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The Impact of Covid-19 on Working Women in India: A Gender Analysis

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Abstract

Whenever we talk about any pandemic, we often fail to address the after-effects because it always outlasts the pandemic that had occurred. The virus has affected every segment of society be it economy, livelihood, education, environment etc. Women are one of the highly vulnerable groups of society, which makes them more prone to facing inequalities and discrimination during the period of Covid-19. This paper is an attempt to examine the profound impact of Covid-19 on the working women of the organised sector. Have women experienced more psychological issues than men during the pandemic? Were the dual responsibilities and the patriarchal mindset the root cause for the deteriorating health of women? Therefore, to answer the above key questions and many other correlated questions, this study seeks to understand the broader set of problems women faced during the pandemic along with the range of critical issues which further widened the gender gap in the country. Additionally, In the effort to recognise the various obstacles encountered by women, the research strives to cover the distinctive states and regions of the country to form an extensive perspective of problems and hardships faced. This paper further renders the predicament women experienced in terms of social, economic, psychological aspects.

Keywords: *working women, pandemic, patriarchal, gender, Inequalities, overburden, Covid-19*

1.0 Introduction

Women from primitive times have always been taught to be dependent and subordinate to men, in the ancient text of Manusmriti¹, Manu writes, “Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.” Women constitute almost half of the total population in India but they have found themselves in social and political structures dominated by men. Historically, India has moved towards a more complex and patriarchal culture, with families piously buying into the notion that an educated daughter would be unable to find a husband and so would end up being a

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¹ *Manusmriti* Verse 9.3 under section I- Husband And Wife. This verse is quoted in Parāśaramādhava (Prāyaścitta, p. 286);—in Vivādaratnākara (p. 410);—in Vyavahāra-Bālabhaṭṭī (p. 608);—in Nṛsiṃhaprasāda (Saṃskāra 66b);—and in Saṃskāratnamālā (p. 674).

drain on her parents' resources. The flaws and the fallacies of the patrilineal and patriarchal system have often caught women bearing dual responsibilities and expectations while social customs have given rise to discrimination and fuelled the gender gap. As Savitribai Phule² writes in her poem "Should they be called humans?",

"The woman from dawn to dusk doth labour
The man lives off her toil, the freeloader
Even birds and beasts labour together
Should these idlers still be called humans?"

India ranks among the bottom 15 countries in terms of its Female Labour/Workforce Participation (FLFP) rate which stands at 20.3 per cent of the total working population³. The FLFP rate which measures the involvement of women in the economy has been steadily declining since 2005. In patriarchal societies, women's employment is largely distress-driven, considering health, economic and social perspectives. The COVID-19 outbreak is the most severe and deadly pandemic since the H1N1 influenza (Spanish flu) pandemic occurred in 1918. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women more profoundly than men in several areas, both at the workplace (especially in the health and social sector) and at home with an increased workload due to lockdown and quarantine measures. With the spread of the virus, even the limited growth made towards gender equality and women equality in the past few decades are at severe risk of being reversed and getting stagnant. The various pre-existing inequalities and gender-based evils have been exacerbated during the pandemic in several aspects. A global survey conducted, has shown that seven out of ten women who encountered disruptive patterns in their routine because of the pandemic believe that their career growth has been stopped⁴.

² "Poems Archives." *Feminism In India*, January 3, 2021. <https://feminisminindia.com/tag/poems/>.

³ Andres, L. A. 2017. Reassessing Patterns of Female Labor Force Participation in India (Introduction. World Bank

⁴ "Understanding the Pandemic's Impact on Working Women." 2020. Deloitte.Com. October 28, 2020.

