

Less Equality and More Risks: The Global COVID-19 Impact on Women and Girls

Yuejiao Xu^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Humanities and Social Development, Northwest A&F University, Xianyang, China*

a. irisxyj@nwfau.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls faced significant inequalities. Result of the pandemic's fast spread, increasing variables widened the gender gap and affected gender equality. It has increased disputes, crises, and barriers for women and girls, including imbalanced house-care work, severe gender-based violence, and the digital gender divide. This article illustrates the global gender inequality during the pandemic to highlight the severity of the gender gap and the importance of ensuring equal rights for women and girls. According to the article's findings, the protection of women's and girls' rights was greatly affected by the blockade policy, school closures, and the reduction of NGO services due to COVID-19. In addition, the shortage of digital knowledge and development resources further exposed women and girls to higher social risks. As a result, gender gaps and inequalities are aggregated, creating social conflict worldwide. Through this paper's further exploration of the key issues that led to the reversal of gender equality during COVID-19, the study aims to bring attention to the relevant backlashes of this particular period of gender equality and also targets to provide insightful reflections on those problems the world still face in future normalization society. This will allow researchers to intervene in the future in relation to each of the main priorities presented in this article to improve gender inequality in many ways.

Keywords: gender equality, COVID-19 pandemic, employment and education, women and health, digital gender divide

1. Introduction

Besides being a basic human right, gender equality is essential for constructing peaceful communities in which the whole human potential is fulfilled and for achieving sustainable development. In recent decades, the United Nations has made tremendous strides in tackling gender equality issues. However, people continue to face a number of unsolved difficulties in addition to making substantial progress. Females are more likely to be disadvantaged in developing nations that have not attained gender equality. Globally, there are approximately 130 million out-of-school girls at elementary and secondary school age. Only around two-thirds of nations worldwide have achieved gender equality in enrolment in primary school [1]. Moreover, women suffer lower earnings and less job security than males in the workplace, accounting for almost 45 percent of worldwide job losses in 2020 [2]. These existing problems were exacerbated by the pandemic.

The economic and societal impact of the pandemic has exacerbated these dire conditions. The economic systems of several countries are facing major difficulties due to the embargo caused by COVID-19. The World Bank forecasted a 5.2% decline in the world GDP in 2020, and economic activity in industrialized countries was expected to decline by 7% [2]. In June 2020, it was estimated that this recession would be the worst since World War II, with the largest block decline in output per capita since 1870 [2]. Besides, emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) would decrease by 2.5%, marking the first time in at least 60 years that they have declined as a group. The anticipated 3.6% decline in per capita income would drive millions of people into severe poverty [2]. Economic setbacks could further exacerbate already existing problems, while this would potentially reverse gains made in gender equality. As the pandemic spread rapidly around the world, disputes, crises, and obstacles erupted in the struggle for gender equality. During the blockade, girls' education was largely neglected as schools were closed and students were sent home, forcing many girls to become babysitters and family caregivers. The economic downturn also increased the burden of family caregiving for women and girls [1]. This might influence parents, especially those who place a lower priority on their daughters' education, to keep their daughters at home after school has resumed for the year.

Impacted by the pandemic, women and girls have endured a greater burden of home-based care work, severe gender-based abuse, and a digital gender divide that diminished their chances of obtaining employment and gaining access to school. As a result of the reaction, women and girls are more likely to be negatively affected by present and potential variables that impact their physical health and well-being. Women's and girls' empowerment is facilitated by the inherent right to seek employment and sufficient education. Therefore, the drawbacks that limit alternative possibilities for women and girls must get increased attention. This article intends to gather and evaluate the numerous accessible reports to reflect women and girls' living conditions during the pandemic. By evaluating the burden of home-based care work, high levels of gender-based violence, and the additional impact of the digital gender divide, the study aims to bring public attention to the impact of COVID-19 on global gender equality and sustainable development.

2. Women's Job Insecurity and Household Labor

As a result of the worldwide economic slump, the unemployment rate among women aggravated. Estimated that in 2021, 100 men for every 118 women from age 25 to 34 will be living in extreme poverty, and by 2030, this discrepancy is projected to increase to 100:121 [3]. The economic backlash from the pandemic has aggravated families' poverty, worsening the plight of millions of women. Due to gender stereotypes and sex segregation, women are less likely to work in the formal sector. Especially during the pandemic, many women were laid off despite their employment in informal firm sectors. Statistics indicate that during the first shutdown in the European Union, 1.5 million women lost their jobs in traditionally feminine fields such as hospitality, retail, and domestic work [4]. Globally during 2020, almost 54 million women lost their jobs, and an estimated 740 million women were employed in positions that give limited protection from the formal dismissal economy [3]. In addition, the economic recovery has shown a huge disparity between men and women in terms of work prospects. According to the analysis, the economic rebound in Europe during the summer of 2020 restored 1.4 million work opportunities for males but only 700,000 opportunities for females. There was just a 0.3% increase in the number of jobs available for women between the ages of 25 and 49. The employment rate for males of the same age climbed at a rate that was more than twice as fast, reaching 0.7% [4]. In industrialized and developing nations, women tend to earn less, save less, and have less job stability.

