Further Burdened: Women and the Pandemic in Pakistan

ASIA’S PATH FORWARD

By S Akbar Zaidi | 13 October 2020
The multiple normalized burdens on women – from social and so-called ‘cultural’ ostracization and exclusion, patriarchal norms which discriminate simply on the basis of gender, economic and political marginalization and discrimination, and issues of gender violence, to name just a few – were all considerably magnified during the coronavirus pandemic. At minimum, psychologists in Pakistan and elsewhere have noted that women now “have had to disproportionately bear a triple burden of work: increased household work with everyone at home, increased and constant caretaking responsibilities (including coronavirus patients), and home schooling of children (including learning and managing new technology).”¹ It is also feared that domestic abuse and gender based violence have increased in a “horrifying surge.”² This surge would add to the existing “70 to 90 percent of women [who] experience some form of physical, emotional or psychological abuse from an intimate partner” in Pakistan.³ With pre-pandemic domestic and gender-based violence already approaching catastrophic proportions, the pandemic lockdown means that the perpetrators of that violence – men – are now also locked-out of their offices and public spaces and are locked-in at home. Women and girls therefore face the brunt of far worse oppression, given (male) frustration, loss of male and family income, and other situational changes.

Another major consequence for women has been the loss of income which supplemented household incomes, making coping with economic stress easier. More and more Pakistani women had been entering the work force as independent working women. Now they have lost not only their own income, but also any autonomy and agency they may have acquired. Although the situation of women has improved markedly over the last two decades in terms of education and work possibilities, according to the Global Gender Gap Index, Pakistani women are among the worst paid globally. Pakistan ranks second worst, just above Yemen.⁴ Women account for only 24 percent⁵ of formal

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employment in Pakistan. Moreover, women earn significantly less than men do at the best of times in the best of circumstances. The coronavirus pandemic has made these circumstances far worse.

The economic loss for women spans many levels. Firstly, especially in urban areas where women used to leave their homes to work whether in factories or as domestic help, the loss of income has been significant. As the economy tumbled and as factories and workplaces closed, women lost their jobs and income. Unlike in many developed countries, there is no social insurance, and no payments could have been made to workers regardless, since the economy was already in bad shape with manufacturing growth falling every month for the entire fiscal year from July 2019 through the pandemic to June 2020. Further job losses occurred as a result of the pandemic, and female workers are the easiest to let go. Domestic workers, who make up a large proportion of urban working women, lost their jobs as their well-to-do employers told them to stay away: “I have been denied access to households as they fear I would bring the deadly virus. The domestic work I did in the past is not possible for this reason.” Such anecdotes became the norm for such a large proportion of working women, and they bore “the brunt of [the] coronavirus outbreak.”

Secondly, the collapse of the economy resulted in supply chain disruption, goods not being made available and rising prices. Pakistan saw “the highest inflation in the world” during this period. With men also put out of jobs, women unemployed and costs rising, it is clear that the economic costs – with knock-on effects on nutrition and schooling, especially for girls – are bound to be severe. A third consequence for women concerns the large proportion of women who work from home; the home-

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6 Clearly, these numbers are under-reported as most women, especially the poor and lower income groups work, often at low or no wages. Domestic workers in urban areas, agricultural women who work, are such categories and household work is almost always unpaid and unrecognised. Clearly, there is a need to reorganise definitions and categories related to women’s work.

7 Iftikhar Ahmad, “No country for working women,” Express Tribune, March 10, 2018 https://tribune.com.pk/story/1655699/no-country-working-women


based-workers (HBWs). This work includes “stitching, packing, needlework, shoemaking, bangle-making, embroidery etc.”\(^{13}\) As argued above, women have suffered psychological and physical violence on account of having to stay at home and manage the household, husband and children, and while lockdowns have depressed demand for goods typically produced by HBWs. Customers and middlemen have stopped coming to such HBWs and most have had to manage with severely reduced incomes.

The response by various governments during the worst phases of the pandemic was to provide some financial support to some of those who have been laid off and were struggling to make ends meet. The Ehsaas program and the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) social protection programs which reach around 5-6 million families, support poor women who are identified through a process of verification of their poverty scores.\(^{14}\) One of the conditions of these payments – unconditional cash transfers – is that every applicant must have a Computerized National Identification Card (CNIC). There is little doubt that the Ehsaas and BISP have had a significant impact on the lives of women and their families, but because of the CNIC requirement, many of the poor, particularly marginalized and mobile women, have had to be excluded from such programs. Despite the initiative of this and previous governments to provide support for the poor, the most vulnerable and most in need have been left outside the social safety nets created for such a cohort.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

At time of writing, the coronavirus pandemic, for now at least, has surprisingly and unexpectedly come to a hard and fast end in Pakistan. Scientists have not been able to explain why this has happened\(^{15}\) and since they do not know why, there is speculation about whether there will be a second spike or whether Pakistan has succeeded in flattening the curve at a time when India and other comparable countries are experiencing infection and death rates almost as fast as the United States.\(^{16}\) Nevertheless, if Pakistan

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\(^{16}\) “India,” worldometer, [https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/)
has reached an end to the pandemic, this allows some speculation and possibilities about how life could return to some old or revised, normal for the economy and for women.

