



# COVID 19 AND GENDER ROLE: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON WOMEN IN INDIA AND RUSSIA

**Smrutirekha Sahu**

*Ph.D. Scholar, Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated the world's peace by creating terror and brought the world to a protracted crisis of health, economy, education, and livelihood. The dreaded pandemic has continued to wreak havoc on the routine life of humans, especially bringing staggering consequences for women worldwide. Due to the lockdowns and temporary shutdowns, the pandemic has aggravated the existing gender inequality with ample workload on women in the domestic spheres. This paper has done a comparative analysis of the status of women during covid-19 in Indian and Russian society. Gender inequality has increased during the Covid-19 that women from the workforce disappeared; women lost their job as domestic helpers in the cities, and there is massive job loss for women as it is difficult for them to re-enter the workforce in post-lockdowns. In India, women are culturally bound by the social and family expectations that they take time off for kids or family. Ultimately, they face the problem of job loss. In Russia, where the percentage of women is more in the workforce, they abide by the traditional values of family roles and have no time for their productive work. Domestic violence against women is a common issue and deeply rooted in societies of both countries, which have become doubled in India and increased two and half times in Russia during the pandemic. The paper critically explores how the Covid-19 pandemic has provided social, economic, and psychological hardships for women in both countries. Secondly, it asserts how the increased workload in lockdown and the job loss in the pandemic affect the women in India and Russia. Thirdly, it studies the increasing domestic violence cases as a significant physical and emotional damage to women during the pandemic. The paper further examines the state's response to the women's issues during the covid-19 pandemic. The study is analytical, descriptive, and primarily based on secondary data from India and Russia.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pandemic, Covid-19, Gender role, Women, Domestic violence, Gender equality, India, and Russia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is a pandemic that has taken millions of lives worldwide. The World Health Organization declared the disease of Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. The pandemic has severely affected the everyday life of people across the world. Every country has been affected deeply, and along with health impacts, they have faced the closure of offices, educational institutions, and markets [8]. Lockdown was imposed in many countries around the world to stop the spread of the virus. The pandemic has resulted in health degradation and economic crisis. It has differently affected the gender role. It has affected children, elders, youth, and all the gender, but women are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic worldwide.

Pandemic and gender inequalities are closely associated. The outbreak of the Zika Virus in 2015 impacted pregnant women and newborn babies. Women were experiencing miscarriages in high numbers during that period. The Ebola Virus of 2014-2016 had brought many unwanted reproductive health issues for women as women were kept mistakenly in isolation at the Ebola Treatment Centers for unusual bleeding and abortion. The devastating pandemic of 1918-1919 Influenza made women fill the labor gap as men were engaged in the First world war. Although they entered

the workforce, they were still performing the childbearing and caregiving responsibilities which impacted their health. Another gender discrimination women faced during the post-war and post-pandemic period was when men returned to the workforce, and women lost their job [16]. All these past diseases affecting women revealed that pandemic is not gender-neutral as it affects women's livelihood at a higher level than men. Dietrichson (2020) has highlighted that widows during the Spanish Flu were more affected [26] after their spouses' deaths than the men who lost their wives.

Covid-19 has increased the gender role worldwide. Women face multiple burdens in the pandemic; they are over-represented in the health care system, which is risky to get infected by the virus; they are more likely to face economic insecurity and poverty; and they face various kinds of violence, harassment, abuse, and exploitation in private places. The unpaid work of the household has increased, affecting women's mental and physical health during quarantine. Due to the existing gender inequality everywhere, women's jobs, business, and living standards are more exposed than men's, and women are more into facing an economic crisis [15]. As a result of isolation, women are more likely to experience a significant burden because of their multiple care responsibilities in the private sphere, which



makes them reduce their official working time or quit their job. Small-holder farmers and female cross-border traders suffer economic hardships because crop production goes down, and border crossing is restricted due to the lockdown. According to the World Bank Group (2020), women move from place to place using public transport, while men travel using their private vehicles. Such different way of movement impacts gender exposure to virus differently [9]. Women in academia also suffer from the work burden and lack of productivity due to the pandemic while working from home without proper concentration to write research articles [6]. On 24th March 2020, the government of India imposed its first nationwide lockdown and extended it till 30th May in many phases. As the cases started declining again, the devastating and severe second wave of covid-19 hit India in 2021, where states of India observed lockdown differently. Russia followed its first partial lockdown on 30th March 2020, which increased phase-wise. Presently India is experiencing the fourth wave of Covid-19, where as Russia has already experienced its fourth wave.

