

# A Gendered Pandemic in India, Nepal and Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** *Impact of Covid-19 has been felt very differently by women across the globe. We saw a rise in the number of cases of domestic violence in the world over, women suffered much more in terms of job lay-offs, they have continued to face discrimination in terms of re-employment, lower wages and continue to be at a greater risk of contracting the virus as most of them are engaged in frontline health work. In this new context of lifted lockdown (in most countries), weakened or battered economies and fear of a repeat scenario, this paper looks at South Asia and the impact of covid-19 on women, their rights, their struggle for reclaiming the public space and the sacred space of the household. South Asia makes for a unique study given its deeply existent patriarchal attitudes that have kept women confined mostly to the home or engaged in gender-based jobs. South Asia has a poor track record of women's rights, gender based crimes and gender-stereotypical attitude in society. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, among the eight regions covered in the report, South Asia ranks the lowest, with only 62.3% of the gender gap closed in 2022. This lack of progress since the last time that the study was conducted means that it will take the region 197 years to close the gender gap, due to a broad stagnation in gender parity scores across most countries in the region. This paper looks closely at the impact of covid-19 on women in three South Asian countries, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. I will be looking at covid-19 and rise in crime against women in the space of the home and otherwise, labour force participation rate among women and related economic disparities that have been accentuated after the pandemic, impact on civil society and if and how governments of these countries have addressed the issue. It will be a comparative study among these countries on the gendered impact of the pandemic. The aim of the paper is to highlight the cause of women in a new global context of the pandemic and crippled economies.*

**Keywords:** Labour participation, domestic violence, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, laws

## 1. Introduction

A study of the gendered impact of Covid-19 on three South Asian countries which are any way riddled with an age old disease like patriarchy seems like a plot of a horror movie. Globally Covid-19 has deepened the gender divide, escalated gender based violence rates, sharpened gender-based roles and isolated women and girls even further, South Asia has been no exception to this trend. South Asia is infamous for its deeply patriarchal attitude, gender crimes rates, female feticide, dowry deaths and the like. While this paper is a commentary on impact of the pandemic on women, it should be borne in mind that Nepal, Bangladesh and India have traditionally scored abysmally low in most gender scores irrespective of the pandemic. This fact has been brought out year after year in numerous surveys and reports, the latest being the WEF Global Gender Gap. While looking at each country specifically, there are some common indices during the lockdown and post it, like employment in informal sector, child marriage, girl-child education, domestic violence etc that we shall compare and contrast to highlight the impact of the pandemic.

The Global Gender Gap 2022 is a global study of gender parity left to be achieved by countries. Regionally, South Asia has performed the worst. South Asia has the widest gender gap on Economic Participation and Opportunity, having closed only 35.7% of this gender gap. While the sub-index score is an improvement of 1.8 percentage points from last year, varied countries in the region have performed differently anchoring the result as the lowest among all regions. The highest score of Nepal stands at 64.1%. Increases in the share of women in professional and technical roles were most notable in Nepal, Bangladesh and

India. On the other hand, the shares in Iran, Pakistan and Maldives regressed, with less impact on overall regional performance. India and Sri Lanka have progressed on closing the gender gap in the share of women in senior positions as well, while Iran has regressed. [1]

In comparison to other regions, South Asia ranks second lowest on the Educational Attainment sub-index, above Sub-Saharan Africa. Literacy rate, one of the core indicators for education, saw no change in five countries. However, there were losses in literacy parity in Afghanistan (10.3 percentage points) and in lesser measure, in Bangladesh (-0.3 percentage points). All countries for which data is available have closed more than 98% of their gender gap in enrolment in primary education. [2]

South Asia has one of the lowest regional gender parity scores for Health and Survival, at 94.2%. Sex ratio at birth remains relatively low in large, populated countries such as India and Pakistan, whereas Bangladesh, Bhutan, Iran and Sri Lanka have reached parity. South Asia has the fourth-highest regional performance on the Political Empowerment sub-index, having achieved 26.3% of gender parity. The highest-ranking countries in the region within this dimension are Bangladesh, India and Nepal, where women have held the highest office in the country or participate more widely in government. The lowest-ranking countries on this sub-index are Bhutan and Iran. [3]