<https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/understanding-the-pandemics-impact-on-working-women.html>

According to scholars like Karl Marx⁵, the exploitation of women in the work sector is purely an outcome of the capitalist structure which often explains unpaid domestic work and widens the gender gap. Women take on greater care demands at home which makes their jobs vulnerable leading to cuts and layoffs because the system of ‘dual responsibility’ makes them overburdened with work and responsibilities, which often give rise to mental stress and trauma. Working women with a multitude of responsibilities incessantly need to juggle and balance the multiple roles that they are invested with daily, which may be overwhelming and may badly affect their wellbeing and health. Weber⁶ stated that the concept of well-being requires an in-depth understanding owing to the implications that this may have on the health of a mother and the overall health and well-being of the family. In addition to taking care of her children and the home as they are perceived as the traditional responsibilities of a woman, she is expected to perform well at her workplace and to be financially independent in order to have a say in the family. Nonetheless, the pandemic has only exaggerated the very essence of these rigid gender roles and the patriarchal system prevailing. Practically, what is expected of a man in modern society? Probably to have a promising and prosperous career to support the family, first and foremost and it would be considered generous if he can share the household work, care for his wife and sometimes babysit his own children. Unfortunately, all these deeds of livelihood are a serious responsibility for women along with their non-existent careers. A study by the World Economic Forum⁷ found that women spent about 44.6 per cent of their non-working hours on unpaid work like maintaining the household, taking care of family and children, while the figure was only 18.9 per cent for men.

From taking care of their household activities, children(in absence of house help) to managing their official work-life balance, the pandemic has imposed a new benchmark of tolerance and work capacity on women. The new work culture has been overwhelming for women because it

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⁵ Armstrong, Elisabeth. 2020. “Marxist and Socialist Feminism.” https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg_facpubs/15.

⁶ Kaul, Ashok Kumar. *Sociological Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2004): 266–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23620408>.

⁷ Global Gender Gap Report 2021.” n.d. Weforum.Org. Accessed October 10, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/ab6795a1-960c-42b2-b3d5-587eccda6023>.

wasn't just 'Work From Home' but was equally 'Work For Home' at the same time. Health implications was another factor that has taken a toll because of the lifestyle change due to the pandemic. From past experiences, it is safe to say that pandemics result in a prolonged dip in women's income and labour force participation. The world altogether is recovering from the devastating effects of the pandemic but customarily women have to work harder in order to overcome the obstacles in the way.

2.0 Historical Context

It is no secret that women are hardly allowed to work in the sector outside households in the Indian patrilineal structure and there has always been a fight for women to claim their rights. Over the past four decades, there has been an increase in economic growth, urbanisation and literacy rates, leading to some kind of women empowerment. However, despite this rapid progress, women in India are absent from the labour force and their employment rates have fallen or remained stagnant. The working culture of the country is more or less accountable for low Female Labour Participation rates and the potential constraints on participation are basically due to low wages, insignificant recognition, and lack of maternity considerations.

3.0 Social Impact

The Greek philosopher Aristotle⁸ said that "Man is by nature a social animal" and so are women. Women consist of 49 per cent of the total Indian population and currently around 80 per cent of the women are not involved in the work sector, according to Public Affairs Centre's (PAC) report⁹. In the social arena, the impact of Covid-19 on women has been disturbing, altering life in almost all aspects. Women's increased burden of work came with multiple unpaid tasks like children, household chores, taking care of the family and other sets of gender norms. The responsibility fell completely on the shoulders of women which was extremely exhausting.

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⁸ The Hindu. 2012. "Man as a Social Animal." The Hindu. March 12, 2012.

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/education/research/man-as-a-social-animal/article2988145.ece..>

⁹ Glance, A. T. A. n.d. "Public Affairs Index." Pacindia.Org. Accessed October 10, 2021.

<https://pacindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/pai2020sr.pdf>.

Since the pandemic happened and work from home came into effect, there came a lack of demarcation between the personal and professional lives of women, resulting in the decline of their performance and efficiency. The drudgery of household work is so high that women have to work for longer hours than men because they are simultaneously involved in the unpaid work which comes at the expense of their sleep, personal activity and leisure. As per the report of the First Post¹⁰, 38.5 per cent of the working women surveyed said that their routine was adversely affected by the added burden of household, child and elderly care while 43.7 per cent of them said that their work-life balance had become disproportionate.