Anecdotal and observable evidence suggests that economic activity has restarted in Pakistan. Educational institutions have opened, and markets are again attracting customers. Domestic workers have been allowed back into the homes of those for whom they worked. Clearly, if the coronavirus does not return anytime soon, economic activity will continue to pick up and incomes will rise. Yet this is far from the full story. With a thoroughly ravaged economy, any recovery will take considerable time. Two areas which will require much recovery are those which deal with the external sectors of the economy. Even if Pakistan’s pandemic is over, this is not the case with the rest of the world, particularly the US and the EU, both which are Pakistan’s main export market. Until there is some global respite from the coronavirus and some recovery in demand, those sectors in Pakistan which are linked with the global market – particularly textiles, which employs a large number of women – will still take some time.

Pakistan is highly dependent on foreign remittances from the Gulf countries and from the West, which constitute 8 percent of Pakistani GDP. Remittances have historically served as Pakistan’s primary social safety net and its main poverty alleviation tool. While Pakistan might recover, unless those countries from where remittances are received also do, expected income from abroad is likely to be lower than it has over the last few years. In fact, the Asian Development Bank forecasts that remittances will fall by more than a quarter in the next year which will have huge ramifications on the economy and on households. Despite the supposed end of the coronavirus pandemic, the outlook is poor for Pakistanis.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Clearly, the EHSAAS and BISP social safety nets must continue and must be extended to those who need such support the most. How officialdom will get around its own constraints is unclear, yet ways need to be found to cut through red tape. Apart from cash transfers, support in the form of interest-free loans for all working women, many of whom have set up their micro businesses, is also required, yet again, a CNIC is a prerequisite to receiving such a loan, as is having a bank account. Even well-meaning initiatives may not reach the most deserving on account of strict requirements. While some women

17 Imtiaz Ali, “Educational institutions to reopen countrywide in phases from Sept 15,” Dawn, September 08, 2020 

18 “Pakistani remittances could fall by 27% as coronavirus jolts money flow to millions,” Arab News, August 04, 2020 
https://www.arabnews.pk/node/771441/pakistan
with a CNIC could benefit from such programs, such as support and loans for the SME sector, many who are in dire need will remain outside the net thrown by banks and other financial intermediaries.

Any policy to support the economic efforts of women struggling as a consequence of the pandemic, would need an extensive drive to register all women regardless of their immediate need. Such a drive would also allow new recipients of the BISP to be found to be eligible.

If there is one possible beneficial outcome of the lockdown and pandemic for women, it is that their plight has been publicly and widely discussed and debated in different forums and awareness about women’s rights issues has increased. This is a first step to acknowledging the gendered nature of such a pandemic and its necessarily gendered responses. The usual one-policy-fits-all approach will not succeed, and all policies require a solution which addresses different social classes and genders differently. Also, with growing awareness of violence against women during the lockdown, civil society groups and government will need to set up support groups, devise stronger laws and policies and provide protection to women in sight of any form of danger.

If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has allowed all of us to acknowledge sociocultural weaknesses in society and allows the consideration of mitigation measures. Whether such intervention actually happen remains a debatable point, and if overlooked and not addressed, the multiple burdens on women will only get much heavier and far worse.
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AUTHOR

S Akbar Zaidi

S. Akbar Zaidi is currently the Executive Director (Vice Chancellor/President) of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi. He was Professor at Columbia University, New York from 2010 to 2020, where he held a joint position at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS). He was also Adjunct Professor at the IBA from 2013 to 2020. S Akbar Zaidi is a Political Economist who has had nearly four decades of teaching and research experience in Pakistan and abroad. He has taught courses on colonial history, Pakistani history and on the political economy of South Asia. Amongst his books are: Military, Civil Society and Democratization in Pakistan (2011), The New Development Paradigm: Papers on Institutions, NGOs, Gender and Local Government (1999), and Pakistan’s Economic and Social Development: The Domestic, Regional and Global Context (2004). His recent books include Issues in Pakistan’s Economy: A Political Economy Perspective published by Oxford University Press (2015), and a co-edited volume entitled New Perspectives on Pakistan's Political Economy: State, Class and Social Change, published by Cambridge University Press in April 2019. His history manuscript Making Muslims: Reading Publics and Contesting Identities in 19th Century North India is to be published by Cambridge University Press later this year.