



Gendered Experiences of COVID-19 in India

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CHAPTER 2

The Pandemic Crisis and Economic Engagement of Women: A Historical Enquiry on Implications of Catastrophes on Female Economic Participation

Bindu Balagopal and Chacko Jose P.

INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing the ravages caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic are felt all over the world. The world that was known to humankind has disappeared. A new normal has set in, which has changed the existing contours of economic and social life. Historically, women have been the victims of all major catastrophes. The present pandemic has widened the gender gaps in societies. In a post-pandemic society, the equations are going to change. The role of women and the place they occupy in society may change beyond recognition. The existing

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fabric of social structure delineates women's economic and social status. Women's role in the labour market is undergoing transformations under the onslaught of Covid-19. Their existence is threatened; they are being pushed back from workspaces to the confines of family. Nevertheless, the emerging economic structures are ill-defined to make a precise post-Covid analysis.

The world has survived many catastrophes in the past century. It has witnessed great depressions, world wars, financial crises and epidemics. The Great Depression of the 1930s, the war and post-war periods of the 1940s, the financial crisis that has rocked the Western world and the ongoing raging pandemic have all caused repercussions in the world economy. Whether it be wars, natural calamities, or economic crisis, women are impacted more than men due to multiple interlinkages of socio-economic and cultural factors (World Economic Forum, 2021a).

The world has seen women taking up the slack in catastrophes such as world wars, depressions, epidemics and revolutions. Nevertheless, there was a method to it; during world wars, women took up many jobs on the war front and offered help in several ways to the cause of war. Similarly, during the Great Depression, when there were no jobs, women went back to sustenance and survival, which is considered care work (Ferrant et al., 2014). Women have always been survivors, their brains being wired for the continuance of the species. They were as relentless as men or even more so when it was a question of survival.

Women, in general, are impacted primarily because of the roles imposed on them by the hierarchical and gender stereotyping of society (Sultana, 2012). Growth objectives, targets and strategic action are designed and formulated by political leadership and administration, which has a built-in middle-class gender bias (McGinn & Oh, 2017). In this background, this chapter assesses how the crisis caused by the pandemic has impacted the productivity and economic engagements of women and how it widened the existing gender inequalities. A historical survey of four periods of upheavals from the past century (1920–2020), namely the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II (1945), the Economic Recession of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic, and their impacts on female economic participation are attempted in this chapter.

From the vantage point of 2020, a look back at 1920–2020 brings out periods of unparalleled catastrophes and calamities. World wars have been fought, depressions and economic crises have occurred, each leaving a trail of suffering. World wars and global recessions affected the whole world, and it is their economic fallouts that make these events comparable. Cost in human lives, destruction of property and wealth, and cost in human

suffering were most visible in world wars. The upheaval was slow in coming and less visible in the recession, although the economic destruction was even more disastrous. In the last 100 years, technological advancement and globalisation made a health crisis, which would have been confined to a specific area of the globe, into a pandemic affecting the lives of the whole of humankind. In 2020–2021, Covid-19 was spreading like a radioactive cloud, causing devastation in its wake.

The Great Depression and Its Impact on Women

The Great Depression of the 1930s was considered to be the most severe catastrophe which affected the world. Starting from the stock market crash in the US in 1929 to the collapse of the business world, the number of goods and services produced fell by one third, about 25% of the labour force was unemployed, stock market assets lost 80% of their value, the number of suicides escalated to an all-time high, and the financial world rocked (The Economic Times, 2017). The magnitude of the Great Depression was immense, and its severity continued unabated for a large number of years right up to the end of the Second World War. However, the effects of the Great Depression on men and women were different. During the Great Depression, women were more insulated than men as the areas hard hit were mainly male-centric. Women mostly worked in service industries as domestic help, nurses, maids, teachers and clerks and could find employment even at the height of the recession. Their income played a crucial role in supporting the family through the period (Sabena, 2018).

