

Introduction

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The emergence of the novel Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has thrust the world into an unprecedented and multifaceted crisis, one that extends well beyond the boundaries of a conventional public health emergency. As we grapple with the labyrinthine challenges posed by this global pandemic – economic downturns, social dislocations, and human rights infringements – a conspicuous and sobering reality comes to the fore: women, far from being spared the pandemic’s ravages, are distinctly vulnerable, burdened by the manifold impacts of Covid-19. While the pandemic’s impact on women’s physical health may appear less severe in comparison to its effects on men, it would be a grievous oversight to underestimate the pandemic’s far-reaching implications for gender equality. Indeed, Covid-19 has acted as an incendiary catalyst, amplifying the pre-existing fault lines of gender inequality that have long persisted within societies. In this urgent and overdue exploration of the gendered dimensions of the pandemic, we endeavour to understand the ramifications of Covid-19. This special volume seeks to illuminate the multifaceted gendered impact of Covid-19 and advocate for equitable solutions that will help build a more resilient and just world in the wake of this crisis.

Assessing the gendered impact of Covid-19 necessitates a comprehensive lens, one that refracts the full spectrum of the pandemic’s effects. As the pandemic unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that gender-disaggregated data was a missing piece of the puzzle. Comprehensive data collection is not just about quantifying the extent of gender disparities but also about revealing the nuances that inform effective policy responses. By looking beyond the surface, we can uncover the disparities in infection rates, economic losses, access to healthcare, and incidents of gender-based violence. A study by the World Health Organization (WHO) reveals that women, who constitute the majority of frontline healthcare workers, face a heightened risk of exposure to Covid-19. In fact, 70 per cent of the global health workforce, encompassing professions such as nursing, midwifery, and cleaning staff, is comprised of women. These women are not only at the forefront of the battle against the virus but also shoulder the burdens of unpaid care work and the often invisible, unrecognised domestic chores that are indispensable to sustaining any society. Armed with this knowledge, policymakers are better equipped to design gender-responsive policies that address the unique needs of women as they navigate the pandemic’s treacherous terrain.

The systemic changes wrought by Covid-19 are not ephemeral; they are deeply ingrained and are enduring. It has laid bare entrenched issues such as gender inequality, unequal access to healthcare, and disparities in economic opportunities. While some

may argue that the pandemic itself is gender-blind in its transmission, it is crucial to understand that its consequences are not. Indeed, Covid-19 has acted as a revealer of deeply rooted inequities that affect women disproportionately. The pandemic has magnified the hardships faced by marginalised women, those at the intersection of gender and other forms of discrimination such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Recent data from organizations like Oxfam reveals that women from marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. They often lack access to quality healthcare, face higher unemployment rates, and experience increased vulnerabilities to violence and exploitation.

For instance, indigenous women in many countries have faced significant barriers in accessing healthcare services during the pandemic. The lack of culturally sensitive healthcare facilities and language barriers has compounded their challenges. Moreover, women of colour, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, have borne the brunt of Covid-19's economic fallout, experiencing higher job losses and reduced access to social safety nets. The pandemic has forced millions of women out of the labour market. While some argue that work from home has mitigated the impact, the reality is more nuanced. Women often bear the dual burden of professional work and domestic responsibilities, as evidenced by data from the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO reported that women are more likely than men to have experienced a significant increase in household chores and caregiving during the pandemic. With schools and childcare centres closed, women have had to juggle remote work with childcare, a responsibility that has fallen disproportionately on their shoulders. Furthermore, the shift to remote work has not been equitable. Women are often concentrated in industries with less access to remote work opportunities, leaving them more vulnerable to job losses.

Responding to these systemic challenges necessitates more than stopgap measures; it demands an examination of the underlying causes of gender disparities. Immediate relief, while essential, must be supplemented with efforts to dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality. This includes a reevaluation of entrenched gender roles, norms, and expectations, both within households and within the broader fabric of society. We must prioritise gender equality within the decision-making echelons, empowering women in leadership roles. Their perspectives and voices are indispensable in the development of comprehensive policies that transcend the superficiality of pandemic response and delve into the roots of gendered disparities.

Challenging stereotypes and promoting gender equality are critical components of addressing the gendered impact of Covid-19. Education and awareness campaigns play a pivotal role in this regard. They serve as vehicles for dispelling myths, unravelling biases, and fostering a society that not only acknowledges but also values and respects the contributions of women.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of accurate information and the dangers of misinformation. It is essential to counteract harmful narratives that reinforce gender-based discrimination and stereotypes. Education campaigns can provide the tools and knowledge necessary to challenge these narratives and promote a more equitable society. In times of crisis, the importance of support networks cannot be overstated. Covid-19 has created an environment where women are at heightened risk of domestic violence, economic hardship, and mental health challenges. Support networks act as lifelines for those facing these challenges, providing vital assistance and resources to navigate the turbulent aftermath of the pandemic. These networks should encompass a range of

services, from shelters for survivors of domestic violence to mental health support helplines. They should also prioritise accessibility for all, including women from marginalised communities who may face additional barriers to seeking help.

In the pages that follow, this special volume delves deeper into these critical themes, underpinned by data-driven analyses and rigorous scrutiny. Our aim is not only to elucidate the gendered dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic but also to offer insights into how to control and mitigate its profound impact on women across a wide spectrum of dimensions.

We are not content with merely documenting the disparities and challenges; we are driven by a shared commitment to gender equality and social justice. By embracing this commitment within the framework of pandemic response and recovery efforts, we endeavour to pave the way toward a brighter and more equitable future for all. This special volume stands as a testament to our collective dedication to this cause, and we invite all readers to join us in this important endeavour.

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