In an online survey conducted by the author, at a pan- India level, considering both urban and semi-urban areas, with a total sample size of 55 women of organised sector, it has come into account that 67.27 per cent of the women faced difficulty managing their household activities and the workplace duties. Comparatively, 21.8 per cent of women were neutral in their approach to answering the question, “Was it difficult to manage both, official work and home?”. This shows that pandemic was an unpleasant experience for a majority of women because of their increased sets of tasks. Working women’s household activity is largely dependent on the house help they hire for their basic domestic management but after the Government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, the house helpers, in order to ensure social distancing, left or stopped coming to the houses, which is one of the major factors that contributed to the increased workload of women. In the survey conducted, 52.72 per cent of women encountered unavailability of house helpers which intensified their work-life imbalance while 16 per cent of the women had access to intermittent help from their domestic workers. Women, especially in the urban sectors, are often in need of domestic helpers who assist them in their household activities like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. This helps maintain their work-life balance and secure time for official paid work but, the pandemic also made them

¹⁰ Survey Highlights Negative Impact of Work from Home during COVID-19 Crisis on Indian Working Women.” 2021. Firstpost.Com. March 6, 2021.

<https://www.firstpost.com/india/survey-highlights-negative-impact-of-work-from-home-during-covid-19-crisis-on-indian-working-women-9385521.html>.

witness the harshness of complete responsibility which further led to an unsettled state of mind. During the pandemic, women managed both their duties and sometimes asked for help amongst their family members but because of the patriarchy and the stereotyping of gender roles, they hardly received help. In the survey when women were asked about stressful experiences faced during the lockdown, the responses conveyed their anxiety resulting from the attempts to balance career and domestic chores particularly, with the unavailability of the services of maids, and constant fear of the pandemic.

Taking into account one of the deadliest pandemics that occurred in the year 1918 (Spanish Flu) because of the H1N1 virus, it proves that women's progress has always been obstructed more than men whenever such tragedies take place. Carrie Chapman Catt¹¹, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association said, "This new affliction is bringing sorrow into many suffrage homes and is presenting a serious new obstacle in our Referendum campaigns and in the Congressional and Senatorial campaigns. We must, therefore, be prepared for failure." Women suffragists were in the fight for over 70 years and the moment their fight seemed to achieve success, the pandemic struck and their rights got delayed as they had a hard time campaigning due to the sudden dip in participation.

When women are missing from decision making, we see the world through only one perspective of society. In the context of covid-19, women all over the world and India, in particular, have faced gender discrimination. The virus has undoubtedly increased the burden on women and the situation is made worse by the existing gender equalities in the country. Women's jobs and livelihood are more vulnerable to the covid-19 pandemic as they are the ones facing the dual responsibility of managing both works from home and work from home.

¹¹ DuBois, Ellen Carol. 2020. "A Pandemic Nearly Derailed the Women's Suffrage Movement." *National Geographic*, April 20, 2020.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/pandemic-nearly-derailed-womens-suffrage-movement>.

Did you face any difference in the work culture for working women in comparison to working men?

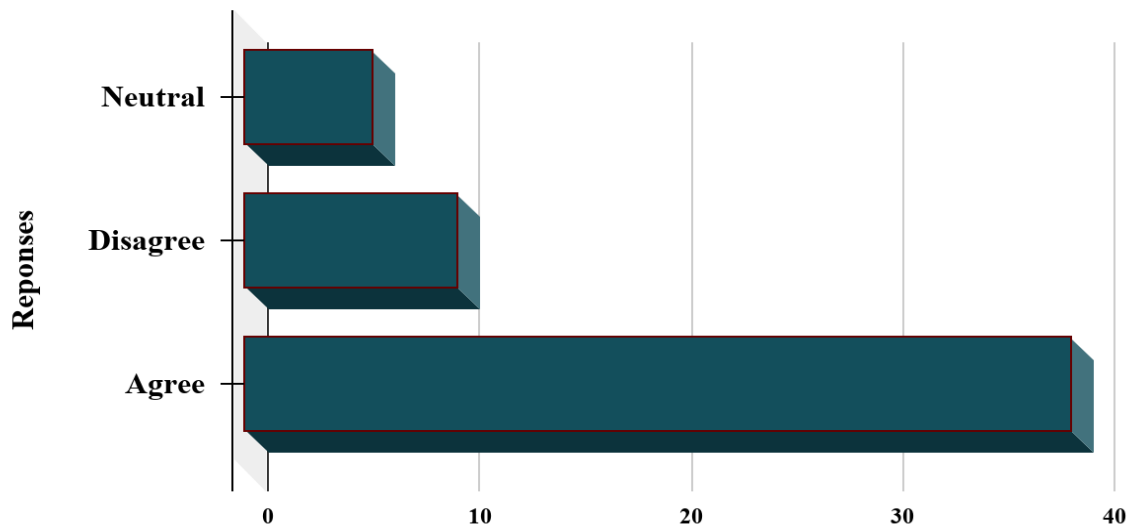


Figure 1 shows how discrimination at the workplace makes it difficult for women to fulfil their role of dual responsibility.