Drastic cuts in the availability and use of essential public health services across South Asia due to COVID-19 may have contributed to an estimated 228,000 additional child deaths in 2020, according to a new United Nations Report. It is expected that there would be 11,000 additional maternal

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deaths due to the lockdown. [4] Some 420 million children in South Asia remain out of school due to pandemic control measures. The report warns that 4.5 million girls are likely to never return to school, and are at particular risk due to deteriorating access to sexual and reproductive health and information services. [5]

Excessively low female labour force participation rates are especially evident in the Arab States and South Asia. This suggests deep-rooted obstacles to women's economic empowerment and gender equality. Even if women's economic opportunities have generally improved, women's access to decent work remains elusive. Women continue to be over-represented as contributing family members in low-skilled and low productivity sectors and in informal work arrangements. Thus most also lack access to labour protection and social protection. [6] In South Asia, women spend ten, seven, and three times as much time in unpaid care work than do men in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, respectively. In the Arab States, women in Iraq reported spending six times as many hours as men on housework and childcare. It is obvious that South Asia performs very poorly on most gender scores. It is because of its shared cultural practices and beliefs that are often steeped in patriarchal notions of gender based roles, the importance of a male heir etc. Now let us look closely at Nepal, Bangladesh and India for a deeper analysis.

### Nepal

A recently published Nepal Jobs Diagnostic report indicates that most wage jobs are going to men. This, despite the fact that the proportion of working-age females is higher with 11.53 million – as opposed to 9.2 million males. [7] Majority of women are engaged in unpaid labour. Even in paid labour women get lesser wages compared to men. Over 66.8 percent of Nepal's entire women informal workers earn below the minimum wage standard, compared to 31.6 percent for men informal workers.

In the case of domestic workers—that are majorly women—over 90 percent of them are paid below the minimum wage. [8] The pandemic has disproportionately impacted women, who make up two-thirds of domestic workers in Nepal. Even though the government offered financial assistance in response to the crisis, most of the domestic and home-based female workers were left out. According to an ILO study, during the first month of the pandemic, twice as many workers in the informal economy fell into poverty compared to pre-COVID-19 times.

A study conducted by the Government of Nepal found a 337 percent rise in the number of women not involved in any paid work. Of the study's 465 respondents across 12 districts, 83 percent reported losing their jobs and income during the pandemic. The study also found that women's unpaid care workload increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns due to school closures and restrictions on mobility outside the home. Two-thirds of all unpaid production work was done by women.

Women across rural parts of Nepal reported that people with COVID-19 symptoms choose not to get tested because PCR testing was too expensive or was not easily accessible. [9]

According to a recent survey on the labour market conducted by the ILO, Nepal's labour force has lost anywhere between 1.6 and 2 million in the current crisis, either with complete job losses or reduced working hours resulting in decreased wages.<sup>1</sup>[10] In Nepal, a total of 631,000 female jobs (24.3% of the 2018 female workforce) are estimated to be at risk in the higher impact scenario, compared to 1.3 million jobs for men (also 30.3% of the 2018 male workforce) (ILO, 2020). [11]<sup>2</sup>

Women bore the brunt of job losses even in the informal sector. The effect was mostly observed in Nepali women who held pink-collar jobs or did un-paid household work. As a consequence of the perceived gender roles and traditional societal structures, women are trained in certain work-sectors, often regarded as 'pink-collar' jobs. They are then dissuaded from exploring other opportunities which might have better pay scale and growth. [12] Before the pandemic, almost 70 per cent of Nepalis were said to be employed in the informal economy. 90 per cent of women work in the informal sector with no social security or protection against job loss or income. After the pandemic a majority are still unemployed, and most of the women are less likely to return to work. Nepal remains a highly rural economy where subsistence farming is the main economic activity for women. This means that most working women use their productive capacity to feed their families, unpaid care work. The unequal distribution of the workload is particularly noticeable among this category of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic is equally threatening for young girls in the country. School closure as a result of lockdown can increase the risk of girls to witnessing violence at home and facing exploitation, violence, and abuse. As per anecdotal records, there have been 48 complaints of child sexual assaults in the first six weeks of lockdown compared to a total of 211 cases in the last Nepali fiscal year (2018/2019) [13].

