

## Editorial

Earlier in 2022, *The Lancet* published a bibliometric analysis examining the COVID-19 burden and women's wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries through published literature between February 2020 to May 2021 found that while 91 percent of the reviewed articles focused on women's and girls' health, just about twelve percent discussed the gendered social outcomes of the pandemic, and an even lesser five percent focused on gendered economic impact ([McDougal et al., 2022](#)). The most traversed sub-themes within women's and girls' health were mental health and maternal health. Less than one percent of the articles ventured into the impact of the pandemic on women's leadership and on women's collectives. And even the single article on women's agency "was authored by neither a lead nor senior author with an in-country affiliation." *The Lancet* report is a telling indicator of the scholarly inability to capture the lived realities of women, especially in the global South, as they found themselves in the crosswires of the pandemic, navigating the loss of lives, livelihoods, and liberties, while burdened with unpaid work and care.

This special volume of the *Peace Prints* is a small step in illustrating the untold measurable and unmeasurable impact of COVID-19 on women, particularly the employment, representation, and leadership of the marginalized and the most vulnerable, and more importantly the fall out of the pandemic on the gender agenda and the already challenging gender and developmental goals. Significantly, the set of articles in this volume articulates the perspectives of scholars, practitioners, and academics from South Asia.

World over, COVID-19 has set the clock back on gender empowerment. An article in *The Atlantic* squarely blamed the coronavirus as a disaster for the feminist agenda reversing gains of previous decades. The situation in South Asia and its neighborhood is particularly grim, where even before the pandemic the region was not on track to achieving its gender targets. Addressing the Commission on the Status of Women, UN Secretary-General Guterres remarked: "Women's equal participation is the game changer we need" ([UN Secretary-General, 2021](#)). Yet, women's jobs were the most hit during the pandemic, making them more vulnerable and reversing decades of progress in this field.

For the first time, as a global framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offered a gender-specific goal (SDG 5), and gender-related targets in other goals. This was a great step forward considering the Millennium Development Goals did not offer such specificity to gender goals. Regardless, there were two strong feminist criticisms of SDGs. One, it failed to address the structural factors that formed the foundation of inequality; and two, it was naïve in equating development with women's empowerment without addressing the flawed economic model that segregated gender along specific professions and did not include women's contribution to the economy through unpaid care and work. It brought to center stage key questions on women's empowerment, on whether it was a goal or was it a process. Or was it both? Here again, what was the ultimate goal? Was it a development agenda that sought to build on existing structural flaws perpetuating inequality but still striving toward gender parity? Or was it geared towards the realization of women's agency and their ability to question, negotiate, and reframe structures and institutions that were inimical to gender empowerment? The pandemic has proved that these questions can no longer remain an academic debate. It unraveled decades of work on women's empowerment exactly in the weak seams that the feminist critiques have been pointing out – inequality (which perpetuated multiple marginalities) and a flawed economic model (that pushed women deeper into the informal economy and segregated professions).

Studies of previous pandemics and health crises – Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2015-16, SARS, swine flu, and bird flu – highlight the undeniable fact that these crises had significant and long-lasting effects on gender equality. Likewise, COVID-19 majorly impacted those professions that employed more women – whether it is the health sector, the tourism sector, the hospitality industry, or as is the case in South Asia – the informal sector. It also increased manifold the unpaid care and work undertaken by women. Two drivers for women’s empowerment and gender equality – employment and education – have been severely impacted by the pandemic.

Women lost more jobs during the pandemic, and women’s and girls’ unpaid care and work have increased significantly due to lockdowns, travel restrictions, closure of schools, and increased need for care at home. According to a 2020 McKinsey report, women’s jobs and livelihoods are 1.8 times more vulnerable than men's during COVID-19 ([Madgavkar et al., 2020](#)). Women make up 39 percent of global employment; however, they accounted for 54 percent of job losses. In Bangladesh, one of the worst-hit sectors was the readymade garment sector which employs three million women. One of the main reasons for this is the disproportional unpaid care work undertaken by women the world over, which has increased manifold during the pandemic. In India, it increased by 30 percent. In South Asia, women are already overrepresented in the informal sector. And even in the formal sector, women experience high levels of horizontal and vertical segregation and receive lower wages. In India, for instance, women earn just one-fifth of male income. Another factor that will keep these women out of work until the economy bounces back is a myriad of traditional mindsets and values. According to the 2020 Global World Values Survey, more than half the respondents in South Asia and the MENA region felt that “men have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce.”

