COVID 19 PANDEMIC: REINFORCING THE NEED FOR GENDER SENSITIVE POLICY [3]FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The uncertainties the world is facing since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic is a test for humankind. The impact of the pandemic is definitely universal; however studies and statistics have revealed its disproportionate impact on women and girls. The paper examines the gender dimension of the pandemic and argues for a more gender responsive policy framework to address the challenges women are facing due to the pandemic. The threat to peace and security due to COVID 19 pandemic has further highlighted the centrality of the UN WPS Agenda. Inclusion of women voices will be critical to address future pandemics.

Key Words: Pandemic, human security, gender sensitive policies, WPS Agenda, sustainable development

Introduction

The world witnessed unprecedented uncertainties with the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020.The pandemic once again highlighted that non-traditional security issues like health can have serious ramifications on governance, economy and politics, the impact of these challenges cut across borders. COVID 19 pandemic changed the world scenario in a way none had ever expected.

The security challenges posed by the pandemic are multidimensional. Today, security is not just limited to traditional military issues. It has movd from "an exclusive stress on territorial security to a much greater stress on people's security, from security through armaments to security through sustainable human development."(Human Development Report, 1994) Now, human security is an integral part of deliberations on

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security. Back in 1945 at the San Francisco Conference that led to the creation of the United Nations, the essence of human security was expressed by the then US Secretary of State as: (Human Development Report, 1994) The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace.

The primary components of human security are: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political (Human Development Report, 1994). The General Assembly Resolution 66/290 stated that "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people"(UNGA, 2012). An important paradigm of human security is health security. The loss of life due to disease is one of the greatest threats to people in many developing countries. The Goal 3 (Establish Good Health and Well-Being) of the Agenda 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforces the significance of health for peace and development.

Health issues are no longer confined to domestic boundaries and there is need for serious deliberations on "transnational aspects of health" (Venkatapuram, 2020).The pandemic has once again made us realise that "we need to learn how to globally govern biological contagion with as much dedication as we give to governing economic and security matters"(Venkatapuram, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, there have been several instances like SARS outbreak in 2003, growing threat of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), *Zika, Ebola, Chikungunyav*, HIV/AIDS highlighting the global ramifications of health hazards.

Health emergency is a challenge to international peace and development. The pandemic has highlighted the strategic significance of health issues. The World Health Organization (WHO) has noted that "pandemics, health emergencies and weak health systems not only cost lives but pose some of the greatest risks to the global economy and security faced

today" (World Health Organization, 2023). Peace and development will remain elusive if people lives are under constant threat. The Human Development Report (HDR) of 1994 writes: "the world will never be secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and in their jobs" (Human Development Report, 1994). Thus, the pandemic is "not only a challenge for global health systems, but also a test of our human spirit" (UN, 2020).

The impact of COVID 19 is universal but its disproportionate effect on women and girls makes it imperative to understand the challenges emerging from the pandemic through a gender lens. Like any other crisis, the COVID 19 is also not gender neutral. Time and again it has been proved that "crisis and conflict have profound and disproportionate impacts on women and girls, amplifying pre-existing inequalities" (UN Women, 2020). The vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in wartime like food and housing scarcity, loss of livelihoods, increase in vulnerability to gender-based violence, and more burden of unpaid care work echoes in the challenges women are facing because of the pandemic (UN Women, 2020).

Gender Dynamics of the Pandemic

The challenges humanity are facing from the COVID 19 pandemic is not limited to health issues; it has deeper ramifications. Looking at some of the data on the impact of COVID 19 on women/girls since 2020, it is critical to address the crisis from a gender perspective.

The economic burden on women since the outbreak of the pandemic is a concern. The UN Women in a report in September 2020 notes that the pandemic has economically affected women "harder" because of several factors like women earn less, engaged mostly in informal sector, have fewer savings, limited access to social protections and had to leave work as they are mostly burdened with unpaid care and domestic work (UN Women, 2020). The Report further highlighted that 70 percent of the health workers and first responders in the world are women but are not at par with their male counterparts (UN Women, 2020). In 2030, it is

expected that there will be 121 poor women for every 100 poor men (UN Women, 2020).

