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Assessing the Social Ramifications of COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In the post COVID world lockdowns have emerged as a crucial measure to curb the intensity of the spread, while they're no panacea for the pandemic when implemented efficiently they have been successful in reducing the caseloads, thus, safeguarding the health infrastructure from getting overwhelmed. But their benefits come at manifold social, economic and human cost, this paper analyses the social ramifications these lockdowns on the most vulnerable sections of the society through the study of data and observations pertaining to the hardships faced by masses in the nationwide lockdown imposed to curtail the spread of virus in 2020. The observations made reflect the mid and long-term implications of consequential mass unemployment, compromised access to maternal health care, domestic violence and education while pointing out the policy limitations. When with surge in infections states are resorting back to reinstatement of lockdown it's imperative to learn from the mistakes of past; based on the observations made in the study the paper presents a set of constructive suggestions to mitigate the consequential negative implications during these reinstatements.

Keywords: COVID 19, social implications, lockdown, reverse migration, debt bondage, child trafficking, domestic violence, maternal healthcare, abortion.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the second wave of COVID 19 infections surge, the case counts and hospitalizations are testing the limits of public health infrastructure in India. Gasping for medical oxygen and critical medications, states are resorting to reinstatement of lockdowns and restrictions on movement. While these restrictions are imperative to curb the intensity of spread, they come with manifold social, economic, and human cost. This paper attempts to scrutinize the social ramifications of such lockdowns through the analyses of data and observations pertaining to the hardships faced by most vulnerable sections of Indian society in the complete lockdown and following partial restrictions imposed to curb the spread of infections in 2020. We study

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the ramifications from the point of view of mass unemployment, reverse migration, debt traps, inaccessibility of maternal care and abortion, domestic violence, school dropout rates and present their mid and long-term consequential repercussion in the society, predominantly in the socio-economically marginalized communities. While acknowledging the importance of restrictions in containment of the spread, the paper is an endeavour to highlight the policy limitations and social cost of 2020's lockdown. It attempts to motivate learning from the mistakes of past and offers constructive suggestions to mitigate the negative social implications with their implementation to curb the ongoing spread in 2021 and the predicted third wave of infections in future.

II. MASS UNEMPLOYMENT AND ALLIED CONSEQUENCES

The restrictions on movement and non-essential services, imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 virus sent the world economy to an unprecedented standstill, triggering a sharp plunge in demand, closer of commercial establishments and halt in manufacturing activities, which manifested into staggering job losses across the spectrum. In India, the Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) recorded a jump in unemployment rate from 8.75 % in March 2020 to a horrifying 23.52 % in April 2020 followed by 21.73 % in May 2020.³ In absolute terms, about 121 million jobs were lost in the month of April majority of which were the daily wage earners in the unorganized sector. The Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) also recorded loss of about 21 million salaried jobs between April 2020 to August 2020.

While the unemployment rate showed significant improvement post partial relaxations in the lockdown, the ramifications of the damages already done manifested in form of multi-dimensional humanitarian crisis on different fronts; the most visible of them being the unfortunate mass exodus of jobless migrant workers from metropolitan cities to the hinterlands. The mass job losses set off qualitative degradation of jobs as comparatively higher skilled workers replace the less skilled or unskilled for lesser paying jobs, paving way for a mid to long term exclusion of the vulnerable labours at the bottom of the food chain from the active workforce; they in majority of cases happen to be from socio-economically marginalized Dalit and Tribal community in India.

A study by Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University (APU) observed that the lockdown induced job losses have pushed about 230 million additional Indians below

³ *CMIE Series of Unemployment: Unemployment rate in India*, CENTER FOR MONITORING INDIAN ECONOMY, (10 May 2021, 10:30 AM), www.unemploymentinindia.cmie.com.

the poverty line;⁴ with state's social security programs being limited in both outreach and scope, the sudden yet prolonged plunge in earnings forced the marginalized households to take far greater debts than their income for survival. The Azim Premji University's study found that the poorest 25 % households in the country to have borrowed 380 % more than their income during lockdown⁵. Most of these borrowings are sourced from private lenders at high interest rates leaving them vulnerable to vicious debt traps with potential of forcing them into debt bondage in many cases. The joblessness and consequential migration have had severe ramification on the poorest of poor, children of affected households have been forced out of schools⁶, the added burden of debt repayment would not only deprive them of an opportunity to return back but also render them susceptible to child trafficking, exploitive bonded labour, abuse and forced underage marriages; the risks are exacerbated by the unsaid impunity restriction on movement imparts as the aggrieved children remain disconnected from social workers, teachers, friends and volunteers of Child Welfare Organisations.

