

Women's Vulnerability in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Asia

In collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP)

COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequalities in South Asia as there exist minimal to no unemployment benefits nor adequate health facilities for women and the most marginalised. An inherently biased patriarchal structure has made it difficult to devise effective response plans, especially during the current pandemic. Therefore, this panel will focus on four main areas:

(i) Economic

Data from South Asian countries indicates digital illiteracy, fundamentally contributing to slow job recovery rates for women during the pandemic. Specifically, women within the informal sector with exploitative contract enforcement, lower minimum wage and lack of unemployment benefits face the brunt of economic inequalities within South Asia. This, coupled with additional care work exacerbates inequality, limiting promotions and other job opportunities. Governments can devise a range of informed, micro and macro level strategies guided by nuanced gender-based stakeholder analysis.

(ii) Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the doubly marginalised status of gender minorities within the health sector. Its privatization, resulting in the increased cost of health services, de-prioritisation of women's maternal and reproductive health concerns and increased burden of care work have worsened during the pandemic. Governments need to make effective policies to timely deliver vaccines as well as medical support to make the health opportunities more readily available to women. Lack of discourse surrounding these issues, along with absence of data to improve healthcare makes COVID-19 centres inaccessible to gender-based minorities.

(iii) Education

South Asian countries have an endemic problem of inequitable distribution of the right of education amongst gender minorities. Factors that have worsened dropout rates include increase in monetary constraints, household tasks, domestic abuse as well as child marriages. As these issues became more prevalent during the pandemic, more girl-children have been permanently taken out of schools. This is cause for serious concern and debate.

(iv) Social Status

Since COVID-19 relief strategies function within pre-existing patriarchal structures, institutions and norms, its gendered impact is pervasive and multifaceted. Whether it is the alarming increase in domestic violence, the invisible burden of caring for sick members, inequitable access to digital literacy or internet facilities, women have been disproportionately affected.

This panel will try to deconstruct the gendered dimension of COVID-19's multifaceted impacts discussed above.

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