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Women Empowerment stringed with Women Employment during Pandemic

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During the pandemic what muddled manhood after healthcare was the economy. Economic instability along with the challenges during COVID triggered us to understand issues that were not necessarily taken seriously. When we consider women as subordinate economic helpers to men, it signifies injustice to her contribution to the workforce which is either neglected or marginally paid. The gender gap at the workplace did exist before and made exclusiveness of men in terms of making money. But this pandemic not just pushed women back in terms of work, but even they never seemed to come back to work again. Also, Challenges faced by women workers especially women migrant workers are seemed neglected with due course of the pandemic. Thus, this article tries to study the significant effect of the pandemic in the lives of women workers, their challenges and throw light on their contribution in fighting the economic battle together with men.

Keywords: *covid-19, lockdown, crisis, gender equality.*

INTRODUCTION

“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world” - Hillary Clinton¹

¹ Christel Rosenkilde Christensen, ‘International Women’s Day: Women are the Largest Untapped Reservoir of Talent in the World’ (*Treasure World Leaders*, 8 March 2015)

Nevertheless, this pandemic has created enough distress in normal functionalities but, what is even more interesting, is to look at it with a perspective of a socially advanced dimension of women empowerment concerning economic downfall in our country. Women empowerment is often seen with different dimensions. Sometimes it is related to equal opportunity and sometimes with socio-political aspects of her development. But if ever it is seen with a perspective of economic growth, it will first be determined by her financial independence.

There are many examples of how much women can achieve when given the opportunity. In India, women are political leaders, athletes, astronauts, journalists and are working proudly and presenting role models for young women. But poverty and social inequalities are still preventing many women from fulfilling their potential. Even though government policies and Constitutional provisions contain tools for women empowerment, there is still a wide gap between these principles and the reality of the status of women in our community which gets reflected by low female literacy and high maternal mortality rates.

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women” - Pt. Nehru²

Thus, understanding women empowerment and its implicated resources vesting in the hands of the pandemic in today’s scenario brings us to the question of what next? This helps us to take COVID-19 as a tool in understanding its impact on the economy and also, pushes us to get through the “role of women in gearing up the economy in the times of pandemic”.

ECONOMY IN THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Looking at the condition of the economic situation as of the pandemic unwillingly leads us to the door of disappointment. COVID alone led the world economy to shrink by 4.4%³ and

<<https://christelrosenkildechristensen.com/2015/03/08/international-womens-day-women-are-the-largest-untapped-reservoir-of-talent-in-the-world/>> accessed 08 August 2021

² Nimisha Bansal, 'Remembering Jawaharlal Nehru through his Quotes' (*She The People*, 28 May 2018)

<<https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/remembering-jawaharlal-nehru-through-quotes/>> accessed 08 August 2021

³ Yen Nee Lee, '5 Charts show what the Global Economy looks like heading into 2021' (*CNBC*, 27 December 2020)

<<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/28/5-charts-show-covid-impact-on-the-global-economy-in-2020.html#:~:text=Steep%20decline%20in%20activity&text=As%20a%20result%2C%20gross%20domestic,to%205.2%25%20growth%20in%202021.>> accessed 08 August 2021

global trade by 5.3%. Due to COVID, there has been a major disruption in the labor market. Indian economy is going through a demand shock rather than a supply shock at present. A lot of the population has already spent a large amount of their savings in fighting COVID -19, considering some of them are even in debt. It was even estimated that around 7.36 million people have lost their jobs which itself is a terrifying fact for a developing nation. India itself is going through a financial dismal as its GDP contracted by 7.3% according to the National Statistical Office.

India is one of the most adversely hit countries in terms of the economy because of two major reasons. The first is in the manufacturing sector and the second is in terms of the communications barriers where proper instructions to employers are somewhat missing that automatically adds to a decrement in proper delivery of services. In recent reports, the GDP of various countries has declined due to market instability leading to the condition closer to financial insecurity⁴. But, where women can help in bringing GDP back is very well explained through various articles which discuss how women's participation can help boost the economy more than men.

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN TERMS OF GENDER EMPLOYMENT AND EQUALITY

There are numerous examples of how much women can achieve when given the right opportunity. In India, women are political leaders, athletes, astronauts, journalists and are working proudly and presenting role models for young women. But poverty and social inequalities are still preventing many women from fulfilling their potential. The principle of gender equality is contained in the Indian Constitution and government policies. However, there is still a wide gap between these principles and the reality of the status of women in our community which gets reflected by low female literacy and high maternal mortality rates.

Before the year 2020(before the advent of COVID-19 in India), the disparity in gender employment was still prevalent and had a larger gap i.e., 18% of the working women were

⁴ Michael König and Adalbert Winkler, 'COVID-19: Lockdowns, Fatality Rates and GDP Growth' (2021) 56 *Intereconomics*

employed as compared to 75% of men in the man force sector. However, COVID rolled back economic plans if there were any.

The reason for this instability could be as follows:-

1. Lack of good jobs
2. Restrictive social norms- India's societal norms are such that women are often expected to take the responsibility of family and engage in childcare. This stereotype is a critical barrier to women's participation in the labor force.
3. The burden of household works- With the lockdowns and everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities have increased for women creating a massive increase in the burden of household work for women.
4. Less support of family
5. Lack of technical assistance- In India in 2019, internet users were 67% male and 33% female, and this gap is even bigger in rural areas. This divide can eventually act as a barrier for women to access education, health, and financial services, or to achieve success in activities or sectors that are becoming more digitized.

Also, certain social barriers such as caste, patriarchal control, and systematic gender discrimination could be considered as well. Domestic violence created a more devastating condition for them. As revealed in a survey of 10,161 women migrant workers from 12 states in India, it was equally challenging for them to handle the double burden of earning and taking care at home.⁵ According to "State of working India 2021"⁶, COVID had just worsened this situation. According to a report in "Centre for monitoring Indian economy Private Ltd", 61% of male workers were unaffected by their job security instead of 19% for women.⁷ Also,

⁵ 'Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women Migrant Workers' (United Nations Development Programme, 2021) <https://www.undp.org/publications/socio-economic-impact-covid-19-women-migrant-workers#:~:text=Socio%2DEconomic%20Impact%20of%20COVID%2D19%20on%20Women%20Migrant%20Workers,-July%206%2C%202021&text=The%20analysis%20reveals%20that%20women,compared%20to%20pre%2Dpandemic%20levels.>> accessed 08 August 2021

⁶ Centre for Sustainable Employment, 'State of Working India' (Azim Premji University) <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/state-of-working-india/> accessed 08 August 2021

⁷ 'Covid-19: From Bad to Worse for Women Workers' (Legacy IAS Academy, 2021) <https://www.legacyias.com/covid-19-from-bad-to-worse-for-women-workers/> accessed 28 August 2021

47% of women who lost jobs did not return to their jobs and the toll goes to 7% for men. Taking account of India, the female labor force participation (FLFP) rate is constantly declining. According to a report by World Bank, FLFP has come down to 21% in 2019 from 31.79% in 2005.⁸

If we try studying Bihar, one of the hubs of labor class in India, we can see through the reports of Bihar Economic Survey (2019-2020), state's FLFP can be noticed in an abysmal rate ie,6.4% and 3.9% respectively where women are employed in urban and rural areas of Bihar compared to Indian figures of 20.4% and 24.6% respectively⁹. COVID has changed the work culture globally and hence, according to a report by UNDP and The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry(FICCI)¹⁰,150 firms in the formal sector how future of work and opportunities could be made for women by providing them training previous studies have shown that women in other countries have been a victim of financial insecurity as well resulting in job losses and loss of livelihood thus, creating a wider gender poverty gap as well.¹¹

ROAD AHEAD

The first question that pops up is regarding women's education. Women are needed to complete their schooling before being able to be eligible to earn. The literacy rate in India is seen as 65.46 % as compared to 82.14% for men (as of the census of 2011)¹² thus, quality education becomes a must in this regard. Various welfare schemes need to be implemented in a way where it would help in declining school dropout rates and in enhancing reservations in various fields especially in filling pending vacancies. Various government schemes like

⁸ Urvashi Prasad and Pankhuri Dutt, 'Make it Easier for Women to Work' (*The Financial Express*, 9 March 2021) <<https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/make-it-easier-for-women-to-work/2208840/>> accessed 09 August 2021

⁹ Aditi Priya and Tejas Harad, 'Providing Horizontal Quota: The Bihar Way' (*The Hindu*, 4 August 2021) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/providing-horizontal-quota-the-bihar-way/article35708537.ece>> accessed 09 August 2021

¹⁰ 'Gig Economy to Boost Employment of Indian Women in the Formal Sector' (UNDP, 2021) <<https://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/gig-economy-to-boost-employment-of-indian-women-in-the-formal-se.html>> accessed 09 August 2021

¹¹ König (n 4)

¹² 'Census of India 2011: Report on Post Enumeration Survey' (Registrar General & Census Commissioner 2011) <<https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/pes/Pesreport.pdf>> accessed 09 August 2021

MGNREGAs (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes) can be used to absorb workers and increase demand for work especially for low-wage women workers, which may also help in reducing the debt to GDP ratio which goes around 90%.

Indian Constitution¹³ has already empowered women under various provisions such as:

1. Article 14-equality before the law
2. Article 15-prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth
3. Article 15 (3)- positive discrimination in favor of women.
4. Article 16-equality of opportunity in matters of public employment
5. Article 39(a)-equal justice and free legal aid
6. Article 39(d)-that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women;
7. Article 42-prohibition for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

Various Government schemes are introduced such as:

1. Mahila Samridhi Yojana,(1993)-aims at providing loans for women entrepreneurs
2. Indira Mahila Yojana,(1995)-Facilitates decision making and empowers women
3. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh,(1992-93)- delivers women from lower-income groups to access loans to begin small businesses
4. Mahila Samakhiya Project is being implemented to educate rural women
5. Swa Shakti Group-by states to make women self-reliant
6. National Mission for Empowerment of Women-for holistic development of women

Provisions and schemes seem no way working until it is implemented in serious regard. As it is evident that the condition of rural employment is better than the urban employment so, schemes can be introduced to ensure a better supply of man force especially encouraging women with flexible working hours making it easier for them to work. Safe working area and family support is the key for confident women workers thus, awareness programs should be held time to time. Food security, cash assistance, governmental health insurance, and protection against domestic violence are urgent social measures to work upon. Women are

¹³ Constitution of India 1950

needed to be technically equipped to overcome other generational barriers ahead of time. What we can expect from a society in this regard is to have contributions from men too. If men share equal responsibilities of family and respect women for their decisions and show equal love to their daughters as much they show to their sons, this will provide a better model for the next generation.

CONCLUSION

Financial security and stability seem a distant dream for a country where around half of its population dreams of being financially independent but struggles to trespass the social norms created by this society. This indeed can't be ignored, instead, it needs focus and determined effort. For a budding economic hub to achieving dreams of being a superpower, India needs a safer germination center of a prosperous economy for both genders. Women being paid less was an issue a decade back and is still prevalent even today. Certainly, economic growth is seen as the single strongest tool for the development of women in terms of social and political independence as well. So, if India ever sees itself being ATMANIRBHAR, it needs to make its woman population ATMANIRBHAR first. Nonetheless, no one can uphold a woman until she believes in herself. India, where women are worshiped like Goddess, we need the same trait of her in building herself and not being a vandalized section anyone. Thus, campaigns and activist movements to fight discrimination and violence against women are an important part of this battle. To sustain growth and stability, we cannot afford half of our population, resources, and talent to be untapped.

As contributions of women can make a world of difference. our future cannot simply depend upon the present scenario until we fundamentally include both men and women in the nation-building process. It's rightly said –“when there is a will, there is a way.” Let a ray of hope come close to women empowerment and let's be hopeful in paving away with a firm will of providing gender equality in terms of equal opportunities for both men and women and wish to recover from this disastrous downfall of the economy soon.