Education is another sector that has been severely impacted due to the pandemic. According to the World Bank report on the impact of COVID-19 on the informal sector, the lockdown in 2020 alone kept close to 400 million students out of school in South Asia. The report estimated that just five months out of school and associated learning loss would have a lifetime impact on a generation of students and their learning. The region is set to lose between \$622 - \$880 billion in future earnings due to the learning losses occurring in five months of students being out of school. In India, children were out of school for well over fifteen months. As schools moved their classes online, it also accentuated pre-existing inequalities among the students for want of laptops, computers, and smartphones for online classes. For instance, just about eight percent of students enrolled in government schools in India could join online classes. Education is the single most important driver for gender equality and all gender-related programs. Three out of four trafficked persons are illiterate. Teenage pregnancies and child marriages are prevalent among girls with little or no education. And violence against women is higher when both or either partner has received little or no education. Education remains the significant driver of women’s representation and voice across all sectors reducing gaps and inequalities.

The pandemic has also triggered a significant increase in gender-based violence. As many parts of the world went under lockdown triggered by the pandemic, women and children already living in abusive relationships experienced an increase in exposure to violence. The stressful and uncertain situation brought about by the pandemic, the lockdowns, and unemployment, further triggered new waves of violence. And to make matters worse, state and societal systems that were in place to address gender-based violence were severely hampered in their functioning, making access to their services nearly impossible. Even before the pandemic, Bhutan reported about 26 percent gender-based violence; while in Bangladesh, it was about 53

percent, and in Pakistan, it was as high as 85 percent. In India, over 400,000 cases were registered under crimes against women. Even at the beginning of the pandemic, the Indian National Commission of Women registered twice the number of domestic violence cases in March-April 2020 compared to earlier months. In a span of just 11 days during the lockdown due to COVID-19, the government helpline registered 92,000 child abuse cases in the family and the communities. In Bangladesh, there was a four-fold increase in the number of calls to women's helplines. Coupled with increasing violence against women, the pandemic pushed women further into poverty and increasing inequalities between and among the sexes. For instance, the female poverty rate before the pandemic was ten percent. By 2021, it was already thirteen percent. According to the UNDP, in 2030, for every 100 poor men, there would be 121 poor women. Given the demographic size of women in the region, this is about 150 million women driven to poverty.

More than ever before, it is important to acknowledge, understand and address the faultlines in the global development agenda that seeks to attain gender parity without addressing the fundamental structural factors that sustain inequalities among communities, between the sexes, and among women. And it is also pertinent to revisit the basic questions on women's agency, women's empowerment and what is the end goal, and what is the process to achieve that end goal.

In this issue of *Peace Prints*, the multi-dimensional impact of COVID-19 on gender equality and women's empowerment in South Asia has been explored by leading scholars and practitioners from the region. Is it just a matter of lost jobs and opportunities, or is the impact more fundamental that it has shaken the foundations of the gender agenda and reversed decades of progress? What is the impact of the pandemic on various international frameworks that strive for gender equality? What are the lessons from COVID-19 for women's empowerment, the feminist narrative, and gender discourse in South Asia?

Authors took the challenging task of unpacking these questions and raising several more pertinent ones in the process, infusing them with perspectives from a South Asian perspective. The articles fall under four broad sub-themes.

**The first set of articles focuses on how women faced the pandemic:** as frontline workers illustrated within the theory of care, or how their sexual and reproductive rights were put on hold, or the pronounced inequality even among Afghan women refugees in Pakistan which led them to experience the pandemic differently, albeit in varying degrees of apathy.

