



**LORETO COLLEGE**

*Department of Economics*  
*presents*

# RUMINATIONS

A Peer Reviewed E Publication  
|| Volume 2 ||

## FOREWORD

I congratulate the Economics Department who under the guidance of Dr. S. Mitra and the faculty of the Economics Department have worked at a relevant topic 'Socio-economic Inequality in the Post-pandemic Era' for their peer reviewed e-publication, 'Ruminations' in the academic year 2021-2022. The challenges found during and after the pandemic are unequalled in history. While the country's health suffered much, economic data shows distinct sign of recovery in certain spheres in the post-pandemic. Poverty and inequality manifested itself in a startling manner during the lockdown caused by the Pandemic, both of which showed an improvement in the post-pandemic. With an increase in creativity entrepreneurship grew, innovation and enterprise was appreciated and supported. Non-government organization took up social responsibility and the upliftment of people under the due circumstances, assisting wherever the need was the greatest. Work from home became the norm. While many persons lost their jobs, others were pro-active and experimented in their efforts to bring home some income.

The flip side of this was that anti-social activities, lower mental and physical health, a sense of helplessness and depression reared its head. The social structure of families at risks surfaced, some breaking up due to lower resilience in human relationships with prolonged proximity. Discipline too suffered and the resistance to return to normal life in the post-pandemic has affected social economy. Unemployment continues to prevail among youth due to a general mind-set of employers towards those who have graduated during the pandemic (under the guise of online batches). The option emerging is entrepreneurship, skill-based self-employment and a return to renewing farming and nature.

Our pupils have been motivated to think critically and creatively as they penned articles for 'Ruminations'; much appreciations to our contributors.

**Sr. (Dr.) Christine Coutinho**  
**Principal, Loreto College**

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## Navigating Through the Pandemic of Inequality

Sohini Chakravarty

At a time when every light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be a small lamp of hope that keeps us going, when the earlier conventional normal seems to be rather abnormal and at a time when B.C. being an abbreviation for Before Corona does not seem too much of an absurdity; one may quite resonate with a few lines from Nissim Ezekiel's renowned poem The Professor, where he says,

*"Whole world is changing. In India also, we are keeping up.*

*Our progress is progressing.*

*Old values are going, new values are coming.*

*Everything is happening with leaps and bounds."*

Albeit written in a context entirely dissimilar from what we are facing now; these words will echo somewhere within us, no matter in which corner of the world we are right now. The fact that the socio-economic inequality as an inevitable ramification of this pandemic is indeed *"happening with leaps and bounds"* is unmistakably discernible through the 'Timeto Care' report released by Oxfam on the World Economic Forum's Davos Agenda which states that the world's 10 richest people have seen their combined wealth increase by a whopping \$540 billion during the pandemic, making it clearly evident that the Novel Coronavirus can, for reasons justified, also be called the 'Inequality Virus'. On narrowing our vision to the context of the Indian subcontinent, the report also added that the top 10% of India's population hold control of 77% of the nation's wealth cornering a huge part of the wealth through corny capitalism and inheritance.

The crisis born out of this pandemic has threatened a lost decade in the fight against poverty, widening the already existing socio-economic disparity and showing a potential to increase this inequality in almost every country around the globe at once- a phenomenon where, in economies globally, the stinking prosperous and elite are possessing the opportunity to amass massive wealth whilst the poor are being squeezed out and all of this is happening in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression and the worst job crisis in over 90 years.

Shedding light on the situation prevailing in India, certain other social facets annex itself thereby making the analysis of the state of affairs more complex than many other nations. With the apparent manifestation of a social hierarchy due to a 2000 year old caste system, it has definitely not added to the minimisation of the already existing socio-economic inequality and even though affirmative social action policies in the form of reservations to bring forth the deprived has to an extent helped overcome the economic depression and social oppression, it has been somewhat futile in the abolition of the caste system as well as the shifting of the economic resources; in fact the highly unequal distribution of the resources in the midst of the pandemic has only further highlighted this already existing social structure.

Recent reports and estimates show that the pandemic and consequent lockdown imposition is draining the already poor more, whether they are in developing or developed countries. It would be noteworthy at this point to quote Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, who, while delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, said:

*“The COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in highlighting growing inequalities. It exposed the myth that everyone is in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.”*

He highlighted that the world had ignored inequality for too long, further putting the poor at greater risk during the pandemic. In fact, availability and affordability of various services during this time such as healthcare, education, technology, leisure, etc. are based on income level, employment status, gender, caste and religion- the last two criteria coming into play more specifically in the Indian context.

On breaking down the socio-economic structure into economic, gender and racial divides, it has been found that women are evidently the hardest hit due to their over-representation in low paid precarious jobs which have been hardest hit by the crisis, moreover, women are engaged in a large part of the global social care workforce- which are essential jobs but in most cases underpaid whilst also exposing them to the greater risks of Covid-19. The imposition of lockdown has exacerbated the marginalisation of women, especially those belonging from the poorer sections. On a racial perspective, the inequalities in people’s ability to protect themselves and cope with this pandemic is seen in the case of the Afro descendants, Indigenous people in case of the Latin American countries and the Dalits, Adivasi in case of the Indian subcontinent have had to carry a greater burden of the pandemic on their shoulders compared to the privileged classes i.e, the mortality rates are higher in poorer areas of countries, irrespective of whether they are in developing or developed nations. Low-income populations are undoubtedly more exposed to the health risks and more likely to experience job losses and a consequent decline in well-being. These effects are even more concentrated in economically disadvantaged minorities.

Moreover, despite the high infection rate in the urban areas of a country like India as compared to the rural areas, the second wave of the pandemic has shattered the myth that pastoral India is less affected by the wrath of the virus as compared to their urban counterparts. The rural-urban divide along with the high percentage of migrant labour has not only led to an obvious transmission of the infection in the agrarian side but has also widely projected the unequal distribution of resources in the rustic parts of the country, post the proliferation of the virus in these areas. Thus it can be indisputably deduced that quite like any other social catastrophic crisis, the costs of the pandemic, too, are being borne disproportionately by the poorer segments of the society on one hand, whilst they are also

being deprived of facilities to cope with the crisis due to a lack of infrastructural facilities and weak supply chain management on the other hand.

Socio-economic inequality has steadily risen over the past two to three decades and this rising inequality is a major fault line of our generation, which has not only depressed economic growth by dampening aggregate demand and slowing productivity growth, it has also fuelled social discontent, political polarisation, and populist nationalism, in some cases one may even go so far as to call it a form of xenophobic nationalism. And as this pandemic has revealed, it has increased societal and economic fragility to shocks. Higher transmission risk is linked to overcrowded housing and inability to self-isolate. Mortality rates among racial and ethnic minority groups have been up to three times higher than those of the White population, as per the Lancet Public Health Survey conducted in the UK. The risks of both- contracting the virus and of scathing illness and mortality reveals the overlapping structural determinants of health which have been bred by inequality and transmitted across generations.

On moving our concentration to the emerging socio-economic inequalities in different sectors of the economy as a by-product of the raging virus, it can be seen that the education and future of the younger generation as well as the kids has been greatly threatened by the pandemic. Even though substantial efforts have been made to transport the conventional classroom teaching to the students at home, it has been unmistakably only on a digital scale and evidently a socio-economic disparity is seen in this context, where students hailing from economically weaker households have been at a relatively weaker ground to access educational facilities, which has peaked in some cases leading to an absolute deprivation of education due to a persisting digital divide and inability to afford devices owing to economic impoverishment.

The fact that socio-economic inequality has digital divide as an elementary foundation stone is seen in the very fact that working adults, too, are facing a huge digital divide in their work arena. The ease of working from home for employees has a positive correlation with the extent of internet penetration. Employees with poor internet connections at home will be inevitably lagging behind, all the more in countries with colossal internet access and dependency. Moreover, skillset of workers is also a determining factor which has induced inequality as seen for high skilled workers who are able to switch between jobs and hence maintain a more or less constancy in the flow of income as they are generally engaged in occupations where remote working is a possibility. This is, however, almost nugatory in the case of low skilled workers, making them more prone to reduced job flexibility as well as increased job losses. According to Stanford economist Nicholas Bloom, this trend is "generating a time bomb for inequality".

For white collar jobs, they have an almost 'win-all' situation in case of income, health and employment. One may argue that global firms have also resorted to rampant laying off owing to a downfall in business scenario, which brings us to the point that win-alls constitute a very small privileged minority of the workforce and would lose a little. On the contrary, the lose-alls face a triple insecurity with health-income-employment which in fact grows exponentially as they live in unhygienic densely populated urban neighbourhoods where diseases spread much faster generating further income losses and an obvious lesser hours at the job, taking into consideration the fact that a huge chunk of this lose-all workforce consists of daily wage labourers, predominantly the informal workforce. The latter group is essentially trapped in an adverse equilibrium with the unjust choices of risking their health if they go to work, risking their income if they don't go to work, and risking their employment if the COVID-19 lockdown imposition periodically continues, which is distinctly pertinent in case of the Indian subcontinent.