A total of 885 complaints of domestic violence were received in 24-hour toll-free helpline operated by National Women Commission from April to June 2020. This was over twice the number of complaints received within the same period before lockdown (Dec, 2019- Feb, 2020).[14] VAWG can be an outlet or a coping mechanism for some men who feel a loss of control and failure to fulfil traditional breadwinner role during this situation. There were 176 cases of violence against women and girls in just 18 districts since the lockdown began on 24 March up to 1 May.

<sup>1</sup> Results of the survey found that 37% of businesses imposed a pay cut on their female employees, out of which 58% had inflicted a 50% deduction in salary. 5% of businesses had even inflicted a full 100% pay cut on their female employees. Similarly, 37% of the surveyed businesses had laid off a proportion of their female staff. 58% of these businesses laid off 50% to 100% women employees.

<sup>2</sup> According to a study conducted in 2021 by the Asia Foundation, in Nepal, 37% of companies imposed a wage drop in their female employees' salary, with 58% imposing a 50% compensation reduction. Moreover, 5% of organizations gave their female employees a wage decreases of 100%.

A Room to Read survey<sup>3</sup> in Nepal revealed that 16% of the girls had stopped studying at home since school closed in March, meaning they will be hesitant to return to school or will have difficulty catching up and passing important gate-keeping exams when they do return. Of those surveyed, 7% admitted that they would probably not return to school when it reopens. The reasons include the need to work or provide care at home, lack of parental support, and limited financial resources. The closure of schools due to Covid-19 lockdowns has put an estimated 4.5 million girls at the risk of not completing their education (UNESCO). [15]

Nepal is one of the top 20 countries with a high prevalence of child marriage (40%). [16] The legal marriage age in Nepal is 20. Globally, girls who marry before 18 are considered child brides, yet close to 40% girls under the age of 18 are married in Nepal, making the country one of the worst examples in Asia. But in Nepal, radio enabled continuity of the popular social and financial skills programme preventing child marriage, known as Rupantaran (meaning 'transformation' or 'metamorphosis'). Some anecdotal records in the country indicate an increase in the prevalence of child marriage during the period of lockdown. During the COVID-19 lockdown there has also been an increase in domestic violence against female members of households.

'Frontline health worker' mainly referring to the 55,000 Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) are the backbone of the country's rural health service for vaccinations and mother-child survival. COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increased burden on the health care system and first responders in Nepal. [17] Their role has extended during the pandemic, to include informing the public about preventative measures, such as hand-washing, as well as sharing facts about vaccinations. [8] A survey conducted in Nepal in 2020 among 475 health workers, 250 of whom were women, stated that 41.9 percent of the total respondents reported anxiety. Among them, 61.8 percent of women health workers were found to have symptoms of anxiety. [19] They faced social stigma, lack of adequate precautionary measures given to them by the government and isolation from their families during the pandemic.

Raksha Nepal supports women survivors of trafficking in providing alternative livelihood options besides dance bars, massage parlours and other work that often puts them at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Due to lockdown and a drop in guard against trafficking of women and girls, there was seen a sharp increase in such cases [20].

### Bangladesh

Though females constitute more than half of Bangladesh's population, their participation in the labour force is very low compared to men (84% for men while it is only 36% for women in 2020). The covid-19 pandemic has widened the

gender inequality in the labour market, and it has adversely affected the total economic development of the country. [21]

According to the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), one-third of employed young females have lost their jobs as of January 2021, which is roughly three times higher for young females (29%) in contrast to young males (11%). Even after finding a new job later, the income recovery rate has decreased two times higher for female youths (21%) compared to male youths (10%). Female participation in the labour market plays a significant role in the economic development of a country. The International Labour Organization predicted 5.0 million job losses in Bangladesh due to the pandemic and a significant number of them were slated to be women. Additionally, just over a third of Bangladesh's labour force is female, with a tiny proportion—less than five per cent—holding a formal role. On average, women earn 21 per cent less than their male counterparts. [22]

During the first lockdown in April 2020, both young men and women suffered equally. But afterwards, most young men who lost their job found a new one, while most women in a similar situation did not. [23] Even among the young women who managed to regain employment, many were working fewer hours and earning far less. Their average weekly working hours fell by 15%, compared to a meagre 1.5% fall for young men, and their income loss from the pre-pandemic level was 21%, more than twice the rate of young men. [24] These findings are consistent with the findings in other surveys. Another BIGD national survey among economically vulnerable people found that the unemployment rate among female household heads was five times as high as their male counterparts in March 2021.

The Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry is the mainstay of the Bangladesh economy, accounting for 85% of export earnings, about 20% of GDP, and directly employing about four million workers with more than 12 million workers dependent on the sector. Women in the Bangladesh RMG sector have few other employment options; a majority are young, poorly educated, and from rural areas. The RMG sector crucially depends on the abundant cheap female labour in the country. Legal protection for women workers, including against gender violence, are limited, as are the grievance mechanisms.

ILO's 11 forced labour indicators were prevalent in the RMG sector including verbal abuse, targeting pregnant workers etc. The pandemic has had a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of women workers. They reported being constantly under financial and work pressure, being tired all the time and feeling depressed. Their working day has increased, Covid-19 has increased their burden of unpaid care work. They are undernourished because they struggle to feed their families and prioritise their children over themselves. The loss of paid overtime means they do not earn sufficient to feed their families adequately. Young women also suffer from consistently poorer mental health compared to young men. Child labour in RMG factories had increased during the pandemic. Women workers faced increased financial pressures; many of their husbands could not find work due to lockdowns given a lack of demand for

<sup>3</sup> The Nepal survey was part of a series conducted by Room to Read among 28,000 school-going girls in India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Tanzania during pandemic lockdowns. The results were similar to Nepal – 49% of the girls were found to be at risk of not returning to school.

workers in the informal sector, where most men find employment in urban areas [25].

Due to this pandemic, an estimated 50000 garment workers lost their jobs, and the percentage of female workers is around 70% (according to Bangladesh National Garments Workers Employees League) [26].

There are about 10.5 million people who are employed as domestic workers, with an estimated 90% of female workers. Unfortunately, many of them are children. Approximately 54% of female domestic workers lost their jobs from March to September 2020 (CPD Survey). According to Oxfam's Securing Rights assessment, about 90% of female domestic workers have experienced domination and abuse by their family members as they are not providing money to the family. This assessment also mentioned that 95% of female domestic workers were not paid off their salaries for the first 4-5 months of the pandemic. [27]

All in all, Bangladesh women workers were much worse off than men workers. Even in industries that largely hire women like the RMG sector or care work, women have continued to be paid lower wages, faced greater loss in employment and find it harder to regain employment on fair terms.

The social burden of Bangladesh's already prevalent child marriage problem further flared up amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh ranks fourth among countries where child marriage is most prevalent. [28] This increased by at least 13% due to pandemic-enforced long-term school closure throughout the country, while many cases remain unreported. Exacerbated financial crisis, the prolonged shutdown of educational institutions and social insecurities are the principal triggering factors for such a high pace of child marriages [29].

School shut down has dramatically increased drop-out rates especially among girls. This impact has been exacerbated in many places by limited access to the internet for remote training and learning. In many contexts, boys have better access to virtual communication and digital technologies than girls, who also have more domestic and care responsibilities. These gender asymmetries are likely to widen already-existing gender gaps in skill attainment and human development. Girls reported more assignments than boys (41 percent vs 23 percent in COVID-R2). Moreover, boys reported that their families reduce chores for them to study more frequently than girls (44 percent vs 39 percent). [30] The preference for focusing on educating boys over girls is reflection of the gender-roles that each is expected to play as they grow up.

According to the Dhaka city corporation's data, the incidents of domestic violence and divorce rose during the pandemic by 29.78% in 2020. The data shows that in the last seven years, the divorce applications rate has increased by a massive 34%. Gender-based violence is among the major causes behind the rising divorce incidents. [31] Sexual assault is the most reported source of violence over time, accounting for at least 3 in 5 reported incidents. Domestic

violence trails second: it had dipped before COVID's onset but seems to have risen with the crisis. Similarly, reported dowry-related incidents also showed a downward trend in recent years before picking up with the pandemic. [32]

