

The Mask has Slipped: Women & The Coronavirus Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic is one event that seems uniquely singular in its universality. All corners of the globe suffered from the horrors of overwhelmed hospitals, worsened economies, and psychological impacts that continue to linger like a bad cough. Considering how nobody is immune to it, the coronavirus has been depicted by many as the “great equalizer.” What many people fail to recognize is that the pandemic possessed a unique ability to further marginalize an already vulnerable population. According to UN Women, the United Nations entity for gender equality, “1 in 2 women report that they or a woman they know has experienced a form of violence since COVID-19” (UN Women, 2021). All in all, COVID-19 has undermined women’s rights in a number of ways.

Before the emergence of COVID-19, domestic violence was already a significant human rights violation, affecting 243 million women and girls (aged 15-49) globally in the 12 months prior to the existence of COVID-19, according to Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Furthermore, the widespread lockdown that was implemented to protect people from the COVID-19 pandemic had an unintended consequence: it created a shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls. In the wake of these movement restrictions, women were often trapped at home with their abusers, further exacerbating the issue of domestic violence. While the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was a universal problem, men faced unique challenges as their social lives were more likely to be centered around work and other activities disrupted by the pandemic. This social isolation, coupled with socioeconomic stressors such as financial insecurity and job loss, likely amplified existing frustration, which would sometimes manifest as violence against women. With 7 in 10 women saying “they think that verbal or physical abuse by a partner has become more common” since the advent of the pandemic, the collective fear and suffering of women cannot be understated any longer (UN Women, 2021).

In addition to the heightened threat of domestic violence, women were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the informal sector of the economy, which primarily comprises women. Other sectors where women are overrepresented, such as accommodation and food services, were also severely affected by the pandemic. Oxfam International, a global humanitarian foundation, reports that “Worldwide, 740 million women work in the informal economy, and during the first month of the pandemic, their income fell by 60%” (Oxfam, 2021). This illustrates how women became more susceptible to vulnerable and unstable employment. Moreover, women, often engaged in low-wage or part-time employment, found themselves among the first to lose their jobs. Another way women were economically disadvantaged is the exacerbation of the triple shift phenomenon, which involves women carrying out both paid and unpaid labor, as well as the brunt of emotional work in the home. The pandemic-induced shift to virtual learning for children, coupled with conventional expectations of women as primary caregivers, also made it harder for women to participate or reintegrate into the workforce. As a result, during a time when many people had an unparalleled amount of leisure time, many women became victims of a triple shift amidst the chaos of a startlingly unprecedented pandemic.

The pandemic has had a disruptive impact on women’s access to essential services. These pandemic-induced disruptions affected routine healthcare services, leaving women with reduced access to critical resources such as reproductive healthcare, maternal services, and family planning. Educationally, the pandemic interrupted the progress of millions of girls and young women. In numerous instances, conventional gender roles imposed added responsibilities on women, who were expected to shoulder increased domestic duties. This, in turn, reduced their capacity to engage in online learning. This has led to a widening of the pre-existing gender gap in education, which will have long-term consequences for girls’ and women’s opportunities in life. Oxfam warns, “Globally, 13 million more child marriages are

projected to take place by 2030 due to school closures and to increased poverty resulting from the pandemic” (Oxfam, 2021). The reduced access to essential services also included support groups, domestic violence resources, and other safe havens for women, likely contributing to negative effects on their mental health.

In conclusion, it is imperative that society acknowledges the unique challenges faced by women during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and how preexisting issues served as a precursor for such human rights violations. In many ways, the pandemic has unveiled many of these violations; it is in this way that the proverbial mask has slipped. With this knowledge, it is important that urgent action is taken. In order to mitigate still-existing consequences as well as prevent further marginalization, women need to be uplifted in responses, including policy solutions. UN Women stresses how crucial it is that “women’s voices, needs, and rights are reflected in pandemic responses, recovery, planning, and decision-making” (UN Women, 2021). A collective effort is required to address this gender-based crisis and dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality, ensuring that pandemic recoveries are inclusive and prioritize the rights and well-being of women.