It is therefore imperative for the State to adopt and implement structural changes through policies in order to address the varying vulnerabilities among the helpless informal sector; a success of which will act as an aid to the Herculean fight against socio-economic inequality. Considering the widespread disparity in the social and economic state of affairs prevailing in the country, even though the government's advisories about restrictions imposed on social contact are important, for countries like India and other similarly placed nations, such measures are economically risky for those who essentially face a choice between the devil and the deep-sea. It must be realised that **social distancing is impractical for the millions without social security.**

Another counterproductive ramification of the pandemic which has not only reflects but also has further stoked up the persistent socio-economic inequality is the worsening mental health issues as well as undesirable lifestyle trends among people at large. The deleterious effects of social isolation and loneliness on mental and physical health outcomes have come to the fore as a consequence of the pandemic. The unprecedented financial crisis triggered by the pandemic has pushed millions of children into famished financial conditions. Moreover, prolonged school closures and a State imposed home confinement has taken toll on the mental health of children- the pandemic has undoubtedly disproportionately affected socioeconomically disadvantaged children. During home confinement, children are vulnerable to unhealthy lifestyle, sleep disturbances, less physical activity, and longer media exposure which are conceptually related to poorer child mental health. In many cases, which is particularly relevant in the context of this pandemic, the 'grief' factor comes into play; grief and distress caused due to parental loss or separation can have a massive impact on children. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, there is also an increased risk of child abuse because of the heightened stress and social isolation. Such socioeconomic inequality in child mental health, unfortunately, presents with equally crucial short-term and long-term consequences that are not only detrimental to vulnerable children, but also to the wider society.



As far as the adult generations are concerned, specifically the septuagenarians and octogenarians, they are at a higher risk of social isolation, loneliness and thus poor mental and physical health. They are confronted with and have to tackle challenges like non-availability of house help and attendants for diurnal tasks, difficulty in accessing medical help as well as an adverse course of existing morbidity. Amplified caution publicised by the media houses of the high risk of potentially fatal implications on contacting the virus has only added to the sense of helplessness and anxiety for adults of all age groups at large. A branching out implication of this besides the socio-economic inequality in mental health is that a majority of these attendants and house-helps are women who are now having to stay back at home with minimal or no wage and thus being more prone to domestic abuse and other atrocities as men of the household either don't go to work or have lost jobs during this time leading to increased poverty, frustration and violence.

Thus, we can say that the multi-layered vulnerability and deprivation of rural, urban and tribal toiling classes, with the least financial capacity to stay locked down, without access to work, income and food on the one hand and a poorly equipped and understaffed public health system left to combat the mounting caseload, on the other, has indeed stood out starkly as a repercussion of the pandemic.

However, it would be a misdeed to look at the pandemic and its implication with just mere cynicism since the newer potentials rising out of this pandemic, if harnessed, can unquestionably foster economic growth, thereby guide the road to reduced socio-economic inequality. Although major economic reform is politically complex, the elevated political divisiveness in today's world does add to the hurdles aimed at curbing socio-economic inequality. But the crisis born out of this pandemic can shift the political setting for reform, that is, the fault lines exposed by this pandemic can be a driving force and act as a catalyst for a conducive change- putting brakes on the accelerated socio-economic inequality. It is at this time, we remember the quote from 'A Tale of Two Cities' in 1859 by Charles Dickens, little did he know that his eloquent words would hold truer today than perhaps they ever have in modern history-

***"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope."***

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## Migrant Workers and the Informal Sector: Through a Post-Pandemic Lens

Arthita Mukhopadhaya

History had lessoned that pandemics are recurring in nature, and hence such a fatal phenomenon had been a looming risk for decades now. But even then, the Covid-19 pandemic came as a massive shock to the global community –the society, health system, world economy and governments, because of its sheer magnitude, the lack of available knowledge about the virus’s current form, and the dearth of previously existing data that could have helped analyze the severity of the pandemic’s impact, before it actually materialized. And thus, when the first wave of the pandemic hit, every human being on earth was caught off guard; and every country critically underprepared to combat it.

It came in phases; affecting different countries for the first time at *different* points of time, the epicenter shifting from continent to continent, while countries kept falling one after the other like a stack of dominoes – China, Italy, Britain, India, USA. But the story hardly ended there. Before these countries could tide over the disastrous effects of the first wave, and before a suitable vaccine could be formulated, tested and distributed amongst the population, a second wave washed over these countries with new strains of the mutant virus. The world and national economies and political structures, with their already shattered backbone, could barely brave this wave, and it wreaked havoc in country after country.

Now, that the worst bit of the nightmare seems to be coming to an end, now that one can finally start referring to the coming era as hopefully, a *post-pandemic* one, it is time countries focused on the pieces left behind by this tempest, the remnants of this devastating pandemic –the inequalities that have only been deepened by it.

Now what does this post-pandemic world look like? Given the inability of governments across the globe to have managed the pandemic by sticking to older policy measures and strategies (i.e., the ones not good enough to deal with the ravages of the pandemic), it becomes clear that the direction in which economies should be moving is towards a fundamental *alteration of geopolitical and socio-economic norms*. Therefore, the most pertinent questions countries should be dealing with at this point of time are, “What went wrong? Who has taken the biggest hit of these pandemic woes? Which groups of people? Who could afford to make it through the pandemic and who could not?” and lastly but most importantly, “Where do we go from here to rectify this?”. These are also the questions this essay tries to answer.

A good place to start would probably be at the very first activity that was restricted by the onset of the pandemic – *movement, migration*. Cities were put under lockdown, curfews announced, and all kinds of movements across borders halted, but what about the people who were already working as *migrant* workers, both across states and across nations? According to UN/DESA reports there are about 258 million international migrants in the world, out of

which 164 million are migrant workers [source: International Labor Office’s (ILO) data, 2018]. In Italy this number is 10% of their total population which is around 6.04 million [source: The

Times, 2020]in Britain it is 14% which is around 9.3 million [source: Article on Foreign born population ofUK, 2018]. In India the number of international immigrants is about 18 million but more prominently 85% of migrants are *intra-state migrants* i.e., there are around 450 million peoplewho have moved from one state of India to another or from a village to a town [source: Government of India Census, 2011].

It is these people who really suffered during the first wave of the pandemic. They worked in places far away from their homelands and lived in conditions that are not very favorable or hygienic. Most migrant workers have meagre incomes to begin with and they live in very small quarters, often 5-6 people to a room. They do not have the luxury to isolate and neither did they have the assurance that their jobs would be unaffected by pandemic or that the foreign governments of the places they reside in will be looking out for them. A situation of helplessness and resentment was created, and the migrants only desperately longed to be reunited with their families in their homelands. For India, this situation worsened when the first lockdown was announced and millions of vulnerable, poor Indians who worked away from their homes, came to an identical conclusion – that they should not heed state governments’ assurances to stay where they worked; that they could not rely on the State for any financial or physical support; and that with no trade union rights they will have little means to compel employers to support them. Therefore, they decided to walk back to their villages. It was reported that at least 200 workers died on their journey, but the actual figure is likely to be higher, since statisticians and economists find India’s record-keeping of deaths to be inaccurate or unreliable even under normal circumstances. In the process, they may have exposed themselves to the virus, or exposed others to the virus – spreading the pandemic instead of containing it.

Another, and a little different, kind of problem faced by migrant workers in several European countries and the USA, was the vilification of certain groups for supposedly ‘spreading’ the virus. In the US for example, all businesses took a hit because of the pandemic, but sales for Asian-American businesses were down by more than 60% from a year earlier, which is much greater than the drop faced by other small businesses, according to research from the JPMorganChase Institute. This alienation linked to racist rhetoric that blames Asians for the coronavirus, is very unfortunate and it makes life for the migrant population very difficult.

What one has to realize here, is that the post-pandemic era is starting from a point of *severe recession*. People’s purchasing power, and hence effective demand is at an all-time low. GDP growth rates are plummeting and hence to recover from this, countries will have to rebuild their economies piece by piece. Every factor adding to the production process will have to be given due importance. Therefore, policy makers may be forced to rethink how they view migrant workers, who play an essential role in the functioning of their economies. In the face of COVID-19, the migrant rhetoric must change from discrimination to solidarity.

The governments will have to remodel their policies in such a way so that adequate focus and assurance is provided to migrant populations so that they don’t fall prey to stigmatization and misinformation. The pandemic has served as an eye-opener and has brought attention to the criticality and vitality of migrant workers in many sectors of the economy – most prominently healthcare. The rampant socio-economic inequalities that are existent in terms of opportunities available to migrant workers vis-à-vis other sections of the population, need to be corrected if

economies intend to thrive in the post-pandemic world. Now another, not completely unrelated arena that this essay aims to highlight, is the informal sector of a working economy. According to International Labor Organization's estimates, around 2 billion people in the world i.e., more than 60% of the world's employed population is part of the informal economy. In most developing countries, this sector constitutes a huge chunk of the working population because the formal sector fails to create adequate jobs. In India this number is so huge that there practically is no correct or honest estimation available

– the Economic Survey of 2018-19, released on July 4, 2019, says almost 93% of the total workforce is informal. But the NITI Aayog's Strategy for New India @ 75, released in November 2018, said that by some estimates, India's informal sector employs approximately 85% of all workers. In the US this figure is between 3-40% [source: The Urban Institute], China's is about 50%, [source: Johannes Jutting and Theodora Xenogiani, "Informal Employment and Internal Migration: The Case of China,"] and Italy's 18.5% [source: Bank of Italy, 2008].

Given the characteristics of the informal sector – low productivity resulting in lower incomes, less stable employment contracts and fewer social security benefits, it does not come as a surprise that this was the section of the population that was hardest hit by the effect of the pandemic. When lockdowns were announced for months on end, the incomes of these people completely dried up, millions lost their jobs because factories were shut down and modes of transportation made extremely limited. Most of these people do not have income replacement or savings that they can fall back on, neither do they have much access to formal credit and banking, and therefore, to them, not working and staying at home meant starving. *"To die from hunger or from the virus"* was the all-too-real dilemma faced by many informal economy workers. And we are talking about

billions of such workers across the globe. In fact, it was for their sake that governments were forced to unlock the economies even before covid could be completely contained, which in turn proved to be more detrimental because that resulted in an exponential rise in the number of infected people.