A survey conducted by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (2020), a local human rights organisation, revealed that the spread of COVID-19 and the following lockdown increased incidences of domestic violence in Bangladesh by over 30% among those households surveyed. MJF found that those women who reported experiencing domestic violence for the first time in 2020 blamed the socio-economic stresses of the pandemic crisis and lockdown for their situation. They stated that their husbands were becoming increasingly frustrated at home due to a lack of social interaction and angry about losing their jobs due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and some were venting their frustration by resorting to violence against their wives.<sup>4</sup>[33] UNICEF also reported a 'growing wave of violence' during the pandemic that 'further worsened the vulnerabilities of children, urban poor, migrants, displaced people and refugees', and they emphasized the 'need for psychosocial support for children and women amid the social and economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic' in Bangladesh. [34]

#### India

Women make for only 23per cent of those employed in India's informal sector. However, up to 91% of Indian women in paid jobs are in the informal sector. Women's earned income in India was just one-fifth that of men's even before the pandemic. Globally, and in India, more women have lost jobs during COVID-19. Wage inequality and the burden of unpaid care have pushed more women out of employment and into poverty. [35]

A recent report by the Center for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University in India shows that during the first lockdown in 2020, only 7 per cent of men lost their jobs, compared to 47 per cent of women who lost their jobs and did not return to work by the end of the year. In the informal sector, women fared even worse. Between March and April 2021, rural Indian women in informal jobs accounted for 80 per cent of job losses. [36] In India, women made up just 24% of the workforce before the pandemic, yet accounted for 28% of all job losses as the pandemic took hold. According to Dalberg research<sup>5</sup>, women on average lost over two thirds of their incomes during the lockdown, and as their

<sup>4</sup> MJF This rapid survey was conducted by MJF under two projects: Security and Rights of Women and Children, supported by UKAid and Prevention of Gender-based Violence by Swedish SIDA. During the whole period of April 2020 from 16,203 women and children via mobile phone. According to Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) report, 848 women were physically abused by their husbands, 2008 were mentally abused, 85 were sexually abused and 1308 were economically abused. During this period, a total of 33 incidence of child marriage occurred.

<sup>5</sup> Data was drawn from phone interviews conducted across 10 states in October and November 2020. The 17,000 respondents interviewed came from low-income households where government services and social protection programs play a significant role in their lives. It captures their experience through India's nationwide lockdown (March 24-May 31, 2020) and the months immediately following (June-October).

unpaid workload increased they were far more likely than men to report a loss of rest. The increased household burden could also make it more difficult for women to re-enter the workforce, leading to economic that will outlast the pandemic. [37]

Indian women also spend more time doing unpaid care work at home than men. On an average, they spend 9.8 times more time than men on unpaid domestic chores and 4.5 hours a day caring for children, elders and the sick. During the pandemic, their share of unpaid care work grew by nearly 30 per cent, particularly for child care and elderly care. [38]

76 per cent of domestic workers are women. Domestic workers mostly did not get paid during the lockdown period, as restrictions prevented them from getting into employers' homes. Those who did manage to keep their jobs had to confront falling wages: more than four out of five women informal workers interviewed experienced lower money wages. [39] A significant proportion also highlighted greater difficulties in provisioning food due to the lockdown, more time spent standing in queues to access food rations, and concerns about meeting physical distancing norms while collecting food or water. [40] There is a risk that the exodus of women from the workforce could become permanent, reversing not only gender equality gains, but GDP gains.<sup>6</sup> [41]

In 2020-21, the NCW received 26,513 complaints from women, marking a sharp rise from the 20,309 complaints registered in 2019-20, which means an increase of 25.09 per cent in the complaints, a recently compiled report by the NCW shows. The maximum number of complaints received by the NCW was registered as a violation of the right to live with dignity and in 2020-21 8,688 women approached the Commission saying that this right was violated. There was also a steep rise in the cases of domestic violence and 6,049 women, nearly double than the previous year, recorded their complaints with the commission in 2020-21.[42] In April and May 2020, 47.2 per cent of all cases received by the NCW were of domestic violence, against only 20.6 per cent cases between January and March 2020 [43].