The pandemic has brought with it the ingredients for deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing a vulnerability in the social, political and economic domain which ultimately has increased the gender gap. Mostly the nature of work remains gender-specific where both men and women are working but female jobs are 19 per cent more at risk than their male counterparts. In March, UNESCO¹² estimated that the pandemic was preventing 1.52 billion children from attending school and it is more likely that girls will never return to formal education. According to a survey conducted by LinkedIn's opportunity index report of 2021, around 85 per cent of the women failed to get a raise because of the pandemic and their organisation favoured their male colleagues. Moreover, the attitude and mindset of a traditional society push the women's career to take a back seat. Gender discrimination at the workplace has almost become a common phenomenon that is affecting women's work progress and promoting gender inequalities with

¹² "Covid-19 School Closures around the World Will Hit Girls Hardest." 2020. Unesco.Org. March 31, 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest>.

subtle behaviour.

The impact of any pandemic is never gender-neutral. Patriarchy has subjugated women for centuries, especially in countries like India where we are still fighting gender stereotypes. Socio-cultural norms have deprived women of education and women have always been an underrepresented class. Gender gaps have restrained women from actively intervening in public life and voicing themselves. According to a report by the Global Gender Gap Report of 2020¹³, it would take almost 257 years to bridge the gender gap in the economic sense while the same figure was 202 years in 2019. This clearly shows how the pandemic has taken a toll when it comes to gender disparity, with the long era of historical suppression adding to the regressive nature the pandemic has brought.

4.0 Economic Impact

According to feminist economists like Mellor¹⁴, traditional economics has always ignored gender issues by ignoring or underestimating women's work and contribution. Feminist economists say that the mainstream economics developed in early Europe by upper-class men, suppressed the diversity of gendered experience and their economics is coherently exclusionary of women, and that economics is also a part of social construct that prehistorically have favoured men and subjugated women.

The pandemic of 2020 was a major blow to the economy of the world because of stringent lockdown measures and the recession that followed. Women who were part of the workforce were disproportionately affected, with entrepreneurial women, as well as employed women, suffering layoffs or a huge dip in revenue sales. Women entrepreneurs are more likely to be active in the fields of food, fashion, and lifestyle which were evidently the most affected fields in the pandemic crisis; almost 90 per cent of women entrepreneurs faced a consequential

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¹³“Global Gender Gap Report 2021.” n.d. Weforum.Org. Accessed October 10, 2021.

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/ab6795a1-960c-42b2-b3d5-587eccda6023>.

¹⁴ The Hindu. 2012. “Man as a Social Animal.” The Hindu. March 12, 2012.

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/education/research/man-as-a-social-animal/article2988145.ece>.

decline in their revenue generation¹⁵. Ms Nirmala Menon, CEO of Interweave in an interview with 'The Hindu'¹⁶ said that the pandemic has brought the issue of discrimination against women to the forefront which has triggered anger and angst. Women across all professions are of the same opinion that their opportunities and growth have come to a halt.

In a study done by Mckinsey & Company¹⁷ in the United States and India, it is shown the rates at which women lost their jobs was 1.8 times higher than men which makes their socio-economic status more vulnerable, ultimately widening the pre-existing gender gap. At a country level in the United States, women made up 46 per cent of the workforce before covid-19 and later on, unemployment data reveals that 54 per cent of women left the job till date¹⁸. Organisations like the International Labour Organisations(ILO) believe that unequal distribution of unpaid work has tremendously deteriorated the condition of women during the pandemic.

In the same online survey conducted on a pan-India level, considering both urban and semi-urban areas with a total sample size of 55 women of the organised sector, it has come into account that 54.5 per cent of women faced a financial setback and were uncertain of the situation. This is also supported by a survey analysis from Asian Development Blog¹⁹ saying that between March and April 2020, 15.4 million women lost their jobs and the labour force considerably fell by 10.5 per cent for women.