Needless to say, for these people, healthcare is tertiary. They cannot possibly afford treatment if they cannot afford two square meals a day. And therefore, unlike the richer sections of the society, they suffered great losses in this pandemic. Often a substantial number of people in the informal sector were actually migrant workers and therefore for

them, the hardships were even more pronounced. Again, as mentioned earlier, before these groups of people could recover from the effects of the first wave, the second wave hit and to be very honest, it is still an ongoing battle of uncertainty.

But what could be a possible solution to this? What corrective measures could be implemented to bridge this massive economic divide in the post-pandemic era? The answer is twofold – as short-term policies, introduction of cash grants and food distribution for vulnerable groups, and temporary employment schemes for informal workers, along with *targeted cash transfer schemes* could be implemented. Such initiatives have already been undertaken in countries such as Tunisia and El Salvador, Rwanda and Sudan, and Philippines and Indonesia [source: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2020]. And as for the long-term measures, that could be more focused on structural changes in the socio-economic norms.

More specifically, parts of the informal economy slowly but surely have to be brought under the ambit of the formalized sector. The securities offered by the formal sector would benefit the individuals and at the same time the productive capacity of the country would rise, making the policy-restructuring mutually desirous.

It goes without saying, that the story of the pandemic is one of unprecedented challenges, ever-deepening inequalities, great personal losses – and a story of collective mourning. It is a story that is going to be told and re-told for generations to come. It is going to make its way into history textbooks, economic models and it will forever change the way people think about the world. But the post-pandemic narrative need not be the same. That picture needs to be optimistic. Governments will have to acknowledge existing issues, and maybe even make fundamental changes in socio-economic norms, to rebuild and restructure economies in ways that would lead to more equitable distribution of income and employment. If countries are to prosper again, if investment flows and growth rates are to return to pre-pandemic figures, then it is essential that citizens have faith in their governments. And this is only possible when the outlook of the governments is an *inclusive* one, when the economically and socially backward groups receive adequate attention. The experience of the pandemic was catastrophic, but it is up to the people and the governments who lived through it, to learn from the mistakes and indecisions, and work towards a healthier and sounder post-pandemic era.

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## COVID-19 and an Unequal World

Soumili Basu

### Introduction

According to the United Nations World Social Report 2020, inequality has been a rising phenomenon in the world and has affected more than 70% of the global population which has substantially hindered socioeconomic development around the globe (UN News, 2020). Disparities in income and wealth distribution along with varying degrees of opportunities received by parts of the population give rise to several problems and create a vicious cycle of inequality around the globe (UN News, 2020), whereby inequality acts as a cause and consequence of itself and leads to social and economic degradation and is a cause for concern. In this already grave scenario, demand and supply shocks can further accelerate the rate of inequality across the world and put economies at great risk of vulnerability, which gives rise to low levels of development and growth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the lives of the people and boosted their suffering by substantially influencing health, education, economy, environment and other factors negatively which further increased the inequalities experienced by the people and worsened the situation. The pandemic has not only affected the health of millions but also crashed the global economy through the displacement of labour, shutting down of businesses, accelerated financial and capital market instability and stock market collapse due to the significant volatility (Mofijur *et al.*, 2020). The preventive measures have further restricted mobility of human resources and temporarily stopped the global transportation system, adversely affecting trade and commerce which further disadvantaged those vulnerable to negative socioeconomic consequences and pushed around 88 to 115 million people into poverty (WEF, 2020).

According to the joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO, due to pandemic, nearly 132 million people are at the risk of undernourishment, with nearly half of the world's workforce at the risk of losing their jobs with the level of vulnerability being greater for those in the informal sector due to lack of protection, access to healthcare facilities and not being able to even fulfil the basic needs of two square meals to sustain themselves due to loss of livelihood (WHO, 2020).

## **Socioeconomic Inequality**

Social inequality is a multiform concept, studied at academic, local, national and global levels by top researchers, which refers to inequality of access to valued resources, services, opportunities for education, healthcare and jobs, and overall inequality in the quality of life through poor housing and surroundings and the level of happiness acquired by a person (Warwick-Booth, 2018; Milanovic, 2006).

Economic inequality can be defined as the inequalities which exist in the distribution of income and wealth accumulation among people and the inequalities involving other economic factors such as human capital which leads to several damaging consequences such as political unrest, conflicts, increase in the incidence of crimes and lack of collaboration and solidarity among the members of a society (Van de Werfhorst and Salverda, 2012).

Socioeconomic inequality can be defined as inequality in factors such as income, social class of the individuals, academic background, work position, the neighbourhood of individuals and other related factors in which there is a difference among different groups of the society whereby some face deprivation and some, unfair abundance (McGill, 2014).

Inequality is a multidimensional and multifaceted problem that causes immense benefits to some members of the society whereas others face the grave adverse consequences of it. Although when we talk about inequality, economic inequality is mainly focused upon, the concept extends beyond the discipline to the several dimensions within the society (Brian, 2015). The exploration of various determinants of socioeconomic inequality can help a country get a true picture of the deprivation faced by the people in a multitude of factors and that can facilitate policy formulation by the government to mitigate such factors to promote growth and development.

## **COVID-19 and Socioeconomic Inequality**

The unprecedented shock by the novel coronavirus pandemic has induced chaos across the world and has spread to almost every continent, killing thousands in the process and further, increasing socioeconomic inequality in almost every country around the world (UNDP, 2020; Berkhout *et al.*, 2021). Although the virus might be fought off with the vaccines, the aftermath of the disastrous pandemic will prevail for ages to come, costing those in the lower-income strata heavily as they try to recover from the severe impact of the virus.

The virus has caused an exponential increase in the already rising inequalities and has made economic recovery a very difficult job, especially among the lower-income classes, however, it has facilitated income and wealth increase among the rich income classes, even amidst the lockdown measures which had negative consequences for others (Berkhout *et al.*, 2021). Despite the pandemic not being constrained by geographic borders, it does discriminate against those who are the most vulnerable in society (UNDP, 2020).

Recent UNDP estimates have brought into the picture some concerning statistics that are required to be addressed by governments all around the world. They are as follows:

- The conventional measure of income inequality, that is, per capita income, has been estimated to fall around 4%, pushing millions into poverty with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa suffering the most (UNDP, 2021).
- The International Labour Organization has predicted a US\$10 trillion loss to the global economy through the loss of jobs by 50% of the working population with more than 400 million people being at risk of moving into poverty as they will be forced to join the informal sector (UNDP, 2021).
- The World Food Programme has made the estimation of extreme crisis in terms of hunger among more than 265 million people due to the pandemic (UNDP, 2021).

Although inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon, it is accurate to say that COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem of inequality in several of those dimensions including health, income, welfare and access to important commodities and facilities.

Although authorities around the world have been very prompt and effective in announcing and implementing lockdowns and containment measures to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, the measures have been detrimental towards development and have been biased against those belonging to lower social and income classes for a variety of reasons. The preventive measures have not been made in accordance with the lifestyle of those belonging to lower-income classes and in many cases, such measures can increase mortality and exposure to risk (Patel *et al.*, 2020). It has increased the vulnerability of those already vulnerable, making them suffer from the outbreak the most. It has not only affected economic parameters but has also negatively influenced the social, psychological and health factors of those from vulnerable communities (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2021).

### ***Global and Domestic Inequalities***

The pandemic has led to inequalities across countries. The advanced economies that are abundant in resources and have the ability to deal with the pandemic through widespread implementation of healthcare measures because of stable public healthcare systems have emerged as the winners because they have been able to contain the spread in an efficient way, making use of the resources available to them. However, the less developed and developing countries, with significantly fewer resources and poor public healthcare system, poor sanitation and other services have been unable to address and combat the disease with the same efficiency as the advanced countries, especially in rural areas, which automatically put the people of such countries at a disadvantage in the global economy and further increase vulnerabilities (FAO, 2020).

Although there is a common belief among the people that COVID-19 does not discriminate in the choice of the victims. However, this is a harmful fallacy that could not be far from the truth sidesteps the heightened exposure to risk of those who are most disadvantaged in terms of income, wealth endowment and social standing (Patel *et al.*, 2020). The people within countries have already been experiencing the brunt of domestic inequality in terms of access to income, wealth, healthcare, education, formal employment, public services, good opportunities and social protection. Such inequalities have been exacerbated in light of the pandemic whereby these inequalities lead to greater incidences of COVID-19 cases which further breeds inequality because of the lack of access to essentials but a huge proportion of the population in countries. Thus, the effect of the pandemic is magnified within countries with high rates of inequality (FAO, 2020).

The ones who were already suffering from vulnerabilities fall behind because of their housing obligations and work opportunities whereby such people have to live in overcrowded housing facilities which increase the risk of COVID-19 infection due to low possibilities of social distancing in such constrained spaces. Moreover, the ones who belong to lower classes of income and social standing usually work as manual labour in places such as factories, supermarkets, warehouses and others, with very few opportunities for remote working. They also work in the informal sector or have to work on contractual agreements without fixed employment and the pandemic had led to the loss of employment of such people, causing them

to lose the bare minimum earned by them, which further pushed them into poverty and if they had to keep on working in physical spaces, they had been exposed to the virus in greater percentages than others who had the privilege of working from remote spaces, thus, causing them to be affected in great numbers, however, not possessing enough financial standing to avail proper medical facilities (Patel *et al.*, 2020).