Data compiled by select women's groups and Civil Society Organisations, who have been providing essential services during the lockdown and beyond, have pointed out that during the first four phases of the lockdown, women have filed more domestic violence complaints online with them than as compared to a similar time frame in the last 10 years. Most women typically do not dare to call authorities or even NGOs or any 'outsiders' for multiple reasons; but they were even less likely to do so when they were effectively trapped inside their homes with their oppressors. Even working women like frontline care workers faced such violence, often not only from their

<sup>6</sup> A qualitative research found that most female respondents who had acquired a smart-phone in the last two years had acquired it in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns were imposed. There after they have not used it. It shows that women have used phones to keep in touch with their families. Men however are found to have continued using their smart-phones after the lockdown lifted.

spouses, but from in-laws who feared they could pick up the virus during their work and transmit it to the rest of the household. [44] The usual support structures—hospitals, the police, government welfare cells, dedicated phone lines, government-run shelter homes, One Stop Crisis Centres, legal aid cells, protection officers—were either not functional or occupied with COVID-19 duties.

Overall, the burdens of the crisis have been worse for historically vulnerable women, including Muslim, migrant, and single, separated, widowed, or divorced women. An estimated 2.4 million (24 lakh) unintended pregnancies were predicted through the first six months of the pandemic, a high proportion of which were expected among low-income women due to their lower levels of access to contraception. Data was drawn from phone interviews conducted across 10 states in October and November 2020. The 17,000 respondents interviewed came from low-income households where government services and social protection programs play a significant role in their lives. It captures their experience through India's nationwide lockdown (March 24-May 31, 2020) and the months immediately following (June-October). [45]

UN Women data also shows that more girls than boys were left out of school during the pandemic and 65 per cent of parents surveyed were reluctant to continue the education of girls and resorting to child marriages to save costs. The number of child marriages reported across the country increased from 523 in 2019 to 785 in 2020, the year when Covid-19 pandemic forced a nation-wide lockdown, as per data presented in the Lok Sabha. [46] The school closures associated with lockdown, and the fact that most schools remained closed thereafter until early 2022, had very severe implications for child nutrition because it meant that the Mid-Day Meal programme was effectively suspended. This affected around 80 per cent of primary school students, or around 144 million children. [47]

In India, women make up a significant proportion of all healthcare workers and more than 80 per cent of nurses and midwives. Yet, when it comes to decision-making roles in the health sector, they are largely absent, and they get paid much less than their male counterparts. Only 13 per cent of the members of the national COVID-19 task force are women. [48]

Nearly 1 million Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) assigned to rural villages and small towns across India are on the front lines of the country's fight against the coronavirus. India's ASHA program is likely the world's largest army of all-female community health workers. They are the foot soldiers of the country's health system. are earning as little as 3,000 rupees (\$40) per month to fight the pandemic [49]. During disease outbreaks women healthcare workers were found to experience: a higher risk of exposure and infection; barriers to accessing personal protective equipment; increased workloads; decreased leadership and decision-making opportunities; increased care-giving responsibilities in the home when schools and childcare supports were restricted; and higher rates of mental ill-health, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. [50]

Gender disparity plays into the issue of ASHAs not being recognized for their work. [51]

The Indian Government classified domestic violence shelter and support services as “essential” – an important step in COVID-19 response. During the first and second waves of the pandemic, 700 One-Stop-Crisis centres remained open in India, supporting over 300,000 women who suffered abuse and needed shelter, legal aid and medical attention.

## 2. Conclusion

According to the WEF Global Gender Gap report South Asia is the world’s most gender unequal region. Among the eight regions covered in the report, South Asia ranks the lowest, with only 62.3% of the gender gap closed in 2022. This lack of progress since the last edition extends the wait to close the gender gap to 197 years, due to a broad stagnation in gender parity scores across most countries in the region. Bangladesh and Nepal lead regional performance with over 69% of their gender gaps closed. South Asia has some historic socio-economic trends that set it apart from the rest of the world. For instance traditions of child marriage, dowry, gendered division of labour have remained entrenched in our society despite laws and public mobilization against the same. While caste and religion are the dominant identity politics played out in South Asia, the brunt of this is borne by women in the form of sexual crimes, public harassment and fixing the women apropos the loosely defined male. We see that Nepal, Bangladesh and India share a common trend in occurrences of domestic violence, poor education of girls, and high instances of child marriage. Across caste and religion, there is a unifying idea that girls after the a certain age become a burden to their parents and are best married off early; that girls do not need education but should be groomed to do house-work; the public space is that of the male, female workers are open to harassment from co-workers and bosses, lower wages than men and the like. This discourages women from seeking outside their homes and keeps them bound to unpaid labour at home and outside.