Juliet Mitchell and other Marxist feminists argue that women serve as a reserve army of workers kept in abeyance. They can be brought to the labour market when labour is scarce and withdrawn when abundant. When labour is in surplus, women are forced to retreat into unpaid work in households (Mitchell, 1971). The Great Depression was a period of severe misery when suicides escalated to a horrendous total. In the census reports of April 1930, the US unemployment was 4.70% for women and 7.10% for men, which is evidence for the fact that women were less affected than men by the Great Depression. But it is to be noted that women's labour was cheaper compared to that of men.

Nevertheless, there was a gradual worsening of women's situation when the Great Depression intensified. Women had to substitute more and more homemade goods in place of consumer goods as the family income

dwindled. As a result, they had to stretch available resources to make ends meet. Also, they had to deal with the psychological problems resulting from employment loss (Milkman, 1976).

There was a marked increase in the employment of older women after the period of the Great Depression. Before the 1930s, women entered the employment scene in their twenties and left the labour market by the time they got married. However, women of working age in the early 1930s either remained in employment till retirement or left and re-entered the labour market. The change was attributed to the economic deterioration which persisted during this period (Bellou & Cardia, 2021).

Women who entered the labour market suffered the stigma of taking away jobs from the 'more deserving men'. There was no choice for women but to work because they had to raise money to support their families. Women could only fill the jobs of cleaners, nurses, maids and clerks, given society's existing social structure. The Great Depression directly hit male-dominated industries like the manufacturing sector and heavy industries. According to census figures of the US, the percentage of employed women, 14 and older, rose during the Great Depression from 24.3 in 1930 to 25.4 in 1940, a gain of two million jobs.

Impact of War and Post-War Period on Women

With the beginning of World War II in the 1940s, there was a surge of investment in industries producing war-related products. Women were employed in many capacities during the period of war in the army and navy. Jobs that were previously delineated for men began to be explored by women. World War II witnessed a massive change in women's employment. More than six million women entered the labour market additionally during this period, leading to more than 50% of the female labour force. In industries related to war, the new entrants worked in male-centric jobs like aircraft manufacturing and other wartime industries. The age composition of women entering the labour force also changed during this period. More women between the age group of 14–19 and 35–44 began to join the workforce. Girls below 20 joined the workforce in large numbers during wartime. In normal times they would have been in school completing their education. Another significant change was that the proportion of married women entering the labour force increased compared to the pre-war period (US Department of Labour, 1946). Thus World War II was considered a turning point in the lives of women. Education

and secretarial training enhanced women's capabilities in the long run. When married women began to enter the labour force, it caused significant changes in women's economic status in society (Goldin, 1991). Just as Rose (2018) concludes, there was a wartime boom in the women labour force.

The peak of women's employment was in July 1944 when women formed more than one-third of the total labour force, mainly engaged in non-agricultural work. Nevertheless, between 1945 and 1946, there was a fall in employment in non-agricultural work. When the war was over, many women left the employment scene (Breen, 2001). Still, the number of women employed in the post-war period was much higher than that in the pre-war period. This period also witnessed a change in occupational distribution. The number of women employed in domestic service declined. Instead, more women began to be employed in the manufacturing sector (Goldin, 1991).

Layoffs of women workers were widespread during the post-war period (Gabin, 1982). In 1946 the number of women workers was less by four million compared to that in 1944. The employment of women in the manufacturing sector declined by 1.5 million between 1944 and 1946 (Milkman, 1976). However, there was a tendency among women in the post-war period to seek employment rather than being homemakers. Another significant change that occurred was the fall in the birth rate. This may be because women's reproductive age group declined as women began to spend a large part of their life in the paid labour force (Lim, 2002).

After the war, women were expected to go back to their old roles, which many women did not find easy. Apart from all the privations of the post-war world, women began to question the old structures and accept new value systems. Thus, war and the post-war period challenged the existing roles of men and women in traditionally maintained society. New roles were identified, which were more appropriate for both men and women. As a result, there was a conflict in gender reconstruction, delineating power and status in society (Yellen, 2020). For analysing the new gender perspectives, the post-war era's cultural patterns and social structures need to be examined. When women and men started to reappropriate roles in the changing scenario, relations, family and friendships also changed into new arenas (Sorensen, 1999).