In addition to being severely confined by the employment market, women are also enormously subjugated by household labor. Traditional gender norms and gender expectations are evident in the

family division of labor, in which a woman typically serves as the family's caretaker while the husband is the breadwinner in the labor market. This imbalanced housework division occupied women's leisure time and required them to put more effort into unpaid domestic work, which is not good for their well-rounded personal development but only benefits the efficiency of families. The situation worsened during the pandemic, as many women lost jobs and kept to the domestic sphere. Even in households with two incomes, women continue to do the majority of caregiving duties, not to mention the plight of jobless women.

3. Girls' Education

As a direct effect of the pandemic, a tremendous impact on economies worldwide has caused educational institutions in turmoil. Around 11 million girls who were forced to leave school were unable to complete their education [1]. In Eastern and Southern Africa, forty percent of children and young adults between the ages of five and eighteen are not engaged in any educational program [1]. And the pandemic has further exacerbated the situation.

The pervasiveness of gender preferences in a country's homes hinders girls' access to adequate schooling and overall development resources during the pandemic. What's more, low-income households were more likely to care for school-aged boys than school-aged girls (between ages 6 and 10), significantly reducing the educational opportunities of female students. As a direct influence of the pandemic, an account of limitations, particularly those placed on publicly accessible resources, had a significant and detrimental effect on the educational opportunities available to female students. 11 million girls worldwide were at risk of being unable to return to school if the crisis caused by COVID-19 is not solved [3]. Due to school closures, millions of females dropped out of school before finishing their basic education. The rising dropout rates and the inability to return to previous levels of study have a profound impact on the quality of girls' education. More female students were compelled to remain at home instead of receiving proper education.

The detrimental repercussions on females' education, well-being, and economic standing are glaring. During lockdowns, girls who are unable to attend school do extra home duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings and ill family members, which may put their health in jeopardy [1]. A survey showed that girls frequently take on additional household and caregiving responsibilities, which has a significant impact on the amount of time they spend in school [4]. Moreover, the financial crises faced by families may motivate young girls to participate in income-generating activities earlier, making it far more difficult for them to return to school after the pandemic [1].

4. Women and Health

Women's and girls' health conditions have been at the forefront of the pandemic response. Among all, they are more vulnerable to gender-based violence, especially domestic violence during the pandemic. Gender-based violence is experienced by a person as he/she is targeted for harm based on biological sex or gender identity. Regardless of whether they take place in private or public life, it includes instances of sexual, verbal, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, as well as threats and denial of economic opportunities or educational opportunities [3]. Most victims of gendered violence are women, and those who are not finally independent would choose to hide their suffering and didn't ask for help from social workers or police officers.

Resulting of the COVID-19 outbreak, some towns and schools have instituted closures, which raised the psychological strain on community people. People infected with Coronavirus may suffer from a multitude of mental health issues, including stress, panic disorder, unreasonable anger, impulsivity, and mood disorders. This will result in an upsurge in gender-based violence. Additionally,

instability in masculinity also exacerbates the effects of other risk factors for domestic violence, such as economic strain, environmental unpredictability, misuse of alcohol, social isolation, and the possibility of being involved in exploitative relationships [5]. As a result, children who remain in their families confront widespread hazards, while females are more susceptible to violations and possible threats, making them vulnerable to unequal abuse and violence. With the increasing ratio of global gendered violence and child abuse, females' physical and psychological health is exposed to greater risks.

Furthermore, child marriage became an indelible problem during the pandemic. Many families are under pressure to allow their daughters to marry at a young age in order to alleviate the financial burden. Research illustrated that the pandemic had enlarged the possibility of child marriage among girls, and the pandemic's expansion might lead to 10 million child marriages worldwide [1]. On the other hand, child marriage increases the risk of domestic violence, precocious pregnancy, unsafe abortion, maternal problems, and death for girls. In the 15 months before the onset of the pandemic, the account of pregnant adolescent females between the ages of 10 and 24 seeking prenatal care increased by 20% [1].