### ***Gender Inequalities***

The pandemic had also caused a major setback to the progress made in the field of gender equality, leading to increased cases of inequality and torture against women. Not only have there been divisions and inequality in the labour markets, but women across the world have also been subjected to greater rates of domestic abuse within households. Although the containment measures are in place to ensure the safety of the people, it has decreased the safety of those who face domestic abuse. It also puts the survivor at risk of greater violence and also makes it difficult for such people to take support from the various support groups who are restricted due to the prevention protocols. Mainly women are subjected to such violence and it greatly affects their physical and mental health exposing them to a number of medical conditions such as clinical depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even suicidal tendencies (Anurudran *et al.*, 2020). In a country like India, with a high incidence of misogyny, patriarchy and hate crimes against women, the National Commission for Women had reported a 100% increase in complaints concerning violence against women following the implementation of the lockdown measures in April 2020 (Malathesh *et al.*, 2020).

Research studies have shown that women are most likely to be affected by the uncertainty accompanying the pandemic and are at a greater risk of losing their jobs than men. Mobility restrictions during the pandemic have forced hundreds of thousands of people to work from home and have also led to job losses and pay cuts which greatly impacts the purchasing power of the people, leading to a fast-paced economic downturn. However, studies show that women have been more affected by such situations because of the greater negative impact upon women employment in an already unequal world. The labour market disruptions have had greater implications for gender inequality and have caused a shift in societal gender dynamics, pushing women to the traditional roles which they have been trying so hard to break away from (Reichelt *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Income Inequalities***

The persistence of socioeconomic inequalities further triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disproportionate adverse impact on people which has wide implications for socio-political structure and can cause problems related to social cohesion and disrupt political stability. The main brunt of the economic disruptions are faced by those with lower income and that leads to increased income inequality from which recovery will be an arduous task. Although governments are trying to provide support to those affected economically through relief packages, the net effect of such support is not much because inequality continues to prevail, primarily driven by a loss in employment and deductions in salary faced by the medium and low-skilled workers with jobs that do not pay quite well already (Aspachs *et al.*, 2020).

The best example of such inequality is seen by the fact that the 1000 richest people of the world had been able to quickly recover from the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 situation, however, the others are estimated to take up to a decade to recover from the shock provided by the pandemic. According to the Oxfam report 'The Inequality Virus', a survey with 295 economists from 79 countries had revealed a significant positive increase in income inequality among the countries of 87% of the respondents. The Oxfam research illustrates how the extremely rich minority has successfully accumulated income and wealth amidst the pandemic, which has been the greatest recession since the Great Depression, while billions of people have struggled to meet their basic needs. This shows the exacerbation of inequality of gender-based, economic and ethnic factors by the pandemic, healing from which can take a long period of time (Oxfam, 2021).

### ***Labour Market Inequalities***

The impact of the pandemic has led to shocks in labour markets around the world, causing an employment crisis of a large magnitude. While nearly all workers and nations have been affected by the unprecedented extent of job market upheaval, the effects have indeed been asymmetrical, which has made some areas of the labour force even more vulnerable. Comparing the formal and informal sector has revealed that the workers in the informal sector are at higher risks of job losses than those in the formal sectors, which puts nearly 2 billion workers of the informal sector at risk of unemployment with estimations of a severe crisis among 1.6 billion of such workers. They will face severe damages relating to poverty and insufficient income and might be unable to meet their basic needs, subjecting them to high rates of physical and mental disorders which might make their survival difficult in the present scenario (Lee *et al.*, 2020). The

policies by governments across the world to boost employment will not be sufficient to make up for the labour market chaos created by the pandemic.

In countries across the world, the ones with job security and formal sector employment at high positions have been able to hoard essentials for the lockdown period and have stored rations to aid survival during the time when all stores were supposed to be closed for days. However, such a privileged task was not possible by those belonging to sectors with poor job security and low wages as they barely had the amenities to survive them for a day, the question of hoarding was not even considered. The daily wage workers who earn what they consume on a regular basis were severely impacted because work ceased for them and they were unable to meet basic consumption needs which led to undernourishment among their families and increased incidence of poverty. The governments across the world have been in the dilemma of choosing whether to prioritise health or wealth, however, amidst such a dilemma, the daily wage earners whose wealth is the only thing preventing them from death, face the trade-off between death due to the coronavirus or death from hunger and poverty (Kabeer, 2020). Such things are rarely considered when policies are formulated for the entire demographics. However, in the economies where the majority of the labourers engage in menial labour and are paid on a daily basis, the problem of unemployment had a massive adverse impact which also increased the absolute number of years it would take to attain the sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially of poverty and inequality.

### ***Digital Divide***

Digital inequalities have already been prevalent before the pandemic, however, the pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities leading to a digital divide that keeps on widening. The preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus had pushed more than 3 billion people into isolation which has shifted the importance of the digital environment from comfort or convenience to an essential requirement as digital platforms have become some of the only means to access economic, educational, social and recreational services (Beaunoyer *et al.*, 2020).

The pandemic brought with it, a digital revolution, which forced people to shift to online platforms for conducting important tasks. Several sectors have been moved to online platforms for their smooth functioning including education, employment, commerce and others.

However, in underdeveloped and developing countries, not everyone has access to advanced technologies which leads them to be denied access to activities that involve the use of such technology. Moreover, some might not possess the necessary skills required to access those platforms even though they provide the means (Beunoyer *et al.*, 2020). This causes a digital divide among the people as those without access to technologies fall behind and are subjected to further social and economic inequalities. The digital divide exacerbates existing inequalities and leads to decreased opportunities among the people who also face exclusion. In the post-pandemic period, being excluded from digital technologies also implies an exclusion from essential services such as health services, education, trustworthy COVID-19 information and also e-commerce concerning the purchase of essentials online. Thus, the digital divide can really cause a lot of problems in society and the mitigation requires fool-proof solutions by the government (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Socioeconomic inequality is a serious problem that has been accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It excludes people from essential amenities like healthcare, education and others and leads to division on the basis of social and economic factors including gender, income and others. All this causes problems in society and increases the number of people subjected to poverty and undernourishment and ultimately, socioeconomic degradation. Inequality is the main reason for regressive growth and hindrance in development across countries and can also cause political and social turmoil which further affects development and causes instability within nations. The problem is not an inevitable one and can be fixed through appropriate government policies and increased investment in grass-root activities by the government to promote increased access to opportunities by the people. Unless the governments across the world address the graveness of the issue and take appropriate measures like regressive taxation and other policies to improve the living standard of those who are vulnerable and provide greater opportunities to them, the situation is not likely to improve and can cause further socio-economic turmoil. However, one can be hopeful for the future.

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## Post-Pandemic Crisis in the Areas of Remote Work and Education

Ahana Mitra

### **Introduction:**

Life is uncertain yet beautiful in its own way. Hardships that come along the way build us into a new version every day. However, sometimes hardships are not just personal; at times it's economic, social, physical and mental on a large scale threatening the very existence of humans. Sounds a little harsh? Then let me take you back approximately a year ago.

On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019, Wuhan in China reported cases of Pneumonia which was eventually identified as novel coronavirus or COVID-19 which eventually got characterized as pandemic (WHO, 2020). It had hit Europe and America hardest resulting in a heavy blow to market confidence and economic activity.

### **Immediate impacts on economy:**

Besides causing innumerable deaths all over the world, COVID-19 shook the world economy as a whole. The Chinese economy grew at the slowest pace. There was a synchronised economic slowdown in all the major economies in the world. International Trade was hampered. Income Inequality started to increase across many countries. A time came when oil prices in US had turned negative crashing from \$18 per barrel to -\$38.

The IMF called the economic crisis sparked by COVID-19 the Great Lockdown and projected that global growth would fall by -3%. The Great Lockdown is the worst recession since Great Depression, far worse than GFC (Global Financial Crisis in 2008).

COVID-19 had resulted into a twin crisis for health and economy.

### **Socio-economic inequalities:**

António Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, while delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, said:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in highlighting growing inequalities. It exposed the myth that everyone is in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.”

The COVID-19 is now being called the pandemic of inequality. Socio-economic inequalities are the as the inequalities relating to the differences in income, social class, occupational background, educational achievement and neighbourhood deprivation.

### **Income inequality:**

Recent estimates and analysis show that the pandemic is impacting the already poor more whether they are in developed or developing countries. It's not just that the world is witnessing the first recession to be triggered by pandemic but also the sharpest decline in per capita income since 1870. The impacts of the global economic collapse have indeed trickled faster to the poor. "The frontline in the battle against the coronavirus is shifting from the rich world to the poor world," said David Beasley, the executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP).

Accounting for government support during the pandemic through a combination of existing redistributive mechanisms and special measures taken, income inequalities have been reduced in post-tax terms. However, without governmental support, the pandemic would have increased income inequalities, hitting harder the bottom of the income distribution. **Clark et al. (2020)** show that in Germany, Spain, France, and Italy, and Sweden, inequality – as measured by the shares of income going to different income groups – first widened from January to May 2020, and then decreased back to pre-crisis levels by September 2020.

Overall, statistics pointing to declining income inequality during the pandemic may be misleading. This decrease entirely relies on short-term policy responses to the pandemic outbreak, suggesting that the interventions have been effective to fight inequalities in the short run. However, the direct impact of the pandemic has been regressive and this can persist for at least two reasons. First, at the bottom of the distribution, workers that have been permanently laid off may experience the known long-term scarring effects of unemployment and human capital depreciation, as well as difficulties finding jobs again. Second, the establishment of remote work as a common practice might widen the gap in the long run, as the subsequent wage premium is unevenly distributed across the income distribution.

### **Remote work opportunities resulting in deepening of inequalities:**

Remote work has experienced a substantial surge during the pandemic. Research suggests that, while working from home induces a wage premium, the ability to work from home is unevenly distributed across the income distribution.

