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Fragility of Women's Rights

Ever since in 1977 the United Nations established 8th of March as the International Women's Day -- that had followed year-long celebrations of the International Women's Year during 1975 -- women-led movements and gatherings have received a moral boost revealing the state of affairs and seeking their place under the sun. As a result, world has become increasingly awake towards women's concerns as also of their disproportionate burdens. Yet, the age old inequity and atrocities have not completely disappeared. And, like in several other indices of measuring human development, the pandemic situation saw a marked regression in state of women's rights world over.

Covid-19, that ruptured life-as-usual for all, saw women disproportionately burdened with care giving in 'crowded' homes accompanied by increased incidents of domestic violence. With lockdowns and social distancing, homes got converted to work spaces for adults and for online education for children. External spaces for leisure, entertainment and social gathering shrank and this saw a shadow pandemic intensifying. All this meant over exposure at home, social withdrawal, job losses and economic and food insecurity. Health services came under strain. In some countries, calls to helplines increased by over five times.

According to the data by the UN Women, less than 40 percent of women, who experience violence, tend to seek help of any kind. From cyber harassment to sexual harassment, pandemic saw reports of increased incidents of mental and physical violence. Some of these

statistics must be mentioned: every day, 137 women are killed by a member of their family; half of them are killed by intimate partners or family members. Adult women account for 49 percent of all human trafficking victims detected globally. Women and girls together account for 72 per cent, with girls representing more than three out of every four child trafficking victims.

The silver lining is that this increased focus on women's rights have also shown how gender equity contributed to overall social and economic development for all. Also, already over 155 countries have passed laws on domestic violence, and 140 have laws on sexual harassment in the workplace. This of course continues to be work in progress and several of these need to do lot more work for strengthening their compliance and enforcement mechanisms. Ensuring providing basic amenities like creches and ladies toilets to facilitating women's representation and equal participation remains a pre-requisite to empower half of human race to harness its full potential.

Without doubt, pandemic also showed how, countries that had achieved greater acknowledgement and ranking for gender equality were also recognised for better management of their societal harmony during these testing times. Countries headed by women leaders -- like South Korea, Finland Germany, Denmark, New Zealand, Taiwan and so on -- were all commended, not only for their gender friendly policies, but also for vigilant leadership in setting great examples in containing the pandemic.

*Prof Swaran Singh
Dr. Reena Marwah
Editors*

Assessing COVID-19 Through Feminist Lens

From a feminist perspective, the Covid-19 has been much more than a health emergency posing multiple existential challenges to women around the world. In addition to impacting their livelihoods, it is their non remunerative work--which remains undefined -- that created new kinds of physical and emotional stress severely affecting their safety and survival. No doubt, pandemic has revived debates about women-centric healthcare from multiple perspectives underlining urgency for bold policy initiatives.



by Dr Aditi Paul

At the outset, women world over were seen playing sterling roles as medical professionals, sanitization workers and other caregivers. Pandemic saw them becoming frontline warriors. State-imposed lockdown -- that redefined distinctions between essential and non-essential workers -- seemed to privilege non-essential sector employees to work from home. But Women had to mix their professional responsibilities with those of home makers. Especially women from middle and lower-middle classes faced not only the impracticalities of remote working -- with poor access to modern gadgets -- but also experience rapid decline in income and even food security.

As regards essential services for the well-being of the society, governments broadly divided these into three – (a) well-paid essential workers like medical doctors, pharmacists, law enforcement and public safety officers; (b) low-skilled, low-paid essential workers like garbage collectors, cleaners, farmers, and vegetable and fruit vendors; and (c) unpaid essential workers who perform duties at home caregivers. Since, women are over-represented in this last category they have been hardest hit by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic has

as a result, revealed several cases of rapidly deteriorating gender inequalities among workers worldwide. According to the Washington DC based Economic Policy Institute, globally a startling 76 per cent of women are in the healthcare sector serving as doctors and medical assistants. All them have been exposed to higher risks of infection and death due to the sheer nature of their job that requires face-to-face contact with infected people. Women are also employed in large numbers in sectors such as, tourism, hospitality, food and restaurant, manufacturing industries, etc. and due to the closure of such industries or reduced working hours, these women either faced loss of jobs or income cuts.

