the global population and significantly contributing to social and economic development, women continue to suffer from multidimensional disparities and gender-based violence more so in times of crisis.

At the national level, no programme except 'Ehsaas' cash support addresses the gender issue where women are the direct beneficiaries. Under this programme, a cash of PKR 12,000 per family is disbursed. However, it is learnt that the cash distribution measures are not effective and pose risks of exploitation making women more vulnerable to the disease.

The above discussion clearly demands gender-based policy to overcome their vulnerabilities and to protect them economically, psychologically and physically during and post-pandemic period. As the issue of women vulnerabilities in terms of health, domestic violence and livelihoods is often overlooked, it is important to understand that the pandemic impact on women with regard to their

well-being is often more severe and long-term. To overcome domestic abuse, the Ministry of Human Rights has initiated a helpline for women and children. National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has also established a “Gender and Child Cell” for the emergency protection of the marginalized community. However, gender gap is still there, so there is a need to address the mental and legal issues of women, in the present-day of crisis.

Policy Recommendations

- The government should map out a plan of action to counter the short and long-term effects of the coronavirus on women keeping in view their health, livelihoods and domestic violence. For this purpose, large-scale consultations with women organizations especially with government, civil society, and women rights bodies need to be initiated.
- Women representatives in parliament should be involved in the decision-making process to form public policies and ensure that these policies are gender just.
- Innovative crisis counseling support services should be provided to women in times when social isolation and distancing is being practiced. This can be done by making use of technology in smart phones and internet as an opportunity to better support mental health through applications that offer free mental health counseling. Create blogs or vlogs that encourage contacting counselors to talk about everyday stresses and how these can be mitigated.
- A national database should be set up immediately to register reported cases of violence against women under lockdown.
- There is a need to scale up existing health services wherever possible specifically targeted for female beneficiaries for instance by allocating a bigger budget in the health sector. By having different research and development cells in the health ministry which work on preparedness and prevention of pandemics even in normal circumstances. Increase doctor-nurse ration. Invest in paramedical care and build capacity through training of lady health workers to lessen shocks caused by pandemics.
- Action Research from a gender lens with organizations helping at the grassroots to examine what works; what is the dynamics of delivery; the impact of women's inclusion; the dynamics of collaboration between government and civil society organizations

- The efficacy of civil sector organizations should be enhanced by giving them outreach and the space to work at that level
- There is an urgent need of a robust local government system to plan and deal with local issues and priorities at their doorstep.
- Health services for all that include Family Planning and Reproductive Health facilities.
- Foolproof mechanisms should be in place to evaluate gender justice programmes being run by the government and to assess if women's needs are being addressed through policy actions.
- Provincial and district governance systems in addition to COVID-19 response teams should be used to impart safety trainings to the women, especially medical staff, who are at the frontline to deal with coronavirus patients.
- All policy related material should be translated into Urdu and other regional languages to disseminate among women and create awareness at all levels.
- Domestic workers need to be documented and informal sector should be taken into formal database.
- SOPs should be formulated as to how respectfully the government can distribute money among women and take into account their dignity to ensure universalized distribution of cash transfer or income support is as smooth as possible.
- An additional debate is required on the universalization of income support for all citizens who need it and should be able to get it.

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