The industries in which women are mostly engaged like food services, retail and entertainment industries are worst affected by prolonged lockdowns. About 40 percent of employed women work in "hardhit sectors" compared to 36.6 percent of employed men (UN Women, 2020). An analysis by McKinsey Global Institute in July 2020 highlighted that women are more vulnerable to suffer economic losses because of the existing gender inequalities (Madgavkar & White 2020). Women constitute 39 percent of the global employment but account for 54 percent of the job losses (Madgavkar et. al., 2020).

Profeta highlighted the vulnerability of women's work during the COVID 19 (Paola, 2020). She indicated that the income of women is lower than men and their poverty rates are high. Moreover, she highlighted that single mothers are particularly vulnerable. She further stated that considering age and occupation, working women are not less susceptible than men; rather it is working women who are at more risk than men. Women constitute two-third of the health workforce and have lower risks of unemployment but work in the health sector exposed women to greater risk of contagion. She further argued that the pandemic has further raised the issue of family relationships. Women are primarily responsible for housework and childcare and thus lock down, closure of schools and working from home increased their burden manifold.

Mental health issues are yet another ramification of the pandemic. The emotional footprint of the pandemic is "disproportionately falling on women's shoulders in most countries" (UN Women, 2020). Some of the prime reasons contributing to more stress and anxiety among women are increase in unpaid care and domestic work, income loss, rise in gender-based violence (UN Women, 2020). Also, there is increase in social evils like child marriage, trafficking, domestic violence, school dropouts and many more since the outbreak of the pandemic. Economic insecurity as a result of the pandemic has led to increase in girls dropping out of school. According to the UNESCO, about 11million girls may dropout from

school (UNESCO, 2021). Young girls out of school become more vulnerable to gender abuses, trafficking, early marriage and other evil practices. Another threat girls are facing due to the pandemic is the increase in child marriage. In the last decade, the proportion of young women globally married as children had decreased by 15 per cent, a progress that seems to be severely challenged by the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). Now, about ten million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides (UNICEF, 2021). About650 million girls and women alive today in the world were married in childhood, mostly from Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India and Nigeria (UNICEF, 2021).

There is a surge in violence against women and girls across worldwide. Globally, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 3 women experienced physical or sexual violence mostly by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2020). About 243 million women and girl aged 15-49 faced sexual or physical violence from intimate partner in 2019 across the globe (UN Women, 2020). The UN reported that "violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries as security, health, and money worries create tensions and strains accentuated by the cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown"(UN Women, 2020). For example, in France, the cases of domestic violence have increased by 30 percent, in Australia about 40 percent of frontline workers reported of increase in request for help by survivors and 70 per cent of them have reported that the cases received have increased in their level of complexity during the COVID-19 outbreak (UN Women, 2020). Highlighting the seriousness and the vulnerable position of women and girls, the UN has termed the violence against women during the pandemic as "shadow pandemic".

The present COVID 19 crisis is not the only time that health hazards have increased violence against women. For example, Sierra Leone saw a rise of 19 percent in gender-based violence during the *Ebola* outbreak in Africa in 2014-16 (Suri & Mona 2022). Looking at the increase in violence against women during health emergency, it is important to address the violence against women during health emergencies as a "public health priority" (Suri et.al.,2022).

Impact of the Pandemic on Women in India

India ranks 140 out of 156 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 published by the World Economic Forum (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021). COVID 19 has pushed the lives of many women and girls in India and in the world to a bleak future. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, women in India have also been vulnerable to various threats and challenges. The prevailing patriarchal social structure and practices further makes the condition of women difficult.

Increasing unemployment among women since the outbreak of the pandemic is worrisome. According to a Survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. unemployment among women increased to 17 percent, more than double the rate for men (Beniwal, 2021). The survey conducted by the Nudge Foundation reported that there is about 76 percent reduction in weekly income for women due to lockdowns, resulting in severe hardship (Beniwal, 2021).

Women as primary care givers are overburdened with household chores leading to stress and anxiety. Also, women are employed as frontline workers as paramedic staffs, which make them vulnerable to the disease and other health problems. Further, lack of adequate and accessible health facilities for pregnant and new-borns, *etc.* added to the difficulties for women.