Lower-income employees have lower potential and fewer opportunities for remote work. In addition, while higher-income employees may on average earn a wage premium from working from home, the productivity gains of lower-income employees seem much more limited. Thus, the rise and spreading of remote work might be a new vector of inequalities, especially if it becomes a norm.

This unequal potential for remote work is likely to reinforce existing inequalities. In Germany, Irlacher and Koch (2021) have estimated that, pre-Covid-19 in 2018, workers who are able to work remotely on average receive a 12% wage premium. **Bonacini et al. (2021)** show that in Italy an increase in the ability to work from home is correlated with an increase in labour income, thus deepening inequalities between workers that can work remotely and those who cannot. In addition, the wage premium for working from home is higher for workers who already earn more, so that inequalities would increase even among those able to work remotely.

Workers' productivity has been affected heterogeneously by remote work. This seems to be at least partially driven by sectorial composition at different income levels, as different sectors have different potentials for remote work. It may also be the result of worse home working conditions for lower-income households. Based on a representative survey on self-reported productivity, conducted in June 2020 in the U.K, Etheridge et al. (2020) show that, while on average workers report being as productive as one year before the pandemic, low-income workers report being less productive. Moreover, it will also affect the migrant workers as most of their jobs include physical labour which is not possible to be done online.

Thus, it is evident that though work from home has its own perks; in the long run it may affect the income distribution more evidently. Lack of productivity in the areas where most jobs are to be done physically rather than virtually have been found less productive like workers in the education, administrative, entertainment, or accommodation sectors. While in the areas of financial, insurance, or information technology sectors report increases in their productivity. To take a step further, countries where most jobs can be done remotely will experience a quicker economic growth in the post pandemic time rather than the countries where most jobs are done physically.

### **Growing Educational Inequality:**

If something that has drastically changed due to the pandemic, it will be the education system. Not only did the classes become completely online for the higher education but also for the kids

in pre-school. Although there was some initial doubts as to how can one go about taking online class, people are now adapting to it. This online education system has resulted into a new set of problems over time. A primary problem currently is prolonged exposure to screens aggravating the risk of eye problems.

However, these problems come when one can actually access the online education with proper internet connection and at least a smart phone if not a laptop. What about those children who only went to school for mid-day meals? What about those kids whose parents have now lost the incentives of educating their children as they got to deal with the hunger pangs due to rising unemployment and decrease in savings?

A recent survey of government responses to COVID-19 by UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank shows that in only half of the cases there is close monitoring of the usage of remote learning. And in those cases, remote learning is being used by less than half of the student population. Before the pandemic, Learning Poverty (the share of 10-year-olds that cannot read and understand a simple text) was already at an extremely high 53% in low- and middle-income countries. With the pandemic forcing massive school closures, we now project that Learning Poverty could increase to 63%. That is, 72 million more primary age kids will be learning poor. Reading is not all but it is a precondition to advance many of the aspects of education we care about. And the ability of a system to assure that their kids read with and understands a simple text is a good proxy of its overall quality.

In addition, data that suggest how unequal these learning losses are is slowly appearing. We have some evidence from rich countries. Despite their extensive technological reach, for a few European countries for which there is learning data post closures, there is evidence of learning losses and higher inequality as a result of the pandemic. In the Netherlands, researchers found a decrease in student performance on a national exam equivalent to a fifth of a school year (roughly the actual time out of school due to the pandemic) and a growing inequality, likely due to children from better-off families receiving more parental support and having better remote learning environments. In the US, regardless of the type of college, Fall of 2020 college enrolment rates for low-income high school students plunged by 29%, nearly double that of students from higher-income high schools.

Thus, it is clearly visible that people from low income backgrounds are unable to carry out the education of their children. It is likely that dropouts will increase over time. In developing countries the situation is even worse. In Chile, a country better prepared than most Latin American countries, it is estimated that the poorest quintile might lose 88% of expected learning for this year, while the richest quintile “only” 64%.

This is an extended impact of income inequality on the younger generation.

### **Conclusion:**

This is just an impact of the pandemic on the economic level. However, the pandemic has an extended impact on the mental health. Most people are suffering from the problems of depression. There is a ravaging loneliness among people. Moreover, the sense of growth which comes about in school and colleges has also been hampered. Classes are now less fun. There is lack of personal touch.

However, everything has its own perks too. This pandemic somehow taught everyone how to more efficiently use technology. It taught people the importance of work. People are now waiting for “MONDAYS” more than the weekends. It taught us to value life a bit more.

Though not related to the topic, COVID-19 pandemic was probably the “Thanos” from marvel universe – one that came to existence causing savage number deaths and threatening the very human existence. I guess “the front line workers of COVID-19” can rightfully be called the avengers in real world. Countries like India are yet to enter in the post-pandemic era as the second wave of COVID-19 did hit us hard. However, every dark tunnel has an end. We will definitely find ours. Things will probably never go back to what we consider to be the stipulated “Normal” but with time we are sure to get attuned to this “New Normal”.

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## **An Economic Outlook to Life Post Pandemic**

Anoushka Kothari

The Coronavirus pandemic is taking charge of the global economy and leaving nations under distress about how to overcome the after effects of this sudden standstill. With the stock markets and global indices crashing, breaking all time low records on most days, future markets touching nearly zero levels, this pandemic has challenged all the theoretical economic models ever made. The case of oil futures turning negative defied the law that asset prices can never go negative. This situation seemed impossible few months back when oil prices were shooting up. What made this happen? People who bought the future were bound to take delivery of goods at forward price decided at the time of contract. Oil futures became negative because of the reduced demand and hence the surplus of oil worldwide and no one willing to pay the forward price. This led to the oil manufacturing countries find new storages for the surplus which increased their costs. So, they started paying the consumers for buying oil!

After discussing briefly about the commodities market, let us see how COVID-19 impacted the strongest economies of the world. We can see the falling consumer demand due to the nationwide imposition of lockdown in India. Economic activities have been stopped and referring India, Moody's predict slow growth and a very low GDP forecast for the fiscal year 2020-2021. Growth rate depends on how much time India will take to recover from this shock. The after-effects of this shock are most likely to be seen in the second half of the current year and beginning of next year. There used to be high inflation a year ago, but now the government thinks of pumping money into the system to increase inflation, a concept called helicopter money. Bringing in liquidity will increase the cash-in-hand which will increase the aggregate demand. With the Government of India announcing the financial package to help boost the economy, everyone thought of the very same idea. But instead, the financial package was merely a reform that will see its impact in the coming 5 years and beyond.

What India currently needs is a reboot to bring back the 'normal' prior to the pandemic. India will take time to adapt to the 'new normal' which will be focused on technology driven and 'work from home' ideas. So we can expect firms to be more inclined towards becoming techno savvy. But there is another way to look at this. Can this really happen in a country where majority of the population is not having the optimum skills and basic education? India Unincorporated, or popularly known as 'India Uninc' forms the majority of working-class people in India. Even if



this problem is tackled, there is an upward trend in the unemployment rates due to various companies laying off their employees to cut down costs. After the pandemic is over, there will be a reduction in number of firms and enterprises who were not able to keep up with their fixed costs over the entire period of lockdown. There is a saying, "Survival of the fittest" by Charles Darwin; this will be seen after many companies do corporate default and ultimately shut down. There is a huge value at risk or downside risk in small businesses and firms. Firms with strong fundamentals will survive in the long-run. With the banking sector fearing to provide loans and thus charge high interest rates, there will be lower investments for up to a year. The government tried to help these banks by providing collateral-free loans for particular sector under the financial package as one measure of the many. But this small stimulus is unlikely to bring about a change in the macroeconomic perspective.

There is a prediction that global recession will kick in by the second quarter of the upcoming fiscal year. Surely this will see a change in consumer behavior and consumers switching to essential buying rather than luxury buying. In the long run we will see technology, pharmaceutical, automobile, fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), insurance industries booming. The stock market movements and consumer sentiments also react positively for these sectors. When we talk about whether lockdown of 4 phases was successful or not, we can say that the government tried to just delay the peak of COVID-19 cases and deaths. It was not done with the sole intention of eradicating the virus, but rather to postpone its effects and just buy some time. This time was utilized to uplift the medical facilities and contain the disease when it hits the level peak. The cost paid by the country is economic failure, market crashes, unemployment, reduction in government revenues, huge borrowings from RBI, increase in fiscal deficit. Revenue for government is almost null. Direct taxes are postponed to the end of financial year ending in June. There are huge taxes imposed on luxury goods but now that has dropped to almost zero. It is speculated that the mega stimulus package has increased the government borrowings for the next year. The informal sector of India is going to face a major challenge in the upcoming days as many of the industries will operate with reduced labour and hence reduced efficiency. Also, many industries are reluctant to pay their workers' wages for the extended lockdown. This will create an excess of labour-force unemployed in the market for the coming year. The labourers need to skill themselves according to the need of the hour and work in those industries which have a huge consumer demand.

The stock market, bond market, commodity market has witnessed high volatility during this phase and many investors are entering the financial markets to book profits for the future. Active investors believe the markets will correct itself and are doing in-depth technical and fundamental analysis on recession-proof sectors which will earn them huge rates of return. Passive investors see this phase as a golden opportunity to start investing and book long-term gains. More cases of COVID are yet to be discovered as they remain censored due to lack of testing which translates to greater risk and uncertainty. Until vaccine is made available to the entire community, all that can save the lives and livelihood is herd immunity. Consider a common example to explain the post pandemic effects on popular sectors like restaurant and fast-food supply. People will not just look for quality and low-priced items but also or majorly at their health implications. These industries will need to adopt new marketing strategies that outlooks the economic repercussions to maintain their market share post pandemic.

