

INDIAN FEDERALISM PERSPECTIVES

The Centre for Multilevel Federalism (CMF) was founded in 2010 to bring together scholars from different disciplines including political science, economics and sociology, public policy experts, lawyers, and journalists interested in the working of federalism in India. One of our strengths lies in our territorial spread of our network. Today we have over 60 members, working in different universities and research institutions in India as well as in other parts of the globe. With its distinguished international advisory board, the Centre has moved from strength to strength.

As a member of the International Association of Centres for Federal Studies (IACFS), it had the honour of hosting the 2016 annual conference. We are happy to announce a new publication "The Value of Comparative Federalism: The Legacy of Ronald L. Watts" edited by Nico Steytler, Balveer Arora and Rekha Saxena which is a collection of select papers presented at this conference.

COVID-19 is having a devastating social and economic impact on both people and households. Reports from across the globe show that the virus is no "great equaliser" as initially thought. The pandemic has hurt the hitherto marginalised sections harder and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities of various types. In this issue of the Indian Federalism Perspectives, Dr Parul Bhandari examines how COVID-19 has proved more deadly and costly for women. She highlights four dimensions of the gendered impact of COVID-19, including job losses, the domestic division of labour, domestic abuse and girl rearing practices. The pandemic she concludes has worsened the life-chances of women, reinforced existing economic and social inequalities and is taking us further away from a just and equitable society.

2020, which clouded our vision pandemically, also marked the tenth anniversary of the Centre. We celebrated with a virtual international seminar with keynotes by Christophe Jaffrelot and M S Quraishi. The latter kindly agreed to join our Advisory Board, and we are happy to announce that Loraine Kennedy will join us shortly as Visiting Senior Fellow. During this year, Prof C P Bhambhri, who supported us in various ways since our inception, left us. Our condolences to his bereaved family.

Finally, as the year draws to a close, we wish our friends and well-wishers good health and cheer in this festive season, and a Happy New Year.

Please write to us at cemufed.india@gmail.com to join our mailing list and also do share this link with your colleagues and collaborators interested in federalism.

Gendered Impact of COVID-19

Parul Bhandari

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Gender inequalities are systemic and structured into the workings of our societies. Anthropologists and sociologists, in particular, reveal these inequalities by studying the everyday realities of life, and by explaining how gendered role expectations of men and women stitch the fabric of Indian society. At the same time, exceptional periods of crises (political unrest, wars) too expose acute gender asymmetries (Das, 2008; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). It is no surprise then that in this trying period of the COVID-19 pandemic, one crisis unimaginable, we are witnessing a unique and unsettling amalgamation of the everyday and the critical event (Das 1995), which has put undue and lopsided pressures on women both in the realm of their everyday lives and professional and economic spheres. While this essay can in no way comprehensively trace the wide-ranging gendered impact of COVID-19, it focuses on four areas where, as evidence suggests, women have been adversely impacted much more than men, namely, job losses, domestic division of labour, girl child rearing practices and domestic abuse.

Job – Loss

In response to the pandemic, governments thought it wise to impose a lockdown, which though may have curtailed the spread of COVID-19, had an adverse economic impact. With markets closed, production thwarted, several employees were shunted out of their jobs, leading to a spiral of global recession. A striking pattern here was that women, more than men, lost employment. This finding is corroborated by a World Bank and McKinsey report, according to which women are 1.8 times more likely than men to face joblessness this recession ([McKinsey Report, July 2020](#)). In the Indian context, one explanation for this could be that the type of employment that women engage in is by nature risk-inducing, as for example, they are employed in large numbers in the garment industry and the informal sector. Economist Jayati Ghosh explains that women comprise 60-80% of workforce in export manufacturing, in developing nations. An economic recession means less consumption, which directly impacts production, as a result of which women working in garment industry lost their jobs ([The Wire, 2020](#)). This dismal situation has been described by economist Sanjay Mathur as “India’s sheseccion”, borrowing this term from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, which too published a report revealing that until April 2020, most of the jobs lost were held by women.

The informal economy, as we know, is more precarious and risk-inducing as at times it is unregulated or relies more on need-based or part-time employment such as work on construction sites, agriculture sector, or street-vendors. It also includes jobs that are preferred by women as they offer flexibility of time and space such as caregiving (nannies, helps to geriatrics), home-based employment (maids or cooks), or other types of work that can be undertaken from home including sewing, stitching, and home beauty salons. Women are considered more suitable for these jobs as they are seen as easy and risk-free hires, who can be employed for lesser money than men, explains Shalini Sinha, the India head of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (Wiego) ([Scroll, 2020](#)). Due to these push and pull factors, women are overrepresented in the informal sector, and certain surveys such as The Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2017-2018, found this number to be 88% of the total workingwomen in India, and a report by SEWA and the 2011 International conference on Economic and Finance Research, pegs this percentage to be as high as 94.