UN Women reports that globally 40 per cent of all employed women compared to 36.6 per cent of employed men were hardest hit by Covid-19. Of the 96 million people who will be pushed into poverty as a result of pandemic, 47 million will be women and girls, living on \$ 1.90 or less. In the informal sectors as well, where 58 per cent of women are employed globally, they have lost on an average 60 per cent of their income. Likewise, 80 per cent of domestic workers (i.e., cleaners, cooks, and babysitters) are women and they continue to face disproportionate income insecurities and violations of basic human rights and freedom. For instance, in India, the lockdown left no time for migrant workers to return to their rural homes and millions were stuck in cities without food and shelter. Women got either locked in the employer's homes or were not allowed to enter houses and perform their routine duties. For these internal migrants, as the sudden lockdown and closure of public transportations forced them to walk miles, more often than not, children became responsibility of their mothers.

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Pandemic has worsened the ugly reality where many essential caring services remain unpaid and unacknowledged. According to the International Labour Organization, women in India spend approximately 5 hours as compared to men spending less than 1 hour on such unpaid care work. The UN Women Rapid Assessment Surveys reveal that Covid-19 pandemic has affected the mental and physical health of women because of increased workload of over-crowded homes. Some of the routine tasks like cooking and cleaning got paired with non-routine tasks like home-schooling and work-from-home. Despite an evident egalitarian division of labour inside domestic institutions with men carrying out non-routine work by helping at household chores, the burden of unpaid work and the fear of income loss created far greater physical and psychological stress for women.

What has added to the stress amongst women is the stay-at-home order which forced women to live with their violent partners and bear sexual and physical violence. Here again, UN Women has brought forth critical information, surveys and data-sets on Covid-19 and its impact on women that highlight emergence of 'Shadow Pandemic' in

which millions of women and young girls across the world are being subjected to domestic violence leading to grave uncertainty on women's participation in the recovery of economy.

Covid-19 has also shown how a large gap continues to exist in the coverage of social protection measures and how such a crisis remain endemic with critical implications for environment, health, economy, etc. Therefore, there is an urgent need for devising a systemic approach that addresses such newer forms of risks for women. Government, international organisations, civil society groups, and especially women's rights organisations must remain vigilant and gender-responsive because a universalist approach at addressing Covid-19 is failing to capture its varied impacts.

I am reminded of Michael J. Sandle, whose latest work *Tyranny of Merit*, has revived debates on the dignity of work and whether wages have ever offered a true measure of social value for jobs. Since, market cannot determine who contributes to common good, Sandle argues that just as a moral judgement is required to decide on whose contributions matter most, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way one feels about 'essential workers' on whom members of society depend the most.

Gender Gap During Pandemic: A South Korean Perspective



by Dr. Geetanjali Singh

South Korea has been one of those exceptions that shows how a pandemic can be handled well. Though the number of cases in the country had started rising in December 2020, these remained significantly low especially when compared to western countries and rest of the world. For the year 2020, the South Korean economy also performed better than most its peers. With 8th of March being International Women's Day, it has come to light how the pandemic had a disproportionately excessive effect on the women in South Korea that can not be overlooked.

Before Covid-19 set in, South Korea presented a case of most gender sensitive nations with women accounting for 43 percent of employed workers. But these women are mostly part-time workers; accounting for 63.5 percent of the part-time labor with majority of them in education, transportation, accommodation and food services, and support services. Part time and temporary work also means that higher proportion of women earned below the minimum wage making South Korea worst case of gender wage gap in the OECD. In addition they also handle the vast majority of unpaid domestic labor.

The pandemic again had a disproportionate impact on women's personal lives. According to a report by Korea Labour Institute (KLO), "During the first half of 2020, 56.3 percent of South Korean women reported an increase in work related to taking care of family and 62.1 percent of South Koreans that took family leave were women." Of those surveyed, 33.5 percent of women said that they were the only ones to do household work, while 17.2 percent said that their household work had increased an average of 2-4 hours per day. While the report did not give

figures for the number of women who quit their jobs to take care of their families, those who did said that there was no one else who could do the household work. Women also faced higher uncertainty in the workplace. As the economy improved since fall 2020, employment picture has also improved. But suicide and domestic violence have also since come to be another critical issue. Suicide is now the leading cause of death for South Koreans in their teens, 20s, and 30s. Over the first half of 2020, national rate of suicide by women increased 7 percent overall but for women in their 20s it increased by 40 percent. Early data suggests that the need for social distancing resulted in an increase in domestic violence against women.

These are not very different from other Asian examples. According to a UN survey, female workers in informal sectors in Bangladesh and Thailand were more likely to work less hours than their male counterparts or lose their job altogether. Garment manufacturing provides the most informal employment for women in Cambodia. But as Covid-19 wreaked havoc on the supply chain, the demand for global clothing has plunged as far as 50 per cent. This resulted in mass layoffs that destroyed livelihoods of these women. The ongoing school closures are another great burden on working mothers who were working from home as telecommuting became the norm. This witnessed further worsening of the existing gender gap in domestic work and childcare.