The study focuses on increasing gender inequality and the changing women's status during the lockdown in India and Russia. This paper examines why women's livelihoods in India and Russia have changed in the wake of the pandemic? This paper delves into how the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the traditional gender role in India and Russia? The study concludes by exploring the possible solution of equal pay, gender equality, equal division of house chores, and strict law on domestic violence. The comparative research gains its importance from the long-lasting cooperation between the nations and the worst phases of Covid-19 suffered by the two countries where especially, women have suffered immensely while no stringent laws were in effect to safeguard the status of women. The subsequent sections systematically brief and analyze the impact of the Covid-19 situation on women in both nations.

### **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN IN INDIA AND RUSSIA**

The covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing gender inequality providing a load of unpaid work for women at home. The closure of educational institutions and offices, the current norm of work from home, and the absence of domestic helpers have worsened women's position in the family due to an increasing need to perform household chores such as cleaning, gardening, washing, cooking, taking care of children and other household members. The burden of unpaid work falls on women excessively due to the sexual division of labor and the social norms of performing gender roles, which specifies domestic work and the role of taking care of the household. Such works are physically and mentally tiring and also time-consuming [24]. Mothers bear the burden of the pandemic as they have reduced their professional work time more than fathers [8] to take care of the younger children after the closure of the schools.

### **THE "SECOND SHIFT" AND GLORIFYING WOMEN AS A CAREGIVER**

The covid-19 pandemic shifted the public place of offices and classrooms to the family's private space. Now women in India are doing the office work from the private spaces where, along with their job, they are performing the

household work, including taking care of children and other family members. The pandemic has added more discrimination to the existing gender role than before. Although the burden of unpaid work has increased for all, women are more sufferers of unpaid labor. Due to the restrictions and fear of virus transmission, more women lose their job as domestic helpers in India and Russia. The lack of services for domestic workers in the pandemic has increased the burden of household work on women. Most of the domestic helpers are women. The closure of schools and kindergartens brought the children to homes where they needed special care. The norms of working from home have intensified gender inequality in performing household chores. Even though men and women stayed at home during the lockdown, women were supposed to do all the household chores according to the traditional gender role. Thus, the burden of the pandemic falls on women as they manage their office work from home while taking care of children, elders, and other family members, along with performing additional unpaid household labor [23]. Although mothers take greater responsibility for household and childcare, they have reduced 5% of their working hours [8]. With the closure of schools and offices in Russia, women face difficulties balancing work and family and taking care of themselves and other family members. Doing household chores after finishing their official job is called the "second shift" [19], which is staying engaged with cooking, laundry, cleaning, solving domestic issues, and caring for children and others.

The traditional gender role of women as caregivers is persistent in Indian and Russian society. The pandemic has glorified women as the caregiver within family and society. Women are solely responsible for teaching their children and taking extra care of them, whereas men do not feel to contribute. Some women have reduced their working hours, and some have left their jobs to teach and take care of their children in this pandemic. Hence, it is clear that the covid-19 pandemic has increased the gender role with the closure of professional spaces and educational institutions. The gender pattern that expects women to be the family's caregivers is disrupting their productivity at work from home. The study of Simba and Ngcobo (2020) highlighted that women take the responsibility of caregivers more than usual during crises, pandemics, and epidemics which harm their health [16]. The traditional notion of gender role discourages women from performing their office work by being frigid and calm during the pandemic. The masculinity happens to hide their fear and anxiety of covid-19 because of the prevalent gender norms.

### **WOMEN'S HEALTH IN THE PANDEMIC**

Indian women who have been infected with coronavirus are more vulnerable to death than men. Women's risk of dying is due to lack of proper nutrition and gender discrimination in the responsibility of child care and managing the household, which affects their physical and mental health [12]. The combination of 'work from home' and 'work from home' [23] devastatingly impacts women's physical and mental health and productivity [2]. Women have reported experiencing back pain, pain in strain on the eyes, and neck pain. Women don't get support in household work from their male counterparts as the household work is gendered [31]. The pandemic has affected the health service for women in India. The services of family planning, maternal health, and abortion



are adversely affected during the lockdown because of the limited availability of contraceptives and menstrual hygiene products and less access to healthcare services [28]. In rural areas, the inaccessibility of the female population to the market for menstrual products during the pandemic resulted in vaginal infection with the use of clothes.

