

EXACERBATING GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 CATAclySM IN INDIA *ANALYZING THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA.*

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ABSTRACT

The hands that rock the cradle, the hands that serve the dishes, are the same hands that bear excruciating barbarity all over the world. One of the essential Sustainable Development goals is to "ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN," which seems to be a fantasy as we enter a new decade. As the pandemic hit the domain, we have been unclasped to a new regular, which has secluded the concerns of vulnerable sections of the society. This research scrutinizes the impact of the COVID-19 microcosm as a shadow pandemic for women in the form of increased household burden, intimate partner crimes, sexual assaults, and domestic violence. An inductive qualitative methodology has been used in this exploratory research, with primary and secondary sources as instruments of data collection. The primary data collected by an online survey of 214 intellectuals from different professional and regional backgrounds showcased that the consequences of COVID-19 are so far-ranging that it is developing into a SILENT pandemic, which needs to be confronted as soon as possible. This research calls for tackling women-related issues exacerbated due to the pandemic and keeping the victims as the prime center for COVID-19 revival policies.

Keywords: Sustainable Development goals (SDGs), COVID-19, Gender Equality, Intimate partner crimes, Sexual assaults, Domestic Violence

INTRODUCTION

Reverberating off the Indian Households, where we tick mark the schools and careers for males and decide whether the female should be conceived or not, tutored or not, or entitled to work or not. The pursuit of a woman's life today has not only been accustomed to rock a cradle but to calibrate its oscillatory motion too. One of the critical sustainable goals remains "Achieving Gender Equality and To Empower All Women and Girls," which seems like a focal point for the new decade. Men and women often diverge in their biological characteristics, yet the world at large uses this bare-bones difference as a premise for the women's captivity. In a country like India, which is experiencing a youth bulge, this social handicap needs to be prioritized and studied well.

Nevertheless, every epidemic or pandemic adds to the societal dilemma of whether women are safe at home or not. Since 23rd March 2020, we have embraced a new normal, which tends to be an anomaly for females. According to the National Commission for Women, domestic violence cases increased almost twofold since the lockdown, with almost 70% of the cases going unreported (The National Commission for Women(NCW)). Moreover, intimate partner crimes, sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, increased household burden, wife battering were some common issues.

This study analyzes the impact of lockdown due to the COVID-19 or Coronavirus pandemic on gender sensitization and the cataclysmic picture it presents before the world. This study further analyzes and tests

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various variables as a premise for gender difference to address the gaps in gender inequality. Besides some traditionally established variables such as patriarchy and social norms, newer variables rising out of the COVID-19 have also been analyzed.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Every day thousands of ominous headlines such as minors getting pregnant (THE HINDU, 2021), a man out on parole homicides a 2-year-old (THE TIMES OF INDIA, 2020), menacing of wife with an acid-attack (THE TIMES OF INDIA, 2021), clearly shows a lot of effort must be effectuated for attaining gender equality. According to the Crimes in India Report, 2019, India experienced a 7.303% increase in crimes against women from 3,78,236 cases in 2018 to 4,05,861 cases in 2019. Most of the cases against women out of the IPC crimes were reported under "Cruelty by husband or his relatives"(1,26,575, 31.18%), followed by "Assaults on women with intent to outrage her modesty"(89,292, 22%). Further, dowry deaths were 7,162 out of total dowry cases (13,674) reported under Dowry Prohibition Act,1961, and rape cases were 7.94% (32260) out of the prevalent crimes. Nearly 30% of the women have faced sexual, physical, or emotional abuse at the core worldwide. (Crimes in India Report, 2019)

