

Equality during a pandemic

Opinion piece by Ameer Yajnik and Rwitwika Bhattacharya | May 2020

"My help kept calling me to check if she could come in to work. I assured her pay for the last month but she insisted. Yesterday she broke down and said that she needed to get out of her house to escape her husband's beatings," the message popped up on a WhatsApp group. It represented the physical and economic denigration and thousands of women are facing today as the fallout of the corona pandemic indicate the closing of a woman's physical and financial space.

"A friend of mine who recently was told that she had lost her Manager's job in the private company she worked. (But that was not all) She was calling me to get her a legal Counsel for filing a domestic violence case against her husband who had suddenly started abusing her during the lockdown." Another incident indicated that this is not just a problem with the socio-economically weaker sections. Many incidents of women abuse have come to the fore and they cut across class, geography, caste and age. The continued lockdown has shown that economic and social lives of innumerable women are devastated. A dangerous fallout of the pandemic is going to exacerbate gender inequality that will take years to regain.

Women will emerge as one of the chief victims of the pandemic as they bear the brunt of economic uncertainty. From Self-help groups to micro-entrepreneurs to construction workers, industries with their involvement will be significantly hit. Women in formal and private sectors facing lay-offs, cancellation of recent job offers, and part time jobs suspended indefinitely will suffer too. The ripple effect of this will be felt by the family, as women are much more likely to put their income back into the families development than men. Thus, the economic disempowerment will not just be limited to the economic disempowerment of women but also its effects on the family.

The problem of women taking ownership of physical spaces will further be challenging as economic uncertainty will escalate. Several economists have identified that micro entrepreneurs will be wiped clean. Last two decades had seen women entrepreneurship at local levels grow significantly. With the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises where women are widely employed facing the worst closures it will push these unemployed women into domestic spheres with all kinds of uncertainties to deal with. The primary focus on protecting the economic independence of women will remain critical at this juncture. Positive steps in this direction can give them the much needed social security, so essential to also aid them in solving the issue of abuse.

What worsens the status of women is that the lockdown has put women in total confinement within the domestic spaces. Women are expected to take care of their spouses, old persons (in-laws) and children. And this is resulting in physical and emotional fatigue. Such situations of continuous confinement give rise to

abuse and the recipient always happens to be the woman. Those at high risk of abuse are being further victimized while new conditions are also emerging.

Since the beginning of the lockdown, in the very first few weeks, the National Commission of Women has seen a doubling in the number of reported cases of abuse against women. The Commission expects an avalanche of such cases to emerge post the lockdown. The issue of women safety will not remain limited to the lockdown. As jobs will vanish, aid from government hardly easy, help from other sources will become scarce and with more migrant workers returning home, it is expected that women will suffer greatly from growing unemployment and economic frustration. Frequency of domestic violence will only increase.

The lock down provided us a glimpse of the stark issues that surround women in confined spaces. The massive disruption caused by the pandemic in our lives has impacted the socio-cultural aspects of our society. Domestic abuse has surfaced as an ugly feature of our so called progressive society. The government has created helplines to respond to cases of abuse. However, the helpline will not be enough since it will not offer instant relief but will fall back on counseling centers and the criminal justice system that will push her into a world of social options or prolonged legal processes.

It is critical that we build strong, proactive and independent institutions that protect women in physical spaces. As the central government rethinks social safety net programs, it is critical to keep women as a core constituent. It will take government proactive thinking and innovative policy design to bridge the gender gap that covid-19 will have created. Unless the law and order and the judicial systems are strengthened to protect women, issues of domestic violence will only increase.

The fallout from the covid-19 is not restricted to economy or public health. The pandemic also threatens to wipeout the progress we have made on bridging the gender inequality gap and safety of women. Being mindful of this, it would be only fitting to put in place the appropriate policy as the first important step to have a combination of gender-specific approach on protection against domestic violence and economic opportunities. Only mindful design of such approaches can help us grow.

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