In conclusion, once the pandemic eases and lockdown is completely lifted, we will see the real aftermath of a pandemic. We will see how the major macroeconomic concerns, i.e., inflation, growth and unemployment will affect the business cycle and that the worst economic disaster is going to happen shortly.

## COVID-19: Public Health Dilemma or Socio-economic Crisis?

Anushka Dassani

The year 2020 is now widely seen as the biggest setback in the development of mankind. Into the nineteenth month of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic with new variants being bred, nobody knows when the pandemic will reach its tipping point. Global epidemics, such as this one, may appear to be uniformly destroying the lives of millions. However, after closely reviewing the data, it is clear that the most affected section happens to be the most vulnerable section of society.

Inequality has always existed and a viral outbreak has only amplified it. Ordinary people around the globe have fallen victim to the dual blows of the current health crisis and the pre-existing economic, racial and gender divides. The COVID-19 recession has widened the inequality gap, with wealthier individuals faring well while their low-earning peers continue to struggle. António Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, while delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in highlighting growing inequalities. It exposed the myth that everyone is in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris."

India happened to be among the hardest-hit nations in the world. During the first quarter of 2020, India saw a decline of 23.9 per cent in its growth (*Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2020*). According to the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, India brought 271 million people out of poverty between 2006 and 2016. Compare this to the situation in 2020, when India experienced the greatest worldwide poverty increase. As per a new Pew Research Center study, the number of poor people in India has increased by 75 million as a result of the COVID-19 recession. Since India accounts for a whopping 17.85 per cent of the total world population, the Indian economy exerts great influence on the distribution of income on a global level and this increase in India's poverty is responsible for roughly 60 per cent of the global increase in poverty.

At 8 pm on March 24, 2020, the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown, confining all citizens to their homes. One half of society was on social media, wondering how to avoid boredom, while the other half was agonising over how to make ends meet.

Social distancing was the main precautionary step adopted to curb the spread of the virus. But there are a variety of jobs in the informal sector that involve social contact and, so, contradict the basic notion of social distancing. The informal sector accounts for 92.4 per cent of India's overall workforce. Rikshaw-pullers, taxi drivers, migrant labourers, landless agricultural labourers, barbers, janitorial staff, lift operators, wholesale market sellers, street food vendors, construction workers, domestic workers, and more jobs fall under this category. They have no paid sick leave, no consistent income, and no job security. The unemployment rate had also reached a record high of 11.84 per cent in May 2021, with the urban and rural areas reporting rates as high as 14.72 and 10.55 per cent respectively. (*Centre for Monitoring Economy, 2020*)

Furthermore, migrant workers make up a sizable portion of the informal sector, having been pushed to labour in cities distant from their homes to provide a supposedly better living for their families. There are an estimated 120 million rural-to-urban migratory labourers in India, who provide 10% of the country's economic output. It was total mayhem for them when the authorities declared a complete lockdown with only four hours' warning. After losing their jobs, they were forced to either remain stuck at their workplace, unable to afford the living circumstances owing to low salaries, or to travel hundreds of thousands of kilometres, often on foot, to return to their small towns and villages. In total, around 198 migrant workers died. (*India Today, 2020*)

For a daily wage earner, each workday is crucial for survival. In general, the poor must save in order to acquire basic essentials, and this is worsened during an economic slump such as this one. For example, for a domestic worker, remaining at home means losing all of their money and perhaps their job. At the same time, getting out to work may help them keep their employment, but at the expense of their own health.

Low-income families tend to reside in densely populated regions like slums where the virus has a larger possibility of spreading rapidly. In times like these, if one member of a family gets infected, isolation becomes an issue since poorer families tend to dwell in small houses, and they also lack access to expensive medical services.

This was particularly evident during the raging second wave of COVID-19 when thousands of financially competent families struggled to get a hospital bed, let alone poorer families who did not even have access to health insurance.

The informal workforce could potentially lose everything in terms of income, employment, and health, whereas government employees, private employees, technical workers, and others could

end up winning on all three counts. According to Oxfam India, the richest 1% of India's population controls 73% of the country's wealth, while the poorest half of the population, 67 crore people, possess only 1%. According to the same study, Indian millionaires boosted their fortune by 35% during the lockout, reaching Rs 3 trillion. During the lockdown, the richest man in India made Rs 90 crore every hour, while around 24% of the country's population earned less than Rs 3,000 per month. This increase in his wealth alone could keep 40 million unemployed people out of poverty for at least five months.

This privileged fraction of society could afford to adhere to the necessary social distancing protocols while still earning a living, from the comfort of their homes. Most of them had the financial resources to seek better treatment. They were able to pay marked-up prices to purchase critical drugs and oxygen from the black market, which emerged as a result of a lack of official government support during the second wave.

COVID-19 has greatly disrupted access to education, with 247 million primary and secondary school students out of school (*UNICEF, 2021*). While school systems in India and elsewhere have made efforts to reach students at home through virtual schooling, many students from low-income households encounter digital obstacles, thus highlighting disparities in access to technology and the internet. Similarly, rural areas are not digitally advanced enough to cope with the unexpected rise in demand for technology. Moreover, millions of girls face great uncertainty about the possibility of continuing their education. Covid-19 threatens to reverse all of the gains made in female education over the last few years.

The COVID-19 pandemic recovery has been divided and unequal. As the restrictions are relaxed, the blue-collar workers will be able to resume their normal routine, but the white-collar workers will remain unemployed.

According to economists, the post-pandemic recovery will be 'k-shaped.' In a k-shaped economy, well-being is restored more rapidly for certain segments while other segments continue to lag. This will have structural consequences for the economy, such as widening racial wealth disparities, stagnant unemployment among low-income groups, and the expansion of corporate monopolies in areas such as technology and healthcare. The pandemic is as much a problem of socioeconomic inequality as it is one of public health. During the hard times of COVID-19, we witnessed some acts of kindness. Many citizens came out to help those in need. Some non-profit organisations donated food and other basic requirements to individuals who could not afford them; others stepped forward to assist by arranging oxygen cylinders through social media platforms. This goes on to show us that individuals can initiate change as well.

There will always be a catastrophe around the corner. These disruptions, such as the epidemic, will continue to spotlight the widening inequality gap. While individuals who become billionaires may be applauded, there is a global pandemic: economies are collapsing, and families are being terrorised by sickness and losing everything. As long as a large portion of our people is employed in the informal sector, the economic recovery will be successful only if measures to improve social security are adopted. The goal of recovery should be to "build back better," which means not only getting the global economy back on its feet but also rethinking how communities are organised and instilling behavioural changes that reduce the likelihood of an unaddressed crisis occurring. It is clear that previous policies have been unjust to minority groups. The government must take up reforms to achieve economic, environmental and social sustainability. The decisions we make now will shape the world of tomorrow.

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## **Women: The Bearers of Disproportionate Fallout of Covid Pandemic**

Neha Singh

In today's economy, if you are spending your time fetching water from a well that is 10 kilometers from your house or taking care of your newborn, you are considered to be at leisure. The heavyweight of this leisure or unpaid work is carried by women and so when Covid-19 spread like wildfire across countries, its scarring impact was most visible on them. Not only did women lose their jobs at a faster rate than men but there was also a significant rise in crimes against women. In this essay, we explore how women's lives took a turn for the worse which is going to have a lasting impact on the economy if significant steps are not taken as soon as possible.

Covid-19 is the largest humanitarian crisis that the world has faced since world war-II. Pandemic has claimed 45.5 lakh lives and affected 21.9 crore people worldwide. The first step taken by authorities to control the spread was to impose a strict lockdown that meant a sudden suspension of all economic activities. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures prevented farmers from accessing markets for buying inputs and selling their produce, and agricultural workers from harvesting crops, thus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global work forces are now at risk of losing their livelihoods (World Health Organization,( Chriscaden, 2020)). In India alone, cost of the COVID-19 lockdown is at US\$120 billion or 4 per cent of the GDP ( The Economist,2020).

Informal economy workers especially women were affected the most as they lack social protection and are under zero-hour contracts. Data shows that female job loss rates due to COVID-19 are about 1.8 times higher than male job loss rates globally, at 5.7 percent versus 3.1 percent respectively. Before covid-19, women made up to 20 percent of the total workforce in India but their share of job losses post-pandemic accounts for 17 percent of the total job losses( Mckinsey,2020).

Living in a society where life is dictated by patriarchal norms, men and women are made to choose occupations that are well suited to their gender. There is a clear distinction between the work a man can do and a women is allowed to do, but thanks to the feminist movement this distinction is becoming blur with each passing day.



Most women work in the healthcare sector, education and manufacturing sector. It would come as a surprise to a few that these sectors were the most affected due to covid-19. As it was highlighted across all news outlets, the healthcare workers of which 70 percent are women, worked for ungodly hours under unhealthy conditions. In normal circumstances, women perform a daily average of 4 hours and 25 minutes of unpaid care work against 1 hour and 23 minutes for men (International Labour Organization, 2020). In times of Covid-19, these hours increased exponentially as women healthcare workers had to tend to their ailing family members after having spent an entire day of saving lives at the front line. This put them under great psychological and physical stress.

The advent of the pandemic caused most jobs to shift to online mode. This caused women belonging to poorer economic background to let go of their jobs. Reasons pertaining to this step could be attributed to the fact they did not have access to a stable Wi-Fi connections or electronic devices. Even if they did, the electronic devices, such as laptop, mobile essential to conduct online work was either used by the male working members of the family or children attending their online classes.

While accounting for those most affected by covid-19, the marginalized and economically more precarious population is left out. The already existing stigma and discrimination against sex workers were intensified during the pandemic. Most government-led policies did not account for the sex workers which exacerbated their mental health issues like anxiety over income, food and housing alongside concerns about infection from continuing to work in the absence of social protection. In short, they were left to fend for themselves, as they always have been.