Into the bargain comes a blind spot such as the Coronavirus pandemic, exacerbating the existing reticence of women all over the world. Surviving pandemics for a woman goes beyond the risks of infection. Taking instances from the Ebola Virus Disease that shook Liberia in 2013, men were not sensitized regarding gender-based violence, and cases of wife battering, verbal abuse, rape, non-reporting of plights, sexual assaults, and victim-blaming attitudes were a common scenario (Dala T. Korkoyah, 2015). In India, the Government imposed a complete lockdown from March 23, 2020. During just a few months of lockdown (March 23 to May 30), the cases of domestic violence spiked from 22% to 47.2%, according to the data collected by the National Commission for Women (NCW). In just 20 days of initial lockdown, 239 cases of domestic violence were reported, which is only 1% of the total cases (The National Commission for Women(NCW)). Prior studies have also recorded most of the cases going under-reported, which has been referred to as "the iceberg of Domestic Violence" (Gracia, 2004). The recognized reasons were fear of embarrassment, economic dependency of women over men, women's fear of retaliation, notions of society at large, etc.

According to a study by Mc. Kinsey Global Institute, women were 1.8 times more vulnerable than men during the lockdown (The power of parity: Advancing women's equality in India, 2015). Moreover, according to UNFA Report, 47 million women do not even have access to contraceptives, leading to 7 million unwanted pregnancies. (UNFPA, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

The research philosophy of Positivism has been executed while working with observable social paradox. An Exploratory Inductive mixed-method approach has been followed, converging both quantitative and qualitative data.

SAMPLE

The current research's primary sample incorporated 214 diversified records among the ages of 15 and above and was consequently merged with secondary data via literature review to give better context to this study.

The respondents were presented the questionnaire through the Internet, seeking their socio demographic profile and their perspective of gender-based violence (on a five-point Likert scale). The respondents were asked to fill as per their comfort level with a confidentiality promise.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

The assessment achieved a 100% response rate, appreciably more from the female population (131, 61%) than the male population (83, 39%) as depicted in the following pivot table-

Table 1. Showing the respondents' gender and State of residence

		GENDER		
		FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
STATE	DELHI	93	52	145
	OUT OF DELHI	37	32	69

Since magnification was on the youth's perspective, 83.18% of the population were people between the ages 15-25, followed by 11.21% between 25-35 years of age and rest, above the benchmark of 35. Almost 12% of the population was either married or living in with their partners.

Furthermore, almost 70% of the population included students from various institutions across India; the rest proportion included people from the corporate background, housewives, academists, businessman, professionals which are presented in figure 1:

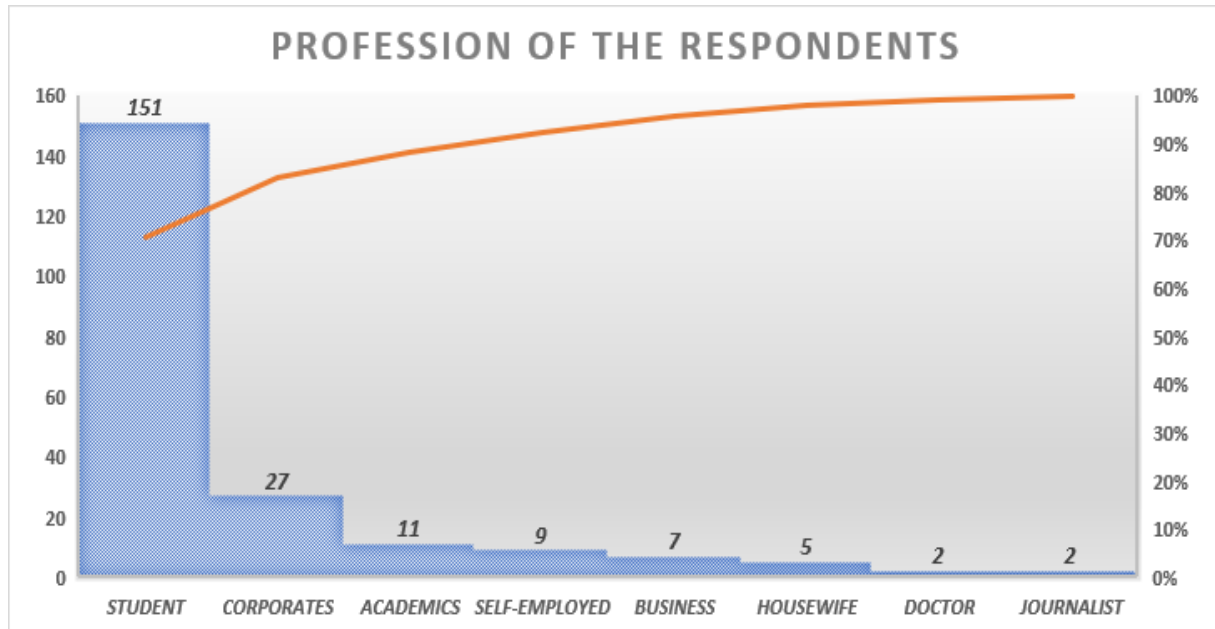


Figure 1: Respondents' profile: this figure demonstrates the profession of the respondents

The education level was rather andragogy, comprising 88.79% of graduates, students pursuing graduation, professional degrees, and Ph.D. scholars.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The questionnaire was prepared with utmost diligence after discussion with experts and referring to published literature. It was structured into two sections. The first section seemed to gather the socio demographic profile of the respondents. Whereas the second section of the sample included the questions such as whether the respondents give credence to gender equality in their milieu or regarding their awareness about sexual consent, cases encountered, and the medium of information. Concerns regarding gender-based issues such as marital rape, increased household burden during the lockdown, domestic violence, and feminine rights were also put forth. The respondents indicated a degree of agreement and disagreement through Likert scale items on a five-point scale, from 1(Strongly disagree) to 5(Strongly agree). Furthermore, the respondents were asked about their candor towards menstrual hygiene, the role of education, and their approval on proximity and safer households (whether being abode is safe or not). Their independent views towards the government initiatives and self-help campaigns were also recognized.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Based on an extensive literature review, the following hypotheses were constructed and consequently tested in this paper:

HYPOTHESIS 1: Gender equality is poles apart among citizens of all marital status. (CHI-SQUARE)

HYPOTHESIS 2: The physical and sexual violence cases experienced by all age groups between 15 or above are not equal. (ONE-WAY ANOVA)

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

All the responses were duly filled, digitally recorded, and considered for analysis. Proper COVID-19 norms were followed. The information received was cross-tabulated and distinctive variables were realized, such as CONTINUOUS VARIABLES (age), DICHOTOMOUS VARIABLES (gender, marital status), DISCRETE VARIABLES (profession, state, education level, living with parents, partners, etc.), DEPENDENT VARIABLES (gender equality, domestic violence, marital rape, sexual and physical violence, burden of household chores, proximity), INDEPENDENT VARIABLES (strict restrictions of mobility and loss of communication channels during lockdown, patriarchy, socio-cultural aspects such as dowry, economic losses occurred during the pandemic, availability of obscene material over the Internet, societal influence, and other factors such as lack of sex education) were studied. Qualitative data collected from a series of studies were exposed to content investigation to distinguish the focal ideas and designs identified with research questions. It acted as a manual for data organization and helped to identify and study the broad-gauge concepts. A combination of Microsoft Excel 2010 and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for analysis. Additionally, both the analyzed quantitative and qualitative premises were induced to produce practical conclusions into the platter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS:

When asked about whether the respondents have encountered any sexual, physical, or emotional harassment or violence during their lifetime, the older generation got heed, with almost 45% of the population experiencing drastic touches and circumstances during their lifetime. Moreover, it was found that there exists a high positive correlation coefficient of "0.884" between age and the cases of such physical, sexual, and emotional abuse experienced. As the age increases, the proportion of cases of physical and sexual violence also increases. However, 39.51% of the male population strongly believed home is the safest place for a woman, whereas women smirked eyeball to eyeball with such views with almost the same proportion strongly disagreeing.

