

Turning Survivors into Saviours –
Could “COVID Crisis” offer the hope
to transform the lives of women and
children from vulnerable households?

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Introduction

As we are in the midst of the strangest times in most peoples' living memory, we also know that the pandemic has not been produced in a vacuum. It came in a world that rests on imbalanced socio-politico-economic structures which amplify the impact of the COVID-19 crisis towards the most vulnerable groups. The Covid crisis is affecting girls and women by adversely affecting education, safety, economic prospects and further marginalization. Women and children are at a greater risk, from the health perspective, when facing the pandemic. Presenting something like a "Profit and Loss Account Statement" of the impending crisis, I end the article with at least one grain of inspiration, motivation and hope!

Impact on Women

While early reports that emerged from different parts of the world provided evidence that more men were at the risk of death compared to infected women, in the long run more women are likely to catch the virus – in the first place as they comprise 70% of the front-line healthcare workforce. In India as well, frontline workers are predominantly women such as nurses, primary care providers in the hospitals, cleaners as well as poorly paid ASHA workers who work out in the

field. The brunt of inadequate infrastructure that was already being borne was augmented when ill-equipped healthcare employees faced the crisis. Mental health issues and work-related stress along with stigma and backlash from society were also faced by female health workers.



The pandemic has not only caused huge loss of livelihoods but has also created barriers to livelihoods and means of sustenance. It is further deepening inequalities and millions of women now risk losing not only jobs but the ability to protect their bodies and health. Women are a significant part of the informal economy and have more of the labour intensive, low paying jobs. The pandemic has brought this down to a virtual standstill. Further, the impact on pan-India schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) broke the back of poor households when it was officially shut down in at least seven states. Many states faced varying impact of COVID-19 lockdowns with huge numbers of migrant workers losing their jobs, leaving the cities and many dying on the way – a large proportion of these being women. They faced quarantine before they were allowed to enter their own villages and MGNREGA should have been one major way to help them; but the low wage rate of ₹104 under the scheme, in states like Jharkhand, was lesser than the state's minimum wage of ₹275 per day. Further, MGNREGA workers are not eligible for unemployment allowances despite the government being the employer. While the government appealed to

all public and private sector employers to give paid leave during the lockdown, for MGNREGA workers demand of payment of pending dues and extension of the scheme in the next financial year to accommodate more workers and additional days of work is critical for thousands of these migrant-workers who stormed back to their villages. There is growing demand of an emergency relief package of ₹7,000 a month for all poor households for April, May and June 2020, which may cost the exchequer to the extent of ₹3.75 lakh crore. As the size of groups at work-sites was reduced to less than 50 per cent of workers, and measurement of work shifted from group attendance to individual attendance in normal districts, in districts where curfew remained in force, unemployment allowance was paid for those who were already registered for work.

With the above scenario being especially prevalent during COVID-19 lockdowns, health of women has also been adversely affected due to diminishing access to health facilities. Evidence from past outbreaks showed increased incidence of maternal mortality and the same is the case during the current outbreak as resources and priorities are re-allocated to the containment of the virus. Issues related to reproductive health also got neglected.

Further, living conditions for most of the poor households became worse as incidence of violence against the vulnerable members increased, which included women and children who found themselves stuck with their perpetrators. The safety of the home too is not something which can be taken for granted. Across the world there has been a surge in violence against women and girls, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sexual and reproductive violence. With the focus on containing the virus, the state's protection mechanisms functioning in normal times became more distant or attracted lower priority. Even the abused ones knew about the limited scope of mobility due to restrictions imposed on movements. Some experts have reported that the instances of domestic violence against women and young girls have increased by 100 per cent. The issue was highlighted by UN Secretary General. A recent UNFPA study found that Covid lockdown has led to increase in the acts of violence against women and children locked inside with their abusers. The data shows that over 47 million women in more than 114 low- and middle-income countries across the world currently live at the risk of sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies. As per UN

population Fund, Executive Director Dr Natalia Kanem, the Covid pandemic can have a catastrophic impact on women and girls. Significant fall in the awareness activities related to the rights of women and children has been witnessed.

Women are disproportionately represented in care work, and some examples of impact of COVID-19 on their condition in “paid work” situations such as in hospitals or office or in field conditions have been presented. But women are represented to the tune of 80 per cent in “the under-paid industry” of house helps, nannies, cooks, housekeepers, cleaners, farm labourers, private school teachers/tutors etc., and many of them were forced out of work due to the lockdown from other informal sectors of the economy like textiles and construction. Further, the worst and most lopsided burden of “unpaid care” is experienced right there in the households where the burden of responsibilities for women as de facto caregivers is enhanced up to 100 per cent to the pre-lockdown levels. The needs of out-of-school children, extra-care demands of containing the sick and needy elders within the confines of home, and “work-from-home” has compounded the exploitation of women by employers and husbands. While rare examples of “celebrity husbands sharing the workloads” are aired on TV screens, in most of the low-income group households, women are psychologically drenched and there is an astronomical rise in the reports of mental disorders and diseases.