The pandemic has also led to an increase in intimate partner violence. These acts are often carried out by their parents and partners, and it can be difficult to escape such situations due to quarantine and lockdown measures. In fact, many

countries have reported higher number of police reports associated with domestic violence, as well as increased calls to gender advocacy organisations. There were reports on child marriages on the rise . According to Girls Not Brides, child brides frequently lose out on schooling and will result in lost human capital during their productive years, further trapping them into a cycle of poverty.

Then there are women working as frontline workers that need protection and access to basic facilities and instruments of work safely. Or states can alleviate the burden on mothers to take care of their children when they are working long hours in health risk sectors. No doubt, local organisations in different countries have gradually brought forward proposals for gender-sensitive policies like encouraging men to share the household workload thus allowing women to fulfil their professional obligations. With regard to increasing concerns of domestic violence in the midst of the pandemic, Vietnam launched a project with the Australian Government and UN agencies to protect children and women from domestic violence. Some countries like Bangladesh have also come up with gender specific stimulus packages to help women entrepreneurs maintain their retail businesses. Bangladesh has allocated a separate budget for women entrepreneurs.

To the least there is urgent need to adopt universal healthcare systems that allow women to have better access to healthcare and information. Singapore has taken the lead in introducing the universal healthcare coverage. Limited numbers of women in politics across Asia can be seen as the reason for this systematic marginalisation of women and gender gap in public policies. The pandemic saw most nations, including developed Asian states like South Korea, witnessing a widening of these gender inequity. There is also argument that depending on their levels of development, Asian will have a certain regional diversity in policies to boost gender equality. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution. But its equally important to understand how gender gap may malign the picture even for developed Asian nations. With Asia being set to be the trend setter for the future, it is incumbent upon Asian nations, especially developed ones like South Korea, to present good examples of gender-positive policies and practices.

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India's soft power diplomacy during Covid 19

With all its unprecedented adversities, the spread of Covid-19 has witnessed a certain toning down in the inter-state rivalries opening of many new avenues for cooperation. This is especially true of South Asia where India has dedicated its vaccine diplomacy to empower its neighbourhood first policy. Being recognised as the 'pharmacy the world', India has provided comprehensive and urgent help to South Asian states with exception of Pakistan which may also potentially receive India made vaccines. At the very advent of the pandemic, India had started distributing hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol drugs to neighbours like Nepal and Bangladesh that were also gifted with test kits to fight back Covid 19 and Rapid Response teams of India were sent to Maldives.



by Dipikanta Chakraborty

India's critical assistance to its South Asian neighbours is cementing New Delhi's stronger connects with its immediate periphery where ascendancy of China had come to be a challenge to India's 'neighbourhood first' policy.

India has been sending its Covaxin and Covishield vaccines to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Myanmar, Srilanka, Mauritius and Seychelles as also to its extended neighbourhood as also to far away nations from Canada to Brazil to Morocco. These are being supplied both as grant and gifts as also on commercial terms expanding India's reach to not just its immediate neighbours but also to several Latin American and African countries. Together these can provide India not just novel leverages of vaccines diplomacy but also financial muscle to further sharpen India's soft power diplomacy.

In the post-covid world order, vaccine diplomacy has become a new source of its soft power policy. India's prompt response to global demands for vaccine has made it a reliable partner and vaccine policy of India has not only opened doors for its pharmaceuticals but also promises to potentially attract foreign direct investments strengthening its 'Make In India' drive. India's vaccine policy, therefore, is all set to accelerate the economic revival as well. Considering the cost affectivity and efficacy of Covishield and Covaxin, Indian vaccine industries have emerged high in global acceptability compared to their Chinese Sinopharm vaccines. While most of them are being sent as gifts yet even on commercial terms, the cheap Indian vaccines are equally favoured for their easy maintenance, storage and transport and other logistics needs. For this reason, these have become especially preferred amongst developing and least developed countries. India's 'Vaccine Maitri' agenda has provided vaccines to Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia etc. making them see India in an entirely new light.

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India's critical assistance to its South Asian neighbours is cementing New Delhi's stronger connects with its immediate periphery where ascendancy of China had come to be a challenge to India's 'neighbourhood first' policy. India has been sending its Covaxin and Covishield vaccines to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Myanmar, Srilanka, Mauritius and Seychelles as also to its extended neighbourhood as also to far away nations from Canada to Brazil to Morocco.