Women and the 2008 Crisis

The economic recession of 2008 has been accepted as the most severe financial crisis that has affected the world since the Great Depression (Verick & Islam, 2010). Unfortunately, most of the nations succumbed to the crisis irrespective of their stage of economic development. It had repercussions reverberating throughout the world. In countries where gender inequality existed, in times of crisis, when the quantity and quality of food in the family budget had to be reduced, the girl children were taken out of school first. When medicines have to be cut back, it is the women who suffered most; they are the victims of violence, they are the people forced to do penal work, and they are forced to sell themselves and face sexual harassment (UNAIDS, 2012).

Universality exists in the overall macroeconomic trends of financial crises that have affected many countries over the 2008–2009 period. It is an accepted fact that the financial crisis had overwhelming effects on the real economy, especially for developing nations since the 1980s. Even though the origin of the crisis was in the financial sector, it soon engulfed the other sectors of the economy. The resulting deficiency in liquidity led to bank failures and the collapse of financial assets. The decline of economic activity eventually led to unemployment and a low standard of living, whereby most women got engaged in unpaid labour (Ghosh, 2013).

Global macroeconomic shocks impacted the lives of women and children worldwide and made serious inroads into the existing gender equality (ILO, 2009). For example, the housing crisis and the collapse of the investment bubble in 2008 were the beginning of a financial crisis that rocked the world (Baker, 2014). In addition, food and fuel price shocks combined with economic downturns badly hit the vulnerable sections of society, primarily women and children.

When the governments worldwide reduced public spending, it often increased private expense for health and education, which in turn were setbacks to women and children (Pearson & Sweetman, 2011). Women had to resort to unstable employment in the informal sector or care for children and look after sick family members during the 2008 economic crisis (DCOMM, 2009).

Gendered Impact of Economic Crisis

Different phases of the crisis like recession, rebound and austerity, affect men and women differently. This is often discussed using the framework of three hypotheses: the substitution hypothesis, buffer hypothesis, and sex segregation hypothesis. It is a common practice that in times of economic downturn, firms try to reduce production cost by substituting expensive labour force with cheaper ones. The substitution hypothesis puts forward the idea that women's labour is considered inferior and less costly (Parpart et al., 2000). Resultantly women may get more employment during periods of economic downswings. The buffer hypothesis talks about internal labour markets. A second labour market exists where the quality of jobs is poor, and the wage rate is low. Competition is high, and flexibility exists in the secondary market. This, along with weak bargaining power, leads to low-paid jobs for women. These may be specific to certain sectors where jobs are women-oriented. Thus, women serve as a fluid force to be tapped under times of expansion of demand and ejected during times of contraction of demand. In the sex segregation hypothesis, the labour market is envisaged as sex-segregated. Occupations are classified based on gender. Depending upon which sectors are affected by the downturn, men or women may fall victim to the crisis. These hypotheses serve to comprehend the gender dimensions of a crisis (Perivier, 2014).

The onslaught of a crisis worsens gender disparities within households. This causes a fall in opportunities open to women and reduces their social empowerment. The shortage of food supply causes women to eat less, even at the cost of their health. During times of economic hardships, it is the women who have to bear the brunt. Malnutrition of women and children is often the consequence. In addition, women's financial dependence on men increases during a crisis, leading to increased decision-making power for men in households (Mohindra et al., 2011).

The employment of women is adversely affected during periods of economic crisis. Women's paid work is considered more flexible and, as such, can be laid off during times of low job openings. Also, there is the preconceived notion that man is the earning member of a family, so man should have the priority in selection for a job. The problem of unemployment can be demoralising for anyone who loses their job. However, for women losing paid work is distressing on several fronts. As women are usually in low-paid work, they have fewer savings, leading to a greater risk of imminent poverty (Bleiweis et al., 2020). This will have particularly severe

effects on single women, especially single mothers. The bearing of the family's increased financial responsibilities may also mean that they are more likely to undertake informal and exploitative vulnerable work to support children.