Simultaneously, the scope of services and the activities of related institutions have been significantly decreased. In the context of COVID-19, the courts, shelters, and institutions that provide essential services for victims of sexual violence and education issues also fail to function properly [6]. This makes the perpetrators brazen and unrestrained in their violations of the rights and interests of women and girls, thereby increasing the personal security risks for females. Moreover, the chances for the police to decrease violations against women and girls via legal methods are severely diminished. Schemes such as girls' clubs, fundamental protection services, and support networks have been discontinued, preventing them from seeking help or gaining access to the necessary resources [6]. What's more, travel restrictions and curfews prevent many member organizations from visiting the victims and communities they assist, especially in rural areas. In addition, the pandemic restricted women and girls' access to appropriate health care. Other resources, including hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, legal help, and protective services, may also be diminished, leaving women and girls in abusive circumstances with even fewer alternatives.

Girls are less likely to return to school in the post-COVID period after experiencing gender-based violence because the pandemic makes it more difficult for them to disclose their experiences and cope with guilt and trauma. Existing inequities have been compounded, leading to increased female mortality and suicide attempts. Throughout the latter phases of the pandemic, female mortality and suicide attempts have aggravated in industrialized countries. Regarding Japanese data, the monthly suicide rate climbed by 16% ranging from July to October 2020. This rise was significantly more prominent among women and girls (37%) than among men and boys (14%) [7]. During the first half of 2020, suicidal rates among women in their twenties also surged by 43% in South Korea [8].

5. Digital Gender Divide

Concurrently, the pandemic has hastened the shift to digital education. As the increasing adoption of online education practices enabled some students to complete their education, digital technology has exacerbated the gender gap in students' accomplishments and educational resources. This disparity in technology products, technological businesses, and digital literacy education is referred to as the gender digital divide. Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, particularly females, are more likely to lack access to current digital devices, dependable Internet connections, and sufficient studying spaces [8]. In low- and middle-income nations, women utilize mobile Internet 393 million times less than males [9]. Girls living in distant locations and on the brink of poverty are more susceptible and have limited access to the infrastructure necessary to ensure the education of their families. In the poorest nations, just 12% of families have Internet access at home, while females

of the same age have 26% less mobile Internet access than boys [9]. In resource-limited contexts, women and girls tend to lack effective access to resources or services such as online learning if they lack access to cellphones, laptops, or other Internet-enabled devices. Consequently, the academic performance of female students was below average, and gender disparities in education are projected to intensify following the pandemic.

Virtual socialization and online events are of great importance, particularly during lockdowns, and the opportunity to stay in touch with friends and family through internet technologies may provide lonely folks with additional socialization options. But without access to digital media, women and girls are prone to experience loneliness, isolation, and despair [10]. As more resources are devoted to digital solutions, the fewer opportunities women and girls have to employ digital tools, the less likely they will acquire information in a dangerous world. Females (37%) are less likely than males (42%) to utilize digital technology to get information on COVID-19, which may further disadvantage women and girls in coping with the pandemic and adjusting to the rapidly changing circumstances [5].

6. Conclusion

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, female unemployment and domestic labor became distinct problems around the globe. Despite the fact that the glass ceiling and gender discrimination exist in the workplace, women also gain low wages and less job security than men. As a result, women and girls are requested to handle more domestic chores and family care work. Especially when during the lockdown period, as the schools were shut down and students were expelled to home, girls' education was extensively ignored, and many of them were forced to become babysitters and family caregivers. It is more than essential to gain proper education; for girls in underdeveloped areas, education is the main way to independence. But without education, girls could be in no way but stay in their homes taking care of families, which strengthens the traditional domestic division reversely.

Besides, given the digital gender gap and their lack of digital access to the world, women and girls are more vulnerable to diseases during the pandemic. Without adequate knowledge and enough resources, women and girls meet more challenges in fast-changing societies and easily endure violence and unprotection. The global cases of gender-based violence were exacerbated during the pandemic in relation to public policy, mental instability, and economic crisis. Being affected by the financial downturn, women and girls without economic income had no agency to choose or change but suffered domestic violence, daily oppression, and unequal treatment. With more violence against women and girls occurring globally, more attention to women and girls' physical and psychological health should be emphasized.

This research aims to draw attention to the unexpected effects of gender equality by analyzing a number of social situations that developed for women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that this article includes case studies from a variety of nations to demonstrate the concerns, the cultural settings, local legislation, and levels of economic development vary from country to country, resulting in findings that are both diverse and intersecting. Individuals' self-reported arguments and subjective feelings are also crucial to consider; therefore, the individual lived experiences shed light on people's concerns surrounding gender equality issues for further examination.

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