As regards India reviving the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), this vaccine diplomacy also provides new opportunities for New Delhi. Prime Minister Modi was the first South Asian leader to convene a SAARC summit and set up the SAARC Emergency Fund with an initial offer of contributing \$10 million which has been richly reciprocated by all other members. This showcases their shared sense of togetherness in their fight against the pandemic. The Modi Government has since initiated e-platforms for sharing information and training as well as for special creating a visa regime for health workers. This promises to revive SAARC and intensify the spirit of friendship. It will resolve pandemic-driven disruptions in trade, 'people-to-people contacts and contribute to reducing mutual suspicions.

Nepal perhaps presents most apt example of efficacy of India's vaccine diplomacy of India. As the pandemic was setting in, India was seen facing confrontation by Nepal which was understood as

part of China increasing influence in South Asia changing India's equations with its neighbours. In sum, this vaccine diplomacy of India today signifies a novel element of its soft power diplomacy with proven efficacy in changing its equations in its immediate region. India's generous health assistance in its neighbourhood promises to address the issue of China becoming the big brother in South Asia. Moreover, even before pandemic, the 'Vasudeva Kutumbakam' tradition had seen India embark upon disaster relief and humanitarian assistance as important components of its regional engagements. What has been questioned by the critiques is whether it will enable India to redress its larger China challenge? Question is also raised if this will have any lasting impact in the post-pandemic as well? Nepal is yet to rectify its map that claims some Indian territories as its own. On Bangladesh's front as well, China remains all pervasive due to its funding of the infrastructural development projects.

To not overlook challenges of India's vaccine diplomacy, the refusal of Malaysia to take Indian vaccine can be seen as part of Pakistan's refusal and the pre-pandemic coming closer of Turkey, Pakistan and Malaysia. India has to think about sustainability of its vaccine policy in the long run. If diseases are going to continue as world's expanding new challenge -- as seen in last two decades -- then India must build its capacity to expand this as its leverage. In that sense, even if India's soft power vaccine diplomacy may not completely wipe out China's growing presence in the region, it has certainly placed India at stronger footing in South Asia. From that vantage point, it definitely promises to reshape South Asia, and make India the forerunner of this transformation.

Webinar Session 37: February 17, 2021

Michael Kugelman "What to Expect from Biden on South Asia"



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*Participants will be given E- Certificate on request, who either made comments or asked questions during webinar

AAS Webinar Series (every 1st & 3rd Wednesday): Session 37
17 February 2021 (Wednesday), 06:30 PM- 08:00 PM (IST)

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM BIDEN ON SOUTH ASIA





Speaker:
Michael Kugelman
 Asia Program Deputy Director & Senior Associate for South Asia, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC.



Chair:
Prof Swaran Singh
 President, AAS

Registration FREE

Webinar Host: Dr. Reena Marwah, Secretary-General, AAS

Register in advance for this meeting @ rb.gy/mzsewa

[Link to webinar here.](#)

The AAS hosted Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director, Asia Program & Senior Associate for South Asia, Wilson Center, Washington DC on "What to Expect from Biden on South Asia", for the 37th Webinar series. The speaker started by stating that the Biden administration in its initial weeks is going to be focused on domestic affairs and not on foreign policy. However, There are many who have said that the US is experiencing three simultaneous problems; once in a generation, a public health crisis with the pandemic, an economic crisis, And a social crisis driven in great part by racial tensions and political polarization, the likes of which the country has not seen for a long time. So, the administration has made very clear that initially it would be focused on domestic issues and not on foreign policy. The speaker further discussed that there will be some key differences in Biden's South Asia policy compared to Trump's. However, Joe Biden has been very explicit about the broad contours of his foreign policy plans. According to the speaker, Biden has vowed to bring back US global leadership to better value international diplomacy to restore US alliances and promote democracy

and human rights abroad. The speaker asserted that Biden was a longtime friend of India. He further added that this bilateral partnership was the defying relationship of the 21st century. And that the Biden's administration would maintain focus on two key areas. These are a) the promotion of free and open Indo-pacific and b) strengthening of ties with Australia and Japan to further boost the Quadrilateral security dialog. Dr Kugelman also shared the details of a phone call between US Secretary Antony Blinken and his Indian counterpart Dr Jaishankar, India's external affairs minister. Both Underlined the importance of the USA and India working together to expand regional cooperation. The lecture was followed by a Q&A session. Dr. Marwah and Prof. Swaran Singh expressed their gratitude to the speaker for his insightful presentation.

by Ashish Dangwal

Webinar Session 38: March 3, 2021

Dr Satoru Nagao "Escalating Competition between US & China: Regional Implications"



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An International Journal of Asian Studies