This precarious and risk-inducing nature of informal economy makes it most susceptible to the economic downfalls, leading more women, than men, to be affected by job losses. For instance, with markets shut during lockdown, women working as street vendors lost their livelihood; as residential areas restricted entry of non-residents, women employed as maids or cooks were severely affected; and women working from home (beauty parlours, tailors) too were unable to offer their professional services and even when partial lockdown lifted their footfall had drastically reduced and business suffered. According to Jayati Ghosh, the agriculture sector has been hit the hardest, and shows no sign of recovery. She states, “there’s no guarantee that even the most basic sectors like agriculture will be employing people” ([She the People, April 2020](#)).

Women-run small businesses and employment in small production units (craft sector) too have drastically suffered, according to a three-part report by [India Spend](#). Citing a study by Bain and

company, this report notes that “upto 73% of women entrepreneurs have dealt with setbacks caused by the lockdown and the pandemic, with 21% witnessing near wipe-out of revenues.” In Uttar Pradesh, particularly in cities of Lucknow, Allahabad, Amethi, and Sitapur, they found that not just women who own small businesses, but women employed in homes, call centres, and handicraft and retail units too lost their jobs, such as the 250,000 women employed in chikankaari and zardozi craft units in Lucknow. To add to their woes, women in government employment schemes were replaced by those men who returned from cities after losing their jobs. To that extent, the return of migrant labour from cities not only lead to added domestic pressures on women but also caused their displacement from government jobs.

It is to be acknowledged that the informal economy is varied and differentiated and will not experience a uniform impact of economic slowdown. For instance, sex workers have been more adversely affected than part-time home workers (maids, cooks) or beauty-salon workers or tailors. As a result, the measures to overcome these differential professional impacts will also differ, keeping in mind which, the Maharashtra government, for example is providing Rs. 5,000 per month to sex workers from the month of October-December. Furthermore, women sex-workers who have school going children will get an additional financial aid of Rs. 2,500 ([The Hindu, 2020](#)). The UP government has initiated schemes which will exclusively focus on employing women, such as the ‘Banking Correspondent Sakhis’ (friends) who will act as links between banks and female customers in 58,000 gram panchayats of the state. They have also initiated self-help groups that employ women to make masks, manufacture personal protective equipment and tailor school uniforms ([India Spend, 2020](#)).

Domestic and Care-work

Not just employment but the household too operates with a clear division of labour, whereby women are in charge of providing emotional and physical care, and men are expected to be the

primary breadwinners. While men's contribution to the household is easily acknowledged and calculated (income), women's contribution (emotional and household care) remains unacknowledged and undocumented. Feminist scholars, economists, and social activists alike have brought attention to the rigorous workload that women carry out every day, taking care of household and emotional needs of family members, and how this work contributes to the smooth functioning of the economy yet it is not included in the GDP. Despite the crucial support that women at home provide, the home continues to be seen as a work-less space. NSS's recently conducted "Time Use in India 2019" survey notes that "women participation in unpaid domestic services for household members — cooking, cleaning, household management — is as high as 81.2 per cent each day compared with 26.1 per cent for men. Women spend 299 minutes (almost 5 hours), thrice as much as men (97 minutes or 1 hour 37 minutes)." ([The Indian Express, October 2020](#)). It is to be noted that these expectations are not only of women who are not in paid employment outside home but also of working women. In fact, recent research suggests that working women might be doubly burdened as they are expected only to manage household activities (with availability of staff), rather than perform the domestic chores themselves, and therefore any failure to do so, questions their position and identity as an able modern Indian woman (Belliappa, 2013; Bhandari, 2020; Qayum & Ray, 2011; Radhakrishnan, 2011).

With the pandemic, as work and home spaces collapsed, women (both engaged in paid employment and those who were not) were confronted with increased responsibilities of domestic and emotional care, as they were expected to cater to the needs of family members round the clock, often without assistance from paid help. The immense pressure of juggling between house-care, rearing of children (without nannies), and doing office work remotely has been captured by several photo essays and articles in popular outlets. Surveys and research on this topic have found that men rarely contribute to household chores in these situations, and when they do, their contribution is minimal

and erratic. One such recent study conducted by economist Ashwini Deshpande notes that "housework and childcare were disproportionately the woman's responsibility and that continues to be the case." (Deshpande, 2020). Deshpande also brings attention to how parenting has become extremely difficult for women who no longer have access to paid services of nannies or creches neither the ready availability of support systems of grandparents, friends, play dates, and so on. This situation has been particularly testing for single parents, and has also emerged as a major theme of negotiation between a couple, to the extent that in the past weeks all major newspapers of India have published articles advising on parenting during the pandemic. Employed or not, the burdens of housework, emotional labour, childcare, are disproportionately being carried out by women during the pandemic. Without adequate support from family members and paid help, their physical and emotional well-being has come under immense strain.