In times of crisis, the unemployment rate of women is high, especially for export-oriented economies. A fall in exports due to the recession adversely affects the plight of women as they constitute 60–80% of workers in the manufacturing sector (United Nations, 2011). When job opportunities for women fall, they are forced to take up employment in less secure jobs or migrate to faraway places searching for jobs and may fall victims to human traffickers who manipulate them and trap them in forced labour, often resulting in sexual exploitation. Creating jobs by governments to reduce the severity of the crisis helps men more than women since large infrastructure projects are initiated during this period (Antonopoulos, 2021). Nevertheless, industries in which women are traditionally engaged are usually not promoted, intensifying women's unemployment.

It is evident from the preceding discussion that economic and financial crisis puts a disproportionate burden on women, who are often concentrated in vulnerable employment, are more likely to be unemployed than men, tend to have lower unemployment and social security benefits, and have unequal access to and control over economic and financial resources.

Impact of Covid-19 on Women

In analysing women's post-pandemic status, one is faced with the scenario visualised by creative writers long ago. The British novelist Nevil Shute in 1957 wrote a post-apocalyptic novel titled '*On the Beach*' (Shute, 1957). The novel depicts the plight of a group of individuals after World War III. The story evolves in Melbourne, Australia, a year or so after a nuclear World War III. This final world war was so devastating that radioactive clouds slowly travelled the earth, killing all people and animals in its aftermath. Radiation sickness spreads across countries, and people are waiting for imminent death. The novel discusses the survival instincts of people and how people adapt to changed circumstances. The story depicts women's lives in different social strata and how they adapt to the new state of affairs. A character in the novel, a housewife, plants orange trees in her garden, which will bear fruit in 20 years. Though the man in the house tries to prevent her from doing it, saying that they will never live to see it

bear fruit, she is not deterred. Another character is a young woman faced with the knowledge that she will never have a family, never bear children, decides to equip herself for secretarial work studying shorthand and typing. She also knows very well that she will never be able to put her training to work, and all that is waiting for her is a painful death. The novel portrays women's fighting spirit; they are unwilling to lie down and die. In the current world order of the Covid-19 pandemic, women adapted to lockdown and shutdown. The survival instincts and strategies adopted by women often guide them to come out unscathed by the onslaught of disasters of any dimension.

Impacts of a crisis are never gender-neutral, and so is the case with the Covid-19 pandemic. According to International Labour Organization's (ILO) quick estimates, 5% of all working women lost their jobs due to the pandemic, compared to 3.9% of employed men International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021). The pandemic has regressively affected women's economic and productive engagements as in all upheavals in the past. The female labour force participation rate in the United States had fallen below 56% by January 2021; the rate was that low only back in 1987 (Djankov et al., 2021). The economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was immediately manifested in the shutdown of productive enterprises and the loss of employment. Due to lockdowns, the sudden and unplanned halt of the economy paralysed both the public and private production sectors.

Covid-19 and Economic Engagements of Indian Women

Before examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women in India, the chapter examines the economic status of women in the country and how various situations impacted the existing gender structure.

The Economic Status of Women in India

In a developing country like India, where gender disparity is significant, women's livelihood is affected disproportionately compared to men due to the pandemic. Many countries, including India, have abysmally low gender empowerment measures. The plight of women during and after Covid-19 will have to be examined, concerning their social and economic role in society. The present chapter analyses the existing literature and statistics to assess the economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic on

women's livelihood. The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021b) states that globally, the average distance completed to parity is 68%, a step back compared to 2020 (0.6% points). The report pointed out that it will now take 135.6 years to close the gender gap worldwide. For this purpose, the gender parameters in India are examined based on the 2011 census.

Various researchers, development agencies and international organisations have come up with several indicators which reflect the adverse gender indices of the Indian population. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has suggested the following 12 indicators to represent India's unfavourable gender situations (ADB, 2013).