In her article, *Women on the Frontlines of the COVID Pandemic*, Vandana Vasudevan presents the dichotomy of what the world expected from women as frontline caregivers even as it stripped them away from formal workspaces devoid of social protection or recognition. "A staggering 83 percent of health workers in India are women. About one million female community health workers and another 1.4 million Anganwadi workers have been checking up on families in their areas for symptoms and holding sessions on how to prevent COVID-19. Millions of masks have been made by women's self-help groups and numerous meals created by women-run community kitchens. More visible contributions were made by women with higher education like doctors, scientists, and teachers." Her article "documents the contributions of women on the frontline of COVID-19, fighting from the trenches, almost completely unsung and unhonored but quietly helping India get back to normal, one day at a time."

Garima Shrivastava and Nawmi Naz Chowdbury's article *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Access to SRHR in India: Challenges and Opportunities* documents the fall out of the pandemic on the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and girls, but more particularly younger demography. Their article goes beyond to contextualize the disruption and denial of SRHR using the "lens of gender equality and intersectionality and the differential impact on access based on an individual's caste, class, age, gender, geographical location, marital status, and disabilities." On a more optimistic note, they conclude that the pandemic also offers an opportunity to revisit long-ignored agendas and foreground them as countries, the world over, rebuild their health infrastructures and frame new policies to address healthcare.

The last article in this set is a vivid illustration of the plight of Afghan women refugees in Pakistan, *Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan*, by Syeda Ailiya Naqvi and Sania Baig. Their article poignantly articulates the multiple vulnerabilities faced by Afghan women refugees, significantly the inequality among them that stems from the documentation they possess (or lack) which accords them different statuses and access (or denial) of services within Pakistan. "The Afghan women refugees have been the primary victims of the shadow pandemic in Pakistan because there is limited research on their social and mental well-being since the virus hit, and their lack of access to social services denies them the right to call for help. COVID-19 has magnified their vulnerabilities and inaccessible health services, loss of income and food insecurity have further increased their helplessness. Research indicates that one in five refugee women surrounded by complicated humanitarian situations suffers from sexual violence." Even as Pakistan struggles to address the basic needs of women in various vulnerable communities within its territories, the return of the Taliban has triggered a further exodus of refugees into Pakistan, a majority of whom do not possess the basic documentation to access any kind of social services and thereby increasing their exposure to marginalization and exploitation.

**The second set of articles locates the impact of COVID-19 on the significant pillar of women's empowerment – their employment.** All articles examine the enhanced inequality among women on how they experienced the loss of livelihoods, and with it their empowerment, by focusing on the intersection between migrant women and their loss of employment. These articles bring to light the impact of the loss of a job is simply not just economic for women. It also takes away their financial independence and the sense of agency.

In *Repercussions of COVID-19 on Women's Employment: The Stories from Domestic Workers in Bangladesh*, authors Razia Sultana and Afsana Alam, through a comparative study between domestic workers (many of them internal migrants) working independently and those working through placement agencies, foreground the different ways both these set of women experience the pandemic, lockdowns, and unemployment, but most importantly dignity. "The trade-off between lives and livelihoods posed by the pandemic was a dilemma for these women in precarious work. While surviving was the priority, the health threat posed by COVID-19 was a secondary issue for many domestic workers. The study, therefore, provides important insights into what this crisis has meant for a group of workers with limited capacity to survive who are largely excluded from formal security mechanisms and what more inclusive approaches need to be taken to ensure their social protection and decent work in the future."

In a similar vein, Samata Biswas, in her article, *At the Margins and Marginalized Further: The Case of COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in India*, expounds on the impact of the pandemic on women working in the informal sector, again mostly migrant women. Like the

article on Afghan refugee women, this article too exposes how marginalization experienced by these women gets compounded with every intersectionality. “On the one hand, they have been pushed out of different development agendas, employed informally in construction, agricultural and service sectors without any of the benefits of the said development. On the other hand, with the increasing precaritization of the informal sector, coupled with unpaid care and work, and the palpable threats of domestic violence, women migrant workers in South Asia continue to experience the worst impact of this pandemic.”

Surabhi Singh’s *The Impact of COVID-19 on Nepali Women with a Special Focus on Women Migrant Workers* offers fresh insights into the complex discriminatory conditions against which Nepali women leave the country in search of work, and how socially, legally, and culturally they have everything stacked against them. There are some telling statistics in the article. Of Nepal’s foreign migrant labor, 4.5 million are men. Just about 0.2 million are women, and 75 percent of this labor is unskilled. Given the additional procedures (basically more restrictions) placed on women migrants, most of them are forced to pursue illegal means to leave the country, often exposing and increasing the risk of exploitation and trafficking. “The global COVID-19 crisis led to upheavals in urban market economies and witnessed sharp declines in employment, including labor markets in major migrant-receiving countries. Transnational migrant workers fall under the most vulnerable population bearing such economic shocks as they are excluded from social and wage protection mechanisms.”