Participants will be given E-Certificate on request, who either made comments or asked questions during webinar

AAS Webinar Series (every 1st & 3rd Wednesday): Session 38
03 March 2021 (Wednesday), 05:30 PM- 07:00 PM (IST)

ESCALATING COMPETITION BETWEEN US & CHINA: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Speaker:
Dr Satoru Nagao
Non-Resident Fellow
Hudson Institute
Washington DC

Chair:
Prof Swaran Singh
President, AAS

Registration FREE

Webinar Host: Dr. Reena Marwah, Secretary-General, AAS

Register in advance for this meeting @ rb.gy/wvudbw

[Link to webinar here.](#)

The thirty-eighth webinar session was held on 3rd March 2021, on the topic 'Escalating competition between US and China: Regional implications'. The lecture was delivered by Dr Satoru Nagao. The webinar commenced with Prof Swaran Singh's welcome address, followed by the speaker's introduction by Dr Reena Marwah. Dr Satoru started the webinar with a power-point presentation. He then explained that how India, USA, and Japan should respond to US-China competition. Later he raised the Taiwan issue with the Hong Kong issue and how China is using force on them. Later he mentioned about the India-China face-off that recently taken place in the Galwan valley in Ladakh. The speaker explained the issues relating to the USA-China trade war. After that via Powerpoint presentation Dr Satoru explained how India, Australia and Japan should cooperate with the US to counter China. He said that through military, economy and value-addition, Quad countries could counter China. The talk was followed by a question and answer session. There were many questions regarding the Quad group, Japan-China relation,

Indo-China conflict and what would be the strategy of the Quad group to control China's domination in South China sea. But the main question that was asked which was really the highlight of the webinar was 'Should Japan start funding the Tibetan government in exile like the United States of America does?'. On this question Dr Satoru responded 'it would a big setback for China if Japan does so, because the Quad countries main aim is to counter Belt and Road Initiative of China and control China's domination in South China Sea'. Dr Marwah thanked the speaker for his impassioned session and the vote of thanks was given by Prof Swaran Singh

by Vikhyaat Date

News in Pictures



Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa with his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan at Colombo. Credit: Dawn



Sri Lanka: During this meeting, Pakistan offered Sri Lanka to be part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Many experts say that this is Pakistan's request to Sri Lanka on behalf of China. Credit: Quora.com



Kashmir: India and Pakistan signed LOC Peace Agreement. Credit: Daily Excelsior



USA and Saudi Arabia: USA President Joe Biden suspended defence ties with America's close ally Saudi Arabia. Credit: Financial Times



At least 18 anti-coup protesters were killed on Sunday (Mar 14) in one of the deadliest days since Myanmar was thrust back under military rule. Credits-CNA



India and Maldives signed UTF Harbour project. Credit: DNA India



India and Mauritius signed free trade agreement. This is the first such agreement of India with an African country. Credit: DNA India



As Joe Biden withdrew his support from Saudi Arabia in the Yemen civil war, Houthi Rebels seized the opportunity to attack Saudi's oil shipping port. Credit: CNN news



Pakistan: Pakistan to get the 45 million doses of Made in India vaccine. Credit: Indian Express.



Galwan Valley: China releases the video of the Galwan valley incident which took place in June 2020 Credit: Times Now

Feedback

"It was a great honour for me to share my thoughts and exchange opinions with a rather high level experts in the Association of Asian Scholars (AAS) webinar. The AAS organises perfect opportunities for debate on IR and these open discussions contribute to the free and enriching future of scholarship across the Indo-Pacific."

Dr Satoru Nagao, non-resident Fellow,
The Hudson Institute,
Washington DC

"AAS deserves appreciation for organising webinars on the topics of relevance in contemporary scenario. Your Webinars are really useful and fruitful for debating local as well as global themes. It is my considered view that the organising team can play a significant role and excellent efforts for well-being of the people carrying forward their visionary approach and missionary zeal."

Dr Ramesh K. Madaan,
Head & Assoc Prof, Deptt of Political Science,
S.D. College, Ambala Cantt

"I am honoured to share with readers of this newsletter my admiration for commendable research and webinars by AAS involving topical themes in international relations. As a regular participant, I find these extremely useful for researchers and policy practitioners. I strongly recommend these for younger scholars keen on having free and easy access to deep academic deliberation with global experts."

Dr Parshuram Sial,
Asstt Prof, Deptt of Political Science,
Jawahar Lal Nehru College, Chakradharpur

Millennial Asia – Volume 11, Issue 3, December 2020

This issue is comprised of theoretically well-grounded and evidence-driven research papers on comparative issues of Asian countries.

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