- (a) The Census of India 2011 shows a fall in sex ratio when considering children below age seven. The sex ratio was 927 girls per 1000 in 2001, but it dropped to 914 per 1000 in 2011.
- (b) Another vital variable is the significant change in the infant mortality rate, which is higher for girls than boys. A high female infant mortality rate exists in India, mainly because of the discriminatory attitudes of society towards women.
- (c) An alternative indicator is the high maternal mortality rate. A host of factors such as early marriage, low nutrition, inadequate health-care facilities, minor role in decision-making, and lack of awareness of family planning programmes contribute towards the high maternal mortality rate.
- (d) An additional parameter is the low work participation rate of women. India has only 36% of female work participation in the overall labour ratio. More alarmingly, for professional and technical workers, the figure is only 21%. On economic and gender parameters, in Asia, the only six countries which perform worse than India are Iran, Bahrain, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.
- (e) If the most prominent gender parameters Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) are considered, all the countries with which India compares itself in recent times, such as Brazil, China and Russia, are well above India.
- (f) Another significant factor indicating gender inequality could be the high level of violence against women in India, of which domestic violence forms a substantial component.
- (g) Low economic participation, low productivity and low returns reduce the quality of life of women.

- (h) Women are engaged more in agriculture and allied activities than in industry and service sectors which are growth-oriented and more gainful.
- (i) Women have a lower share of ownership of assets.
- (j) Women have highly uneven access to financial services.
- (k) Lack of proper sanitation, fuel shortage and water scarcity reduce the well-being of women.
- (l) Transportation problems are acute for women.

The ADB findings depict the actual plight of women in Indian society. It was only during the 1970s that women were recognised as initiators of economic development. Previously their role in the economy was confined to that of homemakers. Health and nutritional programmes were initiated for them to sustain their status as mothers. The seventies brought about an attitudinal shift. Women were brought to the forefront of embracing more productive roles (Beneria et al., 2015).

As Ghani et al. (2014) proposed, there is a direct linkage between political reservations and economic empowerment. The 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution of India giving women reservation for representation in local bodies have enhanced women's capabilities that are transmitted into women's employment. As a result, more women began to exhibit entrepreneurial ability leading to economic empowerment. This increase in women entrepreneurs was mainly seen in the traditional sectors in which women were engaged.

Nevertheless, gender inequality is quite evident in the labour market of India. Women have come to the forefront in the urban labour market, but this is not true for the entire country. According to the various rounds of National Sample Survey (NSS) data, women's labour force participation has declined in rural areas. There is also significant divergence as regards caste, tribe, state and so on. Female mobility is also a factor that affects the work participation rate (Das & Mehta, 2012). Women's participation in the total workforce has increased in developing economies since the middle of the twentieth century (Bezbaruah, 2015). India's social mindset is a curious mixture of social conditioning, traditional beliefs, patriarchal values, and an ambivalent legal system. It is feudal and patriarchal, and women belonging to all strata in society are victims of archaic stereotyping and gender insensitivity. Women's labour force participation in India is showing a declining trend during the last two decades (ILO, 2021).

The ILO observes that the primary reason for the sharp decline in female labour force participation in India is the lack of employment opportunities for women, owing to factors such as occupational segregation (Kapsos et al., 2014). Very often, the presence of women in low-skilled jobs can be attributed to a low level of education and lack of training in skilled jobs. Gender stereotyping of tasks leaves them confined to stipulated works. Time constraint and dual responsibilities also adversely affect women's job prospects (ICRW, 2014).

Covid-19 has impacted women's lives much more intensely than that of men. Quarantine, social distancing, closure of small businesses, and layoffs have added pressure to women's economic position. In a vast majority of households in the lower socio-economic strata, it is the women who make ends meet with the family budget, and they had to adapt themselves to tightened budgets. Women earn less worldwide, save less, are employed in less productive sectors, and work in the informal sector (United Nations, 2020); hence their savings got expended in no time with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the sectors most affected were women-centric, for instance, services, tourism and hospitality.

Shutting down of schools demanded women's services at home for the care of children. Women's unpaid work has increased during the Covid-19 period (Chauhan, 2020). Care for older persons is also a severe problem during the pandemic, requiring women's services at home (Power, 2020). The pandemic turned out to be 'home detention' for women as the lack of public transportation threatened women's mobility (Jain & Singh, 2020). Economic uncertainty is not just employment and income loss in the present. It has an escalating effect on the future lives of women and girls. School closures and online education are predicted to result in more girl children opting out of the educational stream, indirectly affecting their future labour force participation. Impacts on education and jobs in turn can have long-lasting significance that, if unaddressed, will reverse hard-won gains in gender equality (Hanif & Pedersen, 2020).