The precarious girl child

Everyday gender discrimination in households is evident not only in the unequal responsibilities between husband and wife but also between sons and daughters. From sex-selective abortions to different life chances (education and health), boys and girls tend to be brought up with different support systems. Indian government and civic society have initiated several drives to help overcome these differences in upbringing, for instance by promoting education for girl child. For this, parents are incentivised to send their daughters to school by offering mid-day meals and setting up toilets for girls within school premises. One of the most adverse impact of this pandemic is that the progress in this direction has been severely thwarted. Namita Bhandare too pens her concern that girls' "enrolment rates across all levels went up by 25 %age points in five years since 2013. The virus could reverse that success." ([The Hindustan Times, June 2020](#)). In fact, reports by international organisations as UNESCO and IIEP and NGOs ([Girls Not Brides, July 2020](#)) infer that school closures will impact girls more than boys. One of

the reasons for this is that girls will be expected to help with household duties, leaving them little time to catch up with schoolwork, whereas boys will not have such expectations and would use their time for studies. A photo essay ([Scroll.in, October 2020](#)) vividly captured this stark difference as it showed that during lockdown girls were helping out with kitchen work and longingly looking outside through the windows as they were not allowed to step out to meet their friends whilst boys spent their time playing with friends in the neighbourhood or using electronic devices.

Another reason why remote (online) schooling will not be conducive for girls is that girls have restricted or no access to technology, and according to a report by NGO, Girls not Brides, they have 26% lower access to the internet than boys. When access to the internet or electronic devices is limited, parents prefer that their sons make use of these facilities, as sons are expected to be employed and earn income¹. As a result of this bias, girls find it difficult to attend online classes and are left-behind in school work, eventually dropping out of school. Additionally, in certain parts of the country where girls have to walk miles before getting to school, curfews and restrictions on mobility during the pandemic will become another obstacle to access school.

Not being able to continue school education, along with increased economic pressures and financial instability of a household may in turn have another severe impact, namely, child marriage. In the past decade Indian legal system and civic society has made improvements to curb this evil practice such as by passing the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCAM), 2005, which criminalises child marriage. Though the practice still prevails, there has been improvement especially in the past decade as the National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) conducted in 2015-16, reports a steady decline in instances of child marriage across Indian states, except for Himachal Pradesh and Manipur where a marginal rise was reported ([The Leaflet, 2020](#)). The pandemic, however, may reverse these efforts. With restrictions on wedding celebrations, cost of weddings have reduced as have demands

of dowry. Parents of girl child, then, might find this an opportune time to marry off their daughters. The likelihood of this furthermore increases in regions as West Bengal (which according to the NFHS-4, tops the list of instances of child marriage) and Assam, which have witnessed cyclone and floods, causing further poverty and destitution of its people, who might consider it economically wise to have their daughters' marriage arranged now rather than go through the burdensome expectation of saving up for dowry and spending money on a wedding when things return to normalcy. ([The Leaflet, 2020](#))

Another frightening consequence of girls being pulled out of schools is that they will be pushed into child labour and hazardous and exploitative work situations. According to a UN report, by 2000 child labour had declined by 94 million but with the pandemic this success will be reversed. The ILO fears that the ongoing dismal economic situation will create opportunities for child trafficking, sexual exploitation, and child labour ([The Hindustan Times, June 2020](#)). This situation is further exacerbated for a girl child who tends to be hired for lesser pay than male children, and faces grave safety issues. Only in September, during a raid in western India, Nobel Prize winner Kailash Satyarthi's organisation, rescued dozens of girls from sexual exploitation and labour ([The Hindu, 2020](#)).

As we protect our vulnerable populations from the virus, we must also protect them from the adverse social effects set in motion by the virus, particularly those that will take away childhood, right to education, and push girls into exploitative child labour or early marriage.