The state-based comparison clearly shows the juxtaposition between the gender equality faced by people living in the capital vs. the states such as Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, etc. According to a report by the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), female employment is comparatively more in urban areas as compared to rural areas, leading to economic independence (Pozarny, 2016). Therefore, 65.52% of the population living in Delhi believes that there is gender equality in their homes, workplaces, and environment. In contrast, only 35.56% of women believe in gender equality in their milieu.

Diving deep into the dark picture COVID-19 has served, the respondents were inquired about the domestic violence cases during the lockdown and whether the cases were officially heard or not. According to the National Commission for Women (NCW), there has been an increase of at least 2.5 times in domestic violence complaints since the lockdown, with almost 70% of the cases going unreported (The National Commission for Women (NCW)). The primary data collected by the survey of intellectuals from different professional and regional backgrounds showcased the same results; most of the issues were unreported from the population that experienced domestic violence.

It was recognized that out of 28% of the domestic violence cases encountered during the lockdown, almost 60% of the cases were never officially set for trials and inquiry. Therefore, a new enshroud has been identified for underreporting cases, generally known as the "Tip of the Iceberg" problem of domestic violence. The reasons for non-reporting of cases can be personal, like embarrassment, economic dependence of women over men, sabotage of communication channels, or societal issues such as victims being blamed, privacy concerns, the biggest one being misogynistic attitudes and existent internalized patriarchy.

Similarly, when asked about the reasons for increased abuse, some new factors such as unemployment, stress and frustration, loss of communication channels, strict restrictions of mobility straightened up with the current prevalence of social practices such as misogynistic ideologies, societal influences, and ease in availability of obscene material in a youth-bulging country like India. Also, violence tends to be more likely, according to some previous studies, where men are unemployed or where the household bears immense financial difficulties. (The Unemployed Man and His Family. The Effect of Unemployment Upon the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families, 1941)

The implied impetus of the widespread social ramifications includes the traditionally existing premises like patriarchy, societal issues, socio-cultural aspects such as dowry, ease in the availability of obscene material over the Internet, and others such as lack of sex education, lack of speedy trials, etc. with some new emerging and apparent variables such as strict restrictions of mobility, unemployment arising due to the economic crisis, and others such as frustrations and stress arising at the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proportionate cause arising out of the respondents' views for the increased number of cases during the lockdown is well depicted in figure 2.

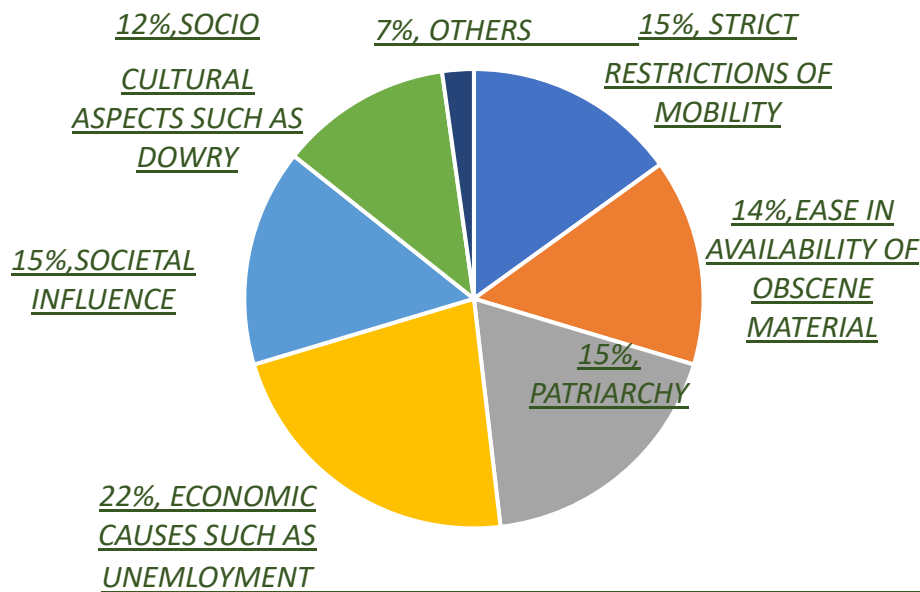


Figure 2: Showing the proportionate causes of increased cases during the lockdown in the views of the respondents.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND RESULTS:

HYPOTHESIS 2- CHI-SQUARE TEST:

Marital rape has always been moral turpitude in society. Once married, a woman’s consent is an implied notion. Over 71.56% of the population strictly demanded strict legal provisions to abandon marital rape in the country. A Chi-square test was conducted to check the consistency level of gender equality within married and unmarried samples of the population.

The results from these hypothesis tests predict that gender equality and gender-based issues are not consistent among all citizens, married or unmarried. The sample included 186 respondents who were unmarried, 25 who were married, and the rest living with a partner or separated. These frequencies were statistically different, $X^2(6, N=214) = 13.015, p=0.043 < 0.05$ as shown in table 2

Table 2: Hypothesis 2: Chi-Square Test Results

Chi-Square Tests				
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	13.015 ^a	6	.043	
Likelihood Ratio	11.721	6	.068	
Linear-by-Linear Association	.040	1	.841	
N of Valid Cases	214			

HYPOTHESIS 2: ONE-WAY ANOVA:

19.77% of the female population between the age group of 15-25 have experienced sexual, physical, domestic violence, and intent to outrage modesty. On the contrary, 60% of the female population above 45 are forced to contend with the same. Victim-blaming and misogynistic attitudes and high tolerance towards abuse dwelling in the society might be the main reason for the same. With this study, this can be concluded that the physical and sexual violence cases experienced by all the age groups among 15 or above are incommensurate. The effect of age, therefore, was significant at $F(3,210) = 2.870, p=0.037$ as shown in the TABLE 3.

Table 3: Hypothesis 3: One-Way Anova Test Results

			Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	(Combined)		106.397	3	35.466	2.870	.037
	Linear Term	Unweighted	14.890	1	14.890	1.205	.274
		Weighted	64.368	1	64.368	5.209	.023
		Deviation	42.029	2	21.015	1.701	.185
Within Groups			2595.135	210	12.358		
Total			2701.533	214			

Qualitative Analysis using Narratives and Interpretative Methods

Examining impact of Patriarchy and resultant mobility restrictions for women through respondents' narratives. The motorning of a child at an early age by a patriarchal mindset puts feminism at the question mark. Patriarchy is basically a social system that conceives from male superiority and male dominance, leading to neglecting feminism and womanhood. According to a report by Allen J. Johnson, it is a manifesting reality that patriarchy is the only gender game so rooted in the world that it goes unchallenged and unexamined. The ultimate prevalence of woman's image as the "home-maker" and the man as "homefinancer" shapes the patricentric society. The woman who tries to rebel in such a scenario is labeled as a "gauche". (Johnson)

This research stems from the patriarchal mindset and examines the impact of Patriarchy and resultant mobility restrictions for women through respondents' narratives. The existence of Patriarchy is allpervasive, which was socially transparent when a respondent shared the plights of his mother. He quoted an experience as, "It is unfortunate that it was Mother's Day and we kids were preparing greeting cards for our mother when we heard a crash of voices in our home. Subsequently, it was our father who slapped my mother over a trivial fight." Moreover, reciting the past school days, he also mentioned that the condition of his school was heinous, and the boys in his school had also committed some severe offenses such as eve-teasing and attempt to rape. He labeled it 'the strange gift of poverty and patriarchy', leaving a concern and impact on the whole study.