The pandemic has only worsened the situation for women in these countries. In all three countries we see a meteoric rise in cases of gender-based violence and domestic violence. Globally this trend was reported but in South Asia it is generally assumed that the actual numbers are much higher than reported. Women are reluctant to complain against their spouse under conditions of lockdown. Even after the lockdown was lifted domestic abuse was rampant because many men were forced to be at home due to joblessness. In any case, women complaining against their in laws or husbands is a step that few would take given the social stigma attached to such actions. There was a 4-fold increase in the number of patients with alcohol withdrawal symptoms visiting hospitals. Alcohol withdrawal results in the development of some mental and physical reactions and violence could be one of them. It can be argued that alcohol consumption or alcohol withdrawal could be a contributing factor to domestic violence. [52]

According to a working paper published by WHO in 2019, titled ‘Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of

104 countries’ women make up 70 percent of the workforce in the health and social sectors and are thus more likely to be frontline workers, especially as nurses, midwives, and community health workers. We see that India’s ASHA workers, Nepal’s pink collar jobs of health-line workers are reminiscent of this trend. Co-opting these women in combating the spread of the disease has been an unfair bargain for them on the whole. While public adulation of their role in the pandemic was noteworthy, after the pandemic they seem to have been forgotten by society and public authorities. Their demands for job security, higher wages and better self-protection from Covid have fallen on deaf ears. The dual burden of care-giving at home and while still working professionally has led to women shouldering a disproportionate burden of the Covid-19 pandemic, often resulting in mental health issues, trauma, and exhaustion.

Women in public employment, or paid labour are largely of the informal sector where there is no check of wages, hours of work, timely payment, etc. In Nepal women are mostly from the informal sector of agriculture or work in the field of care-givers. Pink collar jobs like domestic workers, health line workers and care giving are especially reserved for women. So even though most women are seemingly engaged in work than men, their jobs are such that earns them little to no wages. Gendered jobs also enable gender wage gap that seeks to exploit women. The pandemic immediately impacted domestic workers sector the first with most households shutting these women out with pay or shelter. Therefore women in the public are engaged in high-risk, low paying ventures or in unpaid care work.

Women in India working in the informal economy too faced a similar situation. Domestic workers are mostly all females. Women have very poor labour force participation in India. In India, women made up just 24% of the workforce before the pandemic, yet accounted for 28% of all job losses as the pandemic took hold. More women lost their jobs or faced massive pay cuts as compared to men. They also spent more time doing unpaid work like household chores etc. We see that in both countries women were the fastest to lose their jobs and slowest to gain them back. In India too women largely work as domestic workers in the paid informal sector. The pandemic left this section very precarious. Bangladesh women workers are employed in the RMG sector apart from the usual domestic and agriculture. We see that the RMG sector is highly exploitative and during the pandemic, women faced daily abuse, low wages and overtime work just to make two ends meet. Bangladesh labour force participation stands at 84% for men while it is only 36% for women in 2020 which is extremely poor.

With schools teaching online, a lot of girls fell back in education due to finances, lack of resources like mobile phones, family pressure to marry and the like. It also increased cases of child marriage across the three countries. Girls were more likely than boys to fall behind in education due to the lockdown. Fewer girls were expected to re-join post-lockdown. This can create an entire generation of young women without education and employment opportunities.

The underlying problem of these countries is that girl's education has never been considered important by society at large, despite government programs and schemes promoting girl-child education. Girls are still expected to carry out their gendered roles of house related tasks. The patriarchal hold over South Asian society is one that is hard to shake off and the pandemic has done everything to deepen its roots. To address the issue of poor representation of women all three nations have passed bills that ensure that each political party has one-third seats reserved for women candidates. Bangladesh has gone a step further by reserving seats for women even in the parliament. A similar bill in India has been pending for decades. Each of the countries has a successful girl-child education program that has worked to close the gender parity gap in education by almost 98 per cent. Significant progress has been made in closing gender gaps in education, but these gains have not necessarily led to improved career opportunities for women. Typical obstacles to career advancement encountered by women shrink the talent pool available to employers. Gendered perspective of women's work still dominates and a majority are unwilling to spend too much effort or money in educating their girls, rather have them married-off early. This became very apparent during the lockdown where girl-child education suffered a huge set-back due to unwillingness and inability of parents to support their education.