The pandemic time also saw increase in domestic violence against women in India.In 2020, the National Commission for Women (NCW) had received 23,722 complaints of crimes committed against women, which was the highest in the last six years (Kumar, 2021). About one-fourth of these complaints were cases of domestic violence (Kumar, 2021). 7,708 of these complaints were under the right to live with dignity clause, which includes emotional abuse of women and 5,294 complaints were of domestic violence (Kumar, 2021). In India, more girls (3.2 percent) are out of school than boys (2.7percent) in the age group below 15 years of age (Right to Education Forum, 2021). It is projected that about 10 million secondary school girls in India could drop out of school due to the pandemic, which will lead to increase in other evil social

practices like early marriage, early pregnancy, poverty, trafficking and violence (Right to Education Forum, 2021).

In a Study in 2021 titled 'Impacts of Covid-19 on women in low-income households in India' conducted by *Dalberg*, a Social Impact Advisory Group stated that in India about 8.7 million women who were working before the pandemic were out of work in October 2020 (Dalberg, 2021). Also, the study suggested that women made up just 24 percent of those working before the pandemic but accounted for 28 percent of those who lost jobs (Dalberg, 2021). The Study highlighted that among the women in surveyed areas, the pandemic has increased their nutritional challenges, decreased access to menstrual pads and increase in unpaid work and reduced time for rest.

The Study recommended a gender perspective in designing and executing government programmes to address the problems women are facing due to the pandemic. It also highlighted the need to address some of the structural reasons that makes women vulnerable during crisis like the pandemic. The Study suggested that the government policies and programmes need to have women specific programmes and welfare schemes to address the challenges women face in times of crisis like the pandemic. A few measures like provision of pads and contraceptives in essential supplies, women enrolment in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREGA), improving utility of *Jan Dhan*a accounts, *etc.* will address some of the concerns of the women, suggested the Report.

Akshara, a Mumbai-based Non-Governmental Organisation working for women's empowerment in a report titled "Grappling with the Shadow Pandemic: Women's Groups and Domestic Violence in India" highlighted the conditions of victims of domestic violence during the pandemic in India (Bavadam, 2021). The report indicated that the slogan 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' did not provide safety and security to many women across India. The report wrote that "with family members at home all the time, women were doubly impacted not only with economic and other losses but also with a heavier burden of housework and with

the ugly spectre of domestic violence looming over them" (Bavadam, 2021).

To address the impact of the pandemic, "public activism as well as state intervention and collaboration between different entities need to be carefully utilised", suggested the Report (Bavadam, 2021). The government used services of the private health sector for supplementary hospital beds and vaccination but such collaboration was missing with Women's Rights Groups, indicated the report. The Women Rights Groups deal directly with the affected women and the state has a vast network of departments and human resources like ASHA workers. Hence, the Report recommended that the collaboration between the government and Women Right Groups is critical in addressing the genuine concerns of the vulnerable women.

The government took several measures to address the woes of the affected people during the pandemic. Also, several measures were taken to specifically help women and girls. To help the poor to tide over the crisis, the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana*, a relief package of Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore was announced in March 2020, in which 20 *crore* women *Jan Dhan* account holders was to get Rs 500 per month for next three months (Government of India). The government also took several social protection measures like direct cash transfers to women. Over 200 million female account holders received monthly cash payments from April to June 2020 (Khan & Nikore, 2021). Collateral-free lending limits increased from 1 million rupees to 2 million rupees to benefit 6.3 million women-organized Self-Help Groups (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021) The MGNREGA employed about 108 million persons between April-October 2020 and reserved one-third work for women workers (Khan et.al., 2021). In India, a supportive step taken to help women during the pandemic was to include domestic violence shelter and support services as "essential". (UN Women, 2021) During the first and second waves of the pandemic, 700 One-Stop-Crisis centres remained open in India, supporting over 300,000 women who suffered abuse and needed shelter, legal aid and medical attention (UN Women, 2021).

Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

In a conflict situation the burden on women and girls aggravates and the way women and girls experience the conflict is different from men. However, women have always been in the periphery in the peace making and peace building processes. Traditional and non-traditional security threats make women and girls vulnerable to myriad hardships. The struggle for gender equality has a long history. Among other initiatives, a major step was to include women in the decision making, peace-making and peace building processes. The Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 that resulted in the historic Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda emphasised on "the important role of women in the conflict prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security" (UNDP, 2019, p 5).

The prime focus of the WPS Agenda was to include women's participation in peace and security processes. Lakshmi Puri**,** the former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women noted that the WPS is "an important rallying point for gender equality related multilateral and bilateral diplomacy in the hard core areas of 'waging' peace, assuring security, countering violent extremism and conflict related humanitarian action"(Puri, 2020).

Resolution 1325 does not deal with "one type of development or conflict context, but for all contexts" (UNDP, 2019, p 5). It applies to women in "ongoing violent conflict" and in "stable" countries dealing with violence against women (UNDP, 2019, p 5). The countries engaged in peacekeeping operations ensures that "women are included in decision-making and leadership roles in military and civilian peace operations, and that all forces are properly trained in gender-sensitive peace operations, have the skills and resources to address the conflict issues faced by women and girls where they are deployed"(UNDP, 2019, p 5).

The four pillars of the WPS Agenda are: prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery. WPS Agenda aims at prevention of conflict and all forms of violence against women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations, ensures women's equal participation and gender equality in peace and security decision-making processes at all levels, women and girls are protected from all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and their rights are protected and promoted in conflict situations and stresses on specific relief needs of women are met and their capacities to act as agents in relief and recovery are strengthened in conflict and post-conflict situations(UNDP, 2019, p 5).

The Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda is followed up by nine follow-up Resolutions. There are few more UN Security Council Resolutions related to Women Peace and Security like: Resolution 1820 (2008), Resolution 1888 (2009), Resolution 1889 (2009), Resolution 1960 (2010), Resolution 2106 (2013), Resolution 2122 (2013), Resolution 2242 (2015), Resolution 2272 (2016) and Resolution 2467 (2019). These Resolutions dealt with various aspects relating to women security like sexual violence, establishing Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, post-conflict peace-building focusing on increasing the number of women participating in peace talks, importance of civil society in preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict, stronger measures to improve women's participation and representation in conflict resolution, especially through leadership positions, women's roles in countering violent extremism and terrorism, provides measures to address sexual exploitation and abuse in peace operations, introduces accountability measures for perpetrators of sexual violence and calls for effective support measures for victims of sexual violence to be implemented.

The global South has raised concerns with the WPS Agenda. Critics of UNSC Resolution 1325 argue that the Resolution has been used by powerful countries in the Global North to push for favourable policies in post-conflict countries in the Global South in the name of gender equality (Basu 2016, p 364). Critics point out that the global South is a "passive recipients of policies" developed in the North (Basu 2016, p

364). However, the countries from the global South have been instrumental in linking gender inequality and international peace and security. Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury of Bangladesh in his press statement presented at the Security Council on 8 March 2000 for the first time highlighted the linkages (Basu 2016, p.366). Later in May 2000, Namibia hosted a workshop on gender and peacekeeping leading to the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Plan of Action, which emphasised on gender perspectives in peacekeeping operations (Basu 2016, p 366). Namibia also held the Presidency of the Security Council when UNSCR 1325 was adopted. Two of the three follow-up WPS Resolutions UNSCR 1889 (2009) and UNSCR 2122 (2013) looking beyond 'protection' were adopted during the presidency of Vietnam and Azerbaijan, respectively (Basu 2016, p 366)

India and WPS

India is yet to develop a WPS National Action Plan, which is a national-level strategy to meet the WPS Agenda obligations. India has actively participated in the Security Council's debates on WPS Agenda. Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, the former Permanent Representative of India at UN in a statement at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women and Peace and Security, on 23 February 2012 had said: "India will continue to contribute positively to UN efforts in protecting vulnerable sections, particularly women and children, in conflict and post-conflict societies" (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). Keeping with the commitment to implement the WPS Agenda internationally, India had sent an all-female police unit in the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia in 2007 and South Sudan in 2019. Also, in 2019 India deployed a Female Engagement Team as UN peacekeepers in Democratic Republic of Congo. In January 2023, India sent the largest unit of women peacekeepers to Abyei at the border of Sudan and South Sudan, which witnessed violence in recent times.

Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations at the UNSC Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security on 18 January 2022 had said: "Women's participation in public

life and elimination of violence against them are pre-requisites for promoting lasting peace and security around the world. India firmly supports women's full, equal and meaningful participation in political processes and decision-making to promote an inclusive society. India has today moved from a paradigm of women's development to women-led development" (Permanent Member of India to the UN, 2022). He further said "Member States should identify and address barriers to women's meaningful participation in the prevention and resolution of conflict, and in post-conflict peace-building efforts and programs. This requires devising a legislative and judicial framework, providing economic opportunities, undertaking institution and capacity building, ensuring accountability and checking impunity of those perpetrating violence against women"(Permanent Member of India to the UN, 2022).

Beyond the Pandemic

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women/girls has yet again raised many issues. The pandemic has once again pointed how the existing social structure makes women more vulnerable in times of crisis. In addition to the health issues, pandemic has posed economic, social and mental health challenges for women. Statistics reveal the vulnerablity of women and girls during the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on women/girls could "reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights" (Guterres).

Without gender equality, sustainable development will be incomplete. In the SDGs, gender parity is a vital theme. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to each of the 17 Goals. Further, SDG 5 specifically addresses the issue of Gender equality, indicating the significance of gender parity in the development process. Gender equality and human development are deeply linked. Investments in gender equality will reflect on the targets of the SDGs and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (Osland& Røysamb, 2020)

The disproportionate impact of the crisis on women/girls emphasises the need for a more focused gendered approach in dealing with the crisis. The UN Secretary General in April 2020 had urged governments to "put women and girls at the centre of their recovery efforts" (UN News, 2020). The UN

has suggested five priorities to deal with the crisis: Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is mitigated and reduced, Social protection and economic stimulus packages serve women and girls, people support and practise equal sharing of care work, Women and girls lead and participate in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making and data and coordination mechanisms include gender (UN Women).

The pandemic reinforces the vision of the WPS Agenda, which outlines "a people-centric vision for human security through a gendered lens" (UN Women). Reaffirming the pivotal role of women in peace and security, the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2013 at the Security Council's debate on "Women, Rule of Law and Transitional Justice" said: "Women's participation in peace efforts is a matter of gender equality and universal human rights – and crucial to achieving sustainable peace, economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy" (UN News, 2013).

Gloria Steinem, an American feminist journalist had said: "Don't think about making women fit the world - think about making the world fit women". A gendered policy framework will be beneficial to address emergencies like the pandemic in future. As highlighted by the historic statement of the former UN Security Council President Anwarul Karim Chowdhury: "Peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men", women voices need to be included in decision making processes (Piga, 2021).

Post-COVID-19 recovery strategy needs to focus on gender-sensitive measures. Also, collaborating with women rights groups to address the concerns for women and girls in crisis like pandemic is critical. Some of the suggestions put forward by *Akshara* like creating safety nets and issuing directives based on the demands made by women's rights groups, starting a national emergency helpline with a common number with trained women personnel, publicising a directory of services which can be accessed by survivors and their well-wishers during crisis, strengthening the capacity of functionaries of One-Stop Centres and other shelter and safe spaces for women in the State will be beneficial in addressing future pandemics.

Conclusion

The former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated that "development and security are inextricably linked. A more secure world is only possible if poor countries are given a real chance to develop. Extreme poverty and infectious diseases threaten many people directly, but they also provide a fertile breeding-ground for other threats, including civil conflict" (United Nations, 2004). The pandemic has reinforced the ramification of the health crisis on peace and security.

The pandemic has been a challenging experience for all. However, since the impact of the crisis on women and girls is different from men, we need to focus on the gender dynamics of the pandemic. In future, gender sensitive policies in consultation with women rights group and involving more women policymakers in post-pandemic recovery planning and strategy are critical. Also, it is also imperative that voices of women rights groups from the global South are heard. Women across the globe have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic. However, because of the prevailing social structures and practices the experiences of women from global South is different from women in global North. It is imperative that gender responsive measure according to the local needs be designed to help women and girls in emergencies like the pandemic. Under India's G20 Presidency where voices of the global south find special focus, it is critical to raise the concerns of the women from the global south. The G20 under India's Presidency focuses on 'human centric development', which will be incomplete without gender justice and equality.

The year 2020 was the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, which is the blueprint for promoting women's rights. Even after more than two decades of the historic Beijing Platform for Action, gender justice and equality is still a long way. The pandemic has yet again established the need for inclusion of women voices in decision making, a lesson we need to take seriously.

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