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How women are battling challenges of Covid-19 and changing the face of development

There are many deep-rooted structural challenges that are holding women back, and they need to be acknowledged and addressed effectively for more women to emerge as leaders

PREV

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On March 24, 2020, India declared a countrywide lockdown for 21 days to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. This move was not unprecedented, with nations across the world declaring similar lockdowns to cope with the growing burden of the pandemic on their respective healthcare infrastructures. However, in India, what ensued was large scale reverse migration—with workers from the informal sector scrambling to make it back to their villages, owing to the hardships and trauma faced by them. In addition to this, several micro and small business setups in semi-urban and rural areas suddenly faced closure. The strain for relief material and aid was felt heavily by not-for-profits, civil society, and grassroots level implementation agencies.

Besides its impact on social welfare and the economy, the worst and the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown were women. They found themselves at home with their domestic duties increasing manifold since members of their family were no longer venturing out to go to school or to earn a livelihood. Some of the key figures that are reflective of these statements are that Indian women spend up to 353 minutes a day on household work, as opposed to the 52 minutes spent by men.

Factors such as double shifts for working women, and the increased need for cooking, cleaning, caring, and maintaining hygiene further skewed the balance of domestic work. Women found themselves in a challenging space, having not only to adapt but expected to thrive in what was an unprecedented situation. In addition to this was the sensitively coined ‘shadow pandemic’, during which women were increasingly being subjected to assault and violence at the hands of their husbands, brothers, fathers, in-laws etc. The lockdown resulted in domestic violence going unreported. There was an increase in gender-based violence. The National Commission for Women received 23,722 complaints in 2020—the highest in six years. Of these, 7,708 complaints were received under the ‘right to live with dignity’ clause which accounts for emotional abuse; 5,294 complaints were related to domestic violence. The highest number of complaints were received from Uttar Pradesh (11,872) followed by New Delhi (2,635), Haryana (1,266) and Maharashtra (1,188).

The gendered impact of the pandemic proved to be systemic, rooted deep in the patriarchal customs and traditions that unfortunately form the foundation of India’s socio-cultural fabric. In this context, the role of the organisations working to provide aid has proved to be immensely important. Take the example of Kavita Devi, who was born in a Dalit family, married off at the age of 12, and received no formal education. Yet, through an NGO’s intervention, she realised the importance of access to information which prompted her to launch *Khabar Lahariya*, a publication that is woman-led and reports local events which are often overlooked by mainstream media but should need national attention. With representation like this, we can look to build a future on the bedrock of inclusivity. Today, Kavita Devi is the only Dalit member of the Editor’s Guild of India and through *Khabar Lahariya*, she has brought to the fore pertinent information regarding the pandemic which has been useful for the rural community to navigate the system.

Not-for-profits are the first responders for women—listening, counselling, and providing necessary solutions. Their roles have changed from being just supportive in structure to being solution providers. These organisations are now being heralded by women, with the sole purpose of uplifting other women. Their work is imperative in ensuring that India can provide valued peer-to-peer support, access to relevant resources, and the windows of opportunity for upward social mobility. In addition to ensuring crowdfunding and relief material distribution, organisations such as Goonj, ChildFund India, Uday Foundation, CARE India to name a few, have started to address the reasons behind why women are more vulnerable to the economic after-

material distribution, organisations such as Goonj, ChildFund India, Uday Foundation, CARE India to name a few, have started to address the reasons behind why women are more vulnerable to the economic after-effects of crises, and why they often end up shouldering more of the burden. They are building synergies with multiple stakeholders, enabling resource mobilisation that relies on solid primary data and research instead of mere goodwill, and encouraging the collectivisation of capabilities.

Several women have taken the lead in the fight against the pandemic. Many women entrepreneurs from rural and semi-urban areas went out of business temporarily when the lockdown was announced. They quickly realised that for their businesses to survive the pandemic, they would have to digitise. For many, it was an extremely novel concept, but they took on the challenge and soon began to use the technological and financial infrastructure available to them, to their advantage. They created WhatsApp groups to market their products, accepted cashless payments, set up their net banking, learnt to operate ATMs, and began to connect with larger markets that allowed them to scale up their businesses and earn more profits. In essence, they emerged with a much stronger financial identity than they had pre-pandemic and their businesses have expanded—without additional investment in manpower—and become more efficient and streamlined.

Many not-for-profits working on the ground contributed immensely to the financial literacy of women entrepreneurs. One example is that of our partner organisation, the Mann Deshi Foundation, working in the Satara district of Maharashtra. They created a cadre of female digital literacy agents to bring women from remote rural villages into the technologically-enabled financial ecosystem.

Women across castes, class, and religion have come together to fight the pandemic in their own way. By commending and recognising their participation we are only encouraging more participation, which is critical to solving the country's immediate Covid-19 related challenges.

Therefore, to ensure that women successfully tackle the socio-economic and cultural consequences of the pandemic, they need to remain connected and inspired. This is apart from the structural support they need in the form of direct income transfers, social protections, benefits—if employed in the informal sector—gender-responsive social income security, expanded unemployment benefits, tax breaks, and childcare benefits. There are many deep-rooted structural challenges that are holding women back, and they need to be acknowledged and addressed effectively for more women to emerge as leaders. This can only be done through dialogue, sensitisation, awareness, and capacity building—with optimism, courage, and empathy.

The writer is an Executive Chairperson at EdelGive Foundation



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