Under the light of draconian measures of lockdown, the shadows cast by domestic violence grew darker. The 'stay at home' slogan for the fight against covid-19 was a curse for people, especially women living in abusive households. The Guardian (2020) reported how the surge of domestic violence cases was a pattern being repeated globally. The article stated that in Brazil the cases had risen by 40-50% while in Spain, calls to their helpline number had increased by 20% in the first few periods of quarantine. A similar pattern of rising domestic violence was seen during the Ebola outbreak in Guinea in 2019. Sexual and gender-based violence had increased by

4.5% compared to a pre-outbreak level according to the country's minister of Social Action, women and children.

As the violence increased, the access to help-seeking avenues decreased since the victims were under the constant surveillance of their abusers. Therefore the data representing the number of cases might not be accurate as many cries for help remained muffled behind the closed door of their houses.

As the healthcare sector geared up to fight novel coronavirus, the focus on women's sexual and reproductive health was greatly reduced. The Response Plan against covid-19 had no mention of how resources should be channeled to provide safe abortions and ensure the supply of contraceptives. The increase in sexual violence led to an increase in unwanted pregnancies. Driven under these grounds women were left with no choice but to seek unsafe abortions which damaged their health and well-being.

Women are not superheroes, they never were nor they ever will be. Women are as human as their male counterparts and therefore it is high time that mainstream economics or should I say the "male-stream" economics should take into account the unpaid work carried out by women and how it impacts their paid work. A new branch of economics called the Feminist Economics seems to have risen due to gender inequality.

because it gives serious attention to women and challenges faced due to the common confusion of gender with sex but also because it challenges this definition in masculine only terms (Ferber et al, 2003).

The already existing gender parity was exacerbated due to the pandemic. Whatever progress that had been made to bring equality among men and women seems to have been undone. The year 2020-21 has shown the inability of the governments around the world to fight a pandemic effectively. If policymakers take action now to bridge this gap, by 2030 the increment in GDP will be \$13 trillion, which is an 11% increase if no action is taken (Madgavkar et al, 2020). The government should roll out policies that protect all lives without any discrimination.

As the world is waking up to a new morning, leaving behind the horrors of the pandemic, it is essential to prioritize gender equality to build a future that is sustainable and structurally more viable for living and working.

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## **Pandemic: A Crisis of Yawning Divide Between High and Low** -

Ria Khetan

With the outbreak of Corona virus pandemic in December 2019, the world started practicing social distancing which was the only known way to curb the spread of the disease. Large gatherings were prohibited and only necessary contacts were allowed. This took a toll on the social as well as economic wellbeing both at micro and macro levels.

“Inequality”, according to Gaganpreet Singh, is a relative concept associated to unequal distribution of income, opportunities, education, and standard of living and so on. The pre-existing inequality widened during this pandemic, especially in developing economies, and is bound to leave a lasting impact.

Occupations, that involve a high number of social interactions, are under the ‘informal’ sector in which social distancing would be a threat to their livelihood. Out of these some, like technology related and white-collar workers, could adjust and adapt to the social distancing norm in their occupation and still retain their incomes and jobs. Thus, they enjoy a win all situation and are able to get back to their normalcy rather soon. Some domestic workers lose incomes while practicing social distancing but still have some assurance on retaining their jobs. The rest risk everything if they prioritize their health and face a lose-all situation. Major population of India falls under this category. During pandemic the risk faced by people who fall in the latter category grew exponentially and widened the socio-economic gap. Locking the country down becomes impractical in the countries where major population is still employed under informal sector. The people who fall under middle class incomes have been squeezed and many of them are seeing stagnant real wages for a prolonged period. There is a decline in intergenerational economic mobility with many emerging economies seeing mixed trends with regard to income distribution.

Indian economy had already been facing slow growth in the pre pandemic scenario. According to Gopalan and Mishra, the Small and Medium Enterprises recorded a loss of over 35,000 crores INR. The migrant workers belonging to lower socio-economic stratum were seen traversing on foot to their home town. Most of them did not receive a proper one-day meal. There has been huge spike in hunger not only in India but also in West and Central Africa that saw 135% increase in people insecure of food. Remittances sent by migrant Indian workers saw a downfall.

The pandemic saw more and more people pushed below poverty line. These socio-economic gaps also largely affected health and nutrition indices. McKibbin and Fernando predicted a U.S. GDP contraction of 5% in July 2020. CNBC reports a decline of 3.5% in GDP at the end of the year and called it the worst year from economic perspective since World War II. The unemployment rate in U.S. hit 14.7% in early days of pandemic itself.

In his July 2020 research, Martin concluded that the pandemic would be a massive economic shock as poverty rate increased from 17.1% to 25.9% within the first three months in the Bay Area. People's consumption behaviour is bound to change by the end of pandemic with a significant drop in household savings and consumption.

The crisis has forced people to use up their savings towards consumption making them more vulnerable to other unexpected shocks like recessions or natural disasters. This is especially true for poorer countries with weak social security system. This has led to uncertainty in daily decision making. Thus, the demand will be severely affected. They assumed a recovery period of at least a year post pandemic but with the persistence of Covid-19 this period is bound to increase. India is expected to recover, according to UN, by 7.3% in 2021 after a fall of 9.6% in 2020. World Bank expects India's economy recover by 5.4% in the next financial year. The global economy saw a shrink by 4.3% and is forecasted to grow by 4.7% in 2021 and 5.9% in 2022. According to an assessment by a Food and Agriculture Organisation, Covid-19 might increase each country's Gini coefficient by 2%. The sustainable development goals have been a huge failure for almost all countries in 2020 and there is no big hope for 2021 as well. The broad macroeconomic picture shows fragility to shocks from socio economic perspective.

From the past Ebola crisis, we have seen high education deprivation and sexual exploitation among girls. If similar patterns are followed in the Covid crisis, this may lead to school dropouts in about 20 million girls around the world according to an analysis by Malala Fund. Both economy and society depend on education for improving the standard of life.

Another massive reason for economic vulnerability is digital transformation. With the advent of digital technology, the markets have transformed immensely and this is reflected in the way we do businesses today. The possibilities are endless with technology and it has made earning from home easier. But this is only one side of the true picture. When we take countries like India into account, the benefit is shared unequally.

There is a huge share of population that does not have access to technology and cannot acquire knowledge about it. Thus, social distancing and work from home stays impractical for them. This can also be called education-technology gap that translates into socio-economic gap. Firms that are on technological frontier have acquired dominance in the market. The demand for highly skilled labours that are acquainted with technology has increased as the menial jobs of the companies are now automated. Industries relying on worker contact have been suffering ever since the pandemic started. This has increased inequalities both among firms and among labours. Globalization has become hard. Pandemic has disrupted the supply demand chains leading to inequalities between economies.

Apart from this the state has also played a significant role in increasing this inequality. They are expected to alleviate the market income inequality through taxes and transfers. But these have diminished significantly because of reduced progressive nature of personal income taxes. Also, taxes levied on capital and spending on social programs has been reduced. The state here fails to perform its redistributive role.

The pandemic is bound to leave lasting disproportionate impact across different nations. But with better implementation of policies and quick actions these impacts can be mitigated. Different countries have responded in different ways to this crisis to cushion the health and economic shock. Addressing these problems on time with educated policies and government spending on essentials may have a direct impact in reducing the inequality. Along with redistributive policies, the government should also focus on 'pre-distributive' policies.

Pre-distributive role is the idea that the state should try to prevent inequalities before they occur rather than correcting them later once, they have occurred by taxes and benefits. This enables inclusive economic growth. The policies should be able to keep pace with the technology driven market and business. New ways to reform corporate governance and widen capital ownership should be researched.

Automation is a boon as well as a curse. Excessive of anything is harmful. The tax system bias favouring capital incentive industries relative to labour intensive one leading to job scarcity should be modified. Correct use of public investment can actually help to achieve broader economic and social goals. Digital literacy is the need of the hour. Strengthening this would

help create more opportunities. Steps should be taken to train, up-skill and educate the workers.

The gap in basic education has narrowed immensely but it is only the higher education that will create quality employees for the future. Hence higher education should be considered equally important. Worker's mobility should be increased to help them to move to better jobs. Social security is also a big concern. With many people losing jobs in the pandemic, the weakness in social security has been exposed.

Covid-19 has not been easy for anyone and its impact did not leave anybody untouched. The human race is very interdependent and this pandemic has shown us that what affects one can soon affect the entire race even from the opposite side of the globe. It is only through philanthropy and carefulness that we can thrive and survive through this pandemic. Even when the world would walk towards recovery, it will still remain disadvantageous for the less privileged. As correctly stated by Antonio Guterres in his 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, Covid-19 has exposed the myth of everyone being in the same boat. The world has been ignoring inequality for a very long period. Covid-19 is, indeed, a crisis of inequalities that took birth from inequalities.

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## **‘Distance’: a new virus in the pandemic**

*“Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” – Martin Luther King Jr.*

Ankita Paul

Hope is all we have. Standing amidst a global pandemic, we can only hope for a better tomorrow, a world without any ‘distances’, vertical or horizontal.

Experts say in order to contain the spread of the virus, maintaining ‘horizontal’ distances is of utmost importance. But while doing this, little did we know that the already existing ‘vertical’ distances would aggravate to this extent.

This pandemic has added fuel to the fire of the vast inequalities across the society and the pandemic induced lockdowns have only worsened this. From widening the gaps between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, the rich and the poor to increasing rural-urban divides and the gender inequalities, this pandemic has only made the society more stratified.

Apart from inequalities in terms of income, inequalities in terms of receiving health services, maintaining proper safety protocols, receiving education in this pandemic, receiving vaccination against the virus, etc. has drastically arisen since the onset of the pandemic.

Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, while delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, said, “The covid-19 pandemic has played an important role in highlighting growing inequalities. It exposed the myth that everyone is in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some are in superyachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.”

In India, the government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in March 2020 to contain the spread of the virus. Since then, thousands of Indians have lost their jobs. Among them the worst sufferers are the daily wage earners, casual labourers, street vendors, auto drivers, rickshaw pullers, small and marginal traders, bus drivers and helpers and this list goes on. According to the Oxfam report, India’s large informal sector was the worst hit as it made 75% of the 122 million jobs lost. The informal workers did not have enough opportunities to work from home and also faced more job losses than the formal sector. With the onset of the lockdown, the movement of people got restricted and these people lost their livelihoods for days and months. Many of them were migrant workers who leave their homes and go for work to different cities and states.

After the declaration of the nationwide lockdown in March 2020, they faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces shut, thousands of the migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future. Following this, many of them began walking back to their homes, with no means of transportation available. Social distancing was not possible for them since they travelled in large groups. Many of them died on their way back due to starvation, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutalities, and lack of timely medical care and even by suicides.

“The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant labourers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives”, a 38-year-old construction worker told PTI in Delhi.

“Social distancing is not just for the sick, but for each and every person, including you and even your family”, said Prime Minister Narendra Modi in one of his nationwide address in March 2020. But this is a privilege for the middle and the upper-middle class. It is almost impossible for a large fraction of India’s population who are mostly slum-dwellers. According to a report published by the CNN on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2020, around 74 million people, one-sixth of the urban population lived in the country’s slums, for whom social-distancing is physically and economically impossible. For them, water and toilet are the two biggest reasons to defy the safety protocols. According to this report, in Dharavi, Mumbai, there is only one toilet per 1440 residents. According to 2019 Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation survey, 78% of the community toilets in Mumbai lacks water supply. For these people, staying at home and maintaining social distancing norms is nothing short of a luxury.

Another reason they cannot afford to stay at home is: they need to work. According to the ILO, daily wage earners in India generally earn rupees 138 to rupees 449 per day. Most of them belong to the unorganized sector. If they do not go to work, they are not paid. With no work they do not have money to buy the essentials. Hence, they are faced with the agonizing dilemma whether to go out to work and risk infection or stay at home and face extreme hunger.

“Only 6 percent of the poorest 20 percent has access to non-shared sources of improved sanitation, compared to 93.4 percent of the top 20 percent. 59.6 percent of India’s population lives in a room or less”, says the Oxfam report. This makes them more susceptible to infection.

They say that the covid-19 virus does not discriminate between the rich and the poor. But the health care system definitely does. The rich and the well-to-dos have a greater access to the healthcare facilities than the poor. In India, health care ranges from crowded wards in government-run hospitals that some worry would make them sicker than if they stayed at home to large, spacious and luxury cabins and suites that only the wealthy can afford. The health care system has been underfunded and the government hospitals are immensely overburdened making the patients face daylong waits even to receive some basic treatment. With the onset of the pandemic, India's already strained health care system had to face one of its biggest tests. Although the country's leaders had promised coronavirus testing and care for all those who need irrespective of their income and social status, treatment options are largely stratified and unequal. People not having the capacity to get themselves tested in the private diagnostics labs, had to wait in the serpentine queues in the public hospitals.

Private hospitals generally uphold higher standards of care, but most people cannot afford it. The pandemic has also spiked the education inequalities among the students of the country. With all the schools, colleges and educational institutions being shut, education has shifted largely to the online mode. Our country has seen the digital divide worsening the inequalities. The Oxfam study says that on one hand, private providers such as BYJU's and Unacademy experienced exponential growth and on the other hand, only 3 percent of the poorest 20 percent of Indian households had access to a computer and just 9 percent had access to the internet. The burden of providing education fell on the households and the financially better-offs benefited.

The recent surges in the coronavirus cases have made the reopening of the educational institutions a distant dream. This may have a significant impact on the country's education system. Most of the students living in rural areas come from less educated families and the parents do not have adequate skills and necessary means to access the online classes for the children. With the beginning of virtual learning, the importance of electricity and internet connectivity has rapidly increased. But in the rural areas, there is limited internet connectivity along with high electricity fluctuations, thus impacting the online learning to a great extent.

With the massive losses of jobs during the pandemic, many could not afford the expensive electrical gadgets for their children's education. This trend is common in

the rural as well as in the urban areas. These disturbance in the education system in the country can continue due to the massive surge in the coronavirus cases in the second wave along with the discussions of a possible third wave.

Women received differential treatment during the pandemic. Women constitutes two-thirds of the global workforce in the health sector, but a pay gap of 28 percent exists as per a working paper of the World Health Organisation (2019). Despite this discrimination, women are working as nurses and caregivers in the frontline fighting the deadly virus.

According to a recent report by Mckinsey, female job loss rates are 1.8 times higher as compared to men globally due to the pandemic.

The situation is no different in India. Besides comparatively less pay and greater job losses, there has been an alarming increase in cases of domestic violence against women during the lockdown period. Economic hardships and growing anxiety during the emergencies often fuel violent and abusive relationships directed towards women, and this pandemic has been no exception. The National Commission for Women (NCW) received a large number of distress calls from women seeking help. The pandemic has resulted in job losses and economic distress among men and women alike but the cases of domestic violence has affected women adversely, resulting in further subjugation of women. The Oxfam report says that as of November 30, 2020, cases of domestic violence stand at 4687 in 2020 compared to 2960 in 2019 – a 58% rise. The highest number of cases were from Uttar Pradesh (1576), followed by Delhi (906) and Bihar (265).

As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, participation of the female labour force in India is one of the lowest in the world. According to this report, pay gap in India is 35% as compared to the global average of 16%.

Women in the informal sector has been considered as the most vulnerable by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In the informal sector, women are largely concentrated in domestic work and the home-based works and work as support staff in the informal construction works and waste picking activities. Women have to bear the heavier brunt of the pandemic mostly because their works remain invisible. As per the CMIE Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) data, 4 out of 10 women lost their jobs in India and 17 million women lost their jobs during the nationwide lockdown in March and April 2020. In addition, the total time spent in paid and unpaid activities by

women have risen with the increase in the workload as a result of being stuck at home. Women have been working for longer hours simultaneously managing the daily chores of the households, the educational needs of the children and care for all the members of the family.

COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing social barriers and decreased women's ability to access essential services. The challenges include difficulties in accessing adequate food and nutrition, gaps in access to basic healthcare as supply chains for essential medicines and reproductive health services has been interrupted. Some reports suggest that the long-term impacts of this disparity can be so significant that it can roll back the gains of the decades of women empowerment.

This gender inequality is also visible in our vaccination coverage. We know that vaccination is the only effective protection against this deadly virus and this acquires greater urgency as the virus is spreading in the rural areas of the country. Vaccine hesitancy is more profound among women due to the digital and literacy divide that already exists. Socio-cultural factors that are so deep-rooted in the rural landscape makes it worse. Due to digital illiteracy, women in many cases cannot register themselves for vaccination in the CoWIN platform. The patriarchal ecosystem that persists in the rural area further amplifies this gap. Vaccine hesitancy is also aggravated amongst women due to myths and rumours related to its impact on menstruation and fertility. Pregnant and lactating women are also hesitant to take the shots due to lack of effective communication of the information.

This worries the health experts, who say vaccine inequality could hamper India's already difficult fight against the deadly virus that had been killing more than 4 thousand people a day during the deadly second wave.

"Inequitable vaccination risks prolonging the pandemic in India. Reducing barriers for the most vulnerable population should be a priority," says Krishna Udayakumar, founding director of the Duke Global Health Innovation Centre at Duke University in North Carolina.

The Oxfam report says, "India has the world's fourth lowest health budget in terms of its share of government expenditure. If India's top 11 billionaires are taxed at just 1% on the increase in their wealth during the pandemic, it will be enough to increase the allocation of the Jan Aushadi scheme by 140 times, which provides affordable medicines to the poor and the marginalised."

The report notes that India's billionaires working in sectors like coal, telecom, medicine, pharmaceuticals, education and retails experienced an exponential increase in their wealth since March 2020 when India announced one the biggest lockdowns and the economy came to a standstill. On the other hand, data suggests that 170,000 people lost their livelihoods every hour in April 2020.

“The pandemic has hit India's poor the hardest, from the disease itself to the economic and social impact of a recently lifted nationwide lockdown,” said Ramanan Laxminarayan, an epidemiologist and economist who directs the Centre for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy in Washington. “The lockdown primarily protected the rich because they could afford to stay home. The poor couldn't so bore the brunt of the disease. This is just a grossly unfair situation,” he said in June 2020.

The Coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented crisis which has shaken the world to its core. With no prior experience, the governments and the policymakers across the world have been thrown into a completely novel situation. Each time they are adopting newer and more creative ways to cater to the needs of its people, of course with its own limitations. Especially in such a densely populated country like India with its already existing wide range of socio-economic problems and inequalities, it is a serious challenge for the policymakers to find a concrete way to address this crisis.

Medical experts across the world have been emphasising on the mass vaccination from the very beginning of the pandemic. As on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2021, 21.6% of India's population has been fully vaccinated and 51.6% have received their first dose.

Besides the governments and the policymakers, we, the citizens of this country, must do our bit to contain the spread of this deadly virus by completing our vaccination schedule timely and following all the safety protocols. Once the spread of the virus is contained, it will be a bit easier for the governments and the policymakers to focus on the socio-economic issues.

If each of us can do our bit, then together we can hope for a “Distance”-free tomorrow.

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