

Condition of Women and Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Times of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

According to the WHO, Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which cause illness in animals or humans. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. Covid-19 has spread into many countries of the world and is now a pandemic. This virus spreads very quickly and has proved to be life-threatening. As of April 22 2020, more than 2.6 million persons all over the world have been infected and 177 thousand people have succumbed to this virus. As per the official data more than 21300 people in India have been infected. This pandemic has forced Governments all around to enforce complete Lockdown barring essential industries. The economy is severely hit due to this pandemic. Many rating agencies of the world have forecasted a contraction for the Indian economy in this fiscal year. Many formal and informal sectors have been forced to cut jobs due to complete slowdown in the economy. Women workforce in India will be severely hit. Women already had the burden of running a household with their jobs and now with schools and daycares closed, this burden just got heavier. Rural Women need to prepare themselves for the opportunity when they arrive and use this time to gain a skill which may help them with self-employment if need be. This paper discusses ways to improve women participation in the workforce. This paper also discusses ways through which a society can help women during this pandemic.

Key Words : Coronavirus, Government, Lockdown, Economy, Women, Household, Employment

INTRODUCTION

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses. World Health Organization defines Coronaviruses as a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Covid-19 is a new strain of this family of viruses and had not been known to humans till now. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly infectious disease. The first case is believed to be reported to the regional country office of the WHO in China on December 31, 2019. When China announced Lockdown in Wuhan on January 22, 2020; the total

reported case around the world was 555. Within 9 days, on February 1, the total number rose to 12000. The cases started appearing in different parts of the world. The total number of infected persons spiked to 88.3k on March 1 and to 1 million worldwide on April 2, 2020. The number started to multiply rapidly and the total number of Coronavirus infected persons worldwide currently stands more than 2.6 million. Many persons have also succumbed to this disease. It is being assessed that people with underlying medical conditions and senior citizens are at higher risk of contracting this virus and succumbing to this disease. In India, the first case of Coronavirus 2019 was reported on January 30, 2020. As of April 22, 2020; The Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has reported a total of 21300 persons infected with Coronavirus. Around 678 infected persons have lost their lives to this disease. These numbers are

going to rise in the next couple of days. These data suggest that this disease is highly infectious and spreads very quickly.

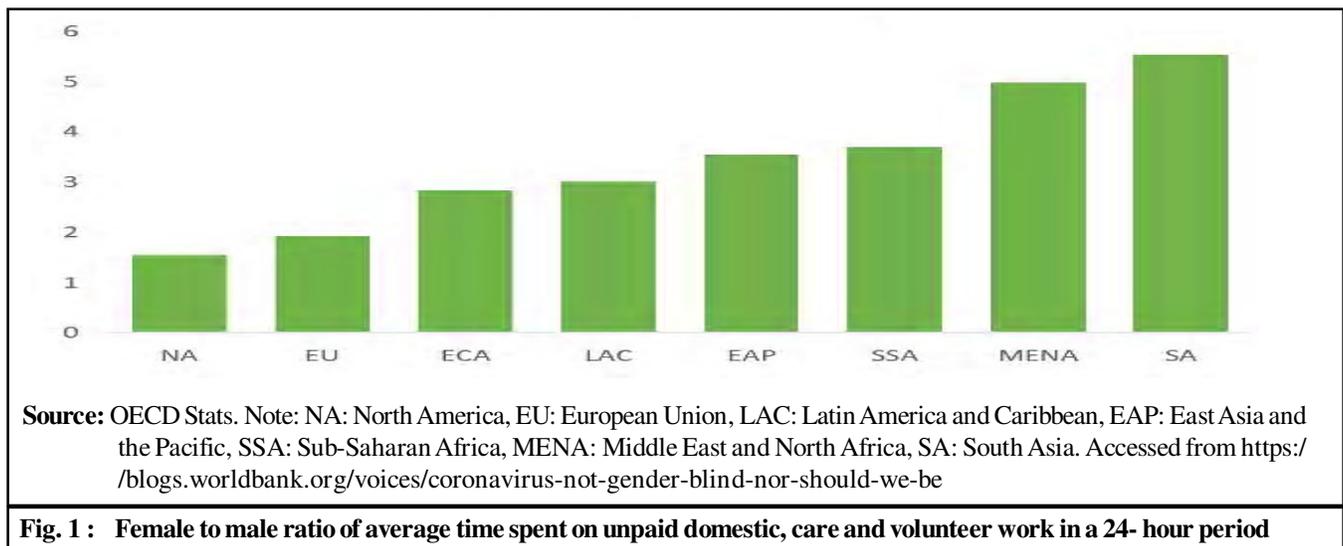
Economic impact:

Many health experts have suggested maintaining physical distance in times of Coronavirus for being a way to avoid infection caused by the respiratory droplets that carry the virus. Many governments have enforced lockdown forcing people to go into self-isolation. In the absence of Vaccine, many medical experts believe the isolation to be the only way in containing the spread of the virus. It has also been observed from countries such as China and South Korea that the spread of the virus can be stopped and chain could be broken by mass testing and practising social or physical distancing. Most of the nations have enforced some kind of lockdown as a preventative step to stop the spread of the virus. Data accessed from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre shows more than 150 countries/regions to have infected cases of this virus. The Lockdown imposed by China, India, Italy and Spain remains the longest and most stringent. The Indian Government announced the lockdown on March 24, 2020, with many state governments such as Delhi and Bihar had announced a lockdown on March 22, 2020. The Lockdown imposed by the Indian Government put a complete halt to all the activities and complete halt on the movement of people and goods but that of essential activities such as medical services et cetera. India has been in lockdown for more than a month now. Though the Government has announced some relaxations, the impact of this

Coronavirus on the Indian economy has been estimated to be severe. The economic activities were completely halted due to the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus. This lockdown has led to a sudden stop in the company. Even when the lockdown eases and the industries start functioning, economic activities will continue facing disruptions for most of this year and early of next year. Many ratings agencies and Institutions have forecasted a very poor growth rate for India's GDP in this fiscal year. It is also being said that the country is witnessing its worst recession since its Independence. The economic activities will remain impacted and will take longer to recover. People are reverse migrating to their natives resulting in absence of cheap labour and affecting supply chains. As per the report, the services sector has also been severely affected resulting in huge job losses. In the US, people claiming unemployment benefits have passed 26 million. Before the pandemic, around 200000 were filing for the same benefits. India is also severely hit. Many companies have already started layoffs procedure. As per the weekly report by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), on April 05 2020, the unemployment rate stood at 23.4 per cent. The graveness of the situation can be assumed by the fact that the unemployment rate in India in April 2019 had stood at 7.30 per cent. Bihar, already a backward state, has unemployment rate crossed 46 per cent in April 2020.

Problems:

Lockdown and Coronavirus pandemic may affect women workforce more severely than anticipated. Women are bearing the brunt of huge economic losses



and job cuts. There is no doubt that gender inequality has existed for most of the pre-COVID-19 time. But with Covid-19, it is expected that gender inequality may be adversely affected. The services sector has been severely impacted and many of the women workforces are employed in this sector such as Receptionist, Aviation Industry, Hospitality, Teaching, Hospital Nurses, Mass Media and Communication et cetera. Some manufacturing industries such as textile also employ a high percentage of women. According to a report 'Empowering Women & Girls in India for the Fourth Industrial Revolution' published by consultancy firm Deloitte, 195 million women are employed in the unorganized sector. With Coronavirus spread and social distancing norms followed elsewhere, the unorganized sector will be severely affected which in turn may close several businesses, suspension of the household maid for the time being et cetera.

As are the social norms, women have been at the forefront of their household care. Even before lockdown and during Covid-19, women had to deal with their household care in addition to their work outside. With the lockdown, schools have been closed; elderly have been advised to stay indoors, social distancing norms are being followed which has also suspended the privilege of the house-care worker.

It is evident from the picture that women carry the burden of household work. Women have been tasked with the increase in care demand and they have been burdened with the extra responsibility of doing these household work. This extra burden may lead to many women to quit their jobs and fully indulge in care work. Women have been exposed significantly due to Covid-19 even outside their homes. The data from the UN suggests 88 per cent of the total number of persons involved in personal care activities and around 69 per cent of health professionals to be females. Women professionals have been at the forefront working as Corona Warriors. We have seen temporarily shutdown of many clinics, nursing home and hospitals during Covid-19. The impact is worst felt in third world countries where resources have been constrained even before the Covid-19. We have seen the temporary closure of Outpatient Departments in many Government-run hospitals. India, which already have weak health infrastructure and now with the resources transferring towards fighting Covid-19, could be posing a serious risk toward other health emergencies for women.