Domestic Violence

According to the NFH-4, 33% of married women in the age group of 15-49 experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence. Of these, 77% never discussed their abuse with anyone, and only 14% sought help. Among the 14%, 65% reached out to their natal family and only 3% reported their abuse to police. Indeed, women consider going to authorities often as a last resort,

and only with the assurance that they will be taken care of and not be made to stay on with their abuser. These complicated situations have become all the more fragile and difficult with the onset of the pandemic and imposed lockdowns, as women are locked-in with their abusers and as other supporting mechanisms (living with aging parents, friends, or simply walking out) are not as readily available as before. In fact, there is every-likelihood that women will also suffer further abuse in homes as the lockdown affects temperaments and mental health. A recent report suggests that there might be 20% increase in global cases of domestic abuse, leading the UN to describe this situation as a “shadow pandemic.” (UN Women 2020). Unfortunately, women are now doubly unsafe, firstly on account of the possibility of facing greater violence and abuse, and secondly, with fewer instant avenues to call for help or seek protection.

We certainly see this situation panning out in India, where the first phase of lockdown witnessed a sharp increase in domestic violence cases. According to the National Commission for Women (NCW), “between March 25 and May 31, 1,477 complaints of domestic violence were made by women. This 68-day period recorded more complaints than those received between March and May in the previous 10 years.” (The Hindu, June 2020). NCW has also released state-wise data according to which, Uttar Pradesh (UP) recorded the highest reporting of domestic abuse incidents. A contributing factor for this, apart from the workings of a patriarchal society, could be that with the start of the lockdown Uttar Pradesh was the first state to introduce a special helpline for domestic violence victims, which was widely advertised by the UP Police and women self-help groups. After UP, Delhi saw a spike in domestic violence cases, followed by Maharashtra and Haryana.

While there has been a rise in domestic abuse cases, the NCW chairperson anticipates that domestic abuse in fact might be underreported as the victim is living with her abuser, making it unsafe to complain about him/them, and also because the victim might not find private space or time to make a distress call. A Delhi-based NGO

reported that during lockdown women made distress calls between 9 pm and 10 am, when family members had retired to bed or not yet started their day. To mitigate this, NCW launched an initiative where instead of making phone calls, the victim can send a WhatsApp message on the provided number. A difficulty here, however, as also discussed earlier, is that women have limited access to the internet and mobile phones. According to the Indian Statistics Ministry, there remains a great digital divide in India, wherein 30% of urban women and less than 10% of rural women have access to the internet (NDTV, December 2020)². This implies that not all women will be able to make use of the WhatsApp message facility. Another reason because of which the situation of domestic abuse victims has worsened during the pandemic is that they can no longer reach out for intervention by friends and family, or move to a safer place (a friend or relative’s home), due to restriction on movement.

Apart from NCW and other government bodies, NGOs too have undertaken innovative initiatives to help domestic abuse victims. One such initiative is by a Bhopal-based (Madhya Pradesh) charity centre, Gauravi, which hires domestic abuse victims as auto-rickshaw drivers (Scroll.in, September 2020) These women auto-rickshaw drivers in turn have created a network of support, wherein they reach out to other women who report abuse. They bring them aid, food, and also ferry them to work (in absence of regular bus or public transport services), and keep a watch on their wellbeing. These are no doubt testing times for women, and it is imperative that both central and state governments offer them support by establishing 24x7 helplines (phone, WhatsApp), providing options of alternative shelter if they decide to move out, and sensitising police (men and women) and other administrative officials about gender violence, so they can effectively handle this situation particularly in these times.

Though the themes discussed in this essay are specific to India, nations of Global South are facing similar problems, leading NGOs, activists, researchers and policy-makers to partner with one another and collectively solve gender-related problems of our societies. One such partnership is

under the aegis of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD September 2020). Feminist activists, researchers and organisations too have collaborated across national boundaries to share information on how the first phase of the pandemic impacted women, including the Feminist Alliance for Rights (FAR), where women in the Global South have collaborated with the marginalised communities in the Global North (Al-Ali, 2020).

When COVID-19 hit the world, a general assumption was that it was a democratic, if you will, disease, which would affect every and any one alike. As we grapple with and unpack the impacts of the pandemic it is abundantly evident that this virus has reinforced the asymmetrical and unequal structures of society for the vulnerable populations remain at highest risk, which certainly includes girls and women, whose life chances and living conditions have been severely impacted. It is imperative for the civic society, governments, and non-profits to come together and recognise how girls and women are being unduly put at higher risk, and suggest robust and long-lasting strategies and programmes to overcome these obstacles and work towards a just and equitable society.

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Notes

¹ In some ways, this bias is an extension of the discrimination between girls and boys in access to food, whereby parents tend to provide more nutritious food to their sons than daughters because they expect their sons to be the future breadwinners of the household, and therefore, take every-care in feeding them well.

² The pandemic has in fact made the digital divide steeper, producing a “new class of digitally poor citizens”, according to Sumeish Srivastava, an internet-access researcher. (NDTV, December 2020). He opines that as banking, school, medical services moved online with the lockdown those with no or limited access to the internet were excluded from government-aided schemes.

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