**The third set of articles focuses on women’s agency and representation** within trying contexts of conflict and disasters and examines how they have collapsed under the multiple burdens of the pandemic.

In *Frontlines, Faultlines, and Walking the Line: Women and Covid-19 in Sri Lanka*, Aaranya Rajasingam and Shakti Devapura take on the challenge of contextualizing the severe challenge to women’s agency and institutional representation within a post-war society that had already acutely polarized and marginalized large portions of the public, but now had to encounter newer trials in the form of the pandemic. And compounding this crisscrossing of multiple realities were the pro-democracy youth-led nationwide protests that shook the country for the better part of 2022 and churned up into prominence the power of alternative voices. The authors argue that “challenges to political participation and advocacy work have the potential to exacerbate issues of women living in former conflict areas and from marginalized communities. This is particularly true for groups such as women-headed households, ex-combatants, and other marginalized groups who are vulnerable to abuse from state and private entities. The curtailment of space for activism and advocacy during COVID-19, coupled with the lack of political representation and participation has removed the limited number of support networks such victim groups had.”

*COVID-19 and Gender in Afghanistan: Reflections of a Development Practitioner* by Lailuma Nasiri offers a first-hand account of how Afghan women recovering from the debilitating effects of decades of conflict and violence were pushed to further marginalization by the pandemic, but all of that paled into insignificance with the return of the Taliban, which rolled back whatever gender gains the country achieved the past couple of decades. Her statement, “schools closed due to COVID-19 but never reopened for girls once the Taliban took control” is a telling reality of the last nail on the future empowerment of Afghan women and girls. The Taliban has already removed women from all public employment. With no education, any future possibility of employment and empowerment has been snatched away. Making a bad situation even worse is the international community’s apathy and indifference to the economic

and humanitarian disaster Afghan people face. The article also powerfully articulates the everyday realities of women in Afghanistan. “Violence against women and girls was already a pervasive problem in Afghanistan before the pandemic. Almost 90 percent of Afghan women based on reports have experienced at least one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence in their lifetime. In a hospital in Kandahar, a southern province of Afghanistan, the doctors said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of cases of women poisoning increased in an attempt to end their life and escape violence.”

The last article in this set focused on women’s agency and representation is *Looking Back on Disasters* by Swarna Rajagopalan and Nandhini Parthib. A report from the WISCOMP’s Archives, it spotlights women’s agency in the wake of natural disasters, in this instance, the 2004 Tsunami and 2005 Kashmir earthquake. This report was specially chosen for this volume to highlight the lessons that have not been learned. Disasters, like the pandemic, are crises that challenge all agencies of the state, expose and exacerbate existing faultlines, and stretch the capacities of the state to respond. The authors’ argument proves that disasters are not very much different from the pandemic, and at the core of the response is the oft neglected gendered understanding of handling the crisis. They say, “the experience of women and girls and their specific needs in disaster situations draws attention to the importance of the private and household spheres. On the one hand, this seems to perpetuate the private-public dichotomy that keeps women from accessing power. On the other, this is the site where women live and work, often in invisible, unaccounted ways. Indeed, while discussions of security usually take place in a rarified, abstract setting, gender-sensitive accounts suggest that women are most vulnerable because their simplest health and hygiene needs are overlooked in a relief environment where planning and distribution are both male-dominated.”