The pandemic has brought women's reproductive health in jeopardy in India. Women cannot access abortion and contraception services due to the pandemic. Pandemic has hit their biological vulnerability as they have been viewed as the caregiver to the sick family member. Agarwal (2021) explains women have less chance to recover their pre-pandemic livelihood than men. When a woman experiences a job loss, she is experiencing poverty, indebtedness, food insecurity, isolation, assert loss, and worse mental health [7]. The quality of sexual life decreased as the frequent sexual intercourse increased, ending in an unwanted pregnancy and the deteriorating health of women [32]. Unsafe abortions because of negligence towards women's reproductive health in the pandemic lead to maternal death. Women from unprivileged backgrounds experience the risk of less access to healthcare services.

The risk of getting infected is more for women than men in India and Russia. Female healthcare workers are at greater risk of engaging with Covid-19 as they are highly represented in the healthcare sector. Some healthcare workers don't come in contact with their families to prevent the virus transmission in the household. They experience depression, stress, anxiety about staying separate from home, having long work hours, and the risk of getting infected. The pandemic disproportionately impacted women's mental health associated with healthcare work [17]. The use of public transport is a risk factor for women to catch viruses than men as they use their private vehicles. Battling with the Covid-19 at the frontline is seen as the first war of women. In Russia, 83% of women are working as pharmacists who are at risk of catching airborne viruses, including covid-19, because of the increasing workload. But the central place of getting infected is the hospitals, where 71% of women are doctors and 95 % are medical personnel [21]. Pregnant women of Russia face more risk because of the disruption in access to medical care. Women's health clinics were closed at the risk of Covid-19. India's first community health workers are "ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists)," who are not paid a fixed salary and visit many houses daily to check the virus in rural and urban India. The study of Pandey and Gupta (2020) revealed that most ASHA workers are doing this job without proper training and safety equipment, resulting in more infections among them.

### **WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY TO POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY**

The economic life of women has been more affected in comparison to men. Women represent 70% of the employment in the informal sector without proper social protection in India. To earn two meals per day, these informal workers depend on public spaces constrained to curb the spread of coronavirus [28]. Women are bearing the job loss more than men because of their invisible work, and they primarily work in the unorganized sector. The post-lockdown period has exacerbated the gender gaps in the participation and employment factors in the workforce [25]. The Covid-19

forced Indian women to face a food crisis. In most households, women are experiencing food insecurity due to their responsibility of feeding other family members during the lockdown. Simba & Ngcobo (2020) study analyzes that the food shortages resulting from lockdown and job loss make women sacrifice their meals to feed their families and children, ultimately exposing them to malnutrition and other diseases.

The salary gap (women's wages are 30 percent less than men's) in Russia is caused by women's restrictions to access the 'male' high-paying profession. In the pandemic, women are more likely to choose family over their career, resulting in permanent job loss as they can't return to the job because of gender discrimination. Research has shown that women faced job loss after every pandemic and never regained it. Men could return to the workforce and re-established their pre-crisis income, whereas women could not go back. The salary gap also enhances women's vulnerability to the economic crisis during the pandemic. Russian women are badly affected by the situation due to their representation in trade, catering, and hospitality which brought them more severe job loss than men [20]. The number of single mothers in Russia is high in the risk category during the pandemic. They find themselves in a difficult position and are more likely to be exposed to poverty [19]. The study by L.K. Reiss and others (2021) provides the data that more than 5 million single mothers in Russia are raising their children without proper financial support, and 27 percent are below the poverty line. According to the report by UN Women, India has approximately 13 million single mothers. These Indian women saw the collapse of the support system- schools and daycares to raise kids. In the absence of such support, their workload became doubled. If these women lose their job in this crisis, they have to depend on assistance from the government, which is very little.

### **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Home is not always a safe space for women, mainly when lockdown is observed. The lockdown has exacerbated violence, harassment, and exploitation against women in both Indian and Russian society. Gender-based violence has increased rapidly during the pandemic, especially in the lockdown period in India. The National Commission for Women report says that complaints from the victims of gender-based violence increased from 116 in the first week of March to 257 in the last week. Also, the reported domestic violence cases increased from 30 to 69 in the same period. Data shows that 86% of women never sought help for the violence they were experiencing, while 77% of the victims didn't disclose the incident to anyone [28]. The story of every Indian woman is woeful as they have been confined in the inhuman, cruel, and terrible attacks on her physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological growth. Since most Indian women are dependent financially on their male counterparts, the pandemic has worsened the social, mental, physical, and economic status of women. Ban of alcohol and loss of income during the lockdown has made women physically and sexually abused by their male partners. National Legal Service Authority (NLSA) provides the data on the increasing rate of domestic violence in India after the lockdown. According to the report by the Tribune (2020), the



cases of gender-based violence against women had increased in the lockdown from 4709 to 5,695 since March. Domestic violence cases increased in the same month from 3,287 to 3,993 [29]. Special women's help desk also reported more than 600 cases of physical torture and mental abuse against their male partners due to addiction to alcohol and drug [21]. Domestic violence has the worst psychological health effects on women during the lockdown as they suffer from depression and mental trauma.