¹⁵ Tejaswi, Mini. 2020. "Women Are Hit Hard by Economic Fallout of COVID-19." The Hindu. October 12, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/women-are-hit-hard-by-economic-fallout-of-covid-19/article32829908.ece>.

¹⁶ Tejaswi, Mini. 2020. "Women Are Hit Hard by Economic Fallout of COVID-19." The Hindu. October 12, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/women-are-hit-hard-by-economic-fallout-of-covid-19/article32829908.ece>.

¹⁷ Madgavkar, A. White O. Krishnan M. Mahajan D. Azcue X. n.d. "COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects." *McKinsey & Company*. July 15.

¹⁸ Madgavkar, A. White O. Krishnan M. Mahajan D. Azcue X. n.d. "COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects." *McKinsey & Company*. July 15.

¹⁹ "Tackling the COVID-19 Youth Employment Crisis in Asia and the Pacific." 2020. In *Asian Development Bank*.

Did you face any financial setbacks which ultimately resulted in disruptions of your career growth?

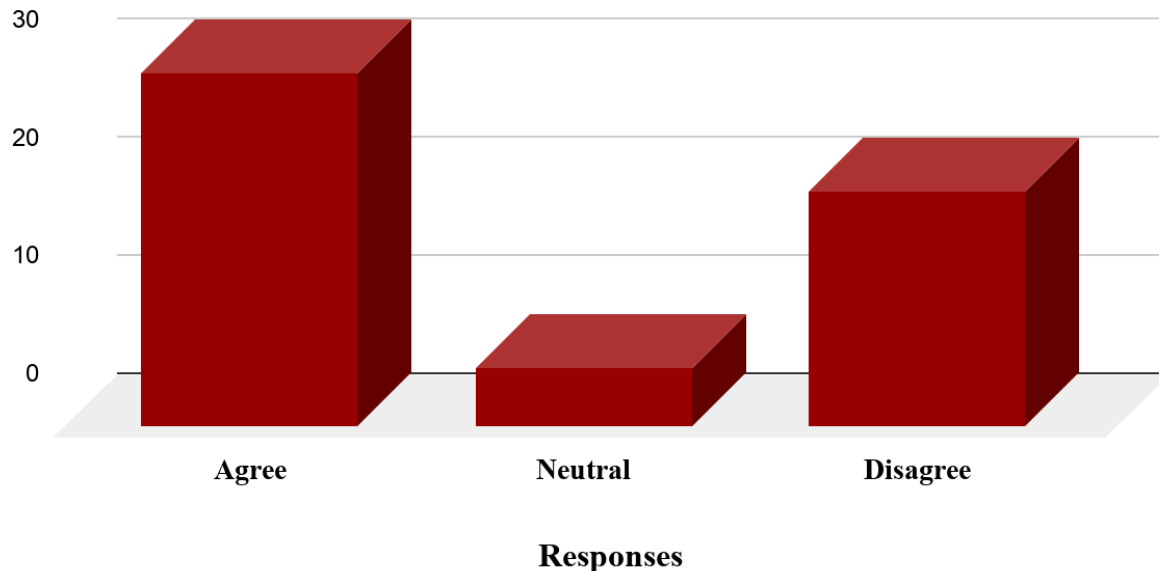


Figure 2 shows the percentage of responses women given in an online survey conducted

Covid-19 has intensified work, household chores and childcare during the lockdown. It is shown that on average a woman spent four hours a day on unpaid domestic work which has increased by 30 per cent in the pandemic. A report by Mckinsey & Company shows that as many as 2 million women have considered taking a leave from their job due to the overburden of work. Women in general and working mothers, in particular, have faced the thought of quitting their job during a pandemic, and the stress and psychological setbacks have led many to quit their job²⁰. Women in the position of leadership are finding it more tiresome to manage both the work than their male counterparts. Mckinsey report shows that in August 2020, women labour supply was still 20 per cent below the pre-recession levels of February 2020, where it was below 9 per

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²⁰ Huang, Jess, Alexis Krivkovich, Ishanaa Rambachan, and Lareina Yee. 2021. "For Mothers in the Workplace, a Year (and Counting) like No Other." Mckinsey.Com. McKinsey & Company. May 3, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>.

cent for men. This has further led to the disparity in the working pattern of males and females, where it has overburdened women, leading them to quit their job. Economic insecurity is not just the loss of jobs and basic livelihood, the impact of the pandemic on the economic aspect has far-reaching consequences influencing the gender gap in education and employment and further provoking gender-based violence. Esteve-Volart²¹ shows that a 10 per cent increase in the female-to-male ratio of workers would increase per capita net domestic product by 8 per cent, which means that the need for women in the working sector is also crucial for the growth of the economy.