While most countries have helpline numbers that address women specific problems like domestic violence and harassment, they have been more aggressively advertised during the time of lockdown to address the increasing crime rates. It is also apparent that violence, lockdown and joblessness have a direct relation with each other. The frustration of being jobless, the economic crisis faced by families and an uncertain future culminated in a life-threatening situation for women of the household. With the lifting of the lockdown and slow re-entry of men into the workplace, it is expected that crime rates will fall.

A few help lines have been set up in Nepal where women and children can access the centers. However, most of the women cannot reach safe shelters due to lack of awareness, social stigma, fear of abusers, and so on. Public education, awareness, and programs targeting for building individual commitment to fight against issues of domestic violence is in immediate need. [53] Bangladesh has One Stop Crisis Center to address a range of issues related to women except that there are too few of them and the public is largely unaware of the existence of such centres. India too has a similar set-up. The biggest challenge that these countries face is the fear and stigma attached to approaching these centers of calling the help line number for help. Women are scared to report against their own family or husband, they are unsure of the support they will receive and ashamed of revealing to the public that they are facing a problem.

Many countries brought put pandemic relief packages for the poor, marginalized, small businesses and the like. The Nepal Government started a concessional lending scheme to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic. It is part of the \$1.26 billion National Relief Program (NRP) package launched by the government of Nepal on 29 March 2020. The NRP was designed to strengthen the medical and health

system in the fight against COVID-19, provide social protection to the poor and vulnerable, and offer economic support to affected businesses. To help the government implement the NRP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided budgetary support of \$250 million under the COVID-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support (CARES) Program in May 2020. The scheme targets women entrepreneurs, Dalit communities, self-employed youths, returnee migrants, textile manufacturers, and those engaged in commercial agriculture. [53]

In Bangladesh, SMEs are estimated to lose 66% of their revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period, according to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Women-led enterprises were more vulnerable during the crisis, which forced them to lay off more workers, about 50% of enterprises have reported laying off 76%-100% of workers in Bangladesh, said the Asia Foundation. Only 5.59% of the government announced Taka 200 billion (\$2.3 billion) stimulus package recipients for the small- to medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector are women, and they are mostly urban-based. Women entrepreneurs have remained untouched by this scheme due to lack of awareness. The government ran similar schemes for the jobless, homeless and marginalized sections of society. [54]

The Government of India provided all female PMJDY account holders with INR 500 (USD 6.77) for three months in 2020—April, May, and June. This move offered economic cushioning for larger households however only half the households had at least one woman who owned a PMJDY account and was eligible to receive the benefits. Government of India data reports that women own 205 million PMJDY accounts as of April 2020. Over 326 million women live below the poverty line, so more than one-third of poor women would be excluded from the benefit even if all female-owned PMJDY accounts belonged to poor women. However, with over 326 million women living below the poverty line, more than half are excluded from receiving this benefit. [55]

MGNREGA a government run program of 100 days work, is often not gender-friendly. A study highlighted that compared to male-led households, those with women as primary breadwinners were less likely to receive employment from MGNREGA after the government relaxed lockdown restrictions. This was partly because rural women were forced to travel long distances to find work at the cost of abandoning their domestic duties. [56]

So, it is evident that these government have tried to cushion the impact of the pandemic on women through varied schemes but each of them have met with limited success owing to lack of reach, social fear, unavailability of resources at ground zero or skewed policies that leave out many women.

Gender-based violence, greater joblessness, lower wages, higher rates of girl-child drop outs, exploitation of girls home and work, high rates of child marriage, limited success of government policies, all can be said to be true for women pre-pandemic and post pandemic. The malaise is not Covid-

19. The pandemic might have heightened gender divisions and gender violence but patriarchy is an evil that has its roots dug deep in South Asia. Nepal, India and Bangladesh stand testimony to that.

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