While the distribution of subsidised food grains under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana (PMGKAY) and other ongoing food distribution schemes through Public Distribution Systems (PDS) shielded a significant population from acute starvation, the burden of repaying debts and reduced earnings have forced economically marginalized households to forgo the consumption of nutritious components from their meal while simultaneously reducing both the quantity and frequency of food intake,⁷ further exacerbating the already bleak malnutrition and severe hunger crisis in India.

III. RISING CASES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Safe indoors or outdoors?

The unprecedented and unforeseen times arrived in the beginning of 2020 and hit the entire world very hard. The world was, unfortunately, compelled to keep itself in the state of abeyance, with complete lockdown across borders. Roads and shops were emptied, the stock was being hoarded indoors, the governments couldn't carry on with everyday affairs, health and judicial infrastructure were to be tested. To put it in an abridged manner, there was a state of abject misery and confusion all around from East to West. People, to a large extent, did

⁴Basole et al. "State of working India 2021: one year of Covid-19." AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY (2021).

⁵ *Id* at 2.

⁶ Shivangi Mishra, *Pandemic has increased school dropouts*, TIMES OF INDIA, (May 2021, 10:30 AM), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/pandemic-has-increased-school-dropouts/articleshow/77716857.cms>.

⁷The World Bank, *COVID-19-Related Shocks in Rural India 2020*, Rounds 1-3, THE WORLD BANK GROUP, (10 May 2021, 10:30 AM) <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/3830>.

acclimatize to the new normal in a couple of months. However, this did not include everyone. One class of people that this paper will discuss continues to suffer the agony and abominable chauvinism in the name of keeping themselves safe. The women!

The ulterior goal of the lockdown of keeping everyone safe was not actually achieved. The imposition of restrictions might have kept women safe from the novel virus, i.e., Covid-19; however, it failed to help women escape the element of patriarchy and chauvinism rooted in the society. Being trapped indoors, suffering became the only regular visitor in the lives of women who had to deal with domestic violence and abuse.

According to *The Guardian*, domestic violence cases saw an exponential surge due to coronavirus lockdown imposed around the world.⁸ Where stepping out of the houses, breaching lockdown restrictions attracted punishments, staying indoors inflicted emotional and physical injuries upon some women. What made the condition of women even more vulnerable was the cut-off from any kind of support system or a mechanism through which women could be helped. The entire focus of the nation was on the collapsing healthcare infrastructure, but hardly did anyone care about the emotionally and physically tortured women trapped inside the houses. The condition exacerbated for women who have been facing domestic violence and abuse ever since forever because they, now, spend more time with their abusive partners. Moreover, the abuse was fueled by external stressors like unemployment, housing instability caused by COVID-19, and the women had to bear the brunt. Seeking help also became difficult because of increased fear among the women that any disclosure may result in a higher degree of torture and abuse to her and her children.

Cases of increased domestic violence were reported from every corner of the world. In India too, the number of reported cases related to domestic violence surged post the announcement of the 21-day lockdown starting from 24th March 2020. This lockdown gave rise to yet another shadow pandemic in the country, a sheerly ignored one.

The shrieks of facts and figures are, apparently, louder than those of the sufferers. Here's a look:

Data shared by the National Commission for Women (NCW) showed that the number of complaints related to domestic violence doubled soon after the imposition of the lockdown in

⁸ *Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence*, THE GUARDIAN (11 May 2021, 12:30 PM), https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

the country.⁹ As reported by national newspapers, during the beginning of the lockdown, the number of complaints recorded was more than the complaints recorded in the same period in the past ten years¹⁰. This is when there is an abysmal under-reporting, with around 86% of the women suffering from domestic violence not seeking help.¹¹ To state a number, the National Commission for Women (NCW) recorded 13,000+ complaints¹² of domestic violence from March to September, when the country was in shambles of lockdown. Tamil Nadu Police reported a hike in the number of complaints received at around 25 calls every day.¹³

With the rising number of domestic violence cases, the number of women reaching out to seek help also increased to an unprecedented level. This violence continues to occur without the unsolicited spread of any virus or disease, no matter how developed the nation is, no matter how hard policymakers try to fight it.

The pandemic has done more harm than people imagined it could do, but it taught some crucial lessons to the governments across the boundaries. The assumption that home is safe for everyone is highly flawed; instead, it is a hub of emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse for many women and children. The home can be a place where the powerful exercise illegitimate power on the powerless, where the definition of the husband is distorted and subverted from being a caring and loving man to a man who has the license to abuse and beat, all of which remains outside the scrutiny of the “outsiders.”

IV. LACK OF ACCESS TO MATERNAL HEALTHCARE AND SAFE ABORTION

Stringent lockdowns and overwhelmed medical infrastructure have had direful ramifications on access to maternal healthcare, predominantly in rural and socio-economically backward communities. Disruption in transportation compounded by apprehensions of getting infected have significantly reduced the number of institutional deliveries¹⁴. The data from Health Management Information System (HMIS) analysed by the Population Foundation of India

⁹ Akshaya Krishnakumar, *Understanding Domestic Violence in India During COVID-19: a Routine Activity Approach*, *asian j. criminol* (2021).

¹⁰ Sumant Sen, *Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown*, *THE HINDU*, (12 May 2021, 4:15 PM), <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece>

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Radheshyam Jadhav, *Abuse of women at home rose during lockdown*, *THE HINDU BUSINESSLINE*, (10 May 2021, 6:21 PM), <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/abuse-of-women-at-home-rose-during-lockdown/article33060560.ece>.

¹³ Siddhu Kanan, *Domestic violence cases in Chennai up, cops get 25 calls a day*, *THE TIMES OF INDIA*, (10 May 2021, 3:13 PM), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/domestic-violence-cases-in-chennai-up-cops-get-25-calls-a-day/articleshow/75153610.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁴ Vimla Kumari et al., *COVID-19 outbreak and decreased hospitalisation of pregnant women in labour*, *THE LANCET GLOBAL HEALTH*, (2020) (10 May 2021, 10:30 AM), [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30319-3.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X(20)30319-3.pdf)

suggest a 22% fall in prenatal services and 28 % plunge in the number of institutional deliveries in the first phase of 2020's lockdown (April to June) as against the same period in 2019¹⁵. Such disruption in access to safe institutional delivery and pre/ante natal care render pregnant women vulnerable to cases of stillbirths and maternal deaths. A study published in the reputed Lancet Global Health Journal observed a 28% increase in such cases globally.¹⁶ While these implications are nationwide, the women from Dalit, Tribal and other socio-economically marginalized communities remain most vulnerable. Similarly, conversion of Primary Healthcare Centres (PHC) into dedicated COVID facilities, unavailability of critical supplies because of lockdown restrictions and fear of getting infected have made the pregnant women in far off rural regions comparatively more susceptible to these ramifications.

The restrictions have also hampered availability of safe surgical and medical abortion whereas their demand is projected to rise due to disruption in supply of contraceptives and large-scale reverse migration into the villages¹⁷. The results of a study by Marie Stopes International (MSI) suggest more than 9 lakh Indian women could not access safe abortion facilities owing to the lockdowns despite abortion being included in the list of essential services, leading to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and even maternal deaths in about 2,600 case¹⁸. But the ramifications of such unavailability are not limited to medical complexities, a difference in fertility preference between partners might result in domestic violence forced abortion or unwanted pregnancy in many cases.

World Health Organization (WHO) recognises access to public healthcare facilities as an unalienable aspect of the right to health¹⁹ which has been recognised by the Supreme Court India as a fundamental right under the purview of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution in *State of Punjab v. M.S. Chawla* (1997)²⁰ and is an obligation enshrined in the Article 47 of the Indian Constitution²¹. Even while the medical infrastructure bats an unprecedented pandemic, the state must not turn a blind eye on non-covid complications, particularly the inaccessibility of safe abortion, pre/post-natal care and institutional delivery for pregnant women. The inability to

¹⁵ Population Foundation of India, *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*. New Delhi POPULATION FOUNDATION OF INDIA (2020).

¹⁶ Chmielewska et al., *Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and perinatal outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis*. THE LANCET GLOBAL HEALTH (2020).

¹⁷ Chandrasekaran et al., *Preparing for an Increased Need for Abortion Access in India during and after COVID-19: Challenges and Strategies*. STUDIES IN FAMILY PLANNING, 51(4), pp.377-383 (2020).

¹⁸ Marie Stopes International, *Resilience, adaptation and action: MSI's response to COVID-19*, MARIE STOPES INTERNATIONAL (2020) (10 May 2021, 10:30 AM), <https://www.msichoices.org/media/3849/resilience-adaptation-and-action.pdf>.

¹⁹ World Health Organization. *Human Rights and Health*, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION GROUP (2017). (10 May 2021, 10:30 AM) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-rights-and-health>.

²⁰ *State of Punjab v. M.S. Chawla*, AIR 1997 SC 1225 (India).

²¹ INDIA CONST. art. 47.

ensure parallel safe and accessible abortion & maternal healthcare services, tackle disruption in supply chain of related commodities and address hesitation among the masses in approaching institutionalized care, can prove detrimental to the positive growth reflected in the recent National Family Health Surveys (NFHS); derailing India's efforts towards attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) with respect to both Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) and Infant Mortality Ratio (IMR).

V. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN

However, the impact of COVID-19 on children was not very worrisome, it has impacted their lives beyond reparation, in few cases. The first strain of the coronavirus disease made the older generation vulnerable to it, posing little danger to the young ones; however, this did not let the children untouched by the adversity that the raging pandemic had brought. The pandemic emptied the streets and parks, the places where children used to find their peace at. Abandoned slides and swings, quiet neighborhoods, vacated desks and chairs of schools were accepted as the new normal, but the world should have never accepted such a hiatus in education and learning. The mitigation measures, however, brought with good intentions, will do more harm than good in some lives, with one of the biggest victims being young children. The cost of this acceptance can never be determined in monetary terms, for the loss is beyond that. This disruption in the educational process does not only affect the future of the kids but also of the nations worldwide. The insidious impact of such disruption will unfold steadily and prove to be hazardous.

The assumption that the learning process could continue online just like other activities is highly erroneous. Firstly, because not all students have access to the logistics required to carry on with the learning online. Secondly, the learning process has been fundamentally altered to fit the conditions of the pandemic, which hasn't left much room for children to learn through interactions and social behaviors. The prolonged gap has forced some kids to even drop out of their schools, mainly because of them being from underprivileged classes, once again proving that poor and marginalized suffer the most in times of disaster.

Soon after the lockdown was announced in India by the Hon'ble Prime Minister, the migrant workers started making the headlines. There was a significant movement of migrants from one region to another, hoping to reach their families. Children of these migrants were suffering at the same time. At an age where children are supposed to be carefree and playful, the most these children could think of was arranging for the next meal. Here's when the darkest of realities hit the surface; no mid-day meals for such children due to the closure of schools. Some more

deprivations like hunger and lack of education were added to the lives of these children who already suffered from malnutrition, poverty, and everlasting stress. Nonetheless, the crisis is universal, creating lifelong impacts on the lives of all children, irrespective of their region or religion.

The worldwide pandemic pushed the global economy into an unforeseen recession, with millions of households losing jobs and resources. According to statistics given by UNICEF, around 142 million more children worldwide could be pushed into poor households due to the pandemic.²² Such loss of livelihood is undoubtedly going to have an adverse effect on the education of children worldwide. The pandemic has certainly exacerbated the already existing universal learning crisis by denying access to schools to around 463 million children globally²³, mainly because these children did not have the requisite access to remote learning. In poor regions, the closures of schools have far-reaching devastating impacts, like increase in rates of child marriage or child labor, which gets students into the loop and prevents the continuation of education. According to an exhaustive survey conducted by SAVE THE CHILDREN in seven countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 7 out of 10 children affirm that they are learning very little due to the lockdown.²⁴

The discussion on the impacts of COVID-19 on children cannot be confined to education only, this pandemic has instead opened a Pandora's box. From the threat of survival of newborns to lack of healthcare facility access to children struggling with chronic diseases, this pandemic has brought with itself the worst set of problems. The virus, per se, might not be deadly for the children, but it is fatal for their future. In the hope of bringing the world out of the omnishambles, the leaders shall not obliterate the spark of innovation from young minds.

VI. CONCLUSION

The entire world witnessed and continues to witness hardships due to the global pandemic. The pandemic happened to test the medical health infrastructure of countries across the world. Countries might have managed well to surge the resources to fight the coronavirus, but they failed to fight the repercussions of the lockdown. The careful analysis of data and observation pertaining to the ramifications of the lockdown on various groups of people is disheartening. Mitigation measures adopted to curb the spread of virus gave birth to many novel detrimental

²² The UNICEF, *COVID-19 and children*, UNICEF DATA HUB, (9 May 2021, 11:23 AM), <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *The impact of covid-19 on children's education*, SAVE THE CHILDREN, (12 May 2021, 7:30 PM), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18738/pdf/education.pdf>.

repercussions while exacerbating the existing ones. The poor and marginalized sections of the society suffer the most under the given circumstances, for instance, the migrant workers, women, children bore the actual brunt of the lockdown. With fear of COVID knocking on the door, the women could not run away from their oppressors, children could not continue with their education, workers and employees could not feed their bellies, pregnant women could not get proper access to healthcare, and infants could not see the sunrise.

The entire world has seen repercussions of chapter one of the pandemic. Chapter two has already begun with there being some speculation of arrival of chapter three in future. There is an urgent need to take a wake-up call and start acting in a manner that does not outcast the larger sufferers during the mass suffering. It is high time the world formulated and implemented a policy that strives to achieve holistic betterment of the communities across the borders. In hope to mitigate negative impacts of any disease, the world should avoid giving birth to the new chronic ones.

Recommendations

After analysing the situation, the authors suggest few recommendations to help evade the harsh consequences, some are as follows:

- ✓ Establishment of few healthcare centres dedicated to treat non-covid patients only.
- ✓ Issue of fiscal help to boost small business.
- ✓ Making loans available at low rates of interest, especially for the sufferer.
- ✓ Creating a strong mechanism to help women out of domestic violence.
- ✓ Continuous supply of ration to people who lost their jobs due to the lockdown.
- ✓ Evolving a robust mechanism to ensure continuous educational process.

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