Domestic violence in Russia was a significant problem before the pandemic. During this pandemic, the cases of domestic violence against women in Russia are two and a half times higher than usual. During the lockdown, the activity of the webcam platform offering 'easy money' to women has increased in Russia, which was already reported by the Russian activists [20]. Due to the lockdown restrictions, women are trapped with their aggressors at home and unable to step out to take action against the abuser, making their partner inflict more harm. According to Pisklakova-Parker (founder of the ANNA women's rights group), between February and April, they registered 30 percent of domestic violence calls nationwide. The head of the Kitezh crisis center, Alyona Sadikova, said, since the beginning of the lockdown they had received 400 calls and more for help. Due to the lockdown, both women and their abusers face job loss and financial crises, exacerbating tensions between them [11]. While staying in a single space for much longer than usual leads to harsh language, arguments, emotional stress, annoyance, and anxiety, damaging the relationship and encouraging domestic violence in Russia. The study of Zhukova (2020) explains restrictions on the movement, lockdown, and isolation have made the perpetrator believe that their criminal activities will go unnoticed as the victims can't step out of the home to report due to the lockdown.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, state and public policy attention on gender has completely shifted towards the virus [3]. Some researcher has revealed that less gender-sensitive policies are formulated for the Covid-19 pandemic. The issues of violence against women in this situation have gone unnoticed by the expertise and neglected in the policy-making process [15] by the Indian and Russian governments. NGOs even filed a petition in the Delhi High court to measure the rising cases of domestic violence against women [27]; the state has provided a helpline number for the victims, which is insufficient.

In response to cases of domestic violence, previously, police in Russia were not responding to the victim of domestic violence, saying it was their 'family' and 'private' affair. Now they have shifted their priorities towards the virus, ignoring the issue of domestic violence under this lockdown. Furthermore, the 2017 law decriminalizing domestic violence in Russia provides a penalty to the perpetrators of this crime as a fine paid from home and increases the family tension. Due to the pandemic, the restrictions have shut down a few existing crisis centers [20]. Simultaneously, until the pandemic ends, the work on the draft bill to prevent domestic violence has been postponed.

### THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS AND 'JOB LOSS' IN THE PANDEMIC

Another risk factor of the pandemic is women migrant workers in India and Russia. Women who work in retail

stores, hospitality, and other service industries are having low-income levels face additional pressure, and are more vulnerable to less consumption after the job loss. Ultimately, these women stay back at home and have to take debt for the accommodation after their savings get exhausted [32]. Kamraju and others have argued that the devastating impact of the lockdown forced women of India to earn their living by selling vegetables, fruits, handicrafts, etc., as previously they were earning from small jobs [22]. It has severely affected the livelihood of poor and disadvantaged people. An estimate reveals that 94% of women work in the informal sector of India [14] and face gender discrimination. Women migrant workers are more vulnerable to poverty in the pandemic as it has added extra-economic and health burdens to their families and livelihood. Since there was no public transportation, lakhs of migrant workers had to return to their home states by walking during the nationwide lockdown, and sadly many succumbed to death due to hunger [1]. They had experienced job loss and faced financial debt in the later period.

The study conducted by Abdul Azeez Ep and others (2021) in Delhi and some parts of Haryana state revealed that the complete lockdown has negatively impacted their life and livelihood. After the withdrawal of the lockdown, these women migrant workers could not get back to the same employment and borrowed money to meet the home rent and family expenses [1]. The women migrant workers experienced the risk of accessing the public toilets due to overcrowding in the slums. The fear of the covid-19 virus is severe among them. Being considered an outsider in a time of governmental support prevents the women worker from the social security measure in the mid of pandemic. Women workers are seen to skip meals and reduce their food intake for the sake of other family members is a gendered concern. The survey by the Menstrual Health Alliance of India (2020) reveals that 84% of the participants were restricted from using pads amid the lockdown. The study of Azeez EP and others (2021) revealed that due to the lack of a database, many urban workers did not benefit from the welfare schemes and had to go back to their native places. Shalu Nigam (2020) has highlighted the plight of returnees of women migrants' workers [27]; many women had to deliver their babies on the road, and some were in their last stage of pregnancy and had to walk hundreds of miles along with others.