The loss of employment in different sectors also had varied impacts on women. For instance, the loss of jobs in the construction and manufacturing sectors in the urban conglomerates led to large-scale reverse migration (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020). This reverse migration, in most cases, resulted in mass fleeing of migrant families walking long distances, causing misery to women and children.

Women working in the formal sector form a minority and are comparatively less vulnerable than those working in the informal sector. Similarly,

technologically educated women are also less affected and have access to jobs in the 'work from home' schedules. But they are also not fully spared of the pandemic impacts. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were high hopes that the global shift to home-working could mean childcare and chores to be divided equally among couples. However, this did not materialise. It merely created a double burden for women, leaving them to juggle domestic work and their paid jobs in their day-to-day existence. Family systems are reverting to more traditional structures due to the closure of schools, day-care centres and summer camps (Reichelt et al., 2021). Dual earner families where both men and women work find it difficult to sustain working because there is no one to care for children at home. In micro families, the ability of both couples to work is disappearing because the maid who used to look after children is no more available.

The Covid-19 situation impacted women on the social fronts also (UN Women, 2020). Women are being pushed back into their conventional roles while being confined at homes. Many sectors are affected by the crisis, which compromises women's decision-making power in economic and political spheres, leading to flared gender gaps in accessing essential services, controlling assets, and managing resources. Women were already poorly represented in positions of power in economic and political spheres. The lockdown puts at risk the gains at the household level and hinders women from participating in decision-making (Rivera et al., 2020).

An investigation of how the pandemic affected women of different economic strata will be meaningful, for instance, examining how it affected women belonging to society's upper, middle and lower strata. All of them are impacted by the pandemic in diverse ways. Women of the upper strata of society, be it working women or housewives, find that their work burden has increased during the pandemic. In the lockdown phase of Covid-19, the availability of domestic labour had almost stopped. Women of the higher-income group had to do manual work in the absence of domestic labour. This has caused an increased purchase of consumer durables like dishwashers, washing machines and robots for house cleaning (Majumdar, 2020). Though consumer durables help and their purchase gives them momentary relief, women are cooped up inside the house most of the day. They have done one crucial economic function; they have propped up the demand for consumer durables of the labour-saving variety. The macroeconomic fallout is significant as this will eventually cause human labour to be displaced by machines. When and if the Covid-19 period gets over, this may result in a fall in women's employment in

domestic services. The aftermath of the pandemic may be the rising unemployment of women in the informal sector. Though the demand for consumer durables increased, the benefits went not to small or medium concerns but giant e-commerce corporates. The fear of pandemic increased the online purchase of goods among women in the high-income groups.

An examination of the impact of the lockdown on the middle-class women who used to be clerks, sales executives or part-time workers gives valuable insights into the intricacies of the minute issues involved. Their jobs were also gone during the lockdown. When most shops and private concerns were closed, there was no longer any need for even low-paid labour. They did not have the privilege of buying home equipment. Their incomes were just sufficient to keep the household going at the current level. But the lockdown, which went along with the pandemic, led to the curtailment of some ostentatious spending. To some extent, it was a relief that marriages and deaths went on without splendour and conspicuous spending.

The desire of the middle class to emulate the rich was weakened during the lockdown. However, this had severe macroeconomic fallout since many services or industries that depended on such events faced a crisis. The beauty industry, the marriage industry, the gyms, and the manufacturers associated with it were at a standstill, and their demand got deferred to an indefinite period. At the macro level, there was a loss of jobs due to pushback to minimalism. Though this may look intrinsically desirable, its macroeconomic consequences are massively negative—deficiency of demand that resulted from the loss of employment exacerbated the recession caused by the pandemic. Adherence to minimalistic living, spending less ultimately caused a fall in production, which in turn produced a multiplier effect leading to an increase in unemployment.