Gender-based domestic violence and sexual violence could also rise during this pandemic. Lockdown has forced the majority of the population being confined to their homes. The United Nations in March 2020 had observed that that being close to their abusers, substance abuse and stress due to this pandemic have intensified the reported cases of domestic violence against women. It is observed from NFHS-4 data that nearly one-third populations of married Indian women face some sort of violence in their lifetime and now lockdown and social distancing has forced a large percentage of them being trapped with their abusers. The Indian "National Commission for Women (NCW)" has also expressed concerns over rising cases of violence against women. As per the NCW data till April 16 2020, for the time period when the country has been in lockdown, 587 cases have been received by the commission, out of which 239 were cases of domestic violence. It has also been observed that many women and girls are being raped inside the quarantine centre and at the isolation centre. It is plausible that unemployment, stressed behaviour, substance abuse may further increase the cases of domestic violence and violence at large.

Women's participation in Labour workforce is on the decline for some years now. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data published by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), India now ranks 10th among the countries with the lowest female workforce participation rate. The Labour force participation rate had fallen to 23.3 per cent for 2017-18. Data from NSSO suggests that Female Labour Force Participation Rate (Female LFPR) has fallen significantly in the rural area than in urban area. The Female LFPR for the rural sector has fallen to a low of 24.6 per cent in 2017-18 from 49.4 per cent in 2004-05 whereas in the urban sector Female LFPR has witnessed a fall of 4 per cent from 24.4 per cent to 20.4 per cent for the same time. There have been many factors for this fall in the Female LFPR. We can further see a downfall in these numbers in times ahead. Lockdown imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many industries to decrease its workforce resulting in job cuts all around the world. Many women who were working in unorganized sectors such as housemaid, self-employed businesses, tutoring have been suffering. Many organized sectors have also been temporarily suspended its businesses resulting in pay cuts. Servicing sector is worst hit. The service sector was employing a lot of female labour force and now with lockdown and social

distancing practices, women could be severely hit. It is expected that most sectors will have to work with social distancing in force and women will be most affected in the unorganized sector as their participation in this sector is much more than men. We were still afar from gender equality in jobs. Now, this pandemic may result in more women being laid off in the organised sector as well as many industries still see women less productive and more costly due to certain women-specific legislation and provisions in different Acts. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017 increased the paid maternity leave period from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. This provision is proving very costly to the Indian employers as they have to bear the cost of availing paid maternity leave. It is in contrast with other countries where the Government supports employers with a certain percentage of the paid amount. Similarly, the Government has passed various legislation and provisions for women safety in the workplace, but they have become constraints for women to work. The Factories (Amendment) Act of 1987 provides that women should not be allowed to work in any factory except between the hours of 6 in the morning to 7 in the evening. These legislations on one hand ensure the safety of the women labour force but on the other acts as major constraints in employment to industries which requires flexible timings. One of the major determinants to Female LFPR has also been an education. The school dropout rate of the female is much higher than male. The temporary closure of schools and colleges and the promotion of web-based education may further accelerate this dropout rate. The economically backward communities of the society don't possess such technological resources to gain web education. Also, in many such families, only the male members possess access to internet-enabled devices. This may increase the female illiteracy rate. It will also lead to the spread of misinformation among women. One of the less-discussed constraints towards a drop in Female LFPR has been mobility. More women are depended on public transportation for commuting to the workplace. With social distancing and this pandemic, the frequency of public transportation stands decreased and also no transportation in certain places and on different routes. This may further escalate the drop in the participation rate.