During the quarantine measures, Russian migrants couldn't return home because of the cancellation of international flights and border closure [4]. According to Zarnigor Omonillayeva (a Russian Human Rights Activist), "migrant workers were the first to suffer the consequence of the pandemic" as they primarily work in the service sector and work as cleaners which were the first to shut down. Gatherings of migrant workers in the larger number at the railway stations and border areas left them infected with the virus. Due to restrictions on borders, women migrant workers face several challenges during menstruation and pregnancy. These migrant workers experienced unpaid wages [13] in the Russian quarantine, which took them into poverty.

In India, during the first wave of Covid-19, 12 million rural women lost their jobs from March to April of 2020, and 5.7 million rural women's jobs washed away in April 2021 as the second wave of coronavirus hit the nation. Moreover, 80% of rural women lost their jobs in April 2021 compared to 11% last year. The high percentage of rural women's job loss is



because they could not travel to towns to do their informal work due to the lockdown. Women farmers were severely affected by the pandemic. They could not go to 'mandis' and local markets to sell their products. As a result, their agricultural product got wasted. Due to the market close and cross-border restrictions, women farmers in the rural area faced the difficulties of selling their products at a low price and not being able to sell the product at some places [10]. Fisherwomen also faced the negative impact of lockdown as they couldn't carry on fishing and selling. As the second wave hit, male migrant workers who returned home in the first wave could not go back. They started taking the high-paying agricultural jobs, leaving low-paying work for women in the rural area, causing severe economic loss.

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the Indian government has considerably unnoticed women's issues. Russian government projects hyper-masculinity in the discussion to tackle the covid-19 pandemic. Putin's determination to tackle the covid-19 pandemic [5] relies upon his views of masculinity, where the fatherly protective nature of the state will provide safety to the Russian community. History has taught about women's response to the vaccine as the antibody response of women was higher than men during the period of Influenza. Therefore, Vora et al. (2020) have highlighted the need to understand the gender-based differences in vaccine effects while developing the vaccine for the Covid-19 pandemic. The Indian government has provided some facilities to women during the pandemic, such as the women's helpline and supporting SHG (Self-Help Groups) to assist women; the Russian government has not come up with any significant assistance. Additionally, under the PMJDY scheme, the rural poor women financially benefited for three months in India. However, the attention of the Indian government to women's problems during the pandemic is negligible.

## CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 Pandemic has increased the gender role, viewing women as the family's caregivers, making women take extra care of children and family members neglecting their health in this crisis. In India and Russia, women are experiencing the risk of getting infected directly as most women work in the healthcare sector. Rural poor women and women migrant workers are more vulnerable to the pandemic as they face poverty, bad health, job loss, exploitations, workforce discrimination, and food insecurity. Domestic violence against women in India and Russia is increasing more in numbers in the pandemic than before. Opening the liquor shop in India has contributed to the violence against women. Less access to reproductive healthcare services has left women in both countries with a devastating livelihood. From a positive perspective, the pandemic brought some men to contribute to the household work as they stayed away from it in the pre-pandemic time.

Furthermore, from a negative perspective, it has disproportionately increased the burden of unpaid labor for women than before, when most men are not doing any single household work. To reduce women's risk of the pandemic government should provide proper medical equipment to the health workers and financial help to the returnee migrant workers. The public policies of India and Russia should focus on job-creating for women post- lockdown.

The study found the problem in the government's response: while tackling the Covid-19 crisis, India and Russia have ignored the gender concern. It suggests that governments should bring gender-sensitive policies while responding to the pandemic. Adopting flexible work schedules, childcare needs, women's welfare policy, and telecommuting options can reduce the rate of gender inequality in the workforce, which the labor market should consider. Both countries must adopt comprehensive schemes to challenge women's higher risk of the pandemic. Accessing proper health care services, food, nutrition, and menstrual products to rural and migrant women is necessary. This paper also suggests gender-sensitive policies required to address confronting women's risk of diseases during the pandemic. To tackle domestic violence, the Russian government should think beyond the state's projection of hyper-masculinity and need to introduce emergency measures incorporating safety and assistance to the victim of the pandemic. Also, the Indian government should prioritize women's health while making strategies for the pandemic. The lack of open study on Russian women during the pandemic is a gap that the Russian government must fill. While inquiring about the impact of the pandemic on women in India and Russia, and the government's response to it, the study found the gap in India and Russia's strategic partnership where the discussion on gender concerns is absent, which still needs to be addressed collectively in the future.

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