While these social handicaps were prevalent, during the lockdown, men and women had to spend more time under the same roof, leading to strict mobility restrictions for women and loss of communication channels. Interestingly, a study titled "Unintended Consequences of Lockdown", published in the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), highlights that the red zones having higher restrictions received domestic violence and abuse cases than the orange and green zones (Ravindran & Shah, 2020). Lockdown may be a smart and perceptive step for controlling the Coronavirus disease, but the consequences by some social

dilemmas are far-ranging, causing "A SILENT AND A SHADOW PANDEMIC" affecting women. (Ravichandran P, 2020)

During the lockdown, when few voices became prominent, it became impossible for the second narrator to be deaf to these voices. Eventually, they encountered a domestic violence case in their locality, where a drug addict husband used to beat and abuse his wife due to all the frustrations and mishaps of the lockdown. Unfortunately, they could not provide a helping hand as it was labeled as a family matter, and the victim did not even retaliate against her husband. She took the imminent solution to leave her husband and live at her parent's house with her two children, which was a valiant option yet looming a trial that was never heard, and the sinister chose to flee.

The levels of Patriarchy in society and strict restrictions of mobility during lockdown are supposed to be considerable reasons for the increased gender gap and surging cases during the lockdown.

AWARENESS-

It was disheartening to know that most of the respondents were numb to woman helplines, NGOs working hard to retrieve the scenario. On the brighter side, the respondents expressed a spark of empathy towards the victims and their emotional values. They observed their disheartening approaches during the lockdown by not giving their mothers and sisters a hand in household chores. Some displayed utter hope towards the victims' future and Government redressal plans for them. Some even got further inspired to launch self-help desks and for joining or funding some NGOs.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

This research calls for understanding the concerns after a new regular and implies statistical testing and drawing conclusions to address the gender gaps and increased gender-based issues during the lockdown. The concerns after a new regular should be to prioritize and tackle the gender-based issues exacerbated because of the pandemic and keeping the victims as the prime center for the COVID-19 revival policies and making mitigation measures for any other situation that may befall us. For this, some suggestions can be to have Sustainable local initiatives, like self-help desk, community space to discuss ideas, recovery plans should address the increasing care burden, strict and stringent laws, acts, and schemes for the welfare, financial incentives, moral support to the victims, and awareness programs.

However, some limitations should be duly noted. Due to COVID-19 situations, the data was virtually recorded, and proper COVID-19 norms were followed. Therefore, personal interviews and direct observation methods and remarks would not be feasible. The data collected focuses more on the urban population than the rural population. This study has not considered the illiterate people of India, which are an essential and a significant part of the population and yet, are more subjected to abuse.

CONCLUSION:

Since the time of the great depression, every pandemic has yielded a line of difference between the genders, leading to an increase in violent and compulsive abuse of women. This study seeks an important initiative of challenging the mindset and having a sustainable world after the COVID-19 waves, where the womanrelated issues should be prioritized. During the lockdown, the biggest reason for violence against

women was that men and women must stay under one roof 24x7, leading to reduced communication channels and strict restrictions on mobility for women.

The complaints received during the lockdown were just a scintilla into the problem; the actual problems are tenses. The biggest challenge starts from recognizing the unpaid work done by a woman to stop the bias on the part of society. Women in the rural districts also do not even have access to basic infrastructural facilities like firewood. Moreover, lack of digital literacy and sex education is also a cause of consideration to be administered. Ironically, the most prominent stakeholders in a woman's life can act as a giant cage for her. To address this issue, awareness programs, self-defense training, and sex education should be organized starting from an early age by various institutions, such as schools, colleges, and even NGOs. It needs to be superintended that sex education is as crucial as teaching photosynthesis to a child. Professional childcare industries could be set up, and women should be encouraged to take part-time internships rebalancing the nation's economic structures. Woman helpline number – 1091 and the woman helpline for domestic abuse – 181 should be like a prayer in the morning assemblies of school, recited daily, hung on the notice board. Women need to be aware and considerate of their rights and pledge not to fabricate themselves to the society.

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