An analysis of the lower-middle-class women's coping strategies, the people who survive with difficulty, will be insightful. Most of them were pushed back to below subsistence levels. To overcome the crisis, they tried their hand at different jobs. For instance, women who did domestic work have become vegetable vendors, and vegetable vendors moved to daily wage jobs (Azim Premji University, 2021). Many women stopped working during Covid-19 through no fault of their own (Coury et al., 2020). Since they are over-represented in insecure hourly work, and since the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are hospitality, leisure, retail and tourism, female workers have lost their jobs or been furloughed at a higher rate. Unless the government takes the initiative, there will be no jobs

available to such people. Instead, they look for dole-outs from the government.

The pandemic will be remembered forever, at least in India, by the long line of migrant labourers, including women trying to walk thousands of kilometres to get back home. Instead of helping similarly placed humans, people have become scared of each other. They forever hear of social distancing, and the distance from one individual to the next has become infinitely long.

CONCLUSION

Humanity has subsisted in concentration camps, just living from one day to the next. During the plague—the period called ‘black death’—wagons were brought to the front door demanding ‘bring out your dead’. Humanity survived two major World Wars and post-war trauma. It endured the period of the Great Depression where business people were reduced to paupers in the blink of an eye when massive scale unemployment and mass suicides were rampant.

A war, a financial crisis and a pandemic are all different when it comes to their impact on the lives of women. But in all these contexts, women are pushed into stereotypes from which they cannot escape. Nevertheless, war is different in the sense that women are asked to leave homes and join the fight. Amidst all the trauma of war, they have to fight along with men figuratively. They might not be fighting on the war front. Still, they are counted. Women came out and worked as nurses, secretaries, storekeepers, caregivers, ambulance drivers, and whatever capacity they could. The Great Depression and the financial crisis of 2008 pushed women onto the employment scene. When men lost jobs, women who were homemakers began to take up menial jobs. Thus both the war and the recession have pushed women out of the homes to join the labour force. The pandemic, on the other hand, has caused women to be pulled back into their respective homes.

The dark days of the pandemic have come, taking away the limited space that women had. The house one lives in has become the place for work and leisure too. It is a difficult situation for everyone, but more so for women. The limited freedom they enjoyed outside has come to an end. Along with the paid job they did outside, the unpaid job of house-keeping settles on them. In effect, women are pushed back, forced to assume the old stereotype of the homemaker. While the pandemic pushes

everyone back to their own limited spaces, the misery inside the house turns to violence, and women inside the house become extremely vulnerable to domestic violence.

The consequences of the pandemic will remain even after the severity of the pandemic eases off, as women may have to suffer long-term declines in workforce participation and income. The fallout will be of utmost severity for the most vulnerable women in society, those who are rarely in the headlines: migrant workers, refugees, marginalised racial and ethnic groups, single-parent households, youth and the poorest of the world. The emerging society in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic should adopt specific endeavours to bring women to the forefront. For envisaging an economy of growth with equity, the policymakers should initiate various welfare measures to bring gender equity and distributive justice. Economic packages can be initiated with direct cash transfers, unemployment benefits, tax cuts, child support and so on.

The United Nations suggests that the central and commercial banks of all nations should develop a unique gender-sensitive financial monitoring system to ensure that loans and cash transfers, which are offered as a pandemic recovery mechanism, target and reach vulnerable women. Such a scheme should also keep track of such payments and ensure that money does not end up in the hands of men or the less needy (UN Women, 2020). Women-owned businesses should be given special funding as well as subsidies, loans and tax reliefs. The social protection system should be enforced for women workers. The existing gender pay gap should be mitigated. More measures should be taken to support families with paid and unpaid work. However, interestingly many women do not feel that the Covid-19 responses of the government had focused on issues that matter most to them (Women's Budget Group, 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic has been rightly termed as a 'national emergency for women'. The burden women shoulder in the family and labour force has escalated to enormous proportions causing distortions in the family framework. Millions of women have lost jobs, and even those employed suffer from salary cutbacks causing severe inroads in the family budget. Women always bear the brunt of every crisis as they are expected to be family makers apart from comprising part of the labour force. Economic, mental and physical bottlenecks confront them in their struggle to survive. Solutions to address the problems should involve a paradigm shift that brings women to the forefront of society so that they play a prominent role in shaping the emerging economy.

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