5.0 Health Impact

Women's health in India was at stake since ancient times; the medical facilities and the healthcare benefits were hardly available in the country and whatever resources were available, priority was given to males because of the patrilineal outlook and male-dominant structure. Social evils like purdah, *sati* system, and female infanticide were a few factors that restricted women from getting western healthcare facilities. Feminists believe that the state of women's health is a reflection of their position in society. The origin of the women's health movement goes back to 1885 but to no avail, with women's health continuing to deteriorate because of neglect and ignorance. The impact of covid-19 is more intensified than ever because it gravely affected the sectors which are slow to recover and health is one of them. Women who are part of the workforce are more vulnerable than others because the increase in responsibility has brought them exhaustion and decline in health both, mentally and physically. Due to the provisions of the pandemic like social isolation, restriction of movement, home quarantine, mental as well as the physical health of the women have shown a downward turn. Restriction of movement and home quarantine made working women vulnerable by letting them take over the entire responsibility in the absence of any external sources of help. Taking care of the elderly and children, cooking, cleaning and hygiene were the add-on liabilities of the women along with their professional

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²¹ N.d. Researchgate.Net. Accessed October 10, 2021.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272303746_Economic_Growth_and_Female_Labour_Force_Participation_in_India.

lives.

A study by CARE International²² says that while in the pandemic everyone is going through hardships and emotional trauma, women are experiencing thrice the issues related to mental health. One of the biggest hurdles that came forward in terms of health was the growing stigma of the virus, people suffered not just because of physical issues encountered but majorly because of mental strain and the fear of isolation. Working women were laid off when they caught the infection and were left jobless, which also adds to the fact that pandemics are not just physically deadly but more than that leave an indelible mark on the mental health of the people.

6.0 A Way Forward

It is for the first time that this generation of humans is facing something this terrible and indifferent; humans altogether are suffering and the death toll has gone way up than ever imagined. Suffering to humankind always comes with pain and lack of empathy but women specifically have suffered and faced more repression than any other section in the society. History acts as evidence of women's subjugation and tyranny, which still is in progress but in the contemporary sense. Pandemic was excruciating but at the same time brought affliction to women in a way that their recent upliftment and progress have taken a back seat. Working women are more at risk because their opportunities have shrunk and their avenues of opportunity have closed along with an immense increase in workload (domestic unpaid labour) and discrimination of sexes in the workplace. Their health was also at stake because of the same reasons and the stringent measures warranted by the pandemic.

With such aspects in mind, there has developed an urgent need to address and recognise such issues in order to prevent falling female labour participation rates and declining health of women which will negatively impact the whole nation. At such times, policymakers play a key role in balancing the situation; policies to ensure working women's health and provisions for unpaid domestic labour shall be made. In the private sector, even working from home should be

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²² Thibaut, Florence, and Patricia J. M. van Wijngaarden-Cremers. 2020. "Women's Mental Health in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic." *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2020.588372>.

made flexible and women should not be deprived of benefits and raises. There has to be an emphatic and understanding working environment that can help women improve their mental and physical health. Efforts should be made on the societal level too, where people and male-centric societies should be aware of the need to condemn gender stereotyping and the oppression of women. The twenty-first century needs a different approach to tackle the effects of pandemics and the plight of working women. With collective efforts and a progressive approach, changes can be witnessed at a larger front, if not for women then definitely for the nation because as Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked, “I have long been convinced that a nation’s progress is intimately connected with the status of its women.”²³

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²³ “Why India’s Female Labour Force Participation Rate Has Been Dwindling - SheThePeople TV.” 2017. Shethepeople.Tv. SheThePeople. October 26, 2017. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/blog/indias-female-labour-force-participation-rate-dwindling/>.

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