While these various sets of articles discuss the multi-dimensional ways COVID-19 impacted girls and women, their education, their employment, their agency and representation, the key question remains, what of the gender agenda that has been painstakingly built over the past many decades. Has that been affected by the pandemic? Two articles in this special issue of Peace Prints seek to address these questions. Thus, **the fourth and last set of articles position the overall impact of the pandemic within the discourses on gender and development, and the global developmental frameworks.**

In their article, *Global Gender and Development Discourse: A View from India*, Savita Singh and Uma Gengaiyah trace the synthesis of theory and praxis of development alongside the emergence of feminist thought that shaped global developmental frameworks. It calls out the flawed economic model that positions women and their contribution in a precariously fragile ecosystem that pushes them into informal jobs and segregated professions, while at the same time robbing them of their contribution through unpaid and unrecognized work and care. The reasons why women were more and differently impacted by the pandemic can perhaps be located within this flawed economic model. “With structural adjustment and the opening of the free market economy throughout the world in the 1980s, it was assumed that rapid economic activities would reduce poverty and improve female labor force participation in all sectors and alter deeply skewed gender relations to usher in gender equality. However, this too did not come about, as evidenced by poor female labor force participation rates in many parts of the developing world. Moreover, economic development measured as GDP growth failed to provide equal opportunities for women. Further, GDP-led growth did not trickle down and did not alter the existing gender relations. The feminist approaches served to recraft the development discourse and brought to light many of these shortcomings.”

The last article within this subtheme, *Gender as a Common Denominator for All Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons from COVID* by Kirthi Jayakumar offers a fresh look at the Sustainable Development Goals through a feminist perspective. She uses “*Fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals: On a Quest for a Sustainable World (Law, Ethics and Governance)*,” edited by Narinder Kakar, Vesselin Popovski, and Nicholas A. Robinson (2021) as a starting point for assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs, but fundamentally goes beyond it to seek to answer why the SDGs, but more particularly, women and girls were impacted the way they were during the pandemic. “It is important to acknowledge that there are more factors than mindsets and cultural notions that normalize gender inequality. This is what makes it vital to treat gender equality as a cross-cutting issue, rather than as a singular destination. With the shift from ‘People’ and ‘Peace,’ to ‘Planet’ and ‘Prosperity,’ the room for exploring gender equality is barely talked about or addressed, much less prioritized. It might seem distant to connect natural resources with gender, and perhaps a low-ranking priority to connect infrastructure with gender. However, without a gendered lens, the inequalities produced by these dynamics ultimately normalize the overt and more evidently manifested forms of gender inequality.”

Read together, all these articles hone in few undeniable realities. First, the impact of COVID-19 was not equally borne. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, women bore the burden rather unequally. But more significantly, even among women, the burden was acutely experienced by the marginalized, the vulnerable, and the migrants. But it continues to be a nightmare for the women still living under the shadow of wars, conflicts, violence, marked by women-headed households, illiteracy, child marriages, and teenage pregnancies. Second, the pandemic impacted three critical pillars of women’s empowerment – education, employment, and representation. Every article in this volume contextualizes how setback on these three sectors will have an adverse impact on all future pathways. Third, wars, conflicts, and violence create and sustain multiple marginalities that rob girls and women of their future. The UN has declared Afghanistan as one of the dangerous places for a child to study. In Nepal, being unskilled, women migrant workers are forced to take the illegal route to reach specific set of countries where unskilled labor is welcome, exposing them to risk of exploitation and trafficking. The list is endless. Finally, the gender and developmental agenda serves as an aspirational framework. It is still fragile, with doubts abounding whether it can deliver or would unravel at the first sight of crisis.

An economic model that does not recognize women’s unpaid work and care, an economy which employs less than ten percent of women paying them and treating them less than their male counterparts, a system that pushes an overwhelming majority of women to the informal sector with no security net or social benefits, states that do not recognize the role of women in sustainability, and a global framework that finally emerged as a result of the dialectics between gender and developmental agendas but still found wanting. This is a snapshot of where half of humanity stood on the eve of the pandemic.

In their article, Aaranya and Shakti share a powerful visualization of the pandemic (as shared by Founder and Artistic Director of Stages Theatre Group, Ruwanthi de Chickera). The pandemic was akin to “a slow-motion never-ending car crash” leaving children and educators in shock, where “instead of looking after the children, we look after the bus” (referring to upholding old educational practices). The same analogy holds true to wider section of the public. Even as countries continue to rebuild post-COVID-19, it would do well that they focus on the people whose lives, livelihoods, and liberties have been disproportionately impacted,

and spend less time rebuilding structures that perpetuate inequalities between and within the sexes and genders.