Suggestions:

Men need to support women in daily household activities. Women had been doing much of the household

activities. This pandemic has increased the burden of women with household care. Women find themselves sleep deprived which may further result in health problems. Men need to share the workload with women. Equal distribution of household work between men and women would be a good start for society. To prevent the situation from becoming worst, men need to understand the household dynamics and share the workload. It has been observed that household where men and women share the workload among themselves prosper and women find themselves with more time and success in their work. Government and prominent Ruling Leaders could use their social media outreach to bring awareness of sharing the work between men and women in the household. The government could also release small media clips with the help of filmmakers and sportspersons to bring awareness in the rural area. Various measures such as broadcasting through radio, television and messaging could help in a bigger way. The time has come to break this stigma and move towards more gender equality. The government must consider women's health needs while drawing up policies for fighting Covid-19. Women and Girls need regular healthcare accessibility and the government should ensure that no females should be deprived of basic healthcare necessities during Covid-19. The government should provide due attention to reproductive health care during this pandemic. Women and girls who have been infected with Coronavirus and are also women and girls who have been transferred into institutional quarantine must be provided with essential hygiene and sanitary items such as sanitary pads and other essential items. The government has been broadcasting messages and preventive measures related to Covid-19 and needs to update the women regularly with new information.

Lockdown has increased the cases of violence against women. It is important to implement measures which can lead to a decrease in cases of violence or measures which ensures safety for women during this time. Now when women are unable to physically visit the police stations due to lockdown, the government needs to find and promote alternate measures to report cases of violence. The NCW in India has a designated WhatsApp Number to report cases of violence during this time. Police Forces should also deal with cases of violence against quickly. Civil Societies can play a constructive role in the awareness program. A violence shelter can be set up during this crisis for the time being.

The role of community members becomes very important as they can be educated of the increased risk of violence against women and they can further help in supporting women in their societies and communities. Family and friends must support women during this crisis as we need to come together to fight this pandemic.

Government need to adopt measures to increase women participation in the economy. During and post Covid-19 India, we will need all the resources at our disposal to fight the fallout of this pandemic economically. We will need the working-age population regardless of the gender to work for accelerating this economy. India is a developing economy and there are many social constraints for women since very early time. Employment has also been a major factor towards empowering women and a further drop in Female LFPR will be doing more damage to their position in family and society. In a recent message to world leaders, UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged governments to “put women and girls at the centre of their efforts to recover from COVID-19 and that starts with women as leaders, with equal representation and decision-making power”. The Government can enforce various measures to increase Female LFPR and also work towards the social safety of the women. The government can introduce some new legislation similar to ‘Parental Leave Act’ with provisions for both parents to avail paid childcare leave against the current ‘Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act’. This will lead to a more egalitarian work environment. The government can also share some percentage of the amount incurred due to the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act with the private companies through the means of its social benefits program. Education should be promoted among girls. The government could promote education through free IVR (Interactive Voice Response) based recorded classes, free consultation with child counsellors, through television et cetera. School Teachers or Counselors could be asked to regularly check on girl students during this pandemic. The government can learn from earlier outbreaks such as ‘Ebola’ in the Western African region, where livelihood activities of the women were severely impacted. Women found it very difficult to return to the pre-Ebola level. The government through the means of various social-economic benefits such as ‘Direct benefit Transfer’ to their registered accounts, extending protection to the women employed in the informal sector, addressing the problems and with some mitigation to the services sector which employs higher

more females could surely help and motivate the females. Certain organizations, NGOs and society at large could also play a greater role in helping women during this crisis.

Conclusion:

Any formulation of policies regarding Covid-19 and response afterwards must be structured through the lens of gender equality. The time is right to formulate policies which provide the opportunity for women to work in different industries. Women must be given treated equally and should be offered the same opportunities as men. New skill development courses can be arranged for women so that they do not feel alienated when economy accelerates and new opportunities are created. The world would likely shift towards Artificial Intelligence-based automation in industries and elsewhere more quickly than it was estimated. The government should ensure that women find themselves acquainted with newer technologies to remain in the workforce. Courses in the schools can be organized in such a way that girls become tech-savvy as soon as their primary schooling is finished. Parents should be encouraged to send their daughters to school. Children counsellors and children psychologists can be hired in the schools, which could help children with their confidence from a very early age. During this pandemic when jobs have been lost, SHGs can help create more jobs for rural women. Masks, PPE Kits etc. could be stitched by the SHGs in villages which may provide some work opportunities who have reverse migrated to their villages. Also, more ASHA, ANM and Anganwadi workers could be employed by the government. There will be a need for more workers at the ground level in some states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal where a large number of people have returned from cities. The government along with civil societies, NGOs, local businesses and communities need to come together and ensure that females aren't left alone in this pandemic.

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