While nature reasserted herself in overstressed cities where the smog cleared up, here again the fault lines were exposed by the fleeing of informal workers and migrant labour from Metros. Ironically, Cities are now appealing for the return of these migrant workers. The fault lines (which got etched as images of suffering as huge number of women and children started walking back to their villages) were more than cracks; rather some experts define these as “massive social-quakes” which might change the attitude of our “marginalised community” towards cities and their employers.

Impact on Children

Almost half of children under five in Uttar Pradesh are stunted; the figure is an astounding 1.43 crore. Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan are not far behind. Experts predict that 60 per cent of India's population in the next 100 years will come from these states. Therefore, we must now be fully aware that the state of malnutrition amongst children exposes them to morbidity and mortality not only to outbreak of Covid but to all other epidemics like dengue, malaria, chikungunya, diarrheal diseases, TB etc. Diversion of resources for Covid handling and deteriorating economic conditions of large number of marginalized households will further exacerbate the situation of malnutrition among children and can further complicate the health scenario in coming years with severe consequences. It is important to note that malnutrition impacts not only health, but also education, cognitive and skill development, and eventual participation into productive workforce. Policy interventions by NITI AAYOG and other state counterparts may redraw their "Perspective Plan to face this aspect of long term COVID Impact", without missing this stark reality. Here again role of women as caregivers, as Anganwadi Workers (AWW) has to be refocused and formats of schemes may need a change.

As UNICEF reported in early June, close to 1 billion students worldwide were out of school. Closing of schools due to lockdown has impacted adversely all children and adolescents in many ways other than in terms of loss of education. In case of destitute children and poor households, the impact has been severe in the form of children forced into beggary and trafficking as mid-day meal scheme of schools stands paralyzed.

Technology has come to the rescue to lessen the impact on education due to lockdown, as many schools and institutions have moved classes and instruction online. With classes moving online, the promise of equality is diminished, creating a situation of digital divide which has further increased the barriers marginalized children have already had to face. Not everyone has access to computers, smart phones and the internet. The consequences can be horrific. Take Devika, a young Dalit child from Kerala, who committed suicide because of her inability to access online classes causing her severe stress.

Now the expected “return to normalcy”, already started in many countries with opening of schools, is also fraught with uncertainty and cannot be implemented uniformly. UNICEF has recently come out with a report on return to school and has suggested many relevant interventions which authorities, schools and teachers should try to learn from. Government is also issuing SOPs in this regard. Schools need to plan during this time to devise protocols to ensure safety and support mechanisms for mental health issues. School will also need to think about measures like holding schools in shifts, ensuring midday meals, safe food preparation practices, water and sanitation facilities, improving overall hygiene conditions in schools. These interventions will need training of administrative staff and teachers. All this planning should be done before schools reopen.

Mental health of children is another huge issue which is on rise and needs immediate attention. School is a great arena for children to learn social skills through playing together, making friendship, co-operating, learning nuances of emotional intelligence. In lockdown due to lack of opportunity of playing in school and parks, children are feeling isolated, depressed and helpless. All need to understand how traumatic it is for children. Although parents at home need to create a supportive and nurturing environment to reduce stress and anxiety along with community support, many households are themselves suffering various forms of disruption including economic distress which increases overall family stress. To mitigate mental health effect so that they are not long lasting, the role of mental health professionals and counselors is very crucial and here lies another challenge: shortage of trained manpower in the field of mental health. These issues need to be addressed on an urgent basis.

There have been increased instances of violence, bullying and sexual abuse that have been reported in the media both in homes and alternate care institutions. Children with special needs also need focused attention. In this grim picture, it is heartening to know that Child helpline 1098 was declared essential service and it never went down with the lockdown. Child Welfare Committee and District Child Protection Units have started offering online system to enhance supervision and monitoring. Counseling sessions online and through phones have resulted in mitigating cases of stress and have helped to maintain much needed calm in Alternate Care Institutions.

Post-Covid Strategy

The current pandemic has brought large scale disruptions and has also highlighted structural sufferings of millions trapped in poverty and inequality. Millions of women are grappling with unemployment, lack of finance, security, poor health and other related issues. With predominant share in contractual, temporary, unorganized and insecure jobs, the post-COVID scenario for women is gloomier as the cut in budgets shows a tendency to hire a male employee, and therefore organizational discrimination is going to be a “new normal”. There is talk of “upskilling to get back to work”, that too, for women only. The prevailing socio-economic realities paint the picture of a period of gloom for the “better half” of the world but women in leadership positions in Denmark, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, and Taiwan have outsmarted their male counterparts in their fight against Covid-19 with creative leadership and abundance of “empathy and compassion”. Back home in India, Finance Minister of India, Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman led the fight and in states MLAs like Ms. Seethakka from Telangana sums up the paradox that “lockdown has pushed women deep into the gender-roles against which they have been fighting for years”. Meaningful participation is a prerequisite for fairness in decisions which are made as we come out of the pandemic to ensure an intersectional approach, as it is clear that not all women or children have uniform experiences. The needs of Dalit and Bahujan women must be taken into account. How our processes can include Adivasi, Dalit and Bahujan women needs more deliberations.

Covid-19 entered India during the ongoing economic slowdown. As Local Government Bodies (LGB) did not have budget to pay the salaries of their employees even during pre-Covid times, we could not expect them to be prepared to face the COVID-Challenge. With choking pollution and looming climate change crises, our education remains disengaged from challenges faced by the biggest employers of our private sector - agriculture and manufacturing. While, both remain woefully disjointed from each other, the Indian response to transform agriculture into an attractive profession has been far from satisfactory. However, during the impending crisis, India rose to the occasion and announced a package to recovery, which the Prime Minister named as “Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan” or, “Self-Dependent India”. In a mixed bag of challenges and opportunities, the

national response could be to transform our “District-level governance”, in which, each district should be allowed to face its unique “socio-economic-environmental-developmental (SEED)” realities by emerging as a “brand” on at least some products and services. This will require lots of creative leadership and innovative thinking at the local level.

A humble beginning could be made at the levels of the Municipal Body of the City or the District Headquarters. It may join hands with adjoining villages and work on a pilot in which “Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan” should be synergized in such a way that participation of “vulnerable households” becomes possible. Such households which have no government job and land in villages number a whopping 51 per cent. Women and children of these households could be the best targets. District SEED Index may be prepared by drawing a leaf from the Performance Indicators created by NITI AAYOG for “ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICTS”. District SEED Index may be used to prepare SEED Plan at district, block and village levels. I came across a preliminary beginning made towards this in Hisar district of Haryana by focusing on branding exercise of the district under an RKVY-RAFTAAR Project grant from State Ministry of Agriculture. The project is knowledge-led by scientists of two farm sector universities of the state located in Hisar along with a farmer’s producer companies which align the members of the vulnerable households from Arya Nagar village. A special focus of the project is selection of children of vulnerable households who are students of vocational agriculture in the village’s Government Senior Secondary School. While their mothers attend the Non-formal Vocational Education Centre located in the village in the daytime, students join it in the evening, after school. The New Education-system for World Survival (NEWS) Learning pro-GRAM Centre or NEWS-LP Centre has successfully linked students and teachers of local schools with scientists of agriculture and veterinary universities, which are less than 10 kilometers away. This way, a very challenging operation focused on livelihood and income generation was started in 2018. I was told that initially it faced several roadblocks within the village as well as at the hands of government officials, but NEWS-LP Centre survives. The focus of the Project Leader is to transform this Centre to prepare its pupils not only to survive through the crises but be the “World Saviours”. It is time, therefore, that the human resource development centric initiative of the Union Government, named Unnat Bharat Abhiyaan, could scale up such projects in which “vocational

education in schools is able to define green businesses as well as green jobs” for “children and women from vulnerable households”. The country in coming times will need numerous such innovative solutions and interventions and academic and scientific institutions should become major stakeholders in offering solutions to policy makers. With the same zeal, implementation strategies should be full-proof so scarce resources are not wasted but used to raise standard of living for many destitute and vulnerable populations. All stakeholders should rise to unique challenges thrown by this catastrophic epidemic with right intent and purpose to deliver best governance so as to uplift millions from structural inflicted poverties and provide them a life of dignity and prosperity.

Conclusion

There is need for gender and children responsive interventions keeping into consideration women and girls, from all spectrum of society, i.e. rural women, tribal women, Dalit women, women in slums, women working as domestic workers. Inclusivity must be the corner stone of policy and decision-making processes and implementation strategies.

During “Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan”, several positive changes have been introduced such as “Farmers Market”, which is now unshackled from the clutches of the APMC Act. Along with it, at least a village in a district should be targeted to be transformed into a “Green and Safe Economy”. With focus on transformation at the district levels, could a state not focus at least one district to encourage best of talent and offer them a clear road-map to let the vulnerable segments not only survive but thrive in the challenge? With possibility of financial, institutional and technological (FIT) innovations in the hands of these innovators from across the world, they could transform the attitude of entire districts as some could even have advantage of “Geographical Indication”. Therefore, it could be easy for the “Brand Sponsor of the District” to also devise and help implement SEED Plan of that district. The big opportunity could be as big as to even replace “District Rural Development Agency” with “District Economic and Environment Development Institute” or DEEDI – an institutional innovation conceptualized for piloting in

Haryana under “The pro-GRAM MODEL”, recommended for implementation in 2010 by the then Planning Commission. With a history of refinement to help develop vulnerable segments as part of district planning, it is time we transform our schemes as well as credit schemes with sharp-focus on provision of knowledge-leadership with enterprise and acumen in the hands of vulnerable households, wherein tangible leadership should be usurped by women with their learning children. In the end, districts could compete to create “Saviours out of Survivors” and combat Covid, China and Climate Change, the 3-C Challenges, and who knows we can harvest a rich crop of